

WHY WE LOVE MARCEL DUCHAMP

Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

March 27, 2009–August 2, 2009

Co-curated by Anne Collins Goodyear and James W. McManus

A good reason to make the pilgrimage to our nation's capitol is to see this exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Especially the 3 plus minute Warhol *screen test* made in 1966; the circumstances were really fantastic. Andy Warhol¹ brought his 16mm camera on a tripod and a coterie including an Italian model, who was instructed to rub up against MD during the filming, and Nat Finkelstein whose 2005 boxed edition of printed matter is on view, scattered inside a vitrine. Describing the event as like crashing Duchamp's uptown opening at the Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery, Finkelstein said, "I left knowing that Mr. Duchamp had treated me like a comrade... A seeker of visions in the Fraternity of Artists," but what is really great about the Warhol film is that it recorded MD age 79, as he surfs the situation with equanimity and ease, sipping water and smoking his ubiquitous cigar,² and you get to look him straight in the eye.³

Anne Collins Goodyear and James W. McManus, are co-curators of this exhibition of over 100 portraits and *self-portraits*, which are installed in 6 rooms connected internally and accessed from a high-ceilinged central hall. The spaces are painted in dark shades of gray which imparts a feeling of agedness to the works, and while certainly dark rooms with moderated light are a necessary measure for conservation, still they give a feeling of attenuated vitality to the installation; bringing to mind MD's observation that artworks really only have a life-span of about 30-40 years. That observation comments on the idea of an object's *aura*, first expressed as such by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay on mechanical reproduction⁴ but that MD and Benjamin were acquainted briefly in 1937 is not well known. In, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Francis Naumann is clearly alluding to the use of multiples in MD's oeuvre, and in a separate text he later discusses the meeting with Benjamin.⁵ The contemporary art works in this exhibition would have benefited from stronger lighting and a more distinctive spatial presentation to set them apart from the early and historical works on display. The most original contemporary works were those by Brian O'Doherty, Douglas Gordon, David Hammons, Alice Hutchins and Mel Bochner; a program of film screenings would have been an excellent compliment to the whole.

Henri Cartier-Bresson *was there*, and in a decisive moment captured MD and Teeny, Irving Penn had him cornered, the marvelous images by Marvin Lazarus invent narratives, and a fascinating set of three

¹ Warhol with 16mm camera was recorded on the scene with MD in a still by Stephen Shore; photograph not in the exhibition.

² What kind of cigars did he smoke and what kind of tobacco did he use in pipes ?

³ Which prompts me to ask, exactly what color were those eyes? Most accounts agree that they were brown, but Beatrice Wood says they were blue and Ray Johnson's collage makes that assertion perhaps audaciously. But notice Picabia's sketch from 1917 indicating that MD's right eye might have a streak of blue, and the realistic drawings of Daniel MacMorris from 1936 show what appears to have been at least a hazel right eye.

⁴ Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936, is still a very rich text, and it is certainly also overdue for an update, re-evaluation and discussion today.

⁵ Francis M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1999); distributed in the United States by Harry N. Abrams (French edition by Hazan, Paris; Dutch edition by Fonds Mercator, Antwerp). Naumann's later essay, *Afterthought: Ruminations on Duchamp and Walter Benjamin*. addresses MD's comments on the 'original' in contextualizing his encounter with Benjamin. Francis M. Naumann, *Afterthought: Ruminations on Duchamp and Walter Benjamin*, 11/08/04 updated 02/11/05, www.toutfait.com.

pages from Joseph Cornell's diaries, of a dream he had just after MD's death, is reproduced in the lavish catalog published by the National Portrait Gallery and The MIT Press. William Copley's oil portrait, which MD and Teeny kept on view in their Manhattan apartment, Julian Levy's *F.B.I. Wanted* document, and the eight part pencil drawing by visionary architect, Fredrick Kiesler (who was at times closely associated with MD), is restored to its original frame for the first time in 40 years. These are just a few of many good reasons to visit and study the works in this exhibition. One of two Polaroids taken in 1955 by Man Ray shows MD wearing a curly blond wig and holding a pipe is in the show. While it is suggested in a footnote that the wig might possibly have belonged to Teeny, or that it might even have been used in *Étant donnés*, it was quite possibly the joke costume property belonging to Man Ray; as a curly blond wig that he kept on hand in his studio is mentioned in his biography.⁶ *Fania (Profil)*, is a portrait MD made in 1916 of the actress Fania Marinoff; a sheet of paper was pulled through a typewriter, unfurling letters and a drawn line of brown ink with nice smudges and inscription complete the picture. Many photographs exist of MD, they can be found online, in books and catalogs, but they could never all be included in this, or any exhibition; thus each of us will ultimately have to assemble for MD our own *musées imaginaires*.

