

# Homage to Marcel Duchamp

ON

*The Occasion  
of The Centennial  
of His Birth*



## Foreword

# HOMAGE TO MARCEL DUCHAMP

## ON THE OCCASION

## OF THE CENTENNIAL

## OF HIS BIRTH

FOREST CITY GALLERY

JULY 28 - AUGUST 30, 1987

LONDON REGIONAL ART GALLERY

JULY 28 - AUGUST 30, 1987

MCINTOSH GALLERY

JULY 28 - SEPTEMBER 13, 1987



## Foreword

When Bob McKaskell first approached me with the idea of an exhibition in honour of Marcel Duchamp's centennial, I had two thoughts: (1) that despite the artist's pervasive influence on 20th-century art, would anyone care enough to contribute, and (2) if we did do the show, it would probably be quite straightforward in its organization. I couldn't have been more wrong on both counts. During the months leading up to the opening, it became overwhelmingly obvious that Duchamp's legacy is a unifying one, as witnessed in the numbers of artists from across Canada and beyond who gleefully joined in the spirit of the celebration, each in a wonderfully unique (and often surprising) way.

There were also little ironies and eerie coincidences. One of the major tasks was that of producing the wall label for each work by keying each artist's statement and catalogue information into the gallery's word processor. The stacks never seemed to decrease, and it became necessary for Bob and me to work several evenings and even a statutory holiday. After the frustrations of countless revisions, we realized the irony of what we were doing: a curator and an art gallery worker were spending long hours producing an exhibition for a man who had been shunned by the art establishment early in his career and who

spent his life questioning all standards and precepts of accepted art dogma. We wondered if he was smiling down on us.

The coincidences may have been mere quirky little twists of fate--the resolution of problems through random chance, the juxtaposition of works--but they had the uncanny habit of occurring just at those moments when we began either to despair of the show's success, or conversely, became confident of our logical methods. We did feel the warmth of a smile.

Catherine Elliot Shaw  
Exhibition Coordinator  
McIntosh Gallery  
The University of Western Ontario

I wanted to spend the summer playing chess, but I spent the summer with Marcel Duchamp.

Jacquie Gillespie  
Manager  
Forest City Gallery



The Homage to Marcel Duchamp . . . exhibition announced loud and clear that the Duchamp legacy still lives--that it's still possible to be a little different from the norm, that it's still possible to develop an alternative way of thinking, and that it's still possible to be involved with critical as well as more basic kinds of problems in art-making. The works submitted to this exhibition ranged from the perverse to the brilliant, from the subtle to the scandalous--and that is exactly what Duchamp would have applauded!

One of the most curious things about Duchamp is that his work has always appeared in unlikely places and in unlikely contexts. The very things that make him interesting are the hardest to pin down and put into words. But it was words--those which he wrote and those which he spoke, which Lyotard said were his greatest works.

In his homage to Marcel Duchamp, well-known Canadian artist Michael Snow decided to play with Duchamp's words and perhaps Duchamp's most notorious piece, Fountain (1917). Snow's installation instructions dictated that someone should write Duchamp's pseudonym, R. Mutt, inverted, on a urinal in the men's rest room using an indelible china marker. Truly the most sexist homage in the exhibition, Snow's request was carefully fulfilled . . . on the sly.

Approximately one week after the opening of the exhibition, the Director of the London Regional Art Gallery was showing visiting dignitaries through the exhibition. One of the gallery's housekeepers overheard the Director remark to the visitors how wonderful it was that so many artists from coast to coast participated, and how there was such a range from the unknown to the famous, citing Michael Snow's urinal piece as an example of the famous. At that point the housekeeper came running up to my desk with tears in her eyes. "I didn't know that the writing on the urinal was the work of a famous Canadian artist! I scrubbed and scrubbed for about half an hour using a whole variety of cleansers--I've ruined his piece!"

