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Far Planet

Duchamp. A Biography

By Calvin Tomkins

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There is a curious puzzle about Duchamp's best known work, entitled *The Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*. Duchamp decided to leave the work 'definitively unfinished' in 1923, and for decades it was rarely seen, being known largely through photographs and by reputation as the artist's legendary masterpiece. In 1934 Duchamp published the first series of Notes about *The Large Glass* and since then all interpretations have been filtered through this textual optic. But what of the life of *The Large Glass* in the years before the Notes, what did people make of it then?

Duchamp was as apparently paradoxical a figure in life as in art, and Calvin Tomkins's biography of this feminist philanderer, who oscillated between bouts of solitude and frenetic socialising, makes entertaining reading; there are Dada pranks and quips, lots of sexual adventures, even one work of art, a gift to a lover, of which Tomkins primly tells us, it was discovered under chemical analysis that Duchamp's 'drawing medium was ejaculated seminal fluid'. (Tomkins, incidentally, sometimes over-eggs this pudding, depicting a scene in which all male, avant-garde artists and intellectuals were fantastically handsome figures who cut swathes through ranks of willing female socialites.) Yet in thinking about the relation between life and art, it is not immediately clear what a biography of Duchamp contributes to the understanding of work which is so resolutely cerebral and anti-expressive. With Van Gogh biographies, we know exactly where we stand because there is supposedly a direct route from tortured spirit to eccentric form; Duchamp's work, by contrast, is frequently so strange that it is hard to imagine it being the product of a human mind at all.

Is it possible, Duchamp wondered in a note written in 1913 yet prefiguring conceptual art, to 'make works which are not works of "art"?' He answered the question by producing 'readymades', manufactured objects presented as works of art. Think of them as three-dimensional collages: the most notorious consisted of a urinal, a signature, a title (*Fountain*) and an art gallery—or at least that was the intention; *Fountain* was rejected from an open exhibition and then lost.

The readymade certainly raised questions about what could be considered art, and what could not, but also about mass-produced consumer goods which were becoming increasingly aestheticised, and subject to a rapid technical and stylistic evolution against which many artists wondered if they could compete. It both lowered the work of art and snidely elevated the commodity. Yet the art world dealt with the readymade

in typically material terms, even if it could not quite grasp the nettle of its message: in the 1950s Duchamp agreed that limited editions of the original ready-mades should be produced for sale, and Tomkins describes how the once mass-produced urinal was painstakingly replicated by sculptors.

If Duchamp's art has a distinguishing quality, it is a sense of amused detachment; as the art scene has become increasingly sceptical about itself and the power of its artefacts, this work has come to seem ever more contemporary. Many of the antics of today's art were anticipated by Dada, but the Dadaists now seem old-fashioned because they were objecting to something (machine warfare and the society that had produced it). Tomkins senses this dimly, presenting Duchamp as a humorist unfettered by ideology (or even opinion) whose work was embraced above all in the United States, a country which could not quite accept what the author takes to be the stern, unsmiling fanaticism of Dada.

By an insistent repetition of internal references to his other works, Duchamp created a self-contained art, not formally but conceptually autonomous; most of the elements in *The Large Glass* are assembled from earlier works, and later he was to create his own catalogue raisonnés in boxes containing tiny replicas of his previous output. Meaning threatened this autonomy which produced detachment, for it would gesture outwards to the world beyond the work. So if it is hard to find statements by Duchamp which he does not elsewhere contradict, the building of such paradoxes was not a personal foible but the very heart of his enterprise. As he may have anticipated, professional art historians and critics often play the Duchamp game, finding themselves in the trap of a complex, self-sufficient system of thought, like alchemy or psychoanalysis, from which there is no exit.



Duchamp, *Sink Stopper*, 1964-7

Duchamp, though, was also a prisoner of this system. He did not want some of his creations (such as the rotary demispheres which he described as optical experiments) seen as works of art, but found that it is far easier to name things art than to forever banish them from that category. Duchamp's Midas touch was cursed, and anything—his neglect of art for chess, playthings made for children, even makeshift household repairs—were eventually sucked into the oeuvre.

Describing artists as gamblers in a 'blind lottery' which advanced some and ruined others, Duchamp was well aware that his fame of later years was a historical accident. For decades, his presence on the art scene had been like that of a very distant planet, invisible, but whose existence can be deduced from the perturbations in the orbits of other bodies. Now his presence is so pervasive that some artists talk about 'getting over Duchamp', rather as one might recover from a virus. Since there are still some worthy practitioners who have never suffered Duchamp, however, those who would prove that they are cured cannot simply neglect his work, but must demonstrate signs of post-viral resistance. Indeed, the virus cannot be cured by a simple act of will; Duchamp seems increasingly important because the commodity culture he touched upon has grown ever stronger and more ubiquitous, and because the prospects for art to make a difference in the face of it seem ever more tenuous.

If Duchamp's art and life are today so thoroughly conjoined, this too is a result of his late, overblown fame, of myth-making by the artist and his many followers. How Duchamp's work was seen before this process took hold is another question that might be asked, though the answer may be as opaque to us now as the state of the *Glass* before the Notes.