

The Reluctant Indifference of Marcel Duchamp

Preface

[...] A brief review of Marcel Duchamp's work, imposed by today's event, held unexpected results. There surfaces concealed issues that, through contradiction, brought the full circle but in a different place.

So, it is with much pleasure that I present these very condensed thoughts on Marcel Duchamp.

The near *impossibility* of discussing Duchamp's work is astounding. To mire through the barrier of imposing myths is formidable. Everywhere there are traps.

There is the trap of discourse and dialogue that circulates around the man himself; the trap of specifics, obsession explication, subjectivity–cognitive sabotage, all of which creates and gives the works great hovering power.

Marcel Duchamp, stiff-lipped master of concealment, confronts us with playful protective wit, ideas that are only defined as ideas, perpetual indifference that contains the forceful reversal of impotency, preoccupation with the mundane game of chess, random chance to avoid choice and a lack of burning passion. Traditional aesthetics holding intention as relevant to interpreting works, has become irrelevant and non-functional.

A sharp, tight focus on some of the works, in the same context of their immediate time, is revealing. The works-in-themselves are not remarkable.

The paintings, if seen with some objectivity, as not “great works of art.” The inclination is to assume that Duchamp gave up painting because he was indeed aware of his limitations. The *Nu descendant un escalier No. 2*, with its colours and fragmentation of surface, is a master use of already established Cubist techniques.

Le Grand verre gave formalism a step forward but failed to engender polemics. The “unloading of ideas” is not derived conceptually by polarities but rather by storytelling.

The ready-mades, the most crucial body of work, lack unity, form, and meaning, thereby opening a space that allows for posited, subjective or arbitrary meaning. These objects that contain opposition and the loud noise of discord are claimed by Duchamp to have only the common factor of indifference. Thus, it would seem that Duchamp did or did not understand the primary force, not immediacy and appearance, but what lies beneath the surface.

Marcel Duchamp is placed in the category of intellect, yet the intellect requires articulation and his artistic concerns were not conceptually formidable, nor for that matter, conceptual.

His stance that art is purely subjective, that painting is only retinal, and his attempts to express time and space through the abstract notion of motion, to make purified of all past influences, to introduce the random in art as a means to avoid the subconscious, do not leave one breathless with depth and scope. One is struck by his repetitive indifference, lack of intention, non-commitment—a sort of throwing-away, letting it all go.

The intention of this analysis is not to diminish the man and his work but to seek its functional totality. Clearly, it rests neither in the articulation nor directly in the objects.

How is it then that Duchamp has monumentally changed our concept of art, changed what art is, changed the meaning of art?

What Duchamp did no do, not what he did—which is what he did, locates the dynamics of his work.

His non-choice of objects, indifference, actions and non-actions, consistency of non-linear development, were all driven by the force of resistance. With his determination and mental-sets, he absolutely refused to fit this slot or to be slotted. He placed himself a far distance from competition, struggle and search for creativity, novelty and recognition; giving him courage and strength to resist the common denominators of art world politics.

His purposeful and tenacious persistence by disengagement and indifference gave him a higher power and made him a hero, persecutor and “traitor.”

How greatly Nietzsche would embrace this man who had a roaring No of the Lion, who intuitively fought for greater creative power with the full certainty that resistance is creating.

Thus, the grand contradiction is that giving up creativity made him the great creator. And the greater contradiction, and the contrary to everything, is that how Duchamp lived contains the functional totality of his work.

Marcel Duchamp: a man who made a throw of the dice.

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