

Tangible Time, Intangible Marcel: Duchamp's Delay

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*Proposal for the 4th Duchamp Research Scholarship
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His best performances were disappearing acts.¹

It's been several days now that Marcel Duchamp has been driving in the desert, somewhere between Joshua Tree and Tucson. The previous owners of the Cadillac left a tape cassette behind: the soundtrack from *Paris, Texas* (1984) by the German film director Wim Wenders. Maybe they were German, Marcel ponders. Or Parisian Texans. Maybe they, too, tried to get away from the world, until - as Travis, the movie's principal character, says - "every sign of man had disappeared". To leave the art world behind²: Marcel contemplates this idea for a while as he steers imperceptibly, following imperceptible shifts in a road that isn't as straight as linear perspective would have him believe.

The cassette plays on repeat. A rather nice feature, this "repeat". Repetition: he recalls an old composition by Erik Satie, *Vexations* (1893), unearthed and given life by Marcel's friend and chess partner, John Cage. "To be played 840 times in a row", Satie had written on the musical sheet - an early precursor to fluxus scores, no doubt. *Vexations* reminds him of a work of his own, also inscribed with timed absurdity: *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918). To perform, hear, look, and see - all occur within a timeframe. Duration is key: how long will Marcel stay in the desert?

He muses on *delays in time*. No traffic delays here, he notes. On this wide open road, the only delays are those I choose. As Ry Cooder plucks his guitar between long silent intervals, Marcel spots a gas station - maybe a mirage. It looks closed or abandoned. A sign reads:

Cold Beer Here

Marcel knows this is not cold beer³ - only a sign of beer, illusionistic, barely retinal. Where is *here*, this desolate place? And *when* is here? He wonders whether he should pull over and sign the beer sign, another *Signed Sign* (1963). But why bother? Who comes here? No one would know him. "I could sign with a different name - a fresh start". He glances at the travel bag in the back of the car, filled with counterfeit *Monte Carlo Bonds* (1923), sitting next to the modified "wanted" sign (*A Poster Within a Placard*, 1923). There she is: Rose, good old Rose, faithful, playful Rose. Is Eros in the desert, in the unflinching gaze of its silent population, the saguaro cacti? Perhaps the cacti wait and long for something, and therein lies Eros.

¹ Sylvère Lotringer, "Duchamp Werden", *Crossings: Kunst zum Hören und Sehen* (Vienna: Kunsthalle, 1998)

² To paraphrase the title of Pamela M. Lee's *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010).

³ Nor is it a pipe, as in Magritte's *Treachery of Images* (1929).

But no, Rose simply won't do today. Nor will R. Mutt, George W. Welch or any of the aliases on the *Poster*. In this place where time seems to disappear, Marcel, perhaps like Travis⁴, needs new shoes - a new avatar.

As I suggest with this timeless desert, my project for the 4th Duchamp Research Scholarship will explore time, or *delay*, a notion central to Duchamp's oeuvre. Time plays a double role: a modality of the viewer's relationship to the artwork on one hand, and, on the other, a factor of the reception of Duchamp's work by art history. With respect to the latter, it is edifying that over a century since Duchamp's first historically significant works (in the early 1900's) scholars are still unpacking his "valise", so to speak. Each object culled points to another in a complex web of hidden meanings (and echoing of *hidden noises*). There is a remarkable congruence between the art historian's base matter - time - and Duchamp's work, something the artist was quite aware of:

You should wait for fifty years or a hundred years for your true public. That is the only public that interests me.⁵

If, as the poet Henri-Pierre Roché has noted about Duchamp, "his finest work is his use of time"⁶, it is critical to assess how time manifests in his oeuvre. Significantly, a number of works in the Staatliches Museum Schwerin are exemplars of how time becomes tangible in the artist's work. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), for instance, alludes to an as-of-yet unrealized event: a bone fracture. It locates the present time and action (viewing a snow shovel⁷) in relation to a future presented as certain. In our conventional understanding of time, the future is not a given: it is a hypothetical. In *Broken Arm*, however, the certainty is the future event, whereas the present is strangely indeterminate: why this snow shovel - what part, if any, does it play in relation to the stated future event? There is no definitive answer. If works of art are typically an end point, Duchamp's snow shovel is an undecipherable starting point. Because the present is undefinable (and therefore ungraspable), establishing links of causality are at best tentative. *In Advance* locates the present as having already passed. Paradoxically, then, statements can only be made for things to come, things yet unrealized: reality, the present, can be described only from the point of view of the future. As in *Broken Arm*, Duchamp's delay is often facilitated by word puns, conundrums, and unusual titles

