

Haarlem, 24th of August 2019

Dear madam/sir,

I took the liberty of sending you a copy of the book I recently published. It is a study on the work of Marcel Duchamp, particularly of his *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Large Glass), and on the work of several of the French writers Duchamp pointed to as being of an inspiration to him: Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Jean-Pierre Brisset, Jules Laforgue and Alphonse Allais.

It is written in Dutch – a language very few people outside The Netherlands are familiar with and was published with the kind support of the Nederlandse Academie voor 'Patafysica (The Academy for Pataphysics in the Netherlands). I nevertheless thought it should find a place in your collection – being one of the most extensive collections on Duchamp's work in the world.

I have included a translation of the foreword I wrote for my book, as an indication of the contents of my book. I hope you find it worthy to be included in your library.

And if you think, thumbing through its contents, it deserves a translation in English I will be more than happy to have a go at that.

Sincerely,

Pieter de Nijs  
Sint Joriseveld 52  
2023 GD Haarlem  
The Netherlands

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'P' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

## FORWORD

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) is one of the most influential and pioneering artists of the twentieth century. For the general public, and certainly the Dutch public, he however is strangely unknown. Picasso, Dali, Mondriaan, Warhol - they are the modern artists that everyone knows. At its most Duchamp is known because of his *Fountain*, an ordinary urinal that was shown at the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition, or *LHOOQ*, a postcard of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, with a mustache and beard added by Duchamp. And maybe because of the term readymade, an ordinary utensil that Duchamp supposedly would changed into art by Duchamp.

Among the initiates, however, Duchamp's significance for modern art is undisputed. He is considered the pioneer of Pop Art and the inventor of the concept of conceptual art. And because of his readymades, he was and is also considered as a Dadaist, an iconoclast and an anti-artist.

Yet it would be a mistake to qualify Duchamp simply as a *provocateur*, just as it would be a misconception to see the readymade as an object intended to provoke the viewer for the sake of provocation itself. The readymade is the material representation of an idea - an idea that must give rise to a dynamic process of reflection on what, when seen, occurs within the viewer's brain. For Duchamp, the idea that underlies a work of art was just as important - even more important - than the actual realization of it. Duchamp never conceived his readymades as works of art or described them as such. In addition, the readymade is pre-eminently a unique object, directly related to the individual who has selected it from a random range of objects and who provided it with a title or a text - that is: to Duchamp. It is therefore also a purely individual expression.

Duchamp's attitude towards aesthetics was one of ultimate skepticism. That skepticism not only concerned the way in which a work of art was automatically incorporated into the aesthetic discourse over time, but also the way in which the work itself and the ideas underlying it were expressed in images and in language, ultimately leading to a loss of its original expressiveness and appearance. Duchamp's ultimate goal was to separate both image and language from the frozen forms in which, in his opinion, they end up over time. The readymades cannot be separated from what Duchamp saw as his most important work: *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even). Duchamp described this "painting on glass", better known as *Le grand verre* (the Large Glass), as a "collection of loose ideas," and anyone who sees it for the first time will immediately understand that description. Duchamp brought together a bizarre collection of shapes on two glass plates, mounted above each other in a metal frame. An insect-like creature floats in the upper half of the Great Glass, with spiky feelers and all sorts of appendages. Right next to it hovers a kind of cloud with three irregularly shaped openings. The lower half of the Glass is dominated by a set of machines: on the left a kind of sleigh, in which a paddle wheel is mounted, and a sort of mill with three grinding stones, resting on three elegant legs. A few metallic containers can be seen behind the sleigh on the left and a series of cones float above the machine in the middle. On the far right there are three silvery ellipse shapes. Both the upper and lower glass plates show a pattern of cracks. The entire work differs quite a bit from an illusionist painted and designed painting, if only because the various parts of it seem to float freely in space due to the lack of a background. Moreover, there is hardly any connection between the different shapes on the two glass plates.

There is plenty to see, but little to admire: the way in which the various forms are represented do not correspond to the traditional properties assigned to a painting: expression, daring brushwork or a pleasant-looking composition of colors and shapes. The Large Glass has the cool and rational appearance of a machine, a cold room or laboratory.

