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THE CONCEPTUAL POETICS OF
MARCEL DUCHAMP

21ST CENTURY MODERNISM (BLACKWELL MANIFESTOS)

Chapter 3

The Conceptual Poetics of Marcel Duchamp

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights.

--T. S. Eliot, "The Fire Sermon," The Waste Land

Duchamp: . . .I had no position. I've been a little like
Gertrude Stein. To a certain group, she was considered
an interesting writer, with very original things. . . .

Cabanne: I admit I never would have thought of comparing
you to Gertrude Stein

Duchamp: It's a form of comparison between people of
that period. By that, I mean that there are people in
every period who aren't 'in'.

--Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp

Empty bottles and cardboard boxes: for the Eliot of The Waste Land these are the very emblem of twentieth-century refuse, the detritus of an Age of Mechanical Reproduction antithetical to the individual talent and, in Pound's stinging words about Usury, 'CONTRA NATURAM'. In Tender Buttons, by contrast, those expendable bottles and boxes become the object of intense concentration: Consider the first of two prose poems entitled 'A Box':

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid
same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes
painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is
something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so
rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so
earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again. (1998: 1, 314)

Unlike Eliot's cardboard box, Stein's cannot be visualized. Is it small or large, made of wood or enamel, lined with cardboard or velvet? We cannot say, any more than we can determine whether this is a jewelry box or sewing box, a large carton in which to keep papers or a small pill box. Yet boxness is immediately established, not just by the title, but by the fourfold repetition of the words 'out of'. Qualities are defined as emerging out of something, the items related by sound and visual appearance rather than direct reference. As in 'Glazed Glitter', discussed in the last chapter, Stein's meanings here are extremely oblique. 'Out of kindness comes redness'--out of the giver's kindness, perhaps, comes the 'redness' of the gift, a valentine, or some other token of love-- whereas 'out of rudeness' comes 'rapid same question': the interruption that is unnecessary because the question has been asked before. 'Out of an eye comes research': the beauty of this phrase is that a specific physical organ, the eye, is now set over against those abstract nouns, kindness and rudeness. Perhaps, Stein implies, we better leave such abstractions aside and trust the 'research' that 'comes' from the eye, and the 'selection' or discrimination that characterizes art even if the process involves 'painful cattle'" (rhymes with 'tattle, and hence part of Stein's everyday life).

But what is the principle of selection, of producing 'order' in this elusive passage? In the second sentence, the repeated 'out of' is replaced by the copula-- 'the order is', a 'white way of being round is', 'it is not', 'it is so rudimentary', 'it is so earnest'-- these assertions being balanced by the question 'is it disappointing'. The box, it seems, is a kind of mental box of tools: a 'white way of being round' that suggests a 'pin', a 'green point not to red' (with puns on 'too' and 'read'), 'but

to point again'. As in 'A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass', the focus is on 'an arrangement in a system of pointing'. 'Is it disappointing', we read, knowing it can't be since 'pointing' is still there, but now amalgamated into a larger word that shifts its meaning. Hence, 'it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analyzed.'

Stein's deconstruction of 'boxness' is thus very different from Eliot's images of cardboard boxes washed up on the banks of the Thames. But suppose one doesn't create verbal equivalents of boxes or bottles but exhibits these very things as works of art? In the same year that Stein published Tender Buttons, Marcel Duchamp produced both his first 'readymade', the Bottle Rack,¹ as well as the first of the remarkable boxes in which he was to reproduce, in limited editions, his random notes for future projects as well as reproductions of his already existing work, usually in miniature versions.² The Box of 1914 contains sixteen notes and the drawing To Have the Apprentice in the Sun, all of them pertaining to the major project which Duchamp had not yet begun to execute and which would not be finished—or, as he insisted, 'unfinished'—until 1922—namely, the Large Glass [The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even]. Originally, as he later explained it, Duchamp planned to assemble his notes in a book on the order of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue, where every detail of the Large Glass [figure 1] might be explained and catalogued (see Jouffroy 115; Kuh 81). But bookmaking inevitably involves linear sequence, and Duchamp much preferred the indeterminacy and arbitrariness afforded by the box, in which the scraps of paper, sometimes torn from larger sheets, sometimes written on the backs of gas bills, could be read in whatever sequence the viewer/ reader might choose.

The situation is further complicated by the issue of facsimile: the notes included in the box were not the originals but contact prints made to size; each reproduction was trimmed and glued onto thick mat board and placed in a standard 18 x 24 cm box [see figure 2] used for photographic plates (Nauman 56; Bonk 97-98). As executed, the Box of 1914, produced in an edition of five (thus insuring that there would be no unique art work), curiously joins 'impersonal' mechanism and individual artisanship. The secondhand readymade boxes bear almost no hint of their altered contents. 'There is' writes Ecke Bonk, 'no signature, no date, not even a dedication in or on any of the known boxes' (98). At the same time, the notes themselves are, of course, in Duchamp's own handwriting. Indeed, says Bonk, 'Handwriting, the scribbled note with all its corrections, rewriting, and underlining—the visualization of a thought process—became in his hands, a

refined, precise instrument. The casual, fragile quality of these random notes was recharged and transformed into a new artistic concept, a kind of reference manual' (97). Linda Dalrymple Henderson further relates this 'reference manual' to Leonardo da Vinci's Notebooks, an elaborate facsimile edition which had appeared in the 1890s, and characterizes the Box of 1914 as 'a miniature library or museum of the ideas of a modern artist-engineer'.³

But what, one may well ask, does all this have to do with poetry? The so-called White Box of 1966 (À L'Infinif), contains a note dated 1913 in which Duchamp asks, 'Can one make works which are not works of "art"?'⁴ The implications of that question, which Duchamp asked in so many varied ways throughout his career, have resounded through the century and have permanently changed our thinking about art boundaries. In the visual arts, intermedia, multimedia (or, in the case of the readymades and boxes, othermedia) works are no longer a novelty. But in the case of poetry, the conventions die hard. Even as radical a poet as Gertrude Stein was, as I noted in the previous chapter, quite unwilling to concede that 'poetry' and 'painting' or 'poetry' and 'photography' might coexist in the same work. For that particular crossing, as well as for the notion that a replica of one's earlier work, miniaturized and rearranged, could itself be a new art work, a new aesthetic had to come into play—the aesthetic we now know as conceptualism.

From Morphology to Function

'The function of art, as a question', writes the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth in 'Art after Philosophy' (1969), 'was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity.' And he explains:

The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to 'speak another language' and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted readymade. With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change—one from 'appearance' to 'conception'—was the beginning of 'modern' art and the beginning of 'conceptual' art.

The 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art. . . . And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down 'language' of traditional art. . . . (Kosuth 18).

In a recent essay on Conceptualism for the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Yair Guttman, concurs with Kosuth's assessment. 'For the conceptualists', he remarks, 'the aim of Duchamp's readymade was an investigation of the conditions that make art possible. According to this interpretation, Duchamp asked the following question: Let us take an arbitrary object with no particular aesthetic qualities. Under which conditions can this object be presented as an art object?(422). In Duchamp's own words cited above: 'Can one make works which are not works of "art"?'

