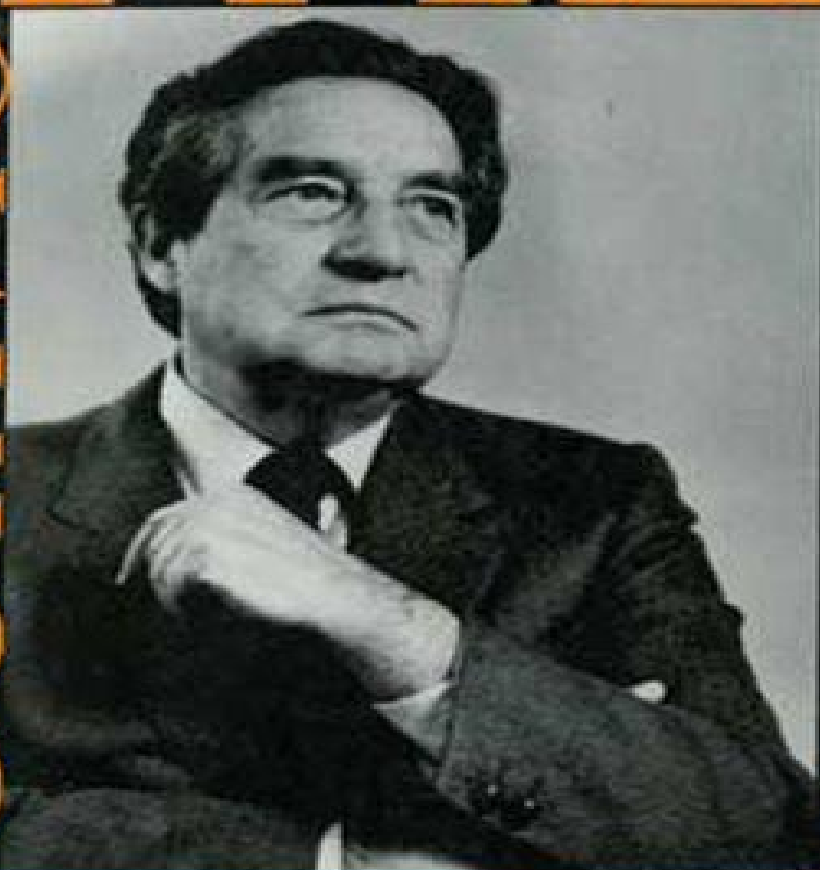


# PAZ

OCTAVIO



Winner of the  
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for Literature

## Marcel Duchamp Appearance Stripped Bare

"Luminous . . . A marvel of limpid readability."  
—*Boston Globe*

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■ In 1923 Marcel Duchamp left the *Large Glass* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*) “finally unfinished.” That was when the legend began: one of the most famous painters of our century had abandoned art to devote himself to chess. But in 1969, a few months after his death, critics and the public discovered to their amazement that Duchamp had been working in secret for twenty years (1946-66) on a work that was probably no less important and complex than the *Large Glass*. It was an Assemblage called *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*), and it is now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as are most of Duchamp's works. The title of the Assemblage alludes to one of the most important notes in the *Green Box*, that collection of ninety-three documents (photographs, drawings, and manuscript notes from 1911 to 1915) published in 1934 and constituting a sort of guidebook or manual to the *Large Glass*. And so the new work may be seen as another version of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.

In the autumn of 1973 a large retrospective Duchamp exhibition was organized in the United States by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art of New York. At the request of both institutions I wrote for the occasion an essay on *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*. That essay complements another text of mine, written in 1966 and included in the “portmanteau book” *Marcel Duchamp, or the Castle of Purity* (New York, 1970). The present volume comprises both studies. The first, after a brief introduction to Duchamp's work, analyzes the *Large Glass*; the second examines the Assemblage and shows the relationship between these two works. When I was preparing this new edition I made a few scattered corrections in the first essay; in the process I added some thirty pages in which I try to uncover all the elements making up the *Large Glass*, the function of each one, and the relationships that unite them. I also revised the second essay and added another fifty pages. In these, my most recent reflections on the subject, I have tried to show where Duchamp's work belongs in the main tradition of the West—the physics and metaphysics not of science but of love—and its meta-ironic relationship with that tradition.

It is above all the rigorous unity of Marcel Duchamp's work that surprises anyone reviewing it in its entirety. In fact, everything he did revolves around a single object, as elusive as life itself. From the *Nude Descending a Staircase* to the naked girl in the Philadelphia Assemblage, via the *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, his life's work can be seen as different moments—the different appearances—of the same reality. Anamorphosis in the literal meaning of the word: to see this work in its successive forms is to return to the original form, the true source of appearances. An attempt at revelation, or, as he used to say, “ultrarapid exposure.” He was fascinated by a four-dimensional object and the shadows it throws, those shadows we call realities. The object is an Idea, but the Idea resolved at last into a naked girl: a presence.

O.

*Mexico, August 20, 1976.*



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[Forewo](#)

[List of Illustratio](#)

[The Castle of Puri](#)

[\\* Water Writes Always in \\* Plur](#)

[Chronolog](#)

# ILLUSTRATIONS

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Comb, 1916.

Ball of Twine (With Hidden Noise), 1916

Air de Paris.

Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy? 1921

The Large Glass, or The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, 1915-23.

Diagram based on The Large Glass Completed, 1965.

Portrait (Dulcinea), 1911.

Typographic version of the Large Glass.

Tantric Imagery of Kali.

Door of Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-66.

Tu m'.

Window installation at Gotham Book Man for publication of André Breton 's Arcane 17.

Cols alités (Bedridden Mountains), 1959.

Photo of Duchamp and his wife at the foot of a waterfall.

