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Among the connections that Marcel Duchamp maintained with the nineteenth century, one in particular stands out: his relationship to Mallarmé. Duchamp himself mentioned the important and even crucial role that the poet played in the creation of his work. In 1946, he declared, after having made clear that at the time of *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), “Mallarmé and Laforgue were closer to my taste” than Rimbaud or Lautréamont, who “seemed too old to me”:

My ideal library would have contained all Roussel’s writings—Brisset, perhaps Lautréamont and Mallarmé. Mallarmé was a great figure. This is the direction in which art should turn: to an intellectual expression, rather than an animal expression. I am sick of the expression “bête comme un peintre”—stupid as a painter.¹

Duchamp saw Mallarmé, whose work he was reading at the beginning of the 1910s, as a vital ally in the construction of a different art.² This was an art that functioned by way of criticism of, and a going beyond, a certain relation to the pictorial. The numerous commentators on Duchamp’s work have not failed to underline this link. We can say, therefore, with some certainty that these two major figures of modernity shared a common creative target range, and that for each of them it crystalized primarily in the shape given to the finished rendering of their work. Both for Mallarmé and for Duchamp, there is a similar economy of means, and in each case a similar reduction to the essential asserts itself. For Mallarmé, this made for a poetic oeuvre that he claimed to have created “only by *elimination*,”³ a collection of short texts—“scattered fragments,”⁴ “trifles”⁵—in thin

1. Duchamp in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney, “Eleven Europeans in America,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 13, no. 4/5 (1946), pp. 19 and 21.

2. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 30.

3. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 77.

4. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance V, 1892*, ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 176.

5. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 184.

booklets rather than tomes, and in what he called, in a famous letter to Verlaine, “trinkets,”⁶ “the thousand fragments already known,” or again “shreds” like “a collection of scraps from materials which are centuries old or precious,” representing so many stanzas or sonnets sent “now and again . . . to the living” as the poet intermittently circulated his “visiting card.”⁷ The latter, a “minimal form” if ever there were such a thing, was a metaphor for the poetic format and the form of address that defined it.⁸ And it went along with that old “mania for sonnets” whose pregnant presence within himself Mallarmé explained by the fact that the sonnet was “a great poem in miniature.”⁹ This, then, was another way to underline the idea that the poetic form was always tied to a deliberately counted out and absolutely measured process of pruning—an extreme rarity and concision—allowing for the display of the essence of the world, the poet’s dream being to achieve “a rarefaction of pictures in a few measured signs.”¹⁰ (Mallarmé said to his friends, “In four pages, one can say everything; I shall explain the world in four pages.”)¹¹ In the same way, Duchamp obeyed an economy of means in the visual arts, saying, in reference to the 1912 version of *Nude Descending a Staircase*: “Reduce, reduce, reduce was my thought.”¹² We can apply this formula to the whole of his work. Thus, for example, he was to refer to his notes as “ideas put down on pieces of paper as they came along . . . tiny bits of paper . . . cut or torn off.”¹³ In these notes, the greater part of which he kept in three boxes,¹⁴ Duchamp clearly explored, to use Mallarmé’s words, the logic of the scrap and the shred that leads on to a rhapsody of brilliant shards.

This literary economy went along with his public life. Mallarmé was conscious of the “immediate disappearance of writing,” declaring that poetry “doesn’t

6. Ibid., p. 145.

7. Ibid., p. 144. We know that Mallarmé, in this letter and elsewhere, conceived of his work in terms of two categories of publication: on the one hand, the album, a collection of fragments and shreds, and, on the other, the Book, “architectural and premeditated,” that was to remain for him, using Duchamp’s terms, a “definitively uncomplete” project, consisting only of fragments, scattered diagrams, and notes, i.e., once again, fragments and shreds.

8. Pascal Durand, *Mallarmé: Du sens des formes au sens des formalités* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 146.

9. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 11.

10. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, lettres sur la poésie*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 621.

11. Mallarmé as quoted by Henri de Régnier in *Les Cahiers inédits* (Paris: Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet, 2002), p. 372.

12. Duchamp in “Eleven Europeans in America,” p. 20.

13. “Changer de nom simplement.” A dialogue between Marcel Duchamp and Jean Viau broadcast by the Radio Télévision Canadienne on July 17, 1960. The transcript was printed in *Fin 5* (June 2000), p. 11.

14. These were the *Box of 1914* (1914), the *Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, known as the *Green Box* (1934), and *In the Infinitive*, known as the *White Box* (1966).

have much power out there.”¹⁵ In his *Variations on a Subject*, he used the expression “restricted action,” and by this he meant the measured echo of poetic writing and its inherent weakness, its excessively calibrated effects, and also the weak public light cast by the very existence of the one who wrote, his discretion, or, again, his “missing destiny—at least, social destiny.”¹⁶ Such an abdication or “missing” pervaded his attitude at the time; it was the stance of one who was “on strike vis-à-vis society.”¹⁷ This *stepping to one side*, setting aside, was inscribed in the very definition of writing. It applied to every man of letters worthy of the name, and it was indeed the signature of a social and political condition: “Can we know what writing is? An ancient, vague but jealous practice, whose meaning resides with the mystery of the heart. Whoever achieves it, utterly, cuts himself off.”¹⁸ It should be hardly surprising to us, therefore, that Mallarmé, at the time of *Hérodiade*, was to declare, “I find intoxication in exceptional solitude.”¹⁹ He was to insist on the absolutely pared-down nature of his own existence, and to claim to have led “an entire life stripped of anecdotes”²⁰ before finally becoming, at the end of his days, “a much sought-after hermit,”²¹ as we learn from one of his close friends who, in a sort of authorized account, described Mallarmé as “an enemy of all publicity, eking out a living on a teacher’s salary,”²² taking on the mantle of “noble poverty,” and assuming “an infinite detachment from all honors”²³—a modernist hero who led “the sad and sorry existence of an obscure and poorly paid schoolteacher”²⁴ and who as a result was to die, as another of his intimate circle was to confirm, after having lived “in poverty and without honors.”²⁵ This same *discretion* and *restriction* are keys to the way in which Duchamp arranged his own personal inscription into his own time. As Pontus Hulten tells us, Duchamp “stood apart from his century, almost absent.”²⁶ He preferred the study of small energies related to the exploration of the infra-thin to social rules and commitments of any kind, and his life was characterized by a refusal to join any group, by retirement, silence, a hatred of activism

15. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), p. 217.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

17. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 23.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 79.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

21. Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *Stéphane Mallarmé: L’Absolu au jour le jour* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), pp. 440–57.

22. Camille Mauclair, *Mallarmé chez lui* (Paris: Grasset, 1935), p. 17.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

25. *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 8., ed. Jackson Matthews (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 328.

26. Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), p. 621.

and, beyond all purely political considerations, of the social games of the Parisian art milieu. Restricted action, therefore, was here an ethical stance, and what we might call, following Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp's *secrecy* was to contribute, in the same way as did the *fold* for Mallarmé, in large part and quite paradoxically, to making his life and work indelible in our memory.²⁷

This essentialism, this *general economy*, bordered what was, if not exactly the erection of a common adversary for these two men, at least the specification of a significant counterpoint to their respective works: namely, the lyricism of the subject and its mythologization. These latter tendencies represented only slight deviations from the idea of the modern subject and its omnipotence, the hypostasis of the *ego cogito*. We can roughly schematize this incompatibility by looking at the ways in which Mallarmé and Duchamp put forward the figure of the artist. As is well known, far from advocating for a cult of the "creator-genius" working through the affirmation of his own person and subjectivity (understood as the absolute ground of his work), and far therefore from extolling the Romantic self (such as was to be found in a certain type of French poetry), Mallarmé maintained that "the pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, through the clash of their ordered inequalities."²⁸ This made the poem the means by which the writer's person might enact its withdrawal from view, and it made the book into a volume that was "impersonified . . . to the extent that one separates from it as author."²⁹ The book, therefore, was a spiritual instrument that necessarily, to quote Mallarmé once again, "entails no signatory,"³⁰ and the man of letters was duty bound to safeguard his "multiplicity or impersonality."³¹ Thus, in his correspondence, it was perfectly logical for Mallarmé, who had, at the time of *Hérodiade*, claimed to have produced the work by means of "self-destruction,"³² to say that his "personal work . . . will be anonymous, since the Text would speak by itself and without the author's voice."³³ As for the line of poetry, it was "very beautiful only in impersonal garb, by which I mean typographic garb"³⁴—in other words, in that moment when the sign became visible and when the hand and the body that traced the words became absent. There were two aspects to the way in which this impersonalization was articulated. The first of these was the poetic work itself and that which crystalized it (the production of lines, the reading of the Book), which led Mallarmé, as he confided to his friend Henri Cazalis, to be, at the time of the *Hérodiade*, "utterly dead" insofar as

27. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 86.

28. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 208.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

32. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 78.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

he was the person he had incarnated before the very instant of access to the poetic state, and to state, “I am now impersonal and no longer the Stéphane that you knew, —but a capacity possessed by the spiritual Universe to see itself and develop itself, through what was once me.”³⁵ The *accomplished* poet thus became an intermediary through which, very much in tune with Hegel, thought was able to think itself³⁶ in a space devoid of the name of an author, becoming thus the vector of a disappearance effected through the reflexivity of an operation that produced “a kind of awareness without a subject”³⁷—a “Subject without subject.”³⁸ Mallarmé went very far in this direction, and very far also in the celebration of it, admitting as much: “I like seeking refuge in impersonality—which seems to me to be a consecration.”³⁹ But this impersonalization was articulated also in terms of the general order of art in all its disciplines, and it marked the historical value of certain of its instances. Thus Whistler was, for Mallarmé, an artist whose desire was that everything that came out of him should be a masterpiece, and that every masterpiece should have as great a character of impersonality as possible;⁴⁰ his work “plays at miracles, and negates the signer.”⁴¹ In the same way, the hand of Manet, who “seeks to lose his personality in nature herself,”⁴² was to arrive at “an impersonal abstraction guided only by the will, oblivious of all previous cunning.”⁴³ Manet and the Impressionists attained greatness because they were “new and impersonal men placed directly in communion with the sentiment of their time.”⁴⁴ Wagner also had created through music a “stage empty, abstract, and impersonal,”⁴⁵ and this was in response (a sign of his unequalled greatness) to the necessity of creating a theater for a myth that was “stripped of all personality.”⁴⁶ In the same way, seeing a ballet featuring the dancer Elena Cornalba, the poet was delighted because the primary subject of dance was, he wrote, “in its ceaseless ubiquity . . . a moving synthesis of the attitudes of each group,” adding: “There results a reciprocity produc-

35. Ibid., p. 74.

36. Ibid.

37. Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 42.

38. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 77.

39. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 78.

40. Gordon Millan, *Les “Mardis” de Stéphane Mallarmé: Mythes et réalités* (Saint-Genouph: Librairie Nizet, 2008), p. 80.

41. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 97.

42. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 459.

43. Ibid., p. 448.

44. Ibid., p. 468.

45. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 109.

46. Ibid., p. 111.

ing the *un*-individual, both in the star and in the chorus.”⁴⁷ Returning to literature, when Mallarmé praised *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, he recognized in Zola “the style itself which is rapid and transparent, impersonal and light just like the glance of your modern reader.”⁴⁸ For Mallarmé, therefore, impersonality or impersonification, the reflexivity of thought detaching itself from the person, mind without a subject, was very much the repeated sign of the coefficient of art, and indeed of great art. Duchamp detested exaggerations of the ego and declared: “My intention was always to get away from myself. Call it a little game between ‘I’ and ‘me.’”⁴⁹ He was to explore, throughout his life and work, a fragmentation and a becoming plural of subjectivity that wrecked any pretension that the latter might have of having the last word and of asserting itself as a foundational and absolute entity—as something *unique*. The many and diverse signatures that punctuate his correspondence are further evidence of this dissemination (Duche, Totor, Roger Maurice, Morice, Marcel Dee, Dee [Vorced], Rose Marcel, Marcel à vie, Sélavy, Marcel Rose . . .), as is the figure of his alter ego Rose Sélavy, and this shattering was nicely contained in an anonymous photograph taken in 1917 at the Broadway Photo Shop in New York. The photo showed Duchamp seated in front of a hinged mirror unit, multiplying the number of his faces to infinity. This fragmentizing of self was taken up again a few years later with *Wanted: \$2,000 Reward* (1923), a portrait of Duchamp as a wanted criminal and whose caption, itself part of the work, pointed to an infinity of possible aliases, including that of Rose Sélavy. In every case, then, we have the extinction of a certain vision of the modern subject and the lyricism attaching to it; we see the dislocation of a certain metaphysics of subjectivity and personhood, and along with it the dislocation of its most exaggerated Romantic version. And that occurs through the *impersonification* of this subject (its disappearance as an identifiable operator and sovereign enunciator, and as an individualized consciousness) and the dissemination of its signatures and incarnations (its withdrawal rendered therefore possible by the proliferation of its faces and designations, a strategy to send it out of sight). And these are so many operations that invent a “Cogito for a dissolved self.”⁵⁰

And finally, this self-impersonifying subject circulated its works, its bits and shards, by means of an economy that had nothing to do with money. Mallarmé, it is known, would write his verses on ornaments that he would then offer to his close friends (Méry Laurent, Marie and Geneviève Mallarmé especially). This was a form of address with no rejoinder, pure gifts of words borne by everyday household media or material supports sufficiently unobtrusive in size that the recipient could take possession of them quite naturally (fans, Easter eggs, pebbles from the beach

47. Ibid., p. 130.

48. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 113.

49. Katharine Kuh, *Talks with Seven Modern Artists* (1962) (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 83.

50. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xxi.

at Honfleur, bottles of Calvados, photographs, glazed fruit). The economy of the gift, of the pure offering for its own sake, but sometimes also the return gift, pervades in various ways his entire poetic production: texts given, gift-texts that allow us to establish a typology of offerings. But with Mallarmé this gratuitousness went along with a financial concern, as the project for the Book was getting underway, to find adequate means to produce it and, more specifically, to find a way to balance the expenses and receipts of the poetic enterprise. This concern can be seen in the numerous formulae and calculations found in the preparatory notes for the great work.⁵¹ These notations bring into focus the (political) stance according to which “everything is summed up between Aesthetics and Political Economy.”⁵²

