

Duchamp's writing of numerous catalogue texts can be understood as a curatorial activity in the broadest sense. His 'self-assignment' as an author of art criticism is the primary concern of this essay. Duchamp's short characterizations of artists reaching from Arp to Picasso and Georges Braque to Gino Severini have been published on several occasions – but never have been closely analyzed. This contribution intends to show how an art theory in nuce is revealed in these concise 'work sketches' – they articulate, perhaps more often than they define the artists and works which are their ostensible subject, Duchamp's core beliefs concerning his self-conception as an artist.

Duchamp as Curator and Author for the Société Anonyme, 1920 to 1950:

Autobiography and Art Theory *in nuce*

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“Understanding the new aims of the artist, Katherine Dreier, as early as 1920, established a Museum of Modern Art, ‘The Société Anonyme.’ In the true sense of the word, the Société Anonyme is today the only sanctuary of esoteric character, contrasting sharply with the commercial trend of our times.”¹
(Marcel Duchamp 1946)

“As *éminence gris* to a number of distinguished collectors and dealers, Duchamp has directly affected what twentieth-century audiences have actually seen in galleries and museums. Although he set himself the difficult task of maintaining total visual indifference in the selection of the Ready-made in a New York hardware store, few of his contemporaries revealed such sensitivity to the aesthetic echo, as he preferred to designate the enduring quality, of a wide range of art.”²
(Anne d’Harnoncourt 1973)

They are legendary in text and image: Marcel Duchamp’s mystifications, malapropisms and obfuscations, his disguises and frequent photographic self-staging, his ironic, sarcastic, humorous comments on art, artists, the art industry, art criticism and art history. For decades, and just as their author intended, the world of aesthetics followed Duchamp’s intellectual poses on a broad front, producing ever-new and microscopic analyses of the anti-art artist’s visible face and adding hundreds of thousands of refractions to the surreal cabinet of mirrors he created.

¹ Marcel Duchamp: *Katherine Sophie Dreier* (1943), in: Robert L. Herbert/Eleanor S. Apter/Elise K. Kenney (eds.): *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at the Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven/London 1984, pp. 210–217, here p. 212.

² Anne d’Harnoncourt: *Introduction*, in: *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. Museum of Modern Art/Philadelphia Museum of Art, New York 1973, pp. 34–45, here p. 42.

Less well known is the Marcel Duchamp who, with great empathy, single-minded intelligence and strategic awareness, embraced the cause of the artists in his contemporary cultural environment: in particular as a juror and the curator of numerous exhibitions between 1917 and 1967, as a consultant to some of the most important collections of modern art and as the author of texts on the artists of his day.

Duchamp as Co-Initiator and Co-Curator of the Société Anonyme

Prior to a closer analysis of the artist texts Duchamp wrote in the 1940s, I will briefly outline the history of the Société Anonyme in the context of which these monographic sketches were written. Following his move from Paris to New York in the summer of 1915, the controversial creator of the painting *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2 (Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2)*, 1912, exhibited at the New York ‘Armory Show’ in 1913, was immediately a focus of attention for the press and the small circle of supporters of contemporary art. In 1917, Duchamp was a co-founder of the ‘Society of Independent Artists’ and became president of its hanging committee, but, in the same year, resigned from the board when the jury, unaware of the true identity of its creator, rejected Duchamp’s *Fountain*, 1917. One of the members of the jury was patron of the arts and artist Katherine S. Dreier, who became a close friend of Duchamp – it was to be one of Duchamp’s deepest and most nurtured friendships, generating hundreds of letters, notes and telegrams and lasting until Dreier’s death in 1952.

In April 1920, together with Man Ray, Duchamp and Dreier founded the ‘Société Anonyme, Inc.: The Museum of Modern Art 1920’ (‘Société’) as a cultural platform for temporary exhibitions, lectures and discussions on the latest developments particularly in American but also in European art, which was practically unknown in the USA at the time. This was preceded in Autumn 1919 by Dreier’s visit to important European centers of art; she and Duchamp met in Rotterdam, together they explored the Parisian art scene. Dreier was significantly influenced by her meetings with Max Ernst in Cologne and above all by her acquaintance with Herwarth Walden and his ‘Sturm’ gallery in Berlin. Walden was a major inspiration for the early initiators of the ‘Société’ in New York: the agenda of his legendary gallery and the magazine of the same name represented an ingenious combination of the promotion, education and communicative presentation of contemporary art.³ German art became a focus of the collection of the ‘Société,’ featuring artists such as Willi Baumeister, Ernst Barlach, Rudolf Bauer,

³ Cf. Jennifer R. Gross: *Believe Me, Faithfully Yours*, in: idem (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 123–142, esp. p. 127f.; and the detailed introduction by: Robert L. Herbert: *Introduction*, in: idem/Eleanor S. Apter/Elise K. Kenney (eds.): *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at the Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven/London 1984, pp. 1–32.

Carl Buchheister, Heinrich Campendonk, Werner Drewes, Johannes Molzahn, Karl Peter Röhl, as well as better known names such as Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Emil Nolde, Kurt Schwitters and Heinrich Vogeler. For these early years in New York, the Italian-American artist Joseph Stella (1877–1946) should also be mentioned as another important partner and mediator between young American and European art.⁴

The year 1923 saw the establishment by the ‘Société’ of its own art collection, initially with works donated by artists; for three decades, Dreier closely coordinated every step of the expansion and orientation of the collection with Duchamp – in the form of letters, telegrams, trips, discussions and concrete exhibition plans. The results of this artists’ initiative: by the time the ‘Société’ was dissolved in 1950, it had held around 80 exhibitions in the original New York exhibition space, in museums, but also in schools and social institutions, organized roughly 60 cultural events, 30 publications and brought more than 70 European artists to the attention of an American cultural audience for the first time. At the turn of the year 1926/27, its art collection already comprised around 300 works.⁵ In 1952, with an addition of items from Dreier’s private collection, a total of 1,019 works by 180 artists were bequeathed to Yale University.⁶

One contemporary voice can be quoted here as the basis for a present-day, retrospective evaluation of a promoting and cultural-political positioning of modern art that was unique in its day: in an interview from around 1960, Robert Mangold (*1937), a key representative of American Minimal Art and a student at Yale, emphasized the ‘inclusivity’ of the collection: while classic art history and the major museums focused on the ‘exclusivity’ of a few star artists, the collection of the ‘Société’ offered an unbiased, ‘respectful’ perspective on the breadth, heterogeneity and diversity of the artists’ individual positions as ‘contributions’ to an artistic era:

“As an artist, one grows by seeing the work of your contemporaries. You go to the shows. You may think it isn’t as good as the last, or something like that, but it’s part of the whole evaluation, growth, visualization, intellectualization, and development that you go through as an artist. You learn to discern, you learn to pick out — you can’t do that by yourself. You can’t just be in your studio and do that; you have to be able to see other work. You measure what you’re

⁴ Ruth L. Bohan: *Joseph Stella and the ‘Conjunction of Worlds,’* in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 17–23, esp. p. 22.