The Triumph of Venus.

To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour, 1916.

Door of Given: 1. The Illuminating Gas, 2. The Waterfall, 1948-49.



■ Perhaps the two painters who have had the greatest influence on our century are Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. The former by his works; the latter by a single work that is nothing less than the negation of work in the modern sense of the word. The transformations that Picasso's painting has gone through—metamorphoses would be a more accurate word—have astonished us consistently over a period of more than fifty years; Duchamp's inactivity is no less astonishing and, in its way, no less fruitful. The creations of the great Spanish artist have been incarnations and, at the same time, prophecies of the mutations that our age has suffered between the end of Impressionism and the Second World War. Incarnations: in his canvases and his objects the modern spirit becomes visible and palpable; prophecies: the transformations in his painting reveal our time as one which affirms itself only by negating itself and which negates itself only in order to invent and transcend itself. Not the precipitate of pure time, not the crystallizations of Klee, Kandinsky, or Braque, but time itself, in its brutal urgency, the immediate imminence of the present moment. Right from the start Duchamp set up a vertigo of delay in opposition to the vertigo of acceleration. In one of the notes in the celebrated *Green Box* he writes: "use *delay* instead of 'picture' or 'painting'; 'picture on glass' becomes 'delay on glass'. ..." This sentence gives us a glimpse into the meaning of his activity: painting is a criticism of movement, but movement is the criticism of painting. Picasso is what is going to happen and what is happening, he is posterity and archaic time, the distant ancestor and our next-door neighbor. Speed permits him to be two places at once, to belong to all the centuries without letting go of the here and now. He is not the movements of painting in the twentieth century; rather, he is movement becoming painting. He paints out of urgency and, above all, it is urgency that he paints: he is the painter of time. Duchamp's pictures are the presentation of movement: the analysis, the decomposition, the reverse of speed. Picasso's drawings move rapidly across the motionless space of the canvas. In the works of Duchamp space begins to walk and take on form; it becomes a machine that Marcel spins arguments and philosophizes; it resists movement with delay and delay with irony. The pictures of the former are images; those of the latter are a meditation on the image.

Picasso is an artist of an inexhaustible and uninterrupted fertility; the latter painted fewer than fifty canvases and these were done in under ten years: Duchamp abandoned painting, in the proper sense of the term, when he was hardly twenty-five years old. To be sure, he went on "painting" for another ten years, but everything he did from 1913 onward is a part of his attempt to substitute "painting-idea" for "painting-painting." This negation of painting, which he calls "olfactory" (because of its smell of turpentine) and "retinal" (purely visual), was the beginning of his true *work*. A work without work: there are no pictures except the *Large Glass* (the great delay), the Readymades, a few *gestures*, and a long silence. Picasso's work reminds one of that of his compatriot Lope de Vega, and in speaking of it one should in fact use the plural: the works. Everything Duchamp has done is summed up in the *Large Glass*, which was "finally unfinished" in 1923. Picasso has rendered our century visible to us; Duchamp has shown us that all the arts, including the visual, are born and come to an end in an art that is invisible. Against the lucidity of instinct he opposed the instinct for lucidity: the invisible is not obscure or mysterious, it is transparent.... The rapid parallel I have drawn is not an invidious comparison. Both of them, like all real artists, and not excluding the so-called minor artists, are incomparable. I have linked their names because it seems to me that each of them has in his own way

succeeded in defining our age: the former by what he affirms, by his discoveries; the latter by what he negates, by his explorations. I don't know if they are the "greatest" painters of the first half of the century. I don't know what the word "greatest" means when applied to an artist. The case of Duchamp—like that of Max Ernst, Klee, De Chirico, Kandinsky, and a few others—fascinates me not because he is the "greatest" but because he is unique. This is the word that is appropriate to him and defines him.

The first pictures of Duchamp show a precocious mastery. They are the ones, however, that some critics describe as "fine painting." A short time afterward, under the influence of his elder brother Jacques Villon and the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, he passed from Fauvism to a restrained and analytical Cubism. Early in 1911 he made the acquaintance of Francis Picabia and Guillaume Apollinaire. It was undoubtedly his friendship with these two men that precipitated an evolution that had until then seemed normal. His desire to go beyond Cubism can already be seen in a canvas of the period; it is the portrait of a woman passing by: a girl glimpsed once, loved, and never seen again. The canvas shows a figure that unfolds into (or fuses with) five female silhouettes. As a representation of movement or, to be more precise, a decomposing and superimposing of the positions of a moving body it anticipates the *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The picture is called *Portrait (Dulctnea)*. I mention this detail because by means of the title Duchamp introduces a psychological element, in this case affectionate and ironic, into the composition. It is the beginning of his rebellion against visual and tactile painting, against "retinal" art. Later he will Marcel assert that the title is an essential element of painting, like color and drawing. In the same year he painted a few other canvases, all of them striking in their execution and some of them ferocious in their pitiless vision of reality. Analytical Cubism is transformed into mental surgery. This period closes with a noteworthy oil painting: *Coffee Mill*. The illustrations to three poems of Laforgue also come from this time. The drawings are interesting for two reasons: on the one hand, one of them anticipates the *Nude Descending a Staircase*; on the other, they reveal that Duchamp was a painter of ideas right from the start and that he never yielded to the fallacy of thinking of painting as a purely manual and visual art.

