

# Marcel Duchamp: War, Trauma, and the Question of Art

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“So far as art is concerned, the war is bound to have the most deadly influence upon it.”

Albert Gleizes, 1915<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on the traumatic impact of World War I, Walter Benjamin noted its silencing and impoverishing effects on storytelling as communicable experience:

With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of alighting the effluvia of stories and personal accounts, the experience of World War I muted its speakers, reducing them to silence. This incommunicability reflected a radical shift, since new forms of tactical and mechanical warfare, along with unprecedented economic, bodily and moral experiences, overwhelmed the capacity for representing human experience.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin’s claims regarding trauma and the “end” of storytelling after the war suggest that other media, such as painting, would be vulnerable to its muting

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in “French Artists Spur on American Art” D2.

<sup>2</sup> “*The Storyteller*” 84.

<sup>3</sup> For Cathy Caruth, the problem of the traumatic event is that it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness, until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4).

impact.<sup>4</sup> His observations invite further inquiry in determining the impact of war on the nature and experience of art.

Marcel Duchamp's reflections on the unprecedented experiences of trauma and grief during World War I led him to consider their impact on art.<sup>5</sup> In a special feature of *New York Tribune* (12 September 1915), Marcel Duchamp declared that "Cubism could almost be called a prophet of war . . . for the war will produce a severe, direct art."<sup>6</sup> Duchamp ascribed the development of such severity and directness of art to a major shift in sensibility resulting from the magnitude of human loss and its desensitizing character:

One really understands this when one realizes the growing hardness of feeling in Europe, one might say the utter callousness with which people are learning to receive the news of the death of those nearest and dearest to them. Before the war, the death of a son in a family was received with utter abject woe, but today it is merely part of a huge universal grief, which hardly seems to concern any one individual" ("Nude-Descending-a-Staircase Man").<sup>7</sup>

Not only did the war rob families of their sons by turning them into the fodder of the machinery of war, but it also robbed them of the experience of their death by depriving them of the capacity to mourn. The experience of bereavement, as "utter abject woe" which formerly found expression in individual loss, was supplanted by the "huge universal grief" overwhelming the continent. The massive numbers of deaths inflicted by the war would be compounded by the injury of no longer being able to claim one's personal loss and suffering through grief and mourning. Duchamp's comments suggest that the nature and fate of art in the wake of the traumatic experience of World War I would have to change. But in what sense and how would these traumatic developments affect his work?

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes commented on the suspension of language and blocking of signification in traumatic photographs by concluding that "no value, no knowledge, at the limit no verbal categorization can have any hold over the process instituting its signification" (*Responsibility of Forms* 19).

<sup>5</sup> This essay is inspired by and reprises ideas initially broached in my article on Duchamp, World War II, and art, "Duchamp's 'Luggage Physics': Art on the Run."

<sup>6</sup> "Nude-Descending-a-Staircase Man."

<sup>7</sup> Commenting on Duchamp's statement in the same article, the American painter Kenyon Cox remarked that, as a result of the war "European countries will have suffered so much that they will have no use for fads in life."

## War Malaise

“all air, all life [in France] is stifled by war.”

—“French Artists” D2

The eruption of the war in France in August 1914 inexorably drew and mobilized Duchamp’s family into the war effort: his two older brothers left for the front, and his sister Suzanne and two sisters-in-law joined the nursing corps. This familial expression of patriotic support also reflected the legacy of Duchamp’s father’s capture and imprisonment during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71).<sup>8</sup> Despite Duchamp’s prior military deferment, he was redrafted in January 1915, but failed his physical exam due to a rheumatic heart murmur. Relieved by this outcome that condemned him to “remain a civilian for the entire duration of the war,” he noted with irony his diagnosis by the military: “They said I was too sick to be a soldier”.<sup>9</sup> Duchamp’s remarks regarding his experience of Paris during the war provide important clues to his migration to America. Quoted in an article written after Duchamp’s arrival in New York on 15 June 1915, the artist described the impact of the war on the City of Lights and on his artistic life:

I assure you the Quartier Latin is a gloomy *endroit* these days! The old gay life is all vanished. The ateliers are dismally shut. Art has gone dusty. . . . But it is a very different life from the happy, stimulating life one used to encounter. Paris is like a deserted mansion. Her lights are out. One’s friends are all away at the front. Or else they have been already killed. (“French Artists” D2)

