

## INTRODUCTION

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) has a peculiar status in the art world. This is, of course, mainly due to the revolutionary concept of the readymade – a concept that has effectively undermined the meaning of the word ‘art’. Duchamp has since then mainly been looked upon as an iconoclast, an artist who aimed at destroying the arts from inside out.

It would however be a serious mistake to play down his contribution to the arts to a dadaist conception of destruction. First of all Duchamp never looked upon his readymades as traditional works of art. As a tool the readymade was an ambiguous conception, aimed at the overall importance that was contributed to aesthetics in the valuation of art. Duchamp stressed the importance of personal experience, personal judgement, free from handed down aesthetic values.

Secondly the readymade was intended to undermine the idea that a work of art is solely to be looked at. Duchamp stated that he was not interested in ‘retinal’ art. He wanted to expand the effects of a work of art towards other regions of the mind, more cerebral or intellectual – towards what he called ‘the grey matter’ of the human brain.

Even though he started off as a cubist, Duchamp did not think much of the intellectual qualities of the painters he knew. He much rather looked for inspiration elsewhere: in contemporary science for instance, both serious and popular, in the language of technique, commerce and advertising, and in literature. ‘I felt that as a painter,’ he stated, ‘it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter.’ Duchamp made no secret of his examples. He considered the work of painters like Matisse and Cézanne as less inspiring than the poetry of Jules Laforgue, the curious novels of Raymond Roussel, the quasi-etymology of Jean-Paul Brisset and the pataphysics of Alfred Jarry. This is why a main part of this review is devoted to the ‘litteral’ character of Duchamp’s work.

Although he produced most of his work before the Second World War, it was only in the late fifties and early sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the name Duchamp became known to a larger audience. In the Netherlands the reception of Duchamp began in the late fifties through the museum valuation of Dada, in parallel with the introduction of the work of the new generation of artists of Assemblage Art, Neo-Dada, Nouveau realism, Fluxus and Pop Art. Unlike elsewhere this reception also gained a literary dimension, mainly due to the attention of young writers K. Schippers, J. Bernlef and G. Brands, who published some of Duchamp's texts in their literary journal *Barbarber*. K. Schippers came in the wake of Duchamp through his interest in Dada, particularly Arp and Schwitters. His knowledge of, and admiration for Duchamp grew when he read the autobiography of Man Ray (*Self Portrait*, 1963), the articles of Calvin Tomkins in *The New Yorker* and the monograph of Robert Lebel in 1959. A year earlier he had discovered *Marchand du Sel*, the first edition of the writings of Marcel Duchamp, of which an English translation appeared in 1963. Schippers published his translation of some of Duchamp's notes in *Barbarber* in 1964. These notes are included in his contribution to this issue. They illustrate the translation in French of a chapter from Schippers' recent book *De Bruid van Marcel Duchamp* (Marcel Duchamp's Bride), in which he looks back at the circumstances of his encounter with Duchamp's work – an encounter related to seeing the Nouvelle Vague films of Truffaut, especially *Jules et Jim*.

As Bert Jansen in his contribution to this review discloses, Duchamp, as a Frenchman, was keen on wordplay and puns, especially if they were of an ambiguous nature. Sexual innuendo was present in his early work – in the cartoons he made for humorous newspapers and magazines – and formed the base for most of his later work. Duchamp thought of language as an extra means to attribute 'colour' to his images. His reading of the extra-ordinary linguistic theories of Jean-Paul Brisset – Brisset 'proved' that the French language was derived from the first words of the frog (words that were an articulation of the discovery of the 'sexe') – made him aware of the mechanisms of homophonic words and sentences, in French and later on – after he moved to the United States – also in English. There he elaborated on this discovery with the punning titles of his readymades. Jansen, moreover, discovered some hitherto unknown sources and facts considering Duchamp's readymades.

Dutch author Dirk van Weelden stresses the importance of Alfred Jarry's 'neo--science' of pataphysics as a source of inspiration for Duchamp. As

Van Weelden notes, Duchamp was not solely interested in concepts or ideas, his drive was 'towards the virtual, ambiguous, irrational side of perception'. Van Weelden states that at the basis of Duchamp's ideas about art, literature, science and philosophy lay the concept of tautology – even 'patatautology'.

The same goes for Duchamp's ideas about language, as Pieter de Nijs argues in his contribution. Duchamp and Jarry seem to have had a comparable interest in humanoid machinery and eroticism as a driving force. As Dirk van Weelden already brought forward, they also shared an ironic attitude towards science and the widely spread believe in universal applicable scientific laws and principles. More importantly however is a comparable view on the laws of language. Both Jarry and Duchamp strain the laws of language to the utmost, trying to establish new relations between words and sounds in order to draw attention to unexpected, seemingly illogical and therefore surprising, often homophonic relations.

Bastiaan van der Velden draws upon his extensive knowledge of French popular 19<sup>th</sup> century images in order to illustrate Duchamp's statement that the theme of his *Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (Le Grand Verre or Large Glass) was inspired by a fairground attraction, called *Massacre des innocents* – an attraction Alfred Jarry was well known with and wrote and spoke about several times. Duchamp knew Jarry's writings and these might very well have drawn his attention towards the theme of the massacred children known from the Bible, in relation to the puppets representing wedding guests that were supposed to be beheaded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'baraques foraines'.

Next to Brisset, Duchamp considered Raymond Roussel as essentially responsible for his main oeuvre, the Large Glass. Roussel's famous 'procédé' was based on two homophonous sentences. Duchamp visited the theatre play Roussel presented in 1911, based on his novel *Impressions d'Afrique*, and must have guessed the importance of the homophonic relations Roussel took as a starting point for his novels and theatre plays. Sjef Houppermans, by means of several homophonic equations, links the secrets Roussel verbally hid in 'L'étang aux grebes' (the lake with the great crested grebes), figuring in his play *L'Étoile au front*, to Duchamp's latest work, *Etant donnés*, in which there also figures a lake, clearly visible in the background.

In her article Caro Verbeek expands on the importance of one of the sensual experiences generally not closely related to works of art: smell. In several of the exhibitions he designed on request of his surrealist friends, Duchamp installed some 'smelling devises', and – in addition – obstructed the view of the visitors by darkening the exhibition rooms or obstructing them in

another way. The olfactory experiments he undertook were meant to address other of the visitors' senses than the habitual visual one.

Marian Cousijn takes Duchamp's exhibition designs as an early example of the growing importance of the curator in the art world. With his exhibition designs and in his later artistic practice, especially in regard to his readymades, Duchamp restricted himself artistically to selecting and displaying. But, as Cousijn puts it, 'selecting and displaying are also the core tasks of the independent curator'. Duchamp proved early on how powerful an exhibition maker can be. This poses a question, that is also valid for the artistic practise of the 21th century : who gives art its weight, the curator or the artist?



Photo by Underwood and Underwood  
'New York Notables sail on S.S. Paris'

'New York City Photo shows Marcel Duchamp, futuristic artist, who sailed for a three month visit to his native home (28-02-1927)'