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THE DESIGNS AND SKETCHES OF MARCEL DUCHAMP

When we turn to the design or sketch of a complete work of art and wish to study it more closely, to gain an insight into the artist's intentions, to the mysteries of the creative imagination, we always presume that preparatory phase is characterised by a certain innocence. The conviction about the innocence of the sketch is a conviction about its direct connection to the original creative impulse which underlies the work. It is also a conviction that the direct notation lays bare the original intention, as yet untransformed by the formative act of creation.

The stripping of the work, or rather the conviction about such a stripping, is accompanied by a conviction about the stripping of the artist, his personality, attitudes, preferences, all noted down in the sketch and possible to be discovered by a critic with a graphological turn of mind. The sketch is thus innocent, as it does not hide anything, and sometimes reveals more than the work itself might perhaps wish to do. Duchamp's notes and sketches have always been included in the interpretations of his work. What is more, it seems that due to the enigmatic nature of his works, such as the *Large Glass and Étant donnés*, attempts at interpreting them cannot be successful without the help of the design — its notes and drawings. All the more so, as Duchamp himself had often encouraged students and critics to use his notes — in the first place, through their continuous publication (from small editions of the thirties to the complete ones on Sanouillet or the selections of Schwarz), and, secondly, through suitable declarations when giving interviews. The artist pointed to the importance of his notes by addressing his artistic creativity, or so he claimed, to the intellect and not to the contemplating eye. He also referred critics (usually not directly) to the various fragments of his annotated oeuvre.

All that created the impression that everything that the author of the *Large Glass* had created, though complex and enigmatic, was nevertheless an extraordinarily precise, symbolic message, loaded with information.

The present reflections on the notes and sketches of Duchamp were first written as part of a larger text which attempted to explain how it was possible to interpret the *Large Glass* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*), at the same time as a coded alchemic allegory, a record of experiences with four-dimensional space, a treatise on the state and evolution of art, transcribed with the help of esoteric symbolism, an expression of the author's psychosexual obsessions, reminiscences of Marey's books on movement, Bergson's philosophic treatises, etc.

The wish to seek an answer to the question, the wish to see through the veil put over the artist and his work, in a natural way leads us to Duchamp's notes and sketches — an often used basis of interpretation, and provokes us to study their contents, order and characteristic features.

Duchamp began collecting the notes, which record the design of the *Large Glass* and of other works as well as general reflections, conceptions, ideas, with the intention of exhibiting them in public, around the year 1912. Doubtlessly, the artist was not inspired by any romantic myth of the sketch, a graphological, personal trace of the artist, a trace that is closest to the fleeing inspiration. On the contrary — Duchamp was motivated rather by the wish to create the impression of long and careful calculations preceding his undertakings, to abandon both the trap of „the hand of the artist” and of estheticism. The calculation included not only the dimensions and order of the elements in the Glass, but also, one could say, their semantic dimension. Not only the visual aspect to the work became the subject of the analysis, but also, to the same degree, its sense. In that context, the undertakings included in the notes present themselves as the result of long and monotonous efforts, as the final presentation of crystallised ideas and forms. In the effort to „put Art back into the service of the mind”, the notes, which so determinedly stressed the mental character of Duchamp's works, became their integral part, designating them to the role of a symbolic notation of contents of great intellectual value.

The notes can be ordered into certain groups, with similarities of subject-matter serving as the criterium of selection. The following groups may be differentiated in the area of Duchamp's annotated work:

1. Notes describing the action in the *Large Glass* — the action taking place between the Bride and the Bachelors.
2. Notes of a purely technical nature, i.e. those concerning the planning of the elements of the *Large Glass*, their size, colours etc.
3. Notes of parascientific nature, containing remarks on the fourth dimension, geometry, aspects of perspective in painting.
4. Notes containing ideas for potential artistic activities, remarks concerning the different aspects of ready-mades, and fragments of a less precise meaning, such as an extensive note on the Jura-Paris road. The state of the notes, coupled with the author's failure to arrange them in a natural order, forces us to attempt to arrange more or less compact wholes from different fragments of Duchamp's notes when analysing the *Glass* and other works. Such a whole is certainly provided by the tale, compiled by Schwarz, of the Bachelors' gas travelling into the sphere of the Bride. In a similar manner, critics have put together whole series of notes referring to other issues, creating something in the manner of subject paths stretching across Duchamp's annotated work.

