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Marcel Duchamp. La Peinture, même.

Centre Pompidou, Paris, 24 Sept. 2014 - 5 Jan. 2015

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- 1 Thirty-seven years after the first Duchamp exhibit for the grand opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977, the purpose of the new Duchamp retrospective was, as the title clearly indicates, to counter the too-popular assumption that Duchamp is « the artist who killed painting »¹ with his first *readymade*, a bicycle wheel, in 1913, and to place in the limelight lesser-known aspects of the artist and of his multi-faceted work, especially his paintings.
- 2 As Philippe Sers recalls and underscores at various points in his essay on Duchamp², the exceptional fame of Marcel Duchamp has led to many a misunderstanding about the artist and his vision of art, including the idea that anything can be promoted to an *objet d'art* status as long as some artistic authority *named* that object a work of art³. Sers, along with many other critics and the curator of the Duchamp exhibit, Cécile Debray, insists upon the necessity to envision Duchamp's *oeuvre* in its own coherence, and as a whole—a necessity made principle in the 2014 Pompidou exhibit, and undoubtedly one of its major achievements.
- 3 The exhibit was conceived to prepare the spectator for its final room (room #8), dedicated to Duchamp's claimed summa, *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (Le Grand Verre) / The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, his unfinished *chef d'oeuvre*—in the original sense of the word, i.e. the final work produced by the artisan-in-training. The title of the exhibit itself is a direct reference to the title of this complex work on which Duchamp worked from 1915 to 1923 (plus time spent on producing replicas in the 1960s). The piece was in part conceived by the artist as a retrospective of his own works, since it groups a three-dimensional reproduction of three of his earlier paintings *Bride* (1912), *Chocolate Grinder* (1914) and *Glider containing a water mill in neighboring metals* (1913–1915)—all presented at the Centre Pompidou. However, *The Large Glass* is not only a *visual* piece, since it was meant to be accompanied by written material (a book that never was bound), coming from a wealth of notes by

the artist. Moreover, in 1926, on its way home from its first public exhibition, the glass panels broke in their shipping crate and received a large crack in the glass. Duchamp repaired them, but left the cracks in the glass intact, embracing the chance element as a part of the work.

- 4 One can imagine the challenge for the Pompidou curator to try and give an idea of what this complex project was in its conception, and could have been in its realization, given that the final room naturally does not claim to give a possible finished *Grand Verre*, since Duchamp himself declared it unfinished in 1923 and chose to keep it in that state. The spectator is therefore offered all the material Duchamp had gathered about that project, including one reproduction of the original *Large Glass*⁴, and the display of Duchamp's own manuscript notes, as a voice is broadcast reading these texts, which was one of the inspirations for this work. The presentation of the work is quite overwhelming for the spectator, though, for it is difficult for a human brain to process at the same time the visual part of the piece—the two glass panes and the play on shadows, reflections and projections—while listening to the text (barely audible in the general noise of the crowd) and while reading the notes exhibited in glass cases along the walls of the room. The complexity and elusive nature of this work, maybe designed to be “mocking the solemnity of the explicator who is determined to find *the key*” (Perloff, 34), requires a lot of attention and involvement of the viewer/reader to be grasped. However that last room towards which the whole exhibit strived was therefore somehow disappointing when compared to the rest of the exhibit, which managed to expose the complexity of Duchamp's works and aesthetics, his playful spirit and daring inventiveness, in a very convincing manner.
- 5 The exhibit therefore combined a thematic and a diachronic approach, justified in its aim to present *The Large Glass* in the end. The first room thus endeavored to underscore Duchamp's multisemiotic approach, and it clearly showed how Duchamp's creativity found its source in the relation between text and image, and in the question of “looking”, through erotic nudes (room #2) and the theme of voyeurism in his first paintings and engravings, but also in his interest in extra-retinian radiations (room #3) and in rendering the unfolding of time and movement. His famous *Nudes Descending a Staircase* 1911-1912 (room #4), inspired by chronophotography and by books on how to draw men in movement (*Physiologie artistique de l'homme en mouvement*, Paris 1895), all displayed at the exhibit, are key-aspects of this interest, as well as his work on projections, shadows, and kinetic works, such as the *Rotative Plaque Verre (optique de precision)* installation (1920/1979), which he managed to produce with Man Ray's help, and which was launched into action at regular intervals in the exhibit. The catalogue and the exhibit emphasize the importance of the rejection of his *Nudes Descending a Staircase* by his artist-friends and his brothers (the painting ended up being refused for the 1911 *Salon des Indépendants*), and see in that event the very cause of Duchamp turning away from painting and creating his first *ready-mades*. Surprisingly enough, though, the exhibit did not really expand upon the impact that emigrating to the US had on Duchamp's works and aesthetics; it may not be to surprising in a French Institution aiming at reclaiming Duchamp's heritage into the French culture, but one could nonetheless be perplexed by the relative absence of the American context in the exhibit.
- 6 According to Philippe Sers, the later success of the *Nudes* in the 1913 Armory Show in New York, did not change Duchamp's awareness of the “idiotic” nature of any kind of

institutional consensus on art works—a realization that opened the way to exploring new possibilities in art. According to Sers, the first *readymades* should not be limited to being experiments in art forms. To the critic, the famous *Fountain* (1917), which had been signed “R. Mutt” and rejected by the Society of Independent Artists for its exhibit in 1917, was designed as a form of revenge, meant to demystify the *reception* of art works by art institutions (Sers, 22). Rather than relying on taste, or conventions and norms, and while acknowledging the relativity of all perception, the exhibit noticeably exemplified how Duchamp chose to place the spectator/receptor at a key-point in his works, whether it was to decipher puns and *calembours*, or to be the eye grasping the kinetic qualities of his work, noticing the shadows and reflections, or placing itself in the designed perspective necessary to grasp the piece, as for his last work *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* / *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas* (1946-1966), a piece that surprised the art world, as it was believed that Duchamp had abandoned art for chess in the 1930s.

