

Serious Play: Games in Twentieth-Century Modernism

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Twentieth-century artists and cultural theorists have energetically pursued the analysis and exploration of the realms of “play” and games, aspects of culture that had been marginalized during the Enlightenment and ignored or denigrated by high-modernist critics. For example, in 1938, partly in response to the contemporary political situation, the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga recognized fascism’s barbarous and “puerile” censorship of play and games. At the same moment the cultural theorist Roger Caillois broke off his affiliation with the surrealist circles of both André Breton and Georges Bataille. Twenty years later he responded to aspects of Huizinga’s analysis as well as to the surrealists in *Man, Play and Games* (1958), where he attacked the conceptual foundation of the postwar surrealist games Breton began publishing in 1953. Viewing games by the French surrealists and by Marcel Duchamp through the lens of Caillois’s surrealist-inspired game theory, this paper considers how games by these artists challenge modernist art production. More particularly, where the surrealists used games to resist the restrictive political and intellectual conditions brought about with the rise of fascism, Duchamp eschewed such direct engagement. In his last years Duchamp redefined his own art-chess as a primarily visual event. He thereby secured a place for himself within the modernist canon but also confined art-games to the autonomous realm of high art.

Art historians have recently pointed to the importance of play and games in the eighteenth century and to the period-style of the Rococo. It has been argued that the “frivolous” Rococo artistic exploration of play and games is soundly rejected in the Enlightenment in favor of the “serious” delineation of aesthetics by philosophers such as Diderot, Kant, and Schiller. Jennifer Milam has, however, claimed that the “ludic impulse,” as creative process and as “active engagement with the image,” was central to Enlightenment thought and to the formulation of modern visual experience.¹ Within the

history of twentieth-century modernism little critical attention has been paid to the game as a structure common to the historical avant-garde. We might trace this continued repression of the game within critical discourse to the influential canon-constructing views of mid-century critics such as Clement Greenberg or Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. These thinkers rigorously distinguished the realm of visual modernism from the dross of mass culture as mere entertainment, a state destructive of authentic art. Greenberg's postwar art criticism strictly segregated play, amusement and entertainment from classical modern art. In order to champion the Kantian aesthetic tradition, Greenberg categorized the play of amusement as part of the corrupting effect of mass culture or kitsch, which must be contested and negated within the serious realm of art.² This absolute demarcation of the realms of high and low art willfully ignored Dada and surrealist experimentation with the game.

In contrast to the high modernist critics who were their contemporaries, cultural theorists recognized games as a marker of civilization and acknowledged their place within epistemology. The cultural theorists' views on games perhaps indicate their debt to the disciplinary concerns of anthropology and sociology on the one hand and their reaction to the increasing power of fascist demagoguery on the other. The burst of cultural theory centered on games in the twentieth century can be said to begin with Huizinga, with his first lecture on the play element in culture in an address in 1933. His *Homo Ludens, a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* was published in Leiden in 1938. Huizinga's resounding condemnation of the cultural and intellectual perversions of Nazism is also a modern-day tale of cultural decline that recalls the pessimistic pronouncements of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1920-22) and precedes those of the Frankfurt School. Huizinga mourned the dissipation of play in the twentieth century and with it a code of ethics and a corresponding quality of human decency. He identified the "play impulse" as an inherent characteristic of human society and as an underlying structure of culture, not only in the creative act of poetry and art, but also in the waging of war in accordance with a "code of honor" and "the law of nations." Beginning with Plato's identification of human play activity as a kind of holiness, Huizinga sees play as central to ritual and inseparable from it; he discusses the use of masks in archaic cultures in marking the realm of "sacred play," a quality he claims has never wholly disappeared from social life and can still be manifested as "sheer play" (26). He goes on to chart the epistemological function of play within world history.

Huizinga then identifies five core qualities of human play throughout world history: 1) that it is voluntary in nature 2) it is separate from "real life" 3) it has a beginning and end and must be repeatable 4) it creates order in shifting between the states of tension and resolution of conflict and finally, 5) all human play has *rules*. Huizinga traces the end of play activity in the

sphere of the visual arts, where he dismisses contemporary art as overly esoteric and too concerned with the proliferation of “isms”—the “game” of a specialized critical discourse around modern art as it hurls itself toward the ever-more “new.” In a passage that recalls the contemporaneous analyses of Walter Benjamin but lacks his political radicalism and familiarity with the avant-garde, Huizinga notes how changes brought about in art by photographic reproduction work against the development of a “play-element” in art. In his view art becomes at once too self-conscious and too connected to the market to retain its “eternal child-like innocence” (202).

