

Duchamp: marginality and modernism and the questioning



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Both Dada and Surrealism cannot be understood as just new art movements, but also social ones. During the 1960s, the whole notion of what constituted art underwent a profound change, accompanying this questioning of the aesthetics of the art object; this was also a time when massive acceleration took place in the extent to which sex was discussed and sexual images, produced.

One of the main developments that came out of the innovative ferment of the early twentieth century, and continued to take root in the preceding cultural and political discourse, was an improvement in the social position of women, and it is no coincidence that feminism was among the most important forms of subject matter in modernist art. Furthermore, in lieu of the massive widening of the definition of “ what constituted art”, made it possible to explore these and other issues in especially provocative and productive ways.

Since then, art has no longer been defined primarily in terms of its physical form or medium but of the context in which it is presented; however even these boundaries have been blurred as the boarder between high art and commercial forms has become even more permeable. Specifically looking at some of the major works of the prolific artist, Marcel Duchamp I will attempt to deconstruct his androgynistic impulse, in relation to the unification of the self, and non-self and the variety of double-images that constitute the modernist process of individuation.

In order to explore the duality of the androgyny, we must first attempt to understand its meaning and implications in relation to the context and

culture of which it is implemented. Although many artists shared a project of responding to the popular iconography of the female body, their representations ranged along a varied spectrum, between bodies strictly compartmented according to mainstream gender codes and androgynous bodies working to blur these boundaries.

However, a unifying aspect of the dominant culture's representation of women is that they are predominately represented both as consumer or alternatively, a strictly sexual object to be consumed. Many artists labored to deconstruct this binding of femininity, proposing equality between the sexes by transgressing the culture-bound question of gender divisions. By refusing to draw deep distinctions between male and female bodies or actions, either by taking a unisex view of gender roles among bodies, or by conflating and bending gender roles in individual bodies.

The modern term " androgyne" comes from the Greek language, and combines the words meaning man [Andros] and woman [gene]. In biology and botany, " androgyny" identifies plants and animals that have the capacity to change sex, or to fertilize themselves . In the medical community, the term " androgyny" is used for people who are born with ambiguous genitalia. As Sally Banes succinctly explains in her inquiry of the gendered body: " the primary difference between ' masculine' and ' feminine' then creat[ed] the difference between public and private, work and leisure, economic and domestic, political and aesthetic.

This, in essence is the set of divisions that a variety of modern artists called into question; additionally, it was precisely what Duchamp reflected and

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challenged, set within the discourse of a higher level of two-fold perception. In 1912 Duchamp painted his famous *Nude Descending a Staircase*, (Fig 1) which created a scandal at the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. I like to propose the notion that this exhibition marked the first public declaration of Duchamp's interest in androgyny; whereby the artist is rapidly moving past the vestiges of cubism towards a purely mental foundation of imaginary images.

As Alice Marquis states in her text: *Duchamp In Perspective*: "certainty and contradiction invade each other in sequence of works as well as in individual works by Marcel Duchamp. Even the art-historical facts of the development of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* suffer infiltration by impossibility, unlikelihood and irony." This image not only marks the starting point of the Duchamp's androgynous agenda, but also it is one of the primary examples of futurism. Futurism is an artistic impulse that seeks to represent the movement of the modern world, and, by the very geometrical forms, painting is thus connected to cubism.

This image represents both a cultural disassemblage as well as an aesthetic one. *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a representation of the simultaneous aspects of forms, departing from cubism, which represents motionless elements seen under various planes. Visually, Duchamp makes it very difficult to access this image, by disorientating the viewer in the absence of a distinct point of view and organization of forms. The painting is fundamentally constructed on a downward diagonal; if one trusts the bust's, it appears as though there are 6 different silhouettes that can be followed.

The bodies are distinctly non-gendered, and the appendages of are represented in an almost mechanical manner. The image is one of movement, and fluidity, whereby the stairs remain the only grounding element of the piece. The urgency of Duchamp's image is further emphasized by the strong lines and restricted color palette, which both confuse and disrupt the expectation of the viewer, upon viewing the title of the image. In addition, it is valuable to note that the dominant culture's representation of the nude, are most often identified to be women.

However, here Duchamp charts the profound ambivalence about sexual difference; customary of the late nineteenth century, for it is the image of a disguise, laced with witty deception. This image, in being unnervingly ambiguous, essentially draws the spectator's attention to the congruencies between the persona of the nude, and the climate of shifts and dislocations that represents the loss of past traditions. Paralleling this is fracturing of tradition, is the modernist framework; that too was once defined not in relation to formal concerns, but rather being structured in cultural terms, that are often inherently oppositional.

In place of the usual insistence of self-expression in art, Duchamp pointed out that self-centeredness could be removed from the artistic process, or at least moved off center. Thus, this image represents not only the abandonment of conventional artistic tradition, but it is one of the first steps taken by Duchamp that works to both challenge and deny the uniformity of sexes, and rather put fourth a transcendent notion of unity.

Furthermore, as we analyze the progression of Duchamp's work, we will see how the image of the Androgyne will come to represent the process of integration and disintegration, whereby the transformative practice will result in the self-realization through the unity of archetypes. Moreover, in the shift away from cubism, to a purely mental set of images, Duchamp was seriously questioning selfhood, and these manifestations were an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. This activism is taken even further when Duchamp released his revolutionary "ready-made" Fountain (1917)(Fig. 2).

