

Window Shopping with Kant and Marcel Duchamp

Patrick Hutchings

Flowers are free beauties of nature. Hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty. Hence no perfection of any kind – no internal finality, as something to which the arrangement of the manifold is related – underlies this judgement. Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise), and a number of crustacea, are self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but please freely and on their own account. So designs *a la grecque*, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, etc., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing – no object under a definite concept – and are free beauties ...¹

Introduction

A very genial account might be given of window-shopping if one adopted Kant's notion of free as opposed to adherent beauty. Its function and utility rescinded from, anything might become a focus of 'the free play of the cognitive faculties', a free play that – for Kant – constitutes the aesthetic attitude/experience. What window-shopping exactly is not, is illustrated by the story of a rich Texan who went window-shopping and came home with a truckload of big sheets of plate-glass, many elegantly lettered.

Window-shopping can slip into actual shopping: things in shop windows are in a state of suspended utility, objects of pure regard, attractively arranged, often in a 'this goes with that at Sussan' way.² The aim, nevertheless, of the shopkeeper is that pure regard will slip into desire and desire into purchase. Whether purchase issues in use is of less concern to the shopkeeper than is purchase. Purchase, even so, more or less implies that the suspended utility will become un-suspended in the unwrapping and use of objects seen first in a

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¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928 [1911]), §16.

² Sussan is an Australian middle-market women's wear chain, good at matching accessories and so on. Its advertising slogan, 'this goes with that at Sussan,' was written by the distinguished poet Les Murray while moonlighting.

shop-display. Men are said to go specifically shopping for ‘X’: women are said to go window-shopping – and end up by purchasing. I do not believe this for a moment; men and women may shop in like ways. Being a window-shopper who enjoys the window dressing of Henry Buck’s³ and the antique jewellery trays in the better jewellers, and the occasional pawnshop, I am unisex in my buying habits. Over years of admiring antique rings, cufflinks, and so on, I have bought one ring. An almost-perfect window-shopper’s record broken? On the other hand, I have a lot of shirts that are in the wardrobe of a fallen window-shopper.

The finest window-shopper in modern times may have been Andy Warhol, who went – endlessly – window-shopping and falling into actual shopping, indeed. But what he brought home remained in its wrapping. A photograph in a *New Yorker* shows Warhol’s elegant Art Deco dining room, full of parcels big and small, there after their owner’s death, pristine and crisp, if a little dusty. (The dust! This is reminiscent of the carefully varnished-down dust on Duchamp’s metal elements in the *Large Glass*).⁴

To buy but not to buy! To take a free beauty from a shop and buy it – not into slavery/use – but at once to manumit it with respect and utility, and let it be in idleness. An elegant aesthetic move, this of Warhol’s: and, in a consumer society, striking. It was a nice gesture indeed from Warhol, whose iconography and production were very much a function of that same consumer society, critiqued by Marxists with their phrase ‘the fetishisation of the commodity.’ Warhol’s compulsive shopping may be read as an act of grace – aesthetic grace at least – in so far as much of what he bought was not put to use. Useless possession with its uselessness highlighted is the gesture of a modern dandy. Oscar Wilde would have admired this, though Beau Brummell might have been puzzled. He may have been the first dandy, but was something, too, of a utilitarian, and a dress reformer, who insisted on one’s washing oneself, and on wearing clean linen each day.

Ready-mades and Free Beauty

In an earlier article on Duchamp I have suggested that the suspension of utility, the deliberate denaturing of the imminent teleology of objects, is for Duchamp a necessary (though not necessary and sufficient) condition of Duchamp-the-

³ Henry Buck’s is an upmarket Melbourne menswear shop that issues its customers lavish catalogues, which make armchair window-shopping possible.

⁴ On the dust on elements of Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, see ‘Dust Collecting’ (1920), in Calvin Tompkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp: 1887–1968* (Amsterdam: Time International, 1977), p. 159.

Magus making readymade objects into Ready-mades.⁵ The sufficient condition was that a Magus, Marcel Duchamp, declared for example, the bottle rack to be ‘A Ready-made!’ This necessary condition must be borne in mind as we consider Duchamp on shop windows. Shop windows are places where teleology is kept in suspense or on ice, until it issues: (a) in purchase; itself (b) the condition of actual *use*. Duchamp had, in all his work, the idea of *delay*, as a kind of ideal. Total abstention goes, however, a bit beyond mere delay. As we shall see, Duchamp may, when faced with the shop window, be a total abstainer. Further, and in a different register, Duchamp’s shop window passage may force a modification of the account of the Magus-making of Ready-mades which I gave in my previous article as: (1) denaturing the readymade object; (2) making it a Ready-made by performative utterance; and (3) *so fetishising it*. The shop-window examples seem (a) to elide move 2 and, (b) to perform 3 upon the instant, in such a way as (c), even, to collapse move 1.

Duchamp: Window Dressing, Window Shopping

Warhol’s buying but not unwrapping might not have met Duchamp’s standards at all, mere purchase being – probably – an absolute fall from grace (aesthetic grace). We shall consider this a little later. First, it is useful to look at Duchamp’s essays in window-dressing. In Anne d’Harnoncourt’s ‘Introduction’ to the catalogue *Marcel Duchamp* there is a passage on Duchamp’s art and anti-art where she asks whether Duchamp’s dressing of a book store window, Brentano’s on Fifth Avenue New York in 1943,⁶ constituted a work of art – or a Ready-made – or both? Or neither? Neither if the exercise was simply to sell copies of Denis de Rougemont’s *La part du diable*. Both, if Duchamp’s Midas-like touch transformed everything he handled into a Ready-made and, thus, into a work of ‘art.’ And, again, both, insofar as the window dressing included a half-undressed mannequin, a ready-made made a Ready-made by being in a bookshop, not a boutique, window.