For Duchamp, art had gone dusty not just in the ateliers of Paris shut down, but also as an idea whose pursuit was supplanted by the unrelenting preoccupation with war: “Nothing but war was talked from morning until night. In such an atmosphere, especially for one who holds war to be an abomination, it may readily be conceived that existence was heavy and dull.” Fleeing the war, the reproaches of his sister-in-law for being “behind the lines,” and the occasional insults of civilians who spat at him on the street for not fighting at the front, Duchamp declared to Walter Pach his resolute decision to leave France: “I am not going to New York, I am leaving Paris” (Naumann and Obalk 36). Was his flight from war an attempt to step out of history? Or do his works during the period of 1914-18 bear testimony to the reality of war in ways that would also challenge the nature and meaning of painting and art?

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<sup>8</sup> Marquis 17; also mentioned by Lyons (10).

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Walter Pach, 19 January 1915 (*Affectionately*, Marcel 30).

## War Refugee and/or Art Refugee?

"Flags are the only things you get to see in color."

—Marcel Duchamp, 1915<sup>10</sup>

Duchamp's efforts to take refuge from war reflected his enduring aversion to patriotism and militarism. He remarked: "From a psychological standpoint I find the spectacle of war very impressive. The instinct that sends men marching out to cut down other men is an instinct worthy of scrutiny. What an absurd thing such a conception of patriotism is!" ("French Artists" D2). Speaking of the reasons for his migration to the United States during World War I, he stated, "I had left France basically for lack of militarism. For lack of patriotism, if you wish" (Cabanne 59). He held on to these convictions throughout his life, although after World War II they were colored by an expression of some ambivalence and regret.<sup>11</sup> Even as early as 1905, "being neither militaristic nor soldierly," he availed himself of the exemption of "art worker" by becoming a printer of engravings as a way of fulfilling his military service (Cabanne 19-20). Duchamp's aversion to war largely overlapped with his discontent with art and his sense of incompatibility with its professional endeavors and modes of operation. In his letter to Walter Pach (27 April, 1915), he commented on the combined impact of war and art on his decision to leave France: "Long before the war, I already had a distaste for the artistic life I was involved in. It's quite the opposite of what I am looking for. And so I tried, through the Library, to escape from artists somewhat. Then, with the war, my incompatibility with this milieu grew. I wanted to go away at all costs" (*Affectionately, Marcel* 36). Trapped by professional and market pressures that relegated artists to merely repeating themselves by copying and multiplying a few ideas, he actively sought to escape both the ravages of war and the damages of the art market.

The buildup and onset of World War I fed Duchamp's disaffection with art and Parisian artistic milieus. Duchamp's rejection of the pictorial dogmas of cubism coincided with its increased alignment with expressions of patriotism.<sup>12</sup> His dissatisfaction also reflected his increased recognition of the commodification and monetarization of painting, and more generally, art. Duchamp later summed up the corrosive impact of market and speculative considerations on artists and their works: "The feeling about the 'market' here is so disgusting that you never hear any more of a thought for itself – Painters and Paintings go up and down like

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to Walter Pach, 19 January 1915 (*Affectionately, Marcel* 30).

<sup>11</sup> "I left France during the war in 1942, when I would have had to have been part of the Resistance. I don't have what is called a strong patriotic sense; I'd rather not even talk about it" (Cabanne 85).

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of cubist painting and the war, see Cottington 87-108.

Wall Street stock" (*Affectionately*, Marcel 168). Reacting against the increasing impact of commercial forces on artistic production, he was searching for alternatives to conventional drawing and painting. He began work on projects leading to *The Large Glass* and became a librarian in the "Perspective" section at the Bibliothèque St. Geneviève in Paris, thus putting an end to his pictorial endeavors: "I wasn't trying to make paintings, or to sell any" (Cabanne 41). His disenchantment with painting reflected the exclusive cultivation of its visual aspects (what he called the "retinal") to the detriment of intellectual expression. Would the suspension of his pictorial activities signify an end to painting or a way of putting "painting once again to the service of the mind" (Duchamp, *Writings* 125)?

### The Box of 1914: Photography and Contingency

"The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock,  
as it were."