Huizinga concludes with a powerful critique of the “friend/foe principle” outlined in the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt, which, Huizinga argues, destroys the ethical workings or “fair play” aspect of international law.³ Huizinga explains how Schmitt’s theory recasts the relation between states:

The theory refuses to regard the enemy even as a rival or adversary. He is merely in your way and thus is to be made away with. If ever anything in history has corresponded to this gross over-simplification of the idea of enmity, which reduces it to an almost mechanical relationship, it is precisely that primitive antagonism between phratries, clans or tribes where . . . the play-element was hypertrophied and distorted. Civilization is supposed to have carried us beyond this stage. I know of no sadder or deeper fall from human reason than Schmitt’s barbarous and pathetic delusion about the friend-foe principle. His inhuman cerebrations do not even hold water as a piece of formal logic. For it is not war that is serious, but peace . . . Schmitt’s brand of “seriousness” merely takes us back to the savage level. (209)

Thus, Huizinga writes, Schmitt provides the intellectual foundation for the adolescent “puerilism” of fascism and its culture in 1938, a perverse “boy scoutism” without playfulness but which thinks itself beyond competitiveness: a world of yelled greetings, the wearing of badges and “political haberdashery,” of “collective voodoo,” crude sensationalism, pleasure in mass meetings and parades—simply, the “bastardization of culture” (205-06). However he finally trusts that moral consciousness (a “drop of pity”) will return with the awareness that human action may be “licit as play”; “But if we have to decide whether an action to which our will impels us is a serious duty or is licit as play, our moral conscience will at once provide the touchstone” (213). Huizinga trusts that the play-instinct will reject thinking such as Schmitt’s and compel a reentry into the sphere of ethics and civilization.⁴

Perhaps due to his aversion to the economic totalizations of Marxism, Huizinga did not theorize the place of games within the capitalist economy. Caillois’s *Man, Play and Games* pointed critically to Huizinga’s

decontextualized and teleological narrative of play-as-drive that established it as an enduring human quality throughout all of world history. Well before Foucault, Caillois advanced a nuanced theory of power that is more optimistically based upon the rise of competition and its dialectic with *alea*, or the chance advantages of a privileged birth; Caillois raises the possibility that power in modernity flows not unidirectionally but circulates and is actively *contested* in democratic society.

To formulate a less abstracted study of play culture, Caillois developed a taxonomy of existing games, which he delineated on two axes: 1) *ludus*, games that are subordinated to the disciplining framework of rules, and 2) *paidia*, games that consist of spontaneous and even tumultuous activity. On the other axis Caillois places the categories of 1) *Agôn*, games of competition 2) *Alea*, games of chance 3) *Mimicry*, games of simulation and play behavior, such as the playing of a role in theater, in children's games, or by means of the process of identification with another within the act of spectatorship, as in, for example, the cult-like worship of film stars or athletes and 4) *Ilinx*, or games that pursue vertigo, disorder and physical disorientation, as is offered by amusement park rides like the rollercoaster.

Caillois claims a wider berth for games within human society and the animal kingdom than does Huizinga. He does not ascribe rules or an ordering function to all games, as he understands that *paidia*- and *ilinx*-type games may not operate on rules or may even strive toward disorder. In fact, he concludes that games either have to do with rules or they have to do with "make-believe," with "acting as if." Caillois tracks the development of civilization, or democracy, in the shift from *paidia* to *ludus*, across numerous world cultures, and in the "struggle against the prestige associated with simulation and vertigo" in democratic societies (100). He understands the use of masks in ancient society along these lines; he describes how the mask is used as a symbol of superiority, furthering the inequity of power by instilling terror in political inferiors in the "reign of mimicry and *ilinx*" (105-07). When, for example, the Greeks began to understand the universe as ordered through the use of mathematics, *agôn* and *alea* also began to structure social life. Regulated competitions thus take on significance, relating to the founding of numerous games—Olympic, Pythian, the Aztec game of *pelota*, and Chinese archery contests. Further, competitive examinations come to determine a bureaucratic elite. According to Caillois, social power comes to be achieved rather than ascribed; it becomes dominated by the shift from inheritance to merit or by competition and chance. Soon regulated competition becomes dominant, even between social classes. The game takes on the function of clearing a social field by establishing conditions of pure equality.

Huizinga seems to have been either unaware—or possibly dismissive—of the activities of the Dada and surrealist avant-gardes within the realm

of visual art. In contrast, Caillois's expanded theory of games in modern society can also be attributed to his involvement with the surrealists and to their rethinking of hardened polarities such as seriousness/nonseriousness, or work/leisure. However Caillois finally broke with the surrealists exactly because of the radicality of surrealist thought, particularly as Georges Bataille developed it. Earlier Caillois participated in four "*Recherches Expérimentales*" in February and March of 1933, sessions that also included Salvador Dalí, Gala, Giacometti, Breton, Paul Éluard, Nusch, Tristan Tzara and Benjamin Péret (Garrigues 114-35).⁵ Caillois's *Man, Play and Games* is a pointed response to Huizinga and to Bataille in that it clearly distinguishes the ludic from the sacred realm, which Huizinga had not. In drawing this major distinction Caillois initiates what has been identified as his secular postwar "new humanism," where the ludic realm figures centrally.⁶

Caillois was involved in a number of Bataille's "secret societies" or quasi-experimental alternatives to democracy, including the Contre-Attaque Group, the College of Sociology, but finally not Acéphale, where Caillois seems to have been aware of the rituals Bataille envisioned for the group and therefore finally refused to participate (Frank 28-31). Infamously, human sacrifice was central to the collective and "masterless" bond that Acéphale was to achieve, according to Bataille. However, as no member would volunteer to act as executioner, the plan failed.⁷ During their period of close intellectual contact, both Caillois (in *Man and the Sacred*, 1939) and Bataille shared a major concern with the realm of the sacred. Inspired by pagan or archaic ritual, the sacred was key to realizing Bataille's utopian collective bond of "la vraie vie," or authentic life. In contrast Caillois regarded the realm of play and of playful transgression—and not sacred transgression—as the second realm central to civilization. Caillois rejected Bataille's radical appropriation of ideological devices used by the fascists. He recognized Bataille's idealized ritual as a kind of parallel to the fascist myth of a sacred, collective military death. This was one contributing factor to his break with Bataille's surrealism.

