

Voisins du Zero: Hermaphroditism and Velocity

In a well-known Spanish medical publication called MD, diverse articles relating to anomalies in art were often published: the elongation of El Greco's figures was the result of a distortion produced by squint; Goya's black paintings were due to progressive lead poisoning; Van Gogh's flaming colors, a particular case of schizophrenia. Perhaps because of this and other reasons, I ended up associating Duchamp (MD) with a picturesque uncle of mine, a doctor and subscriber to this magazine in the sixties. A connection that surely underlay one of my dreams where Duchamp appeared camouflaged with my uncle, as if he were another member of the family.

The dream consists of a family reunion, which takes place in a room whose atmosphere, from what could be seen through a french window, was redolent of Paris or Buenos Aires. In a cinematographic black and white, the effect of contrasted lights and shadows reproduced a saturated masculine ambiance –somewhere between Bogart and Gardel- characteristic of the first detective movies. No one speaking, we were all there, our silhouettes cutout against the window's resplendence while a river grew torrentially outside, sweeping debris along the street. Shortly after, much like the effect of an acetate about to burn, the image acquired a reddish tone, gradually dissolving into the face of Marcel, who ended up with his hair tinged of a red oxide, a color between minium and brick, as one of his "bachelors" or, why not, like a cosmopolitan Adam in a two-piece suit about to ignite.

This reference to a distinctly masculine universe makes me think of gentlemen's purveyors and of the goods themselves : cigars, pipes, cards, dice, liquor cases, gaming tables lined with green cloth, roulettes, domino pieces, chess boards... some of the elements extensively and enigmatically used in cubist

imagery, along with instruments and music scores.



Figure 1

Marcel

Duchamp, *Monte*

Carlo Bond, 1924.

Except for chess, which was an obsessive presence in Duchamp's life, the only one of his works related to these types of games, more specifically to Roulette, is that known as the *Monte Carlo Bond* (Fig. 1), dated November 1, 1924, the year after leaving his masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) 'definitely unfinished'. This is also the year that marks his legendary and supposed retirement from art, and his move towards the more rarified and abstract world of chess.

The *Monte Carlo Bond* or *Obligation pour la Roulette de Monte Carlo* is a 'rectified and imitated readymade', a lithograph for a real document, a bond issued in 30 numbered exemplars each with a value of 500 francs. The original bonds, commercial obligations used to release a certain sum on a defined date with a determined rate of interest, were redesigned and released by Duchamp with the purpose of collecting funds in order to experiment with a mathematical system in the game of *Trente-et-Quarante*, using a Martingale⁽¹⁾ that would allow him to win 'slowly but surely' over the Monte Carlo bank, thus making roulette to behave like

a chess game.

Placed directly over the 'radiant' image of a roulette wheel in the lithograph, is a curious photograph of Duchamp with his hair and face covered in foam. In the lower part of the document, inscribed on the roulette table there are two signatures : Rose Sélavy's (Duchamp's feminine alter ego, here starring as President of the Administrative Council,) beneath the black diamond; beneath the red one, as simple administrator, is Marcel's. Printed in the background and repeated 150 times in green ink, is a game of words of the capricious harvest of Rose Sélavy: *moustiques domestiques demistock (domestic mosquitoes half-stock)*.

But let us first see how some authors have described this image:

David Joselit: “a lithograph including a portrait by Man Ray of Duchamp transformed through shaving cream into a chimerical figure perhaps resembling a faun or devil (...) Marcel, like Rose, is masquerading as a hyper-masculine devil or faun.” **Dalia Judovitz:** “a self-portrait of his head covered with shaving foam and his hair pulled up into horns, further destabilizes the authority of this financial document.”

