

Richard Hamilton: In the Mirror with Marcel

Richard Hamilton died on September 13, 2011. For more than half a century he made art that shone a bright light onto our world and our representations, skillfully revealing their narcissistic delusions and deceit. The famous collage he made in 1956, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* convincingly establishes his credentials as the father of British—if not all—Pop Art. The father, but not the pope: Hamilton was always too busy trying new things and reorganizing the relations between image, technology and idea to make a career out of a movement. In addition to his own experiments, Hamilton was a lifelong devotee of Marcel Duchamp. Without trying to impose an interpretation, or becoming hemmed in by the older artist, he worked tirelessly to explore the implications and details of Duchamp's work.

It is fascinating to see how a person who some, myself included, consider to be one of the most important artists of the last century, constructed his own body of work through a long-running relationship with another artist who was at once an elder, a model and a mentor, and how his unflinching fidelity to Duchamp underpinned his own artistic freedom.

I interviewed and filmed Richard Hamilton several times when making *La Légende du Grand Verre*, a film about Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, which Hamilton made a replica of for the Tate Gallery in 1966. The exchange that follows is taken from these interviews.

■ *How did you discover Marcel Duchamp's work?*

It was just after the war, a friend of mine showed me a copy of the *Green Box* notes.⁽¹⁾ I found it fascinating, as anyone might. Of course I had no understanding of anything. I couldn't read it because it was in French but it interested me as an object. After that, the first painting which I had seen was the *Bride* painting, at the exhibition at the Tate Gallery called *Masterpieces of Modern Art from the Museum of Modern Art, New York* I was absolutely overwhelmed by it. Of all those masterpieces that's the one that opened my eyes to something new.

And how did you meet him?

Years later, in 1956, for an evening devoted to Marcel Duchamp, I tried to make a translation of some notes of the *Green Box*, with a friend who spoke French. I wrote to Marcel Duchamp and asked him to look at it, and to let me know what he thought. A year later, I had a letter which turned up with the handwriting that I recognized from the *Green Box*. He wanted to introduce me to George Heard Hamilton, who is no relation of mine but happens to have the same name, and worked on the translation of the whole of the notes of the *Green Box*. So, we were brought together.

What interested me about this project was the fact that the notes can't be just printed in a normal way, like literary text, because alterations, interventions, crossing outs, and all these marks and little diagrams that he made in the notes were very difficult to treat in a normal typographic way. The problem was to express the meaning of the notes, the thinking behind the work. It was necessary to find a form which would give you some idea of the thoughts of the person making these notes.

After three years of correspondence with Duchamp, and having met him in Paris, I was a kind of a disciple, from another generation. He seemed to appreciate the effort that I was making to understand what he had done, and he thought I understood pretty well! [laughs]. That's how we met and how we became friends.

Did you see him often?

Of course I was with Duchamp quite a lot. I went to the Duchamp exhibition in Pasadena in 1963. My duty was to do a lecture, but it was rather difficult for the Americans to understand what I was talking about [laughs]. Now, a long lecture talking just about the *Large Glass*, is hard to take. I didn't feel that I was getting very much through to them, but it was a great occasion because I met Warhol, Oldenburg, and all the American Pop artists, who knew me fortunately because they knew me as an artist also. When I came back, I proposed that somebody should do a retrospective in England. I was told: "Ok, Richard, you do it!" [laughs]. I realized very soon that there was no point in having a Duchamp exhibi-



« Self-portrait ». 1990. Huile sur cibachrome sur toile.
75 x 75 cm. Oil on cibachrome on canvas

tion if you couldn't have the *Large Glass*, and it wasn't possible to get it from Philadelphia. So I decided to make it. That meant that I would have to spend another year making the *Large Glass* itself.

A RECONSTRUCTION

*How did you make the replica of the *Large Glass*, technically?*

The decision I made right from the start is that I wouldn't try to make a facsimile of it. It would be impossible anyway, because the *Large Glass* in Philadelphia is in such a decrepit state. I mean it's old, very old. It's practically in the grave. And I thought that what I must do is find out exactly what he did. And go through the same motions. The first thing I did was to make a drawing, following the numbers. I found all the information in the *Green Box* notes: numbers, distance from the vanishing points, the distance for every perspective feature that was required... There's nothing missing.

There is an artistic tradition of copying important works by great masters. At the Louvre, for instance, people copy canvases to understand how there were made. Did you make your replica in that way?

No. I didn't copy it for my own edification or education. I copied it, because it was necessary to make the exhibition. Well... I don't like the word "copy" in relation to this, I like the word "reconstruction." But not only did I reconstruct the *Large Glass*, I reconstructed the *Glider*, I reconstructed the *Malic Molds*, everything that had to be done. I went through the early stages. It wasn't just a simple reconstruction or facsimile version of the *Large Glass* itself, it was a study of the whole of the activity going right back to the initial speculations he had about the project in 1912. From that principle, I had to see the technical procedures that he had adopted.

For a lot of artists from your generation the main influence is the readymades. You seem to be more interested by the Large Glass. Is that true?

I don't make a distinction between them, really. They were done at the same time, and they were done deliberately as a dichotomy. The *Large Glass* is one of the most complex works of the twentieth century. This complexity involves a huge amount of work. Readymades are very ordinary objects, they're the complete opposite of the *Large Glass*.

