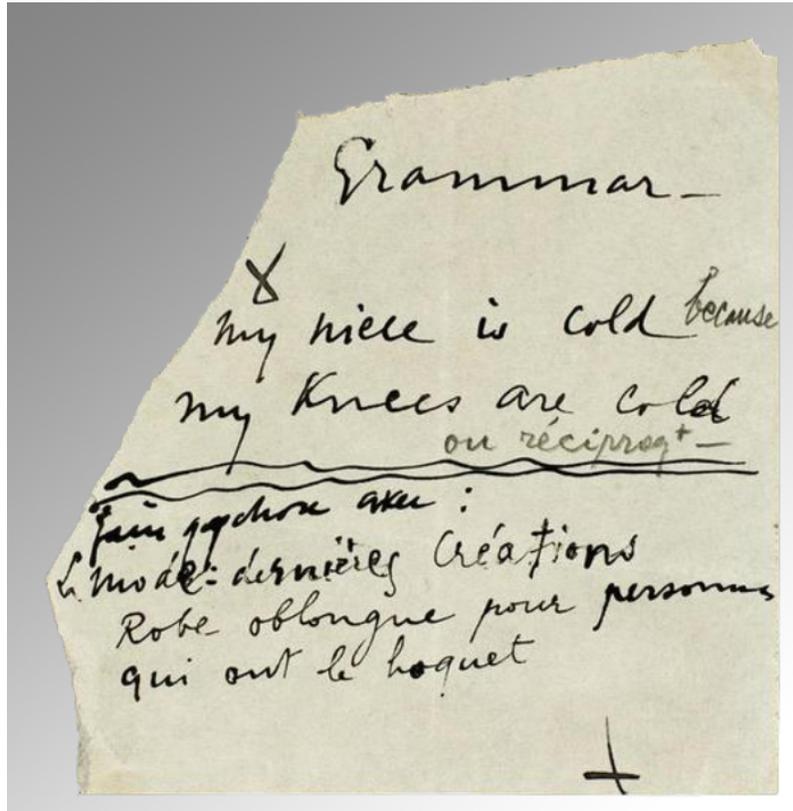


The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp



Note # 283: "Grammar\_ my niece is cold because my knees are cold..."<sup>1</sup>

Note #283 is a *thought thing*,<sup>2</sup> a torn corner of paper bearing writing by Marcel Duchamp. It is an especially important example of how he mixed the use of his native French and newly acquired English language in the word plays. In Note #283 the reader can perceive the way ideas are reinvented, *on the fly*, and intuit Duchamp's thought process as well as to savor the jottings of his hand.

IN FRENCH

Calembour, jeu de mots , maxime ,  
 proverbe, métaphore, expression  
 familière, double sens, figure de style,  
 adage, disant, ironisait, épithète,  
 aphorisme...

IN ENGLISH

Pun, play on words, maxim, proverb,  
 metaphor, colloquial expression,  
 double entendre, figure of speech,  
 adage, saying, quip, epithet,  
 aphorism...

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp, NOTES, Arranged and translated by Paul Matisse, G.K.Hall & Company, Boston, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *Res cogitans* describes the mental object, it is Latin, literally a "thought thing." Duchamp devised, *cerveillite*.

## The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp

Word Play is fundamental to all human languages and cultures. Playing with words, alliteration, onomatopoeia, the use of metaphor to describe subtle realities and awareness in each language are grasped intuitively, literally in French, *les jeux de mots*<sup>3</sup>. The 'meanings' of commonly used phrases, or the ideational attributes of grammatical expressions, are necessarily open to interpretation. When translating from French to English, or reciprocally, one always arrives at an incommunicable mix; *Franglais - Engfrais*, or *Frenlish - Englench* & c. The importance of language to the creative geniuses of Marcel Duchamp, his contemporaries, friends and the zeitgeist of the explosively changing worlds of Paris and New York, forms the substance of much of twentieth century literature and the arts. No amount of exposition or rhetorical construction can 'pin down' a simple meaning to the extended metaphors that are used in figures of speech and plays with words. It is the nature of language to be allusive, one might say *the nature of the beast*. Whether verbalized or written, poets and artists use words and languages as primes; as literal-intellectual elements. It is impossible to determine a fixed 'meaning' for a physical object, or some thing that is poetry. What is the object? Whether intellectual +/- or physical, *thought things* are at once fleeting and subtle pleasures.

**gram'mar** (grăm'ěr), *n.* [OF. *gramaire*, fr. L. *grammatica*, fr. Gr. *grammatikē*, fem. of *grammatikos* skilled in grammar, fr. *gramma* letter, fr. the root of *graphein* to write.] **1.** The science treating of the classes of words, their inflections, and their syntactical relations and functions; also, the phenomena with which this science deals. Abbr. *gram.* **2.** A treatise on grammar. **3.** Manner of speaking or writing, with reference to grammatical rules. **4.** The elements or principles of any science or art; — chiefly in book titles.

