

Review of T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*  
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In *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, T.J. Demos builds an erudite and inventive argument around geographical, national, and cultural exile as the generative theme of several pivotal works by Duchamp. In addition to expressing or otherwise exhibiting the experience of dislocation and alienation, this selection of works also reflects and engages with the tumultuous geopolitical and socio-cultural circumstances under which they were produced. Enriched by considerable involvement with and citation of the great critical thinkers, philosophers, and social theorists of the age (particularly the Frankfurt School), Demos conjures the image of a chameleonic artist capable of complex shifts of location, identity, and aesthetic, which allowed access into—and safe distance from—the avant-garde circles with which he was associated throughout his career. Perhaps the most novel facet of this reading is that, rather than simply reiterating that Duchamp was both supporter and saboteur of Dada and surrealism, Demos takes the reader in thrilling detail through the carefully orchestrated operations that made such a unique and precarious position conceivable.

Demos makes it clear that his study is not intended to be a comprehensive investigation of the application of exile to Duchamp's entire *oeuvre*, but rather a series of close readings of a strictly delineated set of enterprises that best “manifest, define, and exploit the terms of exile” (1). Far from the “poor little floating atom” as Ettie Stettheimer described Duchamp just prior to his 1918 flight to Buenos Aires to evade military conscription,<sup>1</sup> Demos characterizes Duchamp as the active agent of his dislocation, employing radical approaches to the display of his work in the effort to de- and/or re-contextualize it outside of the limiting parameters of the traditional signifiers of identity, including nationality, political ideology, religion, and gender. For Duchamp, the displacement of exile becomes less the passive result of geopolitical instability and more the means through which he was able to maintain a continu-

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ous state of liminality, hovering in a vague space between media, institutions, social systems, and anything else he sought to escape or destabilize from within.

In chapter one, *Demos* focuses largely on Duchamp's *La Boite-en-valise* (1935-41), a collection of miniature replicas and color reproductions of a representative assortment of the artist's work prior to 1941. Designed to be carefully arranged within a suitcase, this "portable museum," made possible by the use of new technologies, especially photomechanical reproduction, is emblematic of *Demos*' "aesthetics of exile" by virtue of its easy transportability and nostalgic underpinnings. These assemblages were produced from materials that Duchamp smuggled out of occupied France, an operation that required multiple trips across enemy lines posing as a cheese merchant. Using the motif of the suitcase as a thread, *Demos* expertly weaves Duchamp's comic tale together with the tragic story of Walter Benjamin's suicide following his unsuccessful attempt to escape occupied territory. Benjamin left behind a handful of personal items and a suitcase "containing complex meditations on history and homesickness, both located within the peripatetic conditions of exile" (17). Indeed, *homelessness* and *homesickness* become in *Demos*' exegesis the catalysts of creation for both texts and objects characterized by fragmentation, collection, miniaturization, and containment. Ultimately, this fragmentation of the artist's identity, memory, and body as a result of the conditions of exile is reified in *La Boite-en-valise*.

Perhaps Duchamp's bold (or brash?) negotiation of Nazi checkpoints for supplies for the "portable museum" upends the notion that Duchamp's earlier flights from responsibility were more a result of laziness or cowardice than anti-patriotism or pacifism—especially in the case of his extended stay in Buenos Aires between 1918 and 1919, which provides the backdrop for *Demos*' second chapter. *Demos* concentrates largely on Duchamp's *Sculpture for Traveling* (1918), a highly malleable construction composed of multicolored strips cut from bathing caps, cemented together and tied to strings attached to the corners of a room, resulting in an abstract, formless installation impeding safe and casual movement. This drive to obstruct and re-contextualize the architectural space is, according to *Demos*, consistent with the theoretical foundations of the readymade, which similarly obstructs the casual viewer of art and recontextualizes spaces, albeit conceptually.<sup>2</sup> The *Sculpture for Traveling* is literally about traveling in that it is rendered anew with each dislocation, a characteristic of Duchamp's own personal and artistic development that *Demos* traces back to the artist's introduction to Raymond Roussel's *Impression d'Afrique* in 1912. Characterized by the undercurrent of Duchamp's self-avowed "spirit of expatriation" (90), or the possibility of becoming something new through transplantation, the works from this period are "less a being, fixed and constant, and more a 'becoming,' generative and

transformative,” (106). They are defined by that which makes them indefinable.

Chapters three and four are devoted to two collaborations with the surrealists. Demos begins with an analysis of Duchamp’s contributions to the 1938 Exposition International du Surréalisme, most notably his *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling Over a Stove* (1938), which describes only part of an extraordinary exhibition design that included a floor covered in dead leaves, a pool, an iron brazier, lavish Louis XV-style beds in every corner, and the aroma of coffee wafting through the air. This massive and certainly intimidating arrangement was clearly designed to disorient the viewer as well as the art, which was hung beneath the coal bags on revolving doors. Like the *Sculpture for Traveling* writ large, this exhibition design not only obstructed and decontextualized the familiar space of the art gallery, it presented an environment correlated—and in some ways opposed—to the “surrealist object,” a transcendent thing that obfuscates the capitalist drive to promote use value. According to Demos, the surrealists’ anti-capitalist position and efforts to divest themselves of a national identity through individual sovereignty and “reciprocal love” (139-40) were thwarted by Duchamp’s exhibition design and ominous contribution of the coal bags, which presented “an image of art as a vacant shell of commercial form—awaiting the institution’s stamp of artificial authenticity and value...expos[ing] the relation between art and its institution as a form of industrial production and consumption” (149). Moreover, André Breton’s appropriation and recontextualization of the readymade to advance the “artistic elevation and conceptual transvaluation” (151) of the “surrealist object” was, Demos argues, frustrated by Duchamp’s efforts to demystify the art through the exhibition design, using “borrowed revolving doors on which to hang objects ... which could not have been more direct in associating the displayed artwork with department store merchandise” (152).<sup>3</sup>

