

Notes on the Index

Part 1

1. Almost everyone is agreed about '70s art. It is diversified, split, factionalized. Unlike the art of the last several decades, its energy does not seem to flow through a single channel for which a synthetic term, like Abstract-Expressionism, or Minimalism, might be found. In defiance of the notion of collective effort that operates behind the very idea of an artistic 'movement', '70s art is proud of its own dispersal. "Post-Movement Art in America" is the term most recently applied.¹ We are asked to contemplate a great plethora of possibilities in the list that must now be used to draw a line around the art of the present: video; performance; body art; conceptual art; photo-realism in painting and an associated hyper-realism in sculpture; story art; monumental abstract sculpture (earthworks); and abstract painting, characterized, now, not by rigor but by a willful eclecticism. It is as though in that need for a list, or proliferating string of terms, there is prefigured an image of personal freedom, of multiple options now open to individual choice or will, whereas before these things were closed off through a restrictive notion of historical style.

Both the critics and practitioners of recent art have closed ranks around this 'pluralism' of the 1970s. But what, really, are we to think of that notion of multiplicity? It is certainly true that the separate members of the list do not look alike. If they have any unity, it is not along the axis of a traditional notion of 'style'. But is the absence of a collective style the token of a real difference? Or is there not something else for which all these terms are possible manifestations? Are not all these separate 'individuals' in fact moving in lockstep, only to a rather different drummer from the one called style?

2. My list began with video, which I've talked about before, attempting to detail the routines of narcissism which form both its content and its structure.² But now I am thinking about *Airtime*, the work that Vito Acconci made in 1973, where for 40 minutes the artist sits and talks to his reflected image. Referring to himself,

1. This is the title of a book by Alan Sondheim, *Individuals: Post Movement Art in America*, New York, Dutton, 1977.

2. See my "Video: The Structure of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (Spring 1976).

he uses 'I', but not always. Sometimes he addresses his mirrored self as 'you'. 'You' is a pronoun that is also filled, within the space of his recorded monologue, by an absent person, someone he imagines himself to be addressing. But the referent for this 'you' keeps slipping, shifting, returning once again to the 'I' who is himself, reflected in the mirror. Acconci is playing out the drama of the shifter—in its regressive form.

3. The shifter is Jakobson's term for that category of linguistic sign which is "filled with signification" only because it is "empty."³ The word 'this' is such a sign, waiting each time it is invoked for its referent to be supplied. "This chair," "this table," or "this . . ." and we point to something lying on the desk. "Not that, *this*," we say. The personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' are also shifters. As we speak to one another, both of us using 'I' and 'you', the referents of those words keep changing places across the space of our conversation. I am the referent of 'I' only when I am the one who is speaking. When it is your turn, it belongs to you.

The gymnastics of the "empty" pronominal sign are therefore slightly complicated. And though we might think that very young children learning language would acquire the use of 'I' and 'you' very early on, this is in fact one of the last things to be correctly learned. Jakobson tells us, as well, that the personal pronouns are among the first things to break down in cases of aphasia.

