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Everyone's Talking About Duchamp. These 5 Artists Are the Ones to Listen To.

BY

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Alex Da Corte: *ROY G BIV*, 2022.

©Alex Da Corte/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



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It is said that artists are the ones to decide which of their peers and predecessors go down in history. Most memorable are the works that influence others and start arguments or conversations, with others replying either in work or words. It is hard, then, to think of an artist more influential today than Marcel Duchamp, who lead the charge in breaking art out of the confines of sculpture and painting. Even artists who don't give him much thought directly find themselves contending with his ideas, which have infiltrated the water supply.

A retrospective opening this weekend at the Museum of Modern Art in New York offers a deeper dive into his rich and varied body of work. We asked five artists to reflect on his legacy and talk about how they transformed his ideas into something truly new. A range of perspectives address Duchamp the painter, Duchamp the trickster, Duchamp the readymade artist, Duchamp the celebrity, and Duchamp the chauvinist—and, perhaps most of all, Duchamp the artist who always kept mixing it up, obsessed with motion and refusing the easy legibility of a lifelong style.

The MoMA show, on view through August 22, is **an unmissable chance** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/reviews/marcel-duchamp-moma-retrospective-review-1234780609/>) to see what Duchamp's ideas were. Below, find out what they have become.

Josephine Halvorson



Josephine Halvorson: *Night Window*, 2015.

Photo : Photo Jason Wyche. ©Josephine Halvorson, courtesy Sikkema Malloy Jenkins.

My aha moment with Duchamp came when I was living in Rome at the French Academy, at the Villa Medici, from 2014 to 2015. I painted this one window in my studio—a studio that had once belonged to Ingres, as well as many other artists in the intervening years. That small window looks onto the garden, and I painted it repeatedly over the course of one night, from dusk until dawn. All the works were the same size and shape as the window itself, and the window trim was a grayish green. Because it was night, I mostly saw the glass and maybe some reflections, as well as the darkness beyond.

Soon after, I was invited to participate in an exhibition at the American Academy in Rome curated by Peter Benson Miller, called “Studio Systems.” It also included Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow* (1964), which bears an uncanny resemblance to my work; it has this dusty blue-green frame and black leather windowpanes.

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I hadn't been aware of this piece until it was exhibited alongside my paintings. But I did already know that Duchamp was relevant to me because of the idea of the readymade. My practice involves encountering objects that exist already in the world and then making paintings of them: my interpretation takes place through the medium of painting. But this pairing was just uncanny.

My work comes out of some of the same influences that Duchamp's did: namely, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. In my *Night Window* (2015) paintings I watched the light change and was thinking about abstraction and Matisse's *French window at Collioure*.

Coincidence is part of the driving force behind my work as an artist, so this kind of cultural, geographic, and artistic coinciding was really meaningful to me. Duchamp's title *Fresh Widow* is a pun on "French window." And there I was, painting this window that had been seen by Ingres and many other French artists.

A sense of change is something else that I share with Duchamp: he was really interested in the chronophotograph [think: Muybridge], and in working somewhere between Cubism and kineticism. Specifically, he explored how the static object of a painting could convey something changing, as am I. I paint still lifes, which but actually often possess an animism that I feel is transferred into my own painting. Generally, I'm drawn to art that it has a kind of agency or spirit to it.

Still, I understand why Duchamp disavowed painting at a certain point: he didn't want to belong to any one movement. His entry point into art, though, was already a certain kind of radical art form: Impressionism, which had already broken with the conventions of the discipline. Because of the timing and conditions of his own life, I think in many ways he was destined to challenge such conventions because of the coterie of painters and ideas that were in the water at the time. It has to be said, though, that sadly, one thing that he didn't break with was a very chauvinistic patriarchal position of the male artist. I'm curious to see how MoMA deals with this; it's interesting what changes and what stays the same.



Alex Da Corte: *ROY G BIV*, 2022.

Photo : ©Alex Da Corte/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

For the last six years or so, I've been writing about our engagement with glass and how it defines the past century. This was always an interest of mine, but I did grow up going to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Duchamp's shattered *Large Glass* (1915–23) lives. When I was young and didn't know about art, the gallery there devoted to Duchamp confused me. I would go look at the *Large Glass*, but how it mattered and why it mattered was very far away from me. I thought it was so strange.

