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ED. BY

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

AMERICAN CINEMA

THE NEW
The several branches of art today acknowledge the influence of Marcel Duchamp. In this article Toby Mussman discusses Duchamp's films and points out their relevance to new works by experimental artists in New York today.

In her essay "One Culture and the New Sensibility," Susan Sontag remarks: "The primary feature of the new sensibility is that its model product is not the literary work, above all, the novel. A new, non-literary culture exists today, of whose very existence, not to mention significance, most literary intellectuals are entirely unaware." Cage, McLuhan, and Whitman are commonly considered the prophets of this new culture, and the notes that follow the article on Duchamp consider Whitman's role.

Toby Mussman was born in 1940, graduated from Yale University, and has done graduate work in art history at New York University. He has written for Artforum, Film Culture, and Art and Artists. The article that follows is a revised version of one that originally appeared in Art and Artists, July, 1968.

Near the end of a hour-long interview with Marcel Duchamp in December, 1965, I asked what validity there was to a statement I have read in a university arts journal claiming that the title Anemic Cinema, which Duchamp gave to his only extant filmmaking effort, should be taken as a proclamation of the film's generally anti-cinema attitude. In his tone which is both familiar and polite yet always comfortably aloof, he replied that not in any way had he intended anything which could be construed as a Dada anti-cinema joke. Then almost immediately...

in the same instant as though recalling from too comfortable a position, he said, "But you know, I really should have had a placard with the word 'anti' forever imprinted right across my forehead." Shortly afterward, I related this event to an acquaintance whose response was, "Anti-what? What exactly was his 'anti' directed against?" My reply of the moment was, "Everything"; but upon reflection, I see that the answer I would have been more accurate had it been, "Anything." Anything, that is, which presented itself to Duchamp in the form of tradition or dogmatic formula.

Gleizes and the Cubist theorists refused Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase entry into the Salon des Indépendants of 1912, and within three years Duchamp came to America to live and work for most of the rest of his life. He was refused by dogma because he had refused to paint a picture according to dogma's rules. He left what was already old in its own time and reached for the new which had yet to come of age.

Duchamp's "anti" cannot be looked at simply as a reaction, but must be understood more in terms of a recoil, which sought an entirely independent fruition in previously untrammeled areas of visual and mental investigation. I mention areas of mental investigation not only because, of course, they are fully documented in the Green Box but also to refer to Duchamp's early and far-reaching investigations into the idea of art. He provided a dramatic point of departure and inspiration for the later business of questioning what art's limits are and the recognition of the significance of decision-making amidst indeterminacy to be extended by Cage, Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, and Kaprow. Andy Warhol's twenty-minute movie of Duchamp, where he sits closed-mouthed for the duration while a "cuddly little actress" rubs herself up against him, is the perfect homage paid by the younger artist for the aesthetic affinities he feels toward the man who knocked on the door first.1

One of the results of Duchamp's recoil-like attitude was to be in the direction of an infant, and up to his time only timidly explored, medium—the cinema. Even though Robert Lebel feels that the movies must have had some influence, if only...
Marcel Duchamp's Anemic Cinema

Duchamp liked the idea that any two different people watching a disc at the same time would not be subject to the same simultaneous perceptual experience. One's perception of the film would oscillate according to one's optical faculties, which we can assume are as widely variable as any of the other physical characteristics. The discs are similar in principle to the fluctuating play in Josef Albers's drawings of the fifties or the spatial contradictions in Analytic Cubist works (i.e., Braque's La Portugaise). Duchamp, by putting his discs in motion and strictly limiting their exposure time added a new kind of complexity and indeterminacy, which, he hoped, would leave his viewer unsettled and comfortably on edge.

To act as rests and counterbalances, Duchamp inserted one of nine alliterative puns, also on rotating discs, between each pairing of the optical discs. The words and sense of the puns are revealed as they revolve at what seems a normal reading speed. The puns provide a curious complement to the experience of following the spirals of the optical discs around the center only to have the eye thrown back out to a peripheral circle or to realize that the center is also the foremost tip of a cone projecting outward. In both the optical and the verbal discs, the eye is led into the center only to be laughed at for being there. The puns, unlike ordinary sentences, do not attempt to make a definite statement, but rather they cast ironic doubt on the ability of any written sentence to make ultimate and absolutely conclusive sense. Aphorism is rendered invalid, or at the very least always open to question.

The puns, because of their alliterative nature, are untranslatable. Here is a sampling in French:

"On demande des moustiques domestiques (demi-stock)
pour la cure d'azote sur la côte d'azur."

"L'Acez-vous déjà la moelle de l'épée dans la poêle de cuivre?"

"Esquivons les escarmouches des esquimaux aux mots exquis."

