

Marcel Duchamp: a Re-evaluation

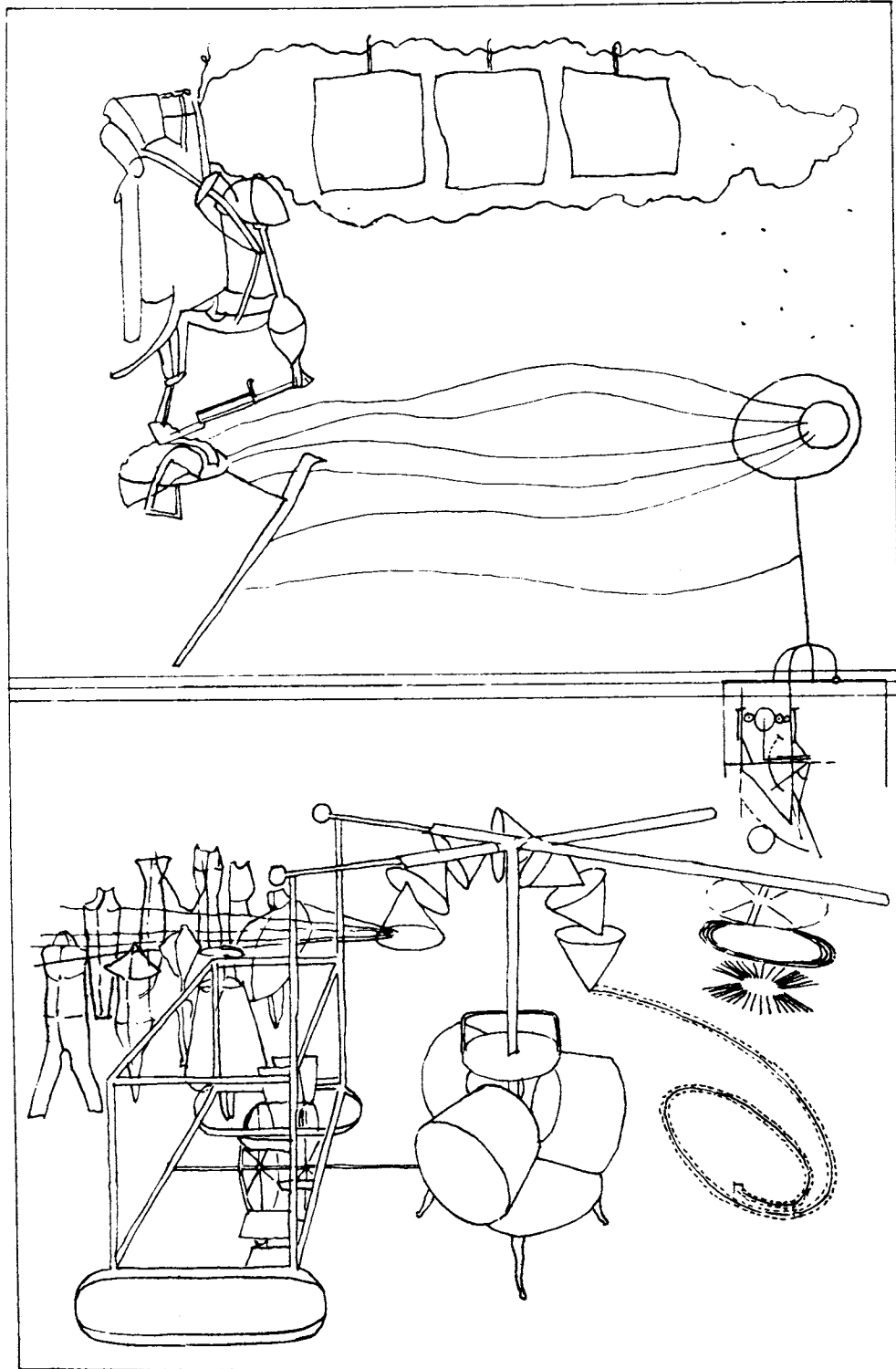
1.

At present, modern art pays dearly for popularization. Various simple formulas appear which aim at making new tendencies intelligible. These are then followed not only by the public in general but also by the artists themselves. As a result, the artist gets tied down by the new tendencies which ought to open up new horizons. Therefore, very soon, these simple formulas become tedious and are replaced by others – at the same time, all the artists who depended on them find themselves stalled. At times even the history of modern art has to be retroactively re-evaluated. The success of conceptualism made Marcel Duchamp, until then neglected, one of the most significant personalities of our times. However, conceptualism was followed by post-modernism or neo-expressionism and Duchamp suddenly became out-dated. Is this the way to understand modern art and how can we possibly continue this way?