⁵ Patrick Hutchings, ‘The Ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp: Cut Flowers or *Les Fleurs du Mal?*’, *Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 10 (2000), pp. 31–50.

⁶ On Duchamp as window-dresser and the Brentano display advertising de Rougemont’s *La part du diable*, in 1943, see Anne d’Harnoncourt, ‘Introduction’, in *Marcel Duchamp*, eds Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (Prestel Verlag: The Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 23. Calvin Tompkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997) records that, as a result of public outrage, the window display was moved to the Gotham Book Mart on 47th Street. There is a photograph of this display on p. 349. The book advertised in the Gotham Book Mart display is André Breton’s *Arcane 7*. Duchamp also (un)-dressed a mannequin in a Dada set of three, for example in the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris. See Calvin Tompkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 159.

Though Duchamp's condition for selecting candidates for ready-mades transformed into Ready-mades was utter indifference to the books for sale, so, as far as the books were concerned, window-dressing by Duchamp might cash out as mere visual-merchandising, like any other. They were simple merchandise; the figure was a Ready-made.

However, if Duchamp was intending that people buy books from the window which he had dressed, this would be quite *contra* to his famous – and puzzling – remark on shop windows, and the need to stop at window-shopping. Buying, for Duchamp, is somehow taboo. There is a many-layered text by Duchamp on shop-windows, the end (if not the conclusion) of which is to enforce the taboo of acquisition *or* acquisition-plus-use. Window-shopping is made oddly absolute:

When one undergoes the interrogation of shop windows, one also pronounces one's own sentence. In fact, one's choice is 'round trip.' From the demand of shop windows, from the inevitable response to shop windows, the fixation of choice is determined [*se conclut l'arrêt du choix*]. No obstinacy, ad absurdum, of hiding the *coition* through a glass pane with one or many objects of the shop windows [*s'en mordre le pouces*] as soon as possession is consummated. Q.E.D.⁷

The Q.E.D. suggests this is (part of) an argument. The argument is not complete in this attenuated quotation; we shall look at a fuller variant in another translation later. Let us begin by working back up from the end; *possession consummated* induces the profoundest regret. Does it? Why? Well as to 'why,' the free-beauty-state of the objects in the shop window – their being objects of pure regard – is abolished. They become mere objects without the – mysterious – *freedom of free beauties*.⁸ Unless, of course, one is Andy Warhol, and can possess without consuming. A *mariage blanc* to an object, leaving it in its wrapping, is a modern dandy's exercise in pure aestheticism.

One has a – kind of – argument here in exegesis of the Duchamp passage. But the passage contains rum elements that this 'argument' – if such it be – does not touch upon. There are two odd moves: (1) the referring of the experience we have with objects in shop windows as *coition*. The expression is at once too strong, and misplaced. This is because the desire which an object in a shop-window inspires is not by any means usually sexual; one desires a

⁷ Jerrold Seigel, *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), p. 29.

⁸ Kant's discussions of freedom in general are less than satisfactory, and his notion of free beauty is not free of this general unsatisfactoriness. See Denis Dutton, 'The Experience of Art is Paradise Regained: Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 34 (1994): 226–241.

necktie in Henry Buck's in an unheated way. This, however, is of no account to Duchamp if – as I have suggested elsewhere – the upshot of making a ready-made a Ready-made is that it is *fetishised*: It is just, thus, that he treats window displays and r/Ready-mades, sliding from indifference with respect to *r*, to fetishisation with respect to *R*. But 'coition' – which does not occur through plate glass – is referred to *because* all desire is (wrongly) held (here and elsewhere by Duchamp) to entail sexuality; all objects of desire are treated by him as though they are objects of sexual desire, even – although it seems silly – the blue and white silk tie in Buck's window.

The over-description of our (possible) enjoyment of the objects in the shop-window, even while they are still safe behind the glass, seems to have at its root a Jansenist collapsing of all desire into concupiscence, and of concupiscence itself into actual sin. To these remarks-in-exegesis one might add that *coition* is exactly what does not happen through plate glass. Think of the utter pathos of wives visiting their convict husbands and 'kissing' through bullet-proof glass. The Jansenist absurdity provides a clue to Duchamp's use of the word 'penalty.' All one has done *to* the objects in the shop is, (i) look at them, or (ii) possibly look at them as *free beauties*. This incurs a 'penalty.' Why? Because to look is to desire, and to desire is to desire illicitly. So one may as well go the whole hog, 'cut the pane,' get the object, or objects, and *then* bite one's thumbs: (a) because one looked, and this, already, incurs a penalty; and (b) because any object thus had is not worth the having. The short version of all this is: To look is to fetishise: *fetishes essentially disappoint*.