It was so Duchampian. For me, this action was what Duchamp is all about--contradictions, demystification and the various possibilities which occur along the way. His lesson is always something which you end up inventing for yourself.

Marnie Fleming  
Curator of Contemporary Art  
London Regional Art Gallery

P.S. Michael Snow's piece was re-installed.



## Notes on the Exhibition

This amused me. It's always the idea of "amusement" which causes me to do things, and repeated three times. . . .

For me the number three is important, but simply from the numerical, not the esoteric, point of view: one is unity, two is double, duality, and three is the rest. When you've come to the word three, you have three million--it's the same thing as three.<sup>1</sup>

Walking home from the Forest City Gallery, an artist-run space in London, the evening of May 23, 1985, my thoughts turned to Marcel Duchamp. We had just had one of those unamusing meetings in which our discussion was related more to art-politics than to art. I remember imagining Duchamp maintaining a bemused silence through the meeting. I arrived home still thinking about him, and about what I might do to celebrate the centennial of his birth which was only two years away.

That night I dreamed about an exhibition like the one held by the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. The interesting thing about the dream was that the works in the exhibition represented all possi-

bilities of art practice I knew in 1985, yet all were accepted by everyone--artists, art administrators and educators, the public--who walked through. Everyone, simply, was enjoying the art. And Duchamp was in the dream, too, smiling benevolently.

During the next year I enlisted the support of three different types of gallery (parallel, public and university) in London to mount an exhibition to pay homage to Duchamp on the occasion of the centennial of his birth.

Cabanne: What is taste for you?

Duchamp: A habit. The repetition of something already accepted. If you start something over several times, it becomes taste. Good or bad, it's the same thing, it's still taste.<sup>2</sup>

JJS And good taste is repetition that is approved by society and bad taste is the same repetition which is not approved; is that what you mean?

MD Yes, good or bad is of no importance because it is always just taste.<sup>3</sup>



What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.<sup>4</sup>

Taste is the enemy of art, A-R-T.<sup>5</sup>

The American Society of Independent Artists, incorporated in December, 1916, borrowed its essential rule from the French Société des Artistes Indépendants (organized in 1884): "no jury, no prizes." Any artist, upon paying an initiation fee of one dollar and annual dues of five dollars, could join the American Society and exhibit work. The foreward to the catalogue of the first exhibition, held in 1917, stated:

THE SOCIETY OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS has been incorporated under the laws of New York for the purpose of holding exhibitions in which all artists may participate independently of the decisions of juries. . . . The great need . . . is for an exhibition, to be held a given period each year, where artists of all schools can exhibit together--certain that whatever they send will be hung and that all will have an equal opportunity. . . . A[n] . . . important measure for ob-

taining equality of opportunity for all exhibitors . . . consists in hanging all works in alphabetical order, thus relieving the hanging committee of the difficulties raised by their personal judgements as to the merits of the exhibits.<sup>6</sup>

Duchamp, one of the founders of the Society, suggested the alphabetical hanging of works, and recommended that each year the letter beginning the schedule of hanging be drawn at random. The most notorious incident of the first exhibition involved the refusal to exhibit Duchamp's Fountain, a urinal, signed (R. Mutt) and dated (1917), and placed on its back on a pedestal.<sup>7</sup> Although there was no "jury," there was a consensus among the Board of Directors that the readymade was not "art," despite the fact that Duchamp, a highly regarded artist, had been "making" readymades since 1913 and had even shown two at the Bourgeois Gallery in New York in 1916. Clearly not "all schools" could exhibit; "artists" were those who operated within certain conventions of painting and sculpture; "personal judgements" still prevailed.

As I developed the "rules" for the homage to Duchamp, I decided to show all work submitted and to show it in alphabetical order. I would select a letter at random and, since I had twenty-four walls in the three galleries, I would also draw a number to indicate the



wall on which I would begin to hang the works. Each artist would be paid a fee of six dollars, in effect allowing me to return the fee charged in 1917. After toying with the idea of actively soliciting work from artists I knew to be interested in Duchamp, I decided simply to publish a call for works in several nationally-distributed periodicals<sup>8</sup> and to allow the exhibition to develop in its own manner. I would attempt not to indulge my own habits of taste.