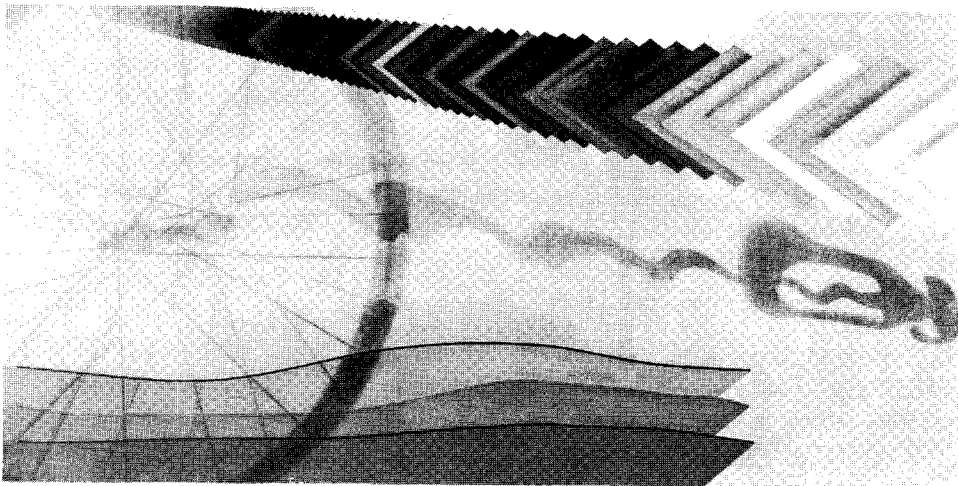
4. *Airtime* establishes, then, the space of a double regression. Or rather, a space in which linguistic confusion operates in concert with the narcissism implicit in the performer's relationship to the mirror. But this conjunction is perfectly logical, particularly if we consider narcissism—a stage in the development of personality suspended between auto-eroticism and object-love—in the terms suggested by Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage." Occurring sometime between the ages of six and 18 months, the mirror stage involves the child's self-identification *through* his double: his reflected image. In moving from a global, undifferentiated sense of himself towards a distinct, integrated notion of selfhood—one that could be symbolized through an individuated use of 'I' and 'you'—the child recognizes himself as a separate object (a psychic *gestalt*) by means of his mirrored image. The self is felt, at this stage, only as an *image* of the self; and insofar as the child initially recognizes himself as an other, there is inscribed in that experience a primary alienation. Identity (self-definition) is primally fused with identification (a felt connection to someone else). It is within that condition of alienation—the attempt to come to closure with a self that is physically distant—that the Imaginary takes root. And in Lacan's terms, the Imaginary is the realm of fantasy, specified as a-temporal, because disengaged from the conditions of history. For the child, a sense of history, both his own and particularly that of others, wholly independent of himself, comes only with the full acquisition of language. For, in joining himself to language, the child enters

3. See, Roman Jakobson, "Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb," *Russian Language Project*, Harvard University Press, 1957; also, Émile Benveniste, "La nature des pronoms," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

a world of conventions which he has had no role in shaping. Language presents him with an historical framework pre-existent to his own being. Following the designation of spoken or written language as constituted of that type of sign called the symbol, Lacan names this stage of development the Symbolic and opposes it to the Imaginary.

5. This opposition between the Symbolic and the Imaginary leads us to a further comment on the shifter. For the shifter is a case of linguistic sign which partakes of the symbol even while it shares the features of something else. The pronouns are part of the symbolic code of language insofar as they are arbitrary: 'I' we say in English, but '*je*' in French, '*ego*' in Latin, '*ich*' in German . . . But insofar as their meaning depends on the existential presence of a given speaker, the pronouns (as is true of the other shifters) announce themselves as belonging to a different type of sign: the kind that is termed the index. As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents of the shifters. Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical signs of objects. . . .

6. *Tu m'* is a painting Marcel Duchamp made in 1918. It is, one might say, a panorama of the index. Across its ten-foot width parade a series cast shadows, as Duchamp's readymades put in their appearance via the index. The readymades themselves are not depicted. Instead the bicycle wheel, the hatrack, and a corkscrew, are projected onto the surface of the canvas through the fixing of cast shadows, signifying these objects by means of indexical traces. Lest we miss the point, Duchamp places a realistically painted hand at the center of the work, a hand that is pointing, its index finger enacting the process of establishing the



Marcel Duchamp. *Tu m'*. 1918. Oil and pencil on canvas with bottle brush, three safety pins, and a bolt. $27\frac{1}{2} \times 122\frac{3}{4}$ inches. (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952.)

