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Paul B. Franklin, ed., trans., with a foreword by Jean-Jacques Lebel, *The Artist and His Critic Stripped Bare: The Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp and Robert Lebel* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016). xv + 411 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-6060-6443-6.

Review by Celia Rabinovitch, University of Manitoba.

This book investigates the relationship between Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), the Dadaist artist and thinker, and Robert Lebel (1901-1986), the French writer, art historian, critic, and associate of the Surrealists in Paris and New York. Reproduced for the first time in their entirety and translated from the French by the editor, Paul B. Franklin—an independent scholar and editor of the bilingual scholarly journal *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp*—the book includes letters, postcards, telegrams, notations, drawings, and ideas exchanged between Duchamp and Lebel that demonstrate the extent of their regard for each other in expressive material form. This book forms a platform from which to investigate Duchamp's character as an artist and friend. Following the provoking foreword by Jean-Jacques Lebel, the son of Robert Lebel and a renowned French artist, poet, translator, and authority on the Beat poets, Paul B. Franklin discusses Robert Lebel's personal history as a writer and art critic, as well as how his friendship with Duchamp evolved.

Robert Lebel first met Duchamp in 1936 at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, An American Place (pp. 32-33). Their friendship, however, did not develop until both lived in New York as exiles from World War II during the 1940s. Lebel lived in New York City from July 1940 to 1945, and Duchamp arrived from France at the end of June 1942. Lebel became increasingly intrigued by Duchamp's enigmatic personality and the origins of his art. Their exchange developed when they both associated with the surrealist group around André Breton that included Claude Lévi-Strauss, Isabelle and Patrick Waldberg, Max Ernst, Kurt Seligmann, and Roberto Matta. However, Duchamp remained on the periphery of the Surrealists except when working with André Breton on various surrealist exhibitions and magazines such as *VVV* to which he contributed the March 1943 covers (pp. 33-34). Duchamp also cultivated other friendships and interests, especially chess, forming the Greenwich Village Chess Club with chess master George Koltanowski, another longtime friend.[1] By 1947, Lebel had returned to Paris while Duchamp stayed in New York. Due to their different locations, the letters became an extension of their friendship. The most intense period of correspondence began in December 1946 with the publication of a key article on Duchamp and Picabia published in the magazine *Paru* in 1949 (p. 59), and continued throughout the inception, development, and design of *Sur Marcel Duchamp* in 1953-1957 (published in Paris by Trianon Press in 1959), and its various iterations until 1967.[2] These works form part of a creative friendship lasting until Duchamp's death in 1968. The first major book on Duchamp, *Sur Marcel Duchamp* drew a new generation of artists, poets and thinkers to him. Lebel's book started a trajectory of increasing recognition for Duchamp, highlighting the artist's originality against that of other major twentieth-century figures. Lebel pursued the ideas, motivations, and awareness embodied in Duchamp's art and personality. Duchamp was psychologically enigmatic, and his apparent indifference to public attention was the obverse of the fascination that he exerted on Lebel and a few others prior to 1960.

This bilingual edition is written in English and translated to French by Paul B. Franklin. The correspondence pairs the English and French versions, also translated to English by Franklin. The transcripts recreate the typographic and written design of the letters. Reproductions of photographs from the Archive Jean-Jacques Lebel and Duchamp's notations and drawings from the Getty Research Institute complement the letters. Duchamp's influence has grown internationally from its reemergence in pop art in the 1960s, exponentially expanding after his death in 1968 through the advocates of conceptual art. Duchamp's output remains relatively small, human in scale, and with an original emphasis on materiality framed by parsimony and humor. Through the correspondence, Franklin humanizes the cultish view of Duchamp to a more realistic depiction of his personality in exchange with Robert Lebel. In investigating two individuals of sophisticated mien and formidable intellect, this book presents a substantial corrective to the ideological view that isolates Duchamp by making him stand for art as a conceptual or textual statement without the informing quality of matter. These letters, notes, telegrams, and other archival fragments allow the reader to uncover the forces of curiosity and wit driving these two men.