Text portraits are referred to in the catalog where one can read a poem by Henri Pierre-Roché; Steiglitz is quoted as saying to Julien Levy, "He is the master of masters...whatever he does he always amazes me and fills me with delight..." and Georgia O'Keefe describes MD as having, "a grace that I have never seen in anyone before and have seldom seen since."⁷ Of the 6 essays written for this exhibition catalog, all are informative and provide new material to consider. Naumann brings a number of interesting portraits and depictions of MD to our attention, notably the lost oil painting, *Marcel Duchamp Triangles*, by Katherine Dreier showing MD perched on a stool with pipe and hat in hand, and the bronzes by Isabelle Waldberg, who took over the studio in Paris at 11 Rue Larrey in the 40s. McManus contemplates the invention of *Rose Sèlavy*, a subject that deserves additional interpretation and debate. He reinforces the idea that MD identified with the *mariée* and *celibataires* [MAR CEL] of the *Large Glass*; but the degree of identification is certainly moot. The *Large Glass* was completed in 1923, in the state of being incomplete or "inachevé," still the *Juggler of Gravity* and other elements described in detail in *The Green Box*, but not executed, leave the drama of virgins, brides, bachelors and grooms in perpetual motion. McManus' presentation and analysis of all known photographs of the work from 1921, *Tonsure*, where MD had his head shaved with a comet-like effect is very good and it invites further examination of the relationship between MD and Yvonne Chastel.⁸ Goodyear brings forward the important matter of MD's ideological dimensions while also discussing works in the show, and Michael Taylor gives four dimensional illumination to portraiture, both of and by MD. His chronological study correctly places the works in the matrices of MD's personal and cultural time line with attention given to the surmised relation to Da Vinci, and some of the dues they deserve are given to American Modernists, including Georges de Zayas and Joseph Stella.

Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture, was augmented by six presentations on March 27th which, to the credit of the National Portrait Gallery, were videotaped for release at a later time. This writer was fortunate to attend three of the presentations; one, on the two drawings shown together for the first time, and demonstrated to have been based on a photograph of the sculpture, *Portrait of Marcel*

⁴ "Man Ray: American Artist," by Neil Baldwin. Inspired quite likely by the Mae West craze, demonstrated in an exhibition devoted to Elza Schiaparelli at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Both France and America were saturated in the early twentieth century by Miss West; she was the first of the platinum blond femme fatales in a succession of pop divas that continues today.

⁷ Gertrude Stein also wrote a portrait of him.

⁸ She was married to Jean Crotti when they met, lived with him in Buenos Aires and later married to a man named Lyon. Which bringing to attention the text from the WANTED poster, "HOOKE, LYON and CINQUER..." She was also the recipient from MD of the *Belle Haleine* perfume bottle in 1921.

Duchamp sur mesure, by Jean Crotti,⁹ followed by Wendy W. Reeves' broad and inclusive selection of portraits from the cultural period including textual ones. Lewis Kachur's presentation on Surrealist photography showing images of their altered group photographs included MD's "coin sale"¹⁰ an installation containing live chickens made for the Breton exhibition, *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain*.¹¹ Two portraits taken by Arnold Newman in Peggy Guggenheim's apartment at a remove of several years; one of Max Ernst and one of MD, each have ropes of smoke featured and they are seated in the same fantastically carved wooden chair. Since many people could not have been present for the all the presentations we will all have to, "go to the tape" as they say in sports coverage.

Widely expressed in the field of Duchamp studies and in this exhibition are suggestions that MD very self-consciously planned to have himself recorded for posterity, and that works like the *Large Glass* or *Étant donnés* are finite depictions of his personal life, when they are all in fact works of art, invented to transmit the artist's broader interests and speculations. Albeit with a distinctive prescience, he did create self-portraits, the most obvious examples are the collaborations with Man Ray, but insinuations that he was promoting transgender identity politics seem dubious applied to MD. While there is certainly a dark element in MD's work and his published remarks relating to women in general are more barbed than much of the general discussion of women's liberation from the 20s through the 60s, the attitude was not unusual in Surrealist and related literature. Art historians make their arguments with the advantage of retrospection, while elaborating on his oeuvre as a whole, still it seems unlikely that MD invested that much purposeful self regard in works that he made as provocative gestures. He was a 20th century gadfly and much remains to be said about the Surrealist concept, *eros c'est la vie*, and analysis of MD's contribution to Breton's collection, *Anthologie de l'Humeur Noir* remains to be done.

To each his own, chaque un son gout and *de gustibus non est disputandum*, are well known expressions of the idea of uniqueness in personal taste, and if we grant that the issue of *taste* in aesthetic theory needed to be isolated and defined, then the *indifference* postulated and applied to art by MD resides, importantly, in the matter of creating a zero point for aesthetics. Thus it is both the designation of "choice" and the removal of "taste" which are crucial in assessing both objects (forms) and intensions (content). This ground was gained by MD for conceptual art in *declaring* the readymade, and directing attention through statements like those published as *The Creative Act*,¹² to the central importance of each participant/audience member's apprehension. By limiting his production, removing his work from the arena of commerce, and by leaving oil painting and the bohemian artist character behind, MD assumed the mantle of *una cosa mentale*,¹³ establishing the rightful place of the artist as an intelligent being in a universal continuum. He defied anyone to pin him down, in a Zen-like stance, by eluding them without comment; and so to put matters briefly, these are some of the reasons why we love Marcel Duchamp...

⁹ Crotti was successively MD's studio mate, friend and brother-in-law.

¹⁰ Literally, coin sale in English, translated as "dirty corner," in French it is a derogatory slang term for women.

¹¹ *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain*, (D'Arcy Galleries, New York, November 28, 1960 - January 14, 1961).

¹² Session on the Creative Act, Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Houston, Texas, April 1957.

¹³ Da Vinci notes. Both Da Vinci and MD are described as very handsome and charismatic young men. It is true that in 1908, complying with his military service requirements, as well as mastering the craft of printer and demonstrating his skill by pulling prints from his mother's father's etchings [Emile Nicole], he also passed an oral exam on Leonardo Da Vinci.