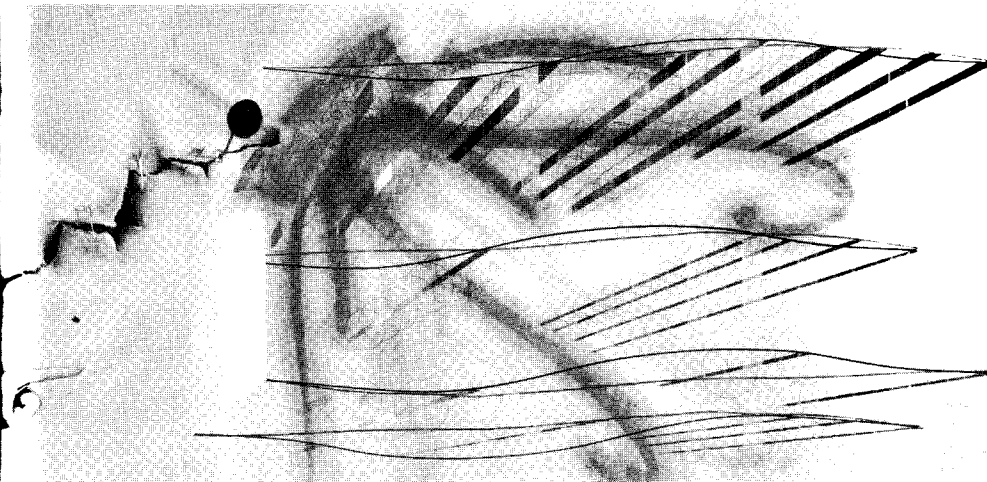
connection between the linguistic shifter 'this . . .' and its referent. Given the role of the indexical sign within this particular painting, its title should not surprise us. *Tu m'* is simply 'you'/'me'—the two personal pronouns which, in being shifters, are themselves a species of index.

7. In contributing an essay to the catalogue of the recent Duchamp retrospective, Lucy Lippard chose to write a mock short story about a personage she characterized in the title as "ALLREADYMADESOMUCHOFF."⁴ Indeed, the seemingly endless stream of essays on Duchamp that have appeared over the last several years certainly does discourage one from wanting to add yet another word to the accumulating mass of literature on the artist. Yet Duchamp's relationship to the issue of the indexical sign, or rather, the way his art serves as a matrix for a related set of ideas which connect to one another through the axis of the index, is too important a precedent (I am not concerned here with the question of 'influence') for '70s art, not to explore it. For as we will see, it is Duchamp who first establishes the connection between the index (as a type of sign) and the photograph.

8. A breakdown in the use of the shifter to locate the self in relation to its world is not confined to the onset of aphasia; it also characterizes the speech of autistic children. Describing the case of Joey, one of the patients in his Chicago clinic, Bruno Bettelheim writes, "He used personal pronouns in reverse, as do most autistic children. He referred to himself as you and to the adult he was speaking to as I. A year later he called this therapist by name, though still not addressing her as 'you', but saying 'Want Miss M. to swing you.'"⁵ In an

4. In *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973.

5. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress, Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, New York, 1967, p. 234. My attention to this passage was called by Annette Michelson in the essay cited below.



important essay drawing the parallels between those symptoms that form the psychopathological syndrome of autism and specific aspects of Duchamp's art, Annette Michelson pointed to the autistic's characteristic fascination with revolving disks, the fantasy (in some cases) that he is a machine, and the withdrawal from language as a form of communication by means of speaking in private allusions and riddles.⁶ All of these features occur, of course, in Duchamp's art with a vengeance. But for the moment I would like to focus on the autistic's problem with the shifter—the problem of naming an individuated self—a dramatization of which is also to be found throughout the later work of Duchamp.

Tu m' is one way of signaling this. Another is the division of the self into an 'I' and a 'you' through the adoption of an alter-ego. "Rose Sélavy and I," Duchamp writes as the beginning of the phrase he inscribes around the revolving disk of the *Machine Optique* (1920). Duchamp's photographic self-portraits in drag, as Rose Sélavy, announce a self that is split, doubled, along the axis of sexual identity. But the very name he uses for his 'double' projects a strategy for infecting language itself with a confusion in the way that words denote their referents. "Rose Sélavy" is a homophone suggesting to its auditors two entirely different meanings. The first is a proper name; the second a sentence: the first of the double Rs in Rose would have to be pronounced (in French) 'er', making Er-rose Sélavy into *Eros, c'est la vie*, a statement inscribing life within a circle of eroticism which Duchamp has elsewhere characterized as "vicious."⁷ The rest of the sentence from the *Machine Optique* performs another kind of indignity on the body of language—at least in terms of its capacity for meaning. Overloaded with internal rhyme, the phrase "*estimons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots exquis*" (we esteem the bruises of the Eskimos with beautiful language) substitutes sheer musicality for the process of signification. The elisions and inversions of the *es*, *ex*, and *mo* sounds upset the balance of meaning through an outrageous formalism. The confusion in the shifter couples then with another kind of breakdown, as form begins to erode the certainty of content.

