empyrrhical thinking  
(and why kant can’t)  

THOMAS McEVILLEY

The critical literature portrays many different Marcel Duchamps: Arturo Schwarz’s alchemic dabbler, Octavio Paz’s tantric initiate, the full-scale occult master described by Jack Burnham, the publicity-seeking self-mythifier of Gianfranco Baruchello, the critical rationalist of the dialogues with Pierre Cabanne, André Breton’s “most intelligent man of the 20th century,” the failed artist and tragic neurotic portrayed by Alice Goldfarb Marquis, John Canaday’s “most destructive artist in history,” and others. Most of these models hinge on interpretations of events between mid 1911 and mid 1913, that is, around Duchamp’s 25th year, for this brief period saw a sudden and thoroughgoing change in the form, material, purpose, and style of his work, a change that suggests a major shift in his attitude toward life.

As Paz says, 1912 was the “climactic year of Duchamp’s] most important oil-on-canvas works.” This was the year of *T. Surrounded by Swift Nudes, N Staircase, No. 2, The Passage, The Bride, The Bride*, and other as of the first drawings for *T. Bore by Her Bachelors, Even, Large Glass, 1915–23*. These some considered them daringly day (especially the *Nude*...), was estheticizing easel-painting tradi sway since the Renaissance.

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works."2 This was the year of *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes, Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride, The Bride,* and other paintings (as well as of the first drawings for *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,* also known as the *Large Glass,* 1915–23). These paintings, though some considered them daringly innovative in their day (especially the *Nude...*), were safely within the estheticizing easel-painting tradition that had held sway since the Renaissance. They were recognizable stylistic extensions of formal sequences already under way in Cubism, Futurism, Orphism, and elsewhere; their oil-and-canvas substance was the most common and traditional in Western art; and their claim to attention was based on the concepts of esthetic composition, formal evolution, craft, and subjective inspiration that were fundamental to the Modernist ideology.

In the next year, however, 1913, all these qualities were erased from Duchamp's work, with the stunning suddenness of a conversion. Easel painting stopped; the traditional emphasis on the artist's hand and skill stopped. The Romantic exaltation of the creative act, and even the notion of the artist's sensibility as a guiding force, were denied. As an alternative to these, Duchamp introduced chance, first in the *Erratum Musical,* then in the *Three Standard Stoppages.* This was the year of the first readymade (though not so called until 1915), *Bicycle Wheel.* Painterliness gave way to a style close to mechanical drawing in *Chocolate Grinder, No. 1.* Linguistic elements, including puns, began to supplement optical ones; irony, mockery, and lampoon came to the forefront. These new approaches annihilate from Duchamp's work the inherited codes that his paintings had been pursuing only the year before.

In attempting to understand this turn, which was to be so portentous for the art of the rest of the 20th century, many critics have scrutinized the events of Duchamp's life in 1911–13 for clues. Burnham, for example, focuses on the two-month trip to Munich in 1912: little is known of Duchamp's reasons for going there, and Burnham hypothesizes that he was seeking obscure alchemi...
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 hereby his older brothers, 
Duchamp-Villon, he 
demanded less skill 
models of quality, 
ad out a third ap- 
analytic analysis of 
he declared to be the 
work of a “schizophrenic”—strong language indeed 
to apply to someone whose life does not seem to 
have been characterized by psychic breakdowns. In 
supporting his argument, Reboul cites the works 
on glass, quoting an authority's opinion that “it is 
as if there were a pane of glass between them [the 
schizophrenics] and their fellow-men.” (But surely 
this is a misleadingly simple inference—wouldn't 
it follow, for example, that those who paint on 
opaque canvas or board cannot even see other peo- 
lies?) Duchamp, perhaps thinking of Reboul's ar- 
ticle, told Cabanne in 1966, “I've never had...melancholy or neurasthenia.”