⁴ "He just ran. He ran until the sun came up, then he couldn't run any further. And when the sun went down, he ran again. For five days he ran like this until every sign of man had disappeared" (*Paris, Texas*).

⁵ Duchamp quoted in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (De Capo Press, 1973).

⁶ Quoted by Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chapter "Painting at a Dead End".

⁷ Do we still see a shovel, urinal or bottle rack once we have witnessed the readymade? A *delay* lies between what the eye sees and what the mind knows.

which cause a shift in one's relationship to time and experience of the artwork. In this research I will examine the linguistic and semantic structures of works such as *Tu m'* (1918), or *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) among others. My French-American bilingual and bicultural background make this investigation *incontournable*⁸, as the French say.

How does one talk about Duchamp when so much has already been said? The answer is perhaps a question: how would Duchamp write about Duchamp? This proposal is motivated by a desire⁹ to embrace the artist not only as object of study but also as underlying and guiding presence, as if he were - to echo a work by On Kawara - "still alive"¹⁰ and had a hand in this project. Following the title of his 1962 retrospective in Pasadena then, this research is simultaneously *of and by Marcel Duchamp*. As I join literary, philosophical and artistic variations with art historical research, fictional and historical Duchamp meet. A new Duchamp emerges. I will combine a personal (at times autobiographical) and creative approach drawn from my art practice in San Jose State University's Masters of Fine Arts, with historical and theoretical investigations grounded in my graduate and post-graduate degrees in Political and Social Science at the Sorbonne. It is my firm belief that Duchamp's legacy goes beyond the conventional dichotomy of object versus subject. It points to a "here and now", a lived experience of viewer and researcher alike. Furthermore, Duchamp's oeuvre cannot be confined to a single or definitive meaning. This attests to its tremendous contemporaneity: as a delay, the diversity of scholarship and angles expands, continues the life of the artwork and cannot be separated from it. To look at Duchamp's work, one must *look through Duchamp's door*, to use Hans Belting's metaphor¹¹. In this research then, following Theodor Adorno, I will demonstrate, by enactment, Duchamp's living quality:

It must be kept in mind that works of art are alive, have a life sui generis. Their life is more than just an outward fate. Over time, great works reveal new facets of themselves, they age, they become rigid, and they die... [Yet] they have life because they speak in ways nature and man cannot.¹²

⁸ Something one cannot get around.

⁹ Desire as the methodology of Eros or Rose.

¹⁰ On Kawara, *I am Still Alive* (series started in 1969). With regards to another work by Kawara, the *Date Paintings* (1966-2013), Jeffrey Weiss indicates that the "distinction between fast (reading) and slow (making) [...] figures [...] the two implied extremes - instantaneity and infinity [this recalls Duchamp's "A l'Infinifit]" that bracket the temporal coordinates of the artist's entire practice". Weiss, "Bounded Infinity", in *On Kawara: Silence*, ed. J. Weiss (New York: Guggenheim, 2015), 30.

¹¹ Hans Belting, *Looking Through Duchamp's Door: Art and Perspective in the Work of Duchamp. Sugimoto. Jeff Wall* (Köln: Walther Koenig, 2009). Belting is referring to *Etants Donnes'* door.

¹² Adorno quoted in Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

How does Duchamp speak today? Increasingly, as this proposal itself attests, through academia, books, and symposia¹³: the perception and reception of Duchamp's work has become mediated. My research reintroduces Duchamp's voice into the study.