Many of his postwar writings, including *Man, Play and Games*, widened this fundamental rift with surrealism in turning critically to Breton's practice. In other essays Caillois commented, sometimes negatively, on both Breton's and Duchamp's manipulation of the game within the realm of art.⁸ In his later years Caillois mounted a constant vigil against what he called "totalitarian" art and thought. By this he meant theory which tended to totalizing claims; Caillois attacked psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, and Breton's games under this conceptual umbrella. By the 1950s, he therefore recognized the significance of Breton's reengagement with surrealist automatism but did not approve of it. Caillois rather insisted that postwar thought and culture follow his own presumably open and anti-totalizing schema for a "diagonal science," itself firmly anchored in his own

reworking of the surrealist legacy.⁹ In strong contrast to high-modernist critics, Caillouis thereby acknowledged the cultural significance, and even the dangers, of both the ludic impulse and of Breton's postwar reengagement with surrealist automatism.

By the 1950s, Breton recognized that the surrealists had, by means of the games they devised, reconfigured the process of art-making *in toto* and even the workings of knowledge and language. Huizinga apparently prompted André Breton, in the interviews that make up his memoirs (*Entretiens*, 1952; translated as *Conversations*, 1993) and in a number of essays in *Médium* (beginning in 1953), to reclassify almost the entirety of surrealist practice as the playing of games. Breton claimed that while the group (that is, *he*) first understood games merely as a kind of social glue and collective entertainment, and in embarrassment concealed their games as “experimental” activities, he only later realized the epistemological “discoveries” it could generate. In his catalogued list of surrealist games, Breton did not separate the automatist games of *dessin* or of the visual arts such as the collective “Exquisite Corpse,” from those involving language: the exquisite corpse is described as “written or drawn”; the “recipes” of the visual arts, listed as “collage, frottage, fumage, coulage, spontaneous decalomania, candle-drawings, etc.,” allowed, so Breton remarks, “greater satisfaction of the pleasure principle” in that such games could put the possibility of art-making in anyone's hands (qtd. in Gooding 137-38).

In contrast, Philippe Audouin's analysis of surrealist games establishes another category, *games of objects*, under which he groups the “Experimental Research,” the “Drawn Exquisite Corpse,” the “Marseilles Game,” and the “Analogy Cards” games. Audouin would later distinguish as surrealist language games the game of “Definitions,” the “Game of Conditionals—if... when...,” and the “Exquisite Corpse,” from what he called “games of options or opinions” such as “Scholarly notation,” and “Would you open the door, or the Visitor.”¹⁰ Breton's 1954 comments on Huizinga and surrealist games appeared with his description of the “One into another” game he developed with Benjamin Péret,¹¹ and a year earlier Breton had published “Would you open the door” (*Ouvrez-vous?*), a new collective game.¹²

The surrealist games which Audouin determined to be concerned with the visual often had to do with the construction or circulation of cards, either playing cards of the “Marseille Game” or the fictional and collectively fashioned “identification papers” of the “Game of Analogy Cards” (“*Cartes d'Analogie*” [Figure 1]). One of these “portrays” Sigmund Freud according to customary categories of a passport of the 1940s; his photograph depicts a “star-nosed mole,” his domicile is “The Scream by Edvard Munch,” his place of birth is “Giza, at the foot of the Sphinx.” Both sets of cards engaged with the immediate wartime experience of the surrealist circle: the state of physical transience of travel and their forced relocation and exile to New

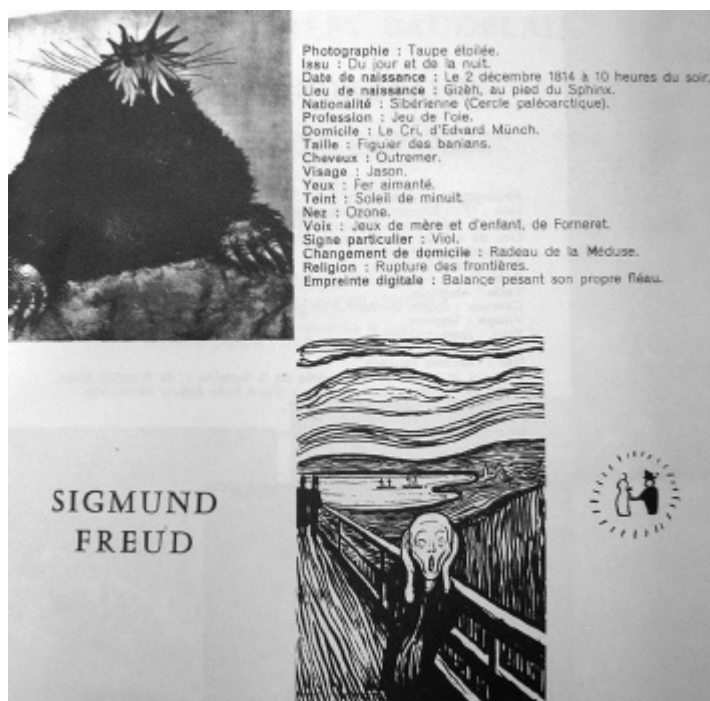


Fig. 1. *Cartes d'Analogie*, 1959.