Schwarz, working in the '60s, gave the psycho- 
analytic approach more substance. On the basis 
of themes in Duchamp's paintings of 1911-12, he 
concluded that the artist was incestuously obsessed 
with his sister Suzanne, and that when she mar- 
rried in 1911 he underwent a trauma that, like an 
aearthquake, rearranged his mind, his work, and 
his life. It was the need to repress or at least con- 
ceil these feelings that prompted him to turn away 
from his oil paintings toward new media both less 
personal and more obscure, to abandon an ex- 
pressive form for a depersonalized art that would 
sidestep his unhappy subjectivity. Schwarz argues 
his case well, though the evidence is cryptic at best 
for his theory, which seems a lot to read into 
Duchamp's rather oblique paintings. But his 
psychoanalytic interpretation acts interestingly 
with his alchemic one, translating Duchamp's sup- 
posed unfulfilled desire for Suzanne into the et- 
ernal quest for the alchemic union, whose tantaliz- 
ing postponement is, in that lore, the force that

234, still from black and white film in 35 mm., 22 mins. showing Marcel Duchamp, left, and Man Ray. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive, New York.
never to have been intimate with women (his first marriage, in 1927, was brief, and may have ended unconsummated, and he did not marry again until he was 67), and to have made his art into an elaborate defensive wall behind which to hide a torrent of unresolved feelings. The gradual deadening of his ability to communicate with others supposedly underlay not only his invention of an alter ego, Rose Sélavy—his sexual (possibly homosexual) and creative self seeking to break out of the prison of his repression—but also his solipsistic obsession with games, especially, of course, with chess, as an alternative to life. And the techniques and ideas that came to dominate his art in 1913 and after—chance, the creation of art by designation of it rather than by the actual making of it, mechanical drawing, the interest in machines and the depiction of human beings as machines, cryptic verbal puzzles, mocking sardonic humor, ironic detachment, emphasis on the absurd and irrational—all these, according to Marquis, were personalizing tactics, expressing “the need to overthrow the subject,” to liberate himself, “in a manner however tortuous and painful, from the emotion-laden ties of family and childhood.” Duchamp muffled his, perhaps unconscious, emotional storm, inside an emotionally neutral, and increasingly icy, aesthetic statement.

Marquis mistrusts Duchamp’s turn away from subjectivity, a movement he seems to see as flatly unhealthy. In a broader cultural context, however, the desire to overthrow the subjective viewpoint appears as a more positive force. It has been a major goal of many important philosophers, both ancient and modern, both Eastern and Western, from Plato’s emphasis on universals to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. It is the goal of many religious and meditational practices, from Patanjali’s raja yoga to the Greek Orthodox prayer of the heart. It is also the fundamental purpose of the scientific method. Doubtless there is a correlation between Duchamp’s emotional state in 1913 and his subsequent art, and one would like to know more about it. But it is only a part of the work, and has little significance to the oeuvre’s ever-rumifying meanings in 20th-century culture—or even to the meanings Duchamp intended, as far as those can be divined.

Of course this crucial period of Duchamp’s life, 1911–13, contained other events besides his trip to Munich, his sister’s marriage, and his rejection by the Salon. Various influences to which he is known to have been exposed at this time seem to have contributed in specific ways to the reformation of his work: Henri Bergson’s emphasis on coming to terms with the machine age, Alfred Jarry’s absurdism, Francis Picabia’s iconoclasm, Guillaume Apollinaire’s humor, Stéphane Mallarmé’s linguistic ambiguities, Jules Laforgue’s provocative titles, the recently published notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Raymond Roussel’s
with women (his first and only love) and never again undid his art into an artifice or to hide a torse. The gradual decampment with others of invention of a queer, possibly homosexual, to break out of the tectonic, is of course, with the techniques of his art in 1913 and 1914 by design and trial making of it, in Paris and elsewhere. A group of humor, ironic absurdity, and irrationality, were depicted, who needs to liberate himself from traditional ideas and painful, from childhood and unconscious, emotionally neutral, and indifferent. "

The turn away from the flat cultural context, to the subjective ontic space. It has nothing to do with universals in the sense of a logical reduction, and meditation.

It is a culmination of the pre-critical method, the relation between 1913 and his subsequent work, and has little to do with the meaning of Dufay's life, as the other trip, and his rejection of or to which he is this time seems to say to the reforma of interest among archeological ideas about the son's emphasis on a single age, Alfred Stéphane's and Jules Lefort's published note, Raymond Roussel's punning and the machines for making art he described in his novel, "Impressions d'Afrique." (a performance version of which Duchamp saw in 1911), and others. But while these influences can explain the details or aspects of Duchamp's post-1912 work, they cannot explain the apparent revolution in his general attitude. One influence that Duchamp himself openly acknowledged, however, was I suspect, has been largely ignored in the critical literature, I cannot account for specific details in his work but also for the change in his attitude around 1913.