- 7 The Pompidou exhibit could not completely reproduce the original *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage*, which is a mixed media work⁵ (what would be called an installation nowadays), visible only through a pair of peep holes (one for each eye) in a wooden door, representing a nude woman lying on her back with her face hidden and legs spread holding a gas lamp in the air in one hand against a landscape backdrop. The nude body, reminiscent of Courbet's *Origin of the World*, is a three-dimensional model, surrounded by many natural and manufactured objects, in front of a two-dimensional background. Even if only a video gives an idea of what the original *Etant donnés* is like, the powerfully innovative aspect of the work was made clear by the elements displayed in the exhibit and by the explanatory text offered to spectators. In many ways, *Etant donnés* provided a better synthesis of Duchamp's aesthetics and art than Room #8, before which it was placed. Moreover, as Caroline Cros underscores, this piece not only challenges art forms, but also challenges the ideal space where art should be shown, i.e. the white cube of galleries and museums (Cros, 82), since the erotic and voyeuristic face-to-face designed by Duchamp obliges the viewer to press his eyes against a wooden door, without sharing the space in which the art work is kept.
- 8 Duchamp stopped producing paintings around 1915 (with works such as *Neuf moules malic* 1914-1915, which mix oil, lead and silver wires held between glass panes), losing interest in what he called “retinal art” (“*la peinture rétinienne*”), but in order to better grasp how and why he came to stop painting the exhibit offered a very clear insight into his family heritage⁶ and his pictorial practice. A very pedagogical video on his childhood, shown at the end of the exhibit, presented many echoes with the works exhibited, and provided, in many ways, a more adapted conclusion to the exhibit than the room dedicated to the *Large Glass*. The Video indeed exposed the bucolic park and surroundings of the bourgeois house, reminding the viewer of Duchamp's early Impressionist and Fauvist works; his early fascination with catalogues of manufactured goods, or with the magazine called *La Nature*, in which the ultimate discoveries and inventions were publicized, and which fuelled his young imagination and endeavored to develop his innovative mind; the home-realizable scientific experiments suggested to children by *L'illustration*, reflected in his passion for scientific treaties and experiments with optics, as in the *Rotative Plaque Verre (optique de précision)* installation (1920/1979); his admiration for automobiles and dirigibles, perceptible in his later resort to wheels and floating objects; the family practice of photography, taken up in his collaborations with Mann Ray (even though that aspect of his creation is only

evoked in the exhibit), or in *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (1946-1966), for which the spectator had to place his or her eye to the hole in the wooden shack wall, as one would place one's eye on a camera viewfinder.

- 9 Francis Naumann recalls that Duchamp quite immediately viewed the ready-made as a potential extension of the traditional definition of art (Naumann, 64). In a letter from 1915 to his sister (and fellow painter) Suzanne, he wrote: "the ready made may be considered as a form of irony, or as an attempt to show the futility in any attempt to define art".⁷ Whether it is in itself ironic that Duchamp's *Fountain* was ranked first in a 2004 survey of 500 artists, curators, critics and dealers commissioned by Gordon's, the sponsor of Britain's Turner prize,⁸ or whether Duchamp contributed to making of irony a major mode of structuring art forms in the 20th and 21st centuries, what the Centre Pompidou exhibit showed, in addition to restoring Duchamp's stance as a major painter, is his unique ability at exploring the dynamics of representation in a myriad of modes.

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NOTES

1. Cécile Debray, "A new interpretation of the paintings of Marcel Duchamp, one of the most iconic figures in 20th century art". Consulted on April 10, 2015. <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cqpxoxR/rBA4KyL>

2. Philippe Sers. *L'Énigme Marcel Duchamp : l'art à l'épreuve du cogito*. Paris: Hazan, 2014. The 2014 book is the revised edition of his *Duchamp confisqué, Marcel retrouvé*. Paris: Hazan, 2009.

3. Sers explains that is more André Breton's definition of Duchamp's *readymades* than Duchamp's own cautious definition of art that is at the source of the misunderstanding (Sers, 15).
 4. The replica shown in the Centre Pompidou is the one made in 1961 by Ulf Linde (1961), and which Duchamp signed as a "*copie conforme*".
 5. It is composed of an old wooden door, nails, bricks, brass, aluminum sheet, steel binder clips, velvet, leaves, twigs, a female body made of parchment, hair, glass, plastic clothespins, oil paint, linoleum, an assortment of lights, a landscape composed of hand-painted and photographed elements and an electric motor housed in a cookie tin which rotates a perforated disc.
 6. Three of his brothers and sisters were artists: Gaston—Jacques Villon (1875-1963)—was a Cubist painter and engraver; Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876-1918) was a sculptor; Suzanne Duchamp (1889-1963) was a Dadaist painter.
 7. "le ready made peut être considéré comme une sorte d'ironie, ou comme une tentative pour montrer la futilité de toute tentative pour définir l'art", quoted by Naumann, 64.
 8. Charlotte Higgins. "Duchamp's Urinal the Font of Modern Art", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec. 3, 2004. Consulted on January 14, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/12/02/1101923273643.html>
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