Webster's Dictionary 1945

It is necessary to state this simplification: languages are built of structures of words and speech, using grammars and phraseologies. In the context of word play, let us cast our regard on the abundant 'expressions' that most people use daily and ubiquitously to navigate social, emotional and intellectual landscapes, sometimes in continuous strings. These 'expressions' are simultaneously literal + figurative (LIT. FIG.s<sup>4</sup>). There are so many of these expressions in each language it would not be possible to record them all. Examples in English come to mind: to hit the roof, to let the cat out of the bag, to shoot the moon, et al. Most LIT. FIG.s evolved naturally out of situations and relate to objects, and many have been in use for centuries. Their origins are not always, but sometimes traceable including the contemporary use of historic sayings, the use of quotations, *good old chestnuts*. New words are in flux forming out of popular expressions, expletives and contemporary slang.<sup>5</sup> They come into being constantly because language is a living phenomenon and it perpetuates the evolution of human attitudes and ideas.

<sup>3</sup> The French expression, *Les jeux de mots*, translated literally, "games of/with words," runs parallel to the French expression *jeux d'esprit*, literally play/game of the spirit... "Jeu de mots," is translated into English as "pun" in many dictionaries, (Langenscheidt, FRENCH-ENGLISH ENGLISH-FRENCH dictionary, 1980) a word which fails to convey the essence and delightful aspects of a literal translation.

<sup>4</sup> LIT. FIG. the literal + the figurative <http://www.literalfiguratives.net>

<sup>5</sup> The French argot, "vachement" I suspect may be derived from Surrealist attitudes of the man, Jacques Vaché.

## The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp

Duchamp arrived in New York in June 1915 not knowing any English, however, he knew some German, probably from early education and had spent critical time in the summer of 1912 in Munich and visiting other German cities. When the ocean liner arrived in New York city he was taken by Walter Pach directly to be the houseguest of Walter and Louise Arensberg who almost instantaneously became his life-long patrons. In the context of the Arensberg's circle and their famous evenings, Duchamp met and was adopted as a cultural icon by the many creative geniuses on the scene in New York. The pre-World War I milieu included a surprising roster of artists, writers, musicians, actors, dancers, and publishers working in consort. They were well educated and many probably spoke some French. Thus Duchamp learned English immersively, and to gain a minimal income he gave French lessons, primarily to the wealthy Stettheimer sisters one may suppose. The experience of one who is learning a language while living in a foreign country can be very existential. Someone might speak to them or they might speak to another person in what was presumed to be the same language, before both might realize that neither understands the other at all. An entertaining vision of Duchamp and his language coaching at this time is given by Louise Norton-Varèse in her essay, "Marcel Duchamp at Play."<sup>6</sup>

The earliest instance in which Duchamp published under his pseudonym, Rose Selavy, occurred in the periodical, *391* published by Francis Picabia in 1921.<sup>7</sup> Transcribed below, this piece was printed on a page with similar word plays by several other contributors including Picabia:

Si vous voulez une règle de grammaire : le verbe s'accorde  
Avec le sujet consonnamment :

Par exemple : le nègre aigrit, les négresses s'aigrissent ou  
maigrissent  
Màcheur Fran[cfort sau]cisse Pisu[e quand elles] habilla.

Marcel Duchamp  
(RROSE SELAVY)

This text is discussed and translated in an essay by Steven J. Gould, *Duchamp Bottles Belle Greene: Just Desserts For His Canning*, published at toutfait.com.<sup>8</sup>

"If you want a rule of grammar: The verb agrees  
with the subject consonantly:

<sup>6</sup> A pdf of this text is here: <http://www.changechance.info/MarcelDuchampatPlay.pdf> From "Marcel Duchamp," Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973, exhibition curated by Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kyneston McShine.

<sup>7</sup> Le Pilhaou-Thibaou, illustrated supplement, 391, July 10th, 1921.

<sup>8</sup> Duchamp Bottles Belle Greene: Just Desserts For His Canning, Steven J. Gould, 2005. [http://www.toutfait.com/online\\_journal\\_details.php?postid=866&keyword=regle%20de%20grammaire](http://www.toutfait.com/online_journal_details.php?postid=866&keyword=regle%20de%20grammaire)  
L. Brandon Krall scribit © NY 2015

## The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp

For Example: the Negro embitters, the Negresses become embittered and thin."

In Gould's complex article he argues that the reference to negresses in this word play may allude to Bella de Costa Green and her mother. The former was curator of the J. Pierpont Morgan library and she employed Duchamp for a short period in 1915. This first statement by Rose is examined here because it resonates directly with Note #283, the "regle de grammaire" in English "rules of grammar" suggests his concern with grammar at the time, and a continuing thought process in French and English, simultaneously. In this word play Rose's poetic disrupts the reader's expectations with a shockingly objective treatment of embittered and starving negresses, which then disintegrates into a disguised sonorous-written version of Francis Picabia's name, as a mangled sausage.