It was in those crucial years that Duchamp completed the first and almost the last job of his life in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He later told Jacques Cauville that he felt the position out of disgust with art and art politics after the Independents' refusal to exhibit "Nude Descending a Staircase" in 1911, "I had been told Cauville that he felt the position out of disgust with art and art politics after the Independents' refusal to exhibit "Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2." Cubism had lasted about two or three years," he noted, "and already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it... as a reaction against such behavior coming from artists whom I had believed to be free, I got a job." In the library, Duchamp sat at a desk for four hours a day, with no duties but occasionally to give advice about where to locate a book. By his own account he read and thought a good deal and withdrew from social contacts, living quite solitary. And he told Schwarz that during this time he had had the chance... of going through the life of the Greek philosophers once more, and that the one that he appreciated most and found closest to his own interests was Pyrrho."

The recollection has been treated as minor, but there is really no other thinker, no other philosophical source, of whom Duchamp ever spoke in such terms. The evidence suggests that his reading of some account of Pyrrho's life and teaching exerted a formative influence, confirming his own emerging skepticism.

Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365-276 B.C.) is an important but little-known Western philosopher. In his time, in terms of Duchamp's 1913 rejection of easel painting and his putative 1923 retirement from art in general, Pyrrho started out as a painter but abandoned art for philosophy. "He had had no positive teaching," says an ancient authority, "but a Pyrrhonist is one who in manner and life resembles Pyrrho." Two sayings attributed to him have survived: first, "Nothing really exists, but human life is governed by convention." To exist, in the context of Greek thought, means to have an unchanging essence, so that statements about an existing entity are objectively either true or false. Instead, Pyrrho suggests that things indefinite in themselves are made to appear this way or that by human conventions and opinions, which may claim to be based on essential truths, but are not. The second saying reinforces this idea: "Nothing is in itself more this than that." The reality that we seek to define through our judgments and opinions, then, actually has no limits. According to Pyrrho's teaching as reported by one of his students, Timon of Phlius, "things are indistinct from one another and from nothing over one another; but that from one another and from nothing can only be seen in a posture of yes and no."

Duchamp suggests that the Pyrrhonian position is expressed in his "Invisible Sculpture," where he said, "one can imagine a posture of yes and no but in reality, we can only imagine a posture of yes and no without being determined by a posture of yes and no, as if it were only a posture of yes and no in the posture of yes and no (apatheia). This is the position of the Pyrrhonian, who cannot imagine a posture of yes and no without being determined by a posture of yes and no, because he cannot imagine a posture of yes and no without being determined by a posture of yes and no, because he can only imagine a posture of yes and no and not a posture of yes and no."

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Duchamp: Nothing, of course! The word "belief" is another error. It's like the word "judgment," they're both horrible ideas, on which the world is based....

Cubanne: Nevertheless, you believe in yourself?...

Duchamp: I don't believe in the word "being." The idea of being is a human invention....It's an essential concept, which doesn't exist at all in reality. 

Duchamp's "irony of indifference" directly relates to Pyrrhonism, as does much else in the exchange. The critique of the concept of being, with its presumption of essence, is central to Pyrrhonism ("Nothing really exists...."). The being/nonbeing pair are alternatives like yes and no, or true and false, and the Pyrrhonist "position" is outside such pairs. It is thus also outside the concepts of self, which supposedly is, and belief, which either affirms or negates. 

