

ASPECTS OF ART LECTURE

Marcel Duchamp and the Paradox of Modernity

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THE PARADOXICAL NOTION of a modern tradition seems valid to describe Duchamp's long impact on twentieth-century artistic practices. One thing that has made him irresistible to generations of artists is his probing of modernism (taking modernism in its narrow sense of an increasingly autonomous and medium-specific art), a questioning or even a kind of resistance to modernism that was generated by his responses to the paradoxes of modernity.¹ The areas of modernist anxiety Duchamp touched upon included the relation of art to new and outmoded technologies, of mass culture to the individual, mechanical perfectibility and human frailty, the superstition of the new, the promises and failures of progress.

Duchamp's influence is now so endemic that much twentieth-century art seems like a footnote to him.² His name is invoked across not just diverse but theoretically and artistically opposite practices: although this does not necessarily tell us much about his work, it does condition the ways in which it is seen and the selectivity with which it is treated. Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and Jeff Koons, for instance, have claimed to inherit his legacy, as have many other minimalist and conceptual artists; recently, artists working with

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¹ See A. Compagnon, *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris, 1990).

² D. Hopkins, unpublished chapter, from Ades, Cox and Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, forthcoming.

moulds, casts, and the human body, and other ready-found materials (such as Rachel Whiteread, Robert Gober, Mark Quinn, Damien Hirst) have brought back into focus other aspects of his work.

On the other hand, he is also seen as embodying the 'negative cast of modernism' or as presaging post-modernity. This has demonised him for modernist critics like Michael Fried as being responsible for what Fried called the incurable theatricality of literalist art, resulting in a disastrous confusion of the arts and, in Thomas Hess's view, of art with life. Hess also called him a failed modernist.³ Some regard him as the greatest villain of modern art, a kind of serial pied piper who has led three generations of artists up a cul de sac.

There is, in fact, not so much of his work, given his antipathy, having abandoned painting round about 1914, to repeating himself.⁴ It is quite slight, as Lyotard said, and lightly armed.⁵ Four aspects of it could be singled out as having imposed especially on his reputation: his use of what Rodin called 'low forms of realism': moulds, casts and photography, as opposed to the high realism of bronze or stone; the invention of the ready-made; his rejection of the retinal and sanction of the conceptual (this, with clear roots as early as 1914, was increasingly urgently reiterated in the 1950s and 1960s as idea-free retinal art in the form of Abstract Expressionism, triumphed); and finally, his apparent retirement as an artist. For this he was chided by André Breton, the surrealist leader, in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* of 1929. Breton, for whom Duchamp had always been the one to arrive most swiftly at the critical point of ideas, reproached him for giving up the game.

I would like to pause on this last point for a moment, not so much because it turned out to be quite untrue, once the work on which he had been secretly engaged for twenty years, *Etant donné*, was finally revealed to the public after his death in 1968, but because this view of him overlooked or undervalued his known, consistent and prolonged engagement with what were seen as simply technical matters.

In 1935, a few months after publishing *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, a facsimile edition of 70 odd notes and drawings for the eponymous work known familiarly as 'The Large Glass', Duchamp wrote to Katherine Dreier that he was considering making 'an album of

³ See A. Jones, *Postmodernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (MIT, 1995).

⁴ The last painting on canvas Duchamp executed was *Tu m'* (1918).

⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers* (Venice, 1990), p. 11.

approximately all the things I produced'.⁶ He immediately began the time-consuming job of gathering photographs of the works he intended to include in what was initially conceived as a book, but quickly assumed a unique format. The *Boîte-en-valise* (literally box in a suitcase, sometimes translated as Travelling Box, rendered by Ecke Bonk as Portable Museum), as it became, allowed for three- as well as two-dimensional facsimiles, and as a consequence raised new problems of reproduction. The *Boîte-en-valise* combined the practice of publishing facsimiles of his notes loose in boxes (which had begun with the *Box of 1914*, a tiny edition with notes and a drawing reproduced scrupulously from templates of the original paper scraps, housed in a Kodak box for photographic paper), with three-dimensional arrangements related to ideas of storage and display. The works could be packed away in portable form, then, like a travelling salesman's wares, unpacked, revealing the ingenious partly mobile display frames fitted inside. (Plate 1.)

In spite of the fact that he worked on this project off and on over three decades, it was for a long while virtually invisible, or at least ineffectual in the face of Duchamp's reputation for having withdrawn his activity as an artist. Tinkering with the Box was regarded as a kind of mechanical activity with less status than the enigmatic objects and fragments that also occasionally appeared in that long lull following the abandonment of 'The Large Glass' in 1923. However, the nature of the mechanical reproductions he was devising was intimately bound up with his conception of the artist and modernity. If they are technical exercises, they are such in the light of a meditation on the historical relations of art and technology, and on industrial and pre-industrial modes of production, in the context especially of photographic and pictorial illusionism.

Take, for instance, the process he chose for the reproduction of those paintings to be included in the *Boîte-en-valise*. First he collected black and white photographic reproductions of the works, and then hand-coloured them or recorded their colours in detailed notes. From these, monochrome collotypes were made, the first proofs of which Duchamp hand-coloured himself (the *coloriages originaux*, one copy of which he placed in each of the twenty de luxe editions of the box). The sequence of colours was then established through a series of watercolours made by *pochoir* specialists, and hand-cut stencils were prepared, for each colour, which was applied individually with a special brush. This

⁶ E. Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Portable Museum* (London, 1989), p. 147. The following account of the *Boîte* is indebted to Bonk's detailed study.

process is highly skilled and time-consuming, and ‘cannot be used for projects of a commercial nature’.⁷ The miniature replicas of the ready-mades raised another interesting problem: the irony of needing to hand-craft a mould for what was originally a mass-produced object, in order then to mass-produce it again. The original of *Fountain* (Plate 2a)—itself a cast—having been lost, Duchamp made in 1938 a tiny papier-mâché model of the urinal (Plate 2b), which was the basis for an ‘inter-positive’ copy made to scale, commissioned from a potter, and from which a mould was taken to produce the cast multiples. Slowly Duchamp received the miniatures, the first batch made using an elaborate white porcelain glaze, later changed to a cheaper matt glaze. By 1940, he had about 270 units, but it was not until the 1950s that he completed the run of 300 needed for the full edition. Duchamp had, in other words, deliberately eschewed the banal modes of mechanical reproduction represented by the book for forms of reproduction which are part-manual and part-mechanical—which resisted commodification while being amenable to production in multiples. In pursuing this idea, he seems to be pinpointing a moment in modernity in which the artist is not cut off from the craftsman/technician through the processes of industrialisation and mass production.

