Wayne Andersen, Marcel Duchamp: The Failed Messiah

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This book is an insult to the intelligence of anyone who believes that Marcel Duchamp was an important and influential figure in the history of modern art in the early years of the 20th century. It's subtitle-The Failed Messiah-tells you pretty much everything. While not technically an oxymoron, within this context, the words "failed" and "messiah" contradict one another, for by definition, a messiah is one who succeeds in his quest, and even Duchamp's most ardent detractors would find it difficult to argue that he didn't. Even the author of this book, Wayne Anderson-an 82-year-old retired professor of history and architecture at MIT (and also a doubtlessly disgruntled academic)-tells us that what Duchamp did to the history of art is comparable to the impact of the meteor that killed the dinosaurs. His use of the word "failed," therefore, must apply specifically to his own personal point of view, for Andersen believes that the adulation accorded Duchamp by the art establishment is unjustified, blown far out of proportion to what he perceives are the artist's actual accomplishments. Since Anderson's myopic view is shared by preciously few, in writing this book he must have envisioned his own role as that of a messiah, someone who has valiantly stood up against all opposition to provide us with the correct path to aesthetic salvation, one that would have gone smoothly had Duchamp and his readymades not intervened.

Andersen's greatest objection-and the reason he claims that motivated the writing of this book-is that Duchamp is increasingly identified as among the most important artists of the 20th century, and his urinal (titled Fountain) is

repeatedly named the single most influential work of art made by any artist of the modern era (as confirmed by a survey of art professionals in England in 2004). He is most aggrieved by those who admire the urinal with the reverence accorded other great works of art. In a prologue to the book, Andersen declares Fountain and all copies of it a sham, in words that tellingly reflect his messianic theme: “Pilgrims by the daily hundreds come to one or the other of these shrines of modern art to contemplate with puzzlement and some in reverence this recumbent piece of plumbing as if it had closed down the Old and given rise to the New Testament of Art History.” The allusions to religion are not coincidental, for although I have no idea what faith Andersen practices (if any), his real objections to Duchamp are derived from a sense of moral superiority, especially when it comes to the subjects of eroticism and sex (themes that run, admittedly, through Duchamp’s work from start to end). In the introduction to his book, Andersen openly confesses his prudish beliefs. “With sexual freedom comes degradation, since morals of any kind are generated by the immoralities of sex, like valor by cowardness [sic] or honesty by cheating. Yet, the whole biological purpose of each species’ existence is to breed for the next generation. The moral brain cannot always hold up pants and panties when desires press downward to where bodies generate dirt and from there upward to pictures drawn and enacted by dirty minds.” That he was thinking of Duchamp comes a few pages later. “Duchamp was a vulgar man with a dirty mind,” he writes, “sexual, not sensuous.”

The issue of bodies generating dirt and excrement is something that comes up repeatedly in Andersen’s critique of the urinal, and it is abhorrent to him that some might equate these thoughts within the realm of aesthetics. He is especially revolted by the fact that when a urinal is used, it requires the exposure of a man’s penis, something he repeats on no fewer than on four separate occasions in his text. Here is one: “The beauty constant and concomitant sexual urges are

universal. Is it merely coincidental that every man, on stepping up to a urinal, opens his fly and takes out his member?" In an effort to place the urinal in an art-historical context, he places it at the end of a lineage marked by fifty-year intervals that begins with Manet's Olympia (1863), continues with Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907), and concludes with the urinal. (Although Duchamp's Fountain was conceived of in 1917, it was not recognized for its importance within the art establishment until the 1960s, allowing him to place it some fifty years after Picasso's Demoiselles.) This observation causes him to pose the following question:

> How is it that modern art, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century starts and finishes its first fifty-year phase with representations of women not for adoring and seducing or even raping but for just plain fucking? And ends its second fifty-year phase with a urinal pretending to be a fountain while asking to be pissed in. It is of course biological for a man to approach a urinal as if it were a woman. Each time he steps up to one, he open his fly and takes out his member.