This Pyrrhonist antiposition laid the foundation for key areas of Duchamp's work. When he was asked an example of how difficult it was to tell readymades, he replied: "It was very difficult to them. Because, at the end, you don't think about the authenticity. The choice of ready-mades was always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste. Thus to regard the ready-mades as demonstrating that ordinary objects possess the aesthetic qualities usually valued only in art would seem a misunderstanding of Duchamp's intention. When I discovered ready-mades, he wrote in 1962 to Hans Richter, "I thought to discourage aesthetics." But later artists, he continued (referring to the Neo-Dadaists), "have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." The readymades carry Pyrrhonian indifference into the realm of art. Similarly, Duchamp explained the famous door in his Paris studio, at 11 rue Larrey, which when it closed one doorway opened another, as "a refutation of the Cartesian proverb: 'A door must be either open or shut.'"—that is, as a refutation of the law of the excluded middle. Other works, such as his roulette system that enables the player to break even rather than win or lose, reflect that same attitude. L'Opposition et les cases conjuguées sont reconcilées (Opposition and sister squares are reconciled), the book on a rarely encountered chess endgame that Duchamp wrote, with Vitaly Halberstadt, in 1932, has been described as follows: "The king 'may act in such a way as to suggest he has completely lost interest in winning the game. Then the other king, if he is a true sovereign, can give the appearance of being even less interested.' Until one of them provokes the other into a blunder, 'the two monarchs can waltz carelessly across the board as though they weren't at all engaged in mortal combat.' Duchamp himself said that following the system in the book "leads inevitably to drawn games"—that is, to read, he commented that he saw the similarity but hadn't known anything of Wittgenstein's work before. This is not so surprising, since what echoes Wittgenstein in Duchamp is equally reminiscent of Pyrrho. Duchamp's Pyrrhonist remark "There is no solution because there is no problem," for example, finds close parallels in a number of Wittgenstein's statements, such as "The deepest problems are not problems at all." The same applies to the correlations that critics have made between Duchamp and Zen. His denial of language-based constructions of reality, renunciation of opinion, avoidance of affirmation and negation as unreal alternatives, maintenance of a posture of indifference, and focus on the quality of the passing moment have seemed to many to be oriental in flavor; this impression arises from Pyrrhonism's striking similarities with the Zen tradition. Duchamp's statement that "Every word I am telling you is stupid and wrong" could have been uttered by Pyrrho, and also by the Zen master who

Marcel Duchamp, To Katherine Dreier, Knight of the Société Anonyme, 1911, pencil and ink on paper, ca. 6 x 4 1/4 in.

Collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; gift of the estate of Katherine S. Dreier.
said, "The moment you open your mouth you are wrong."38 The commonalities that John Cage and others noticed may be accounted for by Duchamp's solitary reading and reflection on Pyrrho in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in his 25th year.

If a true Pyrrhonian is "one who resembles Pyrrho," Duchamp could well be given that title. The essence of Pyrrho's teaching, in the words of an ancient author, was that "he would maintain the same composure at all times"—something frequently said of Duchamp. Similarly, the report that Pyrrho "would withdraw from the world and live in solitude" recalls Duchamp's often reclusive life-style. The Pyrrhonists never presented a positive teaching, save a Zen-like admonition to attend to the quality of every present moment without the distracting overlays of opinions or interpretations; and Duchamp never wrote a manifesto, or pontificated on what art should be, except by example. He turned from a so-called "retinal" art to an art with a philosophical function immediately after reading that Pyrrho had quit painting for philosophy. And finally, the Pyrrhonist stance outside affirmation and negation, outside speech, recalls what is meant by the "silence of Marcel Duchamp."39 His was not a literal silence, like that of the ancient philosopher Cratylus (a forerunner of Pyrrho who refused to teach verbally, thinking that to make any statement whatever was to submit to "formulating," but, says Aristotle, would only hold up his finger, pointing to the direct experience of the moment). On the contrary, Duchamp was a man of many words. As far as expressing opinions goes, however, these amounted to a silence, for in his use of language he attempted to avoid assumptions that would limit reality. Casual conversation was acceptable, since it is involved in the pleasure of the moment. Like James Joyce, he enjoyed puns and other multidirectional verbal objects, which go beyond positing or negating, reflecting instead the labyrinthine relationships that seem to converge on any given moment of experience. The notes in The Green Box, 1934, and elsewhere are cryptic enough that they too avoid direct statement. If Duchamp was in fact interested in alchemy, incidentally, that was perhaps because it too posits an ultimate attitude beyond the distinction between yes and no.

The Pyrrhonism of Duchamp's work from 1913 onward offers a philosophical context in which to view his youthful turning point. Personal factors were, of course, involved—the search for an objective, detached stance must be at the same time a move away from some subjective situation or other. Still, it is not necessary for whatever emotions Duchamp distance seethed tormenting/y rest of his life. Perhaps the "beatitude," of indifference calms the troubled surface of the mind.

