Duchamp as Curator

Marcel Duchamp’s Curatorial Practice: His Work, Contemporary Exhibitions, Museums, Private Collections and Publications

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Marcel Duchamp made exhibition practice one of the most important parts of his work. Curatorial gestures and concepts, which determined the staging of his works and allowed him to move away from canonical definitions of the artist; publications of photographic documentations of his New York studio; themes, contributions and layouts for art magazines; activity as a consultant, juror and staging curator for exhibitions in the contexts of American modernism, Dada and Surrealism; the exertion of a powerful influence on important private collections of his time – Duchamp exhausted all conceivable aspects of exhibiting and collecting. While deliberately distancings himself from given structures of artistic work, according to the pointed thesis of the symposium and the publication here, he approached a concept of curatorial practice as an aesthetic medium that is today well established. He was one of the first ‘artist curators’ and, thus, decisively influenced the reception of his own work as well as the art historical development of exhibition practice. Duchamp gave the multiple possibilities for perception and open perspectives of interpretation of his oeuvre, via the staging, reproduction and multiplication of his own and others’ works, a new conceptual direction, one which defined a turn in contemporary art. Principles of exhibition practice became decisive factors in the constitution of a work.

The symposium ‘Duchamp as Curator’ took place from April 25 to 26 as part of the exhibition ‘On the Subject of the Ready-Made, or Using a Rembrandt as an Ironing Board,’ curated by the Welsh artist Bethan Huws with works from the Daimler Art Collection ranging in style from classical modern to contemporary art. The event began with an artist discussion between Huws and American art theorist Meredith North.

The conversation between Huws and North followed the evening lecture ‘I Myself Will Exhibit Nothing’ by the art historian and director of the Kunsthalle Basel, Elena Filipovic. She introduced her presentation with reference to a sentence from a letter Duchamp wrote to Walter Arensberg on November 8, 1918: ‘“I myself will exhibit nothing, in accordance with my principles.”’ In her essay ‘A Museum That Is Not,’ translated into German for the first time in this publication, Filipovic examines – as she did in her lecture during the symposium, from his New York studio in 1917 to his last, secret studio in the 1960s – how Duchamp’s instrumentalization of display methods influenced his way of thinking about exhibitions. In
addition, Filipovic questions the extent to which his rejection of exhibitions of canonical art movements and his interest in expanding his own artistic practice in exhibitions were not mutually exclusive. In focus here is Étant donnés: 1° La Chute d’eau / 2° Le Gaz d’éclairage (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946–1966), the complex installation by Duchamp, which is permanently installed behind a massive door at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. To this day, viewers can only view the hidden work through two small peepholes and must constantly change their position in front of the door in order to change their perspective on the work.

In the nearly three decades of his work on the exhibitions and collection of the Société Anonyme between 1922 and 1952, as Renate Wiehager shows in her contribution ‘Duchamp as Curator and Author for the Société Anonyme, 1920 to 1950: Autobiography and Art Theory in nuce,’ Marcel Duchamp authored biographical texts on the collection’s artists in addition to his activities as an exhibition director. From Arp to Picasso, and from Braque to Severini, not only did he describe the artists’ spheres of activity, he also produced an art philosophy in nuce, which furthermore gives information about his self-evaluation as a participant in the context of the art of his time. In addition, Wiehager compiles for our readers for the first time a ›Draft Chronology of the Exhibitions and Collections Curated by Marcel Duchamp‹, providing an overview of the most important exhibitions curated by Duchamp as well as his advisory/curatorial activities for some of the most important private collections of classical Modern art - an excerpt of the diverse and complex curatorial gestures of Marcel Duchamp.

The various Surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s and 1940s played a central role in Duchamp’s curatorial practice. In 1942, Duchamp participated in the exhibition ‘First Papers of Surrealism’ in New York. He was asked by fashion designer (and main sponsor of the show) Elsa Schiaparelli to participate with an installation that would be as cost-effective as possible. The result was Sixteen Miles of String: Duchamp spanned the entire exhibition with a network of thread, thus problematizing the otherwise normal conventions of viewing. It must be noted here, however, as Filipovic determines in her text presented here, that the:

“[…] tangled mesh did not cut off vision completely (it was the frustration, not elimination of sight that Duchamp desired), nevertheless, the entwinement between and in front of so many of the things ‘on display’ constituted a decided barrier between the spectator and the works of art.”
Duchamp experimented with the conditions and possibilities of exhibiting – this included the questioning of visual conventions as well as the use of unconventional locations. Shop window designs and other artificially created spatial situations followed and were equally important as his numerous projects designing books and catalogues.