Marxist criticism has construed this question as part of the larger Dada negation of the modern Capitalist art market. As Peter Bürger has famously put it in his Theory of the Avant-Garde:

When Duchamp signs mass-produced objects . . . and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production. The signature is inscribed on an arbitrarily chosen mass product because all claims to individual creativity are to be mocked. Duchamp's provocation not only unmask the art market . . . it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art. Duchamp's Ready-Mades are not works of art but manifestations. (51)

But the fact is that Duchamp has emerged as nothing if not an 'individual' creator and that, Bürger to the contrary, he was, from the beginning, quite content to exhibit his 'things' in museums and galleries and then to replicate them, again and again, in the boxes and boîtes en valise, now themselves precious museum pieces. Individual inscription on what is paradoxically the 'impersonal' readymade is, as we shall see, central to Duchamp's project, which, far from negating art as a category, directs itself quite specifically at retinal art, as it was understood in the turn-of-the-century Paris art milieu in which he came of age. 'Since Courbet', Duchamp tells Pierre Cabanne, 'it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral' (43). Thierry de Duve sums it up as follows:

[Duchamp] never wanted to burn down the museums as did Marinetti or to break completely with art as did the Cabaret Voltaire. His 'Dadaism' was never made up of social condemnations of art, but only of personal secessions. He never wanted to engage in a tabula rasa of tradition, nor did he believe it was possible to do so. (1991: 106).

Indeed, Duchamp's conceptualism is best understood, not as the negation of 'art' as such, but as the drive to render unto art the things that are art—which is to say, the realm of the mind as well as the eye, the realm of ideas and intellect as well as visual image. The resulting revolution has transformed both visual and verbal language and is therefore central to poetics in the twentieth century.

Stein's relation to this aesthetic is complex. The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas treats Duchamp as a figure of minor importance. Not only is he largely eclipsed by Picasso, but his Nude descending a Staircase, Stein suggests, was largely influenced by François Picabia, who understood 'that a line should have the vibration of a musical sound' and knew how to 'induce such vibration' (1998: 1, 865). Visual art, in Stein's lexicon, was equivalent to painting which was, of course, equivalent to retinal imagery. But she shared Duchamp's interest in the questions of non-Euclidean geometry and its implication for literary as well as painterly realism; his predilection for ordinary machine-made objects as readymades is paralleled by her interest in the everyday items being sold by the new department stores like the Bon Marché and Galeries Lafayette. Indeed, Stein's 'portrait' 'Aux Galeries Lafayette' appeared in the New York Dada periodical Rogue in 1915, as did Duchamp's 'The', of which more in a moment.⁵ And his 1921 readymade Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?—the playfully erotic birdcage filled with marble sugar cubes, cuttlebone, and thermometer—can be linked to Stein's 'Lifting Belly' (1917), with its modulation of the following phrases:

Lifting belly is no joke. Not after all . . . Sneeze. This is the way to say it.

. . . .

I do love roses and carnations . . . You know I prefer a bird. What bird?

Why a yellow bird . . . Lifting belly is so kind. And so cold.

Lifting belly marry . . . Lifting belly is sugar. . . .

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

In print on top. (1998: II 417-25, 438-39; cf. Mink 7-8).

Indeed, it has been suggested that the name of Duchamp's female alter ego Rose (more usually Rrose) Sélavy alludes to Stein and her predilection for what was, in Duchamp's day, an uninteresting, bourgeois female name. As he tells Cabanne:

I wanted to change my identity and first I had the idea of taking on a Jewish name. . . . But I didn't find any Jewish name that I liked or that caught my fancy, and suddenly I had the idea: why not change my sex?

That was much easier! (Cabanne 64).

Here the Jewish lesbian Gertrude, who was to pronounce famously that 'A rose is a rose is a rose' provides a nice model.

'Can one make works which are not works of "art"?' It is on this issue that Duchamp and Stein part company. True, both take their inspiration from the everyday, the ordinary, but for Duchamp, the artwork (readymade? box? set of notes? painting on glass?) is neither purely verbal nor purely visual (or musical), nor is it an intermedia composition, combining poetry and painting or poetry and music, etc. The paradox of the Duchampian readymade, as of the Large Glass, is that although Duchamp used what seemed to be found objects— an upside-down urinal called Fountain, a glass ampule, broken and resealed, called Air de Paris, the machine-drawing of an ordinary chocolate grinder---and although he claimed repeatedly that his 'choice of readymades [was] based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste' (Cabanne 48; cf. Duchamp 1975: 141-42), the works in his repertoire are now understood to be completely unique. Not, of course, literally unique in the sense of one of a kind; in almost every case, the original has been lost and there are a number of replicas. Rather, their uniqueness, their aura is conceptual: the idea, for example, of taking a snow shovel, hanging it by its handle in a glass case—which is hardly the way we normally see shovels—and giving it the witty title In Advance of the Broken Arm.

The individual readymades, moreover, display marked family resemblances: the Chocolate Grinder and Water Wheel] in the Large Glass, for example, echo the circular movement of going nowhere of the Bicycle Wheel, while the erotically suggestive forms of the Nine Malic Molds recall The Bride painting of 1912 and the moustached and goateed Mona Lisa known as L.H.O.O.Q. The notes and sketches made for the Large Glass and preserved in the boîtes en valise provide a kind of *raison d'être* for these relationships, their *modus operandi* being what Duchamp himself called, no doubt alluding to Alfred Jarry's pataphysics, a 'playful physics'—

a reality which would be possible by slightly distending the laws of physics and chemistry'.⁶

Our own experimental poetics, as we shall see in later chapters, are unimaginable without the example of Duchamp. John Cage's and Jackson Mac Low's change-generated texts, the procedural poems and fictions of Oulipo, Robert Smithson's site-specific 'sculptures', Steve McCaffery's Carnival or Theory of Sediment, Susan Howe's Hinge Picture (a title taken straight from Duchamp's A l'Infinifif), Tom Phillips's A Humument, Johanna Drucker's History of The [My] World, Christian Bök's Crystallography and Kenneth Goldsmith's Fidget—all these could be read as under the rubric of what Duchamp termed delays. The Large Glass, as he put it, in a 1912 note found in The Green Box of 1934 was such a delay:

Kind of Subtitle

Delay in glass

Use 'delay' instead of picture or painting; picture on glass becomes delay in glass—but delay in glass does not mean picture on glass—

It's merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture—to make a delay of it in the most general way possible, not so much in the different meanings in which delay can be taken, but rather in their indecisive reunion 'delay'--/ a delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver⁷

Linda Henderson points out that the term delay has perfectly good scientific credentials:

Such a delay is precisely what occurs when a wave of visible light (or any other electromagnetic wave) intersects a pane of glass: it is refracted, or slowed, and thus bent by the encounter. Such effects of refraction, featured in sources on the optics of visible light, had been central to the early investigations of X-rays and to Hertz's experiments with electrical radiations. Distancing himself from the tradition of painting pictures on canvas, Duchamp would create a glass 'delay' in an impersonal, mechanically exact style free of touch, which like his readymades, also challenged his fellow artists' Bergsonian emphasis on profound self-expression. (1998: 120)

Delay, deferment (another favorite Duchamp term, used in the 1914 Box [see Duchamp 1975: 23], where it is defined as 'against compulsory military

service: a deferment of each limb, of the heart'), distance. 'I wanted', Duchamp tells Pierre Cabanne, to give 'delay' a poetic sense that I couldn't even explain. It was to avoid saying , "a glass painting," "a glass drawing," "a thing drawn on glass," you understand? The word "delay" pleased me at that point, like a phrase one discovers. It was really poetic, in the most Mallarméan sense of the word' (40).