York and other locations, and the continued demand to present identification papers while traveling in occupied France. Perhaps the cards also have to do with a sense of being pitched into the realm of pure *alea*.

The “Exquisite Corpse” [Figure 2], a procedure devised so that a collective could by means of automatism assemble or “compose” a singular work and avoid the conscious control of any individual author, opened, as Breton saw it, a “strange possibility of thought, which is that of its pooling” (Breton, “Second manifesto”). However in including as its pool of players only practicing visual artists, the game (or Breton) did presuppose the seriousness of artistic training as its basis. Surrealist games can then be best understood as tools toward automatism, as strategies that attempt to pool a process of collective thought unmediated by the individual ego or to short-circuit the conscious workings of the individual mind as it works its way through and applies the rules of the game to the actions at hand. Sometimes, as in Robert Desnos’s plunges into hypnotic states, games of *ilinx* (physical and mental disorientation) are instead pursued. In surrealism the ends of *agôn*, that is, the regulated and antagonistic relation between powers and the drive to win, are repositioned such that the id, either individual or collective, might, with the proper surrealist discipline and

perseverance, be summoned as a reluctant opponent and be forced to reveal itself in language and in image.

The *Jeu de Marseille* (“Marseille Game” [Figure 3a and 3b]) is most interesting in that it is the collective project/game undertaken immediately before many of the contributing Surrealists, Breton, Victor Brauner, Oscar Dominguez, Max Ernst, Jacques Herold, Wifredo Lam, Jacqueline Lamba, and André Masson, began their exile from fascist-controlled France. Incorporating a woodcut by Alfred Jarry and drawings by these artists, this playing card deck included new court cards—genius (in lieu of king), siren (queen) and magus (jack)—and new suits: flame (love), star (dream), wheel (revolution), and lock (knowledge) (Gooding 124-25, 160; Audouin 485). For their publication in the March, 1943 issue of *V.V.V.* Breton had Robert Delanglade redraw all the designs in order to “preserve autonomy” of the artists involved and possibly to give them a more uniform appearance. The “Marseille Game” featured personages including Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Sade, and Hegel as Genius; Lewis Carroll’s Alice and Hélène Smith (a nineteenth-century clairvoyant) as Siren; and Novalis, Freud, Pancho Villa, and Paracelsus as Magus. The source for these cards in the “magical arts” of alchemy and tarot is clear; the suits flame, star, wheel, and lock, as well as the figures of genius, siren, and magus, point to the traditional tarot deck. It is not coincidental that the famed “Tarot de Marseille” of the late fifteenth century, regarded as the source for many later Tarot decks, is the origin for this surrealist game.¹³ As the tarot is usually used for fortune-telling purposes—it is said to have been brought to Western Europe by Romas—the surrealists’ turn to divination in a time of upheaval underscores perhaps their tenuous situation but also their continuing desire to navigate their future, so to speak, through the influence of other revolutionary minds. On the other hand, this game recognizes card-playing as a means of passing the time, and as characteristic of waiting; the Marseilles Game also wills that skill and ability can begin to structure an uncertain, even treacherous situation. Card-playing is a game that combines both *alea* and *agôn*; in certain card games *agôn*, in terms of the experience and strategy of the card player, can determine the winning hand (Caillois, *Man* 18). The surrealist card game, undertaken in transit and a time of great uncertainty, works to foreground human agency in the situation where fate, chance, or the specter of totalitarianism seem to have overtaken it.

Certainly the slippery interchange between chance on the one hand and ability on the other was well known to Marcel Duchamp. Perhaps more so than any other artist of the twentieth century, Duchamp concerned himself with this divide and with the structure and process of *agôn*, as it delimits human action and as it is personified in the game of chess. He understood that the ludic impulse and the agonistic structure of the universe take place on the plane of eros, and within the tensions, resolutions, and displacements of sexual play. In his art Duchamp systematically introduced the element



Fig. 2. *Cadavre exquis*, 1927.