The first point I want to draw from this can perhaps best be highlighted through Walter Benjamin’s ideas about aura and its loss in such texts as ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (written in 1936, the year Duchamp started work on the *Boîte-en-valise*) or ‘A Small History of Photography’ (1931). In the latter, Benjamin isolates a moment at the beginning of the new technology of photography, before its first full industrial exploitation with the visiting card pictures, when the portrait miniaturist painters became professional photographers, bringing with them a craft training which contributed to the exceptionally high standard of these early photographs. Once industrialised, Benjamin argues, a sharp decline in quality set in. He traces in these early instances the presence of an ‘aura’, due to the continuum of illumination from brightness to the dark, a consequence of such technical facts as the long exposure time. But the crucial point is that at this moment the painter had not parted company with the technician, in the new science—or art—of photography:

. . . in that early period subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they became incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed. For soon advances in optics made instruments available that put darkness to

⁷ *ibid.* p. 153.

flight and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror. After 1880, though, photographers made it their business to simulate . . . the aura which had been banished from the picture with the rout of darkness through faster lenses, exactly as it was banished from reality by the deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie.

Duchamp's dissatisfaction with contemporary notions of art were sometimes expressed as regret for a lost unity of artist and technician; his absorption in technical issues was not regressive or nostalgic, although he referred sometimes to outmoded or archaic machines (the chocolate grinder, for instance). It was rather an open questioning of a misunderstood gap. The question of 'art' or 'anti-art' did not enter into it: Duchamp was all too aware of the kind of bourgeois attack on photography which initiated a hundred years of inappropriate agonising over whether or not photography was an art: 'The very wish [to capture fleeting mirror images] is blasphemous. Man is made in the image of God, and God's image cannot be captured by any machine of human devising. The utmost the artist may venture, borne on the wings of divine inspiration, is to reproduce man's God-given features without the help of any machine, in the moment of highest dedication, at the higher bidding of his genius'. 'Here', Benjamin comments, 'we have the philistine notion of *art* in all its overweening obtuseness, a stranger to all technical considerations, which feels that its end is nigh with the alarming appearance of the new technology.'⁸

Duchamp did not pretend that art had not lost its grander functions in terms of simple, communicable and repeatable meanings. His famous comment to Cabanne that 'Formerly, painting had other functions, it could be religious, philosophical, moral'⁹ can be read as regretful and nostalgic, or as simply stating a fact. Upon this, in a sense, hinges the cast of the work that followed his withdrawal from the avant-garde, the character of its irony. Perhaps it is what he imagined figured in one of his notes: '*allégorie d'oubli*'. '*Oubli*' can be used in the sense of oblivion as well as forgetfulness, and Duchamp seems to be taking allegory in its classical sense here, of figuring an abstract concept. However, how can allegory figure absence? The irony here does inform his 'Large Glass', but not in purely negative terms.

There is a possibly apocryphal story of Duchamp visiting the Salon

⁸ W. Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One-Way Street* (1931), p. 241. Duchamp's experiments with film and with optical machines during the 1920s could be discussed in this context.

⁹ P. Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (Paris, 1967), p. 74.

de la Locomotion Aérienne at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1912 (26 October–10 November), with Léger and Brancusi.¹⁰ According to Léger, Duchamp ‘walked among the motors and propellers without saying a word. Then he suddenly turned to Brancusi: “Painting is finished. Who can do better than that propeller. Tell me, can you do that?” He was very taken with these precise things.’ It is significant that it was Léger, not Duchamp, who remembered this, for Léger expressed very similar sentiments in those pre-war years, and was to remain an optimistic adherent to a machine aesthetic rooted in a belief in the demotic. Apollinaire too embraced modernity: ‘I think the modern style exists, but what characterises today’s style is less noticeable in the façades of houses than in the iron constructions, machines, cars, bicycles, aeroplanes.’¹¹ Of Duchamp, however, Apollinaire noted on the one hand an outmoded attachment to the nude, and on the other suggested that ‘perhaps it will be the task of an artist as detached from aesthetic preoccupations and as intent on the energetic as Marcel Duchamp, to reconcile art and the people.’ (A comment Duchamp dismissed, but now seems more than half prophetic.¹²)

Duchamp himself, however, even before the First World War altered perceptions of technology and the machine, from beneficent aids to human progress and welfare, to destructive and dehumanising forces, mocked the metaphorical use of man/machine imagery: ‘Against compulsory military service: a “deferment” of each limb, of the heart and the other anatomical parts; each soldier being already unable to put his uniform on again, his heart feeding telephonically, a deferred arm, etc.’¹³

However, if there is one constant theme to whose service the absorbing investigation of technological and material potentialities is put in Duchamp’s work, it is, not the nude, but sexuality as a fundamental aspect of human identity. ‘I believe in eroticism a lot, because it’s truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary

¹⁰ D. Vallier interview with F. Léger, ‘La vie fait l’oeuvre de Fernand Léger’ in *Cahiers d’Art* 29, no. 3 (Paris, 1954), p. 140. Transl. in W. Camfield *Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain* (Houston, 1989), p. 44.

¹¹ G. Apollinaire, ‘La Renaissance des arts décoratifs’, *L’Intransigeant*, 6 June 1912.

¹² G. Apollinaire, ‘Aesthetic Meditations’ (Transl. H. B. Chipp) *Theories of Modern Art* (London, 1968), p. 246.

¹³ Marcel Duchamp, ‘The Box of 1914’, in ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York, 1973), p. 23.

schools called Symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another “ism” so to speak.’¹⁴

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, or ‘The Large Glass’, (Plate 3), was constructed in New York between 1915 and 1923, when it was abandoned ‘definitively unfinished’. It was a technically elaborate transcription via various traditional or wholly unexpected mediums, from notes, sketches and finished paintings of the period between 1912 and 1914, made in Paris, with additional planned intrusions of chance. Later, Duchamp indicated that it was more a mass of ideas than a picture, but among these ideas were ones very materially to do with the physical substance of the object. It was a ‘delay in glass, as one might say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver’.¹⁵ This fragment comes from another collection of his notes, published in a limited edition of loose sheets in the *Green Box* in 1934, with the same title as the glass: *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. The collections of notes were meant to be read together with the ‘Glass’, as a catalogue ‘genre Armes de St Etienne’, to ‘go with the “Glass”’, and it could be consulted in order to see the “Glass”, because in my view it should not be looked at in the aesthetic sense of the word. It was necessary to consult the book and to see them together. The conjunction of the two things removed the retinal side that I don’t like. It was very logical.’¹⁶ Their publication prompted the very first attempt to provide a coherent account of the ‘Glass’s’ imagery: André Breton’s ‘Lighthouse of the Bride’, published in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934.

