

MARCEL DUCHAMP  
AND GRAPHIC DESIGN.

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## ESSAY

## MARCEL DUCHAMP AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

This essay looks at Marcel Duchamp's relationship with graphic design in two ways. The first half of the essay considers how graphic design has provided 'extra' readings of his work beyond the traditional art historical approach. Not only can Duchamp scholarship be well served by intelligent design, it almost demands it, given the complex nature of its subject. The second half of the essay considers a selection of graphic works by Duchamp himself. Despite never having a 'professional' design practice *per se*, his work in this field was never as ephemeral as graphic works are so often assumed to be. In his abandonment of painting, Duchamp adopted strategies which pre-empt approaches taken by contemporary 'conceptual' design, whereby a private or political agenda might be concealed under the guise of commissioned work. Such a view concurs with recent scholarship, which argues that Duchamp's 'apparently marginal' activities in the curation of his own works and others, in fact occupy a more central position in his *oeuvre* than has previously been characterized.<sup>1</sup>

Marcel Duchamp features very little in the anthologies of graphic design, despite his extensive use of commercial print (as opposed to printmaking), his artful combinations of typography and photography, and his considerable engagement with paper and reproduction.<sup>2</sup> Few would realise for example that he was commissioned to design a cover for *Vogue*,<sup>3</sup> or that he was in competition with

Paul Rand to design a book cover.<sup>4</sup> One small exception to this lacuna is Thompson and Davenport's *Dictionary of Visual Language* which featured Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, (1919) on its back cover, as it represented the *Women with Moustaches* entry inside.<sup>5</sup>

Sitting before me is a *Series G* (1968) version of Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*. One is struck by how much Duchamp appreciated paper, the graphic designer's primary material. A miniature museum of his key works, each item was painstakingly replicated using a combination of collotype and pochoir. The boxes (over 300 were made in a twenty year period) included technical innovations such as fold-out panels, printed celluloid, miniature urinal, typewriter cover and glass ampoule. For its time, it was a remarkable achievement and represents an early example of the limited edition multiple. On the rare occasion when any box comes to auction, it generates considerable interest and a hammer price to match.

Needless to say, my version is not an original, but a facsimile reproduction designed by Mathieu Mercier and recently published at an extremely competitive price by Walther König.<sup>6</sup> Duchamp's enigma will forever resist the mainstream, but the edition size of 5000 says something about how much this portable museum has acquired significance in recent years; its availability on Amazon

<sup>1</sup> I refer here of course to Elena Filipovic's recent publication which posits Duchamp's 'non-artistic' tasks of curation, art dealing and administration as strategic moves in the construction of his entire artistic identity. Elena Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The only book-length work to consider the graphic output of Duchamp, as a distinct category, is F. M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: the Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Ghent, Amsterdam: Ludion Press, 1999. It should also be acknowledged that Rick Poyner represents a lone, yet insightful voice in this endeavour, in his (sadly too few) articles concerning Duchamp in *Eye* magazine.

<sup>3</sup> In 1943 Duchamp was invited by Alexander Liberman, *Vogue*'s art director to propose a cover design for a forthcoming '*Americana*' issue. Duchamp produced *Genre Allegory* in response, which combined the profile of George Washington with a map of the United States, assembled from stained bandage gauze and studded with gold stars. The disturbing image was not surprisingly rejected, and after slight modification, published by André Breton in *VVV* magazine in the same year.

<sup>4</sup> In 1956 the New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf required a dust jacket for *Modern Art USA* by Rudi Blesh. Duchamp simply provided an elegant visual pun, featuring the front and rear views of a formal dinner jacket perhaps with reference to the 'malic molds' of *The Large Glass*, entitled *Jacquette*. The proposal was rejected and Paul Rand responded with a Matisse-cum-Pollock design, typical of his modernist style.

<sup>5</sup> P. Thompson and P. Davenport, *The Dictionary of Visual Language*, London: Bergstrom + Boyle, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> *De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy (Boîte-en-valise) de ou par Mathieu Mercier*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2015.

seems more remarkable still. It also represents the generous and forward-looking mindset of the Association Marcel Duchamp, who were naturally supportive in enabling this venture.

The facsimile makes no attempt to contextualise or explain ‘Duchamp’; such efforts have been made many times before: scientifically, philosophically, psychoanalytically, biographically, alchemically, cabbalistically, ‘pataphysically, and so forth. All have favoured vast quantities of dense writing over any other approach. For an artist who expressed a certain distrust for language’s ability to explain anything, this is particularly ironic.

