DOUBLE VISION:
REVIEWING MAN RAY AND MARCEL DUCHAMP'S 1920 PHOTO-TEXT

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ABSTRACT

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In the October, 1922 edition of the Surrealist journal *Littérature*, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp published a collaborative work consisting of a photograph of Duchamp’s iconic work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even or The Large Glass* (1915-23) covered in dust along with a brief poetic text. Although the photograph, which Duchamp later titled *Dust Breeding*, has long intrigued scholars their intriguing photo-text work has been completely overlooked. This thesis recovers this unique work from the margins of art history.

Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Michael Ann Holly and others this thesis examines four aspects of the photo-text’s history identified as the encounter, photograph, text and publication from a meta-critical perspective in order to illustrate the fluid relation between the binaries of subject/object and creator/ beholder. This deconstruction, I argue, compels a reconsideration of the relationship between art historians and artworks that moves beyond a binary logic towards a more open, plurivocal and intertextual model of art-historical scholarship.
For one I will not name.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Andrew Hershberger, and my reader Allie Terry for their expertise, encouragement and enduring patience. I would also like to thank the department of art and art history as a whole for giving me the space, time and funding to develop my interests and abilities. Finally I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support.
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INTRODUCTION

In the October 1922 edition of Littérature, the first journal of the Surrealist movement edited by the poet and polemicist André Breton, there appeared a strangely evocative photograph accompanied by an equally mysterious text (fig. 1). The photograph is reminiscent of a desert landscape seen from the air; what appear to be chains of dunes stretch from the center-foreground to the horizon. Further afield, a network of lines, like the ancient geoglyphs of the Nazca desert or the runways of a modern airport, crisscrosses its surface. Beneath the photograph a poetic text reads: “Voici le domaine de Rrose Sélavy/Comme il est aride – Comme il est fertile- Comme il est joyeux – Comme il est triste!” (“Behold the domain of Rrose Sélavy/How arid it is- How fertile it is-/How joyous it is/How sad it is”)! It concludes with the following photo-credit: “Vue prise en aeroplane/Par Man Ray 1921.” (“View taken from an airplane by Man Ray 1921”).

In reality Man Ray’s photograph documents not an arid landscape, but a thick accumulation of dust that Marcel Duchamp had intentionally allowed to collect on the surface of his iconic work The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even or The Large Glass (1915-23) (fig. 2). ¹ The photograph and its text was the result of an intimate collaboration by the artists: Duchamp created the Large Glass, Man Ray photographed it, Duchamp titled the photograph Dust Breeding, and together they co-authored its accompanying text.

¹ Soon after the photograph was taken, Duchamp affixed the dust to certain areas of the work. Hereafter I refer to the work simply as Large Glass.
Dust Breeding has long been of interest to Duchamp and Man Ray scholars alike, in that it documents both a critical moment in the development of the Large Glass as well as marking Man Ray’s transition from painting to photography. However, the photograph’s first public appearance in Littérature, and the intriguing text that accompanied it, has been largely overlooked. The most recent monograph on Duchamp by scholars Dawn Ades, Neil Cox and David Hopkins, for example, mentions the photo-text’s publication only once in a brief note. Additionally they note its appearance in reference not to the original print that appeared in Littérature, but to one of the later prints that Duchamp and Man Ray issued as a signed edition in 1964 (fig. 3). This print is, however, quite dissimilar from the one that appeared in Littérature in terms of its cropping, tonality and clarity. The authors’ decision not to reproduce the earlier print and their literal marginalization of the text that accompanied it in its first public appearance effectively reduced the photo-text to little more than a curiosity. Whereas the above authors marginalized its appearance in Littérature, Calvin Tomkins failed to mention it at all in his canonical biography on Duchamp. Photo-historian, Robert Hirsch, however, has been among the first to critically address this unique work, but the scope of his insight was limited by the constraints of his larger project of writing a broad history of photography. This thesis picks up where Hirsch left off, by probing the photo-text both historically and theoretically.

More than just a curiosity, the photo-text materially embodies a history of interpretive exchanges between Man Ray, Duchamp and the Large Glass, constituting a

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palimpsest wherein the identities of each are inextricably bound together. This thesis contextualizes four aspects of the photo-text identified as the encounter, photograph, text and publication to illustrate the fluid interstices between the binaries of subject/object and creator/beholder. In problematizing the rigidity of these borders, I draw on the deconstructive work of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michael Ann Holly and others. Despite its somewhat waning influence in the American academy, deconstruction still provides powerful tools for uncovering the ways in which “foundational” terms like subject/object and creator/beholder are grounded a priori on an often uncritical metaphysics. This thesis, then, makes a case for retrieving Man Ray and Duchamp’s photo-text from the margins of art history as well as for reviving deconstructive practice.
ENCOUNTER

In 1920 Man Ray principally identified himself as a painter; his use of photography at that time was largely restricted to documenting his paintings. The wealthy New York patron, Katherine Dreier, an early and avid supporter of Man Ray and Duchamp’s work, offered Man Ray a job as her personal photographer to help him subsidize his painting practice. His duties were to include photographing the exhibitions Dreier organized as well as her expanding art collection. 

