

# Duchamp Through Shop Windows

by

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Reviewing new scholarship by David Joselit, Molly Nesbit, Thierry de Duve, and Linda Henderson, Hannah Higgins proposes that writing about Duchamp needs to be Duchampian in flavor.

The question of shop windows

To undergo the interrogation of shop windows

The exigency of the shop window

The shop window proof of the existence of the outside world

When one undergoes the examination of the outside world, one also pronounces one's own sentence. In fact, one's choice is "round trip." From the demands of the shop windows, from the inevitable response to shop windows, my choice is determined. No obstinacy, ad absurdum, of hiding the coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the glass window. The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as the possession is consummated. Q. E. D. (Marcel Duchamp, Neuilly, 1913)

This note from Marcel Duchamp's *A L'Infinifif* (The White Box), a collection of notes for his *Large Glass*, illustrates the artist's ideas about glass and the things viewed through and from it. Here we see the physical attributes of glass (it is transparent, it reflects) as used in storefront windows. Clearly, the glass has symbolic potential. The objects on display and their method of presentation mean something to the pedestrian at the same time as he sees himself in the windows and undergoes their interrogation. The question of shop windows: (what do they show?) Therefore their interrogation, of the thing, the glass, or the viewer. Therefore their exigency, the urgent or unavoidable quality of their use since one is compelled to look through and at them. Therefore their proof of the existence of the outside world outside the shop, outside the viewer, inside the shop as outside world, and so forth. By looking through and being reflected in the glass, the passer-by pronounces one's own sentence, and is encased, or determined, by the inevitability of the response since one's choice is "round trip." I like that, I am that I choose.... As Duchamp tells it here, the passerby reaches through the window and takes the thing (literally or conceptually, as seen through or reflected in it doesn't matter which). The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as the possession is consummated. Possession-regret, as it is used here, is initiated by the grip or hold on the object that mitigates, even destroys, desire and the self disclosure and reflective proof of the existence of the outside world which desire (as unattainment) is capable of creating. In keeping with Duchamp's sense of the window as object, its marvelous qualities require some distance or ambiguity. Desire, through a glass pane with one or many objects of the glass window, is better. Indeed, the very power of desire lies in its constantly shifting the boundaries of attainability.

For my purposes, the shop windows suggest a conceptual model for thinking about Duchamp scholarship as a framing device, a reflecting device, and testimonials to the art writer's desire for possession of the artist. Addressing Duchamp, who prized this transgressive aspect of desire, as of art, - he said the only -ism he could believe in was eroticism - requires multiple frameworks when possession by one discipline dominates; in Duchamp's words, "when the pane is cut, regret follows." Duchamp scholarship today falls into three broadly defined camps that can be described as: first, self reflexive interrogation (from within or in terms of Duchamp's private or psychological life), second, possessive (from within the domain of specialized knowledge), and third, social (from the point of view of an other contextual or outside world). The first privileges both the person of Duchamp as object inside the window and the window itself by using the looping mechanisms of biography and/or psychoanalysis. The second situates the work within the highly specialized disciplines (domains?) of art history, economy, and especially science. The third, and by far the largest, sits squarely in the middle. The first embeds various kinds of meaning in the artist's biography and tends toward the more outlandish claims, the second tends toward a rigid iconography that virtually divorces the content of the work from the artist himself, and the third tends to produce the most interesting and well-grounded analysis of both the artist and his work.

## biography

from the inevitable response to shop windows, my choice is determined

The best biography of Marcel Duchamp is Calvin Thomkins' *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), which is laced with vehement criticism of the most infamous psychoanalytical account, offered by Arturo Schwarz in a catalogue raisonné, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Abrams, 1969/1996). Schwarz's extremely valuable list of works and copious documentation of their publication, organization and relevant placement in galleries, publications, etc., is accompanied by an improbable, albeit entertaining, psychoanalysis of Duchamp as an artist managing a sublimated and incestuous love for his sister, Suzanne. That dubious account of Duchamp's biography is best left alone, and whereas Thomkins offers a seemingly even handed account of the greater circle of artists and associates who peopled the artist's life, in Schwarz's catalogue all interactions are spiced up with (nearly laughable) subconscious longings. Use it for the exhaustive list of works in his oeuvre. If you're interested in such things. Or ignore it. For the general reader, Francis Naumann's beautifully illustrated study, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Abrams, 1999), offers reproductions of virtually everything and a useful biographical overview of the artist. This book is a superb study of the artist's career that brings together details of his life (it is written as a narrative) with the seemingly self contradictory issue of Duchamp's use of replication and appropriation in defiance of the stylistic self-repetition of his more famous contemporaries. If you are going to read one book on Duchamp cover-to-cover, read this.

## the specialist account: possession

The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as the possession is consummated.

Linda Dalrymple Henderson's *Duchamp in Context* is a book-length study of the highly specialized context of science and technology in and around Duchamp's most iconographically complex single work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelor's, Even*, (the Large Glass), 1915-1923. Henderson's task was to establish a direct link between the work's symbol system (its iconography) and the specialized world of Victorian science and science fiction. As the book amply demonstrates, Duchamp's Brides and Bachelors inhabit a world of social interactions "delayed" in glass (Duchamp's term) according to the laws of four dimensional mathematics, X-Ray technology, Radioactivity, Engineering, Nicola Tesla's Spark spectacles, and Sir William Crookes's Vacuum tubes and fascinations with wireless communication.

There is an autobiographical impulse behind the project; the book is dedicated in part to her father, "Donald Dalrymple, electrical engineer and inventor extraordinaire." This may partially explain Henderson's voracious appetite for the scientific fascinations of the period. The book constitutes a vast research project (over ten years), that throws much needed light onto Duchamp's interests in mathematics and science. Despite some passages that may proffer too much detail for the untechnologically-minded reader, erring on the side of detailed documentation can hardly be faulted in a book that simultaneously narrates the often related, but seldom combined, stories of technological and art history.