### **Painting 'in the service of the mind'**

Duchamp has criticized the art practice of his time, both verbally and in writing. He was only briefly interested in the traditional craftwork of the painter, working with paint on canvas, and he did not have a high regard as to the intellectual qualities of painters. "J'en ai assez de l'expression" bête comme un peintre ", (I have had enough of the expression "stupid as a painter"), he stated several times. Duchamp did not seek inspiration in the work of painters, but in new developments in technology, science and literature. The resulting work and the attitude of the author towards the world of the visual arts were considered intellectual and literary by fellow artists. Duchamp didn't see this as a disqualification, but as a challenge. The work of painters such as Matisse or Cézanne was less inspiring to him than recent discoveries in technology, such as electricity, the gasoline engine, photography and film, and in new developments in science. But he actually was influenced by literature, in particular by the poetry of Jules Laforgue, by the fantastic novels of Raymond Roussel, the dry humor and bizarre logic of Alphonse Allais, the quasi-etymology of Jean-Pierre Brisset and the 'Pataphysics of Alfred Jarry. "As a painter it seemed more important to me to be influenced by a writer than by another painter," he later stated.

According to Duchamp, in the course of the 19th century the emphasis in painting had increasingly shifted to the physical side of the art. He thought this had resulted in a one-sided production of pleasant or attractive images, of an art that appealed exclusively to the eye. The painting of the Renaissance, of the Baroque, according to Duchamp, was never just image or image. "I am against the view that painting can be reduced to a retina emotion. Ever since Courbet, people think that painting focuses on the retina: the retina sensation. In the past, painting had many more functions: religious, philosophical, moral [...], "he said in a conversation with Otto Hahn. Realists and impressionists had successively banished that religious, philosophical or moral content from painting, in favor of a purely sensory (retinal) impression, of an (instantaneous) excerpt from visible reality. Even more revolutionary movements such as futurism and cubism, which emerged around 1910, did not escape this trend, according to Duchamp.

Duchamp also criticized the lack of freedom and inventiveness among the artists of his time. Most of them simply followed what their predecessors had done. Duchamp consciously looked for other ways. "I was interested in ideas - not just visual products. I wanted to bring painting back to the domain of the mind. "

It was therefore not surprising that around 1912 he broke with the current that was seen as the most radical at that time - cubism. Duchamp was not convinced that the cubist artists, in particular the painters from the circle of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, represented a real innovation in painting. From that moment on, he distanced himself from the life of the artist, before being catapulted back into it about sixty years later, when his work was rediscovered by Popart artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein. In the sixties and seventies of the 20th century it became clear that with his work Duchamp had let a bomb explode that shook the visual art world to its foundations. After Duchamp, art was no longer just art. The question, however, is whether that was ultimately his intention.

### Painting and text

The Large Glass is a unique work, because of its theme and exceptional design – a painting on glass, made with materials and techniques that are unusual for a painter – but also, and mainly, because Duchamp had it accompanied by a large number of texts. From those texts, published separately in a few boxes (*boîtes*), it becomes clear what Duchamp depicted or had wanted to depict.

In the Large Glass, Duchamp summarized the results of the ideas that had occupied him in his artistic practice from about 1911. And from the outset on he had planned to have the Large Glass accompanied by a series of notes, as a sort of caption or verbal illustration. He wanted to avoid that it would only be viewed or interpreted according to the usual aesthetic standards and would only be regarded as a painting that can only be looked at.