Unsure of his talents or his desire to become a professional photographer, Duchamp, who by this time was a close friend of Man Ray’s, suggested he practice by taking a photograph of the *Large Glass*.

Man Ray accepted and with his large-format camera, he headed to Duchamp’s New York studio. There the *Large Glass* lay upside down on a pair of sawhorses collecting dust. Man Ray positioned his camera at a slight angle just above the lower half of the work. He later recalled:

I…noticed that there was only a single light bulb hanging over the work. Looking down on the work as I focused the camera, it appeared like some strange landscape seen from a birds-eye view. There was dust on the work and bits of tissue and cotton wadding that had been used to clean up the finished parts, adding to the mystery. This I thought was definitely the domain of Duchamp…I opened the shutter and we went out to eat something.

Man Ray’s recollection exemplifies how a subject’s perception actively shapes the object of his or her gaze. What begins as a simple factual observation ends with the creation of a fantastical landscape as seen from the air—an act of beholding seamlessly

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transforms into an act of creation. A double vision is at work: Man Ray’s eyes observe one set of conditions, but his photographic gaze sees something else. The difference between these two gazes corresponds with a physical shift in viewing. When he entered the studio, Man Ray took in the scene before him in a broad and general manner, pausing to observe small, yet critical, details like the presence of a single light bulb above the work. But when he looked down on the surface of the *Large Glass* through his camera, his gaze narrowed to a single vantage point close to the surface of Duchamp’s work. In the first instance, Man Ray’s vision was literally outside the frame of Duchamp’s work, whereas in the second it was inside it. This shift from an outside to an inside viewpoint corresponds with a shift in the binary relation of subject to object.

The relation of subject to object is predicated, as Paul de Man argues “on an ‘inside’ to an ‘outside’ world.” This spatial rhetoric entered modern discourse via Immanuel Kant. Kant followed the modern epistemological dictates established by Descartes, who divided reality into mind and body. For Descartes the only thing whose existence was certain was that which questions existence itself—the mind. Everything that could be known and said beyond the mind remained for Descartes a matter of perception. Kant furthered Descartes’ perceptual realism by positing the subject as the mind *inside* one’s head and the world of objects as *outside* this perceiving subject. The ability to distinguish subject from object descends from this spatial rhetoric, and this

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construction is, as art historian Michael Ann Holly points out, “what the whole idea of knowledge in the West is predicated on.”

In the beholding of works of art this spatial rhetoric is made manifest both by the physical distance between the beholder-subject and the artwork-object, and by a purely mental spacing expressed in the metaphor of “critical distance.” As long as the spatial rhetoric is preserved, whether in actuality or metaphorically, than a recognizable difference between subject and object remains tenable. However, as de Man points out: “The…polarities, inside/outside… [that seem] to make up a clear and coherent system [can become]… scrambled.” This scrambling begins the moment one shifts their critical viewpoint by attuning it to the commonalities and interdependency between a given perceiving subject and the object of its perception rather than their differences. The shifting poles of subject and object already at work in Man Ray’s passage from an outside to an inside viewpoint can be further underscored by drawing out the very real connections and similarities between the Large Glass and Man Ray’s camera.

Standing over six feet high and weighing over two hundred pounds, the Large Glass consists of two, large, vertically stacked panes of glass held in place by a metal frame. The lower pane depicts (according to Duchamp) a mysterious assortment of fantastical machines including a chocolate grinder, water wheel, and nine bachelor-machines. The bachelors are (again, according to Duchamp) forever grinding chocolate in an attempt (the success is never certain) to seduce the equally mechanical bride.

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depicted in the pane above. Duchamp’s choice to sublimate the eroticism of this narrative through mechanical illustration perfectly accords with many artists of his time who similarly saw the machine as an aesthetically and even sexually alluring site.

World War I saw the proliferation of a host of new technologies and with these emerged an increased interest in the mechanical aesthetic. What nature had been to the nineteenth century imagination, the machine became to the early twentieth century’s. The Italian Futurists were among the first to call for art to express this new ideal of industrial speed, power and strength. Their leader, Tomasso Marinetti, declared in 1909: “We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty… [The] roaring car…is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.”¹³ Both Duchamp and Man Ray were exposed to Futurism as well as other avant-garde movements through the photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz whose gallery was one of the few in New York to exhibit the “new” art of Europe. The Futurists’ emphasis on expressing dynamic movement surely influenced Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) (fig. 4). The sense of movement is clear as is the fact that the “nude” appears more robotic than human thus fusing in one image the two principle interests of the Futurists—movement and mechanization. By 1922, the year the photo-text was published, the photographer Paul Strand boldly declared that the machine was the “new God.”¹⁴ He immortalized the machine in his seductive photographs of them; shot in rich chiaroscuro they embody the rhetoric of classical portraits and nudes (fig. 5). By adopting the