Maybe I was drawn to his colors. There are these ochres, these browns, this really beautiful pink: those colors have a history or a humanity to them that doesn't feel as saccharine and electro-pop as the world we know now. I love them so much. And then there's his reverse glass painting, which I've long studied. This was all an entry point for my work. Early on, I was thinking about the clothes he wore and the material he was using, be it a chess piece or just things of the world, which he put into spaces as readymades. As I get older, this work seems to speak to how objects show that they are of a specific time.

For my in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, I played Duchamp and his alter ego Rose Sélavy, and then

another version of Duchamp as the Joker from *Batman*. The characters I embody are always cornerstones of culture, be they Eminem or Jim Henson or Duchamp. Their histories and their stories precede me in ways that are intimidating, of course; but my desire to approach them comes largely from being unable to understand them. I want to understand them better, or differently.

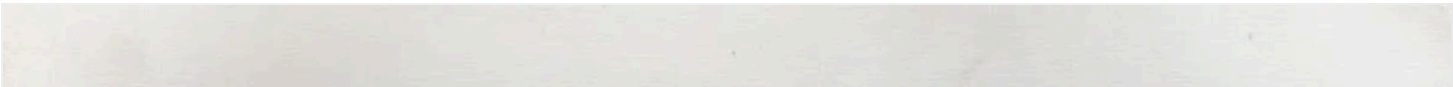
ROY G BIV led to a bunch of different opportunities to speak about Duchamp's work and really engage with his thinking. Beyond Calvin Tomkins's book and the fascinating interviews published by Paul Chan, I was able to look at the kind of salons that Duchamp was having, his sidebar conversations with peers, the ways they would play games with each other, and how language was so much a part of their relationships, of their zine-making, and of their book-making.

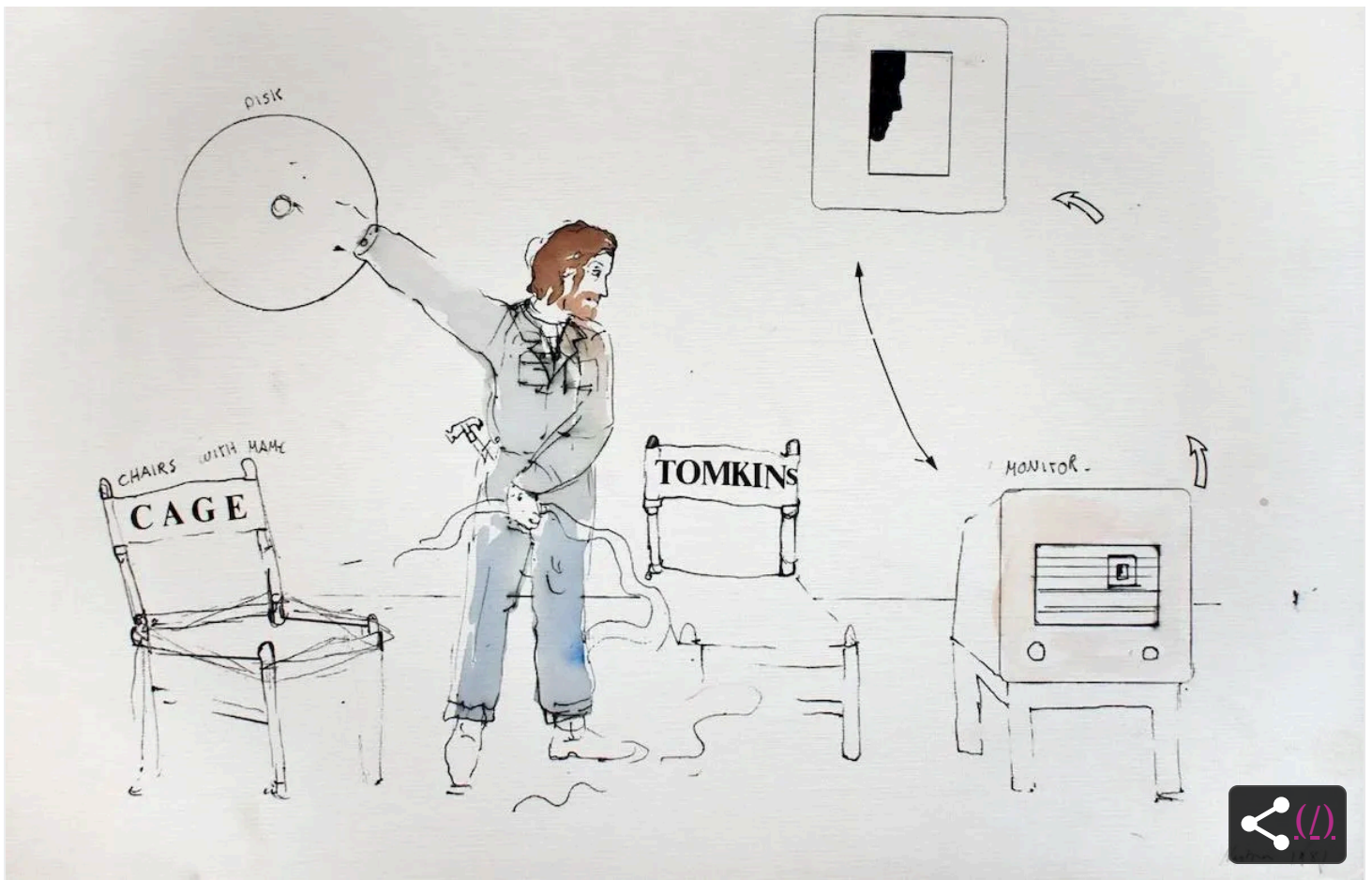
[Curator] Stephanie D'Alessandro approached me while she was organizing [the Met's 2025] Man Ray show, asking about my engagement with Duchamp and his relationship with glass. My talk at the Met [earlier this year] involved cobbling together all these publications, almost like an exquisite corpse. I talked about this idea of a glass age, a space where we live within a screen and among a grand history of images that we have to reconcile, interrogate, accept, refute, or turn on their head, as he did so wonderfully throughout his career.