In a conversation he had in 1946 with the critic James Johnson Sweeney<sup>1</sup> Duchamp hints at the influence of Laforgue on his painting: "The idea for the *Nude* ... came from a drawing which I had made in 1911 to illustrate Jules Laforgue's poem *Encore à cet astre*.... Rimbaud and Lautréamont seemed too old to me at the time. I wanted something younger. Mallarmé and Laforgue were closer to my taste...In the same conversation Duchamp emphasizes that it was not so much the poetry of Laforgue that interested him as his titles (*Cornice agricole*, for example). This confession throws some light on the *verbal* origin of his creative activity as a painter. His fascination with language is not an intellectual order; it is the most perfect instrument for producing meanings and at the same time for destroying them. The pun is a miraculous device because in one and the same phrase we exalt the power of the language to convey meaning only in order, a moment later, to abolish it the more completely. Art for Duchamp, all the arts, obey the same law: meta-irony is inherent in their very spirit. It is an irony that destroys its own negation and, hence, returns in the affirmative. Nor is his mention of Mallarmé fortuitous. Between the *Nude* and *Igitur* there is a disturbing analogy: the descent of the staircase. How can one fail to see in the slow movement of the woman-machine an echo or an answer to that solemn moment in which *Igitur* abandons his room forever and goes step by step down the stairs which lead him to the crypt of his ancestors? In both cases there is a rupture and a descent into a zone of silence. There the solitary spirit will be confronted with the absolute and its mask, chance.

Almost without realizing it, as if drawn by a magnet, I have passed over in a page and a half the

years that separate his early works from the *Nude*. I must pause here. This picture is one of the pivot works of modern painting: it marks the end of Cubism and the beginning of a development that has not yet been exhausted. Superficially—though his work is constant proof that no one is less concerned with the superficial than Duchamp—the *Nude* would seem to draw its inspiration from preoccupations similar to those of the Futurists: the desire to represent movement, the disintegrated vision of space, the cult of the machine. Chronology excludes the possibility of an influence: the first Futurist exhibition in Paris was held in 1912 and, a year before, Duchamp had already painted a sketch in oil for the *Nude*. The similarity, moreover, is only an apparent one: the Futurists wanted to suggest movement by means of a dynamic painting; Duchamp applies the notion of delay—or, rather, of analysis—to movement. His aim is more objective and goes closer to the bone: he doesn't claim to give the illusion of movement—a Baroque or Mannerist idea that the Futurists inherited—but to decompose it and offer a static representation of a changing object. It is true that Futurism also rejected the Cubist conception of the motionless object, but Duchamp goes beyond stasis and movement; he fuses them in order to dissolve them the more easily. Futurism is obsessed by sensation, Duchamp by ideas. Their use of color is also different. The Futurists revel in a painting that is brilliant, passionate and almost always explosive. Duchamp came from Cubism and his colors are less lyrical; they are denser and more restrained: it is not brilliance that he is after but rigor.

The differences are even greater if we turn from the external features of the painting to considering its real significance, that is to say, if we really penetrate the vision of the artist. (Vision is not only what we see; it is a stance taken, an idea, a geometry—a *point of view* in both senses of the phrase.) Above all, it is one's attitude toward the machine. Duchamp is not an adept of its cult; on the contrary, unlike the Futurists, he was one of the first to denounce the ruinous character of modern mechanical activity. Machines are great producers of waste, and the refuse they leave increases in geometrical proportion to their productive capacity. To prove the point, all one needs to do is to walk through any of our cities and breathe its polluted atmosphere. Machines are agents of destruction and it follows from this that the only mechanical devices that inspire Duchamp are those that function in an unpredictable manner—the antimachines. These apparatuses are the equivalent of the puns: the unusual ways in which they work nullify them as machines. Their relation to utility is the same as that of delay to movement; they are without sense or meaning. They are machines that distill criticism into themselves.

The *Nude* is an antimachine. The first irony consists in the fact that we don't even know if there is a nude in the picture. Encased in a metal corset or coat of mail, it is invisible. This suit of iron reminds us not so much of a piece of medieval armor as of the body of an automobile or a fuselage. Another stroke that distinguishes it from Futurism is the fact that it is a fuselage caught in the act not of flight but of a slow fall. It is a mixture of pessimism and humor: a feminine myth, the nude woman, turned into a far more gloomy and threatening apparatus. I will mention, as a last point, a factor that was already present in his earlier works: rational violence, so much more ruthless than the physical violence that attracts Picasso. Robert Lebel says that in Duchamp's painting "the nude plays exactly the same role as the old drawings of the human skeleton in the anatomy books: it is an object for internal investigation."<sup>2</sup> For my part I would emphasize that the word "internal" should be understood in two senses: it is a reflection on the internal organs of an object and it is interior reflection, self-analysis. The object is a metaphor, an image of Duchamp: his reflection on the object is at the same time a meditation on himself. To a certain extent each one of his paintings is a symbolic self-portrait. Hence the plurality of meanings and points of view of a work like the *Nude*: it is pure plastic creation and meditation on painting and movement; it is the criticism and culminating point of Cubism; it is the beginning of another kind of painting and the end of the career of Duchamp as a pictorial artist; it is the myth of the nude woman and the destruction of this myth; it is machine and irony, symbol and

autobiography.