—Walter Benjamin<sup>13</sup>

*The Box of 1914* is a black bound photographic box containing sixteen black and white photographic facsimiles of manuscript pages of notes and a drawing.<sup>14</sup> Although artlessly produced to look like actual documents, these photographic reproductions are compiled in a case and put forward as artworks.<sup>15</sup> Duchamp began compiling his notes in 1913-14, but he remarked that at the time "I didn't have the idea of a box as much as just notes" (Cabanne 42). Duchamp's archival activities reflected his professional library training in 1912 that included courses on bibliography and modes of organization and classification for libraries and archives.<sup>16</sup> Reproducing disparate fragments of Duchamp's mental musings, these notes "can" his thought processes as counterparts to the physical production of art.<sup>17</sup> Isabelle Wallace observed that this impulse to catalogue presents not just an opportunity for the artist to review and reflect on his or her work, but also a way to carve out in the present a space for "a moment's gravity" (133). Celebrating the

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Baudelaire 132.

<sup>14</sup> For descriptions of the various versions of *The Box of 1914*, see Schwarz 598-603. My comments in this paper refer primarily to Box No. 1 from the edition of five at The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Elena Filipovic underlines Duchamp's deliberate assimilation of the documentary and the artistic in contravention to their opposition and separation prior to World War I (39).

<sup>16</sup> Le Penven; also mentioned by Filipovic (13).

<sup>17</sup> David Joselit suggests that Duchamp's use of photography to give access to his personal notes ends up equating mental and industrial processes (84-86).

contingency of the moment, these incidental notes privilege the creative processes of art making rather than objective outcomes, thus resisting the pressures of commodification and consumption. Did Duchamp stop making art by merely repeating himself through a strategy of self-quotation? Or does the compilation of his notes in *The Box of 1914* lead him to envision new forms of artistic making?

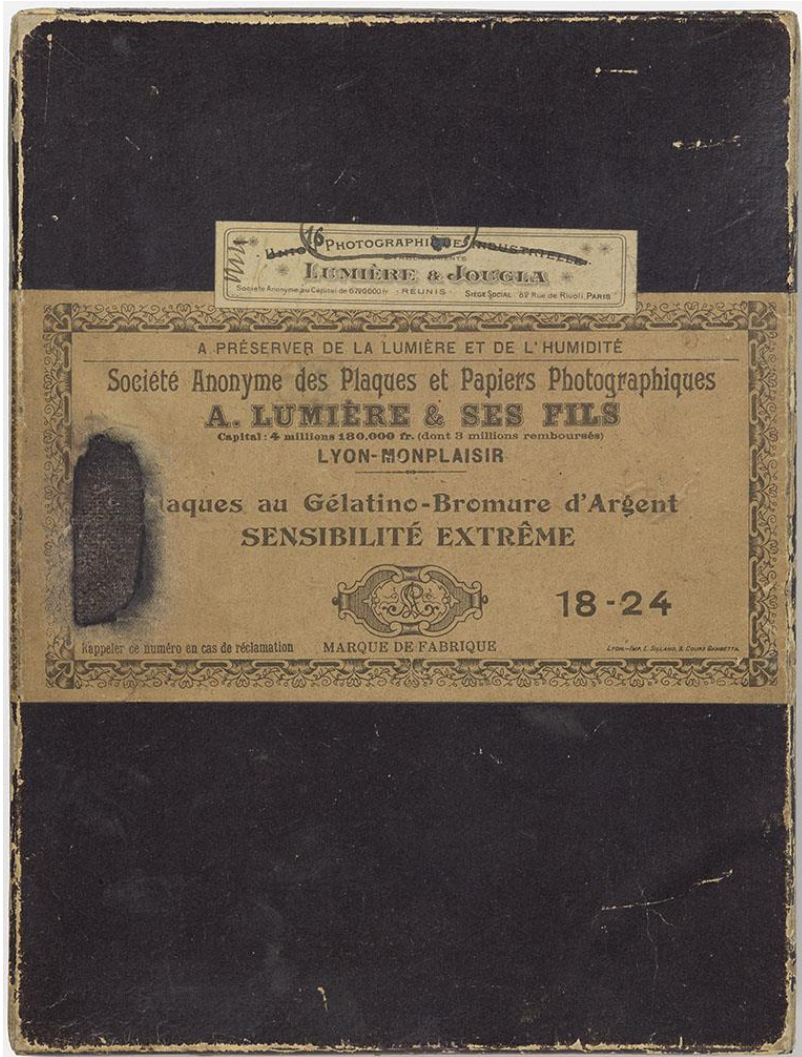


Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, *The Box of 1914*, 1913-14, outside view.