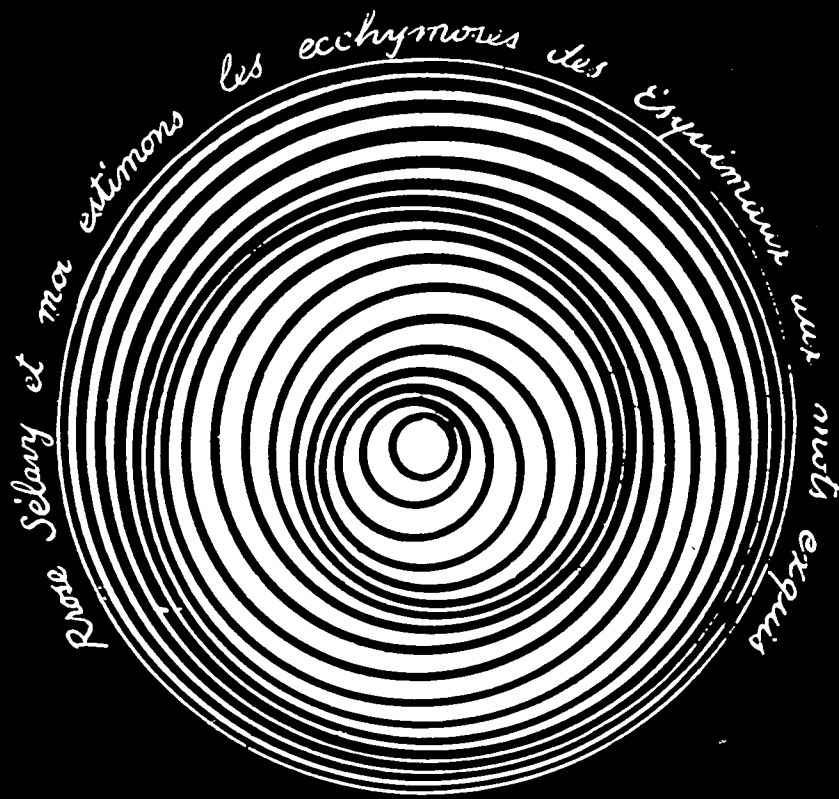
9. The collapsed shifter announced itself through a specific use of language, and through the doubled self-portrait. But then, up to 1912 Duchamp had been concerned as a painter almost exclusively with autobiography. Between 1903 and 1911 his major subject was that of his family, and life as it was lived within the immediate confines of his home. This series of explicit portraiture—his father, his brothers playing chess, his sisters playing music—climaxes with the artist's own self-portrait as *The Sad Young Man on a Train* (1911).⁸ In most of these portraits there is an insistent naturalism, a direct depiction of the persons who formed the

6. Annette Michelson, "'Anemic Cinema' Reflections on an Emblematic Work," *Artforum*, XII (October 1973), 64-69.

7. This is from "the litanies of the Chariot" one of the notes from the *Green Box*. See, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. A typographical version by Richard Hamilton of Duchamp's *Green Box*, trans. George Heard Hamilton, London, Lund, Humphries, 1960, n. p.

8. The inscription on the back of this painting reads: *Marcel Duchamp nu (esquisse) Jeune homme triste dans un train/Marcel Duchamp*.

Marcel Duchamp. Machine optique. 1920.



Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, photographed by Man Ray
in New York. c. 1920-21.

extensions of Duchamp's most intimate world. Only by the end, in *The Sad Young Man* . . . do we find that directness swamped by the adoption of a cubist-informed pictorial language, a language Duchamp was to continue to use for just six more months and then to renounce, with a rather bitter and continuing series of castigations, forever. It was as if cubism forced for Duchamp the issue of whether pictorial language could continue to signify directly, could picture a world with anything like an accessible set of contents. It was not that self-portraiture was displaced within Duchamp's subsequent activity. But only that the project of depicting the self took on those qualities of enigmatic refusal and mask with which we are familiar.