After the *Nude* Duchamp painted a few extraordinary pictures: *The King and the Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*, *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*, and *Bride*. In these canvases the human figure has disappeared completely. Its place is taken not by abstract forms but by transmutations of the human being into delirious pieces of mechanism. The object is reduced to its most simple elements: volume becomes line; the line, a series of dots. Painting is converted into symbolic cartography; the object into idea. This implacable reduction is not really a system of painting but a method of internal investigation. It is not the philosophy of painting but painting as philosophy. Moreover, it is a philosophy of plastic signs that is ceaselessly destroyed, as philosophy, by a sense of humor. The appearance of human machines might make one think of the automatons of De Chirico. It would be quite absurd to compare the two artists. The poetic value of the figures of the Italian painter comes from the juxtaposition of modernity with antiquity; the four wings of his lyricism are melancholy and invention, nostalgia and prophecy. I mention De Chirico not because there is any similarity between him and Duchamp but because he is one more example of the disturbing invasion of modern painting by machines and robots. Antiquity and the Middle Ages thought of the automaton as a magical entity; from the Renaissance onward, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was a pretext for philosophical speculation; Romanticism converted it into erotic obsession; today, because of science, it is a real possibility. The female machines of Duchamp remind us less of De Chirico and other modern painters than of the Eve Future of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam. Like her, they are daughters of satire and eroticism, although, unlike the invention of the Symbolist poet, their form does not imitate the human body. Their beauty, if this word can be applied to them, is not anthropomorphic. The only beauty that Duchamp is interested in is the beauty of "indifference": a beauty free at last from the notion of beauty, equidistant from the romanticism of Villiers and from contemporary cybernetics. The figures of Kafka, De Chirico, and others take their inspiration from the human body; those of Duchamp are mechanical devices and their humanity is not corporeal. They are machines without vestiges of humanity, and yet, their function is more sexual than mechanical, more symbolic than sexual. They are ideas or, better still, *relations*—in the physical sense, and also in the sexual and linguistic; they are propositions and, by virtue of the law of meta-irony, counterpropositions. They are symbol-machines.

There is no need to seek further for the origins of Duchamp's delirious machines. The union of these two words—"machine" and "delirium," "method" and "madness"—brings to mind the figure of Raymond Roussel. Duchamp himself has on various occasions referred to that memorable night of 1911 when—together with Apollinaire, Picabia, and Gabrielle Buffet—he went to a performance of *Impressions d'Afrique*. To his discovery of Roussel must be added that of Jean-Pierre Brisset.<sup>3</sup> In the conversation with Sweeney referred to earlier, Duchamp talks enthusiastically about both people: "Brisset and Rousseau were the two men I most admired at that time for the wildness of their imaginations.... Brisset was preoccupied with the philological analysis of language—an analysis that consisted of spinning an unbelievable web of double entendres and puns. He was a kind of Douanier Rousseau of philology. But it was fundamentally Roussel who was responsible for my glass, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. This play of his, which I saw with Apollinaire, helped me greatly on one side of my expression. I saw at once that I could use Roussel as an influence. I felt that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter. And Roussel showed me the way...."

*The Bride* is a "transposition," in the sense that Mallarmé gave the word, of the literary method of Roussel to painting. Although at that time the strange text in which Roussel explains his no longer strange method, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, had not yet been published, Duchamp intuited the process: juxtaposing two words with similar sounds but different meanings, and finding



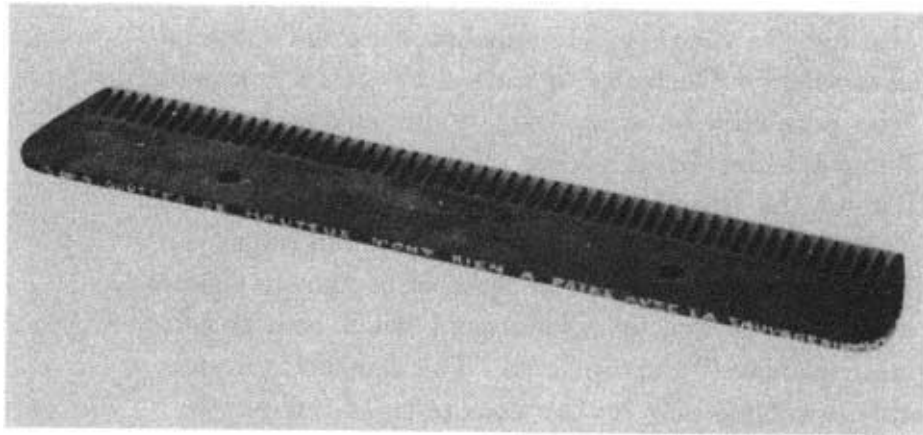
verbal bridge between them. It is the carefully reasoned and delirious development of the principle that inspires the pun. What is more, it is the conception of language as a structure in movement, the discovery of modern linguistics that has had so much influence on the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and, later, on the new French criticism. For Roussel, of course, the method was not a philosophy but a literary method; equally, for Duchamp, it is the strongest and most effective form of meta-irony. The game that Duchamp is playing is more complex because the combination is not only verbal but also plastic and mental. At the same time, it contains an element that is absent in Roussel: criticism, irony. Duchamp knows that it is insane. Roussel's influence is not limited to the method of delirium. In the *Impressions d'Afrique* there is a painting machine; although Duchamp did not fall into the trap of naively repeating the device literally, he resolved to suppress the hand, the brushstrokes, and all personal traces from his painting. Instead, ruler and compass. His intention wasn't to paint like a machine but to make use of machines for painting. However, his attitude does not show any affinity for the religion of the machine: every mechanism must produce its own antidote, meta-irony. The element of laughter doesn't make the machines more human, but it does connect them with the center, which is man, with the source of their energy, which is hesitancy and contradiction. "Beauty of precision" in the service of indétermination: contradictory machines.

In the summer of 1912 Marcel Duchamp went to Munich for a time. There he painted several pictures that laid the groundwork for his "magnum opus," if it is permissible to use the terms of alchemy to describe the *Large Glass: Virgin (No. 1 and No. 2)*, *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*, the *Bride*, and the first drawing on the theme of Marcel *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, still without the adverb that makes the phrase stumble. The project of the *Large Glass* was on his mind from 1912 to 1923. Despite this central preoccupation, he was possessed by a will to contradiction that nothing and no one escaped, not even himself and his work, and there were long periods in which he almost totally lost interest in his idea. His ambiguous attitude to the work—whether to realize it or to abandon it—found a solution that contained all the possibilities that he could adopt toward it: to contradict it. This is, in my opinion, the meaning of his activity over all these years, from the invention of the Readymades and the puns and word games distributed under the female pseudonym Rose Sélavy, to the optical machines, the short *Anemic Cinéma* (in collaboration with Man Ray), and his intermittent but central participation first in the Dada movement and later in Surrealism. It is impossible in an essay of this length to enumerate all Duchamp's activities, gestures, and inventions after his return from Germany.<sup>4</sup> I will mention only a few of them.