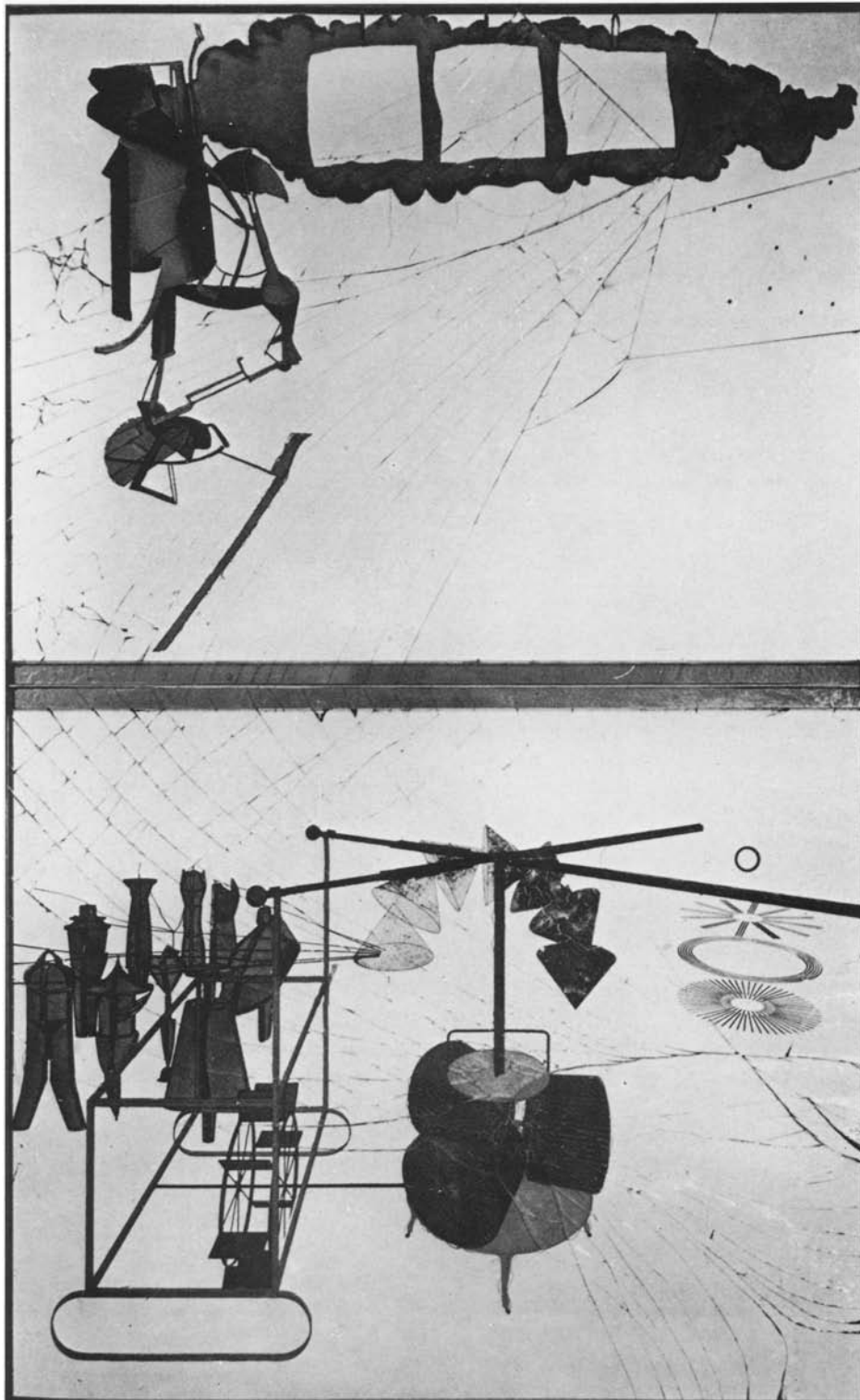
Duchamp's art in particular represents an art which can never be reduced to any simple formula. Duchamp is an extraordinarily complex figure. There is Duchamp the spontaneous painter and Duchamp the speculative intellectual. There is the Duchamp who constructs objects with the precision of an engineer, and the Duchamp who reduces the creative act

to the selection of banal objects. There is Duchamp the provocateur and Duchamp who refuses even to exhibit; Duchamp the dadaist and Duchamp of the optical devices; Duchamp the cynic and Duchamp the Platonist; Duchamp the punster and Duchamp the man of long silences; Duchamp who condemns the sensory aspect of art and Duchamp who creates theatrical diorama; the Duchamp who is determined not to be an artist and the Duchamp who is, in his own words, nothing but an artist. And all of these aspects exist within the same person, both consecutively and concurrently. The usual approach by critics is to select some facets of Duchamp's personality and ignore others. And yet everything about the man would seem to be equally important. How can one bring all this together?

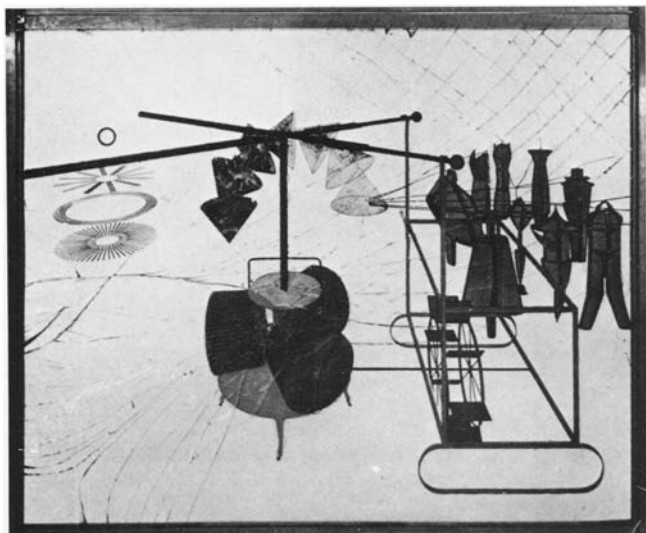
From the outset, what is surprising is the interest and, at the same time, the restraint, with which Duchamp regarded the art world of his youth. Those were the dazzling years just before the First World War when modern art was exploding all around him. For Duchamp there was Matisse, Braque and Kandinsky (but not, however, Picasso), there was the speculation about the third and fourth dimensions, about space and time, about sensual and intellectual art. Yet during that time of great ferment in Paris, Duchamp remained a rather melancholy outsider, someone who, despite his youth, impressed



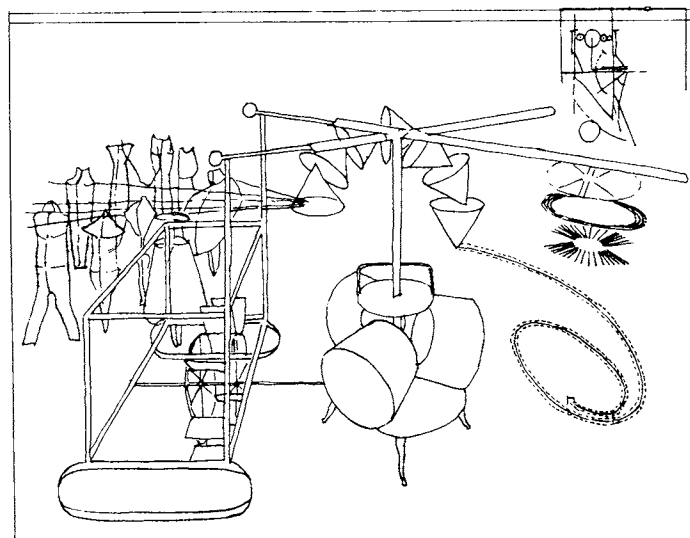
1) «The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even» (La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même), 1915-1923. Reconstruction of the original plane by J. Chalupický.