There he goes again with the penis reference. But in making his point, it is worthwhile to ask why Andersen used the word "fucking," when he could just as easily have used any other more socially acceptable euphemism for sexual intercourse? He finds Duchamp's sexual puns vulgar and distasteful, so on the title page of the book (yes, on the title page), he issues the following warning to his readers: "This book was written for mature readers at an adult age. It contains words and expressions that are suppressed as obscene wherever English or French is spoken. And it includes quotations of texts by others that are pornography in both the original language and English translation." Presumably, Andersen's own words were not translated from anywhere, so what could be his excuse for resorting to such foul language?

In the end, what Andersen finds most objectionable is that the

art establishment has accepted Duchamp as having made a legitimate contribution to its history, when he feels that the artist is an outright charlatan. At one point, he even stoops so low as to try making his own sexual pun by calling Duchamp a con artiste [cunt artist], having found the Etant donnés to be "one of the greatest domination assaults on a woman that art history has recorded." Throughout the text, Andersen foolishly and quite naively states that the readymades are not art, and he takes us through what he must believe is a logical line of reasoning to dismiss them as such, constantly reminding readers that when a readymade is returned to the setting for which it was originally designed, it reverts back to the object that it was. No kidding! Of course it does, but that is precisely the point of these objects. Context is everything. Indeed, in the case of the readymades, when placed into a museum, it is their very raison d'être. What Andersen seems incapable of understanding is that the readymades are both things simultaneously: objects designed for a specific purpose and, when placed on display in a museum or art gallery, works of art. In a sense, they are conceptually akin an optical illusion, like the schematic drawing of a staircase, for example, that is comprised of steps that go up and down simultaneously. The problem is that our minds are limited in their capacity to see them going in both directions at the same time, but we are intelligent enough as human beings to know that they do. Apparently this simple concept is way over Andersen's head. Either that or, if he understands it at all, he ignores the logic within it, for it does not facilitate his insistence that the readymades be dismissed as works of art.

In the introduction to his book, Andersen takes a swipe at university presses, many of which, we can be fairly safe in assuming, have rejected his manuscripts for publication. "Like mega-corporations in economics, academic presses control the trade," he tells us, "five to ten university art editors with the power to determine what gets published." The opinions of

these highly qualified and informed individuals did little to deter Andersen, for he responded to their rejections by forming his own private printing press, a firm that goes by the name Editions Fabriart, which, on the copyright page of the Duchamp book is identified as an imprint of the consulting firm of Vesti Design. Only from the website for the publishing house do we learn that Vesti Design is founded and owned by Wayne Andersen, and that Editions Fabriart publishes only the writings of one author: Wayne Andersen. Ostensibly, nothing is wrong with publishing your own writings (indeed, I plan to do so one day myself), but if not handled properly, the result can be an academic disaster, which is unquestionably the case with Andersen's book on Duchamp. To begin with, academic presses employ a peer-review process, something that would have caught the countless regrettable errors contained in this book and, anyone familiar with the literature on Duchamp and Dada, would have cut out at least half of the 388 pages of insufferable text by pointing out the simple fact that most of it has been published elsewhere and, in most cases, in writings based on primary source material.1 Andersen is certainly driven in his quest to defame Duchamp, but, apparently, he is not sufficiently motivated to seek out and read the appropriate literature on the artist, and least not enough to make a significant contribution of his own. Even when he does consult the appropriate sources, they are usually only skimmed, causing him to miss important details that could-in some instances-even have bolstered his argument. Anderson tells us, for example, that it will be his purpose in this book to strip Duchamp bare, to "peel away at his mythical overlays until he becomes shiveringly naked… under his wrappings of adulation." With this in mind, he delves into the Duchamp biography, using Calvin Tomkins's excellent book on the artist as his primary guide. In his summary, Andersen tells us that Duchamp "produced no children" (p. 157), but Tomkins is among the first to publish the fact that, in 1911, Jeanne Serre, a model who appeared in several paintings by the artist from this period (one of which, The Bush, Andersen

reproduces), gave birth to his only biological daughter, Yvonne. She was never formally recognized as his offspring, but in the late 1960s, he met and established a close relationship with her during the last years of his life. In my review of the Duchamp retrospective that took place at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1993, I connect the birth of this illegitimate child to the theme of the unobtainable, which I postulate figures into the making of not only the Large Glass, but also the Etant donnés. This review was not published in an obscure periodical, but rather appeared seventeen years ago as a full-length article in the pages of Art in America. Somehow, Andersen managed to miss it.[2]