⁵ Cf. Herbert 1984 (see # 3), pp. 7 and 10.

⁶ For details, cf. *ibid.*, p. 31.

doing against it, think about what you're doing in relation to it. So all of that work becomes important.”⁷

In Mangold's view, few art collections in the USA had ever initiated, maintained and institutionalized an approach even roughly comparable to that of the 'Société' in its radical openness and unbiased acceptance of heterogeneous styles; here, Mangold mentions the private art collection of fellow artist Sol LeWitt (1928–2007) and the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection (today in the National Gallery in Washington). And in around 1940, Chilean-born artist Roberto Matta (1911–2002) wrote enthusiastically to Katherine Dreier:

“I considered your collection one of the most important: as Structures! Not only in so far as the relations of pictures which we know (Duchamp – Picabia –...) but those very little known star artist[s] of Germany, France (D. Villon) and America. I think it is the only document which exist[s] of the unknown artists which it will be a priceless document of the future.”⁸

And how did the 'Société's' collection develop? From the beginning, the concept of 'inclusivity,' that is, an appreciation of artistic individuality that transcends categorizations based on nationality, art history or style, distinguished the rapidly growing collection from those of private collections being established at the same time, for example, that of husband and wife Louise and Walter Arensberg, who were friends of Dreier/Duchamp, that of collector, author and gallery owner A. E. Gallatin or Alfred H. Barr's somewhat later concept for the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

With the establishment of the 'Société' collection in 1923, Katherine Dreier, an extremely dynamic person and a keen traveler, and the skillful networker Duchamp established an increasingly international communication with artists, gallery owners, directors and curators of museums, private collectors and potential sponsors.⁹ Duchamp and Man Ray added to these initial undertakings the spirit of Dadaism and developments in Paris in around 1920. Early testimony to this, dating roughly from the time of the birth of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, was the publication of an anthology of art reviews on the French Moderns by Henry McBride, initiated, designed and published by Duchamp for the 'Société' in 1922. The essays cover the work of many artists who would later be included in the

⁷ Jennifer R. Gross with Susan Greenberg: *The Artists' View: Sylvia and Robert Mangold on the Société Anonyme Collection*, in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 157–166, esp. p. 158f.

⁸ Roberto Matta, quoted from: Jennifer R. Gross: *An Artists' Museum*, in: idem (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 1–16, here p. 2.

⁹ This close-knit network of communication, established over three decades, can be traced via the correspondence kept in the Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. Cf. also Katharina Neuburger: *Die Amerikanische Erfahrung, oder: Weshalb Marcel Duchamp in New York Werke ausstellen konnte, die keine Kunst sind*, Cologne 2017, pp. 256–301, esp. p. 279ff., and her essay in this volume.

collection: Paul Cézanne, Constantin Brâncuși, Albert Gleizes, Henri Matisse, Jacques Villon, André Derain, Pablo Picasso and Francis Picabia.¹⁰ Wassily Kandinsky and Alexander Archipenko, whom Duchamp had met in Paris and invited to contribute, were also represented at an early date; these artists were to form the basis for the strong presence of the Russian avant-gardists in the collection. This aspect had already been prominently launched in 1925 with the exhibition and accompanying catalog ‘Modern Russian Art’¹¹ and, in the following year, was a focal point of the Dreier/Duchamp ‘International Exhibition of Modern Art’ in the Brooklyn Museum.¹²

In 1926, Katherine Dreier once again visited numerous artists in Europe and traveled to Italy with Duchamp to select Futurist paintings for the large-scale ‘Société’ exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum.¹³ Instead of following the contemporary trend of organizing the works of the participating artists according to styles and movements, Dreier and Duchamp chose an associative, open arrangement for the exhibition with the aim of allowing the viewer to experience visually both the unifying moment of a universal, ‘cosmic’ connection between the individual artists and the kaleidoscopic diversity of modern art. In contrast, the catalog was arranged by nationality. Characteristic of the qualitatively new focus of the ‘Société,’ here each artist was introduced with a portrait photograph, artist statement (where available), signature and individual characterization of his/her work and ‘spirit.’ Subsequently, the epoch-making show would be on display in condensed form at the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, as well as at the Toronto Art Gallery. During the same period, Duchamp organized an auction of works by his friend Picabia and exhibitions of his friend, Paris-based sculptor Brâncuși in Chicago and in the Brummer Gallery in New York (which subsequently offered Duchamp a job as a gallery director that he did not accept).¹⁴

¹⁰ See Henry McBride’s art reviews and photos by Charles Sheeler in a publication edited by Marcel Duchamp for the Société Anonyme: Henry McBride: *Some French Moderns Says McBride*, ed. by Rose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp), New York 1922.

¹¹ *Modern Russian Art*, ed. by Louis Lozowick, exh. cat. Société Anonyme Inc.: Museum of Modern Art, New York 1925.

¹² Cf. Dickran Tashjian: ‘A Big Cosmic Force.’ *Katherine S. Dreier and the Russian/Soviet Avant-Garde*, in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 45–74, esp. p. 45f.

¹³ Cf. Kristina Wilson: ‘One Big Painting.’ *A New View of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum*, in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 75–95. Cf. Herbert 1984 (see # 3), p. 8, for details of Dreier’s visits to artists’ studios in Europe in the spring of 1926.

¹⁴ Cf. a. o. Calvin Tomkins: *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York 1996, pp. 239, 270–275, 285f. On the subject of Duchamp’s links with the Brummer Gallery, see: David Joselit: *The Artist Readymade: Marcel Duchamp and the Société Anonyme*, in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 33–44, esp. pp. 34f. and 42, note 9.