In his *The Inventor of Gratuitous Time* (1943-44),<sup>[3]</sup> Robert Lebel created an inventor, A. Loride, who is a veiled description of Duchamp. Patrick Waldberg wrote, "We easily recognize, in the 'inventor' in question, if not Marcel Duchamp in person, at least one of his brothers in spirit."<sup>[4]</sup> The story concerns a curious narrator who seeks to understand the inventor's intent. When the narrator presses the inventor on the meaning of his work, he responds with a laugh: "He started to laugh quietly. 'You see,' he went on, 'I will only accept the title 'thinker' if it's used with the word 'comic,' not in the sad sense, but in the way Stendhal envisioned becoming 'the comic bard.' Unlike Molière and his miserable suite of vaudevillian writers, I laugh less about man himself than about the abstractions he's highly conscious of. The comedy of thought is a lot more irresistible than that of character. It's high time we finished with the classic form of comedy and its arsenal of forever withered ideal types, and replace it with a comedy of knowledge that would end with a beautiful butchery of ideas, instead of a routine conclusion which smothers what's 'funny.'...I often like to think that the amazing forms which modern art has been lavished with are ideas which have taken shape and been dressed up for the future where they will be shot down. These are the characters in our new comedy and their appearance, sometimes repulsive at first, only confirms their mythical significance and announces the farcical sacrifice they are destined to make. ...We're not magi or heroes, dispensers of justice or prophets, but we'll take care to play any roles with a false seriousness in order to create an illusion. It's exactly within social time—not outside of it, which will itself be enlightening—that we'll create, without necessarily meaning to, zones of refusal and lightness."<sup>[5]</sup>

These "zones of refusal and lightness" are manifest through the salient presence of each man in the photographs, drawings, and correspondence included in this book. These offer a resonance beyond scholarly argument, expressing the creativity of their mutual exchange. A photograph from 1961 (see figure 1 below), shows Lebel and Duchamp in Cadaques, Spain with Lebel wearing two straw hats atop one another while Duchamp wears none (p. 116). This visual pun refers to Lebel's "two hats" as an art historian and creative friend while Duchamp is freed from any role. In addition to an innate sense of wit, both Lebel and Duchamp must have been familiar with Max Ernst's Dadaist collage of 1920, *The Hat Makes the Man* (*C'est le chapeau qui fait l'homme*), in the collection of Paul Eluard prior to being acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1935. After first meeting Duchamp in 1936, Lebel, Duchamp, Ernst, and Breton moved in the same circles in New York in the 1940s, and Duchamp designed the First Papers of Surrealism exhibition in New York in 1942. Ernst's playful subversion of the bourgeois hat into a psycho-sexual examination of masculine identity in *The Hat Makes the Man* echoes in the whimsical photograph of Lebel and Duchamp taken in 1961. This seemingly impromptu photograph follows a pattern established in earlier images of Duchamp and Robert Lebel, included in Jean-Jacques Lebel's insightful examples in his foreword, discussed below.



Figure 1. Photograph of Robert Lebel and Marcel Duchamp, provided courtesy of the Jean-Jacques Lebel Archive. All rights to this image reside with the Archive.

The dialectical structure of the book is one of its strengths, formed by the editorial placement of different viewpoints. The dialogue echoes throughout the correspondence, seen against the sections by Franklin and Lebel's foreword. Jean-Jacques Lebel employs two photographs of Duchamp and Robert Lebel together as points of departure for a larger discussion of the two men, inviting the reader into their "zones of lightness and refusal."<sup>[6]</sup> He begins with a pun between the two men embodied in a spoof photo taken at the Broadway Photo Shop in New York in 1956. They take standard, even banal poses. According to Jean-Jacques Lebel, the image's punning caption, "Thanks for the Buggy-Ride" or "Merci pour la balade en calèche," means either sex or being tricked (pp. 1-3).<sup>[7]</sup> This pun becomes a leitmotif for their friendship and mutually ironic view of the world.

Lebel's foreword illuminates the irreverent acuity of both men, while debunking the limited, hagiographic view of Duchamp that evolved after his death. Both were dissidents whose interrelated wordplay eluded all but a few friends, and whose friendship was alternately playful and removed. Jean-Jacques Lebel witnessed elements of this friendship during the early 1950s until Duchamp's death in 1968. He situates Duchamp's ideas between Dada and anarchism, rejecting the ponderous explanations of his work in recent discourse. Lebel presents Duchamp as an anarchist and Dadaist opposed to the dominance of the art market and against any restriction of the creative process, and who was always aware of the socially radical nature of his ideas. Lebel shows that Duchamp's understanding of materiality as the embodiment of wit was manifested in Duchamp's observations on Hans (Jean) Arp's work as a "three-dimensional pun," illustrating the marriage of mind and matter (pp. 8, 10).