Under the title ‘“The First Time an Artist Subsumed an Entire Gallery in a Single Gesture:” Brian O’Doherty Interprets Marcel Duchamp and His Surrealist Shows,’ Eva Fabbri examines the in-depth work of artist and theorist Brian O’Doherty on the Surrealist exhibition of 1938, which was organized and designed by Duchamp. From the 1930s onwards, Duchamp’s institutional and curatorial concerns were entwined with artistic practice in a new way – more ‘gestural’ than before. In this way, Duchamp participated as both artist and curator in the 1938 ‘Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme’ in Paris. He contributed his famous mannequin figure Rrose Sélavy and the environment of coal sacks, but is also designated as ‘Générateur Arbitre’ in the exhibition’s catalogue. According to Fabbri, O’Doherty determined that, by means of an unusual gesture, Duchamp created an architectural space completely for himself. The gesture of inversion and the ‘reversal’ of physical limits (i.e., placing coal sacks on the ceiling and not on the ground) generate symbolic as well as linguistic and structural meaning. In her study, Fabbri connects O’Doherty’s essay series ‘Inside the White Cube,’ today one of the best-known works of contemporary space theory, with the artistic practice of its author, who also grappled aesthetically with the work of Duchamp.

Eva Kraus also connects her research to Duchamp’s work with Surrealism. Her essay ‘André Breton, Marcel Duchamp and Frederick Kiesler in Correlation: Die Surrealisten Ausstellung von 1947’ deals with the eponymous exhibition and Duchamp’s role therein, but also with the connection between Duchamp and Frederick Kiesler, who, as architect and designer, generated new aspects in the display of Duchamp’s work. According to Kraus, Duchamp’s curatorial interventions and Kiesler’s ‘correlative’ displays, combined with a narrative of thematic spaces, exceeded in complexity the much discussed exhibition strategies of the famous Surrealist exhibitions of 1938 and 1942. Kraus’ text is accompanied by a comprehensive series of images of the exhibition, which makes both the arrangement and staging of the works, as well as the tautly stretched exhibition architecture, comprehensible.

Following the lectures two of the outstanding institutions with collections of works by Marcel Duchamp were presented during the Symposium. These include the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, with its collection of objects, numerous drawings, prints and editions. This collection, one of the most important in Germany, was augmented by the Serge Stauffer Archive, both of which are discussed by art historian Susanne Kaufmann in her article ‘The Marcel Duchamp
Collection and the Serge Stauffer Archive at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart’ The Duchamp Research Center at the State Museum of Schwerin, founded in 2009, whose core collection, consisting of the comprehensive holdings of Ronny Van de Velde, was acquired in 1995, is presented by the heads of the center, Gerhard Graulich and Kornelia Röder. The collection is described here in their article ‘On the History of the Duchamp Research Center, Schwerin.’

Akiko Bernhöft analyses in her essay “‘Time and Again Duchamp Knocks at the Door:’ The Dynamics of the Reception of Duchamp by John Cage and Michael Asher in the 1960s and 1970s” the generation of artists ‘after Duchamp.’ She makes a comparative analysis of the movements in Duchamp reception during the 1960s and 1970s with the artistic positions of John Cage and Michael Asher. The focus is thus placed on a generation of artists that not only brought about a renaissance of Duchamp’s work, but who furthermore first positioned the term of ‘curator’ in the sense which we use it today. Closely following Bethan Huws’ approach for the exhibition ‘On the Subject of the Ready-Made,’ Bernhöft investigates chance operations in the context of the found object (Duchamp) as well as the found sound (Cage) as artistic materials in space. According to Bernhöft, Michael Asher carried over this expansion of the ready-made concept into institutional space. His interventions were applied in found situations and structures and staged these as materials inherent to the work.