In 1929, after a phase of decreasing motivation during the Great Depression,¹⁵ Dreier/Duchamp traveled to Spain and visited Kandinsky and the artists of the Bauhaus in Dessau, returning with further purchases to augment the rapidly growing collection of the ‘Société.’ In consultation with Dreier, Duchamp – who spent the years 1923 to 1942 predominantly in Europe – also collected works by artists such as Max Ernst, Joan Miró and Piet Mondrian for an exhibition at the New School for Social Research in 1931. The exhibition featured works by 37 artists from ten countries; many of the works were dated later than 1924, emphasizing for the New York audience the necessity of an uncompromising and bold contemporaneity. Duchamp was ceaselessly engaged in advising the New York collectors in his circle, finding works of art for them and establishing contacts with artists. Later, he would devote himself with great energy to the institutionalization of these collections – and, thus, that of his own major works.

In 1936, while visiting Dreier at her home in West Redding, Connecticut, where he repaired damage to his key work *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Large Glass*), 1915–1923, Duchamp persuaded Dreier, an avid collector of contemporary art, to transfer 45 works from her own collection to that of the ‘Société.’ At the same time, they signed an agreement making them the sole trustees of the collection.¹⁶ In 1937, plagued by ill health, Dreier undertook her last trip to Europe, meeting with close artist friends and business partners for the last time. The outbreak of World War II at first halted the further development of the collection. In 1940, the ‘Société’ celebrated the 20th anniversary of its founding with a large-scale exhibition in Springfield and at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. In 1942, Duchamp succeeded in returning to New York via Casablanca.

After years of mutual deliberation on the long-term home of the Collection, on October 13, 1941, Dreier and Duchamp signed an agreement with Yale University in New Haven, and by the end of November, 481 works had already been transferred to its museum. Contrary to Yale’s wishes, Duchamp managed to ensure that Dreier’s own private collection, which included many of his own works, would remain in Dreier’s possession for the time being – also astutely ensuring that he would retain control over decisions concerning loans from the Collection and the later, final home of his works and those of fellow artists he considered particularly important. At the same time, the young art historian George Heard Hamilton was hired by the Museum of Yale University and for many years dedicated himself with great enthusiasm to changing presentations and the promotion of the Collection.¹⁷ A first major exhibition with 127 works from the newly integrated Collection opened on January 13, 1942 in the exhibition halls of Yale University.

¹⁵ Cf. Gross 2006 (see # 8), pp. 5–8, for details of the early history of the exhibition rooms, the collection of the Société Anonyme and the crisis in 1928.

¹⁶ Elise K. Kenney: *The Société Anonyme Collection Comes to Yale*, in: Jennifer R. Gross (ed.): *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 143–156, here p. 143.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Parallel to his activities for the ‘Société,’ from 1938 to 1961 Duchamp was extremely active as the curator of major exhibitions on the subjects of Surrealism, Dadaism and chess: in 1938, together with André Breton, he organized the ‘Exposition internationale du Surréalisme’ in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris; this was the year in which his genuine passion for curatorial work culminated in the publication of the first exemplars of the *Boîte-en-Valise* (*Box in a Suitcase*). Duchamp’s credibility and professionalism as a curator are illustrated by a noteworthy biographical detail from the year 1941: in order to expedite his plan to return to the United States, made in the summer of 1941, through the mediation of his friend, the art collector Arensberg, Duchamp arranged for a pro forma appointment as curator of the art collection of the Francis Bacon Library in New York. Organized by the curator team Breton/Duchamp, the exhibition ‘First Papers of Surrealism’ opened in 1942 in New York, followed a short time later by ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947’ in the Galerie Maeght in Paris. The latter was largely installed by a friend, artist, architect and designer Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965). In 1942, Duchamp staged the exhibition ‘The Imagery of Chess’ in New York for friend and gallery owner Julien Levy and, in 1945, a surrealist window decoration for the publication of a work by Breton. In 1953, Duchamp was co-organizer of the exhibition ‘Dada 1916–1923’ in the Sidney Janis Gallery, also in New York. His final commission as an exhibition organizer and publisher for the Surrealists followed a dispute with his old friend Breton in 1961. Breton had written to Duchamp from Paris asking him to curate the exhibition ‘Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter’s Domain’ in New York’s D’Arcy Gallery and to assist in designing the exhibition catalog. Duchamp’s decision to include a work by Salvador Dalí, who had been ‘excommunicated’ from the circle of the Surrealists by Breton, triggered letters of protest from Breton.¹⁸

The years from 1942 to Dreier’s death in 1952 once again saw a phase of intensive collaboration. Duchamp assisted Dreier in communicating with the international artists of the ‘Société’ and brought art historians, writers, artists and gallery owners to her new home in Milford, Connecticut. Together, they acquired further works for the Collection, some purchased and others donated, by around 30

¹⁸ Cf. Lewis Kachur: *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and the Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, Cambridge/London 2001. The author only briefly mentions this important exhibition in the Galerie Maeght in 1947 (p. 204f.); it is covered in detail in this publication, see the article by Eva Kraus. On the career aim of becoming a curator at the Francis Bacon Library, cf. *Marcel Duchamp: Die grosse Schachtel: De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy, Inventar einer Edition von Ecke Bonk*, Munich 1989, p. 164. Cf. Serge Stauffer: *Marcel Duchamp: Interviews und Statements*, collected, translated and annotated by Serge Stauffer, ed. by Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart 1992, p. 116; and Robert Harvey: ‘Where’s Duchamp? Out Queering the Field,’ in: *Surrealism and Its Others: Yale French Studies* 109, 2006, pp. 82–97, here p. 87f. Surprisingly, Lewis Kachur does not mention ‘Surrealist Intrusion,’ the last exhibition curated by Duchamp. A detailed description of Duchamp’s complex staging for the exhibition and an excerpt from the correspondence between Duchamp and Breton can be found in: Francis M. Naumann/Hector Obalk (eds.): *Affectionately, Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, Amsterdam 2000.

artists who had not been represented in the Collection before 1941.¹⁹ On April 30, 1950, 30 years after the doors to its humble New York exhibition rooms opened for the first time, the ‘Société’ officially ceased its activities. Marcel Duchamp assumed one important final function after the death of Katherine S. Dreier. As authorized executor, he split her private art collection, which comprised some 250 works which the pair had hitherto explicitly kept apart from the ‘Société’ Collection, into a few thematically connected blocks and distributed them among the most important American museums of the day. In this way, further outstanding works by artists including Constantin Brâncuși, Max Ernst and Jacques Villon as well as Duchamp’s own painting *Tu m’*, commissioned by Dreier in 1918, became part of the Yale Collection.