techniques of portraiture, Strand offered the machine as the new human surrogate, as the new sleek and efficient working body. He explained “the machine must be humanized lest in turn it dehumanize us.” This process of humanizing the machine set up a new ideal of bodily efficiency, speed, and power. The fascination with machines in avant-garde art reflected a massive shift in modern culture at large towards an increasingly mechanized existence. Theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari argue that this attraction to the mechanical, transformed the human psycho-social body itself into a “desiring machine.” As desiring machines, they argue, humans are “plugged” into the libidinal economies of the modern capitalist state, continually producing and reproducing the desire to produce, reproduce and consume. They write, “[t]here is no such thing as either man or machine now, only a process that produces the one within the other…desiring-machines everywhere…the self and the non-self, outside and inside no longer have any meaning whatsoever.” The old logic that had held that the human was the subject, the machine always an object broke down in modernity as the two colluded. The humanization of the machine inevitably engendered its sexualization as well, bonding the human/machine binary together through (re)productive discourses of industrial capitalism.

Duchamp recognized this connection between mechanized industry and sexual reproduction; he was fascinated with the rise in mechanized farming for exactly this reason. Duchamp’s posthumously published notes reveal that among the Large Glass’s

15 Ibid.
17 Ibid, 1.
18 Ibid, 6.
working subtitles was “agricultural machine.”¹⁹ The mechanical plow embodied for Duchamp the implicit sexuality of the machine in the modern age, it was a machine that acted as mechanical phallus, sowing seeds and breeding life. Thus the machines of the Large Glass are not so much fantastical as they are indexical; they poeticize modernity’s fusing of the human and the machine within the discursive spaces of reproduction.

The modern camera is of course also a reproductive machine, which became tightly interwoven into the fabric of early twentieth century life. The modern camera, then as now, operates at an intimate level of interaction with the human body and mind. The camera came to act as a new ideal eye, a mechanical prosthesis that enabled its operators to see, and by extension think, in particularly photographic terms. Traces of this psycho-social shift are detectable in the casualness with which terms like “photogenic” and “photographic memory” are used.²⁰ Such statements reveal the extent to which humans and photography have become enmeshed. Duchamp understood this connection as well; his notes for the Large Glass make nearly as many references to mechanico-sexual reproduction as they do to photography. He made explicit this connection when he archived the first collection of his notes by meticulously photographing them, mounting them on card paper and storing them in a large-format film box.²¹ At one point he even considered having the bride figure transferred to the glass pane by photographic means. Ades, et al point out that:

This was not only a practical short cut but also a way of drawing out the notion of the Large Glass itself as a photographic analogue, its panes like the plates in a camera, to be imprinted with readymade images. When it proved impossible to

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²¹ Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp, 84.
reproduce the [b]ride on the Large Glass photographically, he painted her in black and white, as though she were a photograph; the imitation of photography was to be noticeable.22

His decision to approach the Large Glass photographically went hand and hand with his desire to sever his ties with the world of painting, his first medium (which he subsequently abandoned to pursue a more conceptual art practice). The association of painting with traditional art was anathema to Duchamp’s thinking at this time as is evident in his terse reply to Alfred Stieglitz’s question: “Can a photograph have the significance of a work of art?” Duchamp responded: “You know exactly how I feel about photography; I would like to see it make people despise painting.”23 His notes document his personal struggle to free himself from conceptualizing the work as a painting. For instance, he writes: “Use ‘delay’ instead of picture or painting; picture on glass becomes delay in glass…”24 In another note he writes, “for the instantaneous state of rest…bring in the term extra rapid [and] we shall determine the conditions of [the] best exposure…”25 Although the language is complex; its photographic rhetoric is clear. His conception of the work as a “delay in glass” calls to mind glass plate negatives whose latent images are only later revealed when they are developed. Duchamp’s notes also refer to the cloud-like shape that appears to be projecting from the head of the bride as a “cinematic blossoming,” thereby placing the theme of cinematography, and by extension photography, directly into the iconographic narrative of the Large Glass.26

22 Ibid, 89-90.
26 Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp, 90.
Using Duchamp’s language, it is possible to uncover an allegorical bond shared between the dust covered Large Glass and Man Ray’s large-format camera. First, as already noted, there is an obvious material parity between the work’s glass panes and the large glass plates used in Man Ray’s camera. In this way, the Large Glass’s collection of dust comes to function as a parodic allegory of large-format photography. The Large Glass was exposed to the interior of the studio and dust developed on it. Each collected dust particle indexes a passages of time, thus the Large Glass collects moments, in a way analogous to cameras and photographs. But the humor should be noted as well: dust can ruin a glass plate negative and as a result most photographers avoid it at all costs.