Commercial cardboard photographic supply box containing photographic facsimiles of sixteen manuscript notes, a drawing and a photographic facsimile of another the drawing, 9 7/8 × 7 1/2 × 1 1/2 inches (25.1 × 19 × 3.8 cm). Philadelphia

Museum of Art, Gift of Mme Marcel Duchamp, 1991; 1991-133-1. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2018.

The somber black clad appearance of *The Box of 1914* presents some interesting clues regarding its contents. Duchamp appropriated a commercial container for photographic glass plates which bears a large white label printed in black on the cover indicating the maker A. Light and Sons (A. LUMIÈRE & SES FILS), a name that Duchamp would find particularly apt for someone in the photography business dealing with the action of light upon sensitive glass. But Duchamp confused this narrative of origination by appending another small label on the top bearing the insignia of a different provider/brand (LUMIÈRE & JOUGLA) and a different location. This additional label was updated by hand to indicate the box's "new" contents of 16 black and white photographs. Duchamp blacked out the word "Industrials" (*Industrielles*) qualifying the photographs, a denial that indicated the box's "artistic" re-appropriation while also reminding the viewer of the mechanically reproducible nature of the photographic medium. These allusions to photography paralleled Duchamp's interest in questions of reproducibility and the multiple, which he began to explore through his readymades starting in 1913.

The large inscription on the main label of *The Box of 1914*, "SENSIBILITÉ EXTRÊME" ("Extreme Sensitivity" in English) that refers to the sensitivity of the gel-coated glass plates to light impressions also signifies a subjective state of extreme susceptibility or sensitivity. It means a heightened ability to sense or perceive, sensibility understood as a capacity for feeling or emotion. Duchamp reprised this idea of susceptibility in another note referring to emotion in *The Box of 1914*: "Given that....; if I suppose I'm suffering a lot...." (*Writings* 23). In doing so, he combined references to the material and technical capacities of the glass plate as a medium for photographic impression with allusions to impressionability as an expression of sentience or sensibility. These allusions to sensitivity understood as impressionability are reprised in several notes related to war referring to military deferment, military games, and the vagaries of fate.<sup>18</sup> Scattered among notes dealing with the making of past or future art works, these notes focus on happy or unhappy impressions produced by experiences of contingency.

## Inventories of Mortality

"Photography is the inventory of mortality."

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of Duchamp's military service and his concerns with the military escalation leading to WW1, see Lyons 2-5.



In a note entitled “Deferment” (*Eloignement* in French), Duchamp counters the compulsory nature of military service with an idea of deferment that implies along with temporal deferral or postponement, also spatial distance, remoteness, or estrangement:

Against compulsory military service: a ‘*deferment*’ of each member, of the heart and the other anatomical parts [*unités*]; each soldier being unable to put his uniform on again, his heart feeding *telephonically* a deferred [*d’éloigné*] arm, etc.

Then, no more feeding; each *deferee* [*d’éloigné*] isolating himself. Finally a Regulation of regrets from one “*deferee*” to another [*d’éloigné à éloigné*].<sup>19</sup>

The assemblage of the great body of the army through the call for military service is countermanded by the deferment of individual body parts, the heart, the arm, etc. These detachments “wound” and thus sunder the army’s unifying ethos perpetuated through the uniformity of military attire. Metonymically alluding to the incorporation of individual bodies into the army, Duchamp’s note exposes the violence inherent in the army’s consolidation through national conscription, a condition whose political stakes and gender presuppositions no longer reflect professional service by choice, but rather mandatory participation in the state. As Norman Bryson pointed out: “The body is no longer leased to the state, it *is* the state; the state emerges as a new kind of biopolitical entity, and by virtue of gender the male body belongs to the state, as state property” (247).

Duchamp’s note on deferment reveals the fundamental strain, anxiety, and violence that haunts male identity in its incorporation and symbolic consolidation into the army. Duchamp’s introduction of feeling with the phrase “Regulation of regrets” (*Réglementation des regrets*) evokes pain or distress experienced at something left undone along with the idea of regulating loss through management.<sup>20</sup> Duchamp’s crossing out of the French word *Union* (meaning union or bonds) on *The Box of 1914* lid’s printed label alludes to the possible nature of such regrets. It suggests a play on the contradictory sentiments aroused by deferment, since the happiness experienced at the luck of being relieved of military service is shadowed by the regrets of one’s detachment from those in service. Duchamp’s reflection on the arbitrariness of deferment captures the opposing impressions that this moment generates, recalling his references to “luck or

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<sup>19</sup> *Writings* 23. All original French terms are from the French edition of Duchamp’s writings, *Duchamp du signe*.