The first was his journey to Zone, a community in the Juras, again in the company of Apollinaire, Picabia, and Gabrielle Buffet. This excursion, to which we owe the title of the poem by Apollinaire that opens *Alcools*, already foretells the future explosion of Dada. The enigmatic marginal notes of the *Green Box* mention this brief journey, which was no less decisive than the one to Munich in the same year. In the personal evolution of Duchamp it has a significance analogous to his discovery of Roussel: it confirms his decision to break not only with "retinal" painting but also with the traditional conception of art and the common use of language (communication). In 1913 the first exhibition of modern art (the Armory Show) was held in New York and *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which was shown there, obtained an immediate and literally scandalous renown. It is significant—exemplary, I should say—that in the same year Duchamp gave up "painting" and looked for employment that would allow him to dedicate himself freely to his investigations. Thanks to a recommendation from Picabia, he found work in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève.

Many notes, drawings, and calculations have been preserved from this period, almost all of them relating to the long-delayed execution of the *Large Glass*. Duchamp calls these notes *physique amusante*. They could also be called *comic calculations*. Here is an example: "a straight thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane and, twisting as it pleases, gives

a new model for the unit of length.” Duchamp carried out the experiment three times, so that we have three units, all three of them equally valid, and not just one as we have in our poor everyday geometry. The three threads are preserved in the position in which they fell, in a croquet box: they are “cannot chance.” Another example: “By *condescension* this weight is denser going down than going up.” All these formulas have the aim of rendering useless our notions of left and right, here and there, East and West. If the center is in a state of permanent seism, if the ancient notions of solid matter and clear and distinct reason disappear and give place to indétermination, the result is general *disorientation*. Duchamp’s intention is to get rid forever of “the possibility of recognizing or identifying any two things as being like each other”: the only laws that interest him are the laws of exception, which apply only for one case and for one occasion only. His attitude to language is no different. He imagines an alphabet of signs to denote only the words that we call abstract (“which have no concrete reference”) and concludes: “This alphabet very probably is suitable only for the description of this picture.” Painting is writing and the *Large Glass* is a text that we have to decipher.



Comb, 1916. (Ready-made.) Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.



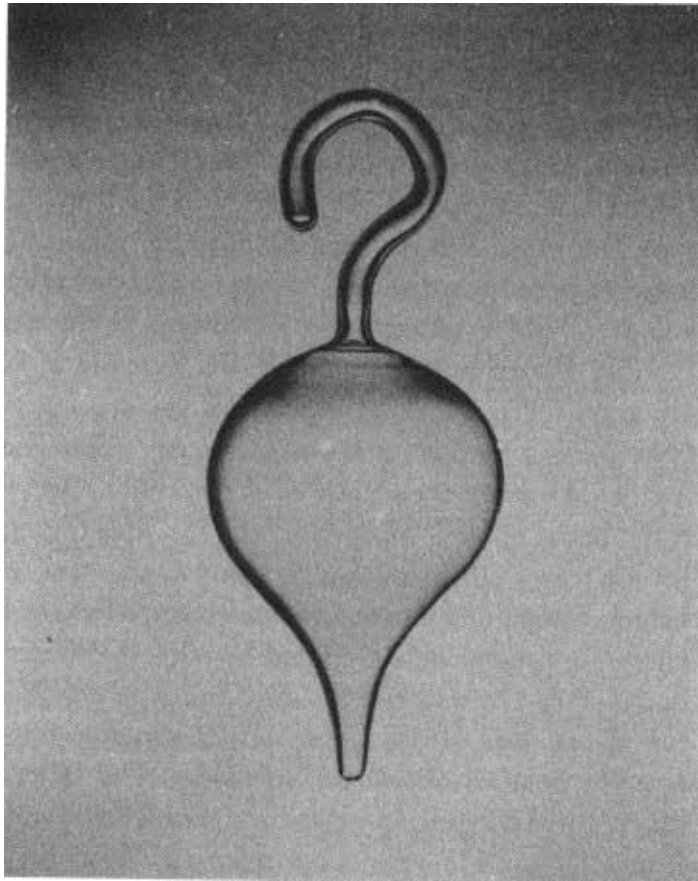
In 1913 the first Readymade appears: *Bicycle Wheel*. The original has been lost, but an American collector possesses a version of 1951. Little by little others arrive: *Comb*, *With Hidden Noise*, *Corkscrew*, *Pharmacy* (a chromolithograph), *Water Ö Gas on Every Floor*, *Apolinère Enameled* (an advertisement for Sapolin enamel), *Pocket Chess Set*, and a few others. There aren't many of them. Duchamp exalts the gesture without ever falling, like so many modern artists, into gesticulation. In some cases the Readymades are pure, that is, they pass without modification from the state of being an everyday object to that of being a "work of anti-art;" on other occasions they are altered or rectified, generally in an ironic manner tending to prevent any confusion between them and artistic objects. The most famous of them are *Fountain*, a urinal sent to the Independents exhibition in New York, and rejected by the selection committee; *L.H.O.O.Q.*, a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* provided with a beard and mustache; *Air de Paris*, a 50-cc glass ampul that contains a sample of the atmosphere of that city; *Bottlerack*; *Why Not Sneeze?*, a birdcage that holds pieces of marble shaped like sugar cubes and a wooden thermometer.... In 1915, to avoid the war and encouraged by the expectations that *Nude* had aroused, he went to New York for a long period. He founded two pre-Dadaist reviews there and with his friend Picabia and a handful of artists of various nationalities, he went about his work stimulating, shocking, and bewildering people. In 1918 Duchamp lived for a few months in Buenos Aires. He told me that he spent the nights playing chess and slept during the day. His arrival coincided with a coup d'état and other disturbances that "made movement difficult." He made very few acquaintances—no one who was an artist, a poet, or a thinking individual. It is a pity: I don't know anybody with a temperament closer to his own than Macedonio Fernandez.



