

Hello to all that
Jackie Wullschlager

Duchamp: "I don't believe in positions."

Interviewer: "But what do you believe in?"

Duchamp: "Nothing, of course! The word 'belief' is another error. It's like the word 'judgment', they're both horrid ideas.

Interviewer: "Nevertheless, you believe in yourself?"

Duchamp: "No. I don't believe in the word 'being'. The idea of being is a human invention. It's an essential concept, which doesn't exist at all in reality, and which I don't believe in."

What happens when art becomes an expression of the mind rather than the eye or hand? Are skill and taste redundant if a clever idea is taken to its extreme? These are the experiments which provocateur, rhetorician and artist Marcel Duchamp initiated with his first "readymade", "Bicycle Wheel", in 1913 and its successor "Fountain" in 1917. The results remain contested today.

Four years ago, British artists voted "Fountain", a urinal signed R. Mutt, the most influential 20th-century work of art. When it was first exhibited, in New York, condemnation flared - for immorality, vulgarity, plagiarism of a plain piece of plumbing.

Duchamp's response has resonated down the decades: "Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object. As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges."

Duchamp Man Ray Picabia is Tate Modern's most significant, illuminating exhibition since Matisse Picasso . Just as, after 1908, every artist had to pass through cubism, so since 1917, all have had to negotiate the irony and nihilism with which Duchamp met early 20th-century experiences of war, collapsing civilisations and the machine age. Yet the complexity of this French philosopher, elegantly preaching anarchy, has been misunderstood. Above all his "visual indifference" - his criteria for choosing and transforming a readymade - has been notoriously diluted in recent conceptualism to mean that anything can be a work of art if so designated. This first UK show of his work since 1966, therefore, is pertinent; it is also vivid, surprising and energised by the drama of Duchamp's interplay with figures who, though less intellectually robust, all urged each other to daring deconstructions of what art, or anti-art, could be.

Extrovert, wealthy, unstable Francis Picabia, sometime owner of 150 fast cars, met Duchamp, a shy lawyer's son, in Paris in 1911, when both were gifted cubist painters - fine examples open this show. Man Ray, a Russian-Jewish tailor's son from Pennsylvania, was among thousands who flocked to their work at the 1913 Armory show, where Picabia gained fame as the sole European to turn up, and Duchamp for his controversial "Nude Descending a Staircase".

This cubo-futurist depiction of a near-mechanised nude in movement had just been rejected by the Paris salon, a defining event in Duchamp's move away from painting. It appears here alongside another assured canvas, "Bride", a mechanomorphic creature of cogs, cylinders and capillaries which Duchamp gave to Picabia, influencing the older artist's pattern of mechanical and decorative erotic forms, "I See Again In Memory My Dear Udnie".

The trio became a group when Duchamp reached New York in 1915, in flight from the clamour of French patriotism, and kick-started American Dada: less furious and lighter of touch than

the European version, it was nonetheless fuelled by a sense of war's absurdity and frustration with established values.

This, plus Duchamp's sexual fantasies and tenor of deliberate indifference - anticipations of Warhol are everywhere here - poured into "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even", a "painting" on glass in oil, lead, dust and varnish. A hellish, mockengineered allegory of thwarted desire, it contains an upper pane where a cloud-like Bride disrobes herself but never makes contact with the bachelors (nine empty jackets, like flaccid puppets) who pedal away futilely at a chocolate grinder below.

Duchamp dedicated eight years to this self-portrait - the word-game by which the opening letters of "mariée" (bride) and "célibataires" (bachelors) form his own name Marcel is a giveaway - as a mechanised nightmare of repetition and masturbatory isolation. Tate displays a range of blasphemous and ingenious responses to it: Picabia's "Daughter Born without a Mother", a diagram of a steam engine, suggesting a halo, on a gold background evoking medieval Madonnas; his black ink splotch "The Sacred Virgin"; Man Ray's vibrant cut-out "The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself with her Shadows", whose ropes against a neutral background recall Duchamp's lines of lead against glass.

Absorbed in experiments of light and transparency, Man Ray went on to invent the rayograph, a photogram whose receding spaces render objects surreally indistinct by extreme close-up or distance. "I have finally freed myself from the sticky medium of paint, and am working directly with light itself," he wrote of richly sensual abstract/figurative images such as his 1922 "Fields of Delight". His fragmented nudes - models included his lovers Kiki de Montparnasse, Lee Miller and Meret Oppenheim - are highlights, their erotic charge here accentuating the sexuality in Duchamp's work. All three artists share a laddishness too: the title and round hole comprising Picabia's "Young Girl"; the letters "L.H.O.O.Q.", sounded out in French to read "she has a hot arse", scrawled on Duchamp's bearded "Mona Lisa"; the pair of hands clasping curvaceous buttocks in Man Ray's "The Prayer".

Picabia's 1920s canvases depicting multiple heads, bodies, eyes, mimicked photography's superimposed layers of exposure with thin veils of paint and blurred effects. Man Ray countered with solarisation, exposing partially developed photographs to "escape from banality" and "produce a photograph that would not look like a photograph": halo-like outlines and partially reversed tonalities, emphasising the body's contours, are stunning in "Solarised Nude" and "Dora Maar (Solarised)".

"Can a photograph have the significance of art?" begged Alfred Steiglitz. "You know what I think about photography," replied Duchamp. "I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable."

Duchamp had Man Ray photograph him in drag as his alter ego, an oculist called Rrose Sélavy ("Eros, c'est la vie"), but otherwise scepticism led him to retreat from art into obsessive chess-playing. In despair, his wife glued his pieces to the board; their marriage finished after six months. Not surprisingly, Duchamp's favourite chess piece was the knight - a bachelor who makes unusual moves - and he published a book on end-games in 1932.

He had played out art's end-game so brilliantly, it appeared, that a prescient horror of the banality of repetition kept him silent. "The danger is to lead yourself into a form of taste. It is repetition of the same thing long enough to become taste," he said. Picabia, by contrast, embraced that banality; half a century before Jeff Koons, he painted vapid, kitsch nudes, announcing in a late poem, "Perhaps I have made painting ill, but what a pastime to be the doctor. Tomorrow I shall count on painting to be my doctor."

That hints at the battle - between beauty and nihilism, mastery of form and meaninglessness - which is the fierce, inescapable subtext here. Duchamp, of course, had the last laugh. After his death in 1968, it emerged that he had, after all, been working - for several decades on the single assemblage "Etants donnés: 1. La chute d'eau/2. le gaz d'éclairage": a sculpted nude,

legs splayed open, holding a lamp in a leafy landscape, the entire tableau visible only through a peephole in a large, forbidding wooden door.

All Duchamp's obsessions of sex, perception, transgression, the atrophy of art, are here in this twin to "The Bride Stripped Bare". But so is something else - la chute and l'éclairage , fall and illumination. So he suggested a recapitulation of art's oldest

raisons d'être , mortality and enlightenment, internalised in his own unique, arid aesthetic sensibility. "Besides, it's always other people who die," his gravestone read. No wonder, as this marvellously stimulating show makes clear, we can't escape his sleight-of-hand or his towering presence.

'Duchamp Man Ray Picabia', Tate Modern, London SE1, to May 26, tel: +44 (0)20 7887 8888, then Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, June 18-October 12

Fonte: Financial Times, 23 Feb. 2008, Life & Arts, p. 11.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusivo para fins educacionais.