'One or many objects' may be the cynosure of the concupiscent gaze: whatever is/are so gazed upon becomes/become fetish/es. What is denatured by this gaze is *not*, then, made a *free beauty*, but sold into the harem of an Indifferent Potentate. The shop-window passage re-writes the protocols of making an *r* an *R*: The concupiscent regard makes, by 'coition,' a fetish of the object(s) regarded, quite eliding performative utterance. We have noted this already. But is even the Magus himself dealt out of the game? Is the person in front of the shop window not always Duchamp, but possibly, just anybody? Well, anybody who has 'coition' with displayed merchandise can and must *eo ipso* fetishise, so why not also make an *R* of any *r*? The trouble with this is that nobody would take any notice. We can all be concupiscent, but only Duchamp's Ready-mades interest the public. He is a Magus; anyone else is just odd if they seek to canonize a banal manufactured object. And if they fetishise things, they need to present to a competent psychiatrist. No one is a Magus to their valet or their psychotherapist. Duchamp himself needed the success and scandal of *Nude Descending a Staircase II* to give him the status successfully to force and utter Ready-mades.

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It is received wisdom in Duchampian discourse that the sexual satisfactions of the *Large Glass* are onanistic. And the *Large Glass* is the apotheosis, perhaps, of the shop window. If the sexual satisfactions of the denuded Bride occur – in some future moment, where the yet-still-uncompleted work is completed? – they will occur as mechanised sexual activity occurring between two panes of glass, even! In Duchamp's demand that we do not come to possess the objects in the shop-window there seems to be what Duchamp himself calls elsewhere, 'strictness of a Huguenot sort.' In his fetishisation of the 'malic moulds,' his putting of banal shapes from a clothing catalogue into an erotic context, but one in which the erotic is suggested rather than represented, is a kind of boundless license. Marcel Duchamp and Molière's *Tartuffe*, with a new twist. Too pure to buy a chocolate grinder but so naughty as to make of it an erotic object; a fetish, indeed. Concerning fetishes (not his own) Duchamp observed in an interview with Pierre Cabanne; 'it's a little like masturbation.'⁹ The second odd move (2) is from *free beauties* to onanism. And the idea that art-is-masturbation remains unconvincing.

Art for Duchamp is generally erotic, in the sense that his remarks to Cabanne make, more or less, clear:

CABANNE: What is the place of eroticism in your work?

DUCHAMP: Enormous. Visible or conspicuous, or, at any rate, underlying.

CABANNE: In "The Bride" for example?

DUCHAMP: It's there, too, but it was a closed-in eroticism, if you like, an eroticism which wasn't overt. It wasn't implied, either. It's a sort of erotic climate. Everything can be based on an erotic climate without too much trouble.

I believe in eroticism a lot, because it's truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called Symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another "ism," so to speak. You're going to tell me that there can be eroticism in Romanticism, also. But if eroticism is used as a principle basis, a principle end, then it takes the form of an "ism," in the sense of a school.

CABANNE: What personal definition of eroticism would you give?

DUCHAMP: I don't give it a personal definition, but basically it's really a way to try to bring out in the daylight things that are constantly hidden – and that aren't necessarily erotic – because of the Catholic religion, and because of social rules. To be able to reveal them, and to place them at everyone's disposal – I think this is important because it's the basis of everything and no one talks about it. Eroticism was a theme, even an "ism," which was the basis of

⁹ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), p. 100.

everything I was doing at the time of the “Large Glass.” It kept me from being obligated to return to already existing theories, aesthetic or otherwise.

CABANNE: Still, in your work, this eroticism has remained disguised for rather a long time.

DUCHAMP: Always disguised, more or less, but not disguised out of shame.

CABANNE: No, hidden.

DUCHAMP: That’s it.

CABANNE: Let’s say underlying.

DUCHAMP: Underlying, yes.¹⁰

I have considered much of this Cabanne dialogue in my earlier paper. However the ‘smash-and-grab’ vocabulary of Duchamp’s shop-window passage now becomes – clearly and paradoxically – erotic. One obtains objects from shop windows not by ‘cutting the pane,’ but by going into the shop and putting down one’s money. How much more elegant, though, would Duchamp’s ‘cutting the pane’ be than just chucking a brick through the glass! Duchamp would be a very stylish robber; but he wishes to have none of what he might have from the shop-window, dishonestly or honestly. The paradox of course – the irresolvable tension – is between *coition* which occurs through the glass pane – in a Pickwickian sense of ‘occurs’ – and actual intercourse that has as its necessary condition penetration, and/or rupture. Duchamp was a sexually experienced person, married twice, and with a long-term sexual relationship with Mary Reynolds. The element of fetishisation and auto-eroticism in his work is therefore puzzling. Lawrence D. Steffel Jr has referred to the *Bride* as ‘autistic intercourse,’¹¹ where the self-containedness of ‘autistic,’ would make nonsense of ‘intercourse.’ *Intercourse, autistic* is an oxymoron of some pathos. Both Steffel and Seigel agree that the postponement or even the avoidance of climax were for Duchamp-the-Artist (if – probably – not for Duchamp the chap) of the essence. Delay – and double delay – was *de rigueur*. Steffel writes in his essay ‘Marcel Duchamp and the Machine,’ richly and suggestively *à propos* Duchamp’s obscure and obscurely erotic ‘machines’ and of the system of designed-nonsense in which they do exist. All of the following, dense, passage, is necessary to my argument:

... a game is “Dadaized” by Duchamp, who takes the limited space to be the translucency of a glass panel or the emptiness of a room where we find a Readymade, while the limited time may be a