The psychoanalytic in Duchamp's work after 1912 is his inner problems were not by his ongoing repression. The hatred of the paucity of his output of self-expressiveness, its moth-eaten, its unnecessarily prolonged evanescence, its hints of repressed subterfuges of critical evaluative absurdity, its solipsism, and its qualities, incidentally, are as maladies as they are to the problem with this approach. Duchamp to the very affinity of the problem: it removes him from the world of ideas. See text, the work acquires a coherence that are altogether

It has sometimes been objected to a contradiction in a philosophical sense and then proceeding views of other philosophers. In tradition the undermining of to imply the affirmation of (This would represent accepta excluded middle.) The indifferency, does not precluding in debate; it only soliciting a positive doctrine. Duchamp practice was to attack toward imperturbability by a of reality and revealing the un and inner contradictions hide, Duchamp's indifference dic arguing, in the mute acrostics what he perceived as prevailing. Such a program, in fact, und general, alongside the other intimation that activate its core.

Duchamp once described his "a renunciation of all esthetic sense of the word."39 The qual ordinary sense of the word" not, as it has often been, nihilism.40 In European art, esthetics "in the ordinary means the aesthetic theory adumbrated by the Earl of Shaftesbury and fully in his Critique of Judgment (the German metaphysical elabo- Shelling, Schopenhauer, and Duchamp studied these philo- the Greeks at his desk in the B
Geneviève is unknown and unimportant; unlike Pyrrhonism, the ideas in question were pervasively in the air, as familiar to any well-read person, and certainly to as cerebral an artist as Duchamp, as his or her address. According to Marquis, the collector and patron Walter Arensberg once “thought he discerned a pattern in Duchamp’s work. ‘I get an impression,’ he wrote, ‘when I look at our paintings of yours from the point of view of their chronological sequence, of the successive moves in a game of chess.’ Duchamp readily agreed to the analogy.”41 It was the system of Kantian esthetics, and its hold on Modern art, that Duchamp’s work was devised to checkmate.

The foundation of the Kantian doctrine is the notion of a sense of taste through which we respond to art. Being literally a sense, like seeing or scenting, this quality is noncognitive, nonconceptual; it is a sensus communis, innate and identical in everyone; it is a higher faculty, above worldly concerns; it is governed by its own inner necessity.42 Duchamp’s work at once intuitively and systematically illuminates the flaws in this teaching. For example, Kant’s theory implies that literature or language cannot be art, since words are conceptual entities; Duchamp’s inclusion of linguistic elements in his work—punning titles and inscriptions, sets of notes—forces the dilemma that either these works are not art or art is conceptual as much as sensual. The readymades take aim at the idea of the universal sense of taste—calling a urinal “art,” for example, resulted in a rift of opinion so intense as to throw into question the idea of a sensus communis—and also, of course, at the idea of art’s noble separateness from the world. The introduction of chance procedures illustrates a mode of artistic decision-making that takes literally Kant’s injunction that esthetics should lie outside human desires and prejudices, and yet is not even conceivably acceptable in Kantian terms. At the same time, it lampoons the Kantian notion of esthetic necessity. And so forth.

What is most significant in Kant’s esthetic is the idea that taste is a universal constant, an unchanging faculty—a necessity. This is the element of his thinking that most contradicts the Pyrrhonist position, which denies the possibility of essences (“Nothing really exists”), and abstains from all the judgments of a thing’s quality to which they give rise. Duchamp astutely focused his attack on this crucial point. Esthetics for him had nothing to do with some transcendentally autonomous and self-validating faculty, like a soul. Instead, he proposed a relativistic view of taste as “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.”43 Taste here is simply the shape of one’s limitations, the ingrained habitual system of prejudices that is the stumbling block to a generalized appreciation of life. As Duchamp told Cabanne, “One stores up in oneself such a language of tastes, good or bad, that when one looks at something, if that something isn’t an echo of yourself, then

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The psychoanalytic model holds that Duchamp’s work after 1912 is itself the proof that his inner problems were not resolved but hidden by his ongoing repression. This seems to be suggested by the paucity of his oeuvre, its mute lack of self-expressiveness, its mocking ironic distance, its unnaturally prolonged enfant terrible rebelliousness, its hints of repressed sexuality, its subterfuges of critical evaluation, its determined absurdity, its solipsism, and so on. (Most of these qualities, incidentally, are as egregious to the formalists as they are to the psychoanalysts.) The problem with this approach is that it subjects Duchamp to the very affliction he sought to remedy for art: it removes his work from its context in the world of ideas. Seen within such a context, the work acquires a directness and a coherence that are altogether rational.

