

Dadas on Art

Edited by

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Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). If there was a single architect (or demolition expert) of the Dada movement, it was certainly the man Apollinaire had described, as early as 1913, as “detached from esthetic preoccupations” and “preoccupied with energy.” From his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) to his last painting, *Tu m’* (1918) to his final masterpiece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) (1915–23), Duchamp demonstrated his commitment to the antiphysical, antihedonist, antipermanent, finally destructive side of art. Though the results came less from the objects made than the attitudes inspired, few other artists in the twentieth century have done so much to renew the premises and possibilities of visual art. Duchamp’s innovation was the simple declaration that *anything is art if an artist says it is*. The train of thoughts and actions set in motion by the first “readymades” (ordinary manufactured objects presented either unchanged or very slightly altered as art objects) provided one source for the “machine esthetic” dominating the twenties and thirties, but it also provided a manual for the future of the art that Duchamp himself rejected. He was interested in separating “the readymade in quantity from the already found. The separating is an operation.” It opened upon the world of art the flood tides of materials and actions from the “real world.” The irony of Duchamp’s position as noncombatant in the art battles he himself had instigated was not of course lost on him, as he watched his objects of antiart become the prototypes for one new art after another, from the Surrealist object to the exploitation of chance in abstract expressionism to pop art, happenings, Op art, kinetic art, and “dematerialized” or “conceptual” art. If today many young artists reject Duchamp’s “influence” it is because by now that influence is pervasive rather than specific.

Duchamp came to Paris in 1904, joining his two older brothers—artists Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon. His early work adapted certain Cubist-Futurist ideas. However, the decisive moment came in 1913, when he mounted a bicycle wheel on a common kitchen stool, when he chose an unaltered bottle rack as sculpture, when he began work on *Three Standard Stoppages*, which he called “canned chance.”

In 1915 he went to New York where, with Picabia, Man Ray, Jean Crotti, Arthur Cravan, and the occasional participation of Edgar Varese, Joseph Stella, Mina Loy, Marsden Hartley, and Morton Schamberg, he headed the proto-Dada group, edited or coedited *Rongwrong*, *The Blind Man* (1917), and *New York Dada* (1921), and provoked the "Richard Mutt Case" (see text below which may or not have been partially written by Duchamp), one of Dada's causes célèbres. Duchamp, who was among the organizers of the unjuried Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York in 1917, submitted to it an unadorned urinal, titled *Fountain*; the artist was listed as R. Mutt (perhaps a pun on the German word *Armut*, or poverty). It was "exhibited" behind a curtain and Duchamp resigned in protest. His other great gesture of defiance to conventional institutions was the publication in 1921 of the reproduction of a mustached Mona Lisa, inscribed "L.H.O.O.Q.," which read in French means "she's hot in the ass."

Duchamp returned to Paris for six months in 1921. Though he continued to make objects, he participated only peripherally in Paris Dada, its public nature and tendency to buffoonery being anathema to his intellectual fastidiousness. Later he took part in Surrealism from the same detached position, though the movement claimed him anyway. He returned to New York in 1922 and lived there for the rest of his life, as a chess player and ultimate Dada in his very refusal to participate in the world Dada wanted to change, but by which it was eventually absorbed. Yet paradoxically, and typically, after renouncing art publicly, Duchamp continued privately to produce minor objects, drawings, statements, exhibitions, interviews, even etchings. At his death it was revealed that he had been working for years on a life-size, three-dimensional tableau incorporating a nude and object puns on his life's work; it is now at the Philadelphia Museum.

Interview with Marcel Duchamp by James Johnson Sweeney

Futurism was an impression of the mechanical world. It was strictly a continuation of the Impressionist movement. I was not interested in that. I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purposes, and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. And my painting was, of course, at once regarded as "intellectual" "literary" painting. It was true I was endeavoring to establish myself as far as possible from "pleasing" and "attractive" physical paintings. That extreme was seen as literary. My *King and Queen* was a chess king and queen. . . .

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with "literature." It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a state of mind—to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés—to get free. The "blank" force of dada was very salutary. It told you "don't forget you are not quite so 'blank' as you think you are." Usually a painter confesses he has his landmarks. He goes from landmark to landmark. Actually he is a slave to landmarks—even to contemporary ones.

Dada was very serviceable as a purgative. And I think I was thoroughly conscious of this at the time and of a desire to effect a purgation in myself. I recall certain conversations with Picabia along these lines. He had more intelligence than most of our contemporaries. The rest were either for or against Cézanne. There was no thought of anything beyond the physical side of painting. No notion of freedom was taught. No philosophical outlook was introduced. The cubists, of course, were inventing a lot at the time. They had enough on their hands at the time not to be worried about a philosophical outlook; and cubism gave me many ideas for decomposing forms. But I thought

From James Johnson Sweeney, "Interview with Marcel Duchamp," in "Eleven Europeans in America," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, XIII, no. 4-5 (1946). Reprinted by permission of the Museum of Modern Art and Marcel Duchamp.

of art on a broader scale. There were discussions at the time of the fourth dimension and of non-Euclidean geometry. But most views of it were amateurish. Metzinger was particularly attracted. And for all our misunderstandings through these new ideas we were helped to get away from the conventional way of speaking—from our café and studio platitudes.

Brisset and Roussel were the two men in those years whom I most admired for their delirium of imagination. Jean-Pierre Brisset was discovered by Jules Romains through a book he picked up from a stall on the quais. Brisset's work was a philological analysis of language—an analysis worked out by means of an incredible network of puns. He was sort of a Douanier Rousseau of philology. Romains introduced him to his friends. And they, like Apollinaire and his companions, held a formal celebration to honor him in front of Rodin's *Thinker* in front of the Panthéon where he was hailed as *Prince of Thinkers*.

But Brisset was one of the real people who has lived and will be forgotten. Roussel was another great enthusiasm of mine in the early days. The reason I admired him was because he produced something that I had never seen. That is the only thing that brings admiration from my innermost being—something completely independent—nothing to do with the great names or influences. Apollinaire first showed Roussel's work to me. It was poetry. Roussel thought he was a philologist, a philosopher, and a metaphysician. But he remains a great poet.

It was fundamentally Roussel who was responsible for my glass, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*. From his *Impressions d'Afrique* I got the general approach. This play of his which I saw with Apollinaire helped me greatly on one side of my expression. I saw at once I could use Roussel as an influence. I felt that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter. And Roussel showed me the way.

My ideal library would have contained all Roussel's writings—Brisset, perhaps Lautréamont and Mallarmé. Mallarmé was a great figure. This is the direction in which art should turn: to an intellectual expression, rather than to an animal expression. I am sick of the expression "*bête comme un peintre*"—stupid as a painter.

The Blind Man

The Richard Mutt Case

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He **CHOSE** it. He 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.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

Anonymous, "The Richard Mutt Case," from The Blind Man (New York, 1917). Reprinted by permission of Marcel Duchamp.

Wanted: \$2,000 Reward

For information leading to the arrest of George W. Welch, alias Bull, alias Pickens, etcetry, etcetry. Operated Bucket Shop in New York under name *Hooke, Lyon and Cinquer*. Height about 5 feet 9 inches. Weight about 180 pounds. Complexion medium, eyes same. Known also under name *Rrose Selavy*.

Marcel Duchamp, "Wanted: \$2,000 Reward," rectified ready-made, 191½" X 14". (New York, 1923). This text appeared below front and profile portraits of Duchamp on a simulated "wanted" poster. Reprinted by permission of Marcel Duchamp.