Duchamp as Author for the Société Anonyme

By the late 1930s, Dreier and Duchamp had already made plans to catalog the works of art of the ‘Société,’ and, in 1941, together with George Heard Hamilton, they were able to begin writing the texts: Dreier and Duchamp wrote a major portion of the biographical notes and profiles of the works themselves. Finally, in 1950, the collection catalogue ‘Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920’ – 225 pages and around 180 illustrations – with works from the period from 1909 to 1949 by 169 artists from 23 countries, was published.²⁰ During final editing, Dreier in a few cases corrected Duchamp’s at times faulty English in the artist texts and revised content which she may have found subjective or pointedly interpretative. The catalogue raisonné ‘The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University,’ created by Robert L. Herbert, Professor at Yale University from 1974 to 1990, together with Yale curators Eleanor S. Apter and Elise K. Kenney, and published in 1984, traces these editorial changes for a wider circle of readers.²¹ Based on Duchamp’s original manuscripts – not all of which have survived – the catalog republishes 30 of the total of 33 texts written by Duchamp and published in 1950 (Duchamp’s texts on Alexander Archipenko, Émile Nicolle and Jacques Villon from the 1950 catalog are missing from the 1984 edition). Robert L. Herbert points out that although Hamilton – always under the vigilant eye of the avid collector Dreier – largely monitored the editing processes, Duchamp’s prose did occasionally suffer at the hand of Dreier and her “blue pen.”²² In the most recent scientific work on the collection of the ‘Société,’ published in 2006, a team of curators, once again from Yale, headed by Susan Greenberg, have written

¹⁹ Gross 2006 (see # 3), p. 135; Herbert 1984 (see # 3), p. 27.

²⁰ Katherine S. Dreier: *Introduction by Katherine S. Dreier, President of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920*, in: idem/Marcel Duchamp (eds.): *Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920*, collection catalogue, New Haven 1950, pp. XIII–XV, here p. XIII.

²¹ Robert L. Herbert/Eleanor S. Apter/Elise K. Kenney (eds.): *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven/London 1984.

²² With respect to Hamilton’s work as an editor and the changes made by Dreier, cf. Herbert 1984 (see # 3), p. 27.

updated, brief biographies of 94 of the artists whose works feature in the Collection, but without the Dreier/Duchamp texts of 1950.

Michel Sanouillet printed Duchamp's artist texts based on the 1950 edited version of the catalog, first in 1959 and later in an extended edition of Marcel Duchamp's writings published in 1975. The introduction contains a few short sentences on Duchamp's texts.²³ Moreover, in this first edition, under the title 'Critical Glossary from Airplane Propellers through Waldberg,' Sanouillet includes for the first time Duchamp's letters to artists, texts published anonymously and puns on artists from Alexander Archipenko to Isabella Waldberg.²⁴ It was not until 1981 that a first German version of Duchamp's monographs followed with Serge Stauffer's German translation of all Duchamp's writings published during his lifetime.²⁵ His source was the texts from 1950, as the new Yale collection catalogue did not appear until 1984 and Stauffer did not consult Duchamp's original manuscripts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. This means that in Stauffer's work, it is not possible to trace the few editorial changes made by Dreier. For this reason, there follows a brief summary before a discussion of the tone, the impetus and key concepts in Duchamp's monographs.

Proof of Katherine Dreier's Editorial Intervention in Duchamp's Artist Texts

Duchamp's text on the American naive painter Louis Michel Eilshemius (1864–1941) begins with a differentiation of the term 'primitivism,' which – contrasting with its common understanding at the

²³ First edition 1959: Michel Sanouillet (ed.): *Marchand du Sel: Écrits de Marcel Duchamp*, Collection 391, Paris 1959; 2nd revised and extended edition: Michel Sanouillet (ed.): *Duchamp du Signe: Écrits, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée avec la collaboration de Elmer Peterson*, Paris 1994 (1975), pp. 151–157. English: Michel Sanouillet/Elmer Peterson (eds.): *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, New York 1973, pp. VII and 143ff. In 1959, for the monograph by Robert Lebel, Duchamp's friend Henri-Pierre Roché wrote his 'Souvenirs sur Marcel Duchamp,' which contains only brief reference to the texts of 1950: "In 1912, Duchamp was living in Munich and working as a critic. He was one of the first to support Kandinsky and Klee. The catalog of the Société Anonyme Collection in Yale, dating from 1950, contains texts by Duchamp in which he rates the great European painters of our day. These notes are valuable for their clarity, their eye for the bigger picture and their conciseness. Although written for use in America, they offer a good general overview." Henri-Pierre Roché: *Erinnerungen an Marcel Duchamp*, in: Robert Lebel: *Duchamp: Von der Erscheinung zur Konzeption: Mit Texten von André Breton und H. P. Roché*, revised edition, Cologne 1972 (1959), pp. 168–182, here p. 178.

²⁴ Marcel Duchamp: *Critical Glossary from Airplane Propellers through Waldberg*, in: Michel Sanouillet/Elmer Peterson (eds.): *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, London 1973, pp. 160–170. The French edition (Sanouillet 1994 (1975) (see # 23), pp. 231–251) records this collection of texts under the title 'Alpha (B/CRI)tique.' Serge Stauffer adopts this title for the German edition of texts by Marcel Duchamp: Marcel Duchamp: *Alpha(B/Cri)tisch*, in: Serge Stauffer (ed.): *Marcel Duchamp: Die Schriften: Band 1: Zu Lebzeiten veröffentlichte Texte*, Zurich 1981, pp. 227–238.

²⁵ Serge Stauffer (ed.): *Marcel Duchamp: Die Schriften: Band 1: Zu Lebzeiten veröffentlichte Texte*, Zurich 1981, pp. 219–226.

time and by tracing its etymological roots – he turns into a positive one: For Duchamp, the term stands for a return to a natural and spiritual simplicity, whereas in the artistic terminology of 19th-century France, it denoted an ‘imitation’ of the Italian and Flemish ‘primitive’ painters of the 14th and 15th century. What Duchamp refers to as ‘primitivism’ here finds a conceptual interpretation in his “art coefficient.” When using this term, he is not referring to

“great art, but [is] trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in a raw state – à l’état brut – bad, good or indifferent. In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. [...] In other words, the personal ‘art coefficient’ is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.”²⁶

Dreier would later delete the beginning of Duchamp’s text on Eilshemius²⁷ entirely:

“[Eilshemius] cannot be called a ‘primitive’ although his works show a ‘self-taught’ quality. Like the primitives, he craves for an elaborate technique which fortunately, he never achieves. In his paintings, built on defiant drawing, never a doubt, never fear ever barr (marr) [*sic*] complete innocence. Out of time, landscapes as well as figures are foreign to any surrounding influence nor do they describe the period he lived in. Naturalistic in appearance and treatment his conception interprets a purely poetic brushstroke far remote from any formula or ism.”²⁸