Those series of notes, longer or shorter, usually become the interpretative basis of the *Glass* and other works, all the more as the importance of the notes in the context of the artist's overall achievement, particularly the *Grand Verre*, as has already been mentioned, was pointed out by Duchamp himself:

„When I made this Glass, I did not intend to make a picture to be looked at, but a picture which one could simply use as a tube of paint (...). And so I wanted to add a book or rather a catalogue (...) in which every detail would be explained — catalogued”¹.

It is difficult, nevertheless, to make use of the artist's notes in a direct manner. E.g. the description of the machinery in the *Glass* is conducted in a quasi-poetic language:

¹ Duchamp's remarks noted down in: A. Jouffroy: *Une Revolution du regard*, Paris 1964; quoted from: *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*, London 1969, s. 7-8.

„Isolated cage
 in which would take place
 the storms and the
 fine werathers of the wasp”² (i.e. the Bride)
 (which undoubtedly possesses an esthetic value).

The tale of the Bride and the Bachelors is further characterised by the fact that its information value for us is small or almost non-existent. The tale takes place in a singular world, in the realm of which everything is lucid, but becomes unclear when we reach out beyond the context of that world. All the more so, as the tale, using specific terms has a self-closing quality, seeking justification within its own realm. Let us study an example:

„The motor with quite feeble cylinders
 is a superficial organ of the bride, it is
 activated by the love gasoline, a secretion of the
 bride’s sexual glands, and by the electric sparks
 of the stripping”³.

The motor is thus started up by love gasoline and the electric sparks of the stripping and next, it triggers the whole action of stripping.

One could say that the specific way the tale of the Bride and the Bachelors is told resembles the linguist’s sentence: „A maggy lenar dagly micked a suttle manton”, which attempts to present the semantic dimension of grammar. The sentence carries the information that a lenar, which is maggy, micked (and dagly at that) some suttle manton. But until an internal system of references is produced, we are unable to obtain any other information. Thus our store of knowledge about the Bride and the Bachelors makes sense only within its own sphere due to the lack of contextual references. Critics have to seek such references outside the reconstructed tale. Associated with the notes on the principle of an allegoric reading, the senses are in such a situation easy to summon, while the quasi-poetic language and form of notation make that all the easier.

Sometimes, a number of themes meet in the realm of one note. That is often true particularly in the case of notes concerning the technical aspects of the *Glass* and the tale about the Bride and the

² Notes and Projects..., s. 116.

³ Op. cit., s. 30.

Bachelors. In the quasi-poetic context, technical remarks may seem to possess their own symbolism. They also may become the subject of an allegoric interpretation.

Reflections on the potential of the fourth dimension, connected to the conclusions one could draw from the new concept of space for the phenomenon of perspective, were written down in a different language, one could say — a parascientific one. The language of the fragments and the type of Duchamp's sketches, surrounded by a network of sums and dimensions, are responsible for the parascientific aspect of Duchamp's annotated work. Its parascientific character creates an impression of the importance and precision of what has been written down in the notes. But at the same time, on account of the poetic context, the „scientific" character was made less explicit, or rather left open to an allegoric analysis.

The notes concerning the fourth dimension, geometry, perspective, may thus be interpreted in two ways: 1) as a record of the artist's interests and thoughts, while his works are their experimental test, 2) as a symbolic transcription achieved with the help of remarks on the fourth dimension.

The interpretative paths, of which we have described merely two are, in the end, characterised by the fact that, in the first place, they are usually separate, independent, and secondly, they are what they are — path, series, with some notes selected and others repudiated; they represent a passage through the content of the notes, a change from penetrating into the interior to journeying along one plane.

Finally, it is worth pointing out some specific expressions found in the notes, which are very often quoted by critics. They usually appear as a certain summing up of a series of statements. Key-expressions which thus appear, if they may be so called, focus the meaning of a fragment of the text they are accompanying, their mysterious quality and position draw our attention and they thus turn into centres of interpretation, at the same time imparting dynamism to the appropriate verbal context. Their privileged position in a certain way uproots them from the context in which they function and they begin an independent existence outside it. At the same time, they become susceptible to meanings that are given to them from outside, all the more so, as they are explained in a specific manner within the notes themselves. Let us quote a few examples.

The following expressions are most frequently used in the interpretations: „arbor-type”, „delay in glass”, „a world in yellow”, „agricultural machine”, „apparition of an appearance”. And thus „delay in glass” is a:

„poem in prose
spitton in silver”⁴.

