

# Duchamp; Gestures and Answers

## By Renato Osoy

*“The Capitals of the Old World have labored for hundreds of years to find that which constitutes good taste and one may say that they have found the ‘zenith’ thereof. But why do people not understand what a bore this is?”*

Marcel Duchamp

The history of art is full of great artists and great moments of art production, through the means of revising history we come across them, many artists have influenced how we perceived and produce art, but some of these traces have become invisible to pinpoint as we examine art. Such is not the case with Marcel Duchamp, because the more we inquire on his art works, statements and references from other great artists, the clearer it becomes that contemporary art practices are super-linked or somehow based on Duchamp’s influential conceptual legacy. Strangely enough Duchamp didn’t necessarily gave an array of clear-cut statements on how art should be made or how artists should behave towards themselves, but through a series of gestures, actions and materializations, he counteracted towards the art mainstream of his times.

Duchamp is an artist that has been quite revisited, written and reflected upon, it is obviously complex to find an angle where we might be able to come up with something ‘new’ or ‘original’. For that matter it might be best to attempt, by surveying rather than concluding, on what effects the presence of Duchamp had or has in today’s art world. In that act we are exploring in a spiral upwards action, noting how he went about his personal process and producing his art works, while at the same time influencing an endless list of artists. Certainly questions arise as we investigate Duchamp, since at times we get the impression that Duchamp was some sort of superior lord that descended towards the New York skylines from the Parisian clouds, to grant artists a license to be more than just retinal reproducers of the world. The phenomenon of Duchamp takes another value as we also try to understand its context, and why timing was so important for his avant-garde conceptions to flourish.

The motivation that draws me to choose Duchamp among the choice of the other artists we have explored throughout the semester, can become quite obvious according to the above mentioned. But some things specifically about him intrigue me, and that’s where I will try to find answers or rather suggestions to my own artistic questions, and

parallels to my own art production. Essentially I am looking into how he morphed from being a (retinal) image producer towards a conceptual artist, that, because of my own work that has a photographic background and an attachment to the straightforward image. But now as I progress, I feel more inclined towards other mediums where producing images becomes secondary and hopefully non-existent. I am also puzzled by the fact that the volume of his art production was quite low and simple but had such a profound impact. At the same time it becomes captivating to reflect upon the idea on how he brought the significance of the 'artist intention' to light, or the role of the 'spectator' in the creation-construction of meaning, while making it acceptable to think of the value of 'gesture' as an art form.

### **Duchamp, His Context**

A brief biography of Duchamp is laid here to setup as context of his lifetime and a general situation where his time and activities took place. As we mention before, the importance of understanding certain aspects of Duchamp can be better read when we think in parallel with his micro and macro social context, especially since he lived through the two World Wars, and the social transitions from Modernism towards Postmodernism, and nevertheless, how he became acquainted with such emblematic and influential people from the art scene then.

Born July 28, 1887 – Died October 2 1968 in France. He is notably Associated with the Dadaist and the Surrealist movements in Paris and New York. His earlier works bear the Post-impressionistic style, probably do to the fact that his older brother was painting with such a technique. He was brought up in a household where consumption and practice of culture was highly motivated by the family, it is also known that three of his siblings also became succesful artists. In Paris through his older brother Jacques Villon and his circle of painters he became acquainted with art critic and poet Guilliame Apollinaire, later also with the artist Francis Picabia with whom he became good friends. He left cubism after his emblematic painting "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1912) got rejected to participate in the "Salon des Indépendants", disappointed he then submitted the work to participate in New York's 1913 Armory show where a complete new audience received his painting and responded with awe and confusion, which made the work achieve great success and controversy. Growing tired of the scene in Paris and the ideals of Cubism, he started to explore in another direction and to dig more into philosophical matters, essentially the work of Poincaré, also he begins studies for piece "the Large Glass".

With the declaration of World War I, and other facts he decided to move to New York in 1915, where to his surprise he was received with much amazement and respect. There he meets again with Picabia, befriends with artist Man Ray and gets well acquainted with art collectors and patrons. Later he starts the magazine "the Blind

Man” and forms the “Société Anonyme”, which collected artworks and made exhibitions. At the same time he also becomes an art consultant for major art collectors. Picabia brings back DADA concepts from Zurich. All along Duchamp is busy working with his “Readymade’s”, suddenly upheaval becomes present in the art scene, when he submits “The Fountain” under a pseudonym R. Mutt to the Society of Independent Artists exhibit in 1917 and gets rejected. This situation led him to dislocate from the Dadaist movement in New York and head towards new explorations in art creation. Although he kept busy with scattered art activities and later his involvement with Breton and Surrealism, around 1918 Duchamp starts to head into his Chess stage for almost 25 years. Later he returns and participates back in the art scene with acclaim and recognition until his death in 1968.<sup>i</sup>