2) Marcel Duchamp, «The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even» (La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même), 1915-1923, mixed materials on two glass panels, 227,5x175,8 cm. Work unfinished.



3) «The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even». Lower part.



4) The reconstruction of the lower part of «The Bride» (by J. Chalupecký).

Gabrielle Buffet as someone marked by “a lack of appetite for work and an incapacity for life.”¹ Thus when his avant-garde friends prevented him from exhibiting his *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the twenty-five year old Duchamp was both upset and relieved. He decided that he would no longer be a professional artist, and that whatever he might do would perhaps not even be considered art.² He remained faithful to this decision. Not art, but what lay behind art, became the proper subject of his inquiry. Wasn't it because of his very sadness that he painted? It was in trying to make this explicit to himself that *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* came into existence.

This work has been explained many times. It is not an easy task. The picture is unfinished. A good third of the glass remains empty and part of the original plan is even missing. We must look at the notes and sketches Duchamp made while working on the glass for help. Yet these notes are fragmentary, sometimes scarcely comprehensible. Duchamp himself began publishing them in 1934, but a significant part of them did

not appear until 1980, when the last part of his literary remains were published.³ It is only with their help that we may attempt a full interpretation of *The Bride* [Fig. 1, 2].

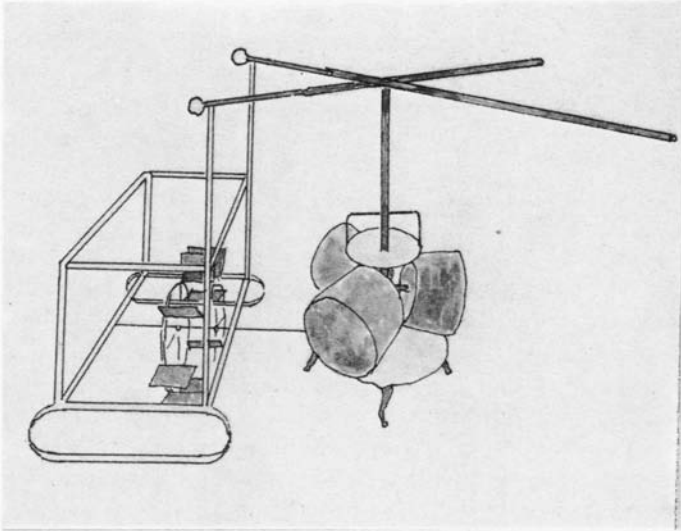
So far all the descriptions and analyses of the piece have ignored the important fact that the work is composed on two spatial planes. The central, and most elaborately developed motif is that of the Bride herself, in the upper left-hand part, and the Milky Way connected to her, occupying the top part of the upper section. The Bride connects both planes. As the context makes clear, her body is on the front plane, the Milky Way – which is a part of her – on the rear one. Furthermore, the planes are separated and each one bears a different significance. The rear plane is devoted to a curious sequence of events: the transformation of the illuminating gas into light. The Bachelors, underneath the Bride, are filled with illuminating gas and the gas then passes from left to right through a chemical apparatus, where it condenses and finally falls to the ground as mere sludge. This last stage of the transformation was never realized and the other transformations are only

¹ Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, “Some Memories of Pre-Dada: Picabia and Duchamp”, in: Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 1951, p. 257.

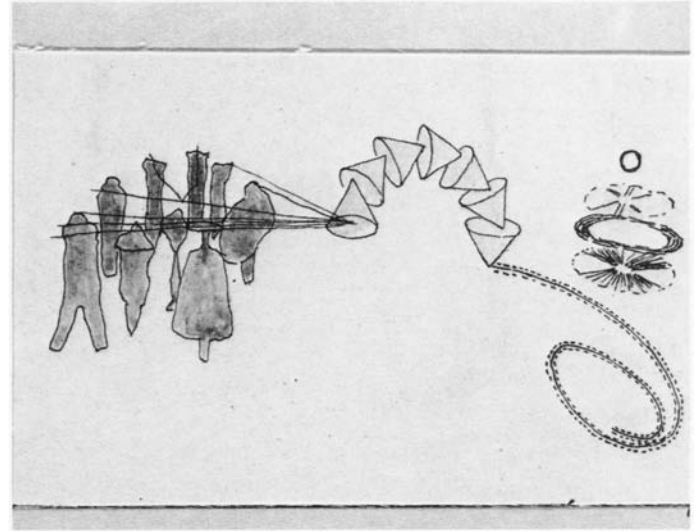
² William Seitz, “What Happened to Art”, *Vogue*, New York, Feb. 1963, p. 112. Also: Pierre Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*,

1967, p. 52. Francis Steegmuller, “Duchamp, Fifty Years Later”, *Show*, Feb. 1963, p. 28.

³ *Duchamp du Signe, Ecrits*, ed. par Michel Sanouillet et Elmer Paterson, 1975. Posthumously: *Notes*, ed. Paul Matisse, 1980.



5) «The Bride...». Two spacial plans of the lower part. First plane (by J. Chalupický).



6) «The Bride...». Two spacial plans of the lower part. Second plane (by J. Chalupický).

fragmentarily indicated: a “dazzling of the splashes”⁴ was to have taken place, the sludge transformed into combustible gas and as light, risen to the Milky Way above and in a final gathering of strength, touched it and perhaps even blended with it [Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6].

The front plane too is uncompleted. The Water Mill with Glider, in the lower half of the picture, belong to it, along with the Chocolate Grinder and the Scissors, all of them devices that move mechanically in repetitive and pointless patterns, either back and forth or round and round. In the upper section of this plane, there was to have been a Juggler balancing a tray with a ball as he danced. He was to have been the Bride’s antagonist, his tray was to have been at the same level as her lap, and a weightless filament was to have floated between it and the plate. Although the Juggler was to have been one of the main motifs of the picture, both in terms of its meaning and its appearance, Duchamp never got further on it than a few very general sketches [Fig. 7].