There is no solution because there is no problem.<sup>9</sup>

In February, 1987, the work began to trickle in. It seemed to be a good sign that the first three works were very different from one another and arrived from both coasts of Canada and Ontario. From Newfoundland we received a multiply-re-photographed "window to infinity" showing a man snorting a cut-up photograph through a straw (cat. no. 88). Instructions to install an "invisible ready-made" by creating a cone of light came from Toronto (cat. no. 64). And from British Columbia we received an object, assembled from a hat, a hat stand, and various labels, that resembled a bearded man's head (cat. no. 74).

About a week before the deadline for receiving works, we had approximately sixty, most of them small, delivered by mail or by

hand by local artists. I almost lost faith. Having committed three galleries to the exhibition, I had only enough work to mount a sparse show in one. At that, two of the works were problematic. One, a gun to be placed on a metal shelf, whose title was This Gun Is Loaded (cat. no. 107), seemed too dangerous and, perhaps, illegal. We called the fire arms officer at the London Police Department to find out if there was a law prohibiting the exhibition of a gun as a work of art in a gallery. He knew of none. But, was the gun loaded? The other, a sealed jar of urine in which a fabric rose was submerged (cat. no. 92) offended even me. What if the jar broke?

But then a large work arrived by express from Nova Scotia. In a beautifully crafted travelling case there was a piece of broken glass that explicitly recalled Duchamp's Large Glass. It was called Travelling Picture (cat. no. 156). I called the artist and said, "I'm terribly sorry. The glass broke in transit." He laughed. My faith in the exhibition was restored.

Another work, in three crates, arrived from Val-David, Quebec. They contained three objects: a shelf on which various stages of the construction of a miniature model of a kitchen stool, with a miniature wheel mounted on the last, were represented; a full scale model of Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel made of string, cardboard and wood; and a large port-



rait (an altered readymade image) of Duchamp (cat. no. 118).

The exquisite craftsmanship of these two works recalled the care with which Duchamp approached his own work. I thought especially of his repairing the Large Glass and of his patient assembly of the materials for the Green Box and the Box in a Valise. The trickle of works became a flood. Each was like a gift. Rather than having too few works, it seemed as though I might have too many.

The danger is of being academic;  
and one cannot put up a successful  
show without a bit of gaiety.<sup>10</sup>

It became obvious that I would not be able to display works along the walls of the various galleries, but would have to use the volumes as well. I decided to place certain sculptures on pedestals but to attach labels on the walls in the alphabetically correct places. (I used the same device for performance works and video.) Since there was a limited number of pedestals available, I made shelves that were attached to the walls for smaller three-dimensional works that would not lose their character if seen from limited angles. And, to unify the exhibition in the three spaces, I used green information cards and painted the pedestals and shelves rose.

The interval between the works was kept as consistent as possible in the three galleries, and a unified centre point was used for all works that did not have instructions for installation.

Happily, we also received a work (cat. no. 161) that unified the exhibition. An artist from Lucan, Ontario, developed a realization of the note in the Green Box that called for the development of a new alphabet from signs composed to designate the abstract words in a dictionary. She randomly selected abstract words, dropped pieces of thread on cards on which she had typed the definitions of those words (after the procedure Duchamp used to create the Three Standard Stoppages), and distributed them through the three galleries. The alphabet itself was placed on cards that, placed together as a group, had the dimensions of the Large Glass.

