Dalhousie French Studies
Revue d'études littéraires du Canada atlantique

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Baas, Jacquelynn. Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life

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Number 122, 2022

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101640ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1101640ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)
2562-8704 (digital)

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Cite this review

Slopek, E. (2022). Review of [Baas, Jacquelynn. Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life]. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (122), 145–148. https://doi.org/10.7202/1101640ar

expose la fragilité de l'Homme qui se retrouve « Sans abri » : « […] te poses où/ tu peux/dortoirs viciés aux odeurs de renfermé couloirs déserts traversés de courants d'air/du pareil au même ».

Ces poèmes, regroupés en cinq parties de longueurs inégales, rappellent le fleuve de l'existence, mouvement d'ondulation des sables du désert qui peuvent s'agiter comme la mer. La première partie, « Préambules pandémiques » contient sept poèmes qui introduisent la matière du recueil sur le ton de la révolte, façon de montrer que l'on est encore en vie. Ensuite vient « Isolements intérieur nuit », qui, avec dix-neuf poèmes, décrit la noirceur des divers confinements et rejets convoquant l'attente patiente, mais également l'évasion. L'« Entre-deux » comprend trois poèmes qui pointent vers la porte conduisant aux « Voyages, extérieur jour ». Cette partie du recueil, la plus longue avec dix-huit poèmes, est celle de l'éclosion de la vie jusque-là sclérosée par la pandémie, isolement intérieur.

On retrouve dans ce volet cinq photos de paysages du sud de l'Alberta : *badlands*, coulée de roches cassées, éboulement, canyon désertique où le panneau « *One Way* » signale l'évidence du risque inhérent à l'existence, tandis que l'illustration de l'art rupestre autochtone grave « l'empreinte de l'épreuve sur une terre austère ». Toutes ces images sont paradoxalement porteuses de lumière, signes évidents de la renaissance en cours, la « matière vive » et les fulgurances lumineuses venant témoigner de la promesse d'une nouvelle éclosion. Enfin « Écrire », dernière partie du recueil, nous offre trois poèmes et une photo d'un amas de charbon entouré d'arbustes et d'arbres en floraison, présage de l'écriture de la nature qui renaît pour laisser place à la germination finale telle qu'on la retrouve dans *Germinal* de Zola, le dernier poème de *Déserts noirs* faisant écho à ce roman.

Le recueil d'Anna Migdal est porté du début à la fin par une musicalité et une fluidité qui confèrent une légèreté aérienne au voyage poétique qu'elle nous offre. La mise en scène y est orchestrée comme dans un film où la rencontre de la parole et de l'image permettent en définitive de faire du poème une force en mouvement pouvant résister à la mort.

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Baas, Jacquelynn. *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2019. 400 p.

Since his death from a "catastrophic" attack of pleurisy in the early hours of October 2, 1968, Marcel Duchamp, the artist who variously styled himself a chess player, a cheese merchant, an inventor, an art dealer, a theoretician, a "breather", a "bricoleur", and as an "an-artist", has hence been embraced as the founding father, the generative patriarch, and common source of numerous contemporary art movements, notably Conceptual Art, Fluxus, Performance Art, and Pop Art. Though to all appearances working behind the scenes as an administrator, archivist, art advisor, curator, publicist, reproduction maker, salesman of his own oeuvre, Duchamp's stature nonetheless continued to grow steadily. Rivaling today only Picasso as one of the art world's two canonized patron saints, a mythic story has been spun of an artist who changed the course of art, in the process becoming both an abstraction and icon, a cipher of multiple identities, deserved and undeserved. With a highly malleable "author-function", Duchamp has been portrayed in the vast secondary popular literature that continues to this day to appear unabated in manic numbers, as an "alchemical dabbler" (Arturo Schwarz), a "tantric initiate" (Octavio Paz), a "full-scale occult master" (Jack Burnham), a "critical realist" (Pierre Cabanne), the "most intelligent man in the world" (Andre Breton), a "failed artist and tragic neurotic" (Alice Goldfarb Marquis), a "psychotic and imposter filled with self-hatred" (Donald Cuspit), the "most destructive artist in history… the Leonardo of the Age of Intellectual Despair (John

Canaday), an "artist-engineer-scientist" (Linda Henderson), a "publicity-seeking self-mythifier […] the 20th-century art world's most stimulating gadfly" (Gianfranco Baruchello), and, now, in Jacquelynn Baas's recently published book, *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life*, an enigmatic artist whose work was intimately shaped by Asian 'eroticism' and a vast array of Eastern spiritual practices and philosophies.