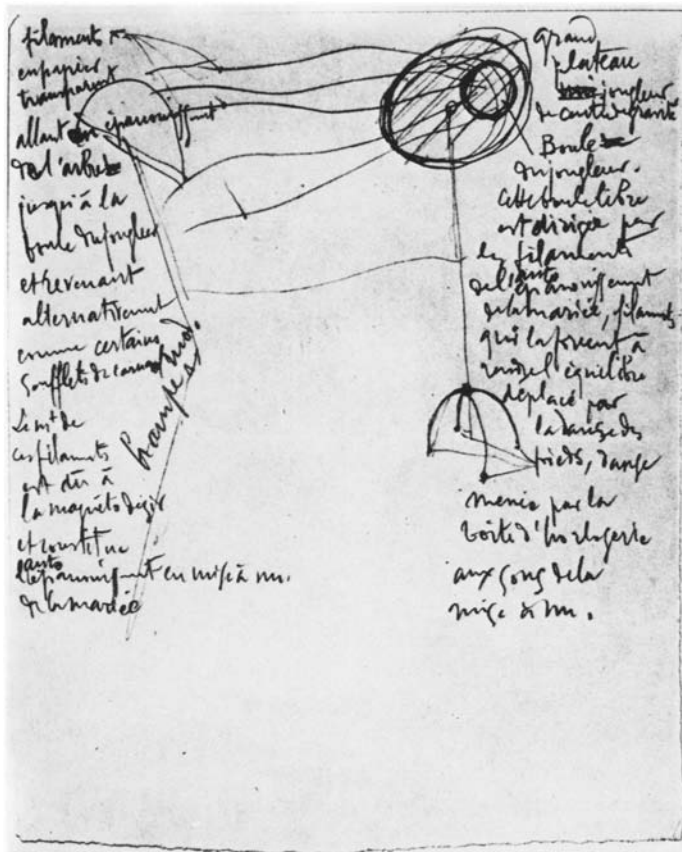
The meaning the entire composition was aiming at can be guessed at. Put briefly, it is the old theme of earthly and heavenly love. The symbol of earthly love is the lower section

of the front plane, with the pointless motion of the mechanical devices, and in the upper section of this plane the Juggler, whose movements, once again, are circular, going nowhere and relating only to the body of the Bride. Opposed to that, the transsubstantiation of the illuminating gas is taking place on the back plane. First it descends to the inertness of the material, solid state, becoming nothing but a puddle of sludge. But there, dazzled by radiation from above, it gradually is transformed into the most refined of material states: the energy of light. In this form it rises to meet the Bride, not to her body but to the most immaterial of her aspects, the Milky Way. The Bride, her attractions and her commands, initiate all of this activity, and for this reason the Bride’s image must exist on the two planes.

2.

Precise though this interpretation of the work may be, it is still an undesirable precision. The work did not have its origins in intellectuality, nor is it an allegory. It arose, rather, from a symbolic reading of reality and the value of a symbol is always in its multiple significance, and even in its universality. The figure of the Bride derives from a series of portraits Duchamp made of his sisters; the Juggler and, to a certain

⁴ Duchamp du Signe, *op. cit.*, p. 92.



7) «The Juggler», sketch for the upper part of «The Bride...». Explanatory note: «transparent paper filaments alternatively blossoming out from the arbor to the Juggler's ball and coming back like certain partly whistles. The movement of these filaments is due to the desire magnets and constitutes the stripped bare self-blossoming of the bride». [...] «Large platform – center of gravity – Juggler's ball. This free ball is directed by the filaments of bride's self-blossoming, filaments which force it to restore the balance shifted by the dance of the feet, dance led by the base of the clock works to the sounds of the stripping bare» (Marcel Duchamp, «Notes», Nr. 149, Paris 1980. Translated by Paul Matisse).

extent, the Bride's body, come from the atmosphere of country fairs on the outskirts of Paris; and the transformations of the illuminating gas were suggested to Duchamp when he was sixteen by the sight of a gas lamp in the dormitory of his boarding school. The theme of the picture recalls the dualistic myth of Gnosticism. It derives from the same belief in the vanity of all worldly deeds and from the greatness of a longing

for all that is beyond this world, from the conflict between the captivity of immanence and the transcendental perspective. This was at the root of young Duchamp's sadness. The action of the picture follows almost exactly the outlines of a certain Manichaean myth. A good god, desiring to help the light free itself from the captivity of material darkness, employs a ruse: he transforms the androgynous Archontes – the creators and rulers of the profane world – into "the most beautiful virgins" and at the sight of their naked beauty, the male Archontes ejaculate, allowing small particles of light to escape with their semen. When the semen falls to the earth, the tiny particles of light – *quanta* we would call them today – begin their long pilgrimage back to the sun. The infertile and thus hopeless excitement of the male Archontes is the same as the infertile and hopeless masturbation of the Bachelors in Duchamp's Glass (The Glider was to recite their "litany").⁵ Even though the clumsy Bachelors appear again in the form of the lightfooted Juggler, his worldly love amounts to no more than dancing on the spot, never redemption. The redemption of their love takes place only with the transubstantiation of the light.

The Bride originated from the transformation and re-evaluation of optical experience. The aim was not to illustrate a set of data; it was intended to lead to a new optical experience. Many of Duchamp's notes from this period testify to this. Just before he conceived *The Bride* he considered making a picture to be called *Jura-Paris*, but he abandoned the idea. Once again, the immediate impulse was a concrete experience – a night journey in Picabia's car from the department of Jura to Paris. That journey – in 1912 it was still an unusual experience – became a symbolic myth for Duchamp. The speed of the journey suggested liberation from the gravity of the material world and the picture, as he conceived it, was supposed to have become a luminous epiphany. At the time he remarked: "This machine of five hearts will have to give birth to the headlight. This headlight will be the child of God, rather the primitives' Jesus. It will be the divine blossoming of this machine-mother. It is to radiate glory."⁶

Duchamp was searching for an entirely different visual language, one that was direct and urgent, more so than the language of painting and sculpture. The material substance of this language was supposed to be radiation, sparkling, reflecting, dazzling. *The Bride* was also intended to radiate glory; it was to be a luminous event, a redemption from immanence, an annunciation of the absolute, an epiphany.

⁵ *ibidem*, p. 82.

⁶ *Notes, op. cit.*, No. 109.