Simply to be able to name the parts of the ‘Glass’ at this stage was a major advance, but Breton went further. For him, the work stood alone among all the other art and artists he championed — surrealist, cubist, primitive — as a hieroglyph of modernity and its failures. ‘This “delay” will continue to be a yardstick by which one may measure everything that artistic routine may still attempt fraudulently to register as an advance. It is wonderful to see how perfectly the Large Glass keeps intact its powers of anticipation. It is imperative that it should be kept luminously erect, its light there to guide the ships of the future through the reefs of a dying civilisation.’¹⁷ The negative dialectic here

¹⁴ A. d’Harnoncourt and K. McShine, *Marcel Duchamp* (The Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 309.

¹⁵ *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, typographic version of *The Green Box* by Richard Hamilton, transl. by George Heard Hamilton (1960), n.p.

¹⁶ P. Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (Paris, 1967), p. 73.

¹⁷ A. Breton, ‘Phare de la mariée’, *Minotaure*, 6, Winter 1935, p. 49.

seems unusual in that Breton normally stressed the positive reconciliation of Surrealism's poles of dream and reality, waking and sleeping. But it should be remembered that the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) had attacked the proscription by civilisation (progress and rationality) of all those things that it rightly or wrongly condemned as superstition, or irrationality. Here, with his depiction of man reduced to the immediate needs of self-preservation, shorn through estrangement from the rights to his own imagination, Breton anticipated Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

With the 'Glass', Breton writes, 'we are in the presence of a mechanistic, cynical interpretation of the phenomenon of love: the passage of woman from the state of virginity to the state of non-virginity adopted as the theme of a basically non-sentimental speculation which would almost seem to have been engaged in by a visitor from outer space making a conscientious effort to visualise this kind of operation.'¹⁸ The cold speculation of the mechanised erotic hints at Leonardo, whose diagram-drawing of copulation prompted Duchamp's *Virgin 1* (Plate 4)—a disquieting drawing, Apollinaire said.

Many readings of the 'Glass' have followed Breton's, relating it to alchemy, to catholicism and other myths such as Hindu and Greek, to psychoanalysis, to the Cabbala, to the dialectic between nature and science; it is packed with references to laws of physics, mathematics, and so on.¹⁹ It has been seen as a giant photographic analogue, and as a polemic against the idea of the autonomous art work. All are in a sense possible, but for the moment I just want to stress the structure of the 'Glass': two identically sized panes, whose respective imagery is of a visual disunity striking even for the twentieth century.

The lower part of the glass notably rehabilitates perspective; the radical or reactionary character of this might be understood in the context of cubism. The cubists had, it was generally agreed, recently finally eliminated this cornerstone of the mechanics of Western illusionism. The pictorial images in this part of the glass, notably the chocolate grinder, were based on the paintings that marked Duchamp's adoption of a dry machine style, following his abandonment of experiments in the fragmentation of space and objects and in movement.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 41.

¹⁹ See for instance O. Paz, *Marcel Duchamp or The Castle of Purity* (London, 1970), and '*Water writes in always in* plural', *Marcel Duchamp*, 1973; A. Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (1970); L. Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, 1983).

Was this move simply Duchamp's reaction against the cubism that had forced him to withdraw his *Nude Descending a Staircase* from the cubists' room at the 1912 Salon des Indépendents? This had certainly profoundly shaken his faith in the freedom of the avant-garde. But more seems to be at stake than this institutional disappointment. If it concerns a larger loss of conviction in either cubism or futurism, what caused this? Or does it relate to his reaction, not just to the organised Puteaux group of cubists to which he belonged, but to the infinitely more original, troubling and restless cubism of Picasso and Braque?

Duchamp was certainly familiar with the claims to a new language that his circle especially among the groups of modern artists was promoting; in 1911 the Société Normande de Peinture Moderne, to whose exhibition Duchamp contributed a *Portrait* of his father, *Chess Game* and a *Nude*, blandly stated that 'each generation contributes a new form of thought expressed in a new language.'²⁰ But what would this 'new language' look like, which was to do away with the old forms of pictorial illusionism, among them perspective? Jacques Rivière, writing in 1912, described the ideal plenitude that should result from the dismissal of one-point perspective, which was accidental (indicating the position of the spectator) and hypocritical, because it denied the painting's flatness.

This to and fro, this coming and going, by making hollows and saliences, will end up giving the picture as a whole a certain volume, more or less independent of perspective. The whole scene, like the individual object, will be endowed with a geometrical firmness; it will show itself in its true solidity, which is altogether different from the dry and fictive depth of a stage setting. We shall have before our eyes no longer the fragile and artificial vision of an instant, but an image as dense and full as reality.²¹

However, Rivière himself had misgivings about the results of cubist experiments, which he couched in the form of a lecture to the cubists on their mistakes. The efforts to give depth, which had replaced perspective, should only mark the independence of objects in the third dimension; if the artist gives to objects and to what separates them the same appearance they are confused and welded into an inexplicable continuum; if nothing is sacrificed as secondary there is no selection and

²⁰ Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, 'Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy', 6 May 1911, *Marcel Duchamp* (Venice, 1993), n. p.

²¹ J. Rivière, 'Sur les tendances actuelles de la peinture', *Revue d'Europe et d'Amérique*, March 1912, quoted in T. J. Clark, 'Cubism and Collectivity', unpublished chapter from forthcoming book, p. 41.

pictures collapse into anarchy; if space is made solid the intervals themselves become in the end entirely imaginary objects.

T. J. Clark has recently argued that the changes in Picasso's cubist paintings between 1910 and 1912 reveal a failure to find a sustainable alternative to the old practices of illusionism that had long sustained and challenged painting. It was still the old signs that do 'the main work of describing' in paintings like *The Poet* (Plate 5), but they pretend, in a sense, not to. They are facile and extrinsic, the snatches of the external world, the pipe and jaunty moustache, suggesting by their very banality that the true job of revealing something particular about the objects depicted by the painter, the metaphorical dimension, must be happening elsewhere, in the vaunted new idiom. But, in converting materialisation into mapping, the solid body with shaded sides into a diagram and the reversible cube into a grid 'the alternative models that had seemed so promising had ended by swallowing the techniques of illusionism, or standing in ironic relation to them.'²² Clark suggests that the contrast to these facile signs, remnants of the old language, is not a new but a 'counterfeit' new language.