Calvin Tomkins: “A Man Ray photograph of Duchamp’s head -the face lathered with shaving soap and the hair soaped into two devilish-looking horns”. (4)

Peter Read: “a colored lithograph representing the surface of a roulette table with a photograph of Duchamp’s head covered with shaving foam, his hair pulled up into the horns of a faun or devil, stuck onto the roulette wheel which forms a surrounding circle, similar no doubt to the halo which, in Henri-Pierre Roché’s eyes, Duchamp always wore. Cut out (decapitated) from a larger photo by Man Ray, Duchamp’s head resembles that of John the Baptist presented on a plate with his erect horns of hair ready to be shaved off, the male falls victim to both Salomé and Dalila –a powerful recurrence of serrated symbolism.” (5)

Juan Antonio Ramírez: “The most striking visual element of the raffle tickets printed by Duchamp is his own effigy, resembling a faun (achieved with shaving soap), against the background of a roulette wheel. This is one way of giving a human story-line to a mechanism, a means of bestowing sexuality on it; here again is the satyr-bachelor trapped in his masturbatory circularity, hoping to acquire the lounged-for winnings after each of the croupier’s ‘manipulations’ [“This was admitted by A. Schwarz, who quoted Freud: ‘A passion for gambling is equivalent to the ancient compulsion to masturbate.”] But perhaps there is something more, an allegory of the artist and his chance reward.” (6)

click to enlarge



Figura 2
Giambologna, Mercury, 1576.



Figura 3
advertising Notice



Figura 4
ad from Patek Philippe

General consensus seems to be that Duchamp's lathered head is like that of a faun or devilish figure. On a closer look however, the foamy shapes above Duchamp's head do not correspond to the traditional horns of devils or fauns; instead, their shape is strongly evocative of one of the principal attributes of classical antiquity's messenger god Mercury (**Fig. 2**). Curved back in their own particular manner,

these forms match Mercury's winged traveler's cap known as *petasus*, as can be clearly seen in Giambologna's sixteenth-century bronze statue, rather than the short erect horns normally belonging to fauns and devils.

Is it not curious that in the different readings Duchamp's face is repeatedly interpreted as a faun, a demon or a satyr, as a masculine being necessarily supplied with horns? This interpretation is fostered not only when thought of in connection with the 'diabolic' artistic-financial operation of the *Tzanck Check* of 1919,⁽⁷⁾ but also by images of the aforementioned creatures in classical mythology in which beard and horns appear simultaneously to characterize them. The horns, as history of art dictates, would proceed from the beard.⁽⁸⁾

Iconographically, the Roman god Mercury –or Hermes as he was known in ancient Greece– is suggestively pertinent to Duchamp's financial document. Renowned for his speedy effectiveness, resourcefulness, and shrewdness, Mercury was the Roman god of trade, profit, merchants, travelers, and shepherds, as well as patron to artists, impostors, and all dishonest folk.⁽⁹⁾ In addition to the winged cap, Mercury was endowed with wings for his feet called *talaria*, a *caduceus* or rod entwined with serpents, and a purse as symbol of his commercial powers.⁽¹⁰⁾ Even his name resonates with these associations; deriving from the Latin root for merchandise, a *mercibus*, the name Mercury underlies the term 'mercantile'. Indeed, these are all attributes intensely associated with Duchamp's conduct, which may be summarized in his anagram: *marchand du sel*, or salt merchant.

Beginning at about this time (1924), this kind of behavior was accentuated when, along with his renewed passion for chess, Duchamp embarked in a series of negotiations and artistic-

financial speculations. Such an attitude is well synthesized in the advertisement of the *Flying Wheel* (Fig. 3), a wheel with wings, identical in essence to the collage over the roulette: a popular synthesis, if you like, of a good part of Duchampian iconography.

Thus, Duchamp's Mercurial image not only bears an iconographic resemblance to the ancient god but is also conceptually tied to the activities surrounding the *Monte Carlo Bond*. Moreover, Duchamp's disguise may be read on yet another level, one with deep personal implications, as shall be developed throughout this essay. For what we see in the photomontage is a bearded Mercury, as he appeared in some archaic Greek vases, but which is rather unusual in later imagery, where he is generally shown beardless, almost feminine.⁽¹¹⁾ Duchamp's use of foam for creating a beard (as an adolescent in front of a mirror conjuring up virile fantasies) (Fig. 4) exalts this ambiguity, for it simultaneously indicates the absence of a beard after shaving and the appearance of a false beard in place of a real one.

Duchamp's obsessive capillary experiments, and the consequential psychological negotiations between various identities begins casually in 1919, in Buenos Aires, when he shaves his head as a part of a treatment to reduce hair loss. This confers him a rather marginal aspect in the widest sense of the word, whether as an initiate in some sort of sect – chess?⁽¹²⁾ –, as a convalescent man –his friends find him excessively thin- or simply delinquent⁽¹³⁾.