The use of graphic design to reframe the work of Duchamp finds its exemplar in the works of Richard Hamilton, starting with his typographic translation of Duchamp’s *Green Box* notes of 1934, known as the *Green Book*, originally published by Lund Humphries in 1960. Working closely with George Heard Hamilton (no relation), and in correspondence with Duchamp himself, Richard Hamilton conveyed the spirit of Duchamp’s original notes in typographic form, complete with their hesitations and alterations.<sup>7</sup> So impressed was Duchamp with the final outcome, that he gave Hamilton an etching with the inscription “*Richard Hamilton mon grand déchiffreur*” (decipherer). Hamilton understood precisely the challenge that Duchamp’s notes presented; not only did the translation to English require a sensitive balance between linguistic fidelity and semantic interpretation, but the typographic treatment had to convey Duchamp’s own ‘mental’ handwriting without losing any of its mystery.

Hamilton used the same principle in a further publication in 1999. This was his elegant book version of the notes which had been previously published by Cordier & Ekstrom in 1967, entitled ‘*À l’infinitif*’, otherwise known as the *White Box*, which Duchamp himself had overseen. In the introduction to this second book (of the same title),<sup>8</sup> Hamilton reflected on the technological progress that had been made since 1960:

**the writer/translator/typographer/designer is free to move over the hypothetical platen of the press unhindered. QuarkXPress provides typesetting resources with limitless possibilities of text control. Bézier curves can translate Duchamp’s intensely personal expression into mathematically defined lines in harmony with the objectivity of type.**<sup>9</sup>

Using a broader range of (by this time digital) fonts, and elegant vector graphics, Hamilton was able to convey with even greater subtlety than before, the fragile peculiarity of Duchamp’s note making.

By 2004, further advances in vector software and wide format digital printing enabled Hamilton, working in close collaboration with the Centre for Fine Print Research at the University of West of England, to produce a ‘Typo/Topographic’ edition of colour prints which, much improving on his rough schematic of 1960, presented a ‘translation-map’ of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915-23).<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Hamilton completed a forty year commitment to recasting Duchamp

afresh, using graphic design as his principal tool. This body of work, in addition of course to his own reconstruction of the *Large Glass* itself, completed in 1966, has meant that in Britain at least, we have come to know Duchamp largely through the graphic interventions of Richard Hamilton.

My first encounter with Duchamp was in fact through a hefty publication by Hamilton’s collaborator Ecke Bonk, in the form of *The Portable Museum*.<sup>11</sup> This is a painstaking analysis of the lengthy genesis, design development and long editioning phase of Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise*. At the time of its publication, I recall being intrigued by what seemed like an ambiguous authorship: was this book by Bonk, by Duchamp, or by Rose Sélavy? Not only mystified by the images inside, the design and structure of the book disrupted my previous notions of what ‘art history’ might look like. Like Hamilton, acting as ‘writer/translator/typographer/designer’, Bonk had presented Duchamp in a way which was simultaneously austere and weird.

A similar tone, and a similarly ambiguous authorship, was conveyed by *De ou par Marcel Duchamp par Ulf Linde*, to accompany an exhibition of the same title at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts and Moderna Museet in 2011, which presented the lifelong engagement of Duchamp’s other great decipherer Ulf Linde.<sup>12</sup> The book’s elegant combination of large type, restricted colour and transparent overlays enabled Linde’s unique thesis on the geometry behind Duchamp’s work to be conveyed with a clarity and precision impossible to achieve with writing alone.

A similar approach was taken by Swiss graphic designer Karl Gerstner in 2003, in a book entitled *T um’: Puzzle upon Puzzle*, which attempts to deconstruct the complex ‘final’ painting that Duchamp made for Katherine Dreier in 1918.<sup>13</sup> Gerstner’s high Modernist approach however drains this painting of its mystery; sometimes puzzles are best left alone. Much as Duchamp was unimpressed with Alfred H. Barr’s deterministic approach to the ‘modern art’ of 1936, looking for logical causality in Duchamp’s art while ignoring its chance poetics is akin to looking at the artist with just one eye (close to, for almost an hour).<sup>14</sup>