Gradually, the question of a deadline for receiving works disappeared. How could a work that arrived late because it had been lost in air cargo be refused? One artist from Vancouver offered champagne for the opening to be served from a table featuring a special centrepiece derived from Duchamp (cat. no. 137). The centrepiece didn't arrive in time, but was displayed later. Another piece, instructions for a computer link-up with centennial celebrations in Baltimore, Blainville (Duchamp's birthplace in France), Mexico City,



Montreal, Philadelphia, Quebec City and Toronto (cat. no. 189), arrived the day of the opening. We barely had time to set up the necessary equipment before the public began to arrive. Then there was a telegram (cat. no. 146). Duchamp himself had used the telegram as an art form. It was pinned to the wall in the appropriate space. Another work (cat. no. 1) had as a main point the arbitrariness of dates. It arrived some days after the exhibition opened and was duly installed.

In the spirit of the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition, which included programs of music, film, readings and theatre, we scheduled evenings of performance art, film, and contemporary music, and, for Duchamp, a day-long chess tournament during which Canadian chess master Roman Pelts played all participants simultaneously.

For the opening we arranged to have a shuttle bus link the various galleries and to have bands play music for dancing. And, of course, we toasted Duchamp with champagne. There were, in fact, no problems--only a great sense of celebration.

#### 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<sup>11</sup>

After the exhibition was installed and the furor of the opening had subsided, it was interesting to link the various works and relate them to Duchamp. Fountain, for example, generated or was referred to in works that included miniature toilets (in the form of an earring included in a collage, cat. no. 61, and as a battery-operated, sound-producing model, cat. no. 199), a full scale toilet (combined with a bicycle wheel and chess board, cat. no. 171) toilet seats (used as a pun in cat. no. 6, as a wrapped object in cat. no. 10, and, in junior form, on a pedestal, in cat. no. 159), urinals drawn (cat. no. 86), signed (cat. no. 188), and xerox collaged (cat. no. 150), and antique bed pans (in male and female versions, Marcel and Rose, cat. no. 37). In Advance of a Broken Arm, was recalled in three works: a painted shovel was hung on a wall, accompanied by a painting of the shovel which rested on the floor (cat. no. 160); a shovel, embedded in a kitchen stool, was used as the ground for a portrait (cat. no. 50); and an upgraded snow shovel, the scoop, also placed in a stool, was the ground for a portrait of the artist of the previously-mentioned portrait, standing beside the portrait he had painted on a shovel (cat. no. 27). Rose Selavy, the game of chess, the



Mona Lisa, the Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2 and the nude in Etant Donnés were each referred to in several other works.

Some works employed a Duchampian humour to refer to works by other artists. There was, for example, a work in which lead plumbing pipes were fitted together to resemble a smoker's pipe with the title, C'est un Pipe, written below the construction (cat. no. 106), referring to René Magritte's The Treachery of Images. We received a white porcelain teacup and saucer with a spoon titled Rasée/Shaved (cat. no. 173), a reference to Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined cup, saucer and spoon and, perhaps, to Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q. rasée. One artist, referring to Jasper John's The Critic Sees and The Critic Smiles, sent a bicycle seat studded with screws titled The Critic Sits (cat. no. 46). Most people who saw the work didn't turn it over to discover the joke on its back side: "a pointed crack."

Two artists sent paint brushes. One, labeled "Touch Up" by the manufacturer, was touched up so that only the "ouch" remained (cat. no. 4). The other artist painted strips of canvas embedded in the handle of a house painter's brush to pay homage to the first painter of this century to give up painting (cat. no. 25).

There were boxes in a variety of forms and sizes, and containing a wide range of materials. The Cardboard Box (cat. no. 31)

was taped closed, but through a peephole one could discover an intricate assemblage of constructed objects, figures, fragments of mirror, and text. There were six shoeboxes (cat. no. 41) with instructions for assembly and installation: 1, unassembled; 2, two sides assembled; 3, three sides assembled; 4, four sides; 5, shoebox completely assembled with shoebox lid assembled and placed underneath shoebox; and 6, shoebox and lid assembled with lid closed on top of box. Each box carried one word of a text: "Allow yourself to be a voyeur." A small, leather-covered case with brass fittings (cat. no. 133) contained a tiny piece of fabric mounted behind a glass dome and a plaque incised with the words "Relic (Portion of Marcel Duchamp's Underpants)." A miniature wooden box (cat. no. 153) held a stamp, a fragment of text and a hook for holding the elastic bands that had been used to secure it in a closed position.