If the intention is to escape from the self, then Duchamp explicitly made this point clear in this artistic creation, in removing the "artist" from the center of the concept of art, thus extracting the idea of self-importance and self-expression from the work of art. In short, the piece can be analyzed as a form of androgyny. To declare this plumbing fixture a work of art certainly was a striking challenge to the sensibilities of the time, however what is even more complex is the questioning of how this may be considered androgynous. Despite the lively interest of the press, the public knew surprisingly little about Fountain.

Camfield summarizes how this piece was often anthropomorphically referenced in relation to Madonna and Buddha forms, both having a simple frontal shape, with a curvilinear profile of which suggests the head and shoulders of the two divinities. This perception of femaleness is placed in direct contrast to physicality of the object, and in addition, the name "R. Mutt" signed on the fixture. Far from being the product of an impulsive decision to challenge the principles of contemporary art, Fountain thus <https://assignbuster.com/duchamp-marginality-and-modernism-and-the-questioning/>

appears to be expressive of its creator, related to the other work by Duchamp and reflective of the art and culture around him.

Although this conclusion is not easily associated with an androgynous sentiment, when we start to view art and objects as all having shape, quality, and individuation that originates from an undifferentiated principle, superior and at the same time anterior to the opposition bet Me and not-Me. As Schwarz describes: “ Absolute freedom is one of man’s oldest aspirations, and to be no longer conditioned by a pair of opposites results in absolute freedom; but to be able to enjoy this freedom man must first attain integration, become a self.

In relation to Duchamp’s Fountain, we can see how the artist is entertaining cultural dominants, not only to produce critique of contemporary and transitional societal values, but to find unity amongst diversity; having the transformative intention of self-realization. The past two works that we have looked at have had particularly ambiguous gender’s and it is at this point now, that I would like to consider the singular way in which Duchamp shifted between a number of rapidly accumulating identities, throughout his processes of individuation.

Bradley Bailey states that “ many scholar and critics have paid an inordinate amount of attention to Duchamp the Man, rather the Duchamp the artist, however those who are familiar with Duchamp’s complex identity will immediately recognize the unfeasibility of trying to pin down exactly where the man ends and the artist begins. ” Looking back to the previous works discussed, we can perhaps attempt to sketch the development of Duchamp’s

process of individuation, and the reconciling of opposing trends towards wholeness.

Furthermore, by taking things a step further, I would like to discuss the controversial image L. H. O. O. Q. (Fig. 3) and the implications it bears when discussing the construction of Duchamp's androgynous self. Produced in 1919, this image is a central example of Dadaism. This derivative work brings together both the principles of Dada, as well as the accessibility of a "ready made." This work, was created by using an ordinary photographic print of Leonardo's Mona Lisa and simply adding a mustache and goatee, in which the title is loosely pronounced as: "she has a hot ass. This act was evidently intended to register contempt for renaissance culture, as well as for the glorified sentimentality of femininity and classism.

However, beyond merely attacking the aesthetic institution, Duchamp turned this prolific image upside down, reversing the gender roles and turning the renaissance beauty into an androgyne, thereby confounding the conventional heterosexuality attributed to her image. Duchamp's masculinization of the Mona Lisa exemplifies the both the act of treating sexes identically, while simultaneously confusing these models by mixing or trading codes.

Ultimately, this image represents the body as a site of simultaneous pleasure, community and liberation. In relation to Duchamp's personal process of discovery, we can look again to Schwartz, where he describes individuation as: "the process through which the individual comes aware of the opposite sex it harbors, the feminine anima in man, and the masculine

animus in women. ” Schwarz then goes on to say, “ It must be well understood that the masculine and the feminine, as soon as they are idealized, become values. And conversely, if they are not idealized, they are nothing other than miserable biological servitudes.

Therefore, the combination of male and female elements in Duchamp’s work symbolize the duality, and by extension, the larger truth of non-duality, meaning the unification of all reality. In other words, plurality is actually oneness, when understood from a higher, perhaps surreal level of perception. Finally, we can see how this transformation has taken place, whereby the conflicting ideas of gender and identity have conflated in the gender-bending character created by Duchamp in 1920: Rose Selavy (“ Eros, c’est la vie”) (Fig.).

Cutting lose from conventional modes of gendered individuation, Duchamp creates a woman with veiled and shadowed eyes who has posed as if resting her elbows on a cafe table. This image of gender doubling exposes Duchamp’s process of stabilizing his masculine personality with his female, producing a balance of oppositions that characterize both Duchamp’s aesthetic interest as well as his development towards self-realization. Duchamp’s proxy explicitly explores the notion that gender is a masquerade, or a construct.

Furthermore, the artist’s expression of Rose Selavy was both a product and a reflection of the very culture it criticized, however being embodied by Duchamp himself, Rose demonstrates the physical and spiritual inside and outside, creator and creation being two aspects of the same substance.

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Images, like the one of Rose Selavy, framed a challenge to the dominant mode of male discourse, by using its own symbols against it.

Whereby cross-dressing becomes a way of addressing and re-dressing the inequalities of culturally defined categories of masculinity and femininity. Thus, feminist modernist costume imagery, like that of Rose Selavy, is radically revisionary; in a political sense, it implies that no one male or female can or should be confined to a single form or self. As Schwartz describes: " Only a unified personality can experience life, not that personality which is split up into partial aspects, that bundle of odds and ends which also call itself ' man'.

Furthermore, as expressed through the Androgyne works produced by Duchamp, to sustain that an artist expresses consciously in his or her work a variety of unconscious archetypes is to reduce the role of the artist merely to that of an illustrator. Thus, it must be understood that the inherent quality of work resides precisely in that fact that its creator was led by forces of which he was ignorant, whereby only secondary to the quest, unveils the artistic reward.