Perhaps, then, the sense that cubism was in a magnificent end-game that he couldn't follow contributed to the moves Duchamp began to make away from painting in 1913–14. His own cubist experiments had already included a formal and literal comment on pictorial metaphor; in 1911 he painted a chess game with the sides of the canvas painted out to the dimensions of a board, as if the picture were the chess grid itself, while the chess pieces scattered in the heads of the players as well as on the board offer a temporal dimension (Plate 6). He described this later as 'indefinite space',²³ though he may also have been aware of Jouffret's notion that the operation of the chess player's mind resembles a visualisation of the fourth dimension.²⁴ In 1913, in response both to Picasso's cubist *Constructions* which used 'real' materials, and to futurism, he placed a bicycle wheel on a stool, and in 1914 chose his first ready-made, the *Bottlerack*. At the same time, he abandoned the 'new language' of cubism for a dry, machine style in which, as in the first version of the chocolate grinder, he returns to the full panoply of

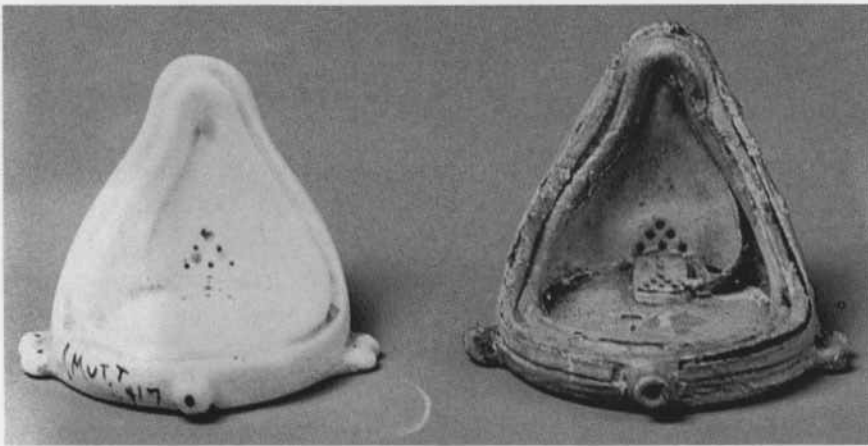
²² *ibid.*

²³ M. Duchamp, *Lecture*, 1964.

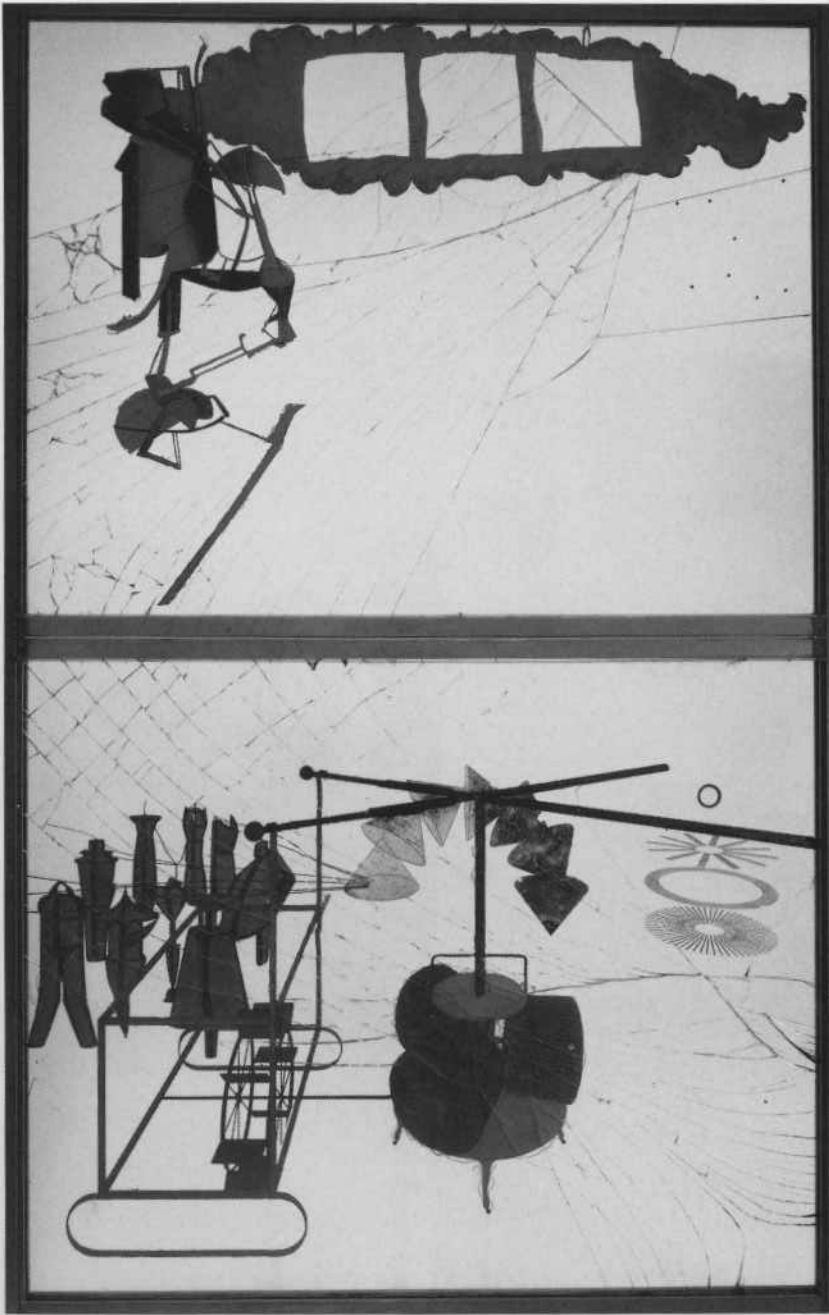
²⁴ See L. Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, 1983).



a. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, porcelain urinal. Original lost (photograph by Alfred Stieglitz 1917). © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996