¹⁰ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, pp. 88-89

¹¹ Lawrence D. Steffel, ‘Duchamp and the Machine’, in *Marcel Duchamp*, eds Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (Prestel Verlag: The Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 76.

minute, an hour, or a whole life. The objects and counters in the Duchamp game are, of course, the paraphernalia of machines and mechanisms, but they are also forms and systems, illusions and mirrorings (literal or figurative), titles and imports – all of which are the counter personae and presences of Duchamp’s “works.” The field of play is not only the “perspective” of the images (and the perspectives we bring to them), but the ambiance of the works in relation to the perceptual and conceptual rapports of the viewers of these works. According to the “fixed” rules, which always seem to be asking to be changed as we play the game, we begin by taking seriously what we see, trying to make sense of the relationships we are faced with – and then abandon that seriousness in favour of Dada hilarity. The operation of chance is, on the whole, the opposition we face: chance as distraction and lack of sense. But our opponent is also the imagery itself (we must “take” the chance), which must be mastered by going beyond the plausible. In this respect Duchamp’s nonsense is a set of strict relationships and a matter of flexibility, a paradox to reason but a new and very twentieth-century poetic of converting the given and the banal into apparitional potency. The scale of conversion from the givens and grinders and dummies, of cylinders and scissors, of hatracks and typewriter covers to the freedom of unimpeded hyperbolic thought is so great that only a kind of “*short circuit*” of *intelligibility* can lead us from the pathos to the ethos of the *Large Glass* and the Readymades, happy or unhappy, which are its offspring or counterparts. This short circuit of our normal ways of using visual imagery is grounded in the logic of mental relations subject to its own laws, limited and controlled by reason and will, *set within and against a suppressed power of cogent irrationality*. Dedicated basically to “balance and safety,” this logic of mental relations, which is “nonsense” instead of “sanity,” postpones the effect of climax which is *orgasmic irrationality*.¹²

The key terms are game (chess/Ready-making?), Dada-ized, and orgasmic. The haunting notion is of ‘rules which always seem to be asking to be changed as we play the game’: such a game would be nonsense, ‘cogent irrationality.’ One might be tempted just to say: ‘Duchamp moves from the mechanics of the erotic to the eroticisation of the mechanical: and makes a nonsense of it.’ But this would not do justice to Steffel’s points. However, we cannot go into a full exegesis here.

The ‘short circuit’; here in lines three and four of the quotation immediately above matches, perhaps, the ‘round trip’ in Duchamp’s shop-window passage. The ‘suppressed power of cogent irrationality’ is such that one can never get to the point – *i.e.* the now new point – of the denatured

¹² Steffel, ‘Duchamp and the Machine’, p. 76.

readymade-made-Ready-made. How constructed – ‘cogent’ – irrationality postpones is perhaps obvious enough here. How it prevents us getting the point of the joke is clear: why the ‘irrationality’ is ‘orgasmic’ has nothing much to do with the irrationality, and all to do with Duchamp’s cashing out of free-beauty and its particular free play of the cognitive faculties, in his system at least, as erotic. The fetishisation of the denatured object, the eroticisation of the so-innocent mere mechanical artefact, is what is made in making a ready-made a Ready-made. The erotic and the mechanical are in the art of Francis Picabia and Duchamp stranded together in a thread: but they are not, in the non-Dada world, mutually entailed. Though, with its claims of access to the unconscious, dada – and with it Duchamp – can eroticise *ad lib*: eroticisation may, indeed, be, to the Unconscious, obligatory. Duchamp’s window-shopper’s fetishising gaze expressed not waking life in which we are cool, but is a function, if anything, of the volcanic unconscious. Duchamp conflates consciousness and the unconscious in an implausible way.

Here are two things that need to be said of the ‘logic’ of all this. First, fetishisation gives everything the same point – if it still, then (considering the principle of difference), counts as a point. It all depends on how you feel? Second, nonsense, as nonsense, deprives everything of its point – so nothing has a point: the *meta-game* of Ready-mades – denatured objects recycled as Duchampian whatevers circulating forever in a closed system – is as deprived of point as are the readymade objects made apt-to-be-Ready-mades deprived of theirs. Fetishisation unites all point-full-nesses under the erotic: nonsense unites all point-full-nesses under the pointless.

The principle of difference, to which one feels wedded, can only deplore such dodgy unities; of this, more later. We shall have, in the remainder of this paper, to go in to the nexus – real or fudged – between total eroticism and total pointlessness. Though, if one is a Dada-ist of the Unconscious, or has orgasmic relations with things in shop windows, the following pages may seem otiose.

Indifference and Delay

Many of Duchamp’s works are witty in a sense immediately accessible – more or less – to persons not in the play of what I have called elsewhere The Free Playground (of the Free-Eroticised-Play of the Cognitive Faculties). *Fresh Widow*, a carpenter-made pair of windows ‘glazed’ in shining black leather is a joke one might get without going all the way with Duchamp. Seigel, however fits – ‘even’ – it into a larger play – and a play of sexual paradox:

Fresh Widow was a glass altered so that the disillusionment that, in the note on shop windows, followed breaking the pane had no chance to occur. The work was therefore fittingly signed with the name Rose Sélavy, the partner who, as the eros that is life, never

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grants her lovers actual possession, keeping their desire fresh too. In this light, the proclaimed “freshness” of the widow derives from her inaccessibility to the new partner for which she is constantly “ready”; as long as she remains separated from the world by the opaque panes that symbolize her state, she exists as an instance of the condition where, to use again Walter Benjamin's phrase about Baudelaire, *lovers are spared rather than denied fulfilment*.¹³

The fact that one cannot have all the sexual partners that one might desire – even Don Juan could not – does not negate the old folk wisdom ‘’tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.’ That one cannot, in the Biblical sense, *know* all the desirable persons one knows in the social sense, does not entail that to be ‘spaced rather than denied fulfilment’ is the best case scenario.