A challenge to traditional linear biography can be found in Jennifer Gough-Cooper’s and Jacques Caumont’s *Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy, 1887- 1968*, which appears as an appendix to the catalogue of the major Duchamp exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, in 1993.<sup>15</sup> We learn of Duchamp’s whereabouts and activities throughout his long and colourful life, in elegantly typeset and illustrated entries, but presented deliberately out of chronological sequence. This wilfully subversive approach favours coincidence at the expense of temporal logic, as if Duchamp’s life can be better told in a Duchampian way. As a complete counterpoint, the two authors previously collaborated on *La vie illustrée de Marcel Duchamp* (1977), which provided an ultra-concise biography in the style of a children’s storybook, complete with charmingly *naïf* illustrations by André Raffray.<sup>16</sup> While neither approach achieves the same authority of Calvin Tomkins’ established biography of Duchamp, they both embrace the

<sup>7</sup> R. Poyner, ‘Typotranslation’, *Eye*, vol. 10, no. 38, Winter 2000.  
<sup>8</sup> The title page provides an English translation: ‘*In the infinitive*’: *A Typotranslation by Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk of Marcel Duchamp’s White Box*, The Typosophic Society, 1999, non-paginated.  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid., non paginated.  
<sup>10</sup> P. Thirkell, ‘From the Green Box to Typo/Topography: Duchamp and Hamilton’s Dialogue in Print’, *Tate Papers*, no.3, Spring 2005.

<sup>11</sup> E. Bonk, *The Portable Museum*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1989.  
<sup>12</sup> J. Åman and D. Birnbaum, eds., *De ou par Marcel Duchamp par Ulf Linde*, Stockholm: Sternberg Press, 2013. Designed by Oskar Svensson/Pjadad, Atelierslice.  
<sup>13</sup> K. Gerstner, Marcel Duchamp: “*Tu m*” *Puzzle upon Puzzle*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003.  
<sup>14</sup> I refer of course to Barr’s diagram for MoMA’s 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which presents each ‘ism’ of art as a logical consequence of preceding ‘isms’. In a lecture delivered at the Hood Museum, New Hampshire in 2012, Michael Taylor reiterated Benjamin Buchloh’s assertion that the *Boîte-en-valise* in particular can be regarded as a critique of this tendency. The lecture can be visited at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOeXeAy-aDs> (accessed 30 December 2016).  
<sup>15</sup> J. Gough-Cooper and J. Caumont, *Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy: 1887-1968*, Milano: Bompiani, 1993.  
<sup>16</sup> J. Gough-Cooper, J. Caumont, and A. Raffray, *La Vie Illustrée de Marcel Duchamp*, Paris: Centre national d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou, 1977.

idea that the artist's life was perhaps his finest artwork, and use design as the means to demonstrate this.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Girst's recent *Duchamp Dictionary*, designed by Heretic, reminds us in its introduction that while Duchamp himself didn't believe art could benefit from verbal translation, and regarded language as an 'error of humanity', he made an exception for the illustrated dictionary format.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by this, the book appears to cover every theme, work of art, publication and personage that might be useful for the general reader, with remarkable economy. Its use of highlighting for Duchamp quotes and bold text for linking to other entries leads the reader through a labyrinth both revealing yet highly compact. It contains no images of Duchamp's art itself, but compensates for this by providing illustrations which convey a Duchampian spirit (and of course gets round the expensive business of image rights). Their overall effect is a little too *Pythonesque* to my mind, and reinforces the misconception that Duchamp was closer to 'wacky' Surrealism than was ever really the case. But in its strident use of navy and fluorescent orange, the book has sought, and probably found, a younger audience which Duchamp scholarship needs. As an ironic take on the scholar's dictionary it has a contemporary, *Hipster* appeal. More than any before, this book asserts that whatever else he was, Duchamp was cool.

A similar sentiment no doubt informs the growing library of miniature hardback books being produced by Stefan Banz's *Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg / Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp*. Always in the same 14x10.5cm format, using around 200 pages, these little bricks of multilingual scholarship present a single essay focussed around either an individual Duchamp artwork, or more contemporary works which the editors believe fall within the discourse.