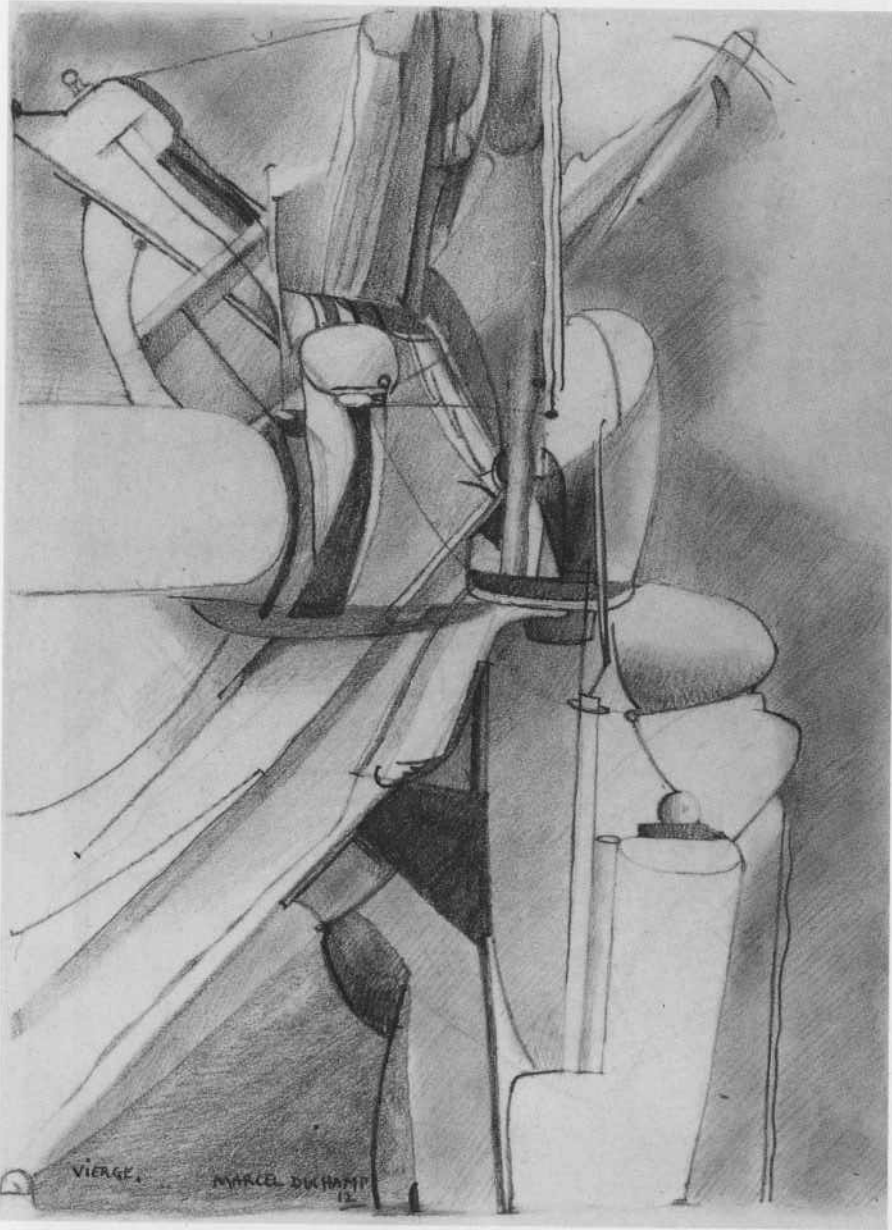


b. Marcel Duchamp, 1st miniature version of *Fountain* for *Boîte-en-valise*, glazed ceramic, 4.5 x 6 x 8 cm, with papier mâché model. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996

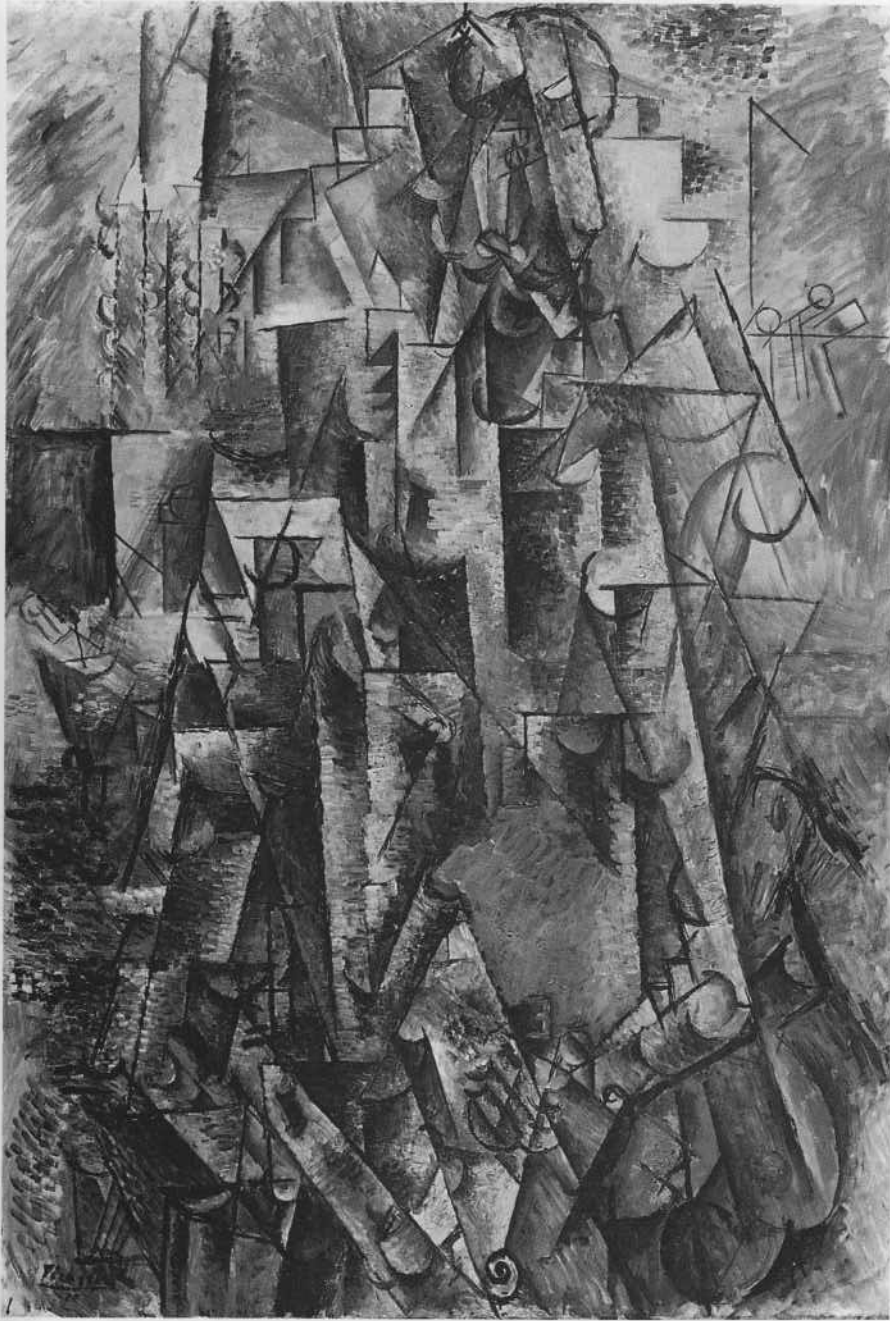


Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915–23, New York, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire and dust on two glass panels, each mounted between two glass panels, w. wood and steel frame, 227.5 × 175.8 cm. The Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier. Photo by Graydon Wood, 1992.