And to make, here, a more or less logical point: If ‘all is erotic’ is the case, then the principle of difference which demands, ‘not all is erotic,’ or ‘erotic’ loses any application or meaning’ is suspended, and all is in-differently erotic, in a sense which would exhaust all lust, and/or issue in no choice of some objects over other objects. Indifference in the psychological sense might well supervene on this *in*-difference of any (erotic) objects from any other (erotic) object. Duchamp plays slyly with ‘indifference’ in a principle of difference sense, and indifference in a psychological one: in an almost Jansenist psychological one, at that. To put it another way: delay might become permanent.

Recapitulation

To recapitulate: (a) it is not self-evident that an object in a shop window is better as a window-shopper’s-virtually-aesthetic-object than it would be as an item bought: consequently the taboo on shopping is not perspicuous as to its *ratio*: (b) Duchamp’s willed-*apatheia* seems to be less free-standing than consequent upon the question: ‘If all is desirable in this array, upon the same terms, where could one begin choice?’ Better be, then, like Buradin’s ass and not begin at all! (One can, of course, have an overwhelming plethora of objects in an un-Duchampized shop window, sufficient thus to block choice, without these object being fetishes in any more than the Marxist sense. Window displays of *e.g.* cheap electric watches can surfeit the eye and head off all desire to purchase.)

¹³ Seigel, *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 168. Seigel’s extension of the notion of the glass unbroken to Duchamp’s ampoule of *Air de Paris* (1919) is exemplary; and it renders the idea of being ‘spared fulfilment’ a little less blank: but it does not fill it in enough for one to embrace the *absence* itself of *The Distant Beloved*.

Kant thought that “*apatheia* in a mind that follows its unanswering principles is sublime”¹⁴ and abstaining from shopping on principle might – in its own way – be sublime, if only one knew the principle and its *ratio*.¹⁵ Muffing his sublimity might well leave Duchamp biting his thumbs: but the matter of principle remains unclear: all we have is the pun-consequence: ‘If all difference between objects in an array is cancelled by their being in-differently fetishes, then we might well be indifferent – in the psychological sense – to one and all of them.’

Cogent Irrationality as the Fetishisation of Banal Artefacts: Can it Constitute a Tradition in Art?

Duchamp has his followers still, some to be treated with hollow laughter, others with attention.¹⁶ The pane of glass that desire might cut, but which remains intact, and a fully erotic sense of desire, come up in a recent art object/event in Chile where performance artist Danellia Tobor went about her daily functions, showering and so on, in a house of glass, watched by an – excluded but interested – public.¹⁷ Here is a nice Duchampian window-piece. There is a Duchampian reading of this: a *Playboy* one; and a political reading, *i.e.* ‘there ought to be more transparency in public life in Chile.’ The Duchampian interpretation out-does his own reflections on the window-pane and his praxis as a window dresser. The best Duchamp managed was to dress up in semi-undress a mannequin in a book-shop window or put one such into a dada exhibition. Undressing a real live lady behind glass walls with her bachelors beyond the pale was not possible until so recently as 1999(?) – perhaps?

Duchamp’s Shop-Window Argument Again: the full Q.E.D.

It may be useful to look, now, at a fuller version of Duchamp’s shop window passage to see how it works/or does not work, in relation to its own claim, ‘Q.E.D.’

The question of shop windows

¹⁴ Kant, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, p. 124

¹⁵ The *ratio* of ‘never-shop’ might be *delay*. But delay remains – as Duchamp uses it – as unperceptible as is the window-not-cutting example under which it would fall. As a cure for premature ejaculation, total sexual abstinence would be a way of coping, but not by any means obviously the best.

¹⁶ See the chapter ‘Hollow Laughter’ on the Duchampian heritage in Matthew Collings, *This is Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

¹⁷ For more information on the performance artist Danellia Tobor in the glass-walled house see Duncan Campbell, ‘When Private Goes Public, the Result is Clear’, *The Age* (28 January, 2000).

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To undergo the interrogation of shop windows
The exigency of the shop window
The shop window proof of the existence of the outside world
When one undergoes, the examination of the shop window, one also pronounces one's own sentence. In fact, one's choice is "round trip." From the demands of the shop windows, my choice is determined. No obstinacy, ad absurdism, of hiding the coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the shop window. The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as possession is consummated. Q.E.D.¹⁸

Is Duchamp a solipsist who having proved solipsism true has, then, no one to talk to about it? Or is he a solipsist who does not wish to share his solitude with any more than he now shares it with? These quips are not gratuitous. In Cabanne's *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp* we find, "I've always felt this need to escape myself."¹⁹ It comes up merely *à propos* his inclusion of a direction-arrow in the earliest of the grinder works (the one painted for his brother's kitchen), but it is set in the context – too – of Duchamp's famous remark about art in general, 'Without knowing if I had opened a window on to something else.' An avowal of a felt need to escape oneself need not indicate a solipsistic condition: but joined with the remark 'I'm going to count on no one but myself alone', it has a solo-to-solipsistic tone to it. And the phrase 'round trip' in the shop-window passage is suggestive of a *degree* of solipsism. Windows, even on to 'something else,' for Duchamp seem to serve as mirrors of oneself, not just as 'proving the existence of the outside world.'