Duchamp also had dealings throughout his life with the logic of the art economy and the art market, and this was simply to ensure his own livelihood and survival. Along with his friend Henri-Pierre Roché, he took advantage of the art market to sell works (often Brancusi sculptures) that allowed him, through the material independence made possible by their sale, to maintain his freedom to be indifferent. But he also put into effect the generosity of the gift, and this is evident to an extent in several examples of the “Box in a Valise.” The twenty boxes that were first produced between 1941 and 1949, to which can be added four others that carried the number zero, included some that were bought by institutions and private collectors (this is true of the boxes at Yale University in Peggy Guggenheim’s collection, and it is probably also true of the piece owned by the Stedelijk Museum). But Duchamp certainly gave away others.⁵³ Each of these boxes contained a unique artwork created by Duchamp, and this gifting further enriched and expanded the offering thus made to his friends and more intimate partners. These pieces emerged very often at crucial moments in his work. His New York gallery owner Julien Levy, for example, was to receive an exact-size maquette of the back cover of the March 1943 issue of the journal *VVV*, with page layout by Duchamp; Roché became the owner of the colorized collotype of *Portrait of Chess Players*; Roberto Matta found himself the recipient of a collage of human hair that suggested a human body; Marie Reynolds came into possession of the hand-colored collotype of *Sonata*; and Teeny Matisse received an original drawing from 1912 entitled *2 Characters and an Automobile (Study)*. But the most striking of these offerings in the economy of the gift was surely the one Duchamp made to his so passionately celebrated lover Maria Martins. This was the famous *Faulty Landscape* that the artist created with his own sperm, an offered work that was also an authentic gift of self,

51. Jacques Scherer, *Le Livre de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). See, for example, sheets 53 (B), 54 (B), 71 (B), 79 (B), 82 (B).

52. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 197.

53. Ecke Bonk only mentions the two purchases: one by Peggy Guggenheim and the other by Yale University Art Gallery (see Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise de ou par Marcel Duchamp et Rose Sélavy* [New York: Rizzoli, 1989], pp. 257–97). But it is possible that the institutions, including the Stedelijk Museum or even MoMA, that obtained this object very quickly did so by acquisition. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine Duchamp selling a *Box*, for example, to Mary Reynolds, Teeny Matisse, or even Maria Martins.

an absolute gift, and yet one that was inoperative as such, physically infertile—a chaste bachelor’s gift. In this way and in many instances, the address with no rejoinder was to find a place in Duchamp’s personal museum and in the recapitulation of its trajectory, taking the form of a gifted object (the entire work in miniature) retaining within itself a special offering, a unique and even precious gift.

Windows

Having pointed out by way of introduction these few background facts, we can now go further into the objectives, themes, and subjects that bring together, or at least indicate, a common field of exploration for Duchamp and Mallarmé. Doing so will allow us to analyze in more detail what it is that made their worlds resonate with one another. Among many possible choices, there are three motifs (noticed little or not at all by the critics) that can serve to define the relationship. The first motif involves an artifact—the window—to which Mallarmé, in the collection *Poems*, devoted one of his poems of Baudelairean and Parnassian inspiration. “Les Fenêtres” was written in 1863 and reworked by Mallarmé throughout the rest of his life, proof no doubt of the importance he ascribed to it but also of the difficulty of its composition. In the poem, the artifact is mentioned in the plural, and in a first instance it becomes an object permitting an old and sick man confined to a sickroom—who is, up to a certain point, Mallarmé’s double, speaking in his name from the middle of the poem onward and becoming a second character—to imagine, as he looks through the window and as he kisses its panes, that he can grasp the beyond, the infinite, and thus free himself of the weight of sickness and old age. But this freeing, the expected salvation that would come through the gaze directed toward a sought-after exteriority, is at best transitory and ephemeral; in reality, it is impossible. The window, rendered opaque in part by the abject trace left by the kiss of the dying man (he “befouls / the lukewarm golden panes with a long bitter kiss”), opens above all onto the spectacle of an exacerbated luminosity, a visual saturation that is more the consequence of drunkenness (“He lives a drunk”) than of a precise gaze aimed at a clear and distinct motif situated beyond the object:

his eye, on the horizon gorged with light,
sees golden galleys, beautiful as swans,
asleep on a fragrant, purple river⁵⁴

The windowpanes and muntins are less tools of perception than projective tools opening onto a “private” theater. They spur a type of hallucination more than they offer the direct discovery of an external world as such. The rest of the

54. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, trans. and notes by Peter Manson (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2012), pp. 26–29.

poem confirms this impossible transparency as Mallarmé expresses himself in his own name and contemplates in the windowpanes nothing but his own reflection—the specular result produced by the recurrence of an aborted translucency gathering to itself a “dream for a diadem.” Hence the poet’s invocation “—That the windowpane be art, or the mystical—” uttered before an object that is seen as a viaticum but that is found to be only the formula for a dreamed liberation, soon vanquished by the return of the here and now. Still, this invocation will at least have marked out an equivalence between the poetic act, the domain of art, and an artifact to which these can be assimilated. For if it is possible to see in “Les Fenêtres” the pessimistic evocation of “the drama of the ideal . . . , of the insurmountable disgust aroused by real life,”⁵⁵ i.e., the desire to escape those mundane concerns that a gaze through the window can allow us to flee (if only scarcely and for a brief moment), it is also possible to detect here the celebration of an object, kissed and therefore venerated at one point in the text by the sick old man, toward which the history of literature has not been indifferent. Becoming the absolute (because adored) equivalent of art, the sign and means of an authentic artistic project that bears the imprint of a problematic transparency, an unattainable ideal transparency, the panes and muntins impose themselves on the gaze as such and for themselves without ever having led Mallarmé to the outside.⁵⁶ The window is the true threshold of visibility pointing to the very instant of discovery, and it is also in *Poems*, specifically in the poem “Une dentelle s’abolit” (Lace sweeps itself aside),⁵⁷ that the window emerges as a pure matrix. This ungraspable translucency, the source, in “Les Fenêtres,” of the singular value of the object, resonates with and renders more complex the themes of limpidity, brilliance, and transparency with its “redemptive power”⁵⁸ and also with the affirmation of their ontological values.

Duchamp, for his part, used to say that he wanted to be seen as a “windower,”⁵⁹ and in 1936, when he was repairing the *Large Glass* (a monumentally sized window) that had been damaged in transport, he dubbed himself “a glazier. . . [who] thinks of nothing apart from repairing broken glass.”⁶⁰ He was to use this artifact as a means to analyze the art of painting and its finished product, thus problematizing, as did Mallarmé, its transparency and, following Mallarmé’s injunction, making art out of a pane of glass. In 1920, with *Fresh Widow*, Duchamp used pieces of leather to close

55. Paul Bénichou, *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 69.

56. Laurent Jenny, *La Fin de l'intériorité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), p. 83.

57. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. and with commentary by Henry Weinfeld (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 80.

58. Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), pp. 492–95.

59. Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 1997), p. 205.