Earlier, I stressed the importance of research founded on an experiential component. I also pondered how Duchamp would have approached this research. I would like to return to these thoughts. A few years ago, I was researching Duchamp in Calvin Tomkins' voluminous biography¹⁴ for an art project. I realized that, like the artist, I have lived in both Paris and New York City - moving back and forth from one city to the other. Like Duchamp, I am also a dual citizen. We share a conceptual and subversive mind, and a love for language and word puns. But the most compelling of these coincidences is *time*. Duchamp's death (Neuilly-sur-Seine, October 2, 1968) and my date of birth (New York City, May 2, 1970, near the Arensberg's building where Duchamp lived in 1915¹⁵) are only nineteen months apart, and only ten months separate his death from the time I was conceived. I would like to posit that, after Duchamp died, he used this "time off" journeying in what Tibetan Buddhism calls the Bardo¹⁶, a state between death and rebirth. After ten months, he emerges in New York City, as the future Keith Daly¹⁷. Granted, "Delavy" may have been a more appropriate name, and, according to Tibetan thought, the Bardo lasts no more than forty-nine days. But if indeed Duchamp's greatest work was his use of time¹⁸, the Bardo's "expiration date" would have been no hindrance. When the forty-nine days were up, he stayed on a few more months - a mere *delay in time*. This is perhaps art's true prerogative: to move constantly between death and life.

While it is of course not humorless, this narrative is not a new-age fantasy or an attempt to trivialize Duchamp. On the contrary. As a visual and performance artist I believe it provides a heuristic meeting point between art practice (appropriation, one of Duchamp's favorite) and historical material. It constitutes a meditation on mortality and an authentic Duchampian conundrum. This status as Marcel's "posthumus" avatar, as Rose Selavy of the after-life (or *Bardo C'est La Vie*): is it my appropriation of Duchamp, or an appreciation *by* Duchamp? Is Duchamp appropriating Duchamp?¹⁹ However we choose to look at it, this

¹³ Francis M. Naumann, "Marcel Duchamp Slept Here", Brooklyn Rail, Nov. 2012.

¹⁴ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: a Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996).

¹⁵ Katharina Neuberger, "Marcel Duchamp: New York and the Readymade, 1912-1917", Lecture Notes No. 1 (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum Schwerin, 2014), 37.

¹⁶ Bar - do (Tib.): between - two.

¹⁷ Is the spelling of *Daly* not a *delay* (in time and text)?

¹⁸ see note 6.

¹⁹ He has done this frequently: if *L.H.O.O.Q.* is an appropriation of da Vinci and his Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved* (1965) then skilfully appropriates those two *and* Duchamp himself (as author of the initial *L.H.O.O.Q.*). *From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy/The Box in a Valise* (1941) is another example of appropriation and remediation of the artist's past works - and yet another delay in time Duchamp plays on us.

credential confers little to no advantage for the artist and historian: like Marcel, and most of us, I must get up²⁰ every day, and try to make the best use of time.

Duchamp was as much alive in his death as he had been in his life [...] "The effect for me of Duchamp's work," [John] Cage wrote, "was to so change my way of seeing that I became in my way a Duchamp unto myself." The only way to celebrate Duchamp was to [...] plug Duchamp's mind into one's own [...] This uncanny collage – this *ménage à deux*, *moins* Duchamp – remains exemplary of the kind of creative crossings that can be achieved between the various arts, but also between art and life, and art and death. Becoming someone else [...] is a way of becoming oneself.²¹

And so the question remains and has taken on a playful and existential connotation: "how *does* Duchamp write about Duchamp?" Just like this, perhaps.

I am confident that this research project will offer compelling insight into Duchamp's work and inspire creative ways to approach his legacy. I am grateful for your consideration.

It's getting late - even by Marcel's clock. The light over the ranges shifts to silver blue. There's a breeze; the air is tangibly cooler. He steps back into the Cadillac and drives off, leaving a cloud of dust. From where we stand, it's hard to see if the "cold beer" sign shows any sign of alteration.

²⁰ On Kawara, "I Got Up" (1968-1979). As Belting (op. cit.) with Hiroshi Sugimoto and Jeff Wall, my research will seek out parallels and intersections between Duchamp's delay and that of other artists, such as Kawara.

²¹ Lotringer (see note 1).