A little further on, Dreier deletes the following comment: “His technique, as well, was not the result of a painstaking study of color and form.”²⁹ In the original manuscript, Duchamp’s concluding characterization of Eilshemius reads: “His allegories were not based on human enacting. One can hardly talk of Eilshemius in positive terms. His paintings speak for themselves.”³⁰ Dreier replaces this with the milder: “His allegories were not based on accepted legends. One can hardly find words to define him. Eilshemius’ paintings speak for themselves.”³¹

²⁶ Marcel Duchamp: *The Creative Act* (1957), in: Michel Sanouillet/Elmer Peterson (eds.): *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, London 1973, pp. 138–140, here p. 139. First printed in English in the New York magazine *ARTnews*: Marcel Duchamp: ‘The Creative Act,’ in: *ARTnews* 56, 4, 1957, pp. 28–29. The French version of this lecture, written by Duchamp himself, was first published in: Robert Lebel: *Marcel Duchamp*, Paris 1959, p. 77f.

²⁷ On the abridged Eilshemius quote, cf. Katherine S. Dreier/Marcel Duchamp (eds.): *Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920*, collection catalogue, New Haven 1950, pp. 1–205, here p. 154.

²⁸ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 154.

In the opening words of his characterization of the work of Albert Gleizes, Duchamp refers to the book ‘Du ‘Cubisme,’ written by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger and published in 1912,³² in which the authors had “unveiled (...) the mental chemistry of Cubism.”³³ Dreier replaces the word “unveiled” with “clarified,”³⁴ thus removing Duchamp’s linguistic imagery of the ceremonial unveiling of a new artistic truth or structural insight. Further on in the text, Duchamp points out that Gleizes had recognized that the new “methods” of Cubism could be applied to “unanimist scenes.” Dreier felt obliged to explain the term and added: “The ‘Unanimists’ were members of a literary group in Paris, about 1905, who concerned themselves with the conflicts between organized bodies of society one against another, or organized bodies of society one against the individual.”³⁵ With this mechanistic explanation, Dreier suppresses the anarchistic core of Duchamp’s reference. The Unanimist movement in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century – to which many Cubists belonged – viewed the collective as an animated, anarchistic force behind human, cultural and national interaction. This idea was taken up in around 1910 in New York, on the fringes of the movement ‘The Modern School,’ which advocated education for all and held liberal-anarchistic views. In 1918, an essay entitled ‘Universality in Art’³⁶ written by Walter Pach – a friend of Duchamp’s, curator of the 1913 ‘Armory Show’ and an important art critic and Cubist painter – appeared in the magazine ‘The Modern School.’ In the same edition, Albert Gleizes wrote about the French pioneers of the movement under the heading ‘The Abbaye of Créteil, a Communist Experiment.’³⁷ This is the political dynamite to which Duchamp implicitly refers, and he sees it as connected to the withdrawal of Gleizes – whom he met briefly after his arrival in New York in 1915 – from classic French Cubism.³⁸

Dreier added another, longer passage to Duchamp’s statement that Gleizes had demonstrated “great personality” both as an artist and a writer. She inserted the statements: “It was natural, therefore, that in later years he should have left the Cubist world, as all Cubists have done, and have continued to develop his own ideas of visualization. Albert Gleizes is deeply concerned with the social problems of our day, especially those affecting the workman.”³⁹ To Dreier, the emphasis on Gleizes’ socio-political consciousness seemed a necessary rhetoric bridge to offset the strong imagery and emphasis of

³² Albert Gleizes/Jean Metzinger: *Du ‘Cubisme,’* Paris 1912.

³³ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 301.

³⁴ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Walter Pach: ‘Universality in Art,’ in: *The Modern School*, February 1918, n. p.

³⁷ Albert Gleizes: ‘The Abbaye of Créteil, a Communist Experiment,’ in: *The Modern School*, February 1918, n. p.

³⁸ Cf. Allan Antliff: *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde*, Chicago 2001, pp. 167ff. See also the biographical references in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 257.

³⁹ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 145.

Duchamp's concluding sentence on the artist Gleizes: "His recent paintings," wrote Duchamp, "serve a definite religious purpose and have become like the stained glass windows of his new creed."⁴⁰

In Duchamp's characterization of the work of Juan Gris, Dreier altered the wording in places. Duchamp writes that Gris' contact with the colony of Spanish artists in Paris led him to a "higher form of expression;"⁴¹ Dreier reduces this to: "caused him to join the cubists."⁴² Whereas Duchamp points out that Gris exhibits a tendency toward a "confusion of forms,"⁴³ Dreier prefers to call it a "complication of forms."⁴⁴ "You can feel in his first canvases," Duchamp continued, "the self-imposed discipline of a surgeon who may cut out (but no more than necessary) and never adds."⁴⁵ Dreier alters this to the: "discipline of simplification, instead of adding through complexity."⁴⁶ Duchamp offers the astute insight: "Gris built his personal approach from the 'motif' down to inner barrenness."⁴⁷ Ever the stern monitor, Dreier changes this to: "Gris built his personal approach from the inner structure of the motif."⁴⁸

Dreier reworded Duchamp's texts on Umberto Boccioni, Kandinsky, Metzinger and Joan Miró in a similar manner. These rewordings will not be covered individually here. She moved sections in Duchamp's text on Paul Klee and deleted the first paragraph of his text on Léger, which in Duchamp's original manuscript reads: "Cubism's period of incubation lasted 3 or 4 years during which several painters, animated chiefly by the spirit of reaction against impressionism and neo-impressionism, arrived at parallel conclusions. The term 'Cubism' was only a vague label which was hardly justified by the results."⁴⁹

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 314.

⁴² Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 60.

⁴³ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 314.

⁴⁴ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 60.

⁴⁵ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 314.

⁴⁶ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 60.

⁴⁷ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 314.

⁴⁸ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 60.

⁴⁹ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 400. For the edited version, comp. Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), pp. 152f.