10. The *Large Glass* is of course another self-portrait. In one of the little sketches Duchamp made for it and included in the *Green Box* he labels the upper register "MAR" and the lower half "CEL." And he retains these syllables of his own name in the title of the finished work: *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même*; the MAR of *mariée* linked to the CEL of *célibataires*; the self projected as double. Within this field of the split self-portrait we are made to feel the presence of the index. The "Sieves," for example, are colored by the fixing of dust that had fallen on the prone surface of the glass over a period of months. The accumulation



Elevage de poussière (Dust Breeding). 1920.
(Photograph by Man Ray.)

of dust is a kind of physical index for the passage of time. *Dust Breeding* (*Elevage de poussière*) Duchamp calls it, in the photograph of the work's surface that Man Ray took and Duchamp included in the notes for the *Large Glass*. The signatures of both men appear along the bottom of the photograph.

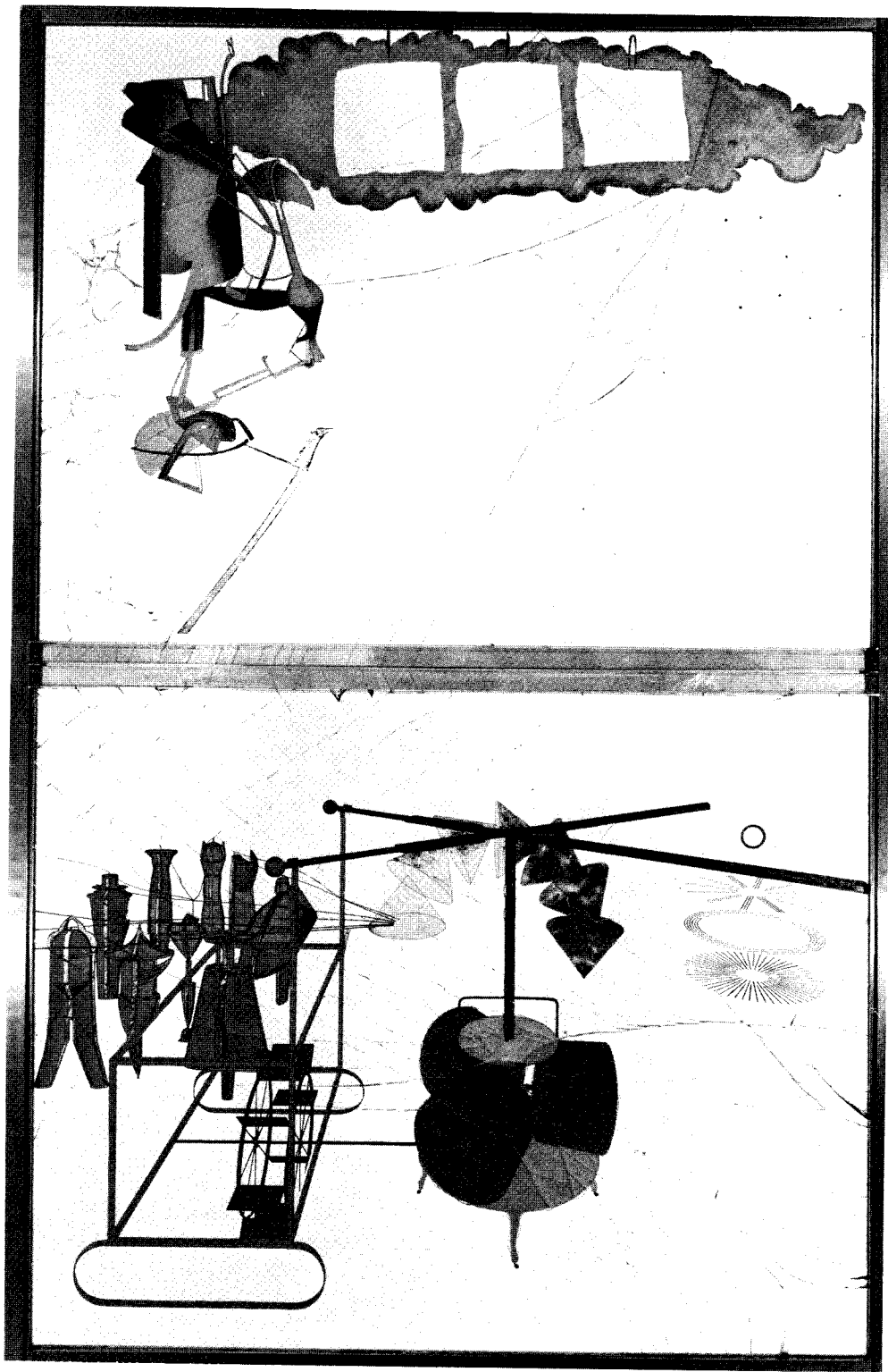
Man Ray intersects with Duchamp's career not only in this document for the *Large Glass* but in those other photographic occasions of Duchamp's work: in the production of the film *Anémic Cinéma*; and in the transvestite portraits of Duchamp/Rose Sélavy. Which is interesting. Because Man Ray is the inventor of the Rayograph—that subspecies of photo which forces the issue of photography's existence as an index. Rayographs (or as they are more generically termed, photograms) are produced by placing objects on top of light-sensitive paper, exposing the ensemble to light, and then developing the result. The image created in this way is of the ghostly traces of departed objects; they look like footprints in sand, or marks that have been left in dust.