A typographic rendering of Note #283 that is illustrated on page one follows, with square brackets indicating a graphic element:

Grammar \_  
 [-mark-]  
 my niece is cold because  
 my knees are cold  
                                   ou réciproq + \_

[----- two wavy lines -----]

faire quqchose avec:  
 La mode: dernières creations  
 Robe oblongue pour personnes  
 qui ont le hoquet  
                                   [-mark-]

The upper section is composed in English and includes the word "because" in pencil, and the penciled French translated here as, "or reciprocally," assuming that Duchamp wrote "ou reciproq" as an abbreviation for the French word, "reciproquement." The top of Note #283 is separated from the bottom by an elegant pair of wavy lines, or lines of waves. They are visually compelling and recall the horizon in the *Large Glass*, but certainly in this context the pair of lines across the middle of Note #283 must be taken as abstract or graphic markings. The lower section, written in French, is translated as follows:

do something with:  
 Fashion: latest creations  
 Oblong dress for persons  
 who have the hiccups

## The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp



At the outset it is important to establish that Duchamp did not have any biological nieces; not one of the six Duchamp children that reached maturity had children, which is the subject for an *Essai Future* in this series. Observe also that the entire Note #283 is written on the torn-off right-bottom corner of a piece of paper, that the words were written with a fountain pen or a nibbed pen evident from the flow of ink, and thus he probably used ink from a bottle or an inkwell when he wrote this note.

The statement, “My niece is cold because my knees are cold” intentionally has the scent of scandal, but it is not explicit and it does not actually make an incestuous or illicit statement, although other of Duchamp’s word plays do. “My niece is cold because my knees are cold” plays with this intimation. It is irresponsible of David Joselit to make the following assertion in his book, *Infinite Regress*<sup>9</sup> rather than to observe the removed aspect maintained with equilibrium by Duchamp.

Duchamp’s project here is extraordinary and quite different from the puns he devised in the 1920s, which established two or more countervailing meanings within a single sentence. These later textual works operate along a linguistic fault line where a displaced or fragmentary parallelism in words provokes a convulsive contradiction.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the English text “My niece is cold because my knees are cold” is tautological but grammatically incorrect on the level of pronunciation (either “my knees is cold because my knees are cold” or “my niece is cold because my niece are cold”), but within this bland repetition of congruent sounds a transgressive incestuous attachment explodes (“my niece is cold [frigid] because she won’t sit on my lap”). In this short text, a linguistic doubling stands in for, as it represents, a forbidden libidinal “doubling”: the incestuous encounter. The only trace of the disturbance, appropriately enough, is a change in tense from singular to plural—from “is” to “are.”

Joselit’s text is typical of a style of cathectic and convoluted interpretation which is rooted in antiquated Freudian and Marxist theory; an unfortunate fact of the intellectual landscape in which Duchamp studies are still mired. There are poles, delightful bubbling and acid angry, in Duchamp’s word pieces. They are intense and a goad, but the assertion by Schwarz and others that Duchamp had an incestuous relation with his sister Suzanne appears to this writer as a misguided fabrication and it has been adopted by other writers and critics who favor libidinal interpretations and conjectures without suitable justification or requisite examination.

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<sup>9</sup> David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941*, October Books, MIT Press, 1998. Chapter 2, *Between Reification and Regression: Readymades and Words*, pp. 74-75.

## The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp



The content of Note #238 was published in two pieces in, *Anthologie de l’Humeur Noir* in 1937-40, and in *Oculism de Precision* in 1939.<sup>10</sup> Duchamp made audio recording of the same set of word plays in 1961 for the sound track of his section of Hans Richter’s film, *Dadascope*<sup>11</sup> and they are the same French “tongue twisters” he rendered in his film, *Anemic Cinema*. The word plays were used in William Copley’s, *S.M.S. Portfolio*<sup>12</sup> where Duchamp recorded both the French *Anemic Cinema* tongue twisters and the English word play, “my niece is cold because my knees are cold” on a floppy lp record which is affixed to the outside of Box #2. Copley’s *S.M.S. Portfolio* project would illumine multiple associations among the creative community of New York and Europe in the mid to late 60s. Copley, his family and friends created, lived and influenced a remarkable transatlantic scene; surely a fruitful subject for another *Essai Futur* in the CHANGEchance series

This essay is titled, “The Euphorismes of Marcel Duchamp” because three notes earlier, in Note #280, the word “euphorisme” was invented. A new aggregate suggesting the confluence of euphemism, aphorism and perhaps a hint of euphoria. Subtle...

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<sup>10</sup> Provide correct citations for both of these...

<sup>11</sup> Dadascope at internet database: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0123026/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0123026/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1)

<sup>12</sup> *S.M.S. Portfolio*, a link online: <http://www.davidsongalleries.com/subjects/sms/sms.php>