In 1934 Duchamp collected the notes, diagrams, (work) drawings, loose scribbles and notes he had made while working on the Large Glass, had them copied on exactly the same paper and in the exact same irregular form as the originals and brought them, together with a few reproductions, in a limited edition on the market in a box with the title *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même*; (the same title as the title of the Large Glass, with the missing comma before *même* being the only deviation). He simply called this box *Boîte Verte* (the Green box), after the color of its cover. The Green box is therefore a facsimile edition of a number of seemingly unordered notes: sketches and plans for individual parts of the Large Glass and notes about the method and material to be used. Duchamp based the idea for his box on the mail order catalogs and catalogs of large department stores that began to appear at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century; catalogs such as those of Manufacture Française d'Armes and Cycles de Saint Étienne or the Sears & Roebuck in the United States, full of images of ready-made clothing, everyday utensils and household or industrial machines, with titles that today are often hilarious, and with extensive explanations and captions. To Katherine Kuh he said: "Originally I had planned to finish the Glass with a catalog like the Green Box, except of course, the Green Box is a very incomplete realization of what I intended. It only presents preliminary notes for the Large Glass and not in the final form which I had conceived as somewhat like a Sears Roebuck catalog to accompany the Glass and to be quite as important as the visual material."

Duchamp had previously – in the so-called *Boîte de 1914* – collected some of his earliest notes. However, this 1914 Box was not intended for a larger audience, as the Green box was: it only knew five copies. It did, however, contain the essence of the idea for a series of "captions" with the Large Glass:

I initially saw the 1913-14 Box not as a box but as notes. I thought I could collect calculations and considerations without interrelation in an album, as in the Saint Étienne catalog. Sometimes it is torn pieces of paper ... I wanted the album to accompany the Large Glass so that people could consult it when they saw the Large Glass, because I don't think it should be viewed in the aesthetic sense of the word. You had to consult the book and view them together. By combining the two, I bypassed the retina aspect, with which I have nothing.

In other words, the quasi-unorganized form of the Green box was intentional. The presentation form, of notes and sketches on separate sheets of paper, had to guarantee that the reader did not see the content as a continuous story, but as a combination of loose ideas and verbal and visual associations. The texts that Duchamp published are therefore more than an explanation or caption: 'After all, the Large Glass was not made for viewing (with "aesthetic" eyes), it had to

be accompanied by a formlessly possible "literary" text that never took a fixed shape. And the two elements, glass for the eyes, text for the ears and the concept, had to complement each other and, above all, prevent each other from taking on an aesthetic image or literary form. " As Duchamp said to Cabanne: "These were things that gradually came up. The idea for the whole was pure and only the execution, plus a kind of description per part, comparable to that of the catalog of the Saint-Étienne arms factory. It was to abandon every aesthetic [...] A total of experiences [...] not inspired by the idea of establishing another painting movement, such as impressionism, fauvism or any "ism". "

The notes in the Green box cover the various stages of development of the ideas that Duchamp intended to realize in the Large Glass. Realized, because Duchamp left the Glass "definitively unfinished" in 1923. Some parts therefore only exist on paper, in sketches or in text form and cannot be found in the Large Glass proper.

In 1966, Duchamp collected a second set of notes under the title *A l'infinifif*. This collection of notes carries the name the *Boîte blanche* (the White box), again after the color of the box itself; the subtitle *A l'infinifif* (In the indefinite mood) can be explained by the fact that most notes have the infinitive form.

The notes or captions in the Green box mainly relate to the name, location, construction and operation of individual parts of the Large Glass. Most of the notes in the White box, besides notes on color, mainly concern the issues of perspective and the concept of the fourth dimension.

The notes from the various boxes together do not provide a clear picture of what Duchamp has depicted in the Large Glass. In the course of time that he worked on the Glass, Duchamp changed his mind about the name, nature and operation of the various parts. In terms of form and content, the texts that he has published therefore only partly corresponds to the "catalog" of the Large Glass he once envisioned.

The latter became clear when his stepson Paul Matisse published a final collection of notes in 1980, under the title *Marcel Duchamp. Notes*. These notes are a welcome addition to the notes from the Green and White Box. They are important because they indicate the different phases in the development of Duchamp's ideas. The *Notes* also contain notes or descriptions that relate to parts that cannot be found in the Large Glass.

The *Notes* give a good impression of the search Duchamp went through. Many notes are repetitions or reformulations of earlier ideas. In addition, there are notes about work he later realized – the readymades for example – and about various concepts he developed in the years after he left the Large Glass "definitively unfinished".