A cultural historian, writer, curator, and director emeritus of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Baas has previously scrutinized the crossover between Buddhism in particular and contemporary art in such publications as *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* [co-edited with Mary Jane Jacob][1] (2004) and *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (2005). In the latter book, her stated intention was not to be comprehensive, but rather "to provide a lens through which to perceive and interpret the art of the recent past", her goal being to foreground "possible" implicit rather than explicit Buddhist perspectives. In her attempt to do just that, she confesses to "having made some imaginative leaps"[2]. Sparked by the research and perspective offered by Tosi Lee's distillation of his 1993 doctoral dissertation entitled "Fire Down Below and Watering, That's life: A Buddhist Reader's Response to Marcel Duchamp," in *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life* she broadens her earlier arguments by focusing primarily on Duchamp, asserting that his "version of artistic realization was grounded in a Western interpretation of Asian body energetics" (Baas, 5). With this premise in hand, she "presents evidence" that "the intellectually omnivorous Duchamp would surely have been aware of Vedantic, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophies, along with Daoist internal alchemy and yogic and tantric techniques for bringing powerful erotic energy to bear on the modification of human perspective and behavior—techniques that had been infiltrating European religious and artistic circles since at least the eighteenth century"[3]. Though, as she admits in the preface to *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life*, she frequently resorts to the subjunctive in her speculations about correlations between Asian philosophies cum practices and Duchamp's work. Baas does so over the course of an elegantly written and prodigiously illustrated book comprised of an Introduction and ten interlocking chapters. In support of her thesis, she insists that a familiarity with Asian philosophies and practices is required so as to "make more sense than they might otherwise" (Baas, 23). To that end, in the Introduction she constructs a conceptual framework outlining the major branches and contours of Asian thought including Buddhism, Taoism, Vedanta, Tantra, and Perenialism. While necessarily brief, her survey of the "Asian matrix" does successfully capture and reveal the complexity of the cultural relationships between these various practices.

In its turn, Chapter One rehearses the standard and by now familiar trajectory of Duchamp's life, yet it refreshingly culminates with an original appraisal of the Polish-Jewish Kabbalist Max Theon's (1848-1927) investigations of magnetism and the psychosomatic practices "designed to channel, enhance, unite, and transform dynamic, 'female' energy and powerful, purposeful 'male' consciousness present in both men and women," and his perceived influence on several of Duchamp's paintings. The chapter however closes with a curiously truncated discussion of T.S. Eliot's poetry and philosophy which, to quote Rosalind Krauss. ''I just don't know where to look in Duchamp to find anything that would connect to this" (Baas, 60).

1 Baas, Jacquelynn and Mary Jane Jacob. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art.* University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004.

2 Baas, Jacquelynn. *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005, p. 10.

3 Bass, Jacquelynn. "Marcel Duchamp and the Artist of Tomorrow". *Interalia Magazine,* issue 3, 2014, p. 3.

The following Chapter takes as its focal point Duchamp's 1911 painting, *Portrait,* or *Dulcinea*, a large work that depicts a figure in the process of transformation from five points of view. It's not made entirely clear exactly how this relates to Baas's main thesis. Moreover, in the manner in which the evidence is presented, this chapter suffers from a surfeit of subjunctive claims – for example, 'Dunne's concept of time as multidimensional *would have resonated* with Duchamp's own understanding of time" (Baas, 66), "they *may have* been watching" (Baas, 75), "Alfassa's gatherings *were probably*" (Baas, 75), "Duchamp *would have known*" (Baas, 78) or "*perhaps* Duchamp mentioned" (Baas, 80). The next chapter tracks Duchamp's sojourn to Munich, "not coincidently, ground zero for the spiritual in art." Lacking any diary entries for the time spent away from Paris, with only a small amount of correspondence, there is not much art-historical that can be gleaned from his three-month stay in Munich except information on matters of everyday or secondary importance. Even if sources of information remain thin, what is known – Duchamp's encounter with the works of Lucas Cranach, his visits to the Bavarian Art Fair, the Deutsches Museum, and the Alte Pinakothek, the iconic portrait of him taken by Heinrich Hoffmann, and his annotations of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* – has provoked much speculation concerning the causes and significance of what Duchamp described as "the scene of my complete liberation." For his part, "I never spoke to a soul, but I had a great time"[4]. Baas takes the opportunity in this chapter to recount biographical material already available in such comprehensive accounts as Calvin Tomkins' *Duchamp: A Biography*. In a prosopopoeiatic conclusion, Baas rhapsodizes that Munich "helped Duchamp realize that for him painting had become a protective trap, an abusive straightjacket that was tormenting him by preventing him from flying, from becoming the kind of artist he wanted to be" (Baas, 109).