It has sometimes been objected that there is a contradiction in a philosopher’s espousing indifference and then proceeding to argue against the views of other philosophers. But in the Pyrrhonist tradition the undermining of one view is not held to imply the affirmation of the contrary view. (This would represent acceptance of the law of the excluded middle.) The indifferent position, or nonposition, does not preclude one from engaging in debate; it only precludes one from maintaining a positive doctrine. One mode of Pyrrhonist practice was to attempt to turn others toward imperturbability by analyzing their views of reality and revealing the unproven assumptions and inner contradictions hidden within. Some Pyrrhonist authors forged massive collections of negative arguments, intended to annihilate all types of opinion and to leave nothing in their place but the “nonspeech” of opinionlessness. Similarly, Duchamp’s indifference did not keep him from arguing, in the mute acrostics of his work, against what he perceived as prevailing dogmatic rigidities. Such a program, in fact, underlies his oeuvre in general, alongside the other levels of meaning and intention that activate its complex dynamism.

Duchamp once described himself as engaged in “a renunciation of all esthetics, in the ordinary sense of the word.”39 The qualifying phrase “in the ordinary sense of the word” shows that this was not, as it has often been called, an “esthetic nihilism.”40 In European art since the 18th century, esthetics “in the ordinary sense of the word” means the esthetic theory adumbrated by the third Earl of Shaftesbury and fully articulated by Kant in his Critique of Judgment (1790), and various German metaphysical elaborations by Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and others. Whether Duchamp studied these philosophers along with the Greeks at his desk in the Bibliothèque Sainte-
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Marcel Duchamp, La Partie d'échecs (The chess game), 1910, oil on canvas, 44½ x 57”. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.
you do not even look at it. But I try anyway.”

His goal, then, was “to reduce my personal taste to zero.”

If the constrictions of habit, of “taste” and its belief system, could be eliminated, Duchamp felt, life could be a “sort of constant euphoria.”

A Pyrrhonist realm of beatific impermeability of escape and self-delusion.

Many of the qualities that have been regarded as deficiencies in Duchamp’s oeuvre are calculated demonstrations of this point of view. The work’s visual unimpressiveness expresses its avoidance of judgment by the conventional criteria of taste. Its appearance of internal inconsistency, its shifts of modes, genres, and materials, express his desire to define or to delimit the space in which art unfolds. The paucity that psychoanalytically inclined critics have taken as evidence of emotional problems in fact suggests Duchamp’s refusal to repeat himself; on the ground that repetition would establish his work as merely one style among many, competing with others for authority, like the dogmatic Cubism of the 1912 Salon.

To create many works on the same principle is to be dominated by a dead habit. Chance and the readymade, Duchamp’s two great tactics for creating art that neither pleased nor offended his own customs of taste, were his avenues for the discovery of objects that he had not been taught to see by his experience of looking at art. Aware that taste changes from one historical phase to the next, and thus cannot really be either universal or necessary, Duchamp referred to it as “a fleeting infatuation,” which momentarily “disappears.”

“Why,” he asked, “must we worship principles which in 50 or 100 years will no longer apply?”

A second major element of “esthetic in the ordinary sense of the word” was the myth of art’s sacredness promulgated by Kant’s successors. To Hegel, for example, the successful artwork was an embodiment of the absolute or the infinite; it represented, he wrote, the “spirit of beauty” to complete which the history of the world will require its evolution of centuries.”

According to Hegel’s contemporary Schelling, art “opens...the holy of holies.... When a great painting comes into being it is as though the invisible curtain that separates the real from the ideal world is raised.”

For Schopenhauer, similarly, art was “the copy of the [Platonic] Ideas” — that is, the embodiment of eternal and sacred truths.

The Romantic tradition, which includes Modernism, deeply incorporated this idea. For Duchamp, however, art was not a link to the universal and permanent, a channel toward the sublime, but a device with which to break mental and emotional habits, and to discourage the projection of one’s self and one’s opinions, or one’s culture’s opinions, as absolute. It was a vehicle of Pyrrhonist indifference. Where the Romantic artist was supposedly a kind of priest or mystic adventurer, Duchamp, in connection with quitting art, remarked that he was “defrocked.”

“I’m afraid I’m an agnostic in art,” he said. “I just don’t believe in it with all the mystical trimmings. As a drug it’s probably very useful for a number of people, very sedative, but as religion it’s not even as good as God.”