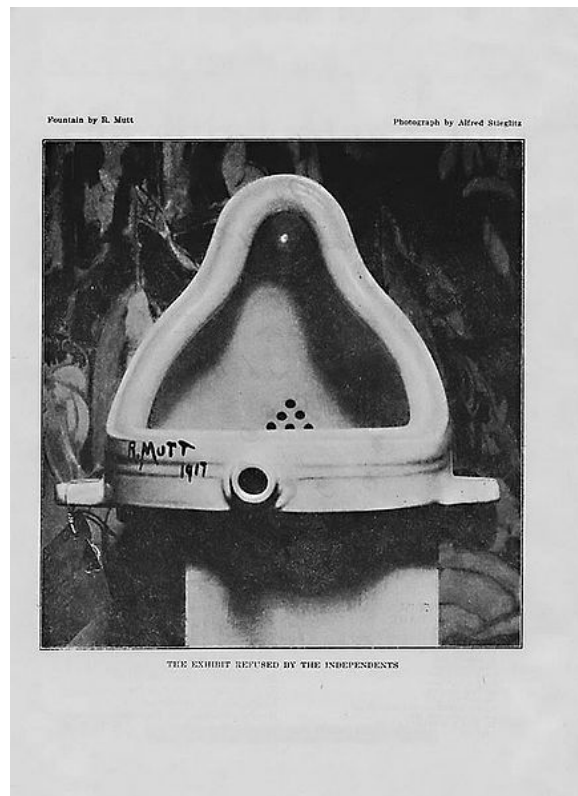
### **Duchamp, An Approximation**

It was stated in the introduction that Duchamp didn’t embark himself to set up the rules of the game, or to become some sort of prophet for the art world. It seems more like he set himself on a personal quest, a self-motivated investigation to find out what art meant for him, and in that same venue, how he could express art through other means and/or devices that those that were the usual, the standard. In that act of digging into knowledge and reflecting on new thoughts that came to his awareness, he stripped and purified it from tricks and artifices in order to display a more profound aspect of it. Through out his career he came up with some key concepts, that although some might think of them as the ABC on how to produce contemporary art, we might have a safer bet looking into them as ‘strategies’ on context, rather than a panacea for all art conflicts.

When we take a brief consideration and note how at the same time that Duchamp became active, also great transformations were happening quite fast in the world. The grand discourse of “Modernism” in history started to show its flaws and many artist and thinkers were seeking new means to confront these issues. The fact that two World Wars went through during Duchamp’s lifetime also gives us an idea of the major shifts that were taking place, and makes us consider how in chaos we seek order. Lets look at these two definitions to compare and imagine the grand transition that occurred from pre-Duchamp to early post-Duchamp times. “[...] modern art has often been driven too by various social and political agendas. These were often utopian, and modernism was in general associated with ideal visions of human life and society and a belief in progress.”<sup>ii</sup> To a later point when “Postmodernism” became identified with: “[...] it collapses the distinction between high culture and mass or popular culture; that it tends to efface the boundary between art and everyday life; and that it refuses to recognize the authority of any single style or definition of what art should be.”<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than numerating and defying Duchamp's breakthrough achievements, it feels more interesting to focus on a main or central position that in a way links greatly to what he has achieved. "Consider once again Marcel Duchamp, whose art neither Hegel nor any of his contemporaries could have considered as such. It was Duchamp above all others whose work was intended to exemplify the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art, particularly in his readymades of 1915-1917."<sup>iv</sup> The admiration of this achievement comes even to a greater stage or level of consideration, when we read the artist's modest statement, by quoting Duchamp on a Symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961: "I don't want to destroy art for anybody but myself."<sup>v</sup> But what is the essence of this great aesthetical achievement? That of course should be left an open question for reflection, but maybe we can hint over an article published by Duchamp's magazine "The Blind Man" where he wrote about "The Richard Mutt Case" right after the rejection of "Fountain", saying that: "Mr. Mutt... took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object."<sup>vi</sup>