And: as Duchamp is not Descartes, there is something a little odd in his hankering to prove the existence of the outside world: this is a problem/'problem' for the bare *cogito*, but not one of everyday life. This is how the whole passage on the coffee-grinder painting goes:

DUCHAMP: I did a coffee grinder which I made to explode; the coffee is tumbling down beside it; the gear wheels are above, and the knob is seen simultaneously at several points in its circuit, with an arrow to indicate movement. Without knowing it, *I had opened a window onto something else.*

That arrow was an innovation that pleased me a lot – the diagrammatic aspect was interesting from an aesthetic point of view.

CABANNE: It had no symbolic significance?

DUCHAMP: None at all. Unless that which consists in introducing slightly new methods into painting. It was a sort of loophole. You know, *I've always felt this need to escape myself.*

¹⁸ The fuller version of the shop-window passage is from Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds), *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), p. 74.

¹⁹ Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, pp. 88-89.

CABANNE: What did the painters you knew think of these experiments?

DUCHAMP: Not much.

CABANNE: Did they consider you a painter?

DUCHAMP: For my brothers, there was no question. They didn't even discuss it. Besides, we didn't talk about those things very much...

You remember that the "Nude Descending a Staircase" had been refused by the Indépendants in 1912. Gleizes was back of that. The picture had caused such a scandal that before the opening he instructed my brothers to ask me to withdraw the painting. So you see...

CABANNE: Did that gesture count among the reasons that pushed you to adopt an antiartistic attitude later?

DUCHAMP: It helped liberate me completely from the past, in the personal sense of the word. I said, "All right, since it's like that, there's no question of joining a group – *I'm going to count on no one but myself, alone.*"²⁰

This may – or may not – make clear why the 'interrogation' of the shop-window must always get the response 'I am no shopper.' The tension between 'needing to escape from oneself' and 'counting on myself alone' might make a good mainspring for 'cogent irrationality,' and issue in a kind of: 'let's play – at least – at solipsism'. Closing himself in a glass box – so to put it – Duchamp felt the need to get out more: but the glass must remain uncut, if the solipsistic and free playground games are to go on. Duchamp as it were moves into Brentano's window, as a long-term tenant, and needs all the living-room he can get there. 'No more objects, *please!*' Outside looking in, inside looking out, the glass must remain intact, both to ensure the perpetual window-shop-status of objects, and to contain the counters in the Free Play Ground Game which Duchamp – for a lifetime – played by denaturing *r* so as to produce *R*: while making of the array of *R*'s a game without sense of closure. Duchamp was, as long as he lived, as well as being the first performative-utterance-art utterer, the first performance artist.

Consumption of objects is a consummation devoutly to be un-wished. The smell pun on consumption/consummation may be the big Idea behind Duchamp's lifelong project. So much did he delay that he made *Etant donnés* a posthumous exhibit, thus denying himself its scandal and its success.

²⁰ Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 88-89

Tentative Conclusions

In the earlier paper I suggested that the *oeuvre* of Duchamp (at least the Ready-made segment) constituted a Free Playground for the – here curious – Duchampian free play of the cognitive faculties. It is a closed world, like Duchamp's beloved chess; Steffel seems to suggest something of the sort too. The solipsist has only himself to play with. But it takes two to play chess as opposed to doing chess problems, and Duchamp is as lonesome as can be. A problems man, at bottom, then.

I choose to relate aspects of Duchamp to two Kantian ideas, (i) free beauty and, (ii) the free play of cognitive faculties. Why free beauties are to be preferred to adherent ones Kant never fully makes clear. And on 'the free play of the cognitive faculties', he is so stingy with examples, that the notion is left up in the air. And this can have unfortunate consequences. Duchamp – as it were – does two things, (a) he makes free beauty, or the freeing of objects from their implicit teleology, a necessary condition of them being made Ready-mades. And (b) the *interest* which Ready-mades – erstwhile free beauties – have in the Duchamp Play Ground is that they are fetishes. The too-general notion of the free play of the cognitive faculties is replaced by the too-specific one of erotic fascination.²¹ This is a move that would have scandalised Kant. Taking 'the free play of the cognitive faculties' and making it pan-erotic would have been for Kant – and for common sense – to subvert its very freedom. Freedom from passion, interest, and so on, was for Kant the essence of his aesthetics as well as his ethics. And: few systems of aesthetics have no place for aesthetic distance; however defined, this would exclude active fetishisation.

The shop-window 'coition' with objects of course – as we have already noted collapses the three Duchampian moves into one: the erotic gaze of itself fetishises. In the 'three' move account of the necessary condition of a Ready-made is that it be made unready for what the manufacturer made it for/to do: the sufficient condition is that it be anointed 'Ready-made!' by a Magus: the

²¹ The geometric and inanimate conjoined to – polymorphous? – sexuality is prefigured perhaps in James Joyce's, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. R. B. Kershner (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993), p. 181. In the famous Scholastic exchange between Stephen and Lynch, Stephen says of St Thomas' *visa* in *Pulcra suut quae visa placent* "This word, though it is vague, is clear enough to keep away good and evil which excite desire and loathing. It means a stasis and a kinesis, also a stasis of the mind. You would not write your name in pencil across the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle. – 'No' said Lynch. 'Give me the hypotenuse of the Venus of Praxiteles.'"