Following this line of reasoning, that the Large Glass is a kind of giant glass photographic plate, then the studio by extension becomes the camera, after all “camera” simply means “room.” Thus the room is at once allegorically and literally the site of the “camera.”

If the Large Glass can be thought of as an allegory of photography and photography an allegory of the collusion of the human and the mechanical then a metacritical perspective is achieved whereby the subject/object positions respectively established by Man Ray’s camera and the Large Glass, predicated as they are on a set of discreet differences, becomes “scrambled,” (à la de Man) by a host of shared commonalities. The interweaving of the identities of the Large Glass and that of large-format cameras of the kind Man Ray used to photograph it blurs the distinction between the positions of perceiving subject and the object of its perception. The object of Man Ray’s photographic gaze is, metaphorically speaking, an object that has already taken large-format photography and the camera as its subject. Therefore, photographing the
Large Glass becomes photographing photography. The subject and object reflect each other thereby momentarily deconstructing the subject/object designations through an interconnected system of allegorical substitution and exchange. Likewise the creator/beholder binary comes undone by a way of Man Ray’s creative act of beholding (photographically speaking) the Large Glass in a new and creative way—as a fantastical landscape. Beholding and creating along with the respective positions of subject and object are thus placed into circulation, and as such, they lose their static and fixed character.
PHOTOGRAPH

After their lunch the two artists returned to the studio. Man Ray recalled: “I closed the shutter. I hurried back to my basement and developed the plate…the negative was perfect. I was confident of my future assignments.” What is intriguing about Man Ray’s recollection is that he evidently believed his experiment in documenting another’s artwork had been a success and was confident that he possessed the necessary skills to do so again in the future. However, he had nothing to say on just how radically his “document” interpreted and even re-created the *Large Glass*.

Man Ray’s compositional choice to isolate only a small portion of the lower section of the work and to photograph this section at such a close range defamiliarized this aspect of Duchamp’s work by cutting it off from the context of the work as a whole and the surrounding environment of Duchamp’s studio. Further, Man Ray shot this section from the side and in doing so rotated the image ninety degrees to the left. Some of Man Ray’s decisions were simply a response to the difficulties of the task. Moving the work in any way was untenable, because this would have disturbed the collection of dust, and backing up too far (if he could have within the room) would have prevented him from getting a clear image of the work. However, Man Ray exploited these limitations in order to create the visual effect of an aerial landscape; the clear “horizon” line in the image helps to secure this illusion. Throughout the remainder of his career, Man Ray continued using similar techniques including the use of a close-up focus and isolating details. Indeed, the photo-historian Herbert Moldering argues that “this photograph is

27 Quoted in *Man Ray: Photographs*, 16.
representative of all of Man Ray’s subsequent photographic works.” Moldering sees *Dust Breeding* as fitting squarely within the tradition of post-World War I photography that often exhibited similar compositional traits including “isolating details and robbing them of their context.” Moldering cites Pierre Bost’s observation in his 1930 study on modern photography that:

> The problem consists in finding a new meaning for each object, to invest it with some miraculous power. The photographer, in order to discover the unknown...chooses the most unexpected, which is also, as so often, the simplest, means: separating the object from the world, he considers only the object itself. This is the true role of photography: to isolate things so as to render that which is familiar strange.  

Seen from this perspective, Man Ray’s compositional choices foreshadow later developments in American photography particularly that of the “F64 Group” (so called because they favored using a small f-stop of 64) including Edward Weston. Robert Hirsch shares Moldering’s assessment. He selects *Dust Breeding* as the lead image for his chapter “The New Culture of Light,” in his *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, archiving it along with Weston’s *Excusado* of 1925 (fig. 6), which is likely a reference to Duchamp’s urinal-as-art, his famous *Fountain* of 1917 (fig. 7).  

However, *Dust Breeding* was one of the first photographs to be published, and thereby officially endorsed, by the first journal of the Surrealist movement. Historically, then, *Dust Breeding* stands at a cross-roads between aspects of what would emerge as the “straight” school of photography that prized clarity, verisimilitude, and denounced any darkroom manipulation (in theory if not in practice) and the Surrealist tradition that often

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29 Ibid.  
30 Ibid.  
prized the opposite qualities. Like the divide that erupted between these traditions, *Dust Breeding* is internally divided along the subjective/objective axis founded on the binary document/artwork. Usually these generic distinctions are easily (if uncritically) maintained, but modern art history has problematized this by its use of photographic reproductions.

The use of photographic reproductions began with the pioneering work of Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945). Wölfflin taught his students the history of art by projecting lantern slides in a darkened room and in doing so largely invented the modern form of the art history lecture. Consciously or not, he was in fact exposing his students to a history of photography as well as that of painting, sculpture and architecture. However, this problematic of modern art history largely remained on the margins of the discipline until the French theorist and novelist, André Malraux, addressed the matter in *The Museum Without Walls*.