His works were a systematic undermining of the whole phenomenon of art’s “aura,” which Walter Benjamin was to discuss. Everyday objects have no “aura,” nor are they “unique” or “original.” Neither are the photographs and mechanical reproductions that frequently appear in Duchamp’s work. The use of chance also takes traditional esthetic decision-making out of art, emphasizing its embeddedness in nature (which Hegel said it transcended). The technique of mechanical drawing bleaches the emotivity out of images.

Even Duchamp’s adoption of a female persona, Rrose Sélavy, was a negation of art’s essentially male-heroic tradition.

Duchamp’s work, clearly, is not merely a survivalist response to “an overwhelming inner conflict,” nor the effect of an infantile destructive nihilism. It could only seem so, really, to commentators for whom there is no world outside the Kantian inheritance. It is, instead, a precise and mature theoretical critique, an overthrow of the Kantian esthetic along with the demonstration of a Pyrrhonist openness as a space for the art of the future to move in. (What art has done in that space is open to debate: as Clement Greenberg put it, “Duchamp...locked advanced-advanced art into what has amounted to hardly more than elaborations, variations on, and recapitulations of his original ideas.”)

Duchamp tried to ring the death knell for formalism, for the belief in art as a spiritual transcendence, and for the Romantic cult of beauty. Of course that cult still has its faithful, and they have rightly perceived him as the enemy. Despite his work’s enormous art-historical importance, it is the subject of a deep strain of hostility. In his New York Times obituary for Duchamp, for example, Alexander Kanes calls his work “vaudeville.”

In that same generally formalist organ, John Canaday similarly spoke of the work in terms of “horseplay,” “a parasitic appendage, an amusement, a vaudeville performance.” According to Canaday, Duchamp was, “along with Picasso and Matisse, one of the trio of most powerful influences on 20th-century art,” yet “unlike his two peers, [he] has exerted an influence primarily destructive.”

In fact, he was no less than “the most destructive artist in history.”

This attitude, which might be regarded as old-fashioned, is still dominant in the Marquis biography of 1981, which presents Duchamp as a
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failed artist and an essentially destructive force—"a powerful figure which knew how to destroy in the most creative ways."60

Other types of responses have acted to tame Duchamp's work in less obvious ways. One is the common description of both the artist and his work as "enigmatic." The headline of the New York Times obituary, for example, reads, "Marcel Duchamp Is Dead at 81; Enigmatic Giant of Modern Art." Calvin Tomkins similarly called Duchamp "the most enigmatic presence in contemporary art."61 This often applied term neatly slots Duchamp's work away into the category of the mysterious and the vague, of things whose meaning is deliberately obscure enough that we need not trouble too long to understand it. A related response has been to focus on Duchamp's legendary status. Baruchello, Marquis, and others propose that his primary achievement was his own self-mythification—as if the work had no point in itself but to draw attention to its maker. Duchamp remarked sanely that "the idea of the great star comes directly from a sort of inflation of small anecdotes,"62 and clearly he himself was the subject of this kind of inflation. His occasional collusion in the process—the many deliberately myth-making photographs he posed for, say—should not obscure the fact that his work had definite purposes, which it went about in a direct and businesslike way.

Yet another strategy to tame the critical thrust of Duchamp's work—and, tacitly, to reestablish the hegemony of Kantian esthetics—has been articulated by Greenberg, Baruchello, and others. In this reading, Duchamp was one avant-garde tactician among many. His techniques were on the same scale as those of, say, the Fauves, or the Cubists, or, later, the Abstract Expressionists. But the fact is that they were not. Duchamp's avant-gardism overthrew the Kantian foundation on which most of the other varieties were based, from Impres- sionism to Color Field. It was a meta-avant- gardism, which went beyond proposing a new embodiment of the Kantian ideology to overthrowing it altogether. Similarly, Tomkins, as if to compliment Duchamp on his subversiveness (but really making him ordinary), claims that "art has a way of undermining all esthetic theories."63 But Duchamp's undermining of theory was not just one among many; he dismantled a theoretical structure that had accommodated most of the avant-gardes that were growing up around him, and that had been solidly in place since the 18th century.