Joyce's *stasis* becomes Duchamp's – perpetual – delay? And Lynch would be just the boyo for Picabia and Duchamp. The – impossibly tense – play of strictness and excess is Duchampian to a high degree. Duchamp is at once Stephen and Lynch; or Jansenist and *roué*.

upshot is that it is, thereby, eroticised. The vocabulary of Duchamp, in the window-piece and pervasively throughout his works, involved his making-of-art in fetishisation. The famous episode of Duchamp's playing, at a retrospective in Pasadena, chess with a naked woman makes for a useful connection of ideas: free beauty, play, the erotic object come together in that elegant suburb of Los Angeles. Had the lady not been able to play chess, then the point of the exercise would have been the stronger.

If fetishised, an object enters the world of the polymorphous-perverse: it is always interesting, and seductive – but often leaves one with the taste of ashes in the mouth.

What has been missed in our discussion of Duchamp under two Kantian rubrics is that other things than sexuality can be polymorphous: and that without preordained perversity. Attention for instance is essentially polymorphous.²² What makes polymorphous sexuality perverse is that sexuality is understood to come with an appropriate range of objects and circumstances. Procreation – if you pursue 'Huguenot strictness,' as you may. Or intercourse of some kind with a member of the opposite sex; or same sex if you are that way determined/inclined, and are PoMo *etc.* The ethics of the matter are not our concern here. The pragmatics of the matter are such that if we call sexual objects 'appropriate' *a priori* (and we do) a name needs to be found for inappropriate objects, and conventionally these are dubbed fetishes.

Sexuality is object-tied in a way in which attention is not. Attention is innocently polymorphous: its imminent teleology is not to pursue only certain kinds of – as it were – objects. Of course attention may fall, as any human being may fall, from innocence: but cases need to be specified and debated. Attention comes with a freedom built in, *de jure*. It is spontaneity. Its range and scope cannot be delimited in advance.

All cases of 'the free play of the cognitive faculties' (special subsets of attention) need, however, to be specified, and if not exactly debated, at least exhibited or the notion remains, (a) empty; (b) consequently liable to entry by squatters such as Marcel Duchamp.

Some attention has a working ground of utility: whether one is doing philosophy or painting the house, attention is bound to the task, and all tasks

²² A remark in conversation made by my friend and colleague Dr G. D. Marshall serendipitously drew my attention to *attention*, and I have made my own use of it here (and blame for the use is mine). One recalls Aristotle's, "The mind becomes in a sense the thing known," see Ronald M. Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [2007]), p. 434-457, which allows for the play of mind across *all* types.

have exigencies. Born free, attention can very much go out to work. Or it can play, at home, or anywhere.

Free play can run across n type of objects, potentially as different as are all the kinds of tasks. Some attention may be aesthetic – even ‘purely aesthetic.’ One model of that may be the model with which we began, that of genial window-shopping. Here adherent beauties may be set free by a regard which, (a) is aesthetic; (b) and, arguably, aesthetic precisely because it sets the objects of regard ‘free.’ Equally one may be an industrial-design buff, and admire the artefact a in the light of its aptness to function well. If this kind of judgement is not equally as aesthetic as is the taking of free beauties, then this needs to be argued. It is not self-evident.

Aesthetic attention may have any number of kinds of *focii*. Socrates thought that a beautiful x was one well-to-splendidly-fashioned-for-its-purpose: Kant seems both to discover and – perhaps – to privilege free beauties; beauties freed of their purpose are the finest. Both philosophers may be ‘right’: it’s a matter of how one looks at the matter.

Caveat

One must, here, make the following point, as clearly as it may be: (a) The Kantian formula of ‘free play of the cognitive faculties’ does not homogenise aesthetic objects as fetishisation would. ‘Free play’ is a formal mode, admitting type differences between objects considered under it: (b) fetishisation however is the material mode, making all objects under it indifferently sexual objects. The ‘free play of the cognitive faculties’ enjoys the protean status of the ‘un-free’ *work* of those faculties: there is no limit *a priori* to the objects of their concern, (even if there is a limit to their competences).

And from (b) we have inferred, if only by way of a kind of pun, that: ‘*if all objects are indifferently sexual, then sexuality which posits difference (of more than one kind too) might be met with psychological indifference, in a so-indifferent universe of, sexual, discourse as that constituted by an array of fetishes.*’ The pun on *in-difference/ indifference* is not, for all its limp logic lax. The world of Duchampian art is riddled with puns, and riddled with riddles, of which ‘when is a fetish not a fetish?’ is the chief.

There is, it seems, only this – paronomastic – kind of link between ready-made objects becoming Ready-mades, and as Ready-mades, made fetishes, and Duchamp’s instance on window-shopping and the avoidance of ordinary shopping. The possibility of Ready-making of ready-mades freezes the shop-window, first denaturing, then fetishising the commodities exhibited therein. And if all is, indifferently, *fetish*, then psychological indifference supervenes, causing not mere delay but a total abstention from

possession/actualised-enjoyment of *x*-in-the-window. Possession would spoil all in Duchamp's game. So: hold off!