Each book is clothbound, suggesting a scholarly tone, but this is instantly undermined by using a forced hyphenation of foil stamped white sans serif capitals for its title, for example:

LA  
BROY-  
EUSE  
DE  
CHOCO-  
LAT  
or  
MAR-  
CEL  
DU-  
CHAMP:  
PORTE-  
BOU-  
TEILLES

This simple disruption, a little bit of oddness in an otherwise 'straight' approach, encapsulates the particular challenge and opportunity that Duchamp scholarship poses for graphic design, if it is to capture the spirit of his life and work: beautifully crafted, typographically 'wrong' but somehow right, serious but undercut with gentle humour. Too 'serious' or too 'funny', and it misses the point: getting that balance right, just as Richard Hamilton always did, ensures that Duchamp scholarship will continue to be presented in the manner it demands.

As per the *Dictionary of Visual Language* mentioned earlier, the visual metaphor is a conceptual device which

works by 'standing in' for something else; we decode the metaphor and complete the communicative process in our minds. Duchamp's insistence that 'the spectator completes the picture' clearly speaks of this process. Duchamp's 'metaphors' were perhaps more occluded than most, and spoke of themes pertaining to his private imaginary yet, set in the context of their time, perhaps yield other readings.<sup>19</sup>

Take for example his use of tobacco, smoke and paper. In 1936, Duchamp designed a pair of covers for a collection of erotic poems and collaged illustrations by Georges Hugnet, entitled *La Septième face du dé: Poèmes-Découpages*.<sup>20</sup> In typically Surrealist fashion, Hugnet's illustrations were assembled from cuttings from *Paris*, one of many pinup magazines of the time, and so combined naked women with Victorian engravings and fragments from contemporary advertising, one in particular featuring a cigarette brand. Hugnet published two versions: one in a numbered edition of 240, and a second special edition of just twenty. For this second edition, Duchamp used photographs of two cigarettes, greatly enlarged to fill the cover, making them about eleven inches in height. In both their disarming scale and mysterious banality, they call to mind Brassai and Salvador Dali's *Involuntary Sculptures*, six photographs published in *Minotaure* three years earlier.<sup>21</sup> The cigarettes are denuded of their paper thus rendering them useless; the anticipated pleasure of smoking is denied by this act of stripping. Are these a clue to the *risqué* nudes contained within? Perhaps, but the impossibility of the post-coital cigarette speaks of the limited sexual pleasure that the images inside provide; they may

stimulate desire for chocolate-grinding bachelors, but much like Duchamp's *Large Glass*, consummation will never occur. By this point, Duchamp had learnt (from Katherine Dreier) of the damage that the *Large Glass* had suffered in transit years before, but had yet to see it for himself. Produced on the eve of his return to the States to carry out its daunting repair, the cover design perhaps speaks of his private anguish that this work would be forever lost.

In 1945, the New York avant-garde and literary quarterly *View* devoted its March issue to Duchamp.<sup>22</sup> The front cover, designed by Duchamp, depicts a wine bottle (with his own WWI military service record as its label) emitting a residual plume of smoke into a starry deep blue sky, possibly alluding to his alleged pacifism.<sup>23</sup> This was the month that the US had firebombed Tokyo; by August Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be destroyed by nuclear weapons. His design for the back cover translates from the French as:

WHEN  
THE TOBACCO SMOKE  
ALSO SMELLS  
OF  
THE MOUTH  
WHICH EXHALES IT  
THE TWO ODOURS  
ARE MARRIED  
BY INFRA-THIN

<sup>19</sup> I am of course paraphrasing here. See Duchamp's *The Creative Act* as transcribed in Tomkins (1996), Appendix p. 510.  
<sup>20</sup> G. Hugnet and M. Duchamp, *La Septième Face du Dé: Poèmes-Découpages*, Paris: Éditions Jeanne Bucher, 1936.  
<sup>21</sup> *Minotaure*, no.1, Paris, 1933. Photographs of everyday objects presented as *Involuntary Sculptures*, including a bus ticket, a piece of bread, a distorted bar of soap and a rolled piece of paper obtained from a person described as "débile mental."  
<sup>22</sup> C. H. Ford and A. Breton, *View*, *Marcel Duchamp Number 5*, no. 1, March 1945.  
<sup>23</sup> In his biography, Tomkins makes light of this, with the exception of Duchamp's comments about warfare given to reporters on his first visit to New York in 1915: see C. Tomkins (1996) p. 153. However a compelling and sustained argument for considering Duchamp's criticism of militarism, and how it manifests throughout his life and work has been made by Kieran Lyons. In this regard, this essay is indebted to his essay entitled 'Military Avoidance: Marcel Duchamp and the Jura-Paris Road', *Tate Papers*, no.5, Spring 2006. Supportive of this perspective is also James Housefield's recent book *Playing with Earth and Sky: Astronomy, Geography and the Art of Marcel Duchamp*, Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> C. Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York: Holt, 1996.  
<sup>18</sup> T. Girst and Heretic, *The Duchamp Dictionary*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014, p. 10.