3.

Duchamp's first readymades appeared while he was still working on *The Bride*. Since Breton's time, it has become almost axiomatic to say that simply by choosing it, the artist can transform a banal object into a work of art – the ready-made.⁷ That notion is also a source of the authority of conceptual art. But it is nonsense. The artist is not a magician who can change what is not art into art by a mere gesture. This interpretation derives from a superficial reading of the declaration Duchamp published in 1917 in defence of his ready-made *The Fountain*, the piece that caused such a scandal at the time. He signed it with the pseudonym R. Mutt, and wrote: "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."⁸ The important point is the "new thought". How did Duchamp achieve that? Readymades are not chosen arbitrarily; moreover, they are installed in a particular way and completed with titles and inscriptions. One exception is the first and most famous of the readymades, *Bicycle Wheel*, but this was only because the original got lost and when he reconstructed it, Duchamp forgot the original inscription. The method in Duchamp's "choice" can be explained, even though he himself may not have been aware of it. When he was asked why he had chosen and installed a bicycle wheel, he replied: "To see the wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting, a sort of opening avenue on things other than every-day material life. I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at the flames dancing in the fireplace".⁹

It is essentially the same symbolism as in *The Bride*. In his first plans for it, we read: "Given; 1. A Waterfall, 2. Illuminating Gas."¹⁰ The illuminating gas is that in the lamp in the dormitory in Rouen. The waterfall is most probably a stream of water falling on a water mill. In *The Bride*, the Water Mill is inside the Glider; and the waterfall itself appears in the background of Duchamp's last work, the diorama, which takes its title from the plan already quoted from. The waterfall and the wheel in Duchamp's work represent and complement each other. Just as the waterfall ceaselessly plunges to the earth, so the observer is hypnotized by the mill wheel endlessly turning. The symbolism expressed in the waterfall and the mill wheel

is also hidden in the symbolism of the bicycle wheel. The wheel appears in Duchamp's work in a wide variety of forms and contexts and in every case there is something luminous, radiant and fugitive projected into it, or out of it. That is also the optical effect created by spinning a bicycle wheel. It is still a symbol of concrete human life and its imprisonment in the merciless cycle of existence and, at the same time, a window on other things, an indestructible belief in the possibility of salvation and redemption.

An educated guess can be made about the symbolic significance of Duchamp's other early readymades as well, including *The Fountain*, which is still wrongly interpreted as a more provocative gesture. At the same time, it is possible to explain the unusual formal presentation of these works. Duchamp never lost sight of symbolic values in the world, and it was here, in the readymades, that he attempted to demonstrate it. For him, a work of art was not meant to remain a mere object of sensual presence, but was intended, as directly as possible, to address our symbolic awareness. In the esthetics of the ready-made, Duchamp pushed this idea to its extreme. The mere presence of these works is enough to make an impact on the viewer. Photographs of the readymades cannot show this, but anyone who has ever seen the originals will never forget the magic they evoke.

During the years when Duchamp was planning and executing *The Bride*, the evolution of painting was reaching a climax in abstraction with dizzying speed. Duchamp too was interested in abstraction, and was only a step away from it in the beautiful picture from 1911 called *Apropos of Little Sister*. It is the last of a series of portraits he made of his sisters and it is a direct prefiguration of *The Bride*. Duchamp had the abilities of a great painter. But he was an ascetic and he very deliberately repressed his worldly delight in the interplay of colour. Painting, after all, could obscure the symbolic meaning. Just as his readymades were meant to be no more than a reference to the symbolic significance behind the world of the senses, so *The Bride* was meant to take the viewer to the heart of his ideas by the shortest possible route. This is why he constructed this «Great Glass» with such precision: it is a work that is thought out rather than painted out. "The painting of exactness and the beauty of indifference," was how he formulated his ideal.¹¹

⁷ "Phare de la Mariée", *Minotaure*, 6, 1935, p. 45.

⁸ *The Blind Man*, 2, 1917.

⁹ Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, 2nd

ed., 1970, p. 442.

¹⁰ *Duchamp du Signe*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹¹ *ibidem*, p. 46.

4.

Duchamp's work seems ruthlessly original, yet in fact it is the expression of the most ancient European traditions. The people of antiquity lived in an orderly cosmos. Their existence was a part of that larger order and was subject to its laws. What signalled the end of antiquity was the sensation that existence in this world, and even this world itself, was evil and suffering. In the early centuries of the Christian era, this found expression in Gnosticism, which saw the existence of man and the cosmos in terms of a dramatic conflict between the spirit and matter, light and darkness. This thinking entered into Christianity and, with it, into the whole European tradition. It happened in two ways and in two forms. One was radically dualistic. Light and darkness have been here from the beginning and will be here for all eternity. The suffering of this world comes from the mingling of the two and the only salvation is to liberate light from the captivity of darkness. This form of Gnosticism influenced the thinking of Aurelius Augustinus and through him, the thinking of Christians. In the second form, there is a gradated difference between light and darkness. Matter represents a degraded form of light; light is the noblest form of matter, its sublimation. This form of Gnosticism, therefore, is monistic. From it came the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagita, whose influence in medieval Europe was no less enormous. Dualistic Gnosticism was a primary source of the asceticism of the monastic orders; the monist version gave rise to Christian mysticism and the Byzantine and Gothic cults of light and colour.

Duchamp's myth of light, therefore, is a revival of the original Gnostic myth. At the time when he was working on *The Bride*, at least, he was closer to the ascetic version of the myth. Immanence and transcendence are torn asunder, our existence is darkness, the world of the Bachelors is endless repetition. But both conceptions, the dualistic and the monistic, overlap and infuse each other, and so it is with Duchamp. The Bride is not merely a selfish female, she is also the bearer of a transcendent message. The Milky Way, according to Duchamp's notes, is her "blossoming", her "aura",¹² and it is towards her that the material illuminating gas rises and is sublimated into light.