That last line, '*created a new thought for that object*', couldn't be more simple, obvious and essential, and at the same time charged with so much meaning to give us insight on the sort of 'Zen mentality', which Duchamp might have used to inspect his artistic concerns. On this brief reflection on trying to get more of what is, or of what could be essential to understand one of Duchamp's original contributions to art, we are aiding ourselves from Arthur C. Danto's "The Transfiguration of the Common Place" which is a great enquire on the contemporary philosophical concerns of today's art practice. Danto at some moment points out how for example 'holy water' is just regular water, that through an act of gesture, in that case spiritual, the simple tap water can just become something else, being that of course 'holy'. Further on he states that "Duchamp's work is not the urinal at all but the gesture of exhibiting it" And when we consider these implications we might just bump into the concern of meaning, which Danto replies by saying: "[...] the object was not a work until it was made one. As a transformative procedure, interpretation is something like baptism, not in the sense of giving a name but a new identity, participation in the community of the elect." Danto's reflections might bring us somewhat closer into grasping the conceptual purity on the meaning of 'gesture as art form'.<sup>vii</sup>



Duchamp, Fountain, Photography by Alfred Stieglitz (1917)

### **Duchamp, as Influence**

Although most people think Picasso has been one of the most influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that has come into discussion and certain artist's poles point towards Duchamp as being one of the most influential artists of the century. This of course is irrelevant information, but not so when you think about Duchamp's volume in art production, not that this matters either, but usually it is the same 20 more or less pieces that always come into discussion when investigating Duchamp. Opposed to Picasso that did: "13,500 paintings, 100,000 graphic prints or engravings, 34,000 book illustrations, and 300 sculptures and ceramics."<sup>viii</sup> Again this data is not telling us much about influence, but it does tell about the relations of proportions in quantity and quality. Especially when we consider that Duchamp not only influenced the DADA generation but also later on the Neo-Dadaist, the so-called Conceptual Artists and we clearly see his effect on today's art practice.

"In 1959 when Robert Lebel's monograph on Marcel Duchamp appeared, it must have been a revelation. Furthermore, the Duchamp exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum surely reinforced the artists knowledge of what had happened at the beginning of the century."<sup>ix</sup> Clearly at this moment new events and manifestations were on the verge of exploding on the art scene: Pop Art, Nouveau Realism, Happenings, Post-Painterly Abstraction, Op and Kinetic Art to name a few, and although Duchamp had been silent for a while on his chess period, his game was not

yet over. To come up with a list of artist's that are or were clearly linked to Duchamp could be a really purposeless and boring enterprise, but on the other hand it is interesting to sight the effect that Duchamp had on the Neo-dada's through out the world, in a very small fraction of time, asserting in this way his legacy and that of the Dadaist.

We will just point and name a few artists from the period in a anachronistic fashion, to give us insight on how they became partly influenced by Duchamp in their very own artistic practices. As Amaya points out in his 1965 text when referring to R.B. Kitaj's paintings "There is a strong connection in some of his works with Duchamp, particularly in the 'corrected' readymades—often nothing more than a page torn from an auction catalogue, and old photograph or the title page of a favorite book, mounted, signed and framed by him."<sup>x</sup> This art practice might not come to us as such a revolutionary notion in art, but if we situate the event on the parallel of its time quoting Clemente Greenberg's 1961 essay "Modernist Painting": "The essence of Modernism lies [...] in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." This strict approach towards art comes into a clear clash with Duchamp's gestures and those of DADA, but that of course didn't stop the up-and-coming artists who were finding fertile ground to plant and grow their ideas on Duchampian soil.

In David Hopkins "After Modern Art 1945-2000" a chapter called "Duchamp's Legacy: The Rauschenberg—Johns Axis", Hopkins gives us insight in how artist's like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Joseph Cornell, Robert Morris towards the later Robert Gober and Sherrie Levine were greatly influenced in their art practice by Duchamp's conceptions. "In 1957 Duchamp delivered an important lecture, 'The Creative Act', in which he argued that 'the work of art is not performed by the artist alone' but the spectator's point of view affects the all-important 'transubstantiation' of inert matter into art."<sup>xi</sup> This of course brings another key topic into his contribution: 'the role of the spectator', pairing beautifully with concepts from Roland Barthes later essay "The Death Of The Author" and later Postmodernist views and practices. This powerful attribution given to art has certainly given another entrance to constructing meaning; essentially against notions based on grand discourses where art has a set of values and predetermined meanings in order to be understood and assimilated. We can certainly ponder on the idea that art is what it is, not what it should be.