Duchamp's Artist Texts – an Art Theory in nuce

“Jean-Marie Drot: ‘It was the rejection of a group in favor of a solitude which seemed to suit you.’ Marcel Duchamp: ‘Yes, that is necessary, in fact even essential. Because in the whole world, only the individual counts for me, and above all, the artist counts as an individual human being, not as [part of a] group. Whether he is an Impressionist, a Realist or something else doesn’t interest me.’”⁵⁰

*“There is no art, there are only artists. [...] In other words, I am putting up a man again: an individual; a demigod who, if he is not crushed by the opposition that he will have, will come out of it and conquer a position above that complete leveling by the great mass of the public. [...] In the end, today I believe in life as the expression of an individual.”*⁵¹ (Marcel Duchamp in an interview with William Seitz, 1963)

In 1981, in his introduction to Duchamp's texts on the artists, Stauffer names only Dreier, Duchamp and George Heard Hamilton as authors of the 1950 'Société' collection catalogue. In fact, although these three indeed wrote the majority of the texts (Dreier 94, Duchamp 33, Hamilton 13), around ten other authors were involved, among them eminent art historians of the day such as Hans Hildebrandt, Alexander Dorner and Walter Gropius from Germany (Hildebrandt and Dorner each with seven texts) as well as Alfred H. Barr and Charles Seymour Jr. from the USA. In addition, the editors selected quotes on the work of the collection artists from authors such as Yvan Goll, Guillaume Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein or from artists like Hans Arp and Man Ray. This is significant in so far as it shows that on the text level, too, curators Dreier and Duchamp were ensuring the multiplicity of perspectives that was of fundamental importance in their concept of the collection.

As far as I can see, Stauffer's brief introduction to the German translations of the artist texts is so far the only contextualization of the texts, whereby he restricts himself to compiling statements made by Duchamp himself in interviews and short comments from other authors without discussing the specific features of the texts themselves. When asked about the significance of the texts for his perception of himself as an artist, particularly in view of his ironic-critical, distanced attitude toward the practices and rules of the art world, Duchamp relativizes the texts as a favor to his co-editor and friend Katherine Dreier:

“At that moment I changed my profession; I became a historian. I didn't do so well, but I tried not to be too stupid, which unfortunately I was sometimes. I made some puns. For Picasso, I said that the public of any period needs a star, whether it be Einstein in physics, or Picasso in

⁵⁰ Jean-Marie Drot: *Jeu d'échecs avec Marcel Duchamp (Chess Match with Marcel Duchamp)*, film, made in late 1963, first broadcast by ORTF, June 8, 1964.

⁵¹ William Seitz: 'What's Happened to Art? An Interview with Marcel Duchamp on Present Consequences of New York's 1913 Armory Show,' in: *Vogue* CXLII/4, February 15, 1963, pp. 110–113, pp. 129–131.

painting. It's a characteristic of the public, of the observer. [...] Yes, I didn't take sides. It was always either biographical or descriptive. It was a collection; there was no call to evaluate it, and my judgement wasn't important. I didn't want to write a book, either. It was simply a matter of putting down the things I knew."⁵²

Stauffer adds that in his opinion, this self-evaluation is significant because it is to be presumed that Duchamp wanted his own art to be viewed in the same way, namely from the matter-of-fact, descriptive perspective of the historian.⁵³

Matter-of-fact? Historian? Reading Duchamp's texts, these terms would appear particularly inappropriate.

“Based on the metaphysical implications of the Dadaist dogma, Arp's 'Reliefs' between 1916 and 1922 are among the most convincing illustrations of the anti-rationalist era. The important element introduced then by Arp was 'humor' in its subtlest form: the kind of whimsical conceptions that gave to the Dada movement such an exuberant liveliness as opposed to the purely intellectual mannerisms of Cubism and Expressionism.”⁵⁴

The first sentence of the first entry already contains a grouping of several key concepts in its reference to Arp: Duchamp's emphasis on a metaphysical dimension, a requirement unremittingly placed on art since the beginning of the modern age; the simultaneously appearing phenomenon of dogmatization in art, for example the expectations of both the viewer and the art trade with regard to 'originality,' 'innovation' and the adherence to 'conventions'; and, finally, the dogmatic and theoretical restrictions Duchamp sees as imposed by the 'isms' of the age – Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, etc.

At this point, it becomes necessary to briefly refer to Duchamp's concisely summarized observations on developments in art from the early 19th century to classical modernism, provocatively expressed in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney in 1946 – in the period when he was writing the texts for the Société Anonyme catalog. Duchamp sees an epochal turning point in art happening around 1850; before this time, the starting point of all art was either literary or religious – but in every case spiritual.

⁵² Marcel Duchamp: *Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne*, Paris 1967, p. 158f. English: Pierre Cabanne: *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Boston 1979, p. 84f.

⁵³ Stauffer 1981 (see # 25), p. 217.

⁵⁴ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 49.

After this point, says Duchamp, art developed toward the sensual, the physical, even the “animal”⁵⁵ – and this continued to apply to Cézanne and the Cubists. Only with Dada, he continues, did loud protest against the exclusive transfer of meaning to the pictorial *physis* of the work appear – and for this very reason (Duchamp cannot resist the play on words here), it was the expression of a “*metaphysical*” attitude. Duchamp saw Dada as the return to a genuinely “literary” and “nihilistic” art free of clichés, of everyday and historical influence, of a rigid orientation toward the heroes of art history: “a purgative” (Duchamp), which can be interpreted here both as the cleansing fire of purgatory and the purging effects of a laxative.⁵⁶

In 1964, following such provocative linguistic outbursts against the documented achievements of art history, repeated by Duchamp in numerous interviews, he undertook to produce an objective description of his own artistic career in the context of art history for an academic, culturally-disposed American audience: ‘Apropos of Myself’ is the title of a slide lecture delivered first in 1963/64 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland and the City Art Museum in St. Louis, and later at other universities and museums in the USA. In it, Duchamp described his artistic and thoughtful appropriation of techniques and ideas from Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and Cézanne, as well as the influence of chronophotography, film and mechanical drawing techniques. He also explained his most important ready-mades. Also in 1963, Duchamp gave a lecture in Utica, New York at the opening of an exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the legendary ‘Armory Show.’ In the form of a slide show, Duchamp presented to the audience the works of 33 artists from the historic show and briefly outlined his perspective on their characteristic qualities.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Cf. Marcel Duchamp: ‘The Great Trouble with Art in This Country: Interview with Marcel Duchamp by James Johnson Sweeney,’ in: *Eleven Europeans in America: Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 13, 4/5, 1946, pp. 19–21. Reprint in: Sanouillet/Peterson 1973 (see # 23), pp. 123–126.

⁵⁶ Duchamp, quoted in: Sanouillet/Peterson 1973 (see # 23), p. 125.