Duchamp's desire to produce artworks 'free of touch' as well as free of 'the retinal aspect' or 'retinal shudder' that, as he tells Cabanne, has posed problems for painting ever since Courbet, recalls, improbably enough, Eliot's theory of impersonality. Indeed, in a piece called 'The Creative Act', written for a roundtable held at the 1957 meeting of the American Federation of the Arts (where he shared the podium with Gregory Bateson, Rudolf Arnheim, and William C. Seitz), Duchamp declared:

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', writes: 'The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material'. . . .

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work. (Duchamp 1975: 138-39)

'This' ['The Creative Act'], notes Eric Cameron in a lecture that touches on the Duchamp-Eliot relationship, 'is the only time Duchamp ever quoted the opinion of a critic word for word (Cameron 1). In a spirited debate that follows Cameron's lecture (see De Duve 1992: 31-38), Rosalind Krauss objects strenuously that 'Eliot's conception of tradition, his idea of high culture, his notion that art is redemptive, seems to me to be . . . far from my understanding of Duchamp', and that it is a 'betrayal of Duchamp' to relate his work 'to larger systems of knowledge'. But Cameron reminds her that the juxtaposition of fragments in The

Waste Land can be seen as 'the equivalent of drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa' (32).

Indeed, Duchamp's desire to produce works in which neither the eye nor the hand would count any longer is not unlike Eliot's insistence, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', that 'poetry is not the expression of emotion but an escape from emotion,' that indeed, 'the difference between art and the event is always absolute.' For once the 'event'—say, Duchamp's payment to Daniel Tzanck, on December 3, 1919, for dental work performed-- becomes the now famous Tzanck Check, drawn on an account at The Teeth's Loan & Trust Company Consolidated, 2 Wall Street, New York for the amount of \$115.00, whose line of payment is bisected by the word 'ORIGINAL', printed in large block letters [figure 3], the temporality of the 'event' gives way to the stasis of the art work exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Memory Imprint

Whatever the Tzanck Check is or is not, its verbal dimension is surely more prominent than its visual one. Indeed, in classifying Duchamp as belonging to the visual arts (the normal procedure), we overlook, not only the verbal dimension of the readymades themselves (their titles, captions, inscriptions, verbal context), and not only the well-known puns like La Bagarre d'Austerlitz and 'Ovaire toute la nuit,⁸ the series of proto-language poems Duchamp was producing in the mid-teens. In The Green Box, we find the following note:

Identifying

To lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar objects—2 colors, 2 laces, 2 hats, 2 forms whatsoever to reach the Impossibility of sufficient visual memory, to transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint.

-- Same possibility with sounds; with brain facts (1975: 31)

To remake the verbal world, in Duchamp's lexicon, is to rule out the axis of similarity which is, of course, the axis of metaphor. Conventionally, poetry is based on 'recognizing 2 similar objects', in establishing likeness. But what if the 'memory imprint' were erased, forcing the reader/ viewer to focus on the thisness, the nominalism of each thing? On another slip of paper in The Green Box, Duchamp develops this notion:

Conditions of a language:

The search for 'prime words' ('divisible only by themselves and by unity).

Take a Larousse dict. and copy all the so-called 'abstract' words, i.e. those which have no concrete reference.

Compose a schematic sign designating each of these words. (this sign can be composed with the standard stops).

These signs must be thought of as the letters of the new alphabet.

A grouping of several signs will determine

(utilize colors—in order to differentiate what would correspond in this [literature] to the substantive, verb, adverb declensions, conjugations etc.) (1975: 31)

And in a 1914 note in À L'Infinitif, Duchamp poses the question:

'Grammar'—i.e. How to connect the elementary signs (like words), then the groups of signs one to the other; what will become of the ideas of action or of being (verbs), of modulation (adverbs)—etc.? (1975: 77)

Here the 'solution' is again related to dictionaries: 'Look through a dictionary and scratch out all the 'undesirable' words' (78).

These exercises, so central, a half century later, to the experiments of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, as well as the Oulipo writers, stands behind a little known Duchamp text called 'The' [figure 4], written in English shortly after Duchamp arrived in New York and published in Rogue in October 1915 under the title 'THE, Eye Test, Not a "Nude Descending a Staircase"' (see Naumann 70, fig. 3.13). Not, in other words, a retinal image representing something seen, this 'Eye Test' takes, as its visual material, letters, words, and sentences. Perhaps Duchamp has in mind the conundrum he posed a year earlier in a note for The 1914 Box:

[see]

One can look at seeing;

one can't hear hearing.

(1975: 23)

The 'directions' at the bottom of the handwritten page tell the reader in French to 'replace each * by the word: "the".' Duchamp's sentences are perfectly grammatical—'If you come into * linen, your time is thirsty because * ink saw

some wood intelligent enough to get giddiness from a sister'--and so on. If this sounds like a routine Dada exercise, the distinction is that Duchamp, far from producing random effects, is interested in rule (here the replacement rule) and grammatical relationship. 'The verb', he tells Arturo Schwarz, 'was meant to be an abstract word acting on a subject that is a material object; in this way the verb would make the sentence look abstract' (Schwarz 457). But what makes the passage look abstract is less noun or verb than the nine giant asterisks which force us to focus on the 'the', that invariant, ungendered article, which has no parallel in French or in other inflected languages. Then, too, the presence of the large black asterisks creates a visual configuration on the page that looks ahead to concrete poetry, the words next to an asterisk inevitably receiving pride of place.

'The', in any case, precedes by twelve years the publication of Louis Zukofsky's first major work, 'Poem Beginning "'The"', whose 330 numbered lines, divided into six movements, are primarily made up of citations from other texts, for example:

17. By why are our finest always dead?
18. And why, Lord, this time, is it Mauberley's Luini in porcelain, why is it Chelifer,
19. Why is it Lovat who killed Kangaroo,
20. Why Stephen Daedalus with the cane of ash,
21. But why les neiges?(9)

Here citations from Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Lawrence's Kangaroo, Joyce's Ulysses, and François Villon's refrain Ou sont les neiges d'antan? (which both Pound and Eliot themselves cited repeatedly) are collaged so as to create startling juxtapositions between literary allusions, academic styles, zoological references (the scorpion or May fly, 'Chelifer'), and so on. Written when its author was only twenty-one, it is, in some ways, a schoolboy spoof, aimed at the learned allusions of The Waste Land. In a trenchant essay, Ming-Qian Ma argues that 'Poem beginning "'The"' anticipates postmodern poetics in its denial of the self as organizing principle, its blurring of text-context (figure-ground) distinctions, and its rendering of information as so much found text. The reference is to the language poets, who have repeatedly expressed a profound debt to Zukofsky's mode here and in 'A'. But I am not sure it is, as Ma suggests, also the case that Zukofsky's verbal texture is a 'cluster of words devoid of any qualitative intuition'(145). Surely

the poem implies that some citations (e.g., Pound and Joyce above) are more valuable than others. Indeed, Zukofsky's title (and consequent opening lines ('The' / Voice of Jesus I' . . .')) are broadly—and one might say, quite traditionally—satiric and iconoclastic, whereas the earlier 'The'-- minor work that it is in the Duchamp canon-- is trying to determine what happens when an invariant one-syllable article, a word that is inescapable in the English language, is embedded in sentences that are grammatically correct but semantically 'nonsensical'. If Zukofsky's poem is aggressively literary, Duchamp's wants to confront the nature of literary language itself. Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?