That, then is Duchamp's hope. But whether one seeks salvation by shedding earthly existence, or by overcoming it, one must always reckon with its ephemerality. What is the artist left with, then? A work of art begins in the senses,

appeals to the senses and at the same time, leads us to something that is no longer sensory. It makes the world transparent. The immanent and the transcendent are not irrevocably separate. We can be in both states. Duchamp, in fact, was always concerned with how to reveal where and how these "dimensions" of existence overlapped, and how one passes from one state to the other. But the more he lost faith in the sensory – the "retinal", as he called it – and the more he assigned art to the realm of ideas, the more his hopes faded. His metaphysical despair led him to place his hopes in art. But, in Gnostic terms, all existence and all activity is vanity, and therefore art itself is vanity.

The shadow of absurdity fell across Duchamp's work during the First World War in New York, when he was working intensively on *The Bride*. The first suggestion of the shadow was inconspicuous, and may even have looked like a joke. *Rendez-vous on Sunday, February 6, 1916* is four pages of meticulously composed text that makes no sense. In a later interpretation, Duchamp notes that he meant to write it in such a way "that it could be read finally without any echo of the physical world."¹³ Any meaning it may have is in its meaninglessness. Salvation is quite beyond the world both of our senses and of our reason. So the readymades from the first few years after the war are a primary manifestation of nonsense. In fact it is no longer appropriate to call them readymades at all, for while the original readymades involved nothing more than giving a new interpretation to finished products, the more recent ones were largely artificially constructed. In particular, they were no longer intended to spur viewers into understanding them symbolically. Our world does not conceal a symbolic significance behind its appearance; it has no significance whatsoever. Let the most famous of those ready-mades, *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy*, from 1921, serve as an example. It is an accumulation of the nonsensical. Sugar cubes were painstakingly cut out of marble and placed in a bird cage, a medical thermometer was stuck among them and the title, on the underside of the cage, is once again absurd.

At the time, Duchamp identified with the Dadaists. Dada was for him a "metaphysical attitude", as he emphasized again and again.¹⁴ The schism between the physical and the metaphysical, the immanent and the transcendent, was the point of departure for all Dada, and not just Duchamp's version of it. It led – it had to lead – to nihilism. Duchamp himself never ceased to fend off nihilism. This is evident in the restlessness that affected even his personal life. At the time, he wandered

¹² *ibidem*, p. 62 ss.

¹³ Schwarz, *op.cit.*, p. 457.

¹⁴ *Duchamp du Signe, op. cit.*, p. 172. Also: *ibidem*, p. 194, 213, 211.

among cities and continents, but the restlessness expressed itself above all in his work. Until the conception of *The Bride*, he had always advanced with relentless consistency. Now he began to develop in many different directions at once. Much of what he did during that period is treated as though it were mere eccentricity. This is yet another of the many misunderstandings that haunt Duchamp's work to this day. His optical devices appeared at the same time as his Dadaist readymades and were of a quite opposite tendency. In them, he attempted to develop the principle of the bicycle wheel, in which an illusory image was now to be achieved before the viewer's eyes, floating in a quite immaterial space. Thus beyond the physical objectivity of the piece, there was a reminder of the non-physical world. Likewise, the "puns" that Duchamp began to publish at the time were a poetic play with language infused with a cynical sense of humour. In his experiments with identity, Duchamp set out on yet another route. This is an old romantic theme: what cannot be realized through the work of art as object should be expressed through a transformation in the artist himself. Thus arose the myth of the androgynous Rrose Sélavy. This transformation also coincided with experiments with chance, such as Duchamp's activities in Monte Carlo. If, as Duchamp believed, transcendence is revealed in the immanent world through chance, then the artist can become its thaumaturge.

In the early 1920s, Duchamp's hectic activities began to slow down and their final expression was a readymade called *Door, 11 rue Larey*. It is from the year 1927. The address in the title was that of Duchamp's Paris studio at the time. There were two doors side by side on a corner and Duchamp had them replaced with single door such that when one room was open, the other was closed, and vice versa. Duchamp always transformed his experiences of life into visual symbols and the door was an admission of his own quandary.

5.

Here lies the reason for Duchamp's long silence at a time of life when other artists usually bring their work to fruition. Every direction he took brought him up against an insurmountable barrier. He was unable to complete *The Bride*, on which he had spent so many years of intense labour. His explanation was that he was tired, which is understandable since the realization of his original plan tied him down to so many years of essentially uncreative work. But beyond that, Duchamp was unable to find a solution for the part of the front plane where the body of the dancing Juggler was supposed to touch the Bride, nor was he able to work out a way to represent the

crucial transubstantiation of matter into light that was to take place on the rear plane. Moreover, the work was to have culminated with some kind of luminous activity, but Duchamp was unable to find a way of achieving this. In what remained, the work leaned dangerously away from the immediacy of the symbolic towards the level of intellectual allegory. Even the esthetics of the readymade proved a disappointment; the selection of objects unmotivated by conscious choice was not enough to make them the bearers of new ideas. If the first readymades were an urgent invitation to see things symbolically, the later ones remained empty of meaning. The optical devices became a set of toys – the *Rotoreliefs*. Not even the Dadaistic gestures like the imaginary self-transformation into an androgynous being and into the Lord of Chance were enough for Duchamp. They remained gestures.

At this point Duchamp came to resemble a religious figure, a visionary, an ecstatic, a shaman. In any case, he was well aware of how close the artistic and the religious experiences were to each other. At the same time he argued against all religious systems, and against the Christian system in particular, and this was done in the same spirit in which he attempted to keep his activities from being classified as "esthetic", that is, classified within the established system of art. He was interested in something more original. He spoke of himself as an "anartist" and at the same time, of the "parareligious" nature of artistic experience.¹⁵ Both expressed his conviction that mere immanence, mere dependence on an existence enclosed in the given world, was not enough. As far as Duchamp was concerned, therefore, art should be more like a religious act than the manifestation of a skill. It had to have some relationship to the transcendent dimension of existence.

If Duchamp's work does not fit very well into the usual definition of art, it is nevertheless still a mistake to interpret it by drawing analogies with radical forms of piety. The Gnostic, and the Gnostic mystic, extend the dualistic separation of immanence and transcendence to the experience of eternity and to a definitive turning away from the world of creation. But when Duchamp stopped creating entirely in the second half of the 1920s and devoted himself to professional chess, it was not the self-imposed silence of the wise man who had recognized the vanity of all earthly strivings. Tortured as he was by the awareness of the absolute, he still clung to the concreteness of this life here and to his worldly role. He had no intention of becoming a mystic. He remained an artist.