I realize that within the context of a book review, it is considered bad form to chastise an author for having failed to consult the reviewer's publications, but I have devoted a good part of my scholarly career to writing not only about Duchamp, but also *New York Dada.* Whereas Andersen has read some of my writings on these subjects and even refers to them admiringly, they are mostly from anthologies, and he has missed the more important books, most notably my monograph on *New York Dada* (published in 1994) and the catalogue *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* (published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that I organized for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1996).3 Had he known these publications, he might have spared us his excruciatingly painful indictment of Duchamp's friends and associates-Beatrice Wood, Mina Loy, Arthur Cravan, Man Ray, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven-all of whom are given separate chapters in my book. Even here, Andersen displays a remarkable ignorance of the most current literature on his subject: he gives a biographical sketch of Mina Loy, without knowing that the definitive book on this remarkable woman was written by Carolyn Burke and published in 1996, nor when he discusses the Stettheimer sisters does he seem to know anything about the biography of Florine Stettheimer written by Barbara Bloemink

and published in 1995.[4] He devotes an entire chapter to presenting what he believes is an original interpretation of Duchamp's Large Glass by comparing it to a Rube Goldberg cartoon, which, he claims, is information repressed by Duchamp scholars. "I find no discussion or even mention of this cartoon in any academic essay devoted to a descriptive analysis of the *New York Dada* [magazine] texts or images," he writes. In my own writings, I have discussed the Goldberg cartoon that appeared in *New York Dada* on at least two occasions: once when comparing it to the complex machinations of the Large Glass, and again when pointing out that the twisted pipes it contains mimes the circuitous route of *New York Dada* through various European capitals.[5] Andersen has clearly not done his homework; these are the sort of literary lacunae for which any conscientious professor of art history would fail his students.

It is known that Andersen published this book without requesting permission from the Duchamp Estate (or the agency that represents them: The Artists Rights Society, or ARS) to reproduce the works by Duchamp that it contains. Rather, it appears that he scanned the images from various published sources, without bothering to request permission from the authors or the publishers whose labors he so freely appropriates. If Andersen can adopt such a moral high ground in criticizing Duchamp, how is it that he can so blatantly violate issues of copyright? Maybe this is just one of many duplicitous positions taken by a man who, in his twilight years, wishes to seek revenge from the same sort of institutions that rejected him (if true, I would recommend he heed the advice of Confucius: "Before you embark on a journey of revenge," he warned, "dig two graves"). It was the art establishment, after all, that also understood and embraced the contradictions that lie at the core of Duchamp's work, a philosophical conundrum that is implicit to its meaning. I find myself in an equally complex dilemma in writing this

review, for allowing its publication can only serve to draw more attention to a book that presents no legitimate justification for its existence. To ignore it, however, would seem the greater injustice. Andersen's objections with Duchamp are shared by comparatively few, yet a number are more influential critics, writers who, like himself, believe that Duchamp has no rightful place in the history of 20th century art. These writings can only serve to inhibit a greater understanding of Duchamp and his work, preventing honest and otherwise diligent students from engaging the serious issues that are necessary to fully comprehend its importance and meaning. Refuting such a biased and highly restrictive point of view is-despite the consequences-a worthwhile endeavor.

Notes

Footnote Return 1. The book is also filled with a plethora of typos and clerical errors. At one point, Andersen says that only he has read the text, which is regrettable, for even a casual reader would have caught mistakes in the sequence of footnotes that occur in several places (most notably in chapter 5, where the footnotes start to renumber themselves, a detail ignored where the footnotes themselves appear at the back of the book). This creates a real headache for serious scholars, but as I hope to demonstrate, it is indicative of the way in which the author so casually treats the literature he consults.

Footnote Return 2. See Francis M. Naumann, "The Bachelor's Quest," Art in America 81/9 (September 1993), pp. 72-81, 67, 69

Footnote Return 3.*New York Dada* 1915-23 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) and Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York (Whitney Museum of American Art, November 21, 1996 – February 23, 1997; catalogue distributed by Harry N. Abrams).

Footnote Return 4. Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), and Barbara J. Bloemink, The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

Footnote Return 5. New York Dada, p. 203, and Making Mischief, p. 20.