But the photogram only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case of *all* photography. Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seem to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings. If the Symbolic finds its way into pictorial art through the human consciousness operating behind the forms of representation, forming a connection between objects and their meaning, this is not the case for photography. Its power is as an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary. In the essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin describes the indexical condition of the photograph:

Painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the processes of reproduction. Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation . . . The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.⁹

Whatever else its power, the photograph could be called sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things.

9. In André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, p. 14.



11. In this connection the preface to the *Large Glass* makes fairly arresting reading. It begins, "Given 1. the waterfall 2. the illuminating gas, we shall determine the conditions for the instantaneous State of Rest . . . of a succession . . . of various facts . . . in order to isolate the sign of the accordance between . . . this State of Rest . . . and . . . a choice of Possibilities . . ." And there follow two other notes: "For the instantaneous state of rest = bring in the term: extra-rapid;" and "We shall determine the conditions of [the] best exposure of the extra-rapid State of Rest [of the extra-rapid exposure . . ." This language of rapid exposures which produce a state of rest, an isolated sign, is of course the language of photography. It describes the isolation of something from within the succession of temporality, a process which is implied by Duchamp's subtitle for *La mariée mise à nu* . . . which is "Delay in Glass."

If Duchamp was indeed thinking of the *Large Glass* as a kind of photograph, its processes become absolutely logical: not only the marking of the surface with instances of the index and the suspension of the images as physical substances within the field of the picture; but also, the opacity of the image in relation to its meaning. The notes for the *Large Glass* form a huge, extended caption, and like the captions under newspaper photographs, which are absolutely necessary for their intelligibility, the very existence of Duchamp's notes—their preservation and publication—bears witness to the altered relationship between sign and meaning within this work. In speaking of the rise of photography in the late 19th century, Walter Benjamin writes, "At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for [the viewer], right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones."¹⁰ The photograph heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign. A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled in by the addition of a text.

It is also, then, not surprising that Duchamp should have described the Readymade in just these terms. It was to be a "snapshot" to which there was attached a tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, a breakdown of the relatedness of the linguistic sign:

Specifications for "Readymades."
by planning for a moment
to come (on such a day, such
a date such a minute), "to inscribe
a readymade."—the readymade
can later
be looked for. (with all kinds of delays)

10. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 226.

Marcel Duchamp. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915-23. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953.)

The important thing is just
 this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like
 a speech delivered on no matter
 what occasion but at such and such an hour.¹¹

The readymade's parallel with the photograph is established by its process of production. It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection. And in this process, it also recalls the function of the shifter. It is a sign which is inherently "empty," its signification a function of only this one instance, guaranteed by the existential presence of just this object. It is the meaningless meaning that is instituted through the terms of the index.