Consider a second Duchamp text from this period called Rendezvous 1916 [figure 5]. To make it, Duchamp took four postcards and taped them together to constitute a rectangular grid; on these, he produced a text that has no beginning or end, typing the maximum number of letters across each card and cutting the words at card edge irrespective of the rules of hyphenation. Although the double-spaced typed lines sometimes match, there is no continuity from one card to the next. The postcard set, each bearing an ordinary one-cent stamp on its verso, is addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Walter Arensberg at 33 West 67th Street, and bears the complete title Rendezvous de Dimanche 6 Février 1916 (à lh. 3/4 après midi).

Why this specification of time and place? In a note for The Green Box, Duchamp wrote:

Specifications for 'Readymades'.

by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), 'to inscribe a readymade'—The readymade can later be looked for.—(with all kinds of delays).

The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendezvous.

--Naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade as information.

Also the serial characteristic of the readymade. (Duchamp 1975: 32)

Such simulated authenticity was to become a Duchamp trademark. What is presented as a pure moment of inspiration, as improvisation, was actually written, so Duchamp later told an interviewer, 'with great pains'. 'Don't think you can just

write pages of it in 5 minutes—it took me at least two weeks to do it.’(Naumann 66). The self-imposed rule that caused these ‘great pains’, was, as in ‘The’, to write sentences that are perfectly grammatical but make absolutely no sense. As Duchamp explained it to Arturo Schwarz:

The construction was very painful in a way, because the minute I did think of a verb to add to the subject, I would very often see a meaning and immediately I saw a meaning I would cross out the verb and change it, until, working it out for quite a number of hours, the text finally read without any echo of the physical world. . . . That was the main point in it. (cited in Joselit 74).

But can writing really have no ‘echo of the physical world’? In one of the rare analyses of these early Duchamp writings, David Joselit suggests that in ‘The’ and Rendezvous 1916, it is the poet’s aim to disrupt the axis of similarity—a disruption that, as Roman Jakobson has explained in his famous essay on metaphor and metonymy, is characteristic of those aphasics, who are able to communicate via metonymy (the axis of contiguity) but cannot find or identify synonyms, heteronyms, or circumlocutions. ‘By simulating aphasia’, writes Joselit, ‘Duchamp was able to insist upon the materiality of language. Like gibberish or an ‘unknown’ language, words are drained of their significance, falling back into a sensuous medium of sound’ (77).

The problem with this argument is that, in Rendezvous, the words, typed—or mistyped as they sometimes are on this unattractive gray grid—do not prompt oral recitation, and hence the appeal of sound; on the contrary, Duchamp has made it difficult to decipher the visual text, with its odd word division at line ends (e.g., marbr-/ures, le-/ur). Difficult but not impossible: despite Duchamp’s claim that he has produced ‘meaningless’ sentences—a contention on about a par with his famous claim that the choice of readymades ‘was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste” (1975: 141)-- the postcard grid itself contains an astonishing figure in the carpet. The last six lines of the bottom right card read;

toutfois, étant don-
nées quelque cages, c’eut une
profonde émotion qu’exécutent t-
-outes colles alitées.

[always, being given
in some cages, it was a
profound emotion that all laid-
up pastes produced.]

These lines may well be free from 'any echo of the physical world', but they are hardly free from echoes—or anticipations—of Duchamp's own creations. Is it, to begin with, a coincidence that the phrase étant données, which was to become the title of Duchamp's last major work, first exhibited in Philadelphia in 1967, appears here? Étant données is further linked to quelque cages, reminiscent of the bird cage filled with sugar cubes, cuttle bone, and thermometer called Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy? And in that vein, the sentence concludes with the image of colles (the word for glue and paste, as in collage) alitées-- collage pastings that have been, so to speak, put to bed or laid up. These colles are said—absurdly enough-- to produce or execute a profound emotion.

The language of Rendezvous 1916—a very apt title for this postcard grid—is thus at least as allusive as Eliot's language—but the allusions are all internal; they point, along a number of metonymic paths, to Duchamp's own verbal / visual universe. Thus, when we read, in the upper left panel, 'Comment ne pas épouser son moind-/re opticien plutôt que supporter / leur mèches?', we are reminded that Duchamp's conception for his own 'bride' represents a refusal of 'marriage' to the optical (here the opticien), just as, far from being unable to bear the least little wisp of hair or dust (mèches), he was fascinated by its possibilities. Just a few years after Rendezvous, he exhibited Dust Breeding (Elevage de poussière), the amazing photograph Man Ray made, on Duchamp's invitation, of the Large Glass in the process of collecting dust in Duchamp's Broadway studio. Far from being a casual Dada joke, Dust Breeding was serious business. As Calvin Tomkins tells it:

Soon after this photograph was taken, Duchamp 'fixed' the dust with varnish on the sieves, cleaned the rest of it away, and took the glass panel to a mirror manufacturing plant on Long Island, where he had it coated with silver in the Occult Witnesses section at the lower right. Over the next few months he spent countless hours working on this section with a razor blade, scratching away the silver around the three oculist's eye-charts (circulating

patterns of radiating lines. . .) which he had applied to the back of the glass by means of a carbon-paper tracing' (229).

Thus Duchamp's innocent little sentence in Rendezvous 1916, looks ahead to the relation of Dust Breeding to the Oculist Witnesses in the Large Glass. These témoins oculistes were made by multiplying three times the ordinary eye chart opticians use to test for astigmatism, and placing one on top of the other, but they are also conceived as témoins oculaires or eyewitnesses (see Judovitz 67; Henderson 1998: 114-15). As such, they give rise to a long note in The Green Box that defines their shimmering optical rings as 'Parts to look at cross-eyed, like a piece of silvered glass, in which are reflected the objects in the room' (Duchamp 1975: 65). It is just such 'reflection' of 'objects', one might argue, that takes place in the 'nonsensical' Rendezvous. And closer inspection will show that all four 'nonsense' panels in Duchamp's text work this way.

Avez-vous accepté des manches?, we read in the upper-right panel. One of the meanings of manches is 'handles'—a key word in Duchamp's world of shovels, boxes, doors, and drawers. Once we 'accept' these handles, we can reach, on the lower-left panel, 'Co-/nclusion: après maint efforts / en vue de peigne, quel dommage!' And of course we are en vue de peigne here because just eleven days after the postcard Rendezvous was composed, Duchamp inscribed a small metal dog comb with the date 'Feb. 16 1916 11 A.M.' and the words '3 OU 4 GOUTTES DE HAUTEUR N'ONT RIEN A FAIRE AVEC LA SAUVAGERIE' ('THREE OR FOUR DROPS OF HEIGHT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH SAVAGERY') [see Duchamp 1975: 71; Hulten 62]. The inscription alludes to a number of things: the Bottle Rack (L'Égouttoir), the Three Standard Stoppages, with their 'gouttes de hauteur' or 'drops of height', and Duchamp's note in The Green Box that perhaps one might 'Classify combs by the number of their teeth' (1975: 71)—the teeth suggesting the 'savagery' attributed to the comb in Duchamp's inscription. But gouttes de hauteur also puns on gout d'auteur, the taste of the author, suggesting wittily that Duchamp's taste in combs may have been quite different.

