D U C H A M P A S C R I T I C

by

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Perhaps because we are still more or less in agreement with the Romantic opinion of Neoclassicism, an artist who today claims he is also a philosopher or critic is apt to be accused of apostasy, and anyone else who ventures to make this claim about an artist is open to a sharp rap on the knuckles for his heresy. Marcel Duchamp, so far as I know, is guilty of no such claim for himself. In suggesting here that some of his activities function not only as art, but also as criticism, heresy in the Romantic view is therefore risked. But due respect for this view urges me to announce at the outset that I do not regard Duchamp at all in the way many of us look back, let us say, at the Neoclassicist theory-painter Mengs, Although that schoolmaster was dubbed a philosopher-artist in his day, we now see him as an exemplar in paint of written texts, most of which moreover were prepared by others. It would be absurd, for instance, to maintain that Breton has been to Duchamp what Winkelmann at one time was to Mengs.

In searching for the critical element that is suspected of residing in certain works by Duchamp, it would be easy to get off on the wrong foot. The simpler conventions of exegesis could lead one astray at once. We might, for example, so analyze Why Wot Sneeze Rose Selavy? Here we witness diced cubes of marble in a little bird cage, furnished with cuttle-fish and a thermometer, the whole surmounting a tilted shaving-glass which reflects, in legible order, reversed lettering that spells out the title and date of the ob-

ject. Taking the marble as a clue, we may recognize it as the classical matter of statuesque form, the traditional "stuff" of art. And this, perhaps in deference to the venerable distinction between matter and form, has a shape, the delectable shape of sugar lumps. Following the line of inference just begun these traditional objets d'art, sweetened to taste, may be seen captive in a cultural cage, possibly tended by a cuttle-bone curator, their condition tested critically and reported by the fever thermometer in perpetuity. What then of the mirror? In well-known lore it separates soul from body. The sneeze too was thought to perform that function, though less smoothly. It was believed that the sneezer sneezes his soul out and, unless a friend was handy to say God-bless-you, it was feared that a demon would get in before the soul could get back. As a consequence here, in the form of a question, is the soul of art at stake?

Plausible or implausible, listings of this sort would at worst lull us into a false impression that we were being made aware of Duchamp's acts, and at best, by allowing us to compare the experience with our analysis, convince us that we had been chasing a rainbow with a dross-filled pot. The chances are that we should be sinking our own meanings into the work and then wresting them out with a flourish of self-congratulation, coming away with no more, and what is more important, with no less bias, than we had had when we started. Or we might suppose that we were following the course prescribed, by Mallarmé of "guessing little by little" the subjects which had been severed by the artist from their metaphors; as when that poet leaned back to the night sky and spoke only of a palace with dead garlands, expecting his readers gradually to intuit celestial things. But the poet himself explains nothing, he is not tacking labels on a dioramic heaven. He makes his emotion individual. It makes the moment for us unique. Quite the contrary, looking at the object by Duchamp, we have itemized a number of details, each of

a kind, and kinds are commodities of intellectual exchange. Our guesses are classifiable. We have taken the trouble to extract supposed meanings from a cryptic context so as to make them intelligible at the level of political discourse. We have overlooked any possible uniqueness in the experience, and we have used our own terms to incorporate what might have been individual with the routine lock step of everyday communication. We have assumed that Duchamp has written a sermon into his stones and have gratuitously obliged ourselves with a set of our own program notes.

Duchamp himself issues no bookish proclamations and writes no scriptures. To him the eloquent experience of art is attained only through an act of submission. As Schopenhauer put it, the observer "loses himself in the object, forgets even his own individuality, his will, and only continues to exist as the pure subject, the clear mirror of the object." Duchamp has expressed the opinion that few people are capable of this exalted state, yet the fact that he occasionally goes about tweaking noses in the business-like manner of a Zen master suggests that he hopes a few more might be made a little more aware. It is as if the scales of self-possession might fall from our eyes with the quick tears of fleeting pain. But pain, of course, is not the word for the effect of these acts of his. His humor has nothing of the cruelty ascribed by surrealists to Breton's "black bile." Nor, at base, has it the callous turn of Addison's joker, who populated his table with guests who stammered. It has nothing in common with Clive Bell's "glow of peculiar, civilized pleasure," which merely amounts to applause of one's own good sense when another is seen in an absurd predicament that seems out of the question for oneself. Rather, it shocks us into a sudden realization that we are standing in our own shadow.