<sup>20</sup> To regret also means “to look back with distress or sorrowful longing; to grieve for on remembering,” from *regreter*, in French meaning “to long after, bewail, lament someone’s death.”



unluck” in his preceding note. When brought into play in art, the idea of deferment enables a new way of envisioning time in relation to events, since the deferral or postponement of an event keeps active its potential for occurrence in the future.



Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp, *The Box of 1914*, 1913-14, inside view. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mme Marcel Duchamp, 1991; 1991-133-1. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2018.

Another note in *The Box of 1914* on the “barrel game” brings together military, photographic, and chance associations: “The barrel game is a very beautiful sculpture of skill [*d’adresse*]: / A photographic record should be made of 3 successive performances; and ‘all the pieces in the frog’s mouth’ should not be preferred to ‘all the pieces outside’ or (not) above all to a good score” (*Writings* 23). The barrel (or frog) game is a game of skill and relaxation dating back to the Greek and Roman armies.<sup>21</sup> It is a game where players gain dexterity through repetition, learning to regulate their move by “shaping” the contingency of each throw. Duchamp’s qualification, that “A photographic record should be made of 3

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<sup>21</sup> For the historical origins of the “frog game” or “barrel game” dating to antiquity, see “Jeu de la grenouille” <http://www.jeuxpicards.org/grenouille.html>. Placed at a set distance of three meters, players attempt to throw tokens designed to fit into specific slots.

successive performances,” associates the attainment of gaming techniques for “regulating” contingency to photographic techniques which mechanically reproduce the contingency of each move.<sup>22</sup> Duchamp’s emphasis on technical modes of production refers back to his opening note in *The Box of 1914* on “The Idea of Fabrication,” dealing with the making of 3 *Standard Stoppages* (1913-14), a work later described as “canned chance” (*Writings* 22, 31). Like the barrel game, this work relies on “3 successive performances” to record and reproduce the accidental shape taken by a falling meter-long string dropped from the height of one meter. The impressions of these chance events are transposed from canvas, to glass, and then to wood templates, recalling the use of negatives to produce photographic prints.<sup>23</sup>

Duchamp’s account of photography in *The Box of 1914* suggests that its relation to time is haunted by contradiction. Roland Barthes underscored the uncanny nature of the photography that “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (*Camera Lucida* 4-5). However, this tireless repetition of contingency proves to be mortiferous, since the imprint of the moment “immediately begins to date.”<sup>24</sup> In immortalizing the uniqueness of an event, photography reduces it to a record of the past that robs the event of its capacity for happening. This “deadening” effect of photography in capturing a moment of existence while evacuating its capacity for becoming is featured in *The Box of 1914* by the inclusion of a photo reproduction of a drawing, entitled *To Have the Apprentice in the Sun*. This photo reproduction of an original drawing using India ink and pencil depicts a cyclist racing up and across a sheet of music paper instead of musical notes. The French title (*avoir l’apprenti dans le soleil*) is an inversion of the expression “To be blinded by the sun” (*Avoir le soleil dans l’oeil*), and it puns with *à voir: l’empreinte dans le soleil* or *sol(oeil)* meaning “to be seen: the imprint in the sun or in the eye.”<sup>25</sup> While referring to the contingent character of the photographic imprint (*l’apprentill’empreinte*), these puns also allude to its vulnerability, even mortality, given its sensitivity to light through overexposure or fading. There is irony here, since the photo reproduction proves more perishable than the original pencil and pen drawing. The threat of loss and mortality thus menaces not just the image but also the techniques entailed in its photographic production. Acting as a photographic album, the black clad *Box of 1914* memorializes notes of projects past as well as projects to be realized in the

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Clair interprets Duchamp’s study of the decomposition of movement as suggesting analogies to chronophotography (54,36-38).

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Molderings argues for the pictorial resonance of this work based on the string, which he interprets as an analogue of the visual ray (49-52).

<sup>24</sup> See Leslie (31).

<sup>25</sup> For this inverted expression, see Rabaté 50; my reading of these puns differs in its emphasis on the imprint in the sun and eye rather than ground. For an analysis of the imprint as Duchampian procedure, see Georges Didi-Huberman’s analysis (113-115).

future. While cautioning the viewer on the unreliability of photography as a visual medium, Duchamp upends its commemorative functions by redirecting its replicative capacities towards securing his verbal annotations on works past and projects yet to be realized.