In the case of the expression „agricultural machine”, we do not even know what it refers to: the Bride, or the *Glass* as a whole. „Apparition of an appearance” is in turn interpreted as „a lighted appearance from within the picture”⁵, and at the same time „in general, the picture is the apparition of an appearance”⁶.

Key-expressions thus gain the ability to draw meanings from different external spheres, as they themselves have to be interpreted to turn into factors interpreting Duchamp’s visual achievement. They are, just as the notes themselves, both the object and the prerequisite of the explanation.

For A. Schwarz⁷, the expression: „world in yellow” — is an obvious reference to alchemic treatises. By giving his work such a title, Duchamp repeated, according to Schwarz, the classic operation of transforming the natural colour of the glass into the yellow colour of philisophic gold. To Schwarz, almost all the notes of the author of the ready-mades in an obvious way bear affinity to alchemic works, while the contents of individual fragments refer to fundamental issues noted down in esoteric texts.

Schwarz considers „love gasoline” — the secretion of the Bride’s sexual glands — an astral sperm or spiritus mundi, while the fragment about the blending of the bachelors’ gas with that petrol — a clear reference to the alchemic coniunctio oppositorum. For Burnham⁸, though, „the world in yellow” is not a sign of any alchemic affinities of the *Glass*, but is the colour of hope, (according to Lusher’s psychological tests), denoting a trend orientated at the future. That is important, as to the critic, the *Glass* seems a treatise

⁴ Op. cit., s. 44

⁵ Op. cit., s. 78

⁶ Op. cit., s. 78

⁷ A. Schwarz: *The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor, Even*, in: Marcel Duchamp, New York, Philadelphia 1973.

⁸ J. Burnham: *Marcel Duchamp: „Magister Ludi”*, in: J. Burnham: *The Structure of Art*, New York 1971.

on art, an analysis of its condition and perspectives, which on the whole seem optimistic. The optimism appears on account of the person of Duchamp himself, who (presented as the ninth of the tin male forms in the lower part of the *Glass*), would point the way to the future to other artists.

Another key-expression: „delay in glass”, makes L. Beier⁹ connect Duchamp's work with Bergson's philosophy. A different test she found in the notes — „plastic duration”, seems to confirm the thesis. Let us add that „delay in glass” denotes — according to Burnham, Duchamp's wish to postpone finishing the *Glass* (it was left incomplete) until the Avant Garde would have proven to be a closed and limited system.

Critics of Duchamp's notes have not limited themselves to interpretations of the various „key-expressions”. Large fragment and whole passages have also been interpreted.

It has already been mentioned that Duchamp himself stressed the importance of his notes and encouraged critics to make use of them. Sometimes, such encouragement was offered in the form of some interpretative clue the artist would suddenly reveal e.g. in an interview, a clue the notes could confirm. The self-commentary embedded in the artist's notes could be, and indeed has often been used both as an auxiliary and a basic interpretative tool. But at the same time, it gave Duchamp the possibility to actively influence the process of analysis of his artistic achievement, the possibility to steer the attention of the critics penetrating the open area of his works and notes. To steer and, as a consequence, to inspire an active reception of his works, to increase their „productivity”, to steer public interest and eliminate the possibility of the works being classified, made to conform to a given pattern, frozen in one form.

J. Claire's¹⁰ example is characteristic in that context — he connects the artist's wish to vindicate perspective in painting with the notes concerning the same subject. As the notes contain remarks both on perspective and the fourth dimension, Claire's studies bore fruit in an interpretation in which problems of topology were to a great

⁹ L. Beier: *Time Machine: a Bergsonian Approach to the Large Glass*, „Gazette des Beaux Arts”, nr 86, 1976.

¹⁰ J. Clair: *Marcel Duchamp et la tradition des perspecteurs*, in: *L'Oeuvre de Marcel Duchamp*, Milano 1967.

extent responsible for the form of the *Large Glass* and of *Étant donnés*.

The sketch is often an introduction, the first phase. Further phases build up a process in which transformations and enrichment take place.