60. *Correspondance Marcel Duchamp/Henri-Pierre Roché 1918–1959*, ed. Scarlett and Philippe Reliquet (Geneva: MAMCO, 2012), p. 29.

off the squares of a painted wood-framed window of modest dimensions (30 1/2 x 17 5/8 inches) made by a craftsman and whose title—its “invisible color,”⁶¹ as he would say (a way of speaking about painting without making use of its traditional tools)—was a play on at least three possible meanings: French window, i.e., window *à la française*, as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon bow windows; merry widow, or “fresh widow” (with the sense of smart or cheeky);⁶² and, through another association of ideas peculiar to the French language, a guillotine (a slang expression for which is “the widow”). But what act of mourning does this window, signed by Rose Sélavy, who makes her first appearance here (Rose was to become Rrose a few months later), materialize, and from what putting to death does it emanate? Obviously, this is the death of transparency, or the death more exactly of an opening that Alberti had made one of the essential points in the modern definition of the art and product of painting, an element that has become a topos in the history of art:

Therefore, all other things about it left aside, I will say what I myself do when I paint. First I trace as large a quadrangle as I wish, with right angles, on the surface to be painted; in this place, it [the rectangular quadrangle] certainly functions for me as an open window through which the *historia* is observed, and there I determine how big I want men in the painting to be.⁶³

By doubling the closure of the window (the two panels in *Fresh Widow* are closed, and the square panes are opaque), Duchamp forbids its complete inscription into the Albertian account of painting (followed by Leonardo’s vision of the surface of a painting as a plate of glass),⁶⁴ since what the artist puts forward here is a way of seeing the painting as object in which its very ground is uprooted, making of the painting-as-object not the host of an *historia* but rather the space of an immanence of painting to itself. *Fresh Widow* is a physically closed artifact—a blind window—that refutes all possibility of the transcendence of its material structuring and that contradicts all transparency, despite Duchamp’s indication that “the little panes are covered with black leather, and would have to be shined every morning like a pair of shoes in order to shine like real panes.”⁶⁵ In order to go beyond that, we have to read the title.

Transparency is also put into question in his work *Brawl at Austerlitz*, the second miniature window made for Duchamp by a craftsman, produced one year

61. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 206.

62. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 66.

63. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. and ed. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 39.

64. Jean Clair, *Sur Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 66–70.

65. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 66.

after *Fresh Widow*. Duchamp said that working with it was like painting in oil⁶⁶—another way of uprooting the ground of painting and its product. On each of the two large panes of the two closed panels, and visible from both sides of the object, a figure eight has been traced as if in whiting. In the same way, a trace of white can be seen on the two smaller upper windows. This gesture, it is generally accepted, indicates to everyone that some work is still going on in a certain place, that a building is under construction and the installed glass does not yet allow for the entirety of a completed structure to be seen. This truncated transparency becomes thus the sign of the very incompleteness of the Albertian painting, i.e., the incompleteness of its story, the analysis of which becomes interminable, and yet it is also the sign of the possibility of a future attaching to it, of a future that is potentially to be constructed. With *Brawl at Austerlitz* it is the endless story of the art and object of painting that is materialized; it is a work that therefore relativizes—and quite strongly—the *soi disant* claim to have abandoned the art of painting, an abandonment that Duchamp supposedly initiated and carried out. Even if after having created *Tu m'* in 1918 Duchamp no longer practiced painting in a conventional manner, conventional painting did not cease to be for him a topic of investigation and analysis, carried out notably by way of an examination of and commentary upon its Albertian definition and of the place accorded in it to transparency. Hence Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915–23) was another key instance in which the translucency of the window, so dear to Alberti and so problematized by Mallarmé, i.e., the translucency of painting as such (and here specifically of painting on glass), was seriously taken on. During the construction of this work, Duchamp had thought to give it the explicit form of a window with a wood-and-copper frame and a handle to open it.⁶⁷ He was not to achieve this highly illustrative version, but nonetheless he did frame the two panels of the *Large Glass*, separated by two metallic bands, within an iron structure. There are two characteristics peculiar to the transparency at work here. First of all, there is a contextual transparency because the painting on glass is transformed, up to a certain point, precisely through the fact of its transparency, by the changes made to the context in which it is installed, and these changes act upon its visual identity. Every time a visitor moves behind the two superposed glass panels, he transforms their aspect, up to a point, and instability is thus introduced into what is, therefore, definitively an uncompleted “graphic” configuration. But this transparency opens also onto another dimension: the invisible. This is not only because the translucent pane of glass escapes our view, challenging to a certain extent any full and complete optical grasping, but also because it is not really necessary to see the *Large Glass* in order to know or understand it. Duchamp was very clear on this: The retinal experience is optional here.⁶⁸ Secondly, transparency (as with painting on glass) belonged to a very special

66. Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 695.

67. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 351.

68. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 39.

domain for Duchamp: the infra-thin.⁶⁹ The infra-thin is the only just perceptible, the only just locatable; it lies at the limit of visibility or readability (an infinitely small difference bringing into unique relief everything over which it circulates). Through the very fact of its translucency, of its whites, the *Large Glass* is a surface area of discovery and a host for the imperceptible. The artist thus answered Mallarmé's ever so slightly programmatic call, installing a hypothetical relationship of salvation toward the beyond, "that the glass pane be art." Duchamp's answer, recognized as his magnum opus, was a glass form that did not establish itself in any one space, trading full visibility against the contextual and partial disappearance of its identity and the partial material invisibility of its coordinates. An answer, therefore, that was also a way for Duchamp to find another future for painting outside of the canvas and the frame, and even, in a very Mallarmean mode, to find a viaticum whose efficacy, however, contradicted that of "Les Fenêtres" because, as Duchamp said to Pierre Cabanne, "the 'Glass' saved me by virtue of its transparency."⁷⁰

Nebulization of the World, or the Life of Fluids

The second motif that sets out a common field of exploration for these two bodies of work involves smoke, air, wind, and what we might call, more generally, the nebulization of the world or the life of fluids. It is a well-known fact that Mallarmé greatly enjoyed smoking pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. In Manet's famous portrait of 1876, the poet is shown with a cigar in his right hand, which rests upon a book, his fixed gaze prey to intrusive thoughts. But the pleasure that he took in smoking was not merely a solo pursuit. For example, over the course of more than twenty years (1877–98), during the famous Tuesdays at the rue de Rome, Mallarmé was to gather around him well-known figures from the world of the arts and letters, people who were faithful to him and to his work, and also younger writers, all of them present in his modest apartment in order to listen to his captivating monologues, punctuated by occasional questions or comments from his audience, and all of this according to a precise ritual in which tobacco, its shared use, played its part. There was first "the offer of a packet of caporal cigarettes to the new initiates," which marked their official entry into this restricted circle of artists, a cénacle that was to become, over the years, increasingly prized and sought-after. There were also "the Louis XIV table, folded into a semi-circle and placed in the middle of the living room; Job cigarette papers for the invited guests, and the tobacco jar, set on the table so that each of them could draw from it in a rite of symbolism, making of this jar, therefore, the umbilicus of the circle,"⁷¹ and the "men [who] light their cigarettes, cigars or pipes, and [signaling thus] that the

69. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 290.

70. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 18.

71. Durand, *Mallarmé*, p. 187.

session, strictly speaking, is beginning,”⁷² with, close by, the “poet discoursing, a clay pipe in his mouth,”⁷³ handling already his “obligatory accessory.”⁷⁴ And then again there was the “dense smoke . . . that was not slow to invade the tiny room [discouraging] henceforth the presence of women,”⁷⁵ these dense plumes from the “lighted cigars quickly [uniting] their airy fumes in a subtle spider’s web, each member of the circle seeming to have spun one of its threads,”⁷⁶ the swirls of smoke spinning thus between the guests their “infinitesimal spider’s web,”⁷⁷ a sort of “symbolic fog,”⁷⁸ an element unto itself of the sessions. Finally, there was the ultimate result of these ritualized Tuesdays: They did not produce a lesson. Camille Mauclair was to say that “Mallarmé taught us nothing,” but “through the charm of [his] spoken word and of [his] person,” these Tuesday sessions led up to that point where the poet “put each of us . . . in a *poetic state*.”⁷⁹ This was more than just a transformation of the listeners, therefore; the weekly rendezvous gathering together the “Tuesday men” allowed for a genuine *poetic conversion*, in which the collective use of tobacco was to play its entirely ceremonial part as an ingredient, and in a relationship through which the practice and person of the poet was to incarnate the highest point of coalescence: “Stéphane Mallarmé was one of the masters of the spoken word, not at all as an orator or a teacher, but in its most alive and animated forms, that of the intimate conversation that goes its way, stops, starts again, is interrupted, and that mingles its circuits with the winged circles of fantasy and the airy smoke of cigarettes.”⁸⁰