Along with the new fields of contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s and the reception of Duchamp’s curatorial practice within the framework of the Surrealist exhibitions, the artist’s order systems are a special focus of the essays gathered in this publication. Of central importance in this context was the edition of the Boîte-en-Valsie (Box in a Suitcase, 1935–1941) designed and realized by Duchamp in the 1930s and 1940s, a complex of works consisting of ‘boxes,’ which both play a central role in Duchamp’s oeuvre and at the same time bring together exhibitions, references and works from it. In her study “‘Dearest Richard…” Richard Hamilton and Marcel Duchamp,’ Gesine Tosin analyses one of these order systems, the Boîte verte (The Green Box, 1934). She does this by connecting Duchamp’s work with Richard Hamilton and his artistic work. At the end of the 1940s, Hamilton came across a copy of the Green Box. This moment, as Tosin points out, marked the beginning of the lifelong engagement of the British artist/curator with Marcel Duchamp and his work. Hamilton went on not only to work on the typographic English version of the notes from the Green Box but also to reconstruct Duchamp’s La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (The Large Glass, 1915–1923).

With the edition of Boîte-en-Valise, those retrospective exhibitions in miniature, Duchamp referenced his early works and thus created important interpretative possibilities and contexts
for his entire oeuvre. Duchamp’s interest in the curatorial began to reveal itself more clearly not with the production of these miniature exhibitions in suitcases, but already in 1917. As a member of the New York-based Society of Independent Artists and chairman of the hanging committee for its first annual exhibition, he was able to formulate his ideas provocatively and publicly. In addition to his own contribution, the famous *Fountain* (1917), Duchamp challenged the American exhibition system with numerous interventions. A cooperation with the artist and collector Katherine S. Dreier was an immediate result of Duchamp’s New York exhibition activities.

Katharina Neuburger’s contribution ‘Marcel Duchamp and the Société Anonyme’ addresses both Duchamp’s collaboration with Dreier in the ‘Société Anonyme, Inc.: Museum of Modern Art 1920’, founded in 1920, and the artistic opportunities this institution afforded. The Société Anonyme was the first modern museum in the USA and served as model for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), founded later and now far more well-known. Unlike with this latter museum, Neuburger argues, Dreier and Duchamp insisted on a turning away from all restrictive stylistic movements and did not link their institution’s structure to the grand narrative of modernity. Duchamp was able to develop a new form of contemporary art practice in the non-hierarchical environment of the Société Anonyme. Here he found the necessary mechanisms of distancing from canonical definitions via a practice of artistic exhibition interventions; here he acted as a curator of uncategorizable art, as an ‘arbiter’ of a radically chaotic collection and as a contemporary artist.

Finally, literary theorist Sandro Zanetti, analyses in his contribution, ‘The Art of Indifference: Duchamp’s Staging of Language and Writing,’ he investigates Duchamp’s writings about the concept and mechanisms of the ‘curatorial’ and critically positions the concept as such. Already with the launch of the first ready-mades, Zanetti argues, it became clear that Duchamp understood ‘curatorial practice’ to be an integral part of his work. The core of Zanetti’s study is found in the concept of ‘indifference.’ Understood as ‘equally valid,’ according to Zanetti the term ‘indifference’ can suggest a conscious ignorance towards one’s own aesthetic pleasure concerning an object. However, Zanetti suggests that ‘indifference’ can also be understood as ‘within the difference,’ that is to say, in the boundary between two observed objects. Thus, Zanetti argues that the extension of Duchamp’s work to include exhibition practice – the curatorial – also serves as a counterbalance to the established role of ‘the artist.’ Vice versa, curatorial practice since Duchamp has played a part in the aesthetics of works.

We would like to thank all of the authors for their contributions and the stimulating discussions with visitors to the symposium. We would also like to thank the latter for their
active interest in this developing field of Duchamp research. We hope that the discussion of the topic ‘Duchamp as Curator,’ which is highly relevant to contemporary art, will continue to be lively and controversial, and that this publication may serve as a complex and multifaceted collection of ideas for this purpose.

Stuttgart and Münster,
The editors