As he once had in Dada, he now found an intellectual milieu among the Surrealists. Surrealism was a continuation

¹⁵ *ibidem*, p. 237.

of Dada except that it transformed the latter's despair into hope. This is what Surrealism meant to Duchamp most. Breton always greatly admired Duchamp, and Duchamp became closer to Breton than to anyone else. And yet Breton's doctrine of the creative power of the unconscious remained as indifferent to him as his desire that art become the handmaiden of world revolution. Something else linked Duchamp with Breton. After his death, Duchamp said that Breton embodied "the most beautiful dreams of my youth." "I have never met anyone," he said, "who had a greater capacity for love. He was a lover of pure love in a world that believes in prostitution."¹⁶ Duchamp, of course, was characterizing himself as well. The artist should remind one, in his work, of the loss of the divine element in contemporary civilization and point from it to the transcendence of love. The essential problem for Duchamp was to find a way to achieve this right here, in this world without God.

Duchamp began to return to artistic creation shortly before the second World War. He did so as inconspicuously as he could, and it is only from the perspective of his last work, *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*, that we may guess at what he was thinking and what he was attempting to do. It appears that he undertook the installation – or rather the *mise en scène* – of the Surrealist exhibitions in Paris in 1938 and New York in 1942 only as a favour to his Surrealist friends. Still, we may conclude that he was here searching for an entirely new way of defining the work of art. Today people are used to thinking of an artwork as something external, something that can be used to decorate their living or working environment. But the artist's role should be something quite the opposite, something to make the viewer more than a mere spectator. Thus the principle behind both of Duchamp's installations was to position the viewer not in front of the work of art, but inside it, to make him an active participant in that work; and, as far as the works exhibited themselves were concerned, to try to make access to them difficult. Later, this idea came to be called an "environment".

Both attempts, however, clearly disappointed Duchamp. Inside the space he created, the visitors to the exhibition behaved much as they always had. They could not be moved to participate. Therefore Duchamp reversed his approach. He tried it for the first time at the opening exhibition of the *Art of This Century* gallery in New York in 1942. To this end, he used a collection of his own works, which he had reproduced, and installed it in such a way that the viewer could only look

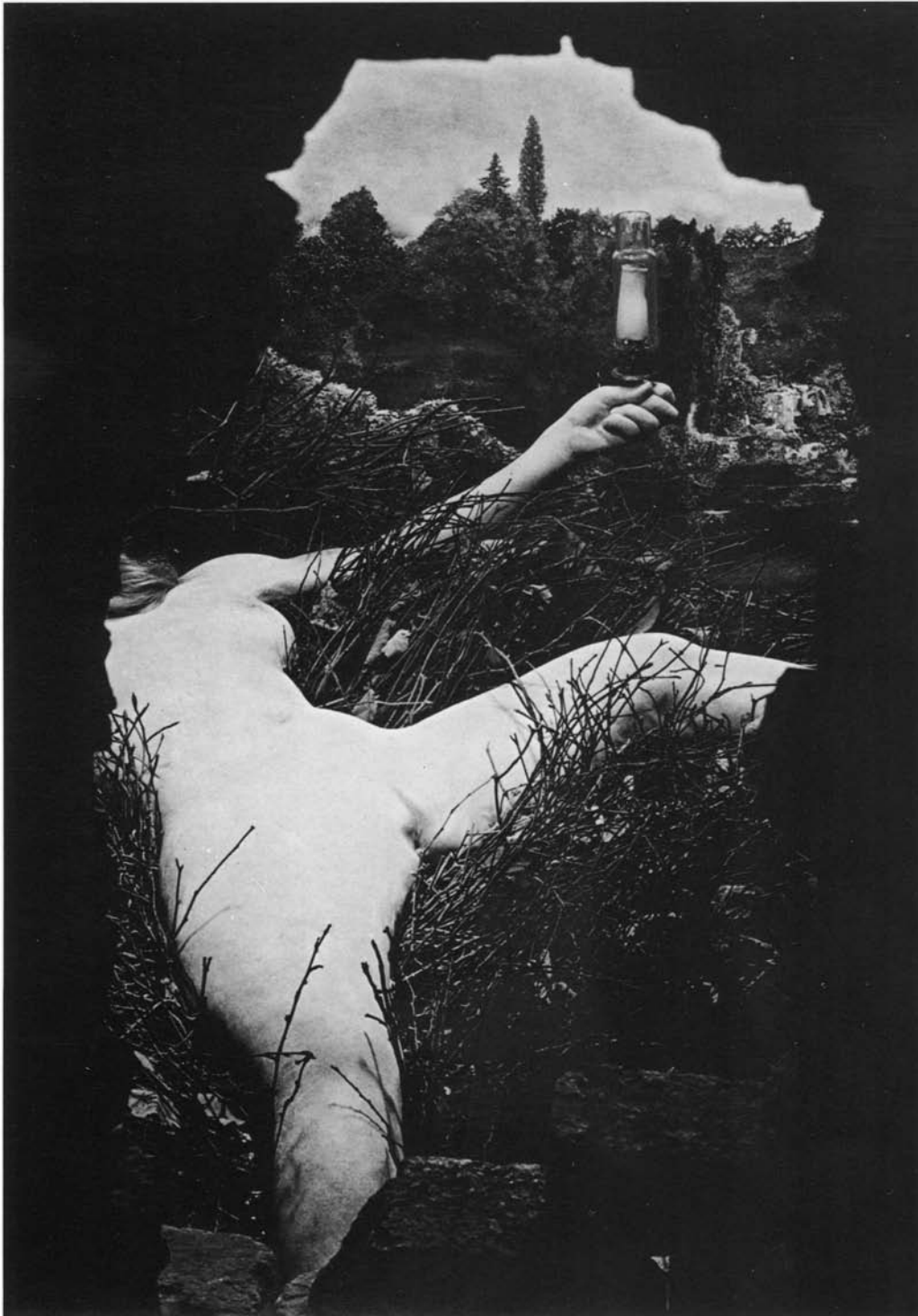
at them through a peep-hole in the wall. This time he achieved what he had set out to do. He had taken the work out of the exhibition space and turned the viewing of it into an unexpected event. He used the same principle in his final work, which can only be seen through a peep-hole in an old wooden gate. The viewer must confront the work alone. He can no longer judge it "esthetically", as an extension of his normal visual environment. The work is elsewhere, and the viewer too must find himself with it elsewhere. At this point, it perhaps becomes clear why Duchamp was so loathe to paint pictures. He was loathe to create a work that would fit easily into the ways that art is made use of today.