⁵⁷ Marcel Duchamp: *Apropos of Myself*, in: *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. Museum of Modern Art/Philadelphia Museum of Art, New York 1973, pp. 233–297 [printed in relation to the requested works]. French version: Marcel Duchamp: *A propos de moi-même*, in: Michel Sanouillet (ed.): *Duchamp du Signe: Écrits, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée avec la collaboration de Elmer Peterson*, Paris 1994 (1975), pp. 217–230. See also the transcription of the audio recording of a lecture given by Marcel Duchamp in the context of the opening of a retrospective related to the 50th anniversary of the New York ‘Armory Show:’ *Recordings of Marcel Duchamp’s Armory Show Lecture, 1963*, recording by Richard M. Miller, transcription by Taylor M. Stapleton, in: *toutfait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, May 4, 2016; <http://toutfait.com/recording-of-marcel-duchamps-armory-show-lecture-1963/#prettyPhoto> (25. August 2017). The retrospective was shown at the Munson-Williams-Procter Institute, Utica, New York, from February 17 to March 31, 1963. The transcription was first published April 1, 2003.

Returning to Duchamp's text on Arp: Duchamp consequently emphasizes that Arp worked to "combat the sophistic art theories of the moment," that his poems liberated the word from the restraints of rational allocation of meaning and opened up the possibility of new meanings through "alliteration or plain nonsense:" it would be hard to find a more apt description of Duchamp's perception of himself as an artist and author. In the tone of classical affirmative art criticism, Duchamp describes Arp's sculptures – exhibited as Surrealist works – as "masterly" with regard to technique and use of materials. But also, and once again, we see here the verbal eroticist Duchamp juggling with multiple meanings and ambiguities in describing the sculptures as "three-dimensional puns: what the female body 'might have been.'"⁵⁸

The concepts of freedom and anti-dogmatic attitude feature with similar insistence and emphasis in Duchamp's texts on Picasso and on Francis Picabia:

"In his fifty years of painting Picabia has consistently avoided to stick to any formula, to wear a badge, and he could be called the greatest exponent of freedom in art not only against any academic slavery but also as against slavery to any given dogma. [...] Very prolific, Picabia belongs to the type of artists, who possess the perfect tool: an indefatigable imagination."⁵⁹

In his brief characterizations of Georges Braque, Giorgio de Chirico and André Derain, Duchamp repeatedly stresses aspects that also represented existential steps in his own development as an artist: a breaking free from the dogmas of Impressionism and Fauvism, the liberation of the artistic mind from "the intellectual application of scientific theories."⁶⁰ In his text on Braque, Duchamp's choice of the phrase "intellectual application of scientific theories" serves as a scientific foil with negative connotations against which the quality of the "inner sense of geometry"⁶¹ intuitively applied in Braque's paintings becomes apparent. The fruitful coherence of the artistic mind and a theoretical framework which Duchamp repeatedly described as desirable in his artist texts found an appropriate literary-linguistic expression in 'Du 'Cubisme'' by the artists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, a revolutionary work at the time of its publication in 1912: "Through his analysis and conclusions, Gleizes showed the connection between the theoretical mind and the strokes of paint, winning the reading public to the new cause."⁶² In his text on Matisse, Duchamp also emphasizes the necessity of achieving a balance between underlying theory and formal innovation:

⁵⁸ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 49.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 525.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 257. Dreier later edited Duchamp's "strokes of paint" to "strokes of the brush," cf. Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 145.

“Matisse, like all pioneers, was more than the theoretician of the [Fauvist] movement. His first important reaction was in the treatment of form. Starting from a natural scene, he would purposely ignore all conventions of anatomy and perspective to introduce whatever drawing he felt adequate to give a maximum value to the flat hues of color inserted in the intentional outlines.”⁶³

In Duchamp’s view, art as living testimony to new aesthetic parameters, as the conscious incorporation of anti-rational moments and serendipitous constellations, must replace stylistic and theoretical restrictions. De Chirico, writes Duchamp, put this to the test by opposing the rationality of abstract art with pictures representing “the meetings of elements which could only meet in a metaphysical world.”⁶⁴ And on the subject of Derain, he writes: “Derain, consistently adverse to ‘theories,’ has always been a true believer in the artistic message unadulterated by methodical explanations, and to this day belongs to the small group of artists who ‘live’ their art.”⁶⁵ For Duchamp, the qualitative counterpart to the aspect of anti-rationality is the “tendency toward an exploration of the subconscious,” which, in addition to the invention of new painting techniques, he mentions as characteristic of the work of Max Ernst.⁶⁶

Duchamp sees the distinguishing features of the work of József Csáky as his ability to free his art from Cubist theory and the development of his own concepts for the treatment of space and “atmospheric structure.”⁶⁷ Duchamp also emphasizes “structural conception” as an “esthetic attitude toward life” in his texts on other artists such as Braque, Matta, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Antoine Pevsner.⁶⁸ In this context, with reference to André Derain, for example, Duchamp sees a rehabilitation of the color black – which Impressionism had eliminated in “nebulous paintings” – as the foundation for artistic structures with accentuated contouring.⁶⁹

The term “simplification” recurs in Duchamp’s artist texts and has positive connotations.⁷⁰ He uses it, for example, in his characterization of the sculptures of his brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, whose *Femme assise* (*Seated Woman*), he writes, outstrips even the works of his great contemporary Rodin in its tendency towards simplification.⁷¹ In other texts, for example that on Eilshemius, Duchamp values the quality of ‘simplification’ as a reduction and a breaking down into natural elements alongside the

⁶³ Duchamp, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 444.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 181.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 445 and 517 on Pevsner, on Sophie Taeuber-Arp p. 654.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 249 on Duchamp-Villon.