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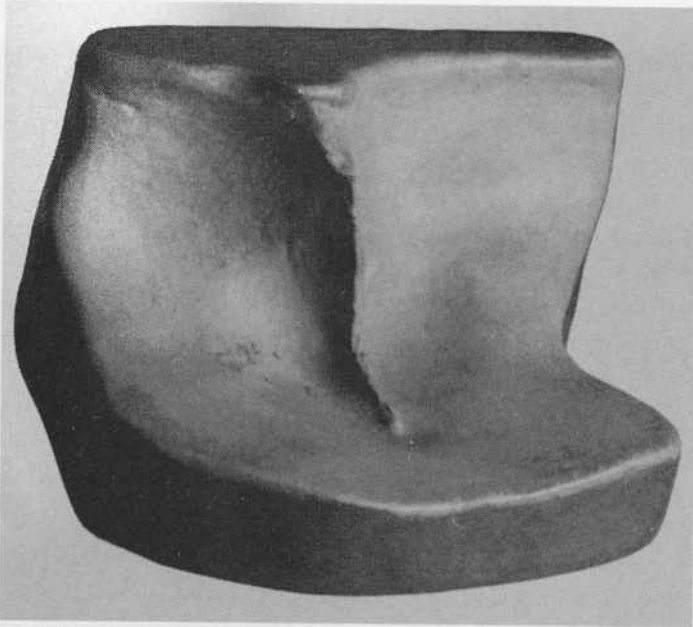
Marcel Duchamp, *Virgin [No.1]*, July 1912, pencil on paper, 428 × 220 mm.
The Philadelphia Museum of Art: A. E. Gallatin Collection. Photo by Lynn Rosenthal, 1994.
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Pablo Picasso, *The Poet*, 1911, oil on canvas, 131.7 × 89.7 cm.
Photograph © 1995 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
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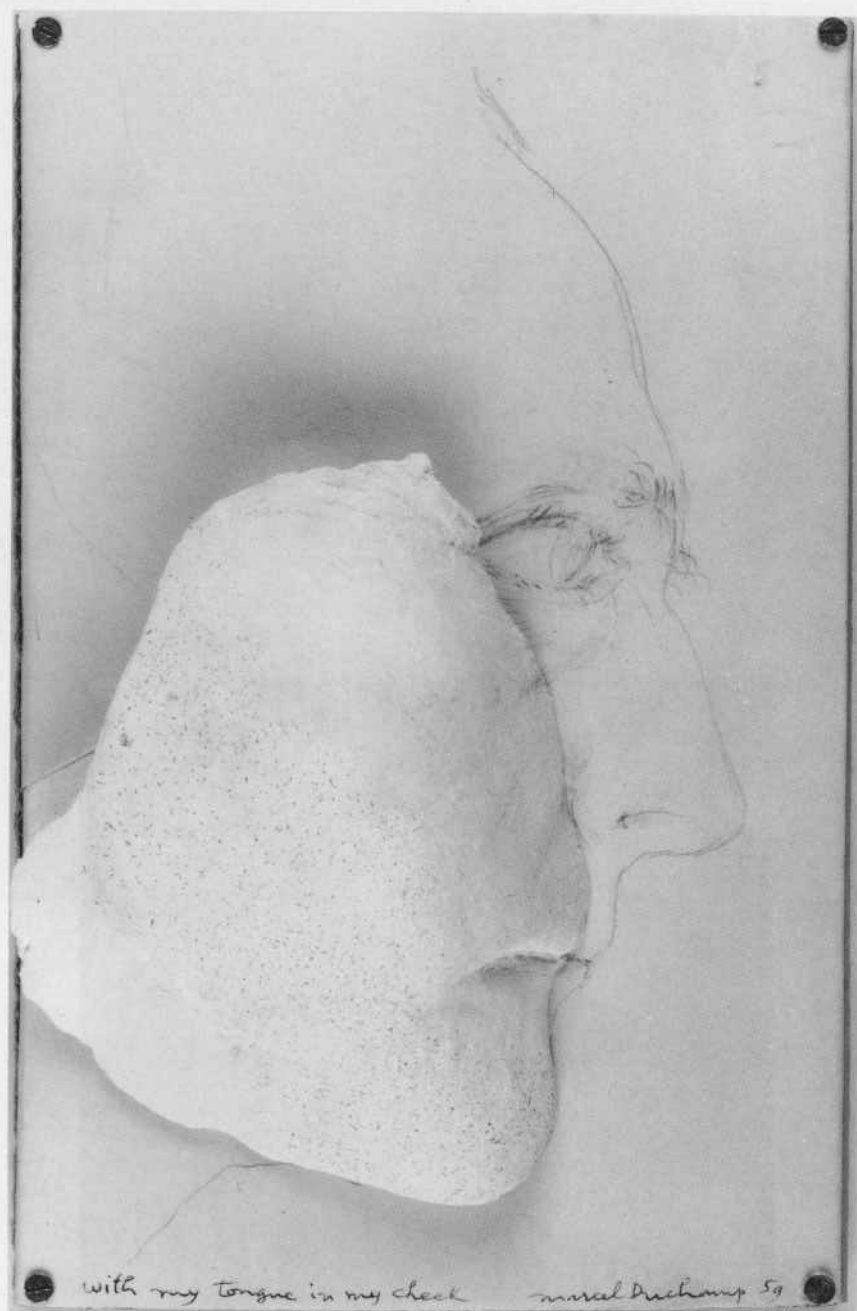
Marcel Duchamp, *The Chess Players*, 1911, oil on canvas, 50 × 61 cm.
Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996



a. Marcel Duchamp, *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950, galvanized plaster, 9 × 14 × 12.5 cm.
Private Collection. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996



b. Cover of *le surréalisme, même*, No. 1, October 1956
(with photograph of *Female Fig Leaf*)



Marcel Duchamp, *With my Tongue in my Cheek*, 1959, plaster mounted on wood, pencil and paper, 25 x 15 x 5.1 cm. Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1996

the old methods of illusionistic depiction including perspective and shadows.