Ball of Twine (With Hidden Noise), 1916. (Readymade.) Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

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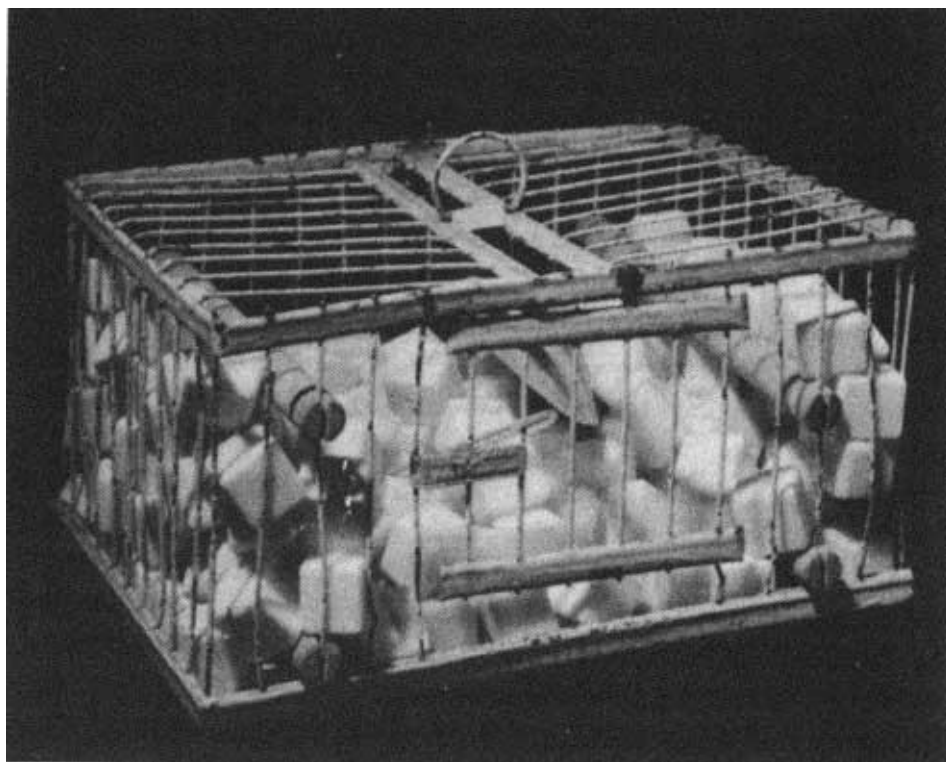
In the same year (1918) he returned to Paris. Tangential but decisive activity in the Dada movement. Return to New York. Preparatory work on the *Large Glass*, including the incredible “du-raising,” which we can see today thanks to an admirable photograph by Man Ray. Explorations in the domain of optical art, static or in movement: *Rotorelief*, *Rotary Glass Plate (Precision Optics)*, *Rotary Hemisphere*, and other experiments that are among the antecedents of Op art. Continuation and final abandonment of the *Large Glass*. Growing interest in chess and publication of a treatise on a move in Monte Carlo, and an abortive attempt to discover a formula that would enable him neither to lose nor to win at roulette. Participates in various exhibitions and manifestations of the Surrealists. During the Second World War settles finally in New York. Marriage to Teeny Sattler. Interviews, fame, influence on the new painting of England and America (Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg) and even music (John Cage) and dance (Merce Cunningham). The chess game goes on. And always the same attitude to good fortune or bad—meta-irony. In the summer of 1967, when I heard that they were going to hold a retrospective exhibition of his work in London, I asked him, “When will they have one in Paris?” He answered me with an indefinable gesture and added, “No one is a prophet in his own country. Freedom personified, he is not even afraid of the commonplace, which is the bogey of most modern artists.... This summary of his life leaves out many things, many encounters, various names of poets and painters and of women whom he found charming or who were charmed by him. It is impossible, however, not to mention the *Box in a Valise* (1941) and the *Green Box* (1934). The former contains miniature reproductions of almost all his works. The latter holds ninety-three documents—sketches, calculations, and notes from 1911 to 1915—and a colorplate of *The Bride*. These documents are the key, though incomplete, to the *Large Glass*: “I wanted to make a book, or rather, a catalog that would explain every detail of my picture.”<sup>5</sup>



*Air de Paris (Readymade.) Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection*

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The Readymades are anonymous objects that the artist's gratuitous gesture, the mere fact of choosing them, converts into works of art. At the same time this gesture does away with the notion of an art object. The essence of the act is contradiction; it is the plastic equivalent of the pun. As the latter destroys meaning, the former destroys the idea of value. The Readymades are not anti-art, like many modern creations, but rather *an-artistic*. Neither art nor anti-art, but something in between, indifferent, existing in a void. The wealth of commentaries on their significance—some of them would certainly have made Duchamp laugh—shows that their interest is not plastic but critical and philosophical. It would be senseless to argue about their beauty or ugliness, firstly because they are beyond beauty and ugliness, and secondly because they are not creations but signs, questioning and negating the act of creation. The Readymade does not postulate a new value: it is a jibe at what we call valuable. It is criticism in action: a kick at the work of art ensconced on its pedestal of adjectives. The act of criticism unfolds in two stages. The first belongs to the realm of hygiene, intellectual cleanliness—the Readymade is a criticism of taste; the second is an attack on the idea of the work of art.



Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy? 1921. (*Readymade.*) Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

For Duchamp good taste is no less harmful than bad. We all know that there is no essential difference between them—yesterday's bad taste is the good taste of today—but what is taste? It is what we call pretty, beautiful, ugly, stupendous, marvelous, without having any clear understanding of its *raison d'être*: it is execution, construction, style, quality—the trademark. Primitive people don't have any idea of taste; they rely on instinct and tradition—that is to say, they repeat almost instinctively certain archetypes. Taste probably came into existence with the first cities, the state, and the division of classes. In the modern West it began in the Renaissance, but was unaware of itself until the Baroque period. In the eighteenth century it was the distinguishing mark of the courtier, and later in the nineteenth, the sign of the parvenu. Today, since popular art is extinct, it tends to propagate itself among the masses. Its birth coincides with the disappearance of religious art, and its development and supremacy are due, as much as anything, to the open market for artistic objects and to the bourgeois revolution. (A similar phenomenon, though it is not identical, can be seen in certain epochs of the history of China and Japan.) "There's no law about tastes," says the Spanish proverb. In fact, taste evades both examination and judgment; it is a matter for samplers. It oscillates between instinct and fashion, style and prescription. As a notion of art it is skin-deep both in the sensuous and in the social meaning of the term: it titillates and is a mark of distinction. In the first case it reduces art to sensation; in the second it introduces a social hierarchy founded on a reality as mysterious and arbitrary as purity of blood or the color of one's skin. The process has become accentuated in our time: since Impressionism, painting has been converted into materials, color, drawing, texture, sensibility, sensuality—ideas are reduced to a tube of paint and contemplation to sensation.<sup>6</sup> The Readymade is a criticism of "retinal" and manual art; after he had proved to himself that he "mastered his craft," Duchamp denounced the superstition of craft. The artist is not the maker of things; his works are not pieces of workmanship—they are acts. There is a possibly unconscious echo in this attitude of the repugnance Rimbaud felt for the pen: *Quel siècle à mains!*

In its second stage the Readymade passes from hygiene to the criticism of art itself. In criticizing the idea of execution, Duchamp doesn't claim to dissociate form from content. In art the only thing that counts is form. Or, to be more precise, forms are the transmitters of what they signify. For a project meaning, it is an apparatus for signifying. Now, the significances of "retinal" painting are insignificant; they consist of impressions, sensations, secretions, ejaculations. The Readymade confronts this insignificance with its neutrality, its nonsignificance. For this reason it cannot be a beautiful object, or agreeable, repulsive, or even interesting. Nothing is more difficult than to find an object that is really neutral: "Anything can become very beautiful if the gesture is repeated often enough; this is why the number of my Readymades is very limited...." The repetition of the act brings with it an immediate degradation, a relapse into taste—a fact Duchamp's imitators frequently forget. Detached from its original context—usefulness, propaganda, or ornament—the Readymade suddenly loses all significance and is converted into an object existing in a vacuum, into a thing without any embellishment. Only for a moment: everything that man has handled has the fatal tendency to secrete meaning. Hardly have they been installed in their new hierarchy, than the nail and the flatiron suffer an invisible transformation and become objects for contemplation, study, or irritation. Marcel Henne's need to "rectify" the Readymade—injecting it with irony helps to preserve its anonymity and neutrality. A labor of Tantalus for, when significance and its appendages, admiration and reprobation have been deflected from the object, how can one prevent them from being directed toward the author? If the object is anonymous, the man who chose it is not. And one could even add that the Readymade is not a work but a gesture, and a gesture that only an artist could realize, and not just any artist but inevitably Marcel Duchamp. It is not surprising that the critic and the discerning public find the gesture significant, although they are usually unable to say what it is significant of. The transition

from worshipping the object to worshipping the author of the gesture is imperceptible and instantaneous. The circle is closed. But it is a circle that closes us inside it: Duchamp has leaped it with agility; while I am writing these notes, he is playing chess.

One stone is like another and a corkscrew is like another corkscrew. The resemblance between stones is natural and involuntary; between manufactured objects it is artificial and deliberate. The fact that all corkscrews are the same is a consequence of their significance: they are objects that have been manufactured for the purpose of drawing corks; the similarity between stones has no inherent significance. At least this is the modern attitude to nature. It hasn't always been the case. Roger Caillois points out that certain Chinese artists selected stones because they found them fascinating and turned them into works of art by the simple act of engraving or painting their name on them. The Japanese also collected stones and, as they were more ascetic, preferred them not to be too beautiful, strange, or unusual; they chose ordinary round stones. To look for stones for their difference and to look for them for their similarity are not separate acts; they both affirm that nature is the creator. To select one stone among a thousand is equivalent to giving it a name. Guided by the principle of analogy, man gives names to nature; each name is a metaphor: Rocky Mountains, Red Sea, Hell Canyon, Eagles Rest. The name—or the signature of the artist—causes the place—or the stone—to enter the world of names, or, in other words, into the sphere of meanings. The act of Duchamp uproots the object from its meaning and makes an empty skin of the name: a bottlerack without bottles. The Chinese artist affirms his identity with nature; Duchamp, his irreducible separation from it. The act of the former is one of elevation or praise; that of the latter, a criticism. For the Chinese, the Greeks, the Mayans, or the Egyptians nature was a living totality, a creative being. For this reason art, according to Aristotle, is imitation; the poet imitates the creative gesture of nature. The Chinese artist follows this idea to its ultimate conclusion: he selects a stone and signs it. He inscribes his name on a piece of creation and his signature is an act of recognition—Duchamp selects a manufactured object; he inscribes his name as an act of negation and his gesture is a challenge.