Malraux theorized that photographs of artworks change how the work is perceived. Malraux notes that the “the angle from which a work…is photographed, the manner in which it is framed and centered, and, above all, a carefully studied lighting…[can] strongly accentuate something that previously had been only suggested.” The reproduction and the original artwork never occupies the easy relation of signifier to signified, but is forever trapped in a state of perpetual self-indexicality; it is

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35 Ibid, 82.
both signifier and signified, sealing its referent within itself, holding it captive like the bachelors and the bride in the *Large Glass.* Man Ray’s reproduction of the *Large Glass* re-creates for it a new visual context. His compositional choices shifted the scale of the tiny dust piles into giant dunes casting looming shadows thereby transforming a banal collection of dust into an expansive desert landscape. Nonetheless it clearly is a visual document of a moment in the life of the *Large Glass.* This condition is emblematic of the doubled character of all photographic reproductions, they are at once copies of and original artworks. As David Campany argues, “*Dust Breeding* exploits the fact that photography has always had two roles in art. On the one hand it’s an art form on the other it’s a functional means by which all art forms are documented and publicized.”

This doubled identity of *Dust Breeding*, being both a document and an original artwork highlights how photographs both capture and displace “reality.” As Hirsch notes *Dust Breeding* underscores the “elusive nature of photographic truth.” Photographs do not merely “index” their referents as Roland Barthes claimed, rather as Rosemarie Garland Thompson notes, “photographs… like all representations…construct the objects they represent.”

*Dust Breeding* is at once a subjective expression and an objective record of that expression. The slippage between the two exemplifies the manner in which subject and object trade locations over the course of successive interpretive relays between beholding.

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and creating. The subject of *Dust Breeding* is an object, the *Large Glass*, but the photograph is also an object that takes the *Large Glass* as its subject. This chiasmus in the subject/object (and in the beholder/creator) binary reveals what Michael-Ann Holly has characterized as the “semantic slipperiness”\(^{41}\) of these terms. The very way in which the terms “subject” and “object” are used in an interchangeable fashion throughout art historical discourse exposes their linguistic uncertainty. Duchamp’s object becomes Man Ray’s subject, which becomes the object of Duchamp’s interpretation at the moment he selects the evocative title, *Dust Breeding*, for it.

*Dust Breeding* stands, then, as a testament to double vision; the visions of Man Ray and Duchamp and the doubled character of the photographic reproduction as at once a document and an artwork. This doubled character collapses the either/or logic of subject or object and creator or beholder, rewriting these binaries with an inclusive and questioning “and.” The stability of these binary distinctions are thereby placed into question to the same extent that they are placed into the circulatory system of hermeneutical discourse.

The history of the text, like that of the photograph is a history of interpretive exchanges between Man Ray, Duchamp and the *Large Glass*. The text works on three levels, as a poem, a caption, and as a textual re-inscription of the gendered narrative of the *Large Glass*. In all three cases the text radically reframed *Dust Breeding* just as it reinterpreted the *Large Glass*.

Exactly how the text came together remains somewhat of a mystery. What is known is that Man Ray and Duchamp were both avid writers. But whereas Duchamp restricted his creative writing largely to notes and ingenious puns, Man Ray was a lifelong poet. A poem written for his wife some years before he photographed the *Large Glass* bears rhetorical similarities with the text in question. Untitled, the poem’s ninth and tenth lines read, “The sun embraces the desert/And the desert its oasis.”42 Like the text, the poem blends the themes of aridity, fertility and femininity. Another poem, this one written years after the publication of the photo-text, may have been directly inspired by the image of the *Large Glass* covered in dust. Entitled “Dust to Dust,” the poem concludes a retrospective essay by Man Ray that recounts the highlights of his career up to that point in time. Just before the poem, Man Ray describes an unnamed boy who makes art with dust, a “poet of the dust” as Man Ray describes him.43

Dust to Dust

For years these objects lie motionless
Though some are articulated for action
Performing satisfactorily
Entailing no wear and tear
No supervision or directing
Accumulating dust
Which is also an object
Of an amorous nature
That seeks its soul-mate
Everywhere and forever
And will never surrender
To our prosaic gestures…

It will return to its accustomed place.\textsuperscript{44

The poem’s description of an object of “amorous nature” “accumulating dust” calls to mind the \textit{Large Glass}, whose photo-shoot occurred largely without “supervision or directing” or indeed without even the artists’ presence. Additionally, the “poet of the dust,” may well be a veiled reference to Duchamp. Stylistically these poems bear similarities with the published text. A second clue to the direct presence of Man Ray’s hand can be traced to the text’s incorrect dating of the photograph that dates it to 1921. In 1921, Man Ray left for Paris and largely remained there until his death. The photo-

\textsuperscript{44} Man Ray, “Dust to Dust,” from “Photography is Not Art,” 33.
text was not published until 1922, so it is possible that Man Ray finalized the text in Paris during 1921 and mistakenly dated the photograph to the same year.