To what purpose then, does he systematically set about examining the old techniques, both pictorial and sculptural, such as perspective? Whether ironically or not, he ponders them in the context of different materials and technologies—such as glass. ‘Perspective was very important. The Large Glass constitutes a rehabilitation of perspective which was completely ignored, disparaged. For me, perspective became absolutely scientific . . . based on calculations and dimensions.’²⁵

In the lower half of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, the bachelors’ domain, the various forms which pertain to the bachelors (nine malic moulds on the left, watermill, glider, sieves, chocolate grinder and at the right the three oculist witnesses), are tightly drawn and apparently disposed according to the rules of scientific perspective. Their forms are ‘imperfect and measurable’.²⁶

The ‘Glass’ as a whole, its two identical panes of glass one above the other, resembles whole page diagrams in such classic treatises on perspective as Abraham Bosse or Dubreuil. In these, normally, one section refers to the geometrical plan, the other to a perspective view (the surface seen in a single glance) of the same figure. Jean Clair lists numerous parallels in the catalogue to the Duchamp retrospective which inaugurated the Pompidou Centre in 1977.²⁷ But in the lower half of the ‘Glass’ there is no domain as such, no circumambient to complete the perspectival illusion. ‘All that background on the canvas that had to be thought about, tactile space like wallpaper, all that garbage . . . I wanted to sweep it away. With the glass, you can concentrate on the figure if you want, and you can change the background if you want by moving the glass. The transparency of the glass plays for you’.²⁸

The elimination of the background in the medium of glass has another effect, however. When the ‘Glass’ can be viewed with sufficient space behind it, the bachelor machines appear firmly situated on the ground, in the space of the real objects of which they are the perspectival projections. There is an uncanny doubling, as they are both on the

²⁵ Cabanne op. cit. p. 65.

²⁶ *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 44.

²⁷ J. Clair, ‘Perspective: Marcel Duchamp et la tradition des perspectiveurs’, *Marcel Duchamp*, 3, ‘abécédaire’ (Paris, 1977).

²⁸ Interview with Marcel Duchamp by F. Roberts, ‘I propose to strain the laws of physics’, 1963, *Art News*, December 1968, p. 46.

surface and beyond it, entering our space backwards, as it were, as figures already perspectively distorted.

The sieves, on the other hand, borrowed straight from de Bosse, fan flatly across the surface, while the oculist witnesses, are drawn as ellipses, in depth, but without recession. The nine malic moulds conform precisely to the schema in that those in the foreground are largest. Their metal outlines or casings are curved to indicate volume but there is no shading. They are positioned, however, according to a special unit of measurement: Duchamp's *Standard Stoppages*, the three threads each one metre long dropped from a height of one metre to give a new unit of measurement produced by chance — canned chance.

This is not a scene constructed according to the laws of perspective, but a series of demonstrations of the uses of perspective in the male domain to map and control objects. In the upper part of the glass, the bride's domain, the apparent lack of perspective is equally significant. Its absence is compensated by copious notes in which Duchamp's interest in n-dimensional geometries and the fourth dimension is playfully displayed. 'By a simple intellectual analogy I considered that the fourth dimension cd. project a 3-dimensional object — in other words, that every 3-dimensional object that we coldly see is a projection of a thing with 4 dimensions, that we don't know. It's a bit of a sophism, but after all, it's possible.'²⁹

Thus Duchamp purports to render the pseudo-metaphysical language of the fourth dimension as a 'higher' dimension, relating to a 'higher' reality, as the cohort of Puteaux cubists had it; however, a note from the *Green Box*, which eschews any mention of the fourth dimension, offers an explanation of the absence of perspective in terms of perspective as an ontological system.

The Pendu femelle
is the form in ordinary perspective
of a Pendu femelle for which one could perhaps
try to discover
the true form

—
This comes from the
fact that any
form is the perspective
of another form

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 68.

according to a certain vanishing point
and a certain distance.³⁰

Thus the unknown female form could be known according to the rules of the masculine masters of perspective — the oculist witnesses, say — below, but only in terms of an impossible condition.

The idea that it should be possible to know the true, the real form of the bride through an apparently scientific method echoes the notion of the gendered character of scientific enquiry. Woman is unknown, and the unknown is also woman. This, as David Hopkins has argued, gathered pace with the Enlightenment, so that the traditionally allegorised female figure of Natura/mother goddess becomes the object of technological research, her mysterious processes stripped to the scientific gaze.³¹ This image of knowledge as stripping was common also to the related pseudo-science of alchemy, and of course crops up in another pseudo-science, psychoanalysis. Witness Freud's notorious aside in the 'Three Essays on Sexuality': 'The erotic life of women — partly owing to the stunting effects of civilised condition, and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity — is still veiled in impenetrable obscurity.'³² Duchamp, however, is closer to a dialectic of knowledge and being, which exposes the pretension of science: 'there is no form of being in the world that science could not penetrate, but what can be penetrated by science is not being.'³³

The bride is, unlike Natura as earth, placed in the upper regions. She is the bride of Christ as well as the bride of man, and, as John Golding has pointed out, the vertical disposition recalls the traditional Christian imagery of assumptions and transfigurations.³⁴ The symbolic structures Duchamp sets in play have their significance always as possibles, in which the very overlappings and transformations — from male to female, up to down, machine to flesh, science to myth — call into question the very idea of any one authoritative paradigm.

For there are often dislocations and reversals, for instance with the 'stripped bare' of the title. 'The life of eroticism . . . is completely close

³⁰ *The Green Box*, op. cit. above, n. 15 n.p.

³¹ D. Hopkins, *Hermeticism, Catholicism and Gender as Structure in the work of Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Essex, 1989).

³² S. Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', Pelican Freud Library, 7, *On Sexuality* (London, 1977), p. 63.

³³ T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London), p. 26.

³⁴ J. Golding, *Duchamp: The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (London, 1973), reprinted in J. Golding, *Visions of the Modern* (London, 1994), p. 265.

to life in general . . . more than philosophy or anything like that . . . it's there stripped bare . . . it's a form of fantasy . . . it's a little to do also . . . stripped bare, probably had even a "naughty" connotation with Christ . . . you know Christ was stripped bare and it was a naughty form of introducing eroticism and religion . . . I'm ashamed of what I'm saying.'³⁵

The *Green Box* Notes reveal a whole gamut of forms of propulsion and movement, visible and invisible sources of energy in 'The Large Glass'. The Bachelor machine passes from steam to internal combustion engine; it includes a water fall, glider and a hook made of a substance of oscillating density (extendible rubber). The bride is/runs on love-gasoline; her stripping produces sparks, she is a one-stroke engine, desire magneto, the second stroke controls the clockwork machinery like 'the throbbing jerk of the minute hand.'