### Shadows and Tombs in *Tu m'*

"The war has killed the Art of the Continent, utterly"

—Francis Picabia ("French Artists" D2)

*Tu m'* (1918; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT) is a multi-media work that combines oil and pencil on canvas, with a bottle brush, three safety pins, and a real bolt. Commissioned by artist-collector Katharine S. Dreier, this unusual, unwieldy work which measures two feet high and more than ten feet long was especially designed to fill in a gap in her library wall. Representing Duchamp's last major foray into the domain of painting, *Tu m'* can be seen as a testamentary work: "It is a kind of inventory of all my preceding works, rather than a painting in itself.... I have never liked it because it is too decorative; summarizing one's works in a painting is not a very attractive form of activity."<sup>26</sup> As Arturo Schwarz has observed, this work represents the realization of Duchamp's project to make a picture by using "shadows cast by 2.3.4. Ready-mades."<sup>27</sup> *Tu m'* includes the depiction of two shadows cast by actual readymades *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), on the left and *Hat Rack* (1917) on the right. Underlying the bicycle's wheel's shadow on the left is a shadow outline of Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14), which is repeated as perspectival studies on the left, underlying the hat rack. Is *Tu m'* a mere pictorial repository of Duchamp's works, and as such, serving as a tomb of sorts after the supposed "death" of painting at the hand of the readymades? Isabel Wallace noted that *Tu m'* is a "painting with death in its title," since it is a homophone of "tomb" (*Tu m'/tomb*).<sup>28</sup> However, while exploring the supposed "death" of painting, the question of painting's "birth" will also be at issue as a way of elucidating Duchamp's ironic take on art.<sup>29</sup>

Evoking the mimetic and illusionist conceits of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, Duchamp literalizes its impulses through the depiction of a painted tear which is held

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<sup>26</sup> Duchamp to Arturo Schwarz, unpublished interviews, 1959-68; qtd. in Schwarz 658.

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Duchamp, Notes note 55; Schwarz 658.

<sup>28</sup> See Wallace's insightful account (133). For Rosalind Krauss, *Tu m'* manifests "a kind of trauma of signification" delivered by the rise of abstract painting and photography (206).

<sup>29</sup> This analysis addresses concerns raised by Wallace in her cautionary note regarding the rhetorical character of Duchamp's gesture (137).

“closed” as it were by three actual safety pins which pierce the canvas.<sup>30</sup> Michel de Certeau described this makeshift tear at the heart of the canvas as “A wound, no longer hidden behind the painting, but inscribed at its center, breaks the text into two fragments held together with safety pins. A fable torn in two” (158).



Figure 3. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918. Oil on canvas, with bottlebrush, safety pins, and bolt, 69.8 x 303 cm (27 1/2 x 119 5/16 in.), Yale University Art Gallery, gift of the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953.6.4. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2018.

This tearing of the fable of the unity of the painted image and its makeshift repair reveal the wounding split between opposing ways of envisioning pictorial representation. *Tu m'* brings together in one picture two different ways of depicting *Three Standard Stoppages*, one based on ordinary vision and the other on its pictorial manipulation through anamorphic distortions. Why does Duchamp resort to this double strategy to represent his work? Duchamp's depiction of painting as a mimetic art through his use of cast shadows in *Tu m'* is doubled by a reflection on painting as a perspectival system of geometrical projection and construction, as indicated by the elongation of shadows suggesting anamorphic distortion. Derived from the Greek prefix *ana-*, meaning "back" or "again," and the word *morphe*, meaning "shape" or "form" in Greek, *anamorphosis* is a technique whereby images distorted through projection may be reconstituted by the viewer through the use of special devices (including mirrors) or by occupying a specific vantage point.<sup>31</sup> By revealing the constructed nature of the pictorial image, anamorphosis reveals the projective scaffolding and thus fiction that subtends its ostensible unity. Duchamp's use of a real bolt that passes through the first swatch in the row of commercial color samples on the right locks down the split that threatens to divide the representational modes at work in painting. But this apparent attempt to secure the unity of the pictorial image is undermined by the

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<sup>30</sup> Thierry Lenain associates *trompe l'oeil* procedures to a “contestation of the ontological status of the image” (87).