Humor may be like a bath in ginger ale, bubbling around our floating selves in endless exhilarating reserves. Or it may startle us out of common sense through witty perception of an unforeseen and even ridiculous relationship, drawing attention not so much to the things related, or to the agent, as to the act of relating. This is a breathless instant, too fast for a smile, leaving us in a state of wonder, dredging our insides for the laughter we had always thought spontaneous. Remote from the yearning metaphors of Mallarmé, it is the stroke with which Duchamp cuts the cushions of culture. He traps attention, which could so easily wander into the habitual ambits of sensory savoring or plastic analysis, and diverts it to transient spiritual action. For to him the stuff of art is simply the pabulum of a keen spirit. Colors, textures and the rest, ways of combining them, and even the assumptions which determine these ways merely provide for it. Pigment is to style what style is to myth, all three being interdependent and mutually sustaining. And the spirit gains independence not by the essential penetration of the three, but by seeing around them as well.

If there appears to be a haze about the talk here of spirit, it is not the smoke of incense but of the game room. Today, it seems to me, we nave a tendency to play ourselves in a game. We stand a little to one side, conscious of the moves and the quality of play in which our other selves are engaged. We see ourselves twofold in the casino of history, not as sure winners, but as counters whose course in governed by house rules that we ourselves may take a hand in forming. We are gamblers, not masters, of our fate. It is risky, for the independence of the more detached self cannot be preserved once the engaged one is blind to all but the rules of a single game. The two selves of the single individual must be mutual informants and still they must stay apart. Let the detachment be relaxed and we take the grave chance of becoming victims of our myths. We may use the jargon of philosophy, but the libidinal

demons of Freud are no less hell-bent then the minions of Satan. More and more individuals are now being caught up in a civilization which, though perhaps conceived in some respects by minds in their independent state, demands the sacrifice of independence as soon as the game is in play.

It might be protested that our forebears got along well enough without recourse to this nonsense about a schizoid conscience. But their hopes are not ours. The hereafter is an orphan in our imagination. The apotheosis of intellect is to us a curiosity of history. We cannot accept the quantitative appraisals of the nineteenth century when it was judged that ignorance, like the world's subsurface supply of petroleum, will at length be exhausted. In some quarters our age seems to be undergoing a process of declassification, perhaps preliminary to a classless condition, and the spirit which that process represents is forced to take action in the interests of its own preservation as well as development.

It is not without weapons. One of them, as we know well, is rudeness. In any game to yield to grave without reservation is to accept the rules, for politeness is a convention which has achieved its polish by repetition of preordained moves. The daily toll of individuals taken in by the current bureaucratic game is contested by other individuals who are obliged to be rude in order to maintain the tense detachment that keeps them outside, when also inside, all games and all myths which might serve them but could enslave them. Rudeness may therefore be a form of vigilance, yet to act in this way it must be calculated. It would be useless to rant, commiserate and lay blame. Unlike a well placed catcall, the sectarian cattishness we often see around us is ineffective. Complaint, no matter how sly its disguise, is merely a symptom and not an expression of spirit. A program so based would be like that of a

child which refuses to play with its fellows, pouting, stamping its foot, crying and calling them unfair, while the game goes on in strict accordance with the rules. In accusing its companions of being unfair the self-deluded child protests a faith in the very rules which have made it unhappy. On the other hand its assumption that the activity is a game has promise. What remains is for it to learn that the game is one among many. Systematic rudeness implies this lesson two ways. Its wedge of impiety introduces the presence of a potential threat to the game as such, and at the same time it intimates the nature of that presence in terms of the rules of a game of its own. Duchamp's nimble gesture of planting a billboard mustache on the "Mona Lisa" pointed up the tasted dislocation of art in the amusement trade, and by adding a phonetic pun in the title L. H. O. O. Q. he insinuated an ironic transition to the serious game of joking. As a game, however, rudeness has its limits. Although it may turn the rules of the system it attacks inside out, it is still dependent on those rules as the fixtures of its own play. It moves as an epicycle around the circle of the questioned game. It cannot lead the imagination into a wider realm where play takes many forms, and where play itself is a conscious instrument of spiritual activity. The rude role has been assumed by Duchamp only intermittently.