In the context of the White Box in which it would later appear, juxtaposed to such items as the Chocolate Grinder and the Bottle Rack, Rendezvous quite literally provides a rendezvous for the readymades already made or yet to come as well as the future inhabitants of the Large Glass. And the stage is set for Etant Données,

the irony being that nothing could be less sexy or voyeuristic than the neutral black type on gray ground of this Rendezvous. Here again Duchamp forces us to stop looking (or reading) and to think through what the art work is doing. The emphasis, as later in such compositions as David Antin's 'November Exercises', is on writing itself as a way of thinking that can bring the 'unrelated' into the relationships that have, it turns out, been there all along.

In the same year that he made Rendezvous 1916, Duchamp produced a readymade [figure 6] in which verbal, material, and conceptual are fused in an especially inspired way. Duchamp described it as follows:

With Hidden Noise is the title for this assisted readymade: a ball of twine between two brass plates joined by four long screws. Inside the ball of twine Walter Arensberg added secretly a small object that makes a noise when you shake it. And to this day I don't know what it is, nor, I imagine does anyone else.

On the brass plaques I wrote three short sentences in which letters were occasionally missing like in a neon sign when one letter is not lit and makes the word unintelligible. (see d'Harnoncourt 280).

The notion of a hidden, unknown, and unknowable object inside the ball of twine, an object to which the viewer can have no access, seems to have fascinated Duchamp: in a note for The Green Box, he humorously calls his new readymade Piggy Bank (or Canned Goods) and supplies a childlike sketch for it (1975: 32). The combination of artifact (metal plate) and nature (the cotton twine) undoubtedly appealed to him. At the same time, as Henderson notes, the nearly square box grid that Duchamp built also looks very much like a typical electrical condenser of the period (1998: 202, figure 89). As for the words themselves, inscribed on the brass plates [figures 7a and b], Duchamp explained:

[They were] an exercise in comparative orthography (English-French). The periods must be replaced (with one exception: débarrassé[e]) by one of the two letters of the other two lines, but in the same vertical as the period—French and English are mixed and make no 'sense'. The three arrows indicate the continuity of the line from the lower plate to the other [upper] still without meaning. (Schwarz 462)

If we follow Duchamp's instructions, we have the following transformation:

. I RE . CA . É LONGSEA P . G .ÉCIDES DÉBARRASSÉ.

F . NE, HEA . , . O . SQUE LE. D . SERT. F .URNIS. ENT
 TE . U S . ARP BAR AIN AS HOW .V . R COR . ESPONDS

becomes:

TIRE CARRÉ LONGSEA PEG DÉCIDES DÉBARRASSÉ
 FINE, CHEAP, LORSQUE, LES DESERTS FOURNISSENT
 TENU SHARP BARGAIN PAS HOWEVER CORRESPONDS

Note that the first word could be 'FIRE' as easily as 'TIRE' and that 'TIRE' can be either the English noun or the French verb ('pull' in first or third-person singular) and that 'AS' on line 3 of the top plaque can become 'LAS; as well as 'PAS'.

What is the significance of this 'hidden noise' for Duchamp's readymade?. Joselit observes acutely that the arrow at the end of each line of text on the bottom plaque suggests that one is meant to turn the object over so as to continue to read the top; the line of text thus 'bends into a sphere . . . precisely echoing the winding length of twine compressed between' the two plaques' (81). As for the language itself, in Duchamp's act of 'geographical and cultural displacement', French and English words are 'jumbled together in an incoherent heap'. (81)

But how 'incoherent' is Duchamp's language 'heap'? Once the reader has played Duchamp's carefully planned acrostic game, the amorphous letters do coalesce into words, if not sentences. The square (CARRÉ) in line 1, for instance, is either between 'fire' and water ('LONGSEA') or we witness someone who draws (TIRE) the square into the sea, letting the 'peg', freed of all prior burdens, decide. In line 2, we read of something 'fine' and 'cheap' when the deserts furnish it. Someone, it seems, has TENU (held) to a 'SHARP BARGAIN', but it doesn't 'HOWEVER', 'CORRESPOND' To what? Here the writing breaks off.

The emergence of 'HOWEVER' from 'HOW . V . R' anticipates, uncannily if, no doubt, subconsciously, to such later word plays as the title of Kathleen Fraser's journal of experimental women's writing, How(ever), just as 'TENU SHARP BARGAIN' anticipates the phrasing of, say, Charles Bernstein's 'Lives of the Toll Takers', of which more in a later chapter. But we need not rationalize the passage too much, for the brilliant stroke on Duchamp's part is that, even as the noise-making object hidden inside the ball of string cannot be identified, the inscriptions on the two plaques would, as we have seen, be 'readable' if we could see the bottom plaque. But we can't and the fact that it is placed, in its museum display, on a mirror, means that its text is an inverted image. Both forms of inscriptions, then, are so much 'Hidden Noise'—obstructing the normal flow of information.⁹

And here the ball of twine comes in, that seemingly ordinary household object, familiarly placed on what, thanks to the long four corner screws, looks like a table. A little boxlike sewing table perhaps, rather like Stein's. But one doesn't turn tables upside down in order to see the inscriptions on their bottom. And one cannot, in fact, remove this ball of twine, whose own top is hidden, from its 'shelf'. Turn it over, and the other side of the ball is hidden. Then, too, the 'thread' that should connect those letters inscribed on the plaques that enclose it is unavailable to the viewer, who must, accordingly, make the connections on his or her own.

What looks like the most basic of assemblages is thus an enigmatic statement about the unknowable. The ball of twine is partly hidden, the letters needed to complete the words on the plaques are missing, and, most important, the 'hidden noise' of the title emanates from an inaccessible source 'I will never know', Duchamp told James Johnson Sweeney, 'whether it's a diamond or a coin' (Schwarz 462). Never to know: here again is the readymade as delay—a guarantee that we will be riveted to the object, trying to make it out. Duchamp's verbal-visual readymade is thus hardly an 'indifferent' object. It must be precisely what it is to create its particular meanings. Its 'ordinariness', in other words, is wholly calculated; the 'hidden' sound must be reflected in the 'hidden' writing on the brass plaques.

So far, I have considered only works that contain actual writing. But language plays a major role even in the readymades that do not. Consider the miniature French window called Fresh Widow [figure 8]. Made to order in 1920, this window—another of Duchamp's delays in glass—has eight panes covered with shiny black leather; its frame is painted an ugly greenish-blue more appropriate for beach chairs than for French windows.¹⁰ On the horizontal window sill, Duchamp has inscribed his name, or rather the name of his feminine alter ego, to read 'FRESH WIDOW COPYRIGHT ROSE SELAVY 1920'.

What is the relation of title to inscription to the window itself? At the most literal level, Duchamp has taken away no more than a single phoneme, the nasal n, from both words and transformed a French window into a fresh widow. What once was transparent, has lost its key letter and is now, thanks to the leather-covered glass, closed to any penetration. What is behind those opaque black panes? Is the 'widow' 'fresh' because she has been recently widowed and is therefore a fresh, unspoiled quantity, challenging would-be suitors who want to penetrate her 'cover'? Or is she 'fresh' in the sense of brazen, bold, defiant?