<sup>31</sup> See “anamorphosis” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For a definitive study of the history and uses of this pictorial device, see Baltrusaitis.

introduction of paint color samples whose pre-fabricated character challenges and preempts the artistic process of making color in painting.<sup>32</sup>

A bottle brush (*goupillon* in French, which also means a gun or lamp brush) attached to a hole in the tear aggressively projects away from the plane of the stretcher towards the viewer. Referring to Duchamp's readymade *Bottle Rack* (*Porte-bouteilles*, 1914; also known as *Egouttoir* or *Hérisson*), the bottle brush (*goupillon*) puns on the idea of taste (*Gou/goût*), as well as playfully suggesting its eradication by flushing it down the sewer or drain (*l'égout*), as in the *Bottle Rack* (*l'égouttoir*). *Pillon* in *goupillon* references violence and wounding, since it signifies a rammer, stamper, or wooden leg, and *pilonner* means to ram, stamp, shell, or bomb. The bottle brush builds on the legacy of threats inscribed in the *Bottle-Rack's* designation as *Hérisson*, which signifies hedgehog quills, or a barbed obstacle used in war. These allusions to danger associated with the object's prickly appearance highlight its latent violence in taking on the idea of art. Thus, in addition to its physical appearance and visual menace in threatening to poke the spectator in the eye, the bottle brush embeds verbal references to violence, wounding, and the language of war.

Duchamp made *Tu m'* using a projector to make shadows that he projected and traced by hand on the canvas (Cabanne 60). The cast shadows in *Tu m'* re-enact the legendary origins of painting, described by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (circa 77-79 CE) as a genesis from the outlines of shadows. Pliny ascribed this discovery to the daughter of Butades of Corinth, who traced the shadow of the profile of her departing lover (Book XXXV, 43, pp. 370-73). The tracing of the lover's shadow commemorates through the capture of presence his impending absence.<sup>33</sup> However, since the cast shadow is an imprint of light, it also may be seen as an early photograph.<sup>34</sup> As such, it comes before, but also after painting, ironically framing its mimetic impulses while dispensing with the painter's hand. Duchamp's painting of cast shadows magnifies these ironies, as Victor Stoichita has noted: "However, in a painting of shadows, the representation turns on itself, and the creative/presenting hand can only be the product of an ironic composition, an isolated sign of the presence of a 'painter,' there where there is no longer any painting" (199). Painted in by a professional sign painter who signed it in pencil as A. Klang, the pointing hand with index finger stages the demise of painting at the hands of the readymade only to re-issue painting's "rebirth" as a hack image produced as commercial copy.

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<sup>32</sup>D'Harnoncourt and McShine mention Duchamp's use of a real bolt in *Tu m'* (286).

<sup>33</sup>Victor I. Stoichita underlines the importance of "the birth of Western representation" being "in the negative," caught up in this dialectical play between presence and absence (7).

<sup>34</sup>Referring to Pliny's legend, Hagi Kanaan analyzes photography as an art of cast shadows.

## Before and After Painting

“Men are mortal, pictures too.”

—Marcel Duchamp<sup>35</sup>

Compounding the play of irony in *Tu m'*, Duchamp accords the insignia of originality to a painted sign, validating its authenticity with the signature of a commercial rather than a fine arts artist. This work re-enacts painting's origination from a copy, from the tracings of shadows as reproduced simulacra rather than living beings. Duchamp's playful allusion to the origins of painting also signals its end, by bringing its destiny to a logical conclusion. It does so by bringing to light the shadowy premises of the myth of the genesis of painting by showing that the copy or the simulacrum is not merely derivative or incidental to its origination but rather necessary to the unfolding of its mimetic logic. Duchamp's display of his strategy of replication suggests that the logic of copy both predates and postdates the logic of the original, thus explaining why “[o]ne may consider the shadow of the corkscrew as a Readymade rather than the corkscrew itself.”<sup>36</sup> He claims that the readymade's significance lies precisely in its “lack of uniqueness,” a message that may also be delivered by the “replica of a readymade” (*Writings* 142). Scrambling distinctions between the original and the replica through simulation, Duchamp's supposed re-visitation of the past in *Tu m'* reveals a strategy of deferment that keeps alive the event-making potential of his works.