Games may be taken lightly, and perhaps all games should be undertaken with that touch of humor which liberates the mind from the matter at hand. In a sense the association William James made between a condition of intoxication and a mystical state may apply here, for traditionally humor is a liquor which, properly plied, makes the earthly station of men more tolerable by releasing them from its immediate pressures. To this end humor has mobilized puns, acrostics, anagrams and a host of other more or less ingenious schemes of word play. Dryden described the anagram as the "torturing of one poor word ten thousand ways." Yet they have

acted as amusing games, covert political gibes, and devices of concealment or unexpected revelation for centuries. To keep in touch with certain forces around him, Louis XIII appointed a special "anagrammatist to the king." Cabalists used to say that "secret mysteries are woven into the numbers of letters," and astronomers such as Galileo would jealously embody discoveries in anagrammatic transpositions to avoid the risk of theft while they were engaged in further verification. Voltaire is supposed to be an anagram of that philosopher's family name, and Rose SéLavy or Rrose Sélavy, the varying allonym Duchamp attached to several of his works, is a promising linguistic conundrum that is crossed with red herrings. The leavening influence of such games is especially effective in a culture where catchwords and slogans count. The springs of much of our daily action, for instance, are couched in headlines and radio jingles. Flashy reporters and columnists have developed trigger-tongues for verbal twists that would have embarrassed Reverend W. A. Spooner himself. But in general their coinage is earth-bound. Less glib, perhaps, P. T. Barnum was more visionary. When he wanted to clear his freak museum of customers, who had tarried too long, over the exit he nailed a sign reading "To the Egress," and the eager crowd marched through.

This, in a sense, is the spirit of Duchamp's famous puns and paronomastic ruses. Through them he tempts his readers outside their sole preoccupation with the everyday spectacle. They are too well known to cite here, but his piercing manner of getting at the heart of a word by visual means is often overlooked. An artist who once studied to be a librarian, he acts with the effect of discovering deed for word.

Local issues frequently make themselves the targets of his thrusts, losing their purely local dependencies in the process. Nourished by local whims, words often grow fat and unwieldy in

general service, and measures are now and then applied to reduce them. It has been said that each noun carries with it an invisible adjective, the choice of adjective depending on the bias of the user. One of the elementary steps in logic is, of course, to expose the adjective so that the noun may be divided into classifications of denotation and connotation. The definition of denotation excludes, as far as possible, conditions that are subject to opinion and consequent argument. Logical denotation is usually understood as meaning the subjects of which a word or term may be predicated. The word "man" denotes Aristotle, Michelangelo, Churchill, Pius XII and any other dead or living creature who may indisputably be classed as a human being. Each of these names, that is to say, represents an individual instance in which a common nature is manifested, and the denotation is concerned with the instance only in so far as it exemplifies the class at large. Simple as this procedure seems, it once led art critics into a logical snarl. Concerned, as all critics are, with the problem of matching words with experiences stimulated by visual art, the theorists of classicism tried to find a common ground in logic. They assumed that organized thought is the lingua franca of art, religion, science and philosophy. They supposed that the word "man" could stand in the same relation to a fixed idea of man as a certain type of painted likeness of a man. The type of painted likeness which they invented cannot, however, meet the logical requirements of denotation. The common nature of which it was held to be an instance is composed of conditions which intimately involved notions of Beauty, Truth and the Good. Logic was defrauded by the importation of disputable claims into the precinct of denotation. The confusion this caused eventually encouraged critics to abandon attempts to make visual art logical, and they turned to other fields for analogies that might induce words to work as suitable references in art criticism.

Undaunted, Duchamp accomplished with a door what the classicists apparently were unable to do with man. He conceived a door which, hinged to the corner of a room, closed the way to the bathroom when it was opened into the room, and closed the entrance to the room when the route to the bathroom was cleared. Executed it would, in fact, be a door that is always open and always closed. It would demonstrate doorness in its full primal compass. Such an achievement would thus come, in the phenomenal world, about as close to thought in a logical denotation as one could get. It could work without recourse to considerations that operate in the realm of connotation. And no word would be needed to intercede. He has created a symbol for logic. But unlike the arbitrary symbols used in some forms of logic, his symbol would be at once a type of thing and the thing itself.

As a rule inferences of the local sort do not occur at the express invitation of Duchamp. His gestures penetrate to the core of common situations, concern themselves with seminal essentials, and only rarely make direct implications that lead to the kind of aside illustrated in the account of the critic's problem above. Even though he does not often linger on local matters as such, however, his few occasions of direct implication indicate that at least at those times he expects others to engage in games of inference. Our ingrained habit of classifying things provides him with ammunition. Things may sometimes appear impersonal to us but they never occupy a totally neutral position in our imagination. We might not know the individual nature of a given thing, yet we take a stand in relation to it by awarding it a place within a class towards which we have an already defined attitude. At one level, Duchamp composes his works in terms of these attitudes. As a result the clues he gives may act as self-portraits of those who take them into account. With him direct implication is largely an affair of timing. This happened when Duchamp's fellow jurors at the New York

Independent's show were offered, in meditating on the now famous entry of the porcelain urinal, the opportunity to depict to themselves their own attitude to the game of art exhibitionism.