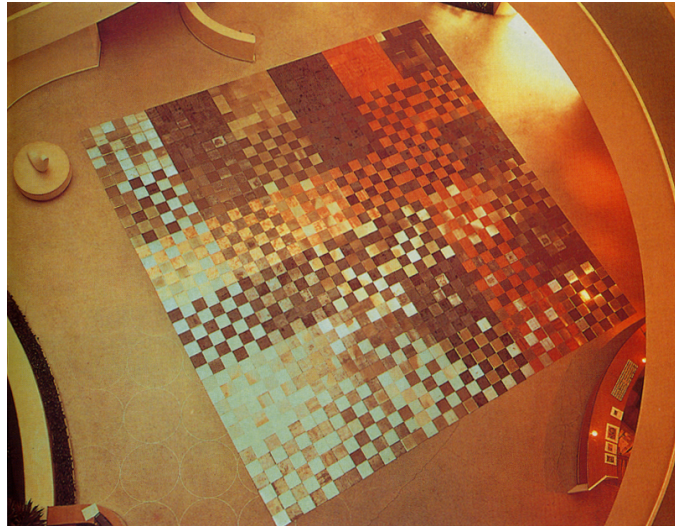
Duchamp. *Nude Descending a Staircase*, (1912)



Richter. *Woman Descending the Staircase* (1965)

Curiously enough other artists have picked-up where Duchamp left, bringing aboard a reinterpretation of art history as a strategy to construct meaning in their own artworks “I am a painter, I love to paint. Using photographs was the only possible way to way to continue to paint... the notion of neutrality and objectivity is an illusion” Said Richter and later Coulter adds “Richter emphasized enigmaticalness and multiple ways of seeing the world in his early years often by painting it in shades of grey. *Woman Descending the Staircase* is a grey painting of a found object, a photograph with an obvious poke at Marcel Duchamp’s ‘pseudo-complexity’ and the notion that artistic production can be denied.”<sup>xii</sup>

Duchamp’s influence was never design or directed to fit a specific art venue; it was plainly laid out and absorbed by different artists as the art flow started to quickly evolve and fragmentize in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we could somehow say that he was always cooking meals for no one but himself, but one way or another everyone invited themselves, and ate them. It became evident in Carl Andre’s work how the role of ‘the spectator’ plays such a crucial aspect on constructing meaning for the piece. “In order that they experienced it in full, the spectator was invited to walk on these plains. The literal feel of the work, the particular density of the metal, its sound and its resistance to the thread are all part of what it can give to the ‘spectator’.”<sup>xiii</sup>



Carl Andre, "37 pieces of work" (1969)

So far we have brought about a brief but concise notion of some aspects related to Duchamp's influence on different generations, movements and styles of art. These topics we have discussed probably won't help to clarify what it is exactly and concretely that Duchamp has done for the art world throughout history, but it can certainly give a sort of milieu for laying the following aspect that concerns this investigation, that of course is how Duchamp's work relates to the individual artist, in this case myself.

### **An Open Conclusion**

If we can bring to mind the impression that Duchamp finally broke the idea that the artist had to be an 'illusionist' in order to be accepted as a magician. That clearly said of course when we consider a magician as someone that truly transforms reality to amaze others. A magician as a transformer of reality, one that can get the common object and make it into something else by some type of effort or simple gesture. In this metaphorical reflection we understand that by flipping a 'urinoir' and putting it on a pedestal, clearly no grand act of physical magic has occurred, but one that we can point as a conceptual event, a sort of "alchemy of the mind" act. That becomes so revolutionary, because unlike previous artists, which had attempted to go through the use of artifices and complex techniques on the physical object in order to achieve the artistic, Duchamp just went about gesture.





Julian Wasser's famous picture of Marcel Duchamp playing chess with Eve Babitz 1963

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Mixed information from: Wikipedia's [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel\\_Duchamp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp) and Bio. <http://www.biography.com/people/marcel-duchamp-9280070>

<sup>ii</sup> TATE, glossary, <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=174>

<sup>iii</sup> TATE, glossary, <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=230>

<sup>iv</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "The Abuse of Beauty", Aesthetics and the Concept of Art (2006). Pg. 94-95, Open Court publishing company.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace" (1981). Harvard University Press.

<sup>viii</sup> Picasso Mio, <http://www.picassomio.com/art-articles/picasso-how-many-artworks-did-picasso-create-in-his-life-time.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Mario Amaya, "Pop Art ...And After" (1965) The Viking Press. Pg.54

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. Pg.140

<sup>xi</sup> David Hopkins, "After Modern Art 1945-2000" (2000), Oxford University Press. Pgs. 37-64

<sup>xii</sup> Photography By Other Means: Gerhard Richter's Challenge to the Real by Dr. Gerry Coulter. <http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/?page=1&content=209>

<sup>xiii</sup> Michael Archer, "Art Since 1960" (2010), Thames & Hudson, World of Art. Pg.56