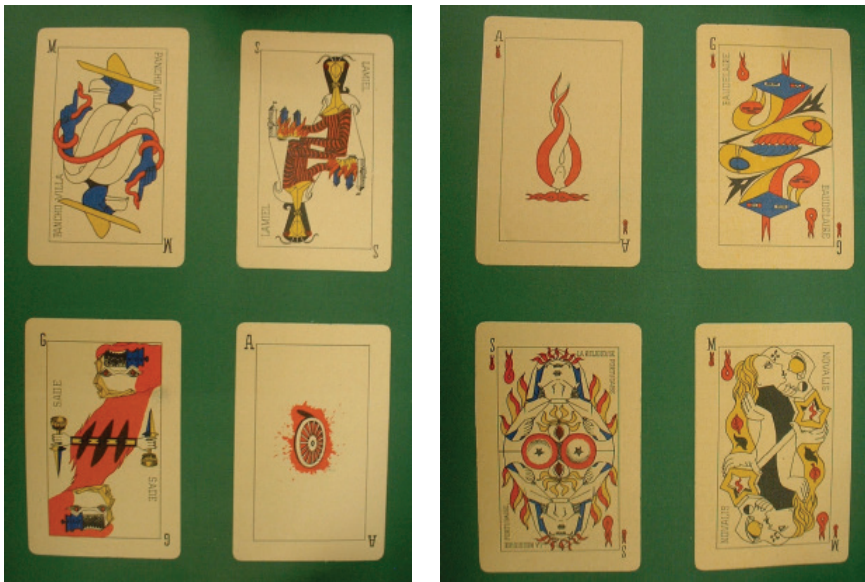


Fig. 3a and 3b. *Jeu de Marseille*, 1940-41.

of gender and tied the confrontations and negotiations of eros to the field of *agôn*. Beyond this Freudian confrontation with the game, Duchamp at first positioned chess-playing as a realm outside of art practice but one that by reason of his activities within it *became* part of the sphere of avant-garde art; his familiarity with the chess community and the remaining chess scores which document his chess-performances radically expanded the field of visual art. Surrealist artists Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst and Man Ray also made reference to chess in their art, but the game did not buttress the entirety of their artistic production the way it did Duchamp's. Duchamp's engagement with *agôn* by means of chess was continuous and spanned his involvement with the divergent artistic practices of Cubism and New York Dada.¹⁴

Late in his life Duchamp utilized chess as a stage for public art performances, part of his elaborate "come back" to the American art scene in the 1960s. Faithfully documented in photographs, he played chess against a number of younger opponents on stage and in art museums. Most spectacularly he played against a nude female opponent in the Pasadena Museum. He thereby explicitly reconnected his art to the high-art tradition of the female nude within Western painting. In a retreat from the collaborative and readymade aspect of chess he had earlier emphasized, Duchamp's late art staged chess as a visual and aesthetic experience that could fit comfortably, as an autonomous practice, within the history of Western art.

Chess, one of the oldest and most rigidly competitive games of *agôn*, is, as Caillois understood it, an ultimate contest of *agôn*, in requiring players to compete as rigorously and intensely as they can with the goal of winning (*Man* 15). Winning is required of a player in order to achieve ranked status in chess, which Duchamp pursued aggressively in France during the 1920s. "Wouldn't you rather win?" Duchamp is said to have dryly queried Walter Hopps in 1963 while they contemplated the roulette tables at the Golden Nugget Casino in Las Vegas. As chance would have it (at least according to Hopps), Duchamp's instructions at the tables resulted in a considerable win.¹⁵ Can we then also understand Duchamp as one of the most competitive artists—that is, one who was most concerned with winning—in the twentieth century? This reading goes against a prevalent postmodernist understanding of Duchamp's involvement with the game, as the possibility of endless "beautiful" play without result or concern for an outcome.¹⁶ In the 1950s Duchamp himself insisted that he was more interested in investigating how the language of chess could visually realize the beautiful than in outplaying an opponent; yet this was surely not Duchamp's view as he played competitively in the 1920s.¹⁷ One can make the claim that the recasting of all human interaction, including heterosexual sexuality, into the guise of *agôn*, thereby creating situations that could be

mastered and possibly won—a process of conversion which one can read across his entire *oeuvre*, even in his final epic work, the installation *Etant donnés*—seems to have interested Duchamp most.

One might also consider the chess game as a parallel and analogue to Duchamp's series of readymades, which he is said to have begun producing in 1913. He first exhibited the readymades in New York in 1916, and the famed *Fountain* in 1917. Duchamp realized he could take up the popular culture phenomenon of chess like a found object and use it as a subject and a structure for his art. Chess was perhaps Duchamp's most compelling assisted readymade, one he could reconfigure almost endlessly but always in accordance to its established boundaries and rules. The chess-game might be considered Duchamp's master readymade, and one which unifies almost his entire *oeuvre*.

Duchamp's love of chess, the game most removed from the workings of chance, is apparent in his art. One can trace an origin of Duchamp's concern with chess and *agôn* in the iconography he developed early in his *oeuvre*, while he worked within the medium of painting. His Cézanne-esque paintings of his brothers at the chessboard of 1910 and 1911, and the paintings of the following year that removed these figures and focused exclusively on the movement of the chess piece in play, *Le Roi et la Reine Traversés par des Nus Vites* and *Le Roi et la Reine Entourés de Nus Vites* are all representations that focus on chess. Duchamp famously declared in 1923, a point in time which coincided with the "completion" of his earliest epic work, the *Large Glass*, that he had stopped being an artist and would in the future only concern himself with chess.¹⁸

