Considering Duchamp, Again

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- 1 Many curators and collectors realised early on that Marcel Duchamp had an acute eye, and solicited him for selecting works and curating exhibitions. Marcel Duchamp himself paid close attention to the staging of a number of his own productions, which now-famous photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, Man Ray and Julian Wasser, among others, contributed to. For the diorama *Etant donnés 1° La chute d'eau 2° Le gaz d'éclairage*, the succession Duchamp even deemed it appropriate to disclose only two apparent photographs. It was necessary to show, rather than make known, the existence of this un-transportable work, created in utmost secret, and accessible only at the Philadelphia Museum. How could the public be more intrigued? This concern for enhancement has been the subject of systematic studies, first by Elena Filipovic¹, and more recently by Renate Wiehager, so that considering Duchamp today requires taking into account this specific feature of his practice. However, according to Renate Wiehager and Katharina Neuburger, this is not sufficient to justify Duchamp, which is why, in a second book, they intend to reconstruct and make up for the previously neglected role of women, through an external and contextual approach. They parse a whole body of biographical data on Marcel Duchamp (Arturo Schwarz, Jacques Caumont and Jennifer Gough-Cooper, Calvin Tomkins and others) and compile a detailed inventory of the women who gravitated around him. The book's aim is commensurable to the influences these women exerted on Duchamp's work. However, caution is still key: there is no question of getting carried away, especially with regard to the influence that Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven could have exerted on the creation of *Fountain*: R. Wiehager and K. Neuburger get away with asking these questions rhetorically.
- 2 Some of the women are very famous: Katherine S. Dreier, Peggy Guggenheim, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Frida Kahlo; others a little less so. But they were just as active: Beatrice Wood, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, the Stettheimer sisters, Mary Reynolds. The difficulty lies in accurately rendering their contributions, which often remain unclear. Others still are completely unknown. They are nonetheless added to the list, to the

delight of curious enthusiasts: Clémence Lebourg (the Céleste Albaret of the Duchamp family²), his sisters-in-law, some mistresses, a few rare friends, journalists. In each chronological entry, a micro-biography summarily describes them, and a text they published is even occasionally inserted; which, in short, forms a very user-friendly anthology.

- 3 But among the women who played an important part in Duchamp's life or who initiated something in his creative process, more space should perhaps have been given to Lucie Nicolle, his mother. She was a good artist, and she hated Marcel. More space should also have been given to facts, including this one, which is remarkable because it is so surprising today: she (re)named one of her daughters *Magdeleine* – thus replacing her previous daughter, named *Madeleine*, who died in infancy. Since the “g” in *Magdeleine* is silent, and the pronunciation of both names is identical, the only distinguishing feature is the letter “g”. Both names are the *same*, only their spelling is different. It is worth wondering whether this had any kind of consequence, especially because when *Madeleine*'s untimely death occurred, Lucie Nicolle was pregnant with Marcel, that she wanted a daughter and that later, she hated her son, Marcel. This shows the difficulty of conducting any kind of *external* analysis, unless it is articulated with the work's modalities (*internal* analysis). Could these facts help to explain Marcel Duchamp's unique interest in strategy, his hope of finding a place somewhere between rejection and integration? Especially when anecdotes, including the emblematic ones concerning the refusal of *Nude descending a Staircase* and the *Fontaine* episode, verify these very difficulties.
- 4 Ultimately, Renate Wiehager and Katharina Neuburger's point is political: they defend the idea that, through his creations, appropriations and rewritings, Marcel Duchamp crystallised certain ideas that were disseminated in his time and owe a great deal to women. This bias has the unquestionable advantage of opening up the horizon, in line with what Marcel Duchamp suggested during the conference he gave in Houston, Texas, in 1957 in front of the American Federation of the Arts. An artist must be considered as a “psychic being” capable of capturing the ideas and emotions circulating in his or her time. In some cases, it would have been nice to have access to more information and iconography; for example surrounding Yvonne Chastel, who is described as an artist, an occupation of which there is little proof other than the fact that she coloured certain surfaces on *Tu m'*.
- 5 Since methodology conditions the point of view, it is necessary to question it here. Jacquelynn Bass is perfectly aware of this, as she justifies the choice of favouring an external approach from the outset. In order to better understand, she finds it useful to proceed by “comparisons” and “parallels”, by confronting Duchamp with Tantrism, an approach which she herself describes as “speculation”. Drawing from this religious doctrine makes it possible in principle to better explain some of Duchamp's positions, particularly the Eastern ones, based on his belief in two complementary principles, male and female, which should merge harmoniously through the practice of certain physical-spiritual methods, particularly erotic ones.
- 6 If tantric practitioners find ecstasy in breathing, it should be noted that Marcel Duchamp preferred to be an inspired “breather” rather than a “dry painter” [*peinturier*] addicted to the smell of turpentine.
- 7 If the use of one's time is akin to an art of living, it is no longer enough to offer up the testimonies of contemporaries and close friends in order to support this hypothesis, or

to list the names of current Asian artists who also noticed this similarity, against the vague backdrop of the influence of Eastern ideas in the West and particularly in Paris, and more specifically still in the Arensberg circle.

- 8 By this reasoning, Duchamp is the result of a humanist culture *à la française* (he went to *lycée*), of diffuse knowledge (including scientific discourses – Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s theory in *Duchamp in context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, 1998) and of occasionally ascertainable readings. One should also add the fact that he attended certain decisive theatrical and cinematographic performances; was influenced by certain ideas spread by certain women in his entourage and, undoubtedly, by some male friends too, including, for example, Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Picabia and a few others; and – why not? – Eastern philosophy. All of this is possible. Creation cannot fail to deepen through a more or less substantial historicisation.
- 9 One could even add what André Breton recognised in four of Duchamp’s creations – *Rotative demi-sphère (optique de précision)*, *Neuf Moules Mâlic*, *A propos de jeune sœur* and *Deux Nus: un fort et un vite* – the permanence of Gallic genius, a “new spirit” which has been at work at least since the gorgeous *Danseuse* of the treasure of Neuvy-en-Suillas (Orléans Museum). André Breton displayed this ensemble in 1955 at the Musée pédagogique in Paris under the title *Pérennité de l’Art gaulois* [Permanence of Gallic Art].
- 10 Imaginary solutions, however delectable they may be, do not constitute proof. The only question that troubles the mind is whether whatever is idiosyncratic in an artist or an author, the fact that he or she leaves a mark or does not, lies in his or her ability to convince, in the power of “crystallisation” and the kaleidoscopic hybridisation he or she organises.

NOTES

1. Filipovic, Elena. *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016
 2. Céleste Albaret was Marcel Proust’s housekeeper and secretary. (T.N.)
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AUTHORS

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