From the published notes it is possible to reconstruct what Duchamp portrayed in the Large Glass. The Glass consists of two distinct parts. The lower part is the "domain" of "the bachelors", the upper part is the "domain" of "the Bride". Three thin strips of glass, together referred to as the Horizon, form the boundary between the lower and upper glass halves. The lower part of the Large Glass is, as I briefly indicated above, dominated by a few machines: the Sleigh (*Traineau*), also referred to as Chariot or Glider (*Glissière*), the Watermill (*Moulin à eau*) and the Chocolate Mill (*Broyeuse de chocolat*). The Watermill "turns" inside the Sleigh and is connected to the Chocolate Mill through a horizontal axis. This Chocolate Mill is a machine with three grinding stones on a base with fragile-looking legs, crowned with a round plate, the Neck Tie (*Cravate*), on which a vertical bar (the *Baïonette*) rises, which is connected with a kind of scissors (*Ciseaux*).

To the left of and behind the Sleigh, the "bachelors" (*Célibataires*): nine metallic sleeves or

moulds are situated. Duchamp also refers to them as Malic moulds (*Moules mâliques/mâlic*) and as a Cementary of Uniforms and Liveries (*Cimétière des uniformes en livrées*). From the Mâlic molds, thin tubes, the so-called Capillary tubes (*Tubes capillaires*) lead to a series of seven cones, the Filters or Sieves (the *Tamis*), also known as Parasols (*Ombrelles*). The Filters form half an arc over the Chocolate Mill. To the right there are three silver-colored ellipses: the Oculist Witnesses (*Témoins Oculistes*), with a (Kodak) lens above. The insect-like shape on the left in the upper half of the Large Glass is the Bride (*Mariée*). "She" hangs on a sort of suspension hook and is also referred to as a Hanged Female (*Pendu femelle*). The cloud-like shape to the right is the Milky Way (*Voie lactée*). There are three more or less rectangular holes in the cloud, the Draft Pistons (*Pistons de courant d'air*). To the right under the Milky Way, nine holes were drilled in the glass: these are the Nine Shots (*Neuf Tirés*).

According to the title, the subject of Duchamp's painting on glass is a kind of erotic display. Duchamp indicates that the "bachelors" long for a dismantling or stripping of the Bride. This erotic display is described in terms that refer to or are derived from mechanics or physics, but also from biology and physiology. It seems that Duchamp consequently gave the depicted machines or machine parts a biological or even psychological life. However, the "characters" that populate the Large Glass, such as the "bachelors" and "the Bride," lend their anthropomorphic or humanoid character not from their appearance, but from their denomination and from the verbal terms with which Duchamp describes their "behavior." Duchamp's texts clearly show that image and text are complementary. Duchamp describes the Large Glass as "a superfast exhibition (= allegorical appearance) of a number of collisions that seem to follow each other strictly legally". Based on this description, it is therefore not just a static image (a display, as in an exhibition), but also an (verbal or literary) explanation of a dynamic process, of a mechanism in motion, of 'collisions' that occur again and again according to a series of laws. The Large Glass must be seen as one of the possible images of various objects and phenomena in motion. That movement is of course imaginary and only takes place in the imagination of the person who looks at the Large Glass – or better: the person who looks at it in combination with a reading of Duchamp's notes.

**De Water Mill** In the lower half of the Large Glass, the Sleigh and the Chocolate Mill are set in motion by the Water Fall (Duchamp did not depict the waterfall that should set the blades of the Watermill in motion). The Sleigh moves back and forth and the Chocolate Mill revolves in a monotonous rhythm.

The bachelors or masculine molds are holders in which the Illuminating Gas is accumulated. That light gas has a tendency to rise. It finds its way from the Malic moulds to the Capillary Tubes, in which it solidifies or freezes and breaks into 'flakes'. In their flight upwards from the Capillary Tubes the gas particles are captured by the Filters that hover above the Chocolate Mill. Once they have been guided through them – they lose any sense of direction and their 'individual traits' – they fall down in a spiral or corkscrew motion (also referred to as Toboggan or Planes of flow (*Pentes d'écoulement*) and, once arrived at the bottom of their fall, splash up against the Horizon. The Horizon functions as a cooler (a *refroidisseur*) and is also described as the Bride's Dress. The Illuminating Gas, which gets its right direction or focus from the three Oculist Witnesses, ends in the pattern of the Nine Shots in the domain of the Bride.