There is no way of knowing. Like Rose (usually Rose) Sélavy herself, whose Jewish name breaks down into eros c'est la vie, we don't know what's 'inside' her dark 'window'.

David Joselit posits that, as in the Large Glass, Fresh Widow 'suggests a frustrated relationship between a man and a woman, articulated in the language of marriage' (154). Jerrold Seigel remarks that 'a recently widowed woman is a person who has been deprived of an important relationship that ties her to the external world, throwing her back into the darkened space of her own thoughts' (166); Arturo Schwarz reads Fresh Widow as a case of veiled castration anxiety (479); and Molly Nesbit declares that Fresh Widow 'makes a joke at the expense of the French war widow' (63).¹¹ The very fact that this seemingly 'simple' readymade can be so variously interpreted testifies to its complexity, but even more remarkable are the poetic possibilities of what is conceptually a unique case of inscription. 'French Window' has twelve letters; remove two and you have, appropriately for a human being, ten, as in ten fingers and toes. Add to this the extreme ambiguity of this particular fresh widowhood and you have a work neither properly visual (there is not all that much to see) nor verbal (the title and caption alone don't resonate), but conceptual. The artist, as Duchamp put it (see Hamilton 1976: Appendix), is one who creates cervellités ('brain facts').

But, in what may be his most enigmatic move of all, Duchamp has introduced his own 'hidden noise' into the 'fresh widow' circuits. The readymade is usually reproduced from the original, which is at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But what about the numerous replicas and reproductions? The replica of Fresh Widow in the Chicago Art Institute has an outlined breast shape in the upper left. And the Boîte en valise (1958) in the J. Paul Getty Center in Los Angeles has a reproduction of Fresh Widow in which the upper right pane, which is not quite dark, has what look like the outlines of nipples, and the upper left a button shape. The panes get progressively darker from top to bottom; only the lowest ones are opaque.

So which is the 'real' Fresh Widow? Are the window panes entirely black and covered with leather or has the artist inscribed these dark panes with erotic references to the widow's body? Here the issue of reproduction and the loss of aura come into play.

Mechanical Object/ Artisan Reproduction

'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art', declared Walter Benjamin in a famous passage of his most famous essay, 'is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. . . . The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.' Accordingly, 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.' (220-21).

Duchamp's readymades and especially his boxes stand on its head this distinction between the unique art work and its reproductions, between what Benjamin calls cult value and exhibition value. Many of the original readymades have been lost and are known only through replicas; others, like Fresh Widow, exist in various incarnations; still others have taken on a cult value because of a particular contextualization, as is the case with Alfred Stieglitz's 1917 photograph of Duchamp's notorious upside-down urinal Fountain by R. Mutt. As for the boxes, whose first exemplar, the Box of 1914, I have discussed earlier, they may be said to take on--and to find an ingenious solution for--the very problem of 'aura' in the age of mechanical reproducibility. For one thing, as Ecke Bonk notes, Duchamp's injection of his own handwritten scribbles and notes, his 'manu/scripts' of 'autography', transforms what is otherwise the 'impersonality' of the found machine-made object chosen as readymade (Bonk 97). More important, in the Box of 1914 and its successors, Duchamp has found an ingenious way to make reproduction something other than repetition.

'The idea of repetition', Duchamp told an interviewer in 1960, 'is form of masturbation.' (see Naumann 15). By repetition, he had in mind the hardening of what are originally innovative ideas and techniques into a signature style that is then trotted out again and again so as to please the art public and earn fame and fortune. His own friend Man Ray might have been a case in point as was the later Picasso. Here a citation by John Cage may be apposite:

If we take the path of looking for relationships, we slip over experience-wise all those things that are obvious, like repetition. . . . But . . . if we change our mind and turn utterly around and refuse this business of relationship, to use Duchamp in our own experience, we will be able to see that those things that we thought were the same are in fact not the same. And this is very useful in our lives, which are more and more going to have what appears to

be repetition. . . . Now, in a world like that, the perceiving of difference in the repeated, mass-produced items is going to be of the greatest concern for us. (Cage 1967)

Repetition, as Cage and Duchamp understand it, is the downside of art-making in the age of mass production. What is needed, instead, is a focus on difference, on the markers that identify a specific work despite its seeming likeness to others. Replication can thus be understood as a form of delay. If the artist takes his or her earlier work seriously enough to re-present it, inevitably in revised form since revision is inherent in the mere act of replication, the reader/ viewer is challenged to reconsider it. A good example of replication—this time from philosophy rather than art as such—is Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, which is in fact no more than the best-known revision of the collection of Zettel (scraps of paper) Wittgenstein had been accumulating since the early 1930s from Lectures 1932 to the Blue and Brown Books to the Investigations (1951), which Wittgenstein declared to be 'unfinished'. Indeed, like Duchamp, Wittgenstein preferred the aphorism and brief proposition to any sort of sustained argument.

In the winter of 1934, Duchamp wrote to Walter Arensberg about his plans to issue a facsimile edition of his notes and documents made for the Large Glass between 1912 and 1915. His plan was to reproduce approximately 135 handwritten notes and a dozen photographs of the key paintings and drawings used for the composition of the Glass. Collotype, whose continuous tone allowed printing from an ordinary film negative, was chosen, but since this is an expensive medium, Duchamp tells Arensberg that he wants to publish 500 ordinary copies of the edition at 100 francs each as well as a deluxe edition of twenty for \$50.00. Individual items were to be placed in a green cardboard box; in the luxury edition, the cardboard was replaced by green leather.¹² This Green Box bears the title LA MARIÉE MISE A NU PAR SES CELIBATAIRES MEME stencilled in a white dot pattern.

Was the Green Box, then, just a diversion for an artist bankrupt of new ideas? Was it a hoax, a new game whereby Duchamp, then largely neglected by the art world, might make money? And was the subsequent 'manufacture' of the Boîtes en valise a capitulation to commodity capitalism? In the sixties, many critics, especially the proponents of Abstract Expressionism, seemed to think so. 'The influence of Duchamp's gesture', declared Max Kozloff in 1965, 'is now spreading with plague-like virulence', leading to what he described as a 'retreat

from originality' in favor of 'multiple originals', which he disparaged as no more than 'three-dimensional prints' (cited in Naumann 293).. Others like Werner Rhode, viewed the Boîtes as proof of Benjamin's point that in the age of mechanical reproduction, the imprint of the individual artist had lost all authority (Naumann 293). The 1912 Bride, for example, reproduced (in a colorized version) as a slip of paper among notes written on the back of gas bills could hardly have aura! Or could it?

The paradox—and this will come up again in the case of John Cage or Jackson Mac Low—is that Duchamp had never worked harder than he did on these multiples in the years when he was ostensibly doing little but playing chess. Twenty years after making the Green Box, Duchamp recalled:

I had all these thoughts [notes] lithographed and with the same ink as the originals. To find paper of absolutely identical quality, I had to scour the most improbable corners of Paris. Then three hundred copies of each litho had to be cut out, using zinc templates which I had trimmed against the periphery of the original papers. It was a tremendous work and I had to hire my concierge. . . . (Naumann 212)

To reproduce the paintings and drawings (e.g., The Passage from Virgin to Bride, the Oculist Witnesses, Dust Breeding) was even harder: photographs of the originals had to be acquired from their owners and in some cases—for example, the 9 Malic Molds-- Duchamp prepared a stencil and colorized the print by hand. As for the Large Glass itself, Duchamp had already worked long hours with Man Ray in New York to diffuse the intensity of the glass surface so that it would be transparent enough to see the paintings placed behind it [figure 9].