Is a sketch *ex post* possible? Perhaps it is so only if a copy were to be called into being, or if we were to decide to create a new, independent composition on the basis of a complete work. But is a sketch with an unclear status: neither before nor after at all possible

Towards the end of his life, Duchamp made a few drawings, most of which were published by A. Schwarz in 1967. One of the earlier sketches titled „*Cols Alites (le Tignet Grasse)*” seems of particular interest to us. At the back of drawing, Duchamp wrote: „Project pour la modelle 1959 de la Marieé mise a nu par ses celibataires même)”. The drawing presents the *Large Glass* with an outline of a Highland landscape and an electric post added in the part with the Bachelors. When one sees the drawing without being aware of the existence of *Étant donnés* (Duchamp worked on the latter in secret, and it was brought to light only after his death, in accordance with the artist’s last will, and put together according to the instructions he left behind), it seems to offer yet another mystery, additionally intriguing as it is difficult to imagine that the aim was to underline the electric nature of the connection between the Bride and the Bachelors. The situation changes when we become aware of the existence of *Étant donnés*. The Highland landscape of the drawing becomes a connecting link between the two drawings. Duchamp’s last work makes the drawing in question start to function as a meaningful gesture pointing to the connections between *Étant donnés* and *Grand Verre* (the *Large Glass*). *Cols Alites* seems to act as an intermediary in those connections. What exactly that mediation consists of, though, can be found only after interpreting the *Glass*, *Étant donnés* and, of course, the drawing itself. Such an approach has often given birth to the process of a new reading of the *Glass* (through the *Étant donnés*), and — as a consequence — of the notes as well.

O. Paz¹¹ draws the conclusion that the title of the drawing — *Cols Alites* - means that the Highland landscape, the one in the drawings,

¹¹ O. Paz: *Water Writes Always in Plural*, in: *Marcel Duchamp...*

is made up of mountain passes (cols), which, are sick (alites). It is thus pointed out that communication between the sphere of the Bachelors and that of the Bride is made very difficult. Paz also turns attention to the homophonic nature of Cols Alites (Causality), which is to point to an interdependence between the *Large Glass* and *Étant donnés*. During an attempt to understand the latter Paz writes, one becomes engaged in an interplay of relations and mutual references. Assemblages, through its mysteriousness, breeding unease, refers one back to the title, the title to one of the notes, the notes to the *Large Glass*, and the *Glass* to our imagination, to our attempts to interpret the glass picture. That interplay of mutual references finds an analogy, Paz claims, in the common feature of the *Glass* and *Étant donnés* — a closed circuit of glances.

The Bride, Paz continues, is not only seen as an erotic object. She also views herself in the sensuous glance of the viewer. Hence, the viewer looks at the Bride, and the Bride looks at herself in the eyes of the viewer contemplating her nudity (the Bride of the *Glass* is here identical to the Bride of *Étant donnés*). At that point, Paz points to an affinity between Duchamp's interplay of glances and the myth about Diane and Acteon.

Diane also needs Acteon, she is realized in his glance. Acteon is a tool enabling the goddess to attain „self-seeing”. When we turn to the myth about her, another expression found in the notes is clarified: „pendu femelle”. The worshippers of Artemis inhabiting Rhodos used to hang portraits of the virgin on trees and called them: Apanchomene, which means: „pendu femelle”. Diane, further, was a driad, Paz writes, and thus the expression „arbor type” becomes clear.

The sketch in question did not appear before *Étant donnés*, as the latter had by then most probably reached the phase of realization. It was also not a sketch about the *Glass*, as at that time it was not a question of creating a copy or of noting down a certain phase of creative thinking, in which the *Large Glass* would be treated as a point of departure. Its status is as unclear as its sense and function.

Putting it shortly, Duchamp's designs and sketches fall short of the expectations often placed in the early phase of a work of art. They serve to open ever new interpretative possibilities rather than to offer ready solutions, they wave promises before the eyes of critics

rather than keep their commitments and — on the whole — darken the picture instead of clarifying it. We therefore have to enquire whether they can truly be called designs and sketches, to what extent they mirror the creative process and in what degree serve something that does not usually lie within the aims of a design. It seems that the open character of the notes, coupled with a similar character of the artist's works and the whole system of the artist's tactic gestures, prove that the projects and sketches lack innocence.

It seems that the preparatory phase was prepared, or at least its reception seems to have been prepared, and that Duchamp turned it into a purposeful game with the critic, with the viewer. A game in the course of which the *Grand Verre* or *Étant donnés* gain a meta-artistic sense, assuming their characteristic form in the stream of meanings, in the stream of interpretations. They become what a work of art is in the first place: a path to be traversed, a meeting, a dispute and an agreement between the artist and the viewer.

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