While certainly poetic, the text’s physical location beneath the photograph situates it within the generic space of the photo-caption, but its poetic language rhetorically exceeds the caption’s expected informational style. In his famous essay, “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin argued that photographers should append only strictly informational captions to their photographs so as to combat what he saw as photography’s dangerous ability to aestheticize and anesthetize reality, specifically political reality. He lamented: “Photography…has become more and more subtle…and the result is that it is now incapable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish heap without transfiguring it.”\textsuperscript{45} He thus demanded that photographers “put a caption beneath [their] picture that will rescue it from the ravishes of modishness…”\textsuperscript{46} In the same essay, Benjamin praised the “revolutionary” Dadaists for the manner in which their combined photo-text montages that often conveyed a political message.\textsuperscript{47} The German Dadaists (these were likely the ones Benjamin was referring to) had been politically radicalized by the horrors of the first World War, and in their 1920 manifesto they called for an art that could awake people to “the thousandfold problems of the day…”\textsuperscript{48} The Surrealists, by contrast, questioned the very notion of reality; Breton wrote in 1928, “let us not forget that in this epoch it is reality itself that is in question.”\textsuperscript{49} Breton and his fellow Surrealists were no doubt intrigued by how Man Ray and Duchamp’s text extends \textit{Dust Breeding}’s

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\item \textsuperscript{45} Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in \textit{Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas}, 496.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 497.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 496.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Richard Huelsenbeck, “First German Dada Manifesto (Collective Dada Manifesto)” in \textit{Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas}, 257.
\item \textsuperscript{49} André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” in \textit{Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas}, 459.
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\end{flushright}
illusionistic power by telling the reader to view the photograph as an aerial landscape. As a caption, the text denies the traditional caption’s servile obedience to “truth,” and instead places the determination of “photographic truth” at the mercy of the beholder’s imagination where the realms of fantasy and reality collude.

Whereas the text formally bears similarities with writings by Man Ray, its poetic content is informed by Duchamp’s work. The text reference to Rrose Sélavy, Duchamp’s famous female alter-persona offers a clear way to begin piercing the text’s enigmatic imagery. In 1920 Duchamp declared “better to change one’s religion would be to change one’s sex.” Her name was a play on the French phrase *eros c’est la vie* (eros that’s life), and she first appeared as simply a name (with an English spelling) printed in block capitols along the base of Duchamp’s ironic sculpture *Fresh Widow* (fig. 8). The name was followed by the copyright symbol as well as the date, 1920, thus it signaled her as the author of the work. However, Sélavy was not only the authorial subject of the work but the object of the work’s punning narrative as well. *Fresh Widow* consists of a pair of miniature French doors with their panes covered in black leather. The veiling of the panes in black secures a connection with mourning, while Rrose Sélavy genders the association making this mourning figure a widow. However, black leather also brings with it a host of sexual associations, which shifts the narrative into an ingenious (if sexist) French pun. Little, French, doors, mourning becomes *petit morte*, French for orgasm. This situating of Sélavy in a death/sex context is revisited in Duchamp’s response to Man Ray’s interpretation that the dust covered surface of the *Large Glass* was not his, but Sélavy’s. In so doing he again linked Sélavy with a sign for death (dust) and a sign for

sex (breeding) as well. “How arid/how fertile” similarly links opposed concepts that call to mind fertility and reproduction, as if Sélavy’s domain were a kind of breeding ground (which in terms of breeding dust it was). Lastly, “how joyous/how sad” can be read as another veiled reference to an orgasm that is at once (especially in the context of the French language) a moment of simultaneous joy and “mourning” at the dissipation of sexual energy.

Later that year Sélavy passed from word to flesh when Duchamp began privately posing in drag for Man Ray’s camera (fig. 8). Man Ray was sympathetic to Duchamp’s gender bending interests; he too posed for the camera in drag. That the artists only cross-dressed in the privacy of their art suggests that they considered gender as a kind of artistic process to be experimented with. This conception of gender as a mimetic affect that is performatively produced finds a clear echo in contemporary gender theory. As gender theorist Judith Butler argues:

> Drag constitutes the mundane way in which all genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation…there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself…those ontologically consolidated phantasms of “man” and “woman” are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real.51

Considered from Butler’s perspective the artists’ cross-dressing gesture becomes a question of just what is crossing what. Is it, for instance, Duchamp who cross-dressed when he appeared as Sélavy or Sélavy who cross-dressed as Duchamp? Duchamp

underscored this when he dedicated a portrait of Sélavy by signing it “lovingly, Rrose Sélavy alias Marcel Duchamp” (fig. 9). This gesture inverses the expected equation by casting “Sélavy” as the dominant and real name and “Duchamp” as but an alias, or false signature.