Some boxes were meant to be opened by the viewers. In a closed lunch box (cat. no. 108) there were the jar, purse and coins that remained in the box after the artist's father's last day at work. When a rough, wooden box, painted black on the outside, was opened an electronically-generated sound tape was activated and one saw a white and blue cloud-scape that covered the interior (cat. no. 129). Another, covered on the outside with xeroxed text, had pictures of the evolution of man on



the inside which were largely obscured by loosely-packed styrofoam pellets (cat. no. 116). An artist's wooden paint box held the charred remains of a chessboard, various plastic toys, drawings and painted tubes of paint and a paint brush (cat. no. 202).

Many of the works had visual and/or verbal puns. The Homage to Duck Cramps (cat. no. 83) was a plastic bag containing duck fecal matter; and Dufiance (cat. no. 169) was a sculpture of a cupped hand, the middle finger raised. A stack of bibles, bound together by a studded belt was titled Bible Belt (cat. no. 180) and Bare Bachelor (cat. no. 138) was a commercial frame produced for framing diplomas. In A Queen for a Knight (cat. no. 151) the picture of Duchamp playing chess with a nude model was juxtaposed with its reversal -- a clothed woman playing chess with the nude Duchamp.

The exhibition also included works especially enjoyed by children (an antique, battery-powered flying saucer toy, cat. no. 15, and a large wooden frame down which a billiard ball rolled making a great sound, cat. no. 121), relatively traditional paintings (Still Life, cat. no. 203 and Okanagan Village, cat. no. 204), many works with text (some political, cat. no. 7, some humorous, cat. no. 63, and some autobiographical, cat. no. 22), constructed sculptures, carved sculptures, modeled sculptures, and, in short, just about every

type of art that was being made in 1987.

In the preceding paragraphs, in an attempt to indicate the range of the exhibition, I have linked works in the most general way. In fact, all works were very different from one another. Each wanted to be seen fresh, as a unique object or comment. There were no "two similar objects." Even when two artists borrowed from the same imagery or idea, used the same media or addressed a similar question, each work reflected a different "brain fact."

I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man as man shows himself to be a true individual. Only in art is he capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet toward regions which are not ruled by time and space.<sup>12</sup>

Since I was initially troubled by the jar of urine, I placed it on my desk as we received and catalogued works. I acknowledged that it was aptly titled--the bachelor number 7 is the flunkey, the guy who would have emptied chamber pots. As the weeks passed, the liquid changed colour and developed a milky-white web. I thought of Kurt Schwitter's Hanover Merzbau which contained a jar of Mondrian's urine. It, too, would have changed. The rose in the jar, however, stayed



essentially the same. Was the bachelor pleased to find the rose?

The "loaded gun" was displayed behind a plexiglas box which enhanced its sense of danger while reducing the chance of a fatal accident.

Shortly before the opening I realized that a work had been placed out of alphabetical order. Av Isaacs had sent Marcel Duchamp's cover for VVV Almanac (cat. no. 102). It had been hung between works by S.E. Alexander Irving (cat. no. 100) and Jed Irwin (cat. no. 101). I wanted the work to be placed under Isaacs' name because we received it through his generosity and his story would appear in the catalogue. Also, it would be a surprise for people to discover a work by Duchamp in the "I" section of the exhibition. My immediate response was to change the order of works so that Duchamp's work would be "correctly placed." Time was short. I took a walk. Then I laughed. So much of the exhibition raised so many thoughts about Duchamp that it seemed entirely appropriate that his own work would be placed "out of order."