There are no prime movers in this mechanistic universe on glass: the Handler of Gravity and the Inspector of Space mentioned in the Notes were not represented. It alternates between activity and stasis, energy and dissolution. Among the notes listing forms of energy, is the single word *Repos*, rest. And in spite of the vivid expressions of generative power, the machine is running down. It gathers dust, and rusts, as though Duchamp were pondering the Second Law of Thermodynamics in relation to the loss of desire.

The glass is a pictured algebraic equation: a over b, 'a is to b as . . .', a formula Duchamp particularly relished, insofar as it left all sorts of possible substitutes for the term of the equation. For Duchamp, one of the coefficients was usually art.³⁶ In the *Box of 1914*, he noted that 'arrhe is to art as merdre is to merde, and that the arrhe of painting was feminine in gender'.

Michel Sanouillet compared this Jarryesque equation to the special law of relativity, but surely it is not a law of the same kind. It postulates a set of relatives apparently analogical in character; but the analogies are only not tautological insofar as each side of the double equation diverges, ludicrously or irrationally or like a linguistic pun, from itself.

³⁵ Marcel Duchamp, radio interview with Richard Hamilton and George Heard Hamilton, BBC London 1966.

³⁶ Alfred Jarry once reviewed a book by Gaston Danville, *La Psychologie de l'Amour*, which tried to express the variation in the relation between the affective and mental states of a subject, in response to their sexual desire for another person, in terms of an algebraic equation ($\frac{\Delta}{\delta} =$); A. Jarry, *La Revue Blanche* 1er Mars 1903, in Jarry, *La Chandelle Verte* (Paris, 1969), p. 665.

Scientific rules, Duchamp held, are tautologies that lead straight back to myths. 'Take the notion of cause: cause and effect, different and opposite. It's quite indefensible. It's a myth from which the idea of God has been drawn, considered as a model for all cause. If one doesn't believe in God, the idea of cause has no meaning.'³⁷

One of the last of Duchamp's secrets, which came to light more or less posthumously, like *Given*, is the infrathin (*inframince*). It was an idea, however, that Duchamp had pondered since at least 1937. Duchamp usually spoke of the infrathin through examples: ('When the tobacco smoke smells also of the / mouth which exhales it, the 2 odors / marry by infrathin (olfactory/infrathin)').³⁸ It is the minimal change needed to pass from one dimension to another: from two to three dimensions, for instance, in the lifting of a flat cloth in a breeze; reflections in mirrors, creases in clothes; it is the difference between two mass-produced objects from the same mould, twins, or peas in a pod; allegory, Duchamp said, was 'in general an application of the infrathin'.

The ready-mades are shadowcasters, and as such 'work in the infrathin'. Shadows, which normally give depth, indicate inclination of a surface with respect to a light source or the position of a body. The urinal *Fountain* was famously photographed to produce the outline of the Virgin within its Buddha frame; shadows of other ready-mades reveal their linear bodiless character, spidery and formless as in *Tu m'* (Plate 7a). The *Female Fig Leaf* (Plate 7b) was lit and photographed so as to appear through a shifting of shadows from concave to convex.

The sporadic appearance of cast or partly cast objects after the War related to the posthumously revealed *Etant Donn e*, *Given (1) The Waterfall*, (2) *The Illuminating Gas* (1946–66). Some were studies, others actual fragments from the casting of the nude figure which lies at the heart of this work. A large wooden door is pierced by two small holes, which give onto a dark passage, ending in a jagged hole through a brick wall, revealing a brightly lit landscape, with mist, cypress trees and a sparkling stream, with a mass of twigs and leaves in the foreground on which reclines a nude woman holding a gas lamp aloft, but with her face veiled in hair. Her legs are shockingly splayed towards the spectator as in Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, but otherwise the scene sums up all the idyllic settings of the classical nude. The illusion is

³⁷ 'Ephemerides', 2nd August 1945, *Marcel Duchamp* (Venice, 1993), n.p.

³⁸ 'Infrathin', *Marcel Duchamp Notes* (ed. and transl. P. Matisse) (Boston, 1983).

brilliant and proclaims its artificiality even as we become aware that the elements of which it is constructed are 'real'.

The single most important fact about *Etant Donn e*, *Given* (1) *The Waterfall*, (2) *The Illuminating Gas*, is that it physically demands the presence of the unique spectator. It cannot, quite literally, be photographed because the physical presence of the door/barrier remains as part of the experience even when the spectator's binocular sight has pierced it through the fixed eye-holes. The spectator must be present and must be barred, the position in relation to the object of his gaze fixed like that of the artist and his model in classical perspective. The vanishing point is a hole seen through a hole. Moulded from plaster covered with pigskin, the nude appears to belong to the Ovidian world of Diana at rest or Venus asleep, emblem of the anatomy of desire.

Benjamin's notion of 'aura' had reference to a special quality linked to uniqueness and a kind of distance in the work of art that was lost in forms of mechanical reproduction like photography and film. It is a notoriously ambiguous concept in that some have taken its absence from modern reproductive techniques as a regrettable loss of authenticity and uniqueness, while others have welcomed it as freeing the work of art from its 'parasitical dependence upon ritual' (in modern times the secular ritual of the exhibition), and introducing a modern form of perception suitable for mass consumption. For unlike film, 'Painting', Benjamin writes, 'simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience.'³⁹

In *Given*, another 'scene' of stripping bare like 'The Large Glass', everything is concentrated into the act of looking, and only one person at a time can ever see in. The aura of the work of art is also the aura of desire.

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be. While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—that is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. Now, to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. And the

³⁹ W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (London, 1977), p. 236.

difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the picture is unmistakeable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately conjoined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The stripping bare of the object, the destruction of the aura, is the mark of a perception whose sense of the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness — by means of its reproduction.⁴⁰

The experience of looking at *Given* purports to be a to and fro between exposure and concealment, proximity and distance, realisation and desire, a wholly palpable work which one is barred from touching, objects in real space which we can only — one by one — gaze at. But Duchamp was perfectly aware that you cannot 'manufacture' aura, any more than you can force paintings to bear the didactic or moral messages they once confidently conveyed. The 'aura' here is so exaggerated that it becomes counterfeit; you can't go back to that tradition, and you can't deny its allure. Duchamp approaches the whole idea with irony, just as he did the symbolic structures in 'The Large Glass'. His genius is that it ends by being an affirmative irony (Plate 8).

⁴⁰ W. Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', p. 250.