## the general account: existence

The shop window proof of the existence of the outside world.

Like Henderson, David Joselit's *Infinite Regress* (Cambridge: MIT, 1998) examines Duchamp's fascination with new technologies (in the form of machines). However, where Henderson limits her study exclusively to Duchamp's fascination with scientific and technological gadgets, theories, and trends and effectively enables science to possess the work, Joselit provides a greater context for this machine culture as it is conjoined to the world of commodities and psychoanalysis. As a result, in Joselit's study the modern self is continuously constituted through a broad range of economic, cultural, and personal contexts. Unlike Arturo Schwarz's account of Duchamp's multiplicity of selves as deeply conflicted and contradictory, Joselit offers the reader a self constantly in flux vis-à-vis the material world, its forms of measurement and quantification, production and public identity.

It is in the method of coordination of the two topics of scientific and art history that Henderson's *Duchamp in Context* falls short of its laudable goal. In the end, I was convinced of Duchamp's scientific and mathematical interests in general and their presence in the Large Glass. However, Henderson's labored attempt to turn every reference into highly specific scientific citations was frustrating. A more tentative approach was called for here, since Duchamp had broader interests than this text

suggests. Probable references to X-Rays in general are attributed to specific issues in the *Beaux Arts Journal* that Duchamp may or may not have known. We are assured that he “would have been exposed” to them, or to conference proceedings that are unverifiable, or that he “would know” the contents of a book by Jollivet Castelot on alchemy owned by Apollinaire.

A less rigid form of connection is made in Molly Nesbit’s “The Language of Industry,” one article in an anthology edited by Belgian Duchamp scholar and philosopher Thierry DeDuve (ed., *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, Boston: MIT, 1991). Nesbit establishes a link between Duchamp’s readily documented technical training in geometrical and mechanical drawing, which forces the issue of a difference between retinal and conceptual rendering, and which Duchamp references repeatedly in his own words. These rendering techniques imply both the industrial subject matter and mechanical style of his drawings for the *Large Glass* and his predilection for the industrial readymade.

However, Nesbit is careful not to overdo the claim - as she writes, “Duchamp did not refer to the language of industry exactly or self consciously, he simply used it logically enough when he decided it would be important to make a work of art that was not a work of art” (372). Nesbit’s soft-footed essay is rich with implications for the readymade and *Large Glass* equally. It has the effect of bringing together the seemingly disparate parts of Duchamp’s oeuvre - readymades and images, and simultaneously marrying them to an industrial aesthetic. It is this aesthetic, one could even call it stylistic, glue that is missing in Henderson’s account, where the basis of the borrowing is almost exclusively limited to subject matter and which neglects the use of a style (in Duchamp’s case a non-style) to comment on the subject.

Thierry de Duve’s remarkable anthology (originally conference proceedings) is rich with essays like Nesbit’s that portend several highly creative, possible approaches to Duchamp. This book is probably the most fun to read and discuss as it also contains often humorous discussion of each chapter by the authors present at the original conference. *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* includes essays on four-dimensional mathematics (Francis Naumann), the issues of sexuality and representation (André Gervais) and a summary version of William Camfield’s book-length study of the *Fountain* (*Marcel Duchamp/Fountain*, Houston: Menil Collection, Houston Fine Arts Press, 1989). Camfield’s essay on the urinal is extraordinarily rich with plausible contemporary accounts of its reception (as hideous, as Marian, as anti-art), versus Duchamp’s probable sense of the urinal as possessive of “pleasing and anthropomorphic” forms.

De Duve’s first book-length study of Duchamp (*Pictorial Nominalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), argued for the philosophically nominalist basis of the readymade, where designation “art” derives from the naming process at least as much as any inherent property of the thing at hand. In this study, the readymade is an almost necessary corollary to the status of representational painting (as an eviscerated symbolizing system) circa 1912. The book offered an escape from the hackneyed polarization of positions that accompany most accounts of the modern and the avant-garde - since full blown abstraction and the readymade are understood as practical and

conceptual corollaries. However, for this reader it was de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) that responded in kind to Duchamp for the contemporary, interdisciplinary reader. *Kant after Duchamp* belongs to that rare category of art history book that both teaches the reader something about an artist, while keeping close to the artist's intent or voice. In the title essay of that book, an experiment of replacing "beauty" with "art" in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* yields a complex rethinking of Duchamp's motivations and deeply philosophical concerns with things in themselves including art. That something of Kant is lost in the process is largely beside the point.

The book takes a leap of faith, if I can call it that, in generating an entire new category of scholarly experiment that has deep implications for how we understand modernism. By viewing Duchamp from within the tradition of Kantian aesthetics, the entire shabby polarization of art into art vs. anti-art camps in the twentieth century is exposed as an historical absurdity. The implications of this Kantian perspective for and beyond Duchamp are vast. If we make this substitution from beauty to art throughout the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the Duchampian mode predominates, then what is its opposite? Painting? *Tableau vivants*? Duchamp made both. And as de Duve's work (like Nesbit's and Camfield's in particular) illustrates, Duchamp was equally concerned with the duplicitous forms and contents of his work. So where do we get by "reading Duchamp through shop windows?" If the art writer is to communicate something of the life of the work if his or her job is to find or define something central to the work and to give that work an afterlife, he or she should be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. Play and ambiguity are probably the most consistent aspects of Duchamp's work and the most interesting scholarship on Duchamp: he is reflected in, and through, them both.

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