But the form of the first readymade he made, the *Bicycle Wheel*, is rather like the rollers of the chocolate machine, and there's a strong affinity between the *Bottle Rack* and the *Malic Molds*, in their construction. These were done in 1913, when he was working on the *Glass*. It's not split up into little compartments, it's a whole, and you have to cover all the ground that Marcel covered in his mind over those years, to begin to really appreciate what a genius he was [laughs].

What did you discover during this reconstruction?

The most extraordinary revelation was when I was working on the part called "the blossoming" which he describes in rather poetic terms as: "the blossoming of the bride, the total sum of her splendid vibrations." So it's quite sexy. I discovered that the tones that I was mixing were flesh tones, not the colors you see through the *Glass*, because the *Glass* puts a green tint over it. When you realize that this is really flesh, it's like a Renoir, like a sensuous nude.

What do you think about the different interpretations of the Large Glass?

I think it can become a little absurd. I've never tried to interpret it. I've tried to think how he made it. There are people who associate it with Zen, other people who associate it with Christianity and the assumption of the virgin! The most elaborate stories come out. Octavio Paz said "it's not about any of these, it's all of these things." It's Marcel's myth, he created this myth, which can be related to any of the great human myths.

Your famous collage Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing? *shows an ironical vision of the relationship between man and woman. Isn't there something like that in the Large Glass, between the bride and the bachelors?*

Well, it's pushing it a bit, I think, to draw these conclusions. In fact, people have come to a great many different conclusions as to what the *Large Glass* is all about. But

that collage was done a year before I had any real involvement with Duchamp's thinking. It was in 1956. But also, the idea of that was to take a whole lot of elements which I regarded as representing or symbolizing modern life. I made a list: "what is today?" I wrote, at the top of my list, "men and women" as being the basic, the starting point. And then, I had a history, I put "We're here now, we can't tell the future, but we can tell the history, or something about the history;" so I put the word history down. And then each of these labels, which were quite extensive, like: food, cinema, telephone, all these things had to be represented in the collage, and I just found ways of fitting them in, somehow, one way or another.

So I think it's too narrow an idea to say it's about a romantic association between men and women, or any other kind of relationship between men and women. It's just the broad picture of life at that time. But it's not a picture of life as it could be imagined, but a picture of life as it could be expressed in the symbols of the time.

AS UNLIKE DUCHAMP AS POSSIBLE

A lot of artists place themselves within the heritage of Marcel Duchamp. We can see that in their works. You seem to succeed in separating your own personal artistic production and your work on Marcel Duchamp. How would you define your relation to his works? Well, I can hardly say I wasn't influenced by Marcel. But, I thought it's too easy to make readymades after he has made them—it's an obscenity! And his theoretical position was that he should divorce the hand from the work of art. That using instruments, like drawing instruments, enabled him to get away from the Montmartre style of moving colors on canvas [laughs]. And so I thought, rather than follow Duchamp's imagery, you could go the other way. Duchamp was an iconoclast: he defied everything, even himself! I think in a way the readymades were an iconoclastic action against his other personality which was so precise and methodical, and thorough to the last degree, and demonstrated in writing. So, it seemed to me, to be true to Duchamp, you had to be as unlike Duchamp as possible. And I even went into fields which were regarded as quite stupid: like landscapes and girls in the forest. They're humorous in a way, but they certainly wouldn't be seen as Duchamp-inspired. But they are attempting that dichotomy that Duchamp found himself with his readymades.

You don't have a unique recognizable aesthetic style, just like Marcel Duchamp, right?

Yes. What I did take from Duchamp was his interest in not repeating himself. That was

almost like a precept for Duchamp. I'm not going to do this, because I did it last month, or last year or 12 years ago. It's always finding new things to do. Because he was bored by repetition. He found it exciting to find new solutions, to different problems which he set himself. And I find that same attitude is worth following.

Is it a moral choice, or is it in order to explore different aesthetic directions?

I suppose it is a moral choice. But before I knew Duchamp, I was tending towards that thing of not adopting a style. To move from one thing to another. At that time, people thought: "Oh he's trying to find a style." But I was finding one style, and then finding another style, and then another, rather than looking for a style that I could adopt for the rest of my life.

I once had to interview Marcel, in the early 60s, for the BBC. In that film I asked him how did it feel to produce that great work of art, looking back on it, now that he had done it. He said: "I didn't think it was a great work of art, I was just doing what I wanted to do. I wasn't concerned about whether it was great or not." And I said: "But you must have been, to spend all that time! Twelve or fifteen or more years, obsessed with the same thing, keeping it moving." And he said: "Lots of people devote twelve or more years to doing stupid things! Why should I be different?"

What is your definition of a work of art?

[laughs] I suppose, in my own terms, a work of art is what an artist does. And if I like to think of myself as an artist, a work of art is what I do. But I always feel that it is necessary to have a certain commitment to what I do, and I like to think that I can reach a conclusion, and that I'll know when I'll reach this conclusion because I am happy, I am satisfied that I have achieved something. And I suspect that I believe that I have achieved a work of art. But if you ask the question "What is a work of art?" I really haven't got a very convincing answer. ■

(1) The *Green Box* is a set of facsimiles of Duchamp's preparatory notes for the *Large Glass*, published by Duchamp in an edition of 300.

Pascal Goblot is a video artist and maker of The unknown secret of Sylvester Stallone (CNC prize, 2010). His installation Through the Large Glasses featured in the exhibition Seconde Main at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2010. His latest book is Henri Atlan, La philosophie dans l'éprouvette, conversation avec Pascal Goblot (Bayard, 2010).

« Hotel du Rhône ». 2005. Huile sur toile. 100 x 100 cm. Oil on canvas