The comparison between the gesture of the Chinese artist and that of Duchamp demonstrates the negative nature of the manufactured object. For the ancients nature was a goddess, and what is more, a breeding ground for gods—manifestations in their turn of vital energy in its three stages: birth, copulation, and death. The gods are Marcel born and their birth is that of the universe itself; they fall in love (sometimes with our own women) and the earth is peopled with demigods, monsters, and giants; they die and their death is the end and the resurrection of time. Objects are not born: we make them; they have no sex; nor do they die: they wear out or become useless. Their tomb is the trash can or the recycling furnace. Technology is neutral and sterile. Now, technology is the nature of modern man; it is our environment and our horizon. Of course, every work of man is a negation of nature, but at the same time it is a bridge between nature and us. Technology changes nature in a more radical and decisive manner: it throws it out. The familiar concept of the return to nature is proof that the world of technology comes between us and it: it is not a bridge but a wall. Heidegger says that technology is nihilistic because it is the most perfect and active expression of the will to power. Seen in this light the Readymade is a double negation: not only the gesture but the object itself is negative. Although Duchamp doesn't have the least nostalgia for the paradises or infernos of nature, he is still less a worshiper of technology. The injection of irony is a negation of technology because the manufactured object is turned into a Readymade, a useless article.

The Readymade is a two-edged weapon: if it is transformed into a work of art, it spoils the gesture of desecration; if it preserves its neutrality, it converts the gesture itself into a work. This is the trap that the majority of Duchamp's followers have fallen into: it is not easy to juggle with knives. There is another condition: the practice of the Readymade demands an absolute disinterest. Duchamp has earned derisory sums from his pictures—he has given most of them away—and he has always lived

modestly, especially if one thinks of the fortunes a painter accumulates today as soon as he enjoys certain reputation. Harder than despising money is resisting the temptation to make works or to turn oneself into a work. I believe that, thanks to irony, Duchamp has succeeded: the Ready-made has become his Diogenes' barrel. Because, in the end, his gesture is a philosophical or, rather, dialectical game more than an artistic operation: it is a negation that, through humor, becomes affirmation. Suspended by irony, in a state of perpetual oscillation, this affirmation is always provisional. It is a contradiction that denies all significance to object and gesture alike; it is a pure action—in the moral sense and also in the sense of a game: his hands are clean, the execution is rapid and perfect. Purity requires that the gesture should be realized in such a way that it seems as little like a *choice* as possible: “The greatest problem was the act of selection. I had to pick an object without it impressing me and, as far as possible, without the least intervention of any idea or suggestion of aesthetic pleasure. It was necessary to reduce my personal taste to zero. It is very difficult to select an object that has absolutely no interest for us not only on the day we pick it but that never will and that, finally, can never have the possibility of becoming beautiful, pretty, agreeable or ugly...”

The act of selection bears a certain resemblance to making a rendezvous, and for this reason, it contains an element of eroticism—a desperate eroticism without any illusions: “To decide that at a certain point in the future (such and such a day, hour, and minute) I am going to pick a Readymade. What is important then is chronometry, the empty moment... it is a sort of rendezvous.” I would add that it is a rendezvous without any element of surprise, an encounter in a time that is arid with indifference. The Readymade is not only a dialectical game; it is also an ascetic exercise, a means of purification. Unlike the practices of the mystics, its end is not union with the divinity and the contemplation of the highest truth; it is a rendezvous with nobody and its ultimate goal is noncontemplation. The Readymade occupies an area of the spirit that is null: “This bottlerack, which still has no bottles, has turned into a thing that one doesn't even look at, although we know it exists—that we only look at by *turning our heads* and whose existence was decided by a gesture I made one day. ...” A nihilism that gyrates on itself and refutes itself; it is the enthroning of a nothing and, once it is on its throne, denying it and denying oneself. It is not an artistic act, this invention of an art of interior liberation. In the *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*<sup>7</sup> we are told that each one of us must strive to reach the blessed state of Bodhisattva, knowing full well that Bodhisattva is a nonentity, an empty name. That is what Duchamp calls the beauty of indifference—in other words, freedom.

*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* is one of the most hermetic works of our century. It stands apart from most other modern texts—because this painting is a text—in that the author has given us a key: the notes of the *Green Box*. I have already said that it is an incomplete key, incomplete as is the *Large Glass* itself; furthermore, in their way the notes are also a riddle, scattered signs that we have to regroup and decipher. *The Bride* and the *Green Box* (to which we must now add the *White Box*) make up a system of mirrors that exchange reflections; each one clarifies and *rectifies* the other. There are numerous interpretations of this enigmatic work. Some of them show perspicacity.<sup>8</sup> I will not repeat them. My purpose is a descriptive one: I want to assemble some preliminary notes for a future translation into Spanish. I will begin with the title, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même*. It is not easy to translate this oscillating, convoluted phrase. First of all *mise à nu* does not exactly mean denuded or unclothed; it is a much more energetic expression—stripped bare, exposed. It is impossible not to associate it with a public act or a ritual—the theater (*mise en scène*) or a performance (*mise à mon*). The use of the word “bachelor” (*célibataire*), instead of the seemingly normal “fiancé” or “suitor,” sets up an unbridgeable separation between feminine and masculine; the bachelor is not even a suitor, and the bride will never be married. The plural (“bachelors”) and the possessive



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