Indeed, in the late teens and 1920s he played competitively in Argentina and then as a ranked player in France, and produced chess pieces and other chess paraphernalia.¹⁹ For a time thereafter Duchamp worked directly on the problem of reconfiguring or transforming *alea* (roulette) into pure *agôn* (chess). While the intellectual challenge of the task attracted Duchamp to the project—it is quite impossible, which he later recognized—he was clearly also motivated to "break the bank," that is, to garner a huge profit by means of gambling. One might even conclude that had his model succeeded, he would have reconfigured the functioning of the capitalist economy.²⁰ He coauthored a treatise, "Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled" on an obscure chess end-game problem in 1932, and produced a "pocket chess" assemblage in 1944 for Julien Levy. Impressed by Duchamp's foray into chess theory, Caillois first commented on Duchamp's essay in 1937 and returned to it in 1970 in his aptly titled collection of essays, *Cases d'un Echiquier* (The Squares of the Chessboard). Caillois was finally most intrigued by one implication raised by Duchamp, that a voluntary failure might bring victory or vice versa. Effectively Duchamp was working to destabilize the notion of zero-sum play, the agonistic cornerstone of chess,

in this theoretical work.²¹

It was in and around his Pasadena retrospective exhibition of 1963 that Duchamp began to present himself as a chess player *within* the realm of art, a reversal of his earlier insistence that his activities in these two domains were wholly separate. One asks why Duchamp seized upon this radical reversal shortly before his death.²² In addition to the reissue of many of his readymades and the above-mentioned assemblage as multiples, and the permission to produce duplicates or “replicas” of many major works for the 1963 exhibition,²³ Duchamp posed while playing chess during a number of highly-publicized appearances both during and after the 1963 exhibition. Many of these appearances are captured in Julian Wasser’s series of photographs of Duchamp, as well as in the film *Jeu d’echecs avec Marcel Duchamp* by Jean-Marie Drot, all of which were completed during and shortly after the Pasadena exhibition.

The most widely disseminated image by Julian Wasser of the chess match between Duchamp and the nude Eve Babitz, a female friend of Hopps’s, was shot on October 18, 1963 in the Pasadena gallery which featured the *Large Glass* and related works in the Duchamp exhibition [Figure 4].²⁴ Wasser and Duchamp staged this game before the *Large Glass* in order to emphasize its composition or even in a sense to perform it. For the exhibition Hopps had placed the early chess-related drawings and paintings in the second gallery. Dickran Tashjian claims that the Babitz/Duchamp match was a chance event whose genesis cannot be traced to any one person, but it was an idea that Duchamp agreed to.

It seems a highly deliberate decision to have staged for the camera and before the *Large Glass* a chess game between Duchamp and a female nude named “Eve,” the biblical Ur-bride. Tashjian suggests that several aspects of this event are purely “serendipitous.” Duchamp had already related the biblical female nude to the movement of chess pieces across the board. His earlier painting “Para dise” (1910-11) featured a nude model posing as Eve, a painting which further became the verso of “King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes.” The Wasser photograph also recalls Duchamp’s theatrical appearance as the nude Adam to Brogna Perlmutter’s Eve in Picabia’s “CinéSketch” of 1924, recorded in a famous photographic image. The Wasser photograph is also reminiscent of a 1936 photograph of Duchamp at the chessboard in front of “Nude Descending a Staircase,” and the image interacts with the complex iconography of the “*Large Glass*” itself, its segregation into female and male domains and its direct references to chess in, for example, the “Nine Malic Moulds” of the lower panel.²⁵ While Duchamp may not have arranged the event himself (as Babitz’s account suggests), it is likely that given the resonances of the image there, he would have suggested the game should be staged before the *Large Glass*.

However, Babitz’s image and her own recollection of the event have



Fig. 4. Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz, 1963.

effectively disappeared from art history. Her essay “Me and Marcel” remained unpublished. In Wasser’s photograph, Babitz’s hair has fallen over her face in her absorption in the game, erasing her as an individual adversary or player from the scene. In contrast the camera captures Duchamp’s absorbed gaze and his gesture, as though he is explaining or gesticulating a recent move. Wasser’s arresting image of an urbane and elegant Duchamp engaged in chess with a voluptuous younger gaming partner reconnects to Duchamp’s investigation of the eros of *agôn* (or the *agôn* of eros) in the *Large Glass* by displacing the onanism of the grinders of the *Glass* onto the movements of the pieces in the game between himself and Eve. However, in the process of rendering this game as a photographic image she disappears as a subject and also as an opponent within the game of chess. The photograph transforms her into a representation of a female nude, a familiar image with a long history in Western painting. Babitz’s image is therefore taken out of the realm of *agôn*, where adversaries confront each other under ideal conditions. She is instead put into the recognizable context of high art and its representations of the female body, which were traditionally offered as an object of the (male) viewers’ gaze. Duchamp also used the photograph of his game with Babitz to relate himself and his art to recognizable genres of modern painting. This traditional subject matter may have enlightened more conservative museum administrators and trustees and also the American public as they deliberated his art, in grounding it in a traditional high-art genre.