Duchamp coined the term the "infrathin" to describe this invisible space between things and us as a culture. Now, even as I speak with you on the phone, there is a kind of invisible space between us. It's separated by just a piece of glass within our phones.

Alex Da Corte (b. 1980 in Camden, New Jersey; based in Philadelphia) is an artist who recently organized a permanent collection display for the MAXXI museum in Rome called "The Large Glass," whose title references a Duchamp work. With Meg Onli, he is currently organizing a Roy Lichtenstein retrospective for the Whitney Museum in New York.

Lynn Hershman Leeson





Lynn Hershman Leeson: Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Making of the Rough and (Very) Incomplete Videodisk on the Life of Marcel Duchamp*, 1994.

Photo : Courtesy the artist and Hoffman Donahue, Los Angeles and New York

I met Duchamp at a museum lecture when I was very young—I think I may have been around 14 or 15. As soon as I learned about him, something clicked in my mind about the dichotomy of reality and how it's interpreted. So, when I saw him speak [in the late 1950s], I already knew how important he was. I went up there and introduced myself and shook his hand. It was thrilling. I did the same thing again 10 years later, when he spoke about his work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

His work was just so radical, and I wanted to know more about it. I thought that by making videotapes about him, I could learn more. The first one was called *Duchamp, C'est la Vie* (1980–81), which was about his influence and his ideas.

Duchamp was a pioneer in creating multiple identities. I thought that Rose Sélavy [Duchamp's female alter ego] was pretty on the surface—she was superficial. I found it interesting to think about what Duchamp accomplished and what he didn't. He didn't put his personas out on a broad scale. His were more private performances. He didn't go deep into creating an identity: To get to the reality of what identity is, you have to get other things to substantiate it, like an ID.