In the course of this process, which was paradigmatic for the later Boîtes en valise even though varying print and reproduction techniques were adopted, each image and note was altered by its context. The same Walter Benjamin who dismissed reproduction as the denial of aura, wrote in a 1937 Paris diary, 'Saw Duchamp this morning same Café on Blvd. St. Germain . . . Showed me his painting: Nu descendant un escalier in a reduced format, colored by hand en pochoir, breathtakingly beautiful, maybe mention' (Bonk 102). Certainly this pochoir, which uses greater color contrasts, and more delicate line than the original and affixes a postage stamp at the bottom, is no longer the same object as the 1913 painting. As a resident of later Boîte en valise [see figure 10] of, this

particular 'nude' interacts with the Chocolate Grinder, 9 Malic Molds, Comb, the Air de Paris ampoule, as well as with Duchamp's aphoristic notes.

Paul Matisse's posthumous bilingual edition of the later Notes contains a section reproducing forty-six scraps of paper, under the title Inframince / Infrathin.¹³ Most of these were written in the later thirties when Duchamp was beginning work on the Boîte en valise and restoring the Large Glass after its having been shattered (see Henderson 217). The title neologism Inframince, the artist declared, could not be defined; 'One can only', as he told Denis de Rougemont, 'give examples of it' (de Duve 1991: 160). Here are a few:

The warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infra-thin (#4)

In Time the same object is not the / same after a 1 second interval—
what / relations with the identity principle? (#7)

Subway gates—The people / who go through at the very last moment /
Infra thin—(9 recto)

Velvet trousers--/ their whistling sound (in walking) by/ brushing of
the 2 legs is an / infra thin separation signaled /by sound. (it is not an infra
thin sound) (#9 verso)

When the tobacco smoke smells also of the /mouth which exhales it, the 2
odors / marry by infra thin (olfactory / in thin) (#11 verso)

Infra thin separation between / the detonation noise of a gun / (very close)
and the apparition of the bullet/ hole in the target. . . . (#12 verso)

Difference between the contact / of water and that of/ molten lead for ex,/or
of cream./ with the walls of its / own container moved around the liquid. . . .
this difference between two contacts is infra thin. (#14)

2 forms cast in / the same mold (?) differ / from each other/ by an
infra thin separative /amount—

All 'identicals' as / identical as they may be, (and / the more identical they are)/ move toward this / infra thin separative difference. 'Two men are not / an example of identity / and to the contrary / move away / from a determinable / infra thin difference—but (#35 recto)

just touching. While trying to place 1 plane surface /precisely on another plane surface / you pass through some infra thin moments— (#45)

'But isn't the same at least the same?' asks Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations (#215). Duchamp's verbal enigmas support Wittgenstein's conclusion that it never quite is. '2 Forms cast in / the same mold differ/ from each other/ by an infra thin separative difference.' The infrathin is the most minute of intervals or the slightest of differences or, as in the case of the subway passengers, 'delays' to be perceived. It is the role of the artist, Duchamp implies, to beware there is no such thing as self-identity, for there will always be an infrathin.

A cryptic note from the White Box (Duchamp 1975: 78) dated 1914 on the back, reads, 'A kind of pictorial Nominalism (Check)'. Thierry de Duve, who takes this term as the title of his important study of Duchamp's aesthetic, notes that this is the only mention of nominalism in the writings published during Duchamp's lifetime, but that there is another one, also dated 1914, in the Notes:

Nominalism [literal] = No more generic/specific /numeric \ distinction between words (tables is /not the plural of table, ate has nothing in common with eat). No more physical /adaptation of concrete words; no more /conceptual value of abstract words. The / word also loses its musical value. It/ is only readable (due to being made up of consonants and vowels), it is readable by eye and little by little takes on a form/ of plastic significance. . . . (#185)

This plastic being of the word (by literal nominalism) differs from the plastic being of any form/ whatever . . . in that / the grouping of several words without significance, reduced to literal nominalism, is/ independent of the interpretation. (#186)

The 'nominalism' defined here, says de Duve, 'is literal: it turns back on metaphor and takes things literally. Duchamp 'intends to specify those conditions that in his

eyes allow the word to remain in its zero degree, force it into the realm of nonlanguage' (1991: 126-127).

Duchamp understood, of course, that such 'zero degree' nominalism could not exist, that a relationship between a discrete a and b always occurs, whether merely grammatical ('ate' /'eat') or temporal (as in the relation of the noise from the detonation of the bullet and the appearance of the bullet hole), or tactile, like the warm seat just sat on. In practice, nominalism can only present itself as differential identity, as infrathin. In de Duve's words, 'The infra-thin separation is working at its maximum when it distinguishes the same from the same' (1991: 160). In aesthetic terms, the 'interval between two names' which is the infra-thin spells the refusal of metaphor—the figure of similarity, of analogy, of likeness—in favor of the radical difference at the core of the most interesting art works and poetics since the 1960s. For no sooner is a link between two items (e.g., table/tables) made than it is negated by a shift in focus or context. And this is where Duchamp's continuous replications of his own work in the series of boxes from 1914 until his death become so important.

The uniqueness of these boxes is that they are, in fact, unique; that the arrangement of notes and reproductions and their individual appearance is never quite the same. Tracking individual items—the Chocolate Grinder, say, or the Oculist Witnesses or Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy – from replica to replica or box to box, one comes to greet them as familiar friends, who are characterized by their Wittgensteinian family resemblances. The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, for example, is instantly recognizable, but in the Green Box version a separate Oculist Witness panel is placed behind the so-called Capillary Tubes. Or again, the Bicycle Wheel retains its identity through many incarnations, but in later replicas the stool seems smaller and the wheel's spoke more prominent. And I have already talked about the version of Fresh Widow that has outlined breasts and nipples on its black panes.

In 1966, two years before his death, Duchamp's White Box [A l'Infinitif] was published in a deluxe facsimile edition by the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York. The distinction of this box is that, except for the Glider on its cover, it contains no reproductions of paintings or readymades, only what look like casual notes and sketches, which are grouped (at Cleve Gray's suggestion) under seven headings: Speculations, Dictionaries and Atlases, Color, Further References to the

Glass, Appearance and Apparition, Perspective, and The Continuum. These titles are hardly parallel—we move from abstract plural noun to specific kinds of reference books, to attributes, to addenda, and so on. As such, the list reminds the reader of Foucault’s discussion of Borges’s Encyclopedia in Les Mots et les choses—published, interestingly enough, in the same year as the White Box—1966.