The many contradictions between the effect Breton possibly desired and the reality resulting from Duchamp’s oppressive reframing of the space causes Demos to wonder whether Breton’s choice of Duchamp was ironic. Breton may have known very well that Duchamp would, however obliquely, reference the looming specters of industrial production and commodity through the readymade. Perhaps Duchamp’s suspicion of Breton’s secret capitalist sensibilities was the inspiration for Duchamp’s design for the dust jacket of Breton’s volume of poetry *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares* (1946), which features the Statue of Liberty with her face cut out so that Breton’s face, which graced the actual cover, shows neatly through the hole.

The Nazi’s tightening grip on Europe in the early 1940s eventually forced the surrealists into exile. They reluctantly took refuge in the United States, leaving them “internationally organized, but geopolitically displaced” (190). Breton’s emphasis on

internationalism, which, according to Demos, was a response to the hypernationalism of the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques in Paris, was a critical factor in his organization of the exhibition “First Papers of Surrealism” of 1942. Duchamp’s outrageous contribution to the exhibition dominates the fourth chapter. *Sixteen Miles of String* (or, more likely, one mile of string) was stretched and tangled into a web-like display that, once again, put the viewer at a tremendous disadvantage as far as traditional forms of art viewing are concerned. As in the first chapter, Demos skillfully locates a counterpoint to Duchamp’s chaotic disruption and decontextualization in Frederick Kiesler’s renowned exhibition design for the inaugural exhibition of Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery, which opened just two weeks later. After acknowledging Kiesler’s oppositional use of string to hang abstract paintings in order to “negate any nonaesthetic barriers between viewer and work of art” (196), Demos indicates that the exhibition designs of Duchamp and Kiesler represent the polarities of the experience of exile and dislocation in surrealism. Kiesler looks for stability and comfort in an undulating, quasi-uterine space, whereas Duchamp’s space remains insecure and uninviting. Demos concludes his exploration with a discussion of the labyrinthine trappings of Duchamp’s use of string, and whether or not this use of string served to advance the mythologization of surrealism, as in Kiesler’s design, or disrupt a “mythical habitability in the space of exile” by using the string to construct a “disorienting frame, which prohibited any pretensions . . . of an unmediated unity between viewers and art objects, or between objects and their space of exhibition” (226).

That Demos’ argument revolves primarily around the texts of a select few critics and historians can be understood as a strength or weakness depending on the perspective and purposes of the reader. The author is forthcoming early on about his sources, and never suggests that his study is to be understood as the last word in the way that Arturo Schwarz’s brilliant and indispensable (albeit flawed and clearly incomplete) *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* attempted to be. Considering the variegated and diverse nature of Duchamp scholarship, it no less methodologically ambitious to limit one’s responses to the complex theoretical approaches of David Joselit, Benjamin Buchloh, Thierry de Duve, and Rosalind Krauss, not to mention the Frankfurt School affiliates and other philosophers alluded to earlier in this review. Indeed, Demos’ study will undoubtedly motivate Duchamp scholars to revisit earlier studies that investigated similar themes of transience and dislocation with a more monographic approach, such as Dalia Judovitz’s *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* and Jerrold Siegel’s *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp*, both published in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

For a book that deals with dense theoretical content in a scholarly jargon, *The*

*Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* has a readable flow that defies its lexical intricacy. However, I would be hesitant to recommend this book as a first or second read to someone still familiarizing him or herself with Duchamp, as the scope of work explained is narrow (though the descriptions and accounts of the works discussed generally surpass those of the more traditional biographies). Rather, I believe that those already more fluent in the work of Duchamp (or Dada and surrealism in general) who are looking for a more focused and creative exploration of this picaresque artist's aesthetic will be best served by this worthy contribution to the literature.

1 Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996): 204.

2 The most notable instance of this would be Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), though Demos delves much deeper into these consistencies, also analyzing how the readymade defies nationalistic signifiers, though some might argue that the snow shovel of *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) was chosen as the first "American" readymade, as he chose an object not produced in France.

3 Demos points to Breton's definition of the readymade in the *Dictionnaire abrégé*: "Readymade: common object promoted to the dignity of an art object by the simple choice of the artist" (151). Duchamp's opposition to the elevated position of the "surrealist object" was made clear by the artist and quoted by Demos (151): "My Ready-Mades have nothing to do with the *objet trouvé* because the the so-called 'found object' is directed by personal taste. ... That most of my ready-mades were mass produced and could be duplicated is another important difference ... thus avoiding the cult of uniqueness, of art with a capital A." Interview with Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962): 90.

4 Dalia Judowitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jerrold E. Seigel, *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).