On his return to Paris in the midst of 1919, in a gesture that clearly anticipates the creation of his feminine pseudonym Rose Sélavy, he creates the well-known readymade of the Mona Lisa (*L.H.O.O.Q.*) adding a mustache and Mephistophelean small beard to the image. At the end of 1921, after the aromatic transsexual display of Rose Sélavy presented as *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette* on the altered label of a lugubrious

flask of *Rigaud* perfume,⁽¹⁴⁾ (Fig. 5) he creates a tonsure on his head in the form of a comet with its tail projected towards his forehead. (Fig. 6)

Three years later, immediately after the self-portrait in the *Monte Carlo Bond* –in *Cinésketch*, a theatrical diversion of Picabia and René Clair- Duchamp reappears as Adam in a *tableau vivant* based on a sixteenth-century painting by Cranach, (Fig. 7) displaying an evidently artificial beard (a significant counterpart to the ambiguous beard of foam), a watch, and a shaved pubis. Certainly not the last ‘shaving’ in his work. Next>>

click to enlarge



Figura 5

Figure 5 Rose Sélavy, 1921. Photo Man Ray



Figura 6

Marcel Duchamp, 1921.



Figura 7

Adam and Eve. Marcel Duchamp and Bronja Perlmutter. Paris, 1924.

Notes

1. "The Martingale is a very old and extremely simple system for recovering betting losses by progressively increasing the stakes. It is based on the probability of losing infinite times in a row and is usually applied to 'even money' bets." For this definition of the Martingale, see

< http://ildado.com/roulette_rules.html >

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2. David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941*. Cambridge,

Mass: MIT Press, 1998.

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3. Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: art in transit*. Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1995.

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4. Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: a biography*. New York: H. Holt, 1996.

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5. Peter Read, "The Tzank Check and Related Works by Marcel Duchamp", *Marcel Duchamp Artist of the Century*, edited by Rudolph Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.

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6. Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Duchamp, Love and Death, Even*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 199

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7. This piece was created by Duchamp as an imitation of a real check drawn upon *The Teeth's Loan & Trust Company, Consolidated*, an invented bank, with which he paid his dentist Daniel Tzanck a sum of \$115 dollars.

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8. That people have read the foam-created forms as horns may also be due to the Dionysiac connections implicit in the game of words resulting from Duchamp's pseudonym Rose Sélavy (*Eros, c'est la vie*). However, this type of eroticism is more readily connected with an essentially vitalist *oeuvre*, as is Picasso's, rather than with Duchamp's, which may be characterized as mental and elaborate.

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9. For "all things Mercury" see <http://www.hermograph.com/science/mercury.htm> Go to the link about the god Mercury for the history, symbolism, and legends surrounding the ancient god, and see in particular his "Work History".

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For Mercury's thievish activities, see the entry for *Mercurius*, in John Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary*.(1788) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p.373-374.

10. For ancient representations of Mercury endowed with his various

attributes see Gregory R. Crane (ed.) The Perseus Project, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> August, 2002. See the references to Mercury under Greek and Roman Materials: 109. Boston 98.1135 which shows a silver coin bust of Mercury wearing his winged *petasus* with *caduceus*;

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122. Boston 98.676 which shows Mercury with his purse.

11. For images of a bearded Mercury, see Gregory R. Crane (ed.) The Perseus Project, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> August, 2002. See the references to Hermes under Greek and Roman Materials: 28. Louvre G192;

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68. Toledo 1956.70

12. From Buenos Aires, Duchamp wrote to Walter Arensberg in 1919: "I play chess all the time. I've joined a local club, where there are very good players grouped according to grade. I have not yet been honored with a grade. (...) I play night and day and nothing in the world interests me as much as to find the right move... I am less and less interested in painting. Everything around me is knight shaped or Queen shaped and the outside world only interests me in as much as it transposes into winning or losing positions."

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13. In *Wanted*, dated 1923, a work immediately previous to the *Monte Carlo Bond*, he personifies as such in a reward poster. This was later used as the poster for his retrospective exhibition at the Pasadena Museum in

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1963.

14. Originally, *Un Air Embaumé*. A balm, a perfume; an 'embalmed' air, as

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well.

Fig. 1, 5-7

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