Like the notes in the Box of 1914 and the Green Box, those in the White Box deal with conceptual issues relating to the Large Glass—questions of perspective, of the fourth dimension, of geometric representation, of the ‘bride motor’ as erotic machine, of ‘cast shadows’ and the ‘delay in glass’, as in ‘The Question of Shop Windows’ (Duchamp 1975: 74). On a page reminiscent of Jackson Mac Low’s 22 Light Poems, Duchamp catalogues metals and their kinds, colors, and uses (1975: 80). ‘Nickel’ appears a number of times: for example, with the subheading:

nickel plated) difference of shine
pure nickel)

And again as under the heading ‘Experiments’ (SS 81), we read:

nickel white, lemon, yellow-green (graduated to yellow-blue
gray for the shadows)’

Duchamp’s ‘nickel’ catalogues are not unrelated to Stein’s intricate prose poem ‘Glazed Glitter’, discussed in Chapter Two, although his infrathin taxonomies have none of her semantic density or suggestibility. Interestingly, again like Stein, he writes on boxes:

--Same exercise in a box. 1. Make a kind of background with the same objects this time lying on their rounded parts in semi-stability, prop them up one with the other. 2. Put a paper on top and remake a second layer above, using the holes left by the layer underneath, and continue thus.
(1975: 74-75)

And on rooms:

Have a room entirely made of mirrors which one can move—and photograph mirror effects . . .

Photo.

Photo: Wall (morning)

- : My portrait in the bathroom mirror
- : 3 rolls of lead wire on an inclined plane (sort of race)
- : piles—heaps—of similar things (stretcher keys) (sponges 10th St.) (1975: 76)

This last note can be read as a poetic meditation on infrathin. Is the 'Photo', presumably on a 'Wall' the 'portrait' of the artist? Or is the only self-portrait the private one seen in the bathroom mirror every morning? Are the walls mirrored or the mirror a wall? In what sense do the '3 rolls of lead wire on an inclined plane' make for a 'sort of race'? Is Duchamp thinking of the Three Standard Stoppages and their unequal line lengths? Or the racing cyclist in To Have the Apprentice in the Sun of 1914? What sort of 'heap of similar things', perhaps on 10th St., would have both 'stretcher keys' and sponges'?

To address these questions is see how clearly Duchamp understood what the function of poetry would be in the 'age of reproduction' and its seeming loss of aura. From the smallest linguistic difference (p ? b), to the key deviation from a given meter or rhyme, to the synonymy that is never complete and the homonymy that produces puns, poetic language is the language that focuses on delay—a delay ordinary discourse is bent on erasing. In a note for the Large Glass (1975: 72) we read:

Cast Shadows

after the bride. . . .
make a picture of shadows cast
by objects 1st on a plane.
2nd on its surface of
such (or such) curvature
3rd on several transparent surfaces
thus one can obtain a hypophysical
analysis of the successive transformations

What are Duchamp's readymades, boîtes en valise, or texticles but just such hypophysical analyses? Infrathin.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Bottle Rack [l'Égouttoir] is an ordinary bottle dryer (the French word égoutter means 'able to drain drops' but also plays on the word goût, 'taste') that Duchamp picked up at the Hôtel de Ville department store, but its multi-phallic form is obvious—a form ironized by the absence of those empty bottles that belong on its rods. I have discussed Duchamp's readymades in Perloff 1992: 5-15; Perloff 1996, 1999. Some of the material in these essays appears here in revised form.

² Duchamp's now famous boxes have become important museum pieces. In 1998, for example, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Menil Foundation in Houston cooperated on an exhibition called Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp . . . in resonance, which exhibited Duchamp's intricate boxes and Boîtes en valise in relationship to Cornell's own magical box constructions. The catalogue (Winkler

1998) is itself a work of art, reproducing each scrap of paper in actual size and in color

³(1998: 72-74). Both Henderson and Bonk (98) note that Duchamp did alter the typeface inscription of one of the box labels from Union Photographique Industrielle to 15/16 Photographies Industrielles, thus creating a slight off-note, but otherwise the artist remained scrupulously impersonal. Henderson's magisterial study of the Large Glass, together with her earlier Fourth Dimension (1983), are essential reading for anyone interested in Duchamp's 'scientific' art-making.

⁴Duchamp 1966: unpaginated; Duchamp 1975: 74. The Hamilton / Bonk 'typotranslation' (1999) is a transcription that retains the original's graphic complexity. 'To convey the information contained in the facsimiles,' write the authors in their Afterword, 'requires that the words, sketches, and diagrams be integrated into a new isomorph.' But since this is a very limited edition, and since the notes themselves, facsimiles like those of the Box of 1914, are reprinted in Sanouillet's edition (Duchamp 1975). The translations here are somewhat different from those in the 1999 edition. The sentence here quoted, for example, is translated as 'Can works be made which are not " of art."??'

⁵ 1915: 13. Cf. 'Flirting at the Bon Marché' (Stein 1998: 1, 304-305): 'Why is everything changing. Everything is changing because the place where they shop is a place where every one is needing to be finding that there are ways of living that are not dreary ones, ways of living that are not sad ones, ways of living that are not dull ones, ways of living that are not tedious ones.'

⁶ See Duchamp 1975: 49, 71. For a discussion of Duchamp's use of Jarry's Pataphysics, see Henderson 1998: 47-49, 95-96. Cf. Tomkins, 122-42.

⁷Duchamp 1975: 26; cf. Hamilton. In his postface (unpaginated), Hamilton notes that since it was impossible to make a complete analogy between Duchamp's calligraphy and the printed version, his own version uses color coding (red) to capture Duchamp's revisions.

⁸ In Duchamp 1975: 103-19, these are grouped under the heading 'Rose Sélavy & Co.' Ovaire tout la nuit turns the common phrase 'ouvert tout la nuit' into an all-night ovary. 'The poet Ron Padgett wittily translates it as 'We never clothe' (111). La bagarre d'Austerlitz (1921), literally 'the brawl at Austerlitz' (an allusion to the famous Napoleonic battle), puns on 'la gare' (the station), specifically the Paris terminal, the Gare d'Austerlitz. David Antin (70-71) suggests that the title can be broken down to La Bague, Garde d'Austères Lits ('The Ring, Keeper of Austere Beds').

⁹ Joselit writes, 'On the surface of the work language is reified while at its center a thing regresses from the status of a commodity to a primitive form of exchange, the exchange of sound. In an extraordinary double move—or double inscription—language becomes a commodity, as a commodity becomes language' (84). This is an intriguing reading, but it gives With Hidden Noise a more negative tone than I think Duchamp intends. The 'double inscription' exists but I take it as a comical reminder that 'noise' is always a form of language.

¹⁰ Joselit remarks that the window's 'odd shade of greenish-blue suggestive of tropical seas' has an air of 'kitsch' (151, 228).

¹¹ Nesbit further notes (63) that 'The claim to copyright [by Rose Sélavy] brings the interrogation by the shop window to a different halt: Duchamp has claimed a copyright for a window that is not only plagiarized but by definition not eligible for copyright. . .The copyright was a bluff. But with it, Duchamp subjugated the culture of the patent in no uncertain terms.' For a disagreement with this interpretation, see Joselit 228-29.

¹² See Bonk 100-101; Naumann, 111-17. The previously unpublished letter to Arensberg is cited in Winkler 111. In the end, Duchamp used only 93 manuscript notes as opposed to the projected 135 and made only 300 copies of the regular edition, 20, as planned, of the deluxe.

¹³The notes are reproduced as facsimile scraps, with the French and English print versions at the bottom of the page. Forward slash marks(/) indicate the end of the line in the handwritten original; back slashes (\) indicate that the word is above a crossed-out word. Duchamp sometimes hyphenates *infrathin*, sometimes not, as if to say that even the word itself cannot remain the same. Similarly, he sometimes ends an entry with a period, sometimes with a dash, sometimes with no punctuation. The book is unpaginated but the notes are numbered.

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