Duchamp had presented his new postwar conception of chess as a primarily visual event already in the 1950s. In his address to the New York State Chess Association in 1952, Duchamp outlined what he called the “three main aspects of chess”: first, as *agôn* or as an intellectual competition; second, as a realm for the development of “scientific methods” for chess, a game “already too complex for the limitation of the human mind” (Hulten, “Ephemerides,” entry for August 30, 1952). He declared that the third aspect, the “artistic side of chess,” was most important to himself. Duchamp notes that chess pieces might be thought to produce an actual visual design within a game, although “with no visual aesthetic value.” Yet he then suggests that chess offers two distinctly aesthetic pleasures. The pieces and their function elicit human thought as language might. As they are moved by the winner, the pattern that emerges “tell(s) an ideographic story through a series of moves and become(s) a real visual pleasure” (Hulten, “Ephemerides,” entry for August 30, 1952). In this short address Duchamp emphasized the *visual* patterns of the winning player’s moves as they are registered across the horizontal playing surface. He described these winning moves as an aesthetic pleasure that is at least in part experienced visually. One might also question why the movements of an opponent who ultimately may not win the game do not enter into Duchamp’s considerations nor count as “sensuous pleasures” in their own right, independent of win or loss.

Keeping these comments in mind we might return to the Babitz/Duchamp match and consider the complex horizontally-based pattern of the match produced as an essential visual element within the installation of primarily vertically-oriented visual patterns, that is, Duchamp’s chess-related drawings and paintings in the same gallery space. Schwarz recounts that Duchamp won the game against Babitz (Schwarz 88).²⁶ Given his association of the aesthetic qualities of chess with a winning player’s moves, did Duchamp then guarantee that he would remain the singular author of all the images, objects and events in the Pasadena gallery in 1963?

Wasser’s photograph of the Babitz/Duchamp match visually conforms to a long lineage of female nudes retinally transformed into objects by male artists.²⁷ In chess a condition of equality is assumed between players regardless of gender; equality must be taken as a point of departure in the game. The Wasser photograph negates this essential aspect of *agôn*, which had always concerned Duchamp. It simultaneously renders the scene recognizable as high art. Duchamp had of course previously used photography to explore cultural assumptions regarding the modern-artist persona, and to deploy his female alter-ego, Rose Sélavy.²⁸ Given his earlier subversive use of photography, the photograph of the Babitz/Duchamp match is all the more disturbing for its gender-conventionality and, if we can believe it, for Dickran Tashjian’s claim that the Wasser photograph was Duchamp’s favorite (Tashjian 71). As a result of the Wasser photograph

the chess match is transformed into a retinal event of the type Duchamp had earlier disparaged. In it Duchamp relegates chess to the autonomous realm of art.

Duchamp was also photographed playing with Hopps in the museum's galleries with people crowded around them. Five years later, in an auditorium at Ryerson Polytechnic in Toronto with his fully-clothed wife Teeny at his side, Duchamp and Teeny were photographed at play in a series of two chess games against John Cage (he lost one, but Teeny won the second). Cage titled the series *Reunion*, a musical composition, and connected the chessboard to light and sound sensors that issued sounds corresponding to the moves of each player (Schwarz 88). In returning to the foundation of his art in chess late in his career, Duchamp configured himself publicly as a challenger to, or even a collaborator with, avant-garde artists of the 1960s such as Cage. Duchamp's phrase "Tous les joueurs d'échecs sont des artistes," further reminds of the realm of precision and beauty that *agôn* should and can occupy and of the importance of games as a sphere proper to *art*, where the agonistic impulse can be tapped as a creative force.²⁹

While modernist art criticism did not recognize the cultural centrality of games during the rise of fascism in Western Europe, artists and game theorists did. Huizinga and Caillois elevated play and the game as markers of civilization; Duchamp and the surrealists claimed the game as a structure for modern art. At least for a time, these artists deployed the game as a means to dramatically expand the realm proper to art. The game-as-art would also, in Breton's conception, lessen the control of a singular creating author/ego behind the artwork. At times Duchamp, like the surrealists, utilized the game to bend the conditions of fate, uncertainty and even chance to human reason, and to will human agency into existence amid chaos or the unknown.³⁰ And while Bataille, Breton, and Caillois all had differing views of how it should be pursued, the surrealists explored the game within art, even as a kind of sacred ritual, in order to contest the absolutism of fascist ideology.

Duchamp at first explored chess as a readymade and attempted to apply its agonistic aspects not only to art but to the real, or, to all human interaction, in order to create situations that might be mastered or "won" through sheer analytic ability. However, late in his life and production, Duchamp turned against the surrealist notion of collective authorship via the game in privileging the moves or visual patterns produced by the zero-sum victor in chess. He absorbed chess into the realm of art in his final years, but in doing so Duchamp notably kept his distance from another aspect of the "real," that is, from the realm of politics. Unlike the direct attacks launched against fascism by surrealist circles, Duchamp formulated his art (and what became his art-chess) as autonomous from other spheres of social life. Duchamp's notion of autonomous art also squared well with American art criticism's development of a similar idea of art's autonomy during the

Cold War. His earlier interest in challenging the zero-sum situation (as he had explored it in his 1932 treatise) seems therefore to have evaporated as Duchamp struggled to assure his own legacy within the history of modern art. This necessitated a return to the notion of a singular, producing author of art. Duchamp's late emphasis on the singular victor/author went hand-in-hand with his own strategic recasting of chess as a visual experience through which he could claim his rightful place, victor-like, within the canon of modern art. In the end, one can confidently say that though they theorized the game structure in dramatically different ways and for vastly different ends, the extended and consistent engagement of Huizinga, Caillois, Duchamp, and Breton with the game is an important if belittled chapter in the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

List of Figures

Fig. 1: *Cartes d'Analogie* (1959), from *Le surréalisme meme* no. 5 (Spring 1959) 21.