Duchamp, too, was a great smoker, and he appears in many images with a pipe (for example, in *Haircut*, 1919), cigar, or cigarette; indeed, this was the case throughout his life. The photograph that was chosen for the front cover of the 1959 publication of his writings, bearing the title *Salt Seller*, was of himself as a pipe smoker, an image that was necessarily destined to remain public. When Paul Matisse drew the ultimate portrait of the creator of the *Large Glass*, he said that what came immediately to his mind was the picture of smoke, its freedom and movement in the air, because Duchamp always had a cigar in his hand, so much so that “the smoke was the picture of his ideas, as with many of the things that he managed to do, with very little intention.”⁸¹ His friends (including Michel

72. Millan, *Les “Mardis” de Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 34.

73. Durand, *Mallarmé*, p. 187.

74. Patrick Besnier, *Mallarmé, le théâtre de la rue de Rome* (Paris: Éditions du Limon, 1998), p. 52.

75. Millan, *Les “Mardis” de Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 34.

76. Henri de Régnier, *Figures et caractères* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1901), p. 120.

77. De Régnier, *Les Cahiers inédits*, p. 373.

78. Adolphe Retté, “Les mardis de Mallarmé,” in *Le Symbolisme. Anecdotes et souvenirs* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1983), p. 90.

79. Mauclair, *Mallarmé chez lui*, p. 88.

80. Régnier, *Figures et caractères*, pp. 140–41.

81. Michel Vanpeene, “Les clefs de la rue Parmentier: entretien avec Paul Matisse et Jacqueline Matisse Monnier,” *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp* 4 (second semester 2002), pp. 8–9.

Sanouillet, his publisher) did not fail to notice this: Aware as they were of this practically ontological fusion of the personality of the smoker and the object of his passion, they organized, on May 15, 1965, at the Victoria restaurant in Paris, the Rose Sélavy dinner in his honor, during which an *Um* was introduced containing, according to an account of the event, “Duchamp’s ashes that had fallen directly from his cigar hand.”⁸² Yet for Mallarmé, as for Duchamp, the tobacco that a person smokes and the smoke it produces are not simply—as we have seen with the organizer of the Tuesdays—a merely anecdotal pleasure. They possess a poetic and visual range and import. In one of his *Prose Poems*, Mallarmé makes of the pipe an accessory that accompanies the poet’s work, including the work of memory, and that alone is capable of making him forget for an instant what he referred to as “the important books I had to write.”⁸³ This mnemonic object and “faithful friend,”⁸⁴ as Mallarmé called it, offered him, from the very first puffs of smoke, a reminder of his old visits to London, with its smells and air—“those dear fogs that muffle our brains and that have, over there, their own particular smell.”⁸⁵ It becomes the go-between for memories, the means to relive, intently and instantly, entire swaths of existence. But the wreaths of smoke that echo the odiferous air of London are also the equals of the work of poetry, resonating with it lightly and materially, ceaselessly in movement, and are in fact the very expression of the commitment of the poet and its limited efficacy. In “Restricted Action,” precisely after having brought up the “reciprocal contamination of work and means,” Mallarmé claimed that the “circumvoluntary patterns”⁸⁶ through which one should express oneself were similar to those produced by a cigar, i.e., to its swirls of smoke, the very picture of a possible writing, but also the image of the movement of thought and of the nothing that structures it—the basis of its relation to the invisible. He was to state also, this time not in “Restricted Action” but in “Solitude”:

Precisely: I don’t think anything, ever, and if I give in, this meditation is joined to my smoke, to the point where I follow them, quite satisfied, as they diminish together, before I sit down to a poem, where they will reappear, perhaps, under a veil.⁸⁷

In this way, we can see the formation of a familiarity between the nothing of thought and the nothing of smoke, between the possible disappearance of the former—and its eventual reappearance—and the scheduled elision of the latter, constituting thus their shared presence, what we might call their shared materiality, and

82. Cited by André Gervais in *C’EST: Marcel Duchamp dans “la fantaisie heureuse de l’histoire”* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 2000), p. 114.

83. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 21.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

this having to do surely with the fact that for Mallarmé, writing meant “to spread a fog, a precious cloud floating over the intimate abyss of each thought.”⁸⁸ The weight of this atmospheric matter in his work must be seen in connection with the importance of the processes of airing (as with a handheld fan), volatilizing, and vaporizing. In a number of remarkable pages, Jean-Pierre Richard has analyzed this aspect of Mallarmean poetics, showing how they are an attempt to “volatize matter” by producing what Mallarmé himself called the “airing of gravity.”⁸⁹ Seen from this perspective, smoke is allied with the dancer, the “emblematic figure of volatization,”⁹⁰ and with objects possessing a diaphanous materiality such as the feather, lace (coupled with language), the cloud (image of thought), or again sea spray, and these latter objects form “the various means of a single, spiritual ‘airing,’” because, as Mallarmé declared, what counted was to abandon oneself to “volatile dispersion, i.e., the mind.”⁹¹ As an atmospheric dissipation or an aerial unthreading of gravity, smoke appears every time as the means and the result of those operations, placed as it is at the heart of creative activity and of the life of the mind, and this is so because “to smoke is also to vaporize a substance” to the point that “every smoker is . . . a poet unaware” and “the art of smoking becomes . . . a poetic art.”⁹²

For Duchamp also, and throughout his life and work, smoke was to be a structuring substance. He was to make use of it in his work on a number of occasions. In March 1945 (almost ten years after his having photographed, for the cover of a luxury edition of George Hugnet’s collected poems entitled *The Seventh Face of the Dice*, three cigarettes whose paper had been removed, leaving the tobacco skeleton, a sort of laying bare of the smoker’s accessory), Duchamp was to show, on the cover of a special issue of the New York journal *View* devoted to himself and with his own page layout, two clouds of smoke coming out of an open and tilted bottle bearing a page from his military booklet and with its neck directed toward a Milky Way of stars. On the back cover of this publication, there is a sentence that makes explicit the relationship between smoke and the infra-thin, the word that Duchamp himself invented and to which he devoted forty-six notes: “When the tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth that exhales it, the two smells are joined by the infra-thin.”⁹³ This is the only note concerning the infra-thin that was published during Duchamp’s lifetime, and it underscores the close relationship between smoke and the world of the infinitesimally small and private perceptions, between the fluidity of the former and the quasi-imperceptibility of the latter. On another occasion sometime after this, Duchamp chose a *carotte de tabac* (the sign that tobacco retailers in France are required to display in front of their

88. Ibid., p. 233.

89. Richard, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, p. 382.

90. Ibid., p. 390.

91. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 391.