Perhaps as another way of saying that there's no smoke without fire, no act of aggression can be blameless. The bottle thus becomes the smoking gun, and its bad breath lingers. In an explanation given shortly after this appeared, he is quoted as saying:

(The infra-thin) is a word with human, affective connotations, and is not an exact laboratory measure. The sound or the music which corduroy trousers, like these, make when one moves, is pertinent to infra-slim. The hollow in the paper between the front and the back of a thin sheet of paper...To be studied!... it is a category which has occupied me a great deal over the last ten years.<sup>24</sup>

This last sentence would suggest that the infra-thin was perhaps in his mind when he designed the Hugnet cover in 1936; the transubstantiation from earthly tobacco to ethereal smoke is only made possible by the thinnest of substances. In February of that year, *Time* magazine would announce: 'Last week another milestone in the galloping progress of atomic transmutation was marked by the disclosure of a few atoms of Radium E created in the laboratories of the University of California'.<sup>25</sup> This is also the year Nazi Germany reoccupies the Rhineland, Italy occupies Addis Ababa and annexes Ethiopia, and the Spanish Civil War breaks out.

The world might literally be going up in smoke! Ever concerned with dimensionality, Duchamp would later write: 'the passage from one to the other takes place in the infrathin'.<sup>26</sup> In 1960, Duchamp revisits the smoking motif in his design for a 'last gasp' Surrealist show at the D'Arcy Galleries in New York. Entitled *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain*, Duchamp hangs a tobacconists' *carotte de tabac* sign above the gallery, and features an embossed image of the same for the catalogue cover.<sup>27</sup> This is the same year that France begins its nuclear testing programme in Algeria and Polynesia.

Revisiting his *View* cover of 1945, Duchamp designed a poster for an exhibition of his Readymades at the Galerie Givaudan, Paris, commencing in June 1967, just a few months after President Charles de Gaulle personally witnesses a nuclear test conducted on the atoll of Mururoa. The design features Duchamp's outstretched palm, his now trademark cigar smouldering between two fingers. The cigar emits a parodic mushroom cloud of smoke, and thus the flattened palm becomes a graphic gesture of protest.<sup>28</sup> The infra-thin once again assumes a darker expression—when matter meets antimatter, annihilation ensues.

And what are we left with but ashes, such as those collected from Duchamp's cigar at the conclusion of a banquet in 1965 held by the Association for the Study of Dada Movement? A tobacco jar, inscribed with Rose Sélavy, is thus transformed into a funerary urn and a late Readymade.<sup>29</sup>

Duchamp's use of smoke is just one instance where he employed a graphic metaphor to obliquely critique militarism, while simultaneously pursuing a metaphysical concept which resists precise verbal definition, one interpretation of which might allude to nuclear fission. Under the *aegis* of graphic projects which at first glance appear peripheral to his *oeuvre*, Duchamp pre-empts much contemporary graphic design which hides socio-political commentary in plain sight.

The graphic designer works in a space situated between logic and seduction, information and persuasion, telling and selling. Duchamp's graphic work explored this moment of apprehension, when logic is sidestepped by absurdity, or its corollary, when thought catches up with feeling, mentality with carnality. The moment is fleeting but both conditions are vital if art is to occur. Sometimes you can barely put a fag paper between them.

<sup>24</sup> Diary record of Denis de Rougemont in conversation with Duchamp at de Rougemont's summer house at Lake George, NY, 1945. Recorded in 'Marcel Duchamp, Mine de Rien', *Preuves* (Paris), XVIII, no. 204, February 1968. Tomkins' *Biography* (pp. 350-351) reminds us that on the morning of Duchamp's departure, Hiroshima is devastated by the world's first atomic bomb.

<sup>25</sup> Author unknown, 'Science: Radium E', *Time*, February 17, 1936.

<sup>26</sup> See Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, arranged and translated by Paul Matisse, G. K. Hall, Boston, 1983.

<sup>27</sup> F. M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: the Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Ghent, Amsterdam: Ludion Press, 1999, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> J. Housefield, *Playing with Earth and Sky: Astronomy, Geography and the Art of Marcel Duchamp*, Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2016, p. 206.