Paul B. Franklin discusses Robert Lebel's life in the second section, titled "Marcel Duchamp and Robert Lebel: The art of friendship, a friendship in art" (pp. 23-103). He describes Lebel's intellectual development through his important works, uncovering the long, complicated struggle to publish *Sur Marcel Duchamp*. Captured by Duchamp's combination of distance and ironic amusement, Lebel's warm regard developed over the course of writing several articles and the book. In this direction, this book

also addresses art historical conventions that place artists as singular figures removed from intellectual dialogue, or as followers and not originators of such dialogue. Duchamp was both. The book concludes with a chronology of Duchamp's life. Continuing the dialectical structure of the book, it might have been useful to complement the Duchamp chronology with a parallel one covering Robert Lebel's life and work as discussed in the text. This chronology could have provided a comparison that may prove useful for further research. The investigation informing this book is thorough and sustained, with perceptive reflections on the art of letter writing that illuminate Duchamp's enigmatic character. The historical oversight and marginalization of Lebel's writing in later works on Duchamp is addressed through the critique of other authors' translations. These critiques might have been better placed as sub-arguments in the footnotes, so as not to obscure the gist of the author's argument. These minor issues do not detract significantly from the scholarly import of the text and its innovative strategy, which builds an image of Duchamp without directly describing him.

Franklin's book structure is forceful and challenging, because it presents a right-angled change in direction with each new section. This compels the reader to hold the information contained in each part simultaneously. This peculiarly modern effect of changing perspectives, as in modern poetry or cubism, provides five points of view, including the grouping of visual images in the plates, with the chronology of Duchamp's life as the last component of the book. The rhetorical strategy provokes the reader's imagination to experience the exchange between the two men, also reflected by Robert Lebel in his fictional narrative with the inventor of gratuitous time. This offers a sense of Duchamp's enigma: "And kindly pushing me towards the door, he concluded, 'Freedom is never separate from a certain silence. Yes indeed, I have already said too much.'" [8]

#### NOTES

[1] Celia Rabinovitch, "A Smoking Pipe: From Marcel Duchamp to George Koltanowski," [https://www.academia.edu/24979846/duchamp\\_a\\_smoking\\_pipe\\_from\\_marcel\\_duchamp\\_to\\_george\\_koltanowski](https://www.academia.edu/24979846/duchamp_a_smoking_pipe_from_marcel_duchamp_to_george_koltanowski), March, 2015. An article summarizing a book currently under review. See also <http://www.christies.com/features/Marcel-Duchamp-his-pipe-and-his-passion-for-chess-7301-1.aspx>, and <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Sculptures-Statues-Figures/marcel-duchamp-pipe-5993805-details.aspx?lid=1>. Accessed June, 2017.

[2] Robert Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Trianon Press, 1959); English translation by George Heard Hamilton (New York: Grove Press, 1959); German translation by Serge Stauffer (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1962); second American edition, expanded (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1967); second German edition, revised and expanded (Cologne: Du Mont Schauberg, 1972). *Marcel Duchamp*, second French edition, revised and expanded but trimmed of its catalogue, illustrations, and layout (Paris: Belfond, collection "Les Dossiers," [September] 1985). Facsimile edition of the 1959 regular edition, expanded with four letters from Marcel Duchamp to Robert Lebel on loose sheets (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996).

[3] Robert Lebel, *The Inventor of Gratuitous Time*, with a preface by André Gervais, translated by Sarah Skinner Kilbourne with Julia Koteliansky, in *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, 1, no. 2 (Published May 1, 2000, Updated July 13, 2016), [http://toutfait.com/the-inventor-of-gratuitous-time/#N\\_2\\_top](http://toutfait.com/the-inventor-of-gratuitous-time/#N_2_top). Accessed June, 2017.

[4] Cited in André Gervais, Preface, translated by Sarah Skinner Kilbourne with Julia Koteliansky, in *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, 1, no. 2 (Published May 1, 2000, Updated July 13, 2016), [http://toutfait.com/the-inventor-of-gratuitous-time/#N\\_2\\_top](http://toutfait.com/the-inventor-of-gratuitous-time/#N_2_top). Gervais writes, "In an article on Robert Lebel and Marcel Duchamp (*Critique*, Paris, 149, October 1959), Patrick Waldberg specifies that 'the brilliant and curious text by Robert Lebel *The Inventor of Gratuitous*

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*Time*, a veritable speculation, in the sense that Jarry heard it,' would have been able to be published in the *De Costa encyclopédique*, which had begun being produced in 1946. And he adds, 'We easily recognize, in the "inventor" in question, if not Marcel Duchamp in person, at least one of his brothers in spirit.'" <http://toutfait.com/the-inventor-of-gratuitous-time/>, accessed June, 2017.

[5] Lebel, *The Inventor of Gratuitous Time*.

[6] Ibid.

[7] This expression can be understood in various ways: first, it means "copulation"; second, it means "to be fooled."

[8] Lebel, *The Inventor of Gratuitous Time*.

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