The second part of his artistic strategy became a banal artlessness. The diorama itself is an outmoded form of entertainment whose naturalistic verisimilitude goes even beyond photographic realism, and that's precisely why it strikes the viewer as being very unreal, making it obvious that the real point is something quite different from what he sees. The theme of *Given* [Fig. 8] is identical with the theme of *The Bride*, and similar symbolic motifs are employed. In *The Bride*, however, the symbolic apparatus was so complex that the work was to be accompanied by an explanatory text. In *Given*, it is neither necessary nor possible to interpret the symbolism of the piece, for this becomes abruptly and immediately clear upon viewing it. The confrontation of the waterfall and the gas lamp is the confrontation of the feminine and the masculine elements, and at the same time the confrontation of natural experience and the artificial work of human hands. This bipolarity comes together in the central figure. It is, in its way (as is so often the case with Duchamp) androgynous. A reclining woman holds the illuminated gas lamp aloft. The female and male areas, which remained tragically separated in *The Bride*, are now joined together. The natural and the spiritual, which is at rest and which is rising, which is falling to earth and which is floating to the sky, are all brought together. Beyond the bipolarity of the universe, the outlines of unity appear, from which all things derive and towards which everything is striving. It is the kind of apparition presented to neophytes in antique mysteries.

6.

Duchamp's work remained almost unknown until the last few years of his long life. For years – for decades – Duchamp did not exhibit. In 1912, when his friends rejected *Nude Descending a Staircase*, he realized that there was no place for him in the contemporary art world. He drew the appropriate conclusions. He left readymades, which would one day become so famous, lying about in his studio. *The Bride* was shown

¹⁶ André Parinaud, "Entretien avec Marcel Duchamp", *Arts et Loisirs*, Oct. 5, 1966, p. 7.



8) Marcel Duchamp, «Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2.The Illuminating Gas», 1946-1966. Diorama. Mixed medias.

once, and without his knowledge, before it ended up in a museum as a gift from its owner. Duchamp did not even show his own work at the Dadaist and Surrealist exhibitions, unless it was in an entirely unobtrusive way. He worked on *Given* for ten years, but managed to keep its existence a secret until his death. At the same time, he chose techniques that were exceptionally complex and he was extremely painstaking in the execution of his works. How are we to balance these discrepancies?

The explanation, again, is that Duchamp felt there was no place for his art. Modern society is locked into its own immanence. Man and all his works here derive from the given world and exist for the given world. The only possible interpretation and use of art in this situation is to serve to adorn and embellish life within this world. Nothing was more antipathetic to Duchamp. He always said that art should not be "retinal", that it should address "the grey matter of the brain". By this he did not mean that art should consist of intellectual speculation. Art should point beyond the three-dimensional and lead to the "four-dimensional", it should look for ways and means to bring about the interpenetration and fusion of the duality of the immanent and the transcendent, the phenomenal and the metaphysical. This is the essence of the artist's experience and it is the only role that art has in today's society. Our world is founded on "brutal materialism", he said in one of his later addresses. "Religion has lost much of its territory and it is no longer a source of spiritual values." It is up to the artist "to conserve the great spiritual tradition with which even religion, it would seem, has lost contact." It should "keep the flame of inner vision, which the work of art is perhaps the most faithful interpreter for profane man".¹⁷ The revolutionary nature of Duchamp consists in his restitution of the great traditions of Europe. It was no accident that he was a student of Plato.

The single most pressing task facing the artist in this world is to evoke the thirst for metaphysical experience, but it is precisely this evocation that the world cannot admit. What is

worse, the mission of art in this world is being distorted, and if the artist tried to resort to and exploit the only chance left to him and if he wishes to find a place in that strange enclave called "the art world", it is there and precisely there that his work is exposed to the gravest misuse and devaluation. Even Duchamp's mistrust of the established forms of art and his attempt to protect his art by escaping from them was open to misinterpretation. A legend developed of Duchamp as a alchemist or as a provocateur. That is folly. What has seemed and still seems to be eccentricity or caprice was simply a consequence of the steadfastness with which he followed his idea. Everything else was a matter of indifference to him.

In his final years, Duchamp repeatedly said that any artist, who wishes to preserve his art must be ready to go underground. He did not mean by this a retreat to the uncommitted life of the bohemian nor the singleminded activity of the political revolutionary. In his Philadelphia lecture in 1961, he said that it was to be a "revolution on the level of asceticism",¹⁸ which was a description, in effect, of his own position, the product of his entire life experience.

Marcel Duchamp remains one of the great figures of our age, not for any particular work, but because he was aware, as almost no one else was, of the mission of the artist in the modern age, and he surrendered to it absolutely. In the midst of the world's metaphysical slumber, he was a martyr to the Absolute, and it was in its presence that he lived. If his old friend Henri-Pierre Roché wrote of him in admiration that his greatest work was his use of time,¹⁹ we must understand it in the sense of working in the presence of transcendence.

"It was my art to live," Duchamp admitted at the end of his life. "Every second, every breathing in and out is a work that is not written anywhere, that is neither optical nor cerebral. It is a kind of permanent euphoria."²⁰ "My life was utterly miraculous."²¹ Miraculous: that is Breton's word. For him, it meant the triple star of poetry, love and freedom.

Translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson

¹⁷ *Duchamp du Signe, op. cit.*, p. 237 ss.

¹⁸ "Where Do We Go From Here", *Studio International*, 1973, 1975, p. 28.

¹⁹ In: Robert Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, 1952, Appendix.

²⁰ Cabanne, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

²¹ Cage-Jouffroy, "Entendre Duchamp", *Opus International*, 49, 1974, p. 59.