Cross-dressing also offers a way of reading the narrative structure of the text, which may be compared to the gendered structure of the Large Glass. The text positions Man Ray above (flying in a plane) the “domain of Sélavy.” Therefore, following the gendered narrative structure of the Large Glass, he is occupying the bride’s space, while Duchamp claims the bachelor’s domain as Sélavy. There is, then, a double session of textual cross-dressing at work in the text. This was not the first time Duchamp had appeared in textual drag. In an early sketch for the Large Glass he placed the first half of his name (Mar) in the upper register and the second half (cel) in the lower one.52 This splitting of his first name along the Large Glass’s gendered axis is preserved, as Rosalind Krauss has noted, in the Large Glass’s French title: La mariée (bride) mise à nu par ses célibataires (bachelors) même. The text thus references Duchamp’s early textual experiments in cross-dressing.

The text’s binding together of the identities of Man Ray, Sélavy and the Large Glass thus situates the text within multiple intertextual and inter-authorial contexts and compels a consideration of the text as less an autonomous singular creation, and more a kind of textual echo-chamber of multiple authorial signatures and coded references.53 This blurring of discursive spaces extends, again, to the designations of subject/object

53 For an excellent study on the principle of intersexuality as defined by Julia Kristeva see Noëlle McAfee, Julia Kristeva (New York: Routledge, 2004).
and creator/beholder. Man Ray and Duchamp, as the perceiving subjects of the *Large Glass*, literally write each other into the final photo-text’s materiality, textually fusing their names with the work’s objecthood. Yet, the two artists also textually present themselves (albeit in disguise) as the principle protagonists or subjects of the text, which then in turn become the interpretive objects of the beholder’s reading/viewing.
Readers of the October 1922 issue of *Littérature* would have encountered the photo-text between the sixth and seventh pages of the journal. It was published/exhibited alone, positioned vertically, its text running parallel with the right margin of the page. In response many readers would have rotated the journal a full ninety degrees in order to view the work. In this way the act of viewing was an intimate and unique bodily performance. This performance in effect retraces Man Ray’s photographic repositioning of the *Large Glass* a full ninety degrees, thus connecting the beholder to the photographer across time and distance. This performative viewing condition dramatizes how all artworks transact with viewers through a complex series of negotiations that leaves neither subject nor artwork un-altered.

Simple as the act is, it nonetheless constitutes a radical undoing of the fixity of the subject/object and beholder/creator binaries. The photo-text as an art object asserts the agency of a subject by motivating a series of bodily changes in the beholder, while simultaneously the beholder adopts the position of a subject that actively changes the photo-text-object through the process of viewing it. As Holly argues subject/object and beholder/maker binaries, in terms of viewing art, always “works actively in both directions.” She writes:

The subject of one side is the object of the other. The object of art also possesses subjecthood, in the sense of an agency distinct from the artist who made it—an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways…the alleged subjecthood of interpreters is not as autonomous as the relativizing inclinations of many poststructuralists…would make it seem. In other words, what is questionable is

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54 While I realize that the image had to be printed vertically in order to fit into the journal; its placement nonetheless dynamizes the subject/object reversals.

not that works of art are objects and viewers subjects, but instead that these statuses are frequently regarded as absolute and exclusive, permanent and fixed. The work of art may be the product of a subject, as the traditional intentionalist view would have it. “Behind” the work stands a sender, in relation to whom…the [beholder] is merely a “receiver.” But then the equation reverses itself. The next step…has the [beholder] taking subject status over the work as object, only to relinquish it again…From that moment on, it seems to me, the relation between the two poles begins to shift, to be more mobile than the subject/object binary distinction would suggest.56

Holly’s point about the shifting relation in the sender/receiver binary opens a way towards theorizing the effects of the photo-text on the mind of the beholder. The beholder is the receiver of the photo-text, but he or she is also sender of their own interpretation. The beholder’s reading and viewing thus transposes into an act of psychological writing and projecting in the course of responding to the work. The beholder views the photo-text and psychologically projects a photographic response onto the photograph as if it were a kind of screen and this psychological image develops between the beholder and the photograph. Similarly the reading of the text becomes a writing process, by way of the beholder’s interpretation that “writes” itself into the interstitial space between the reader and the text. In this way the beholder’s interpretive exchange with the photo-text allegorically re-traces the interpretive relays between Man Ray and Duchamp, blurring these through a series of intimate dialogical relays. As Hirsch notes in his commentary on the photo-text, “Duchamp and [Man] Ray saw artmaking as a process that involved the artist, the art object, and the viewer in an ongoing venture of reciprocal creation and interpretation.”57

Given this condition, what finally does it mean to historicize and theorize the photo-text? How does the adoption of a meta-critical perspective that aims to deconstruct