At a superficial glance they resemble any other typical sen-
The metaphorical mechanizations of desire, female sexuality, and the sexual act realized in Nude Descending a Staircase through The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even find an equivalent via allusion in Anemic Cinema’s spirals and cones. The fact that the cones are placed just off center establishes immediately an undulating sensation, while at the same time contributing to a more general, if elusive, seductive tone. In two of the discs, the concentric circles are more regular and only slightly off the central axis which allows easily for the suggestion of a female breast. The focal points there act as and exaggerate the nipple. In other discs, the indication is one of focusing through the convolutions of the spirals, and thus suggesting penetration into vagina-womb. To take the metaphor of penetration a bit further, I turn to Norman O. Brown who says: “The woman penetrated is a labyrinth. You emerge into another world inside the woman. To explore is to penetrate the world in the inside of the mother. The penis is the bridge; the passage to another world is coitus; the other world is the womb-cave.” The discs of Anemic Cinema delight the eye by pulling it into depth, by demanding that it penetrate. But once the eye does as is asked, it is inevitably frustrated, confused by the never-ending swirl, and finally thrown back out to try again. The ambivalent perception Duchamp has forced on the eye is the penis-bridge. The way that the eye reads the optical illusion as both going in and coming out—that is, the eye goes back, and forth, reading it first as penetration and then as a protrusion—makes it abstract in the sexual act. The element of spatial ambiguity in Anemic Cinema is taken into an entirely ecstatic realm when we consider that Duchamp constructed especially for the first showing of the film a projection screen of translucent glass, like that used in bathroom windows, with reflective mirror-silver backing.

After Anemic Cinema was shown in 1924–25 and assembled in 1926 in France, Duchamp made no further ventures in film until Maya Deren came to him in 1943 for advice on an idea to capture in a movie the magic of Surrealist objects. She shot several scenes which included the Surrealist painter Matta and Duchamp sipping drinks at a Fifth Avenue café, but the film, called Witch’s Candle, was never completed. Her interest in Norman O. Brown, Love’s Body, Random House, New York, 1966, pp. 36 and 48.
Marcel Duchamp's Anemic Cinema

tention was to adapt the Surrealist aesthetic to make a film promoting open defiance of normal time and space relationships—a goal she achieved with distinction under a dream format in Meshes of the Afternoon.

The spatial ambiguities of Anemic Cinema's optical discs and the verbal ambiguities of the pun discs have a tendency to create a limbo-like atmosphere, comparable to that of dreams. Hans Richter was particularly aware of this when he used the Rotoreliefs in one of the six sequences of his surrealist film, Dreams That Money Can Buy, in 1944–46. Using color filters, Richter allowed his camera to glide softly by the turning discs, enveloped them in kaleidoscopic effects with prism lenses, and arranged the discs in various fragmented views, thus nullifying the purely optical effects Duchamp had intended in Anemic Cinema. It is entirely to their credit that even when adapted in a fashion considerably removed from the original intention, the optical discs lend themselves without duress to another, equally significant beauty. One could imagine the Rotoreliefs being adapted still further under new conditions to exploit their extraordinary properties of ambiguity and intangibility.

In film, at least, Duchamp has spawned no immediate followers. The Rotoreliefs were too pure and special a sort of experiment, and the puns, always a Duchamp trademark, were too personal. What is most significant about his work today is the way in which his ideas, partially in reaction to the nearsighted theories and practices of a formalist art, have been taken up and extended by a large number of contemporary painters and sculptors (most prominently Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Robert Morris, Richard Hamilton, and Andy Warhol).

Duchamp's early turn to film in order to confront questions arising out of his experience of painting comments on the general breakdown of aesthetic categories encountered by artists in the twentieth century. Underground filmmakers, many of them originally painters, currently working in New York and elsewhere, take considerable encouragement and inspiration from the pioneering efforts of artist-filmmakers like Richter, Léger, Man Ray, and Duchamp. Recognizing the potential expressive values of two of the cinema's principal faculties—motion and the orchestration of temporal relationships, younger artists—such as Bruce Conner, Robert Whitman, Andy Warhol, Robert Breer, or Stan VanDerBeek—have become increasingly less concerned with the literally static confines of the canvas. Just as for hundreds of years painters have taken up sculptural investigations to complement those encountered two-dimensionally, these contemporary artists have seen, like Duchamp, that a logical way to handle questions implied in their more traditional work on a flat canvas is to move into the relatively undeveloped dimensions of time and motion.

THE IMAGES OF ROBERT WHITMAN

by Toby Mussman

In many ways the new movie/theatre performances in New York are the purest realizations of McLuhan's theory that art adapts a new medium as soon as it has fallen out of front-line usage as a conduit of information. After a technological advance has been thoroughly absorbed by its immediate function, it becomes an artistic tool as, for example, fluorescent light tubes have done for Dan Flavin.

People like Andy Warhol, Robert Whitman, Stan VanDerBeek, Ken Dewey, the USCO Group, and others have created a sensation in the last year with their movie environments and performances using multiple projectors and lighting systems. Their efforts represent a digging into and ultimately an expansion of the mechanics of the film medium and its accompanying atmosphere. Like some mad alchemist in the projection booth conjuring up visions with his magic shaft of light exploring an old, wobbly band, they are finding new dimensions of that fantasy world we have all known as "the Movies."

In December 1965, Claes Oldenburg constructed a literal replica of the experience of watching movies in a happening performance called Moviehouse, at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque. Oldenburg simulated, in his ironic and sublimely surreal manner, an audience sitting through a late afternoon film. A comparison with the numerous film-watching scenes