The recent movement among artists, dealers, and critics to reduce the readymade to which Duchamp called "perhaps the most important single idea to come out of my work"64 to a style accomplishes the same end. Much current readymade work, though it may be attractive, and even intelligent in its focus, should not be regarded as Duchampian. It may look Duchampian, but to concentrate on the look is to miss the point. Duchamp's readymades function as a rejection of style; today the readymade has become a style—

even what could be described as an academic style.65 Where Fountain shocked, and the snow shovel aimed at indifference, this generation of readymades placates and pleases. His works are often involved in language; the current versions are mainly mute form. He rejected commodifica- tion; today's objects affirm it. What Duchamp saw happen to painters through the repetition that he opposed—"They no longer make pictures; they make checks"—has also come true for readymade artists, who relentlessly repeat, writing checks against what has become a habit or taste.

The recent prevalence of such works demon- strates not that the Duchampian influence is ongo- ing, but that it is in a sense dead. The absorption of the once critical readymade into the mainstream market indicates not that Duchamp's theoretical critique has lost validity, but that his formal em-

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4. Cabanne, "The Bride and the Bachelors, New York: Penguin, 1976, p. 22. The Independents were particularly reluctant to accept the title of the Nude..., and asked Duchamp to change it. He preferred to withdraw the painting from the show.

5. Cabanne, p. 15.


7. Marquis, pp. 36, 80.


9. Ibid., p. 96.

10. Except for brief mentions by Schwarz, p. 33 and note 33, and Paz, p. 35.


18. Cabanne, p. 17.

19. Ibid., p. 85.

20. Quoted in Schwarz, p. 194.

21. Cabanne, p. 70.
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bodiment of it has lived itself out, as he himself said that a painting died in about 50 years. An accurate receiver of the Duchampian message would, at this moment, stay as far from the look of his work as possible, since the look of his work has now become part of the rigidity of habit that it was designed to pry loose. The point of Duchamp's violation of the gallery space—the urinal flung in their faces—was not to establish a new style of exhibited object, but to suggest that humans can exhibit anything at all to one another, with the countless ranges of meaning and types of appreciation that this realization opens up. When Arensberg likened Duchamp's paintings to a chess game, Duchamp responded, "But when will I administer checkmate or will I be mated?" The recent slavish and academic imitation of the mere look of his work constitutes, however unconsciously, the closest approach yet to checkmating Duchamp.

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Marcel Duchamp, Designs for Chessmen, ca. 1920, in ink and pencil on paper, each drawing 8¾ × 9". Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Katherine S. Dreier Bequest.

22. Ibid., pp. 89–90.
23. Ibid., p. 48.
27. Quoted in Marquis, p. 234.
29. Quoted in Marquis, p. 311.
30. See, for example, Schwarz, p. 34.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. John Cage, for example, remarks, "I asked him once or twice, ‘haven’t you had some direct connection with oriental thought?’ And he always said no. There weren’t any specific oriental sources. But there may have been other sources." Moira and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp: An Interview," in Maschek, p. 134.
35. Schwarz, p. 34.
37. Lavin, p. 477.
38. Joseph Beuys, for example, entitled a 1964 performance Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überwacht (The silence of Marcel Duchamp is being watched).
39. Cabanne, p. 42. Duchamp was referring specifically to his work on the Large Glass.
40. See, for example, Keeses.
42. In the section of the Critique of Judgment called "Analytic of the Beautiful" Kant places what he calls four "moments," each comprising a related group of propositions. According to the first "moment," the pure aesthetic judgment or sense of taste has nothing to do with cognition or concepts. This is the basis of Modernism’s rejection of content and iconography, of its stress on form—of formalism. It is also the basis of the saying “Stupid as a painter,” to which Duchamp declared his work to be the corrective when he said that he wanted to put art back into the service of the mind. (In the Kantian view, this goal is innately antiracist, since art cannot possibly have anything to do with the mind.) Kant’s second moment attributes universality to the aesthetic judgment, which is held to be the same in all people—a sensus communis, as Kant put it. Some disagreement may of course arise, but only because of subjective distortions of a faculty everywhere constant. In this view, an artwork is objectively good or bad, right or wrong, depending on its conformity to the universal sense of taste. This is the basis of formalism’s emphasis on “quality.” The third moment argues that the aesthetic judgment is purposeless or functionless, that it is, in other words, above the tumults and desires of worldliness. This is the basis of the formalism distinction between high and low, or pure and practical, art. It is also related to the idea of art as a higher spiritual realm, above the...