56 Ibid.
57 Robert Hirsch, Seizing the Light: A History of Photography, 244.
the rigid distinctions that mark the subject/object and creator/beholder binaries implicate the process of writing art history? Jacques Derrida offers a model for how to begin answering these questions. In the *Truth in Painting*, he cogently and creatively critiques the notion of the frame in both its literal and figural manifestations. 58 For Derrida the frame in both cases is a construction that serves to posit an inside and an outside for an artwork. Like his close friend, Paul de Man, Derrida sees this opposition as grounding the entire edifice of Western metaphysics. Just as the physical frame of a painting is generally thought of as extrinsic to the artwork, so commentaries on art are thought of as outside or separate from the artwork. Concerning discourses on art, he argues, “whatever they say: there is for them and inside and an outside…” 59 But what happens, Derrida asks, “before the difference becomes opposition…or without its doing so?” 60 Derrida explores this possibility in his essay “Cartouches.” This essay originally accompanied an exhibition of drawings by the artist Gérard Titus-Carmel. 61 The exhibition in effect (and this was part of Derrida’s point) exhibited two sets of works, the artist’s drawings and Derrida “Cartouches.” Derrida’s gesture broke with the tradition of art writing that posits a clear distinction between commentary and creation. His evocative and performative strategy for bearing this out made hyper-visible the way in which art writing does not simply occur in some distant space apart from the work under the metaphor of critical distance, but rather establishes an intertextual and inter-authorial relationship with the work it comments on.

59 Ibid, 11.
60 Ibid. Italics in the original.
61 Ibid.
Following Derrida’s insight, the writing of a history and theory of the photo-text does not simply or definitively exist outside the borders of the photo-text. The photo-text as an object makes certain demands on the subject’s interpretation; it calls out for some readings more than others. Seen from this perspective, the subject-historian/critic to artwork-object relation loses its fixity. The historian/critic is always responding to a given object, and is thus always already the object of the artwork’s gaze, as much as the artwork is the object of the historian/critic’s subjective perception. This commentary on the photo-text thus participates in the sender/receiver circuit effectively weaving the narrative into the hermeneutic relays between the artists and extending this to the reader who continues the interpretive correspondence.  

At this meta-critical level, the history and theory of the photo-text cannot fully be separated out from the photo-text itself, the two like the constituent elements of the photo-text, are interwoven with one another.

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CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have attempted to retrieve Man Ray and Duchamp’s collaborative photo-text for the October 1922 edition of *Littérature* from the margins of art history, arguing that its history of interpretive relays dramatizes the way in which the binaries of subject/object and maker/beholder lose their fixity over the course of successive exchanges. The differences between these terms are often taken for granted leading to a host of uncritical preconceptions concerning the nature and use of these terms. Such preconceptions have and continue to shape, the disciplines of art history and art criticism. Critics and historians who theorize from the perspective that the differences between these terms are grounded in metaphysics face a difficult but fruitful challenge; to carry forward their deconstructions to critique and demonstrate the manner in which simple terms powerfully shape the way art is historicized and theorized.

Derrida, de Man, and the general project of deconstructive criticism still provides powerful tools for uncovering the ways in which the binary constructions of subject/object and creator/beholder operate and often uncritically structure the locus of debate. Scholars like Michael Ann-Holly, and others are part of a second generation of deconstructors who are going back to the texts of de Man, and Derrida and carrying forward their work by applying deconstructive practices in new ways and in new contexts. By teasing out the metaphysical underpinnings in art writing these scholars are making a case for how deconstruction can be applied to the study of the visual arts.

The elusive borders of subject, object, creator and beholder, which the photo-text exemplifies reminds the art historian and critic alike that the critical lexicon upon which
so much of the study of art is founded on is dependent on the presumed stability of its basic terms, and additionally that this stabilization is often uncritically secured in advance. The deconstruction of these metaphysical categories involves not so much a proving of their non-existence or an utter dismissal of their use-value, but rather a continuous problematizing of them in order to elide their uncritical concretion.

The photo-text allegorizes the fact that histories of art are histories of intertextual and inter-authorial crossings. The fluidity of these crossings and the resulting textual palimpsests they spawn reminds one that the study and writing about art is plurivocal; it blends the voices of artworks, artists, and writers together into polysemous matrices. The writing of art history, like the making of Duchamp and Man Ray’s photo-text, is a case in double vision; that of the artwork and artists on the one hand and that of the beholder-historian/critic/author on the other.
WORKS CITED


ILLUSTRATIONS
Figure 1. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, photo-text for October 1922 edition of Littérature (original orientation, ninety degrees to the left).
Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even* or *The Large Glass*, 1915-23. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Pennsylvania.
Figure 3. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, *Dust Breeding*, 1964. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Pennsylvania
Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912.

Figure 6. Edward Weston, *Excusado* 1925, Center for Creative Photography. Phoenix, Arizona.
Figure 7. Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.