12. There is a late work by Duchamp that seems to comment on this altered relationship between sign and meaning given the imposition, within the work of art, of the index. *With My Tongue in My Cheek* (1959) is yet another self-portrait. This time it is not split along the lines of sexual identity, but rather along the semiotic axis of icon and index. On a sheet of paper Duchamp sketches his profile, depicting himself in the representational terms of the graphic icon. On top of this drawing, coincident with part of its contour, is added the area of chin and cheek, cast from his own face in plaster. Index is juxtaposed to icon and both are then captioned. "With my tongue in my cheek," is obviously a reference to the ironic mode, a verbal doubling to redirect meaning. But it can also be taken literally. To actually place one's tongue in one's cheek is to lose the capacity for speech altogether. And it is this rupture between image and speech, or more specifically, language, that Duchamp's art both contemplates and instances.

As I have been presenting it, Duchamp's work manifests a kind of trauma of signification, delivered to him by two events: the development, by the early teens, of an abstract (or abstracting) pictorial language; and the rise of photography. His art involved a flight from the former and a peculiarly telling analysis of the latter.

13. If we are to ask what the art of the '70s has to do with all of this, we could summarize it very briefly by pointing to the pervasiveness of the photograph as a means of representation. It is not only there in the obvious case of photo-realism, but in all those forms which depend on documentation—earthworks, particularly as they have evolved in the last several years, body art, story art—and of course in video. But it is not just the heightened presence of the photograph itself that is significant. Rather it is the photograph combined with the explicit terms of the index. For, everywhere one looks in '80s art, one finds instances of this connection. In the work that Dennis Oppenheim made in 1975 called *Identity Stretch*, the

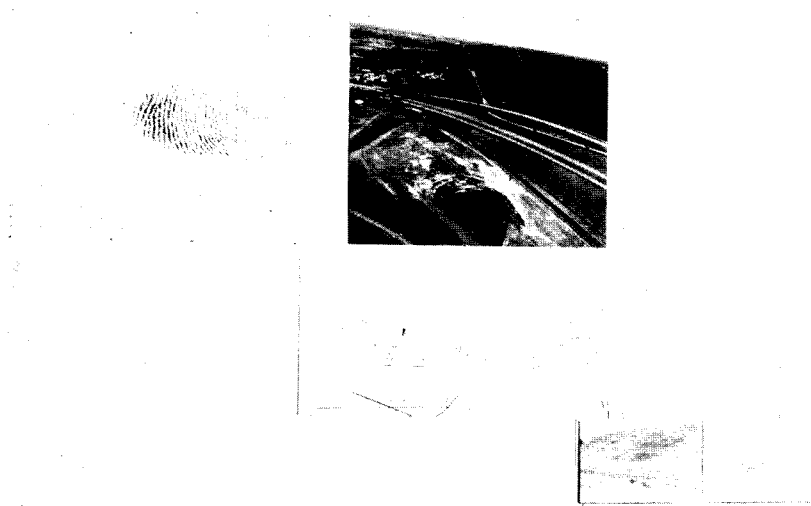
11. See *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. A typographical version by Richard Hamilton, *op. cit.*, n. p.

Marcel Duchamp. *With My Tongue in My Cheek*, 1959. Plaster, pencil and paper, mounted on wood. $9\frac{3}{16} \times 5\frac{7}{8}$ inches. (Coll: Robert Lebel, Paris.)



with my tongue in my cheek moral Duchamp's

*Dennis Oppenheim. Identity Stretch. 1975.
Photographs mounted on board. (Courtesy: The
John Gibson Gallery.)*



artist transfers the image (index) of his own thumbprint onto a large field outside of Buffalo by magnifying it thousands of times and fixing its traces in the ground in lines of asphalt. The meaning of this work is focused on the pure installation of presence by means of the index. And the work as it is presented in the gallery involves the documentation of this effort through an arrangement of photographs.

Or, the panels that comprise the works of Bill Beckley are also documents of presence, fixed indexically. A recent object combines photographic enlargements of fragments of the artist's body with a panel of text giving us the 'story' of his physical position at a given time and place.