That Bride is a kind of an engine, powered by Love Fuel (*essence d'amour*). The Bride-engine is excited by the signal from the splashed Illuminating Gas, which ignites the love fuel in its rather weak cylinders (*Cylindres bien faibles*). That process results in the "dismantling", "stripping" or "undressing" of the Bride. This undressing is also described as a

"cinematographic blossoming" (*épanouissement cinématique*). With that disguise, the Bride sends her Commands (Commandments) or Messages (*Lettres*) back to the bachelors via the Draft Pistons.

Duchamp's notes fail to describe how the contact between the Malic molds and the Bride is established. As mentioned before, it seems to be a physical process (via the Illuminating Gas), but also a literal/linguistic process (through the "messages" or "commands"), or even through visual contact (via the Oculist Witnesses). The notes are also unclear about the final result of that contact. It is not even clear whether there actually is any contact between the bachelors and the Bride: that is in fact prevented by the Horizon.

Certain – and clearly visible – is that Bride and bachelors are occupying different spaces. The machinery in the lower part of the Large Glass is depicted in a strictly three-dimensional perspective, while the forms of the phenomena in the upper part of the Large Glass are spatially ambiguous. From Duchamp's notes, it can be concluded that the outer form of the Bride is an appearance (shadow, projection) in three-dimensional form of a four-dimensional phenomenon.

The notes in Duchamp's *boîtes* are not only unfinished – just as the Large Glass has remained unfinished – they are also brief, often cryptic and sometimes even contradictory. That makes it difficult to determine exactly what Duchamp's objective was with the publication of his notes. The fact that Duchamp describes mechanical shapes as if they were living beings – an insect-like creature named Bride, a number of metallic holders that are called bachelors, gas that changes in phase but is attributed a will of its own – makes it all the more puzzling. In what kind of world do these phenomena exist? What laws do they comply with? Why did the creator of this work opt for those unusual materials? And what did he want to express with this work?

Over the years, after the 'definitive incompleteness' of the Large Glass, Duchamp has only partially answered these questions – answers that, like the notes in the various *boîtes*, often contradict each other and thus increase the mystery of the work.

Even though there is mechanical movement and erotic activity (a stripping), the actions or reactions of the phenomena in both parts of the Large Glass cannot be explained by the mechanics, physics, biology or physiology known to us. Duchamp's notes refer to "canned coincidence", "emancipated metal" with "a oscillating specific gravity", a language that consists exclusively of "prime words" and the ability to "grow colors".

From Duchamp's texts it also appears that he not only wanted to create a world of images that was unknown at the time, ruled by a completely individual law of his own, but that he also sought to use unusual and unknown techniques, using equally unconventional materials: no linen or other canvas, no brushes, no paint from a tube, but glass, lead wire, silver foil or minium and – even – ordinary dust.

The uniqueness of the work, the unusual names of the various parts and the enigmatic terminology describing what takes place in the Large Glass have led to a flood of publications on Duchamp's intentions and the meaning of the work, with interpretations from just about every possible angle. There were commentators who sought the key in esotericism and alchemy, in psychology and philosophy, in mathematics, technology, and physics. The Glass would shape a modern myth, such as that of "the bachelor machine". The story of the Great Glass should be interpreted psychoanalytically as a representation of Duchamp's frustrations about unfulfilled

love or about the impossibility of making a name for himself as a painter. It would be an artistic reflection of technical and natural discoveries and insights from the beginning of the 19th century, including theories about the fourth dimension and non-Euclidean geometry. And Duchamp himself would have been a Dadaist *avant-la-lettre*, a joker in the tradition of 19th-century fumists, or an anti-artist who wanted to shock the entire artistic world.

