Daimler
Art Collection

Duchamp as Curator
Marcel Duchamp's Curatorial Practice: his Work, Contemporary Exhibitions, Museums, Private Collections, and Publications

A Symposium presented by the Daimler Art Collection
Curated by Renate Wiehager and Katharina Neuburger

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Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968, F/USA) was one of the first ›artist-curators.‹ As such, he was singularly influential on both the reception of his own work and the development of exhibition practice. With curatorial gestures and concepts defining how his works were seen; the publication of photographic documentation of his New York studio; his involvement in the conceptualization, editing and design of publications; his work as a consultant, juror and chief curator for exhibitions in the context of American modernism, Dada and Surrealism; and a great influence on many of the most important private collections of the time – Duchamp included all aspects of curatorial practice into his own. Incorporating multiple possible modes of its perception and a looseness between perspectives of its meaning, using methods of staging, reproduction and serialization. Duchamp gave to his own work an entirely new conceptual direction that would also mark a turn for contemporary art itself. With Duchamp, curatorial principles were discovered as critical factors in the constitution of a work of art.

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A first decisive break in Marcel Duchamp's artistic practice can be seen in the context of a 1912 exhibition organized by the Société des Artistes Indépendants, immediately prior to which the French artist's Cubist colleagues in Paris told him that either he must change the title of his painting Nu descendant un escalier n° 2 (1912) or to withdraw the work voluntarily from the exhibition. After this, Duchamp redirected his work. With pieces such as Broyeuese de Chocolat (1913), Roue de bicyclette (1913), or 3 Stoppages Étalon (1913/14), he not only moved away from the Cubists but, moreover, created work whose character could be fully perceived only in connection with a curatorial concept, publication or otherwise restrictive method of reception. As curator and art historian Elena Filipovic writes, "[...] Duchamp inaugurated a curatorial paradigm through his understanding of the exhibition as a means of interrogation, a tool by which to critically question the limit of both the (art) object and its institutions [...]."

This turn was at first problematic, as it was impossible at the time to exhibit such works in Europe. Only after his move to New York in 1915 were Duchamp's pieces successfully displayed in public. The open exhibition tradition of the American modernists, which had evolved according to the motto ›No Jury No Prizes‹ into an inclusive curatorial practice separate from the modern European movements, gave Duchamp the freedom that had become necessary to his practice. By 1917, he was connecting his interests in the curatorial with the tasks of organizing exhibitions. As a member of New York's Society of Independent Artists and head of the hanging committee for its first annual exhibition, he took the chance to formulate openly and provocatively his ideas to the public. Along with his submission of work, the famous Fountain (1917), his many interventions in the show challenged the entire American exhibition system.

One immediate result of Duchamp's New York exhibition activities was his cooperation with artist and collector Katherine S. Dreier (1877–1952). Along with her and Man Ray (1890–1976), Duchamp founded the Société Anonyme, Inc.: Museum of Modern Art in 1920 and thus became a museum founder. With this, the first contemporary museum of art in the United States, a new form of art institution was born that was radically open in what it selected for exhibition and did not define those works in historical terms or by stylistic schools.

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During the 1930s Duchamp's institutional and curatorial concerns continued to be present in his artistic practice, although in an altered, more ›gestural‹ manner than before. The content of Duchamp's artistic interventions became more concerned with the art work's environment and the conventions of perception that accompanied it – and much less concerned with the conventions of art per se. Of central importance in this context was Duchamp's conceptualization and production of the Boîte-en-valises, a series of ›boxes in a valise‹ that were created in the years between 1935 and 1941. Inside these boxes, a ›retrospective exhibition‹ featuring Duchamp's most important works could be found en miniature.

Shortly thereafter, in 1942, Duchamp was invited by fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli (1890–1973) to participate in the exhibition First Papers of Surrealism in New York with an installation. The result was Sixteen Miles of String, for which Duchamp wove a web of strings throughout the exhibition venue, thus restricting any attempt to view the exhibited art in a conventional manner. Shop window designs and other artificially produced spatial situations followed this intervention, playing as important a role in his work as his many book and catalogue product designs.

In all this Marcel Duchamp could be seen to be testing what would become important in his late work, Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage (1946/66). Found behind a massive door deep inside the Philadelphia Museum of Art, this work continues to this very day to unfold its possible meanings: As viewers are only able to view the complex room installation through two small peepholes, they are required to constantly alter their position in relation to the visible work as well as their perception of it.

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Speakers

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