⁷¹ Ibid.

aim of liberating the mind from social norms and evaluations. As indicated above, for Duchamp, ‘primitivity’ means the ability to develop an individual artistic language and the naive, unintentional and independent circumvention of the compulsion to apply academic and technical skills. Other terms used in this context are “poetry” and “lyricism.”⁷² Duchamp writes that “acute lyricism” which developed into a “cruel lyricism” is a constant in Picasso’s work.⁷³ In his characterization of Paul Klee, Duchamp compares the painter’s human and artistic qualities with the “unsophisticated, naive expression which is found in children’s drawings.”⁷⁴ However, Duchamp insists, such primitivity of imagery must be paired with a “very mature form of thinking”⁷⁵ in order to achieve consistent artistic concepts. “His [Klee’s] extreme fecundity never shows signs of repetition as it is generally the case. He had so much to say that a Klee is never like another Klee.”⁷⁶ Duchamp’s frequent references to the fact that the respective artist is characterized by “great personality,” a “personal approach,” a “personal vision” or “humanitarian touch,” for example in his texts on Archipenko, Albert Gleizes, Juan Gris, Man Ray or Roberto Matta, belong within this context.⁷⁷

As previously mentioned, in his characterization of Juan Gris, Duchamp wrote that in his painting, the artist had traced the focus on a ‘motif’ down to a moment of “inner barrenness”: however, understood as ‘uninterestingness,’ ‘infertility,’ ‘mental emptiness’ or ‘numbness,’ it is safe to assume that Duchamp did not mean this statement negatively, but, on the contrary, was referring to the liberation of the artist from the restraints of normative directives and the strength of a recourse to authentic impulses. “[Gris] pursued, up to his last moments, the same line of expression and methodically polished one of the purest facettes in cubism.”⁷⁸ In the case of Wassily Kandinsky, Duchamp emphasizes as the qualitative signum of his painting the intentional meshing of “pure expression” and an overcoming of the “skillful qualities of the hand” – for him the basis of an art that replaces the expression of unclear feelings by imagery as the “clear transfer of the thoughts on the canvas”⁷⁹ – one could hardly find a better description of the principle behind Duchamp’s own Cubist paintings created in Paris in 1911/12. Similarly, writing about Jacques Lipchitz, Duchamp states that in his early period, between 1914 and 1918, the artist worked “in a more poetic vein [...] and dealt more with thoughts than with representation.”⁸⁰ In his text on Man Ray, Duchamp – who himself used photography over decades as a fundamental medium for his conceptual research and creating the drafts for his works –

⁷² Ibid., p. 257 on Eilshemius.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 530 on Picasso.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 376 on Klee.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 23 on Archipenko. Duchamp on Gleizes, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 257; on Man Ray p. 547 and p. 445 on Matta.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 314 on Gris.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 355.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 410 on Lipchitz.

finds the apposite characterization: “He [Man Ray] took up photography and it was his achievement to treat the camera as he treated the paint brush, a mere instrument at the service of the mind.”⁸¹

Again and again, we find passages in the artist texts that could be described as the expression of a sensitive lyricism. For example, Duchamp’s description of the kinetic spatial effect of Alexander Calder’s ‘Mobiles’ ends with the sentences: “The symphony is complete when color [and] sound join in and call on all our senses to follow the unwritten score. Pure ‘joi de vivre’, the art of Calder is the sublimation of a tree in the wind.”⁸² Duchamp wrote a quite touching personal characterization of the graphic artist Émile Nicolle, his grandfather, little known outside French specialist circles and a great number of whose works had decorated the Duchamp family home.⁸³ And Duchamp’s text on the naive painter Eilshemius ends:

“He was a poet and painted like one, but his lyricism was not related to his time. It belonged in fact to no definite period. [...] His landscapes were not landscaped of a definite country, his nudes were floating figures with no studied anatomy. His allegories were not based on human enacting.”⁸⁴

In the case of John Covert, Duchamp praises the fact that, in his pictures, the artist developed and maintained “an American interpretation of the aesthetic needs at the time of the 1st World War.”⁸⁵

Duchamp also mentions such artistic reflection on and translation of phenomena of social and technical development as strengths of the artists Gino Severini and Fernand Léger:

“He was inspired by the mechanical achievements of the modern world and translated it into a concise fragmentation. [...] He is among the rare painters of our times who have treated the technique of the mural painting with modern comprehension [...] and give a new life to decoration – as opposed to easel painting.”⁸⁶

A Sanctuary for Art and Artists

Marcel Duchamp weighed up every sentence, every word – sometimes every letter. Looked at or listened to more closely, a matter-of-fact, laconically phrased description can reveal figures of speech

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 547.

⁸² Ibid., p. 125 on Calder.

⁸³ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 201 on Nicolle.

⁸⁴ Duchamp on Eilshemius, quoted in: Herbert/Apter/Kenney 1984 (see # 21), p. 257.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 400 on Léger; on Severini see p. 616.

with profane or erotic connotations; the horizon of meaning of seemingly erratic or provocative terms from the world of art is suddenly broadened to include other fields of knowledge; puns replace the solemn gravity expected by the reader or interview partner; the transposition of letters suggests extremely misleading interpretations.

This specific characteristic of Duchamp's lectures and texts, the titles of his works and statements made by him in interviews prompted a more detailed examination of the underestimated role of his artist texts within his written works. This examination proceeded from the hypothesis that as an author, Duchamp is perhaps nowhere more authentic than when he is not explaining or – certainly more significantly and consistently – obfuscating his own work, but writing about the work of another artist. Here, too, it is necessary to peel away the layers of meaning while reading. But in these texts, Duchamp clearly expresses fundamental views on the function of art in society. Duchamp's central conviction is that artistic statements can only become effective with intellectual freedom, a secure and controlled position, with mystification and understatement and fueled by a subversive energy. Art immediately loses its potential anarchic impact under the glaring light of commercialization and representation by art historians.

Finally, against this background, we can once again examine the choice of wording in the opening quotation. "In the true sense of the word," Duchamp wrote in 1950 in his text on Katherine Dreier, "the Société Anonyme is today the only sanctuary of esoteric character, contrasting sharply with the commercial trend of our times." In architecture history, the sanctuary is the separate room of a church where a reliquary is kept and ritual acts performed by the celebrants or deacons. There is a second, less well-known meaning – of which, however, Duchamp was surely aware when he chose the word. In the Middle Ages, the sanctuary was a place of shelter for refugees and the persecuted, at the borders of which society's right of access ended. Thus, the Société Anonyme as the sanctuary of modern art offers those who face potential persecution a place of immunity – although Duchamp states his view even more precisely through the addition of the provocative adjective 'esoteric:' not only are the initiates of art forced to remain in the protected, 'immunized' location; they also speak a language intended for and spoken by initiates only. "In all esoteric things, there is a type of mystery which no words can describe. They cannot express these things. They have esoteric practices, but that is a type of occultism, which is completely lost today because a picture has a worth based both on its dimensions and its price."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Georges Charbonnier: *Six Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp (Six Interviews with MD)*, RTF broadcasts France-Culture, December 9, 1960 – January 13, 1961. Transcription and translation by: Stauffer 1992 (see # 18), p. 89.

One can expect weighty, 'stately,' ironic and critical statements when Marcel Duchamp is circling and homing in on the spirit of art. However, they can also be concise and humorous: "For Arp, art is Arp."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Dreier/Duchamp 1950 (see # 27), p. 69.