Compare this gesture with Soupault's performance in submitting a framed mirror, entitled Portrait of an Unknown, to a Dada exhibition. Here too was a chance for self-portraiture, but its fate was haunted from the start by a zero, and its airy charm of hazard fades quickly into an act of insouciance. In the case of the urinal episode, on the other hand, the devil seems to care. Duchamp, for all the impolite fiction of his pseudonymity, made a deliberate appeal to the conscience of his victims. While it could hardly be said that his appeals are amiable, or that he is compassionate about our blind-fold ways, we can never say that his gestures, within their exposed limits, are in any sense coercive on his part. He issues invitations to self-coercion. His manner of statement is unique, but he is not alone among artists in his view. Although his social life had led him at times to be identified with surrealism, it is not so much among Surrealists where one finds his spiritual companions. The latter exist, like himself, as individuals whose vision is in spirit unconnected with the common group classifications which are imposed on them by others. In the public eye artists are cramped in ticketed cribs because that eye is closed to all but the bureaucratic peep-show. People go to exhibitions to see types of art. We are concerned far more with feelings about things than with what philosophers have called the things-in-themselves. The emotions which bind our bookkeeping preoccupations together are invested in attitudes to classes of things. We appear to be less interested in consuming — to use the illuminating cant of the market — works of art than in the trade of art commodities.

The impassioned cheers in our Big Game favor the ones who use their will to compile the most lucid ledgers. Duchamp's activities, as it has been pointed out, may convert these affirmations to interrogations in the minds of those who observe them.

And his actions go further. They may concentrate our attention on ineffable things. Habitually we glance at an object or event and content ourselves with the observation that it is this or that kind of thing. By the simple irony of withholding the thing so that it cannot be classified, Duchamp induces us to reflect on a thing that is not, to our knowledge, of a kind. For unknown things, being beyond the control of will, do not compose a satisfactory class. Archaeologists and anthropologists who drew up the great catalogues of their fields in the last century never tired of telling us that the ancients and primitive people reduced the unknown to gods they could name and classify for purposes of rough control. Unnamed, an unknown thing or event tends to assume an individual character in the imagination. There is an unknown presence within a ball of twine which Duchamp clamped between bolted metal plates and called A bruit secret. Nobody knows what was inserted and yet, to use an image suggested by the title, a seed of sedition has been planted in the ordered field of our outlook.

Because Duchamp has not for many years produced what he calls a hand-painted picture, he is suspected by some people of merely sitting on the side-lines of art. All these years his aesthetic gestures have neatly skirted the conventional artistic forms. His personal interests have kept his own actions from involvement in that matière which, to some artists, is the chief allure of painting. Nor has he been concerned, in any stock medium, with the establishment of the kind of style that often amounts to the internal signature of an artist. In one way or another, painters usually

salute the past of their craft, as when Cezanne said he set out to make Poussin over from nature, and thereby take possession of a tradition. It is a ceremony of ownership that is short-circuited by Duchamp. His art is not to be recognized by the presence of the props of "art." It cannot be assimilated to the great traditions in terms of their external badges. At first sight it might, however, seem that his own badges are analogous to those used by certain poets of this century.

Just as they discarded the emblematic vestments of "poetic" language for the slacks and sweaters of street-corner talk, Duchamp might appear to have turned to the hardware store for his images. But the analogy does not in all respects hold true. To exchange costumes is only to take on another line of goods. Even to strip the puppet is not to get away from institutionalized property, for nudity is as much a cultural uniform as a tunic. Duchamp does not speak the lingo of the trade-mark; nor, in place of making Poussin over from nature, do we hear him paying tribute to Sir John Harington, that Elizabethan inventor of Ajax, the first modem valve water-closet. His allegiance is not to the inventor, and perhaps not to the invention, but rather to the act of inventing, to the working of a mind as in a supernal game. He makes works of art out of thought about thought. He seems to regard the artist, to use words recently put to him by a friend, as "the way in which a picture gets painted." To safeguard the artist in himself, he renounces for himself the term "artist."

And with respect to others it is as though, in some of his own work, he momentarily takes up Schopenhauer's mirror and says, with Hamlet:

You go not till I set you up a glass

Where you may see the inmost part of you.

And what is this spectacle that is ourselves? The metaphor of the mirror is more elusive than the quicksilver which backs the glass itself. A Chinese mystic once ventured to say that the body is like a tree, "and the mind to a mirror bright; carefully we cleanse them hour by hour, lest dust should fall upon them." A rival instantly matched him, saying neither is there a tree, "nor yet a mirror bright; since in reality all is void, whereon can the dust fall?" The rival was honored for his insight, for he had clearly learned the lesson of emancipation.