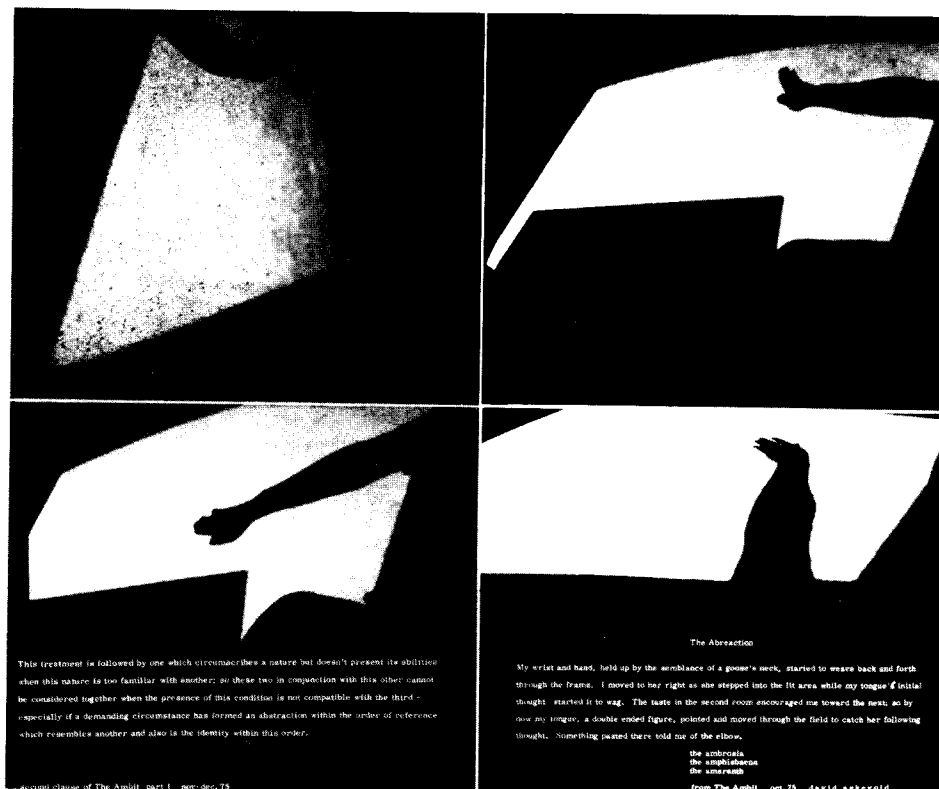
Or, David Askevold's work *The Ambit: Part I* (1975) is likewise made up of photographic panels captioned by text. In his case, like Oppenheim's, we find the index pure and simple: the images are of the cast shadows of an outstretched arm falling onto a luminous plane. The text speaks of an interruption of meaning: "... an abstraction within the order of reference which resembles another and also is the identity within this order." The meaning of these three works involves the filling of the "empty" indexical sign with a particular presence. The implication is that there is no convention for meaning independent of or apart from that presence.

This sense of isolation from the workings of a convention which has evolved as a succession of meanings through painting and sculpture in relation to a history of style is characteristic of photo-realism. For there the indexical presence of either the photograph or the body-cast demands that the work be viewed as a deliberate short-circuiting of issues of style. Countermanding the artist's possible formal intervention in creating the work is the overwhelming physical presence of the original object, fixed in this trace of the cast.

14. The functioning of the index in the art of the present, the way that it operates to substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions (and the kind of history which they encode), will be the subject of the second part of these notes. The instances involve a much wider field than the types of objects I have just named. They include a shifting conception of abstract art as well, one collective example of which was mounted last spring in the opening exhibition of P.S. 1.

An enormous, derelict building in Long Island City, P.S. 1 was taken over by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources and, renamed Project Studios One, became the site for showing the work of 75 artists, most of whom did "installation pieces." There was tremendous variation in the quality of these works, but almost none in their subject. Again and again this group of artists, working independently, chose the terminology of the index. Their procedures were to exacerbate an aspect of the building's physical presence, and thereby to embed within it a perishable trace of their own.

New York, 1976



David Askevold. *The Ambit. Part I*. 1975. Photographs mounted on board. (Courtesy: The John Gibson Gallery.)