### **Why this book?**

The definitive answer to the question of what exactly is depicted in the Large Glass and what it expresses is not given with this diversity of interpretations. It particularly remains the question as to why a visual artist put so much effort in expressing himself verbally – as if the image alone was not enough for him. The fact remains that in addition to his visual work, Duchamp also made his notes public. This is an indication to the fact that he assigned at least as important a role to the word as to the image – something that was emphasized in his later work, for example in his readymades.

This fact, plus Duchamp's own statement that it was more important to be inspired by a writer than by a fellow visual artist, made a systematic investigation of the verbal element in his work a challenging undertaking. And given Duchamp's statement quoted above, it was obvious to take a closer look at the work of the authors he mentioned as an inspiring example.

That is why my book focuses, except on the Large Glass, on the texts that Duchamp has published, and – in the final analysis – on his ideas regarding language. The most important questions that arose during my research were: what is the relationship between the Large Glass and the texts that Duchamp has written and published on and about it? What can be deduced from those texts about his ideas regarding the nature and status of the work of art and about the means that the artist uses to express those ideas? What has been the influence of the authors above mentioned on Duchamp's ideas? And how does this translate into the texts in which he describes the various phenomena depicted in the Large Glass? As mentioned, Duchamp is regarded as one of the founders of modern art. His work is sufficiently known to connoisseurs, but often unknown to the general public. In recent decades it has indeed led to a large number of publications in English, French, German and other foreign languages, but comprehensive Dutch-language publications are scarce. Duchamp's notes are partly available in English, but in their entirety only published in French in an easily available edition. Because publications in French are increasingly inaccessible to the vast majority of the Dutch public, because, as I think I can show, Duchamp's visual work is closely related to his linguistic expressions – titles, play on words, the working notes in his various books – and he was largely inspired by the specific spelling and use of language by some French authors, I thought it would be useful to look at his original French texts and, where necessary, to reproduce them in Dutch.

For a good understanding of what he intended with the Large Glass, I thought it would be necessary to elaborate on the work he realized before 1912 and the ideas he developed in those years. The first two chapters of this book thus form a necessary prelude to my main subject: Duchamp's ideas about, and playing with language and the literary examples that inspired him.

My analysis starts with a discussion of the art and literature of the artistic movements in *fin-de-siècle* Montmartre, of the Hydropaths and Incoherents in relation to Duchamp's humorous drawings, followed by a discussion of his connection with the cubist movement



from around 1910, and ends with his self-chosen farewell to the artistic world in 1912-1913 (chapter 1). In Chapter 2 I describe the new and innovative ideas and techniques that he developed from 1912-13, when working on the Large Glass and the works of art that he developed in that context. In chapter 3 I will discuss Duchamp's play on words and his ideas about language – ideas that have led to the development of the readymades. Finally, Chapter 4 contains an analysis of the poetic ideas and linguistic experiments of the authors who inspired Duchamp – Alfred Jarry, Jules Laforgue, Alphonse Allais, Jean-Pierre Brisset and Raymond Roussel – set against Duchamp's use of language in his *boîtes*, his puns and readymades.

My main conclusion is that Duchamp used the poetic and linguistic ideas developed by the aforementioned authors as a source of inspiration to develop a visual language that is completely unique. Duchamp mainly wanted to stimulate the viewer intellectually with this visual language. He was of the opinion that his work is not only meant to be viewed, but also to be "read". For Duchamp, it was not the finished work of art that was the ultimate goal of the artistic activity, but the ideas that the viewer develops as he sees it in an imaginary dialogue with the creator of the work.

With this book I do not pretend to answer the question of the definitive interpretation of Duchamp's work or of his *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*. I have only seen his work, and in particular the Large Glass, in the light of a few stubborn and sometimes even pathologically driven authors, authors who in their books evoked as many mysteries as Duchamp did with his Large Glass and with his readymades.

In my opinion, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* is one of the most radical and most intriguing and inspiring works of art in recent decades. At least that has it been for me in recent years. I hope this book contributes to a wider appreciation of the work of Marcel Duchamp, and to an inspiration to those who read it.