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- 1 A conference on Marcel Duchamp's oeuvre was held at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1977, a few months after the inauguration of the new Centre Georges Pompidou, marked by the first solo exhibition of Duchamp's work in France. The two events were coordinated by Jean Clair. Mindful of the fact that the artist's bibliography at that time ran to "more than 350 titles", Jean Clair was pleased that the contributions of the guest authors (among them were Hubert Damisch, Gilbert Lascault, Jean Suquet, André Gervais and Thierry de Duve) had managed to sidestep the pitfall of "hackneyed and methodologically dubious analyses" (p. 428). The fact is that the freedom of the different approaches, and the inventiveness and erudition of the papers delivered at Cerisy, are still striking forty years later, despite the plethora of publications appearing since the 1970s. Jean Clair would wind up the 1977 conference by announcing that "studies on Duchamp are only just starting their dazzling career". The prophecy has been fulfilled, and perhaps exceeded Jean Clair's hopes. So for the year 2014 alone a wave of critical and thematic essays, monographs, specialized works and works for a general public has seen the light of day, mainly dealing with the exhibition *Marcel Duchamp : la peinture, même*, held at the Centre Pompidou from 24 September 2014 to 5 January 2015. Two books by authors specializing in the artist, Thierry de Duve and Herbert Molderings, bring together essays (decidedly theoretical for the former, more historical for the latter) written over the same period of time, from the late 1970s to the present day, and published by the Mamco. So with these authors, as with Jean Clair, whose essay concludes the Centre Pompidou's exhibition catalogue, it is now over this lengthy time-frame that it is nowadays permitted to gauge the many different ways in which the artist has been received in France. Accordingly, be it by way of an inquisitive inquiry into the Rouen region of Duchamp's birth, a thoroughly documented comic strip tracing the stages of a life spent "breathing", or a book analyzing the artist's refusal to work, some of these works, functioning alongside art history, often meet the challenge of excellence used to make knowledge available to as many people as possible.
- 2 By deciding to show the pictorial side of Duchamp's output, the Centre Pompidou seems to be suggesting that the legend of an artist called Duchamp as someone decrying painting is an enduring one, and that it thus behoves us to review this myth. One chapter of historiography never tires of going back over the artist's abandonment of the medium in 1918—which, for some, is still tantamount to abandoning art. Right away, the introduction to the catalogue, edited by Cécile Debray (who also curated the exhibition), suggests that the artist was known in Europe mainly for his readymades and his editions—most of his painted oeuvre being in fact held in the United States, a wish expressed by Marcel Duchamp himself quite early on in his career. According to Debray, the readymade contributed to distorting the image of an artist still too often passing for an "iconoclastic" Dadaist, or for a "conceptual" artist. In 1979, Hubert Damisch wrote that only "the naive" want to see "in Duchamp the man with the clean slate", but perhaps the obvious needs repeating. In any event, the idea behind the exhibition, and the catalogue, happily avoids making watertight separations within the oeuvre, and Cécile Debray usefully reminds us that the readymade is "the intelligible counterpoint [...] of his plan to reformulate painting" (p.15). The line of thinking introduced by Jean Clair about the artist over the past few decades shows his influence in a volume which shows a preference for the cultural context of Duchamp's artwork, to the very clear detriment, in particular, of the theoretical approach. The essays thus pay particular heed to the priority given by the artist to literary sources, to painting as a *cosa mentale*, and to the