In the subsequent chapter, *The Headlight-Child* (a reference to the infamous drive to the Jura Mountains), Baas explores the influence of Francis Picabia, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, and Max Stirner on Duchamp's thought, replete with rather strained digressions into Taoism and Hindu philosophy. In both Chapters Five and Six the reader is taken to New York City with an analysis of several key Duchamp works, for instance, the legendary *Fountain,* and the effect of Taoism and other Eastern philosophies on their realization. Therein, Baas frames her narrative around an alternate and revolving cast of characters, including the American art writer Walter Pach, Duchamp's lover Maria Martins, surrealist Andre Breton, author and art expert Robert Lebel, and Isabelle Waldberg, among others. Into the mix, Baas posits a relationship between Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* disks and the "Kashmiri Shaivism practice of retraction and expansion of energy, designed to open the heart to Kundalini." A provocative association, but in the end regrettably unsubstantiated.

Chapters Seven and Eight are chiefly dedicated to the "serious" collaborations between Duchamp and Georges Bataille, an outlier whose corpus constitutes an "assault on the concept of autonomy, whether of individuals, objects, images or texts" (Baas, 207), while the penultimate Chapter delves into the more "humorous" aspects of such projects as the "wickedly humorous *Da Costa Encyclopedia"*(Baas, 247), an enterprise informed by the reputed Da Costa syndrome, "a wartime neurotic condition characterized by heart palpitations, chest pain, a rapid pulse, and fatigue" (Baas, 248). Yet again, Baas's claims, though fascinating in themselves, ultimately falter given her evidence is rooted in the subjunctive mood, for as she writes, Duchamp "*may have* been familiar" (Ibid), he "*may have been partly* inspired" (Ibid), and "Duchamp's *Door may also have been* his answer" (Baas, 252). Finally, Chapter Ten weaves together a number of thematic strands that she maintains inform Duchamp's oeuvre, in particular his last piece, *Étant Donnés,* such as

4 Taylor, Michael. "Visiting the Alte Pinakothek with Marcel Duchamp". in Friedel, Helmut et al. (eds). *Marcel Duchamp in Munich 1912*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2012, p. 54.

Tibetan Buddhism's "rainbow body", Max Theon's "infusion of the psychic active being into the psychic passive being" (Baas, 303), Picabia's and Man Ray's paintings in which dancers are surrounded by energetic forms, and the claim that "Duchamp learned a Western form of Tantric yoga" (Baas, 307).

In an obituary published in *The New York Times* on October 31, 1968, Alexander Keneas observed that "Marcel Duchamp the artist had blossomed into Marcel Duchamp the idea". As an idea, Duchamp has turned into a Rorshach blot, subject to multiple interpretations, Baas's among them. Gianfranco Baruchello, a friend of Duchamp's who Baas references early on in her book, once asked Teeny Duchamp about Duchamp's apparent interest in alchemy and she confirmed his suspicion that alchemy "was something that Marcel couldn't have cared less about." Baruchello extrapolates from her candid remark that "What's horrible is when critics begin to present their conclusions as causes […] or to explain hypothetical relationships without necessarily achieving any exhaustive explanation of events as things in themselves"[5]. Especially when it comes to insisting on presenting Duchamp "as some kind of Samurai or Zen master who was always entirely above it all" (Ibid, 145). As an idea, Duchamp may be construed as a master inquiring into the secrets of Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, or Vedanta, one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy, however compelling this may seem, but as a human being, as an artist in the thick of life, he couldn't have cared less. Except for chess, which toward the end of his life he could no longer play, leading him to reflect, as quoted in his obituary, "You can forget about something you love very much. It's a Zen concept. When I put my 'Nude' under my arm and went home, it was my first Zen experience. Don't Cry".

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5 Baruchello, Gianfranco and Henry Martin. *Why Duchamp: An Essay on Aesthetic Impact*. McPherson and Company: New York, 1985, p. 99.