Indeed, *Tu m'* does not just present a record of Duchamp's past works, since it also prominently displays the elongated shadow of a corkscrew in the center. As an unrealized readymade, the corkscrew's shadow acts as an announcement foreshadowing an event yet to come. The corkscrew's shadow stands in as a copy of a presumed original model yet to be “made” a readymade at a future time. The future is scripted as a temporal deferment or postponement holding out the advent of an event. This temporal ambiguity is figured in the work's title since the word “*tum*” in Latin signifies at that time, then (adverb) or thereupon, or in the next place. The expression “*quid tum*” meaning “What Then?” has been interpreted both as a query on that which follows death, or rhetorically, an intimation of the future as in “What Next?”<sup>37</sup> *Tu m'* hovers between the temporal registers of the past and the future, between the supposed “death” and legendary “birth” of

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<sup>35</sup> Cabanne 67. Duchamp reprises this idea by stating that “The difficulty is to make a painting that is alive” (Tomkins 30).

<sup>36</sup> Undated note from Duchamp to Arturo Schwarz, ca. March 1968, qtd. in Schwarz 657.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase *Tum* refers to Cicero's “*Quid Tum?*” (*Tusculan Disputations*, II.11.26, p. 173). It is also used by Virgil's Dido when bemoaning the loss of her lover as “What then?” (“*quid tum?*”) in *Aeneid* IV, 543 (pp. 458-59).

painting as an event that has already happened and is also yet to come, followed by and yet also preceded by photography. Duchamp's playful attempts to undermine painting's mythic origins and ostensible demise do not enshrine photography in its stead. As Duchamp explained to Alfred Stieglitz, "I would like to see it [photography] make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable (*Affectionately, Marcel* 109). Duchamp's solution in *Tu m'* is ingenious: he avoids the pitfalls of the "retinal" associated with both painted and photographic images by recording the imprints of cast shadows (calling them "becomings" (*devenus*).<sup>38</sup> This label captures their shadowy condition as an adumbration of images, a promise of advent that would realize their potential for becoming without lapsing into art.

### Aftershocks

"You see, art never saved the world. It cannot."

—Marcel Duchamp, 1966<sup>39</sup>

Duchamp's cryptic inscription cum signature "*Tu m' Marcel Duchamp 1918*" (lower left) plays on *m'harcele*, (to be harassed, harried, or badgered) that as a homonym also puns on Duchamp's first name Marcel. *Harcele* comes from *harceler*, which means to harass, or to harry (as used in military or hunting terminology), as well as to badger or nag. To harry also has military connotations: it means to conduct or make a pillaging, destructive raid or assault, to force or move along by harassing and to torment by or as if by constant attack.<sup>40</sup> Who exactly is harassing or badgering Marcel Duchamp and why? Is it the idea of painting that keeps on nagging at him, wounding and haunting him recurrently like a traumatic incident? Even as the advent of the readymade created the illusion of an end by suggesting the possible death or abandonment of painting, painting would continue to linger and inform his works if only through the processes of its mourning. Duchamp's use of a reflexive construction *Tu m'harcele* to both comment on and sign the work reveals the subjective wound or split that marks the reflexive nature of his struggle to leave painting behind while compelled through that very gesture to perennially mourn its loss.

While holding back from image making in response to war, Duchamp affirms its traumatic effects as a wound whose makeshift patching with safety pins warns of a scission that art can neither heal nor redeem. Recognizing that "art never

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<sup>38</sup> For the use of the French term, see *Duchamp du signe* 50. My translation differs from Sanouillet and Peterson, who translate *devenus* as "these having become" (*Writings* 33).

<sup>39</sup> Cooper-Gough and Caumont 8-9 September 1966.

<sup>40</sup> See Merriam-Webster online dictionary at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/harry>.



saved the world," Duchamp's works bear testimony to traumatic events that can no longer be claimed in the name of art and the artist. Attesting to the vulnerability of art in the face of catastrophic events, Duchamp's efforts to take refuge from the trauma of war no longer find retreat in painting or art. His works reflect the realization that the nature of art, its means of production, and the position of the artist must radically change. Acting as bookends to the period of World War I, *The Box of 1914* (1914) and *Tu m'* (1918) stage allusions to death and the trauma of war to challenge the meaning and relevance of both pictorial and photographic images as visual witness to traumatic events. However, rather than negating painting, privileging photography, or upholding their dialectical opposition, Duchamp mobilizes their differences to fuel his critique of the viability of art.<sup>41</sup> Valorizing becoming rather than being, his works derive energy not from a capacity to generate images, but rather from their ironic movement between pictorial and photographic modes of representation. They defer the pretense of providing visual witness by assuming the critical responsibility of bringing into view the premises that govern visual representation historically, artistically, technologically, and socially.

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<sup>41</sup> See Bois's critique of Duchamp's negation of painting (236-37).

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