Fig. 2: *Cadavre exquis* (1927). Joan Mirò, Man Ray, Yves tanguy, Max Morise. Private collection, Paris. Photo credit: Snark/Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 3a and 3b: *Jeu de Marseille* (1940–41), from *V.V.V.* no. 2–3 (March, 1943). Court cards by Brauner, Breton, Dominguez, Ernst, Herold, Lam, Lamba and Masson. Redrawn for publication by Robert Delanglade, to give a more uniform appearance. Courtesy of Special Collections, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, University Libraries, Arizona State University, Tempe.

Fig. 4: *Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz*, Julian Wasser, 1963.

Notes

This paper was first delivered at the 2003 “The Space Between” conference. I am grateful for input I received there, and also for the thorough reading and informed suggestions made by one of the anonymous reviewers. The latter was central to my revision of this essay.

¹ Jennifer Milam, “Rococo Games and the Origins of Visual Modernism,” manuscript of lecture delivered at the Philadelphia CAA conference (February 2002). Milam’s book, *Fragonard’s Playful Paintings: Visual Games in Rococo Art*, is forthcoming.

² See Greenberg 21–34.

³ Here again the early cultural theories of games trace the footsteps of Walter Benjamin, who addressed Schmitt far more positively in his

- essay “Critique of Violence” (1921), reprinted in *Reflections*.
4. Although Huizinga does not discuss it, the National Socialists were very keen on agonistic play, games, and sport, as their fanatical orchestration of the 1936 Olympic Games would indicate. Furthermore during the Nazi period several major and minor chess players aligned themselves with the party, most famously the Russian world champion Alexander A. Alekhine. Alekhine, a collaborator in France, began playing in Nazi Chess tournaments after the occupation and published several inflammatory essays about Jewish chess players. Efim Bogoljubow, a Russian who became a naturalized German, was a trainer for the NS Greater Germany Chess Federation and challenged Alekhine for the world championship. Other less accomplished Nazi chess players included Willi Schlage and Emil Joseph Diemer (also a “chess reporter of the Great German Reich”). Agonistic struggle within chess or sport clearly served as a useful militaristic metaphor for the National Socialists.
 5. The results of the “*Recherches Expérimentales*” were also published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* 6 (May 15, 1933). By the fifth “Recherche” session of 1933 Caillois’s name disappears from the roster of surrealist game players as they are catalogued by Garrigues. Of the sessions that Caillois participated in, the topics were: sessions A and B, “*Sur la connaissance irrationnelle de l’objet*”; for session C, “*Sur les possibilités irrationnelles de penetration et d’orientation dans un tableau*”; and for session D, “*Sur les possibilités irrationnelles de vie à une date quelconque.*” See Garrigues.
 6. In keeping with his general interest in play and creativity in these years Caillois published “*De la Féerie à la science fiction,*” an essay on fairy tales and fantastic literature, in the same year as *Man, Play and Games* (Paris, 1958). On Caillois’s postwar works and his critical turn against not only Bataille but also Claude Lévi-Strauss see Frank’s “Introduction.”
 7. Frank relates that sources disagree on the level of Caillois’s involvement in *Acéphale*.
 8. Caillois comments on Duchamp in “*L’imagination rigoureuse*” especially 38-46, and on Breton’s postwar games in “Actualité des Kenningar” of 1955.
 9. On Caillois’s notion of “diagonal science” see Frank 49-50.
 10. This list of games follows the titles attributed by Audouin and Breton. The dates given correspond to the first publication of the results of the game in question, or, the first published description of the game, as listed in Gooding 143-55. The games were mostly published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Médium*, through some also appeared in *Documents* and *Littérature*. In his essay Breton does not mention the

jeu de la vérité, the results of which were only first published in 1990 (French) and 1992 (English), perhaps due to their explicit nature. See Pierre.

11. Breton, “*L’un dans l’Autre*” and “*Incidences de l’Un dans l’Autre*.” It is this game, *l’un dans l’autre*—where any one object can be derived from any other—that invoked Caillois’s condemnation of Breton’s totalizing artistic framework. See his essay “The Image.”
12. This latter game, whose format is akin to that of a survey, proceeds as follows; if one were told that a particular individual had returned from the dead, would you receive her or him in your home? Breton published the statistical results, and his own elaborated responses, in order of approval. Breton’s comments are noted in parentheses: Baudelaire, yes 100%; Gustave Moreau, yes, 100% (“*Oui grand serrurier*”); Charles Fourier yes 94%; Freud yes, 94%; Gauguin yes, 88% (“*Oui avec grands honneurs*”); Lenin yes 88%; Goya yes 87%; Juliette Droucet yes 87%; Hegel yes 82%; Huysmans yes 82%; van Gogh yes 76% (“*Oui