Binge shopping and the career of Don Juan may lead, for similar reasons, to utter dissatisfaction – a 'biting of the thumbs' – 'even.' But useful shopping, and erotic involvements of some obvious kinds, seem normal enough. And a fall from window-shopping into mere shopping does not always leave one unsatisfied, even if it 'fractures' the free-beauty aesthetic. Not all attention need be aesthetic: not all falls from the aesthetic are to be deplored. Not does the actual possession of *x* render impossible an aesthetic attitude to *x*. I may treat the picture on the wall of the room where I am writing this as a free beauty – even if I have seen it in a shop-window and paid money for it.

Window-shopping is a kind of edge to the aesthetic: treating the display as 'pleasing when seen,' but not going in to buy may indeed be a type of the aesthetic. Collins Street and the Bourke Street Mall may be for one mixed aesthetic-utilitarian walks: and window and real shopping can peacefully co-exist: The possibility of window-shopping does not entail any necessary unsatisfactoriness of all or any episodes of actual shopping. How could we actually live in terms, of free beauty only? We may occasionally cheat in the free vs adherent beauty thing by buying Alessi's Philippe Starck orange-and-lemon squeezers; but muesli is muesli, and we buy it with breakfast in mind, and it gets consumed/consummated. Kant, who was very unsatisfactory on freedom in general left us the inheritance – not altogether to be desired – of free beauties.

Duchamp's Ultimate Freedom – Beautiful?

Steffel in the *Catalogue* affords Duchamp's work the ultimate 'freedom': he regards it as cleverly and deliberately contrived nonsense, yielding to description but not to argument, transcending both the pointfulness of things and the suspension of this pointfulness, and so becoming itself a meta free-beauty, or a free-beauty-doubled.

Kantian free beauties can be laid open to – occasional – enjoyment; and even – equally occasional – explication. They form no homogeneous set: they may differ in type, *etc.* Duchampian ones are each an element in a display in which they have a role, as counters in a game which goes on without end. Nothing is for sale in Duchamp's shop windows: it's all needed for dressing the windows. It's typecast in terms of the game: and the typecasting is a function of eroticisation or fetishisation. Coition through glass.

If this is so, then Duchamp's window-shopping is not as genial as looking into Henry Buck's window while waiting for a tram: and like a

sentence of Joyce's, Duchamp's visual non-merchandising demands a lifetime's attention: it demands his, anyhow.

Meanwhile, actual life for the rest of us goes on elsewhere, and our vital attention to Duchamp's game-in-a-vitrine is displaced by more pressing concerns.

Attention may, having an indefinite number of objects, be polymorphous indeed. But it must also be limited: its not available indefinitely for any one object, or any one game. Some attention is strictly economical: some of it can be aesthetic, and the difference between the economic and the aesthetic is still debated. But all attention is: attention with respect to some *x*, whatever that type of *x* may be. *It* may be polymorphous: but its objects are all definite, and infinitely diverse. It may be that Duchamp's free'd beauties, Ready-mades *etc*, if de-eroticised, leave one up-in-the-air with respect to any practical criticism of them. One can't account for their being objects of 'the free play of cognitive faculties' in themselves: all the practical criticism of them there is exegesis, a discourse which relates them back to the Duchampian great game. The only practical criticism of a Readymade that is possible is yet more exegesis of Duchamp's Great Game.

Ordinary 'free beauties' are free-standing, and not bound to a scheme: Kant's flowers, parrots and crustacea are separate from each other, and separate objects of 'free play of the cognitive faculties.' How free play plays depends very much on what may be said about the – diverse – objects of the play.

Attention is born free, but must needs much of the time to go out to work. Sometimes it goes to art galleries, or it window-shops. And it may, in an aesthetics seminar, attend to the similarities/difference between the gallery glass case and the shop's window. And convention strictly regulates the time-limit of seminars. So it should.

Nonsense is a game without an end-game endlessly deferring meaning: and it must of necessity, so, weary attention. Equally: it may attract *some* attention: as may indeed, just anything. Free beauty included. Or a Ready-made – 'even.'

Endnote

One has not had occasion in this article to look at the role of chance in Duchamp. But the closing reference to nonsense recalls for me Edward Allen's remark in 'Penny Ante,' in *Literary Las Vegas*,

What I like most about gambling is that it does not make sense. I find it comforting that in pursuit of its admittedly fraudulent promises I don't have to pretend to make sense to myself.²³

This is true, probably, to the gambler's experience – on the many 'no win' occasions of a gambling career. The realisation that most situations are 'no win' would be rational grounds for not gambling, but gambling not being a rational activity may (but need not) account for non-rational choices to do it. Does the base-line's not making sense always entail the meta-line's not making sense, too?

As someone who spent two or more days in Las Vegas, without wagering a nickel, but treating the place as a gigantic spectacle, I find Edward Allen's remark interesting. As a spectacle Vegas is a treat, if a rather odd one. Its baroque-tacky sets up a new province of the aesthetic: and the replications/quotations *eg.* In 'New York New York' and proposed Paris and Venice free fantasias, as well as the casino in the vast – and vastly elegant – black glass pyramid, are the very essence of Post-Modernism: and possibly its best examples.

One can absolutely recommend, in Vegas, Duchampian delay/abstention. And the Kantian idea of getting all this, more or less, for free gives free-beauty a whole new dimension.

²³ Edward Allen, 'Penny Ante', in *Literary Las Vegas*, ed. Mike Tronnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. 134.