92. Ibid., pp. 408–09.

93. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 290.

stores) for the cover of the catalog for the exhibition *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain* (1960) that he organized with André Breton at the d'Arcy Galleries in New York. He displayed the sign at the entrance to the building where the exhibition was being held, as if this sign were to give substance in a very precise way to his presence in the place, to his individuality, and as if it were consequently a form of signature, bearing witness also, on the cover of a magazine and at the opening of an exhibition devoted to enchantment and its territories, to what captivated him the most: namely, the insistent aroma of the cigar and the constantly unforeseeable interlacing, always changing and weightless, formed by the wreaths of smoke, a sign of the presence somewhere of the smoker. Is it by chance, then, that the last images produced by Duchamp still bear the imprint of smoke and its power of attraction? For an exhibition put on in Paris at the Givaudan gallery in autumn 1967, Duchamp designed a poster, several copies of which were published, on which can be seen, escaping from a cigar held in his right hand, a cloud of smoke like a mushroom cloud—the ultimate self-portrait as a smoker.⁹⁴ A few days before his death, he worked on the drawings of an anaglyphic chimneypiece intended for his home in Cadaqués. Why this fascination with smoke? It is very conceivably because of its inexhaustible possibilities of becoming, since smoke is transformed, constantly and from its first appearance; it is in a perpetual state of composition and decomposition, always taking form and undoing that form from the very instant when the smoker produces it. Duchamp's world had a Heraclitean structure (as evidenced by the visual diversity of its aspects and the impossibility of assigning to him *one style*); he was animated by a constant movement of taking form, and the swirls of smoke, along with the movements of the air, by the very fact of their ontological incompleteness are an exemplary incarnation of that movement. But they are also a possible face given to what Duchamp thought and verbalized through the term “infra-thin”: Smoke is that labile, weightless substance, infra-thin precisely, that participates in an atmospheric materiality—a vaporization of matter, to use Mallarmean vocabulary—whose visual qualities Duchamp was to use notably through the caprices of the air. He described himself as a “*respirator*,”⁹⁵ and he considered respiration and the invisible forms it produced as a work in itself, a silent creation, imperceptible and insistent, at least as long as the life of the subject was to last.⁹⁶ Air and smoke are thus distinct artistic substances in the life and work that he fashioned, and they are also, for Duchamp, privileged motifs for the artist as analyzer of sensations. He imagined, in one of his amusing pieces of fiction, “taking 1 cubic centimeter of tobacco smoke, and painting the interior and exterior surfaces with a water-repellant

94. On the invitation card for this exhibition, entitled *Ready-made et éditions de et sur Marcel Duchamp*, was the cast shadow of Duchamp's head in the act of smoking a cigar or cigarette.

95. Serge Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp: Interviews und Statements* (Stuttgart: Cantz, 1991), p. 85.

96. Duchamp is quoted on this theme by Francis M. Naumann in “Money Is No Object, Part 1,” in *The Recurrent, Haunting Ghost: Essays on the Art, Life and Legacy of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Readymade Press, 2012), p. 211.

color.”⁹⁷ One of his readymades, *Paris Air* (1919), was a pharmacological vial emptied of its contents and then resealed after having been filled with air from the City of Light, a sort of conservatory of Parisian air. On June 15, 1965, he created, along with Gianfranco Baruchello, the *Small Reservoir of Gaseous Energy: The Exhalation of Tobacco*, an empty bottle that he filled with puffs of cigar smoke.⁹⁸ It is here, in this aeration of the world, that Duchamp meets most directly the universe of Mallarmé. For if the latter was to put the game of dice at the center of his work (Duchamp was himself to make the game of chess into another possible artistic practice), if he were to make the throw of the die into not just a theme but a genuine poetic machine, he also assigned a not insignificant place to the gusts and throes of the wind, not just on the various fans on which he wrote his verses and that he gave as gifts to his close friends, and not just through the play for one actor that he wished to write, *Hamlet and the Wind*, a play that he hoped to perform himself from town to town.⁹⁹ In “The Book, Spiritual Instrument,” he refers, in fact, to movements of the air allowing the pages of a book, placed on a bench, to be run through, the practice of reading being thus tied to the labile and aleatory actions of the wind:

When I see a new publication lying on a garden bench, I love it when the breeze flips through the pages, and animates some of the exterior aspects of the book. No one, perhaps, since there has been reading, has remarked on this.¹⁰⁰

One of Duchamp’s very first works was a small painting entitled *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* (1911), proof certainly of his early fascination with the movements of the air. It was a fascination brought into focus again in 1914 with his three *Draft Pistons*, and equally directly with a readymade called *Ventilation*, published in 1921 in the journal *New York Dada*.¹⁰¹ We can add to this series of works a readymade that was lost in 1915, *Pulled at Four Pins*, a weathervane normally set on roofs, a sort of chimney fan, whose movement and kinetic quality followed entirely the caprices of the wind. And in 1919, Duchamp was to produce a possible variant of Mallarmé’s book (its pages chosen by the gusts and drafts of wind, playing out thus in the open air the laws governing the discovery of signs and the appearing of inscriptions), and this was the famous *Unhappy Readymade*, offered as a gift for the

97. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 350.

98. For more on this work, see Paul B. Franklin, “Smoking Bottles,” *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp* 10 (2011), pp. 226–49.

99. Richard, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, p. 159; see also pp. 160, 309–11 for further analysis of wind and the fan.

100. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 226.

101. This readymade was the text of a notice displayed at that time on New York taxis: “On the question of proper ventilation opinions radically differ. It seems impossible to please all. It is our aim, however, to cater to the wishes of the majority. The conductor of this vehicle will gladly be governed accordingly. Your cooperation will be appreciated” (*Writings*, p. 179). This was surely a spontaneous and delicious democratic ode to the life of air currents.

second marriage of his favorite sister, Suzanne, remarried to Jean Crotti. For this, Duchamp asked her, in a letter from Argentina, to create a *readymade à distance*: a geometry book, hung outside on the balcony of his apartment so that “the wind had to go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages.”¹⁰² Here the wind figures again—the precious animator of the life of fluids, the Mallarmean leavening agent of reading, of the production of meaning, and of visual plasticity.¹⁰³

Nothing Per Haps

Finally, the third element allowing us to mark out the boundaries of a field of exploration common to these two men has to do with the nothing, nothingness— notions with which Mallarmé was to concern himself very deeply. He dreamed, in fact, of writing a book with the title “Sumptuous Allegories of the Void,”¹⁰⁴ and this was at the very time that his friend Cazalis was writing a *Livre du néant* (Book of nothingness).¹⁰⁵ Mallarmé was, in fact, to declare, “I don’t think anything, ever.”¹⁰⁶ Such notions appear from the very beginning of Mallarmé’s *Poems*, his first published collection, and the very first word of the first poem, “Salutation,” is precisely nothing: “Nothing, this foam, virgin verse.”¹⁰⁷ Pascal Durand, commenting upon this inaugural term, suggests that “the incipit of the *Poems* . . . takes on . . . the appearance of a statement of principle. Poetry is clearly being told that it has no other object than itself as the being of language . . . and that meaning is reduced here to this ‘*nothing*’ whose place is occupied by the act of saying and of ‘*design[ating]*’ what it is that says and designates.”¹⁰⁸ The nothing, nothingness, is therefore at the heart of the work of poetry. In Mallarmé’s famous letter to Cazalis, dated April 28, 1866, referring to the creation of *Hérodiade*, he stated that

in the course of quarrying out the lines to this extent, I’ve come across two abysses, which fill me with despair. One is the Void, which I’ve reached without any knowledge of Buddhism, and I’m still too distraught to be able to believe even in my poetry and get back to work, which this crushing awareness has made me abandon.

Yes, I *know*, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed

102. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 61.

103. Here we refer again to a connection pointed out in Gervais, *C’EST: Marcel Duchamp dans la “fantaisie heureuse de l’histoire,”* pp. 104–05.

104. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 82.

105. Scherer, *Le Livre de Mallarmé*, p. 22.

106. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p. 273.

107. Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, p. 3.

108. Pascal Durand, *Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 21.

sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!

That's the plan of my lyrical volume and that might also be its title: *The Glory of the Lie* or *The Glorious Lie*. I shall sing it as one in despair!¹⁰⁹

The Nothing, nothingness, the primordial void therefore is the ultimate truth to be proclaimed. All verbalization and editing of text is tied to this truth, and language gives to it “creative value, a startling power.”¹¹⁰ Without going into all the times that this term and theme appear in Mallarmé (they have been widely studied by the exegetes), let us look more specifically at how the poet writes and spatializes this Nothing in a way that makes it noticeable. In “A Throw of the Dice,” the word is clearly shown at the top and on the left of the ninth double page (NOTHING/ WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE/ BUT THE PLACE), and it is starkly detached against the white background not only because it is written in large letters and because it appears alone in the world on the page, surrounded by a “meaningful silence that is no less beautiful to compose than the lines,”¹¹¹ but also because it hangs over the space of the open poem, dominating it even, giving it a place and visual identity so stressed that the rest of the text seems to proceed entirely from this capitalized nothing. The other parts of the text seem to flow from it as lineaments or a train of words and letters, of blank and empty spaces, like the scriptural equivalent of a waterfall, a falling of signs both as writing and as graphic representation. In the papers written by Mallarmé, published by Jacques Scherer, pertaining to the poet's great project for the Book, the Nothing is also stressed visually. It stands out in the sheet 12(A) where it is not just underlined (Rien) but truly made to leap off the page through its position, relative isolation, and graphic form (the capital adding here to the underlining). Nothingness, its *inscription* into the work, follows therefore a deliberately chosen graphic arrangement, Mallarmé having sought not only to write the Nothing, to write out of the Nothing, but also to have given it, carefully and studiously, a space (the nothing takes place), transforming it into a readable and visible term that was precisely positioned and *distinguished*. Now, one of the questions that ran through Duchamp's life and work was surely exactly that: namely, how to spatialize the nothing, to give form in space to the nothing, to make of the nothing a Nothing/NOTHING?

109. *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 60.

110. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 40.

111. Mallarmé, *Correspondance, lettres sur la poésie*, p. 613.

But let us stay for a moment longer with Mallarmé's Book, in which the nothing is precisely a Nothing. It was made up of a certain number of sheets on which we can read annotations, operations, and calculations, obscure and cryptic sentences—so many rough drafts—the scraps and sketches of an unfinished project. From a formal perspective, these documents are very close to the various notes that Duchamp produced throughout his life. They resemble, in particular, the notes relating to the *Large Glass* that Duchamp drew up from 1912 to 1915 and that he published in 1934 as *The Green Box*—notes that are characterized by the predominance of the notion of incompleteness, the importance given to calculations, and the cryptic nature of the majority of the propositions.¹¹² This analogy is not simply one of appearance because it has to do with the way in which these fragments or shreds function. Just as Mallarmé's Book was "made up of unbound sheets allowing for and calling for them to be freely combined—a way, in fact, on the most concrete level, of turning the book into a machine for books, a text on an infinite Text, with a different arrangement always available,"¹¹³ Duchamp's notes could be consulted like playing cards, endlessly arranged among themselves, opening thus onto an interminable and definitively incomplete reading, an infinite, horizontal montage and series of combinations. This was true even if, moreover, a thematic categorization might emerge; yet it would not rule out the possibility of another rearrangement, Duchamp having even thought at one point of turning the notes into a round book, with no beginning or end, a book as an *open work*.¹¹⁴ This formal and procedural connection has no basis in fact: Duchamp, when he was working on the annotations for the *Green Box*, could have had no knowledge of the preparatory sheets for Mallarmé's Book since the latter was only published in 1957. These striking formal and procedural analogies between the two bodies of work are joined by some equally powerfully shared themes, such as that of the machine.¹¹⁵ Mallarmé assigned a special place in his Book (to be read out loud in public and in systematized sessions) to the one he called "the operator"¹¹⁶ or the "worker," to whom was confided the "dream of setting the great machine going,"¹¹⁷ i.e., precisely the one who "can work a machine [in this case, the Book] that he confesses to not having constructed, [of which he can] show the functioning and make it produce the results that it is capable of giving."¹¹⁸ The

112. Pascal Durand points out this formal characteristic in "De Duchamp à Mallarmé: Un suspens de la croyance," in *Mallarmé et après? Fortunes d'une oeuvre (Collection Formules: Association Noésis-France, 2000)*, p. 159.

113. Pascal Durand, "De Mallarmé à Duchamp. Formalisme esthétique et formalité sociale," in *Formalisme, jeu des formes*, ed. Eveline Pinto (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2001), p. 48.

114. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 295.

115. This is a connection made by Durand in "De Mallarmé à Duchamp," p. 48. The development of this connection is my own.

116. Scherer, *Le Livre de Mallarmé*, sheet 194 (A).

117. *Ibid.*, sheet 30(A).

118. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Book is a machine capable of engendering an indefinite number of books, and this quite notably because it is also a machine for reading. Duchamp, for his part, imagined through the *Green Box*, which was both the reconstitution of the early stages of and an instruction manual for the *Large Glass*, a bachelor machine or even an onanistic machine, for which the notes pertaining to its construction and functioning open precisely onto the question of the nothing. One of the introductory expressions to this collection of remarks, schemas, drawings, and other scattered, fragmentary, and lacunary considerations is precisely “rien Peut-être”¹¹⁹ (nothing Perhaps). Duchamp was to explore constantly the polysemic resources of language, its variations and extensions. We should pay attention, therefore, to the double meaning of this small notation, in which Duchamp wrote, in red pencil, “Peut-être.” It is saying both that the nothing can be a probability, an eventuality, that it can potentially come into existence and that it can also be in reality—it “peut être” (can be), and it may arrive at this state through happenstance: *per haps*. Just as Mallarmé was to underscore, in his equally fragmentary and incomplete sheets for the Book, the existence of the Nothing, a capitalized and therefore doubly *noticeable* nothing, Duchamp, in his notes on the *Large Glass*, formally very close to the Mallarmean pages, also gives sanction to its existence, gives it the possibility of appearing. So, if Mallarmé, carefully and as a poet, was to spatialize the nothing on a sheet of paper, how did Duchamp deal with it visually, how did he arrange the nothing in space?

Before I suggest one of a number of possible answers to this question, it is worth underlining the extent to which this rapprochement between Duchamp and Mallarmé, which can be made equally on the basis of the project for the Book and Duchamp’s notes, rests upon the very real, undeniable, and objectively proven interest that the artist took in the poet. In 1915, the year during which he started to create the *Large Glass*, Duchamp copied in pencil several phrases from “A Throw of the Dice” onto a page bearing the number 2 (the document including originally at least another separate sheet that is now lost), and he drew on the same piece of paper two dies and two cups for throwing them. These rewritten verses include the line “nothing will take place but the place,” clear proof that the link established here with Mallarmé’s work passed also through the question of nothingness.¹²⁰ This copyist work, underlining the strong complicity that the artist maintained with the poet’s magnum opus at the very moment when he was beginning to undertake the creation of the *Large Glass*, his own masterpiece, is proof of the initial establishment of a graphical proximity, and this proximity can also be seen in the “completed” work itself. The work can be understood as the vertical and monumental establishment in space of “A Throw of the Dice.”¹²¹ The empty

119. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, p. 64.