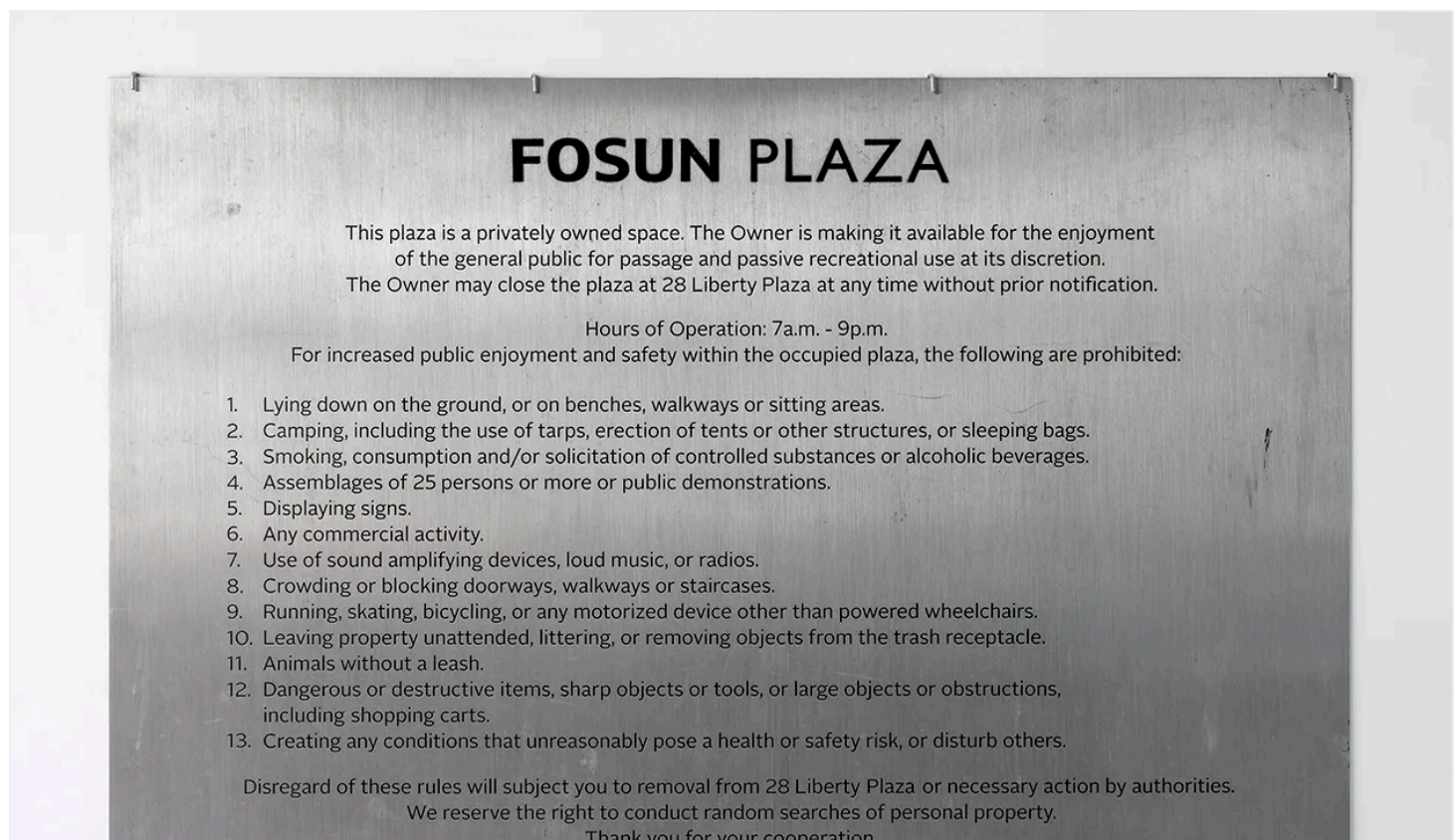
So, when I started creating Roberta Breitmore, she was someone who didn't exist, and I wanted

to make her real. I started to think: How would I do that? She needed a checking account, a driver's license, all of the artifacts that make you become a real part of society. If all these things are put in place, then that fictional person has a better chance of being historically remembered than a real person who doesn't do that.

Then I thought: if I actually became her, what would happen to me? Most of the time, people thought I was a schizophrenic. They didn't think it was an artwork.

Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941, Cleveland, Ohio; based in San Francisco) has produced several works about Duchamp, including the 1984 video The Making of the Rough and (Very) Incomplete Videodisk on the Life of Marcel Duchamp, which features curator Walter Hopps, critic Calvin Tomkins, and others who knew Duchamp personally.