Duchamp as *prospecteur* highly interested in non-Euclidean geometry and mathematical models, which are all issues going hand-in-hand with the paramount idea of *passage* which the exhibition certainly highlights. In particular, the catalogue returns to the press drawing of the years 1907-1909, the painter's "trade" and Marcel Duchamp's refusal of any spirit of corporatism as a corollary. In embracing the different modern pictorial styles, as they were available to every artist at that time, the work seems to have been constructed in nothing less than a spirit of stylistic and formal strangeness (somewhere between a brutality of style, in 1910 or thereabouts, and refinement, if we think of *The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes* produced in 1912), which set him apart from his Fauve and Cubist colleagues. Once the family and social model had been rejected (his painter brothers and the "trade"), it was without any nostalgia that Marcel Duchamp chose the path of a painting relieved of its "retinal" models, asserting, contrary to his painter colleagues, both nominalism and the conventionalism of *language* as being one of the surest ways for him to emancipate himself from the modernist idioms of the moment. But, starting from that considerable break in terms of consequences for 20th century art, it is important to take *everything* of Marcel Duchamp: as we are reminded by Herbert Molderings in one of the essays which compose *Duchamp traversé*, the artist switches around the values of top and bottom, the trivial and the disembodied, and the carnal and the concept. His book shows a constant concern with precision in the way it sets forth original case studies, which manage to revisit the work in depth. Be it by way of the issue of historical relativism in Marcel Duchamp (and his interesting relation with the "ironist", that figure who experiences a "radical doubt" with regard to his own vocabulary, "because others have made a strong impression on him", as the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty puts it), or within the context of a photographic self-portrait of Marcel Duchamp, hitherto little discussed, Herbert Molderings masters a rigorous approach which also has the merit of being devoid of that "genetic bulimia" of art history, which consists in thinking that the sources of a work suffice "not only to explain, but also to constitute a specific type of plastic construction" (Jean-Claude Lebensztejn).

- 3 Hubert Damisch's line of thought, suggesting, almost forty years ago, at Cerisy, that "it was not so much a matter [for Duchamp] of dealing the cards in a different way as of changing the rules, if not, more simply, of changing the game", is not always borne out by the evidence. The tension surrounding the challenges raised by the artist seems to be surprisingly keener in France than in the United States, as if the land of Marcel Duchamp's birth still reluctantly accepted—affect *oblige?*—his *change of game*, and even his change of adopted country. Changing the rules is precisely what Marcel Duchamp strove to do by shuffling some of the cards of art in 1913, 1915 and 1918, to mention just the period of pictorial activity. For Jean Clair, nothing seems to be able to erase the fact of failure in the face of the direction taken by the artist in the early 1920s (when he was becoming a professional chess player), just like the reception, deemed disastrous, of Duchamp's oeuvre in the second half of the 20th century and beyond. "The artist of the future [...] no longer represents anything [after that abandonment]", declares Jean Clair. "He indicates, he points a finger. [...] The object is aimed at an object, it does not represent it. It points to a direction towards a shot, it does not depict a possession" (p. 284). Such a reading, based on a very disputable anthropological analogy between the work and the person (or work/body), also informs Hadrien Laroche's book: *Duchamp déchet*. Returning to the principle of indifference as a keyword in the art and life of the artist, the author proposes seeing therein a principle that is much more ambivalent than it might seem for Marcel Duchamp. His re-reading of the oeuvre, which is stimulating because it involves the

choice of the objects he examines (signature, name, distance), is nevertheless often too quick in the development of the hypotheses and in its conclusions. Grappling with the issue of the object-in-the-making with regard to the human factor in the 20th century, and what he calls the "deconstruction of the fictitious identity" (p. 130) in the time of industrialization and mass war, Hadrien Laroche writes that "the oblivion of the hand [at work in the readymade] responds to the situation of the amputated" of the First World War (p.67). The historical readymades (1913-1921) are "characters of fiction" akin to "dead sons for whom one cannot mourn", and the author perceives, in Marcel Duchamp's decision to proceed to produce replicas of those objects in 1964, an echo of "those deported to the death camps". Without unfortunately positing in advance any clear methodology, this type of analogy informs Anglo-Saxon 'trauma studies'. Far from being the sole hypothesis of the book, it is nevertheless one of the most problematic, because it entrusts the artist whom Marcel Duchamp basically is with ethical questions about which we cannot be sure that any work art can ever come up with answers.