Cabanne: What do you think of the different interpretations given [The Large Glass] by Breton, Michel Carrouges, or Lebel?

Duchamp: Each of them gives his particular note to his interpretation, which isn't necessarily true or false, which is interesting, but only interesting when you consider the man who wrote the interpretation, as always.<sup>13</sup>

For a few weeks last summer, three institutions worked together in harmony. I was not engaged in any conversations about art-politics. Thousands of people looked at art and found both works they liked and works they didn't like. With an exhibition of such diversity there was room for everyone to clarify his or her own taste in art. Each person's response was a mirror of his or her history and experience.

Robert McKaskell

Guest Curator



## NOTES

- 1 Marcel Duchamp, interviewed in Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 47.
- 2 Dialogues, p. 48.
- 3 "A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp," television interview conducted by James Johnson Sweeney, NBC, January 1956, as published in Marcel Duchamp, Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel), ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 134.
- 4 Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," as published in Salt Seller, p. 139.
- 5 Marcel Duchamp, interviewed in Francis Roberts, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics," Art News, September, 1968, p. 62.
- 6 As published in Clark S. Marlcor, The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record 1917-1944 (Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1984), pp. 6-7.
- 7 Several questions remain unanswered concerning the refusal to exhibit the work and the work itself. The most complete account I have found is by William A. Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917," Dada/Surrealism, No. 16, pp. 64-94.
- 8 C Magazine, File, Parachute, Parallelogramme and Vanguard.
- 9 Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Arturo Schwartz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 34, from Henri-Pierre Roche, "Souvenirs sur Marcel Duchamp," La Nouvelle NRF (Paris) I, No. 6 (June, 1953), pp. 1133-1138.
- 10 Marcel Duchamp, interviewed by Otto Hahn, "Passport No. G255300," Art and Artists, July 1966, p. 9.
- 11 Marcel Duchamp, note from The Green Box, as translated in Salt Seller, p. 31.
- 12 Marcel Duchamp, "A Conversation...", Salt Seller, p. 137.
- 13 Dialogues, p. 42.



## Notes on the Photographs and Catalogue

The initial intention to publish a photograph of each work in the exhibition could not be realized for financial reasons. What follow are installation photographs whose captions indicate the catalogue numbers of works on the walls. We were able to reproduce thirty-one individual works. To remain consistent with the nature of the exhibition, I selected a number using a chance operation and allowed it to determine the works illustrated.

Each artist was invited to write a statement apropos of Duchamp. These statements appear in the catalogue. As far as possible, they are reproduced as they were received.

## Acknowledgements

An exhibition of this size and diversity could not have been realized without the encouragement and support of the administrators and staff of the three participating galleries. I am grateful to all, and in particular to Jacquie Gillespie and Brian Lambert of the Forest City Gallery and Marnie Fleming of the London Regional Art Gallery. I also thank Jamelie Hassan for organizing the chess tournament and Janice Truss for printing the photographs for this catalogue.

Catherine Elliot Shaw, Exhibition Coordi-

nator of the McIntosh Gallery, gave initial approval for the exhibition, oversaw countless details, gave up holidays and evenings to help prepare the catalogue, and remained positive during the most discouraging days. The project has been as much hers as mine.

Natalie Schlesak was my highly capable assistant in preparation of the exhibition. During the hot days of last summer we unpacked, measured, catalogued and prepared the works for installation. When the beach beckoned, Natalie would remind me of the number of days to the opening. She always won. She enhanced my enjoyment of the project by sharing my surprise and delight with many works.

Most important are the 224 artists who participated with us in paying homage to Marcel Duchamp.





1 FCG Opening



2 MG Closing (Performance, John Cage's Theatre Piece)



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McIntosh Gallery  
The University of Western Ontario

This exhibition was organized by McIntosh  
Gallery, The University of Western Ontario,  
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Guest Curator: Robert McKaskell

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