David L. Johnson





David L. Johnson: "Rule," 2024—ongoing.

Photo : Photo Roberto Marossi Courtesy the artist; Fanta, Milan; and Theta, New York

The first time I really paused to think about Duchamp was when Paul Chan published *The Afternoon Interviews*, transcripts of Duchamp's conversations with Calvin Tomkins from the '60s. Prior to that, I had a general art historical understanding of the more canonical works, but that was really the first time I'd heard about them in his own words.

I was struck by how he frames his work in relation to his life, as part of the way that he wanted to move through the world. He describes the readymades as initially private works, not intended for public consumption. I continue to think about that move from a private act to a public proposition in my own practice.

As Chan points out, it's kind of strange that he's such a famous artist. He has these moments, like the readymade, that are recognizable art historical breaks. But really, the work is motivated by such a particular and peculiar sensibility. I'm intrigued by how he moved fluidly between his own art and the ways it circulated socially—and sometimes anti-socially—through the world.

I studied in Philadelphia, and at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, there is a Brancusi room he had a hand in curating that I returned to several times. I was also drawn to the work in his galleries by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. That museum shows a larger constellation of artists in his orbit.

A lot of my work involves removing objects from the built environment that either materially or legally put restrictions on the ways people use urban space [like hostile architecture or codes-of-conduct signs, which are then displayed in exhibitions]. The works are often subtractive gestures meant to open up urban spaces to different forms of sociality.

But the readymade is often described in this flattened way, even though it takes on so many forms in Duchamp's own practice. I keep returning to

https://ubu.com/film/hammons_midnight.html) this amazing conversation

https://ubu.com/film/hammons_midnight.html) between artists David Hammons and John Outterbridge, which articulates the totalizing effect of the readymade and what it became: Hammons says he wants to start a Duchamp detox center, and that he'd be a patient.

I definitely draw on Duchamp's rejection of retinal art, his decentering of the optical. I'm more interested in gestures as opposed to images or objects: My work is really about how something moves from the street to an art context, and what is materially and socially produced in that transition. He was one of the first people that I became aware of who really articulated

relationships between an artwork and everyday life, and it's a framework I'm consistently in conversation with.

David L. Johnson (b. 1993 in New York; based in New York) is in the 2026 Whitney Biennial.

Damián Ortega





Damián Ortega: *America Letrina*, 1997.

Photo : Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City and New York

As an art student, I studied with Gabriel Orozco, who recommended an Octavio Paz essay about Duchamp. Paz wrote that Duchamp was important because he *didn't* do certain things. This was so relevant for us, and so powerful. Then, Gabriel gave us a book by Pierre Cabanne called *Dialogues with Duchamp* [1967, trans. 1971] and said, “You need to read this.” Now, I speak English badly, but at the time, it was worse, so I had to ask my friends to translate it. Their version was a polyphony of interpretations, full of jokes, localisms, and slang—Mexican slang. It was an appropriation of Duchamp into a Spanish-language context, a Latin American context. It was such a beautiful book that I decided to share and print it, and that was the beginning of my editorial house, Alias. This was our bible.

I really think Duchamp was the big bang for sculpture in the 20th century. He created a new consensus for sculpture of the future—something more real, more honest; something full of meaning, politics, philosophy, and individuality. For Duchamp, art wasn't only about the work itself. It was about people, too. I think he's a God for my generation.

I used to work as a cartoonist, doing comic books, illustrations, and political cartoons. I saw a really rude cartoon with a map of South, Central, and North America [drawn as a toilet]. I thought it was a great image. really powerful. And I thought. “It will be interesting to do this as a

sculpture.” At the time, I transformed a few cartoons into objects, and *América Letrina* (1997) is one of them. It was a Duchamp reference [to *Fountain*, 1917].

I like the idea of tension between forces creating optical illusions. Duchamp did these pieces with spinning rotors. I’ve done video works where the camera is spinning around an object that looks like it’s stable, but is in fact spinning at the same high speed as the camera. In both, there are two levels of vision. Duchamp was criticizing the proper way of viewing art and opening the perspective for the audience.

Damián Ortega (b. 1967 in Mexico City; based in Mexico City) has a survey at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo in May featuring his found object sculptures.