120. Molly Nesbit and Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, “*Concept de rien: Nouvelles notes de Marcel Duchamp et Walter Arensberg*,” *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp* 1 (1999), pp. 48–86.

121. I wish to thank Christian Bernard for this idea.

spaces of this great, translucent window, its transparent areas marked by no forms or features and yet active, conditioning absolutely the form it takes as well as how it takes on meaning, are a continuation of the white spaces of the poem, so important to the construction of the latter's visual and literary identity. The analogy involves also the approaches taken to reading and viewing these two works. Valéry, it will be remembered, did highlight the fact that with "A Throw of the Dice" Mallarmé, having shown and read out loud the poem to him, had "introduced a spatial reading, which he combined with the linear reading," and that he had thus enriched "the literary domain with a second dimension."¹²² But what, exactly, is a *spatial* reading? In all probability, it is a reading that looks, above all, at the substance of the inscribed surface and at how what is inscribed there appears, and we could also call this a reading that is "graphic, physiognomic, or figural."¹²³ Or again, following certain of Duchamp's reflections, we might call this a visualist reading if we recall that the artist, as reader and copyist of "A Throw of the Dice," emphasized especially at one point, in one of his notes, a certain "[literal] Nominalism," the word insofar as it is "readable by the eye, and [as] little by little it takes on a visual meaning; it is a visual and sensory reality, exactly like a feature or a group of features."¹²⁴ The *Large Glass* explores this spatial, graphic, and plastic—surface—visibility equally directly, working in such a way that the empty spaces, the transparencies, the blanks put into relief both by the poet and the artist, are a driving force, becoming thus another way to address nothingness in the familiar register. Duchamp's passion for the nothing was to continue beyond 1915. One year after having graphically revisited the French poet's key work, he created with Walter Arensberg (his friend and patron, an occasional poet, reader and translator of Mallarmé, owner of the latest publications, who had given to the artist the copy of "A Throw of the Dice" that the latter had in part transcribed) a sort of poem entitled "Concept of Nothing." Arensberg composed the typed text of this short piece, and Duchamp made additions in pencil, encircling the title and thus its relation to the nothing—further proof, if any was needed, of the interest he took in this question through a collaboration with a subtle connoisseur of that French poet whom he had taken the pains to copy one year earlier. We can point to at least one other author who spurred in Duchamp this investigation into nothingness, and this is Max Stirner, whose work *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (*The Ego and His Own*) first appeared in French translation in 1900. Duchamp considered this text to be "remarkable,"¹²⁵ and it is indeed one of the very few books found in his library that bear his own annotations.¹²⁶ The preface to Stirner's

122. Paul Valéry, "Concerning A Throw of the Dice: A Letter to the Editor of *Les Marges*," in Matthews, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 8, p. 312.

123. Muriel Pic, "Constellation de la lettre: Le concept de lisibilité (*Lesbarkeit*) en France et en Allemagne," *Poésie* 137–38 (2012), p. 255.

124. Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, pp. 358–60.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

126. M. Décimo, *La Bibliothèque de Marcel Duchamp, peut-être* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2002), p. 11.

book, one will recall, has the title “I Have Founded My Affair on Nothing.”¹²⁷ This text, therefore, must surely have influenced Duchamp’s approach to the subject, Stirner being, as the artist made clear, a person of importance for him, most particularly at the beginning of the 1910s.¹²⁸ Yet what is most unique about the connection between Duchamp’s work and that of Mallarmé is the artist’s scriptorial appropriation of a major work by the poet in which the nothing plays a role, and in special part precisely through its taking up of a region of the graphic space (NOTHING/WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE/BUT THE PLACE), and through its being situated in that space (a precise and deliberate spatial arrangement that, applied to the entire poem, had struck Valéry when he was exposed to the work for the first time as “the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms”).¹²⁹ Duchamp’s copyist move was quickly followed by a piece by four hands, explicitly dedicated to the question of the nothing. But why copy out the poet of the nothing, why make a work of nothing? Or rather, what to make out of this nothing, how to deal with it, how to give it substance in space, give it a place, how to exhibit it, if it is true that Duchamp, as an artist (and as an organizer of exhibitions), was acutely aware of issues of form in space? Here it seems that Duchamp’s response was the readymade. This was a response invented in order to give three-dimensional form in space to the Mallarmeian Nothing/NOTHING, itself so manifestly graphically situated, and the reason behind this response was simple: In its very origins, the readymade was nothing. Let us review, therefore, the actual genesis of those already made objects. Present from 1913 in Duchamp’s Paris studio, the readymades were at first seen by very few people, and they were thus in large part invisible, removed from the human gaze. The situation was the same in the New York studio after 1915, where the readymades became, over time, more numerous. Duchamp admitted it, saying that at the beginning “there was no public—the public was not invited, was not necessary . . . at all!”¹³⁰ In its origins, the truth of the invention of the readymade, the truth about the difference it created, was thus to be not public, to remain in a zone of invisibility, a zone of privacy, and to keep that zone active; since the readymade “must not be looked at, essentially. It is simply there.”¹³¹ In New York, the first collective exhibition that Duchamp participated in, and in which the readymades were shown, was to confirm this status, if only because nothing in particular has been remembered about it. This was the *Exhibition of Modern Art*, put on in April 1916 by the Bourgeois Gallery, and it

127. Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (1845), ed. John Carroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 39.

128. Duchamp is quoted on this connection in an unpublished interview with Sidney, Harriet, and Carroll Janis. See Francis M. Naumann, pp. 357–58.

129. Valéry, “Concerning A Throw of the Dice,” p. 309.

130. “Will Go Underground,” an interview with Marcel Duchamp by the RTBF in 1965, *Fin 5* (June 2000), p. 18.

131. *Marcel Duchamp parle des readymades à Philippe Collin* (Paris: L’Échoppe, 1998), p. 14.

included two already made objects, about which today we know nothing. Duchamp described the arrangement thus: “I said [to the director of the gallery]: I am giving you some paintings for the exhibition, but take my ready-mades as well. He agreed, and he put them by the entrance. . . . Nobody knew what they were. There was no description, no name, no label.”¹³² So we are clearly very far from the scandal caused by *Fountain*, a readymade that has been much discussed and that was never exhibited in public before the beginning of the 1950s, remaining thus itself equally invisible *in a certain way* and for other reasons. In fact, the readymade objects were for a long time excessively discreet in appearance. Actually, it was only much later, well after its invention and formalization by Duchamp, that the readymade was to attain both a hypervisibility and hyperpresence that were at no point part of its initial standing, which, in marked contrast, was characterized by the discretion that went along with the distinction produced by the choice of the object—the indifferent difference set down in the real, the infra-thin difference allowing the object to be there without one’s being aware of its presence, an object that was itself not very much and that committed us to practically nothing. Chosen, recognized, the readymade was, in its origins, intended to be *unique unto invisibility*; it represented that nothing, that almost nothing, that Nothing/NOTHING, situated in the space of experience, and beside which one could pass without noticing it, since it was to all intents and purposes not very much of anything. In this sense, therefore, it was by way of the readymade, whose first fate was to leave no memory, that Duchamp fulfilled his admiration for Mallarmé, the poet of the nothing, of nothingness (situated nothingness, the nothing placed in space), and about whom the artist was to say in no uncertain terms that he had opened the door to the art of the future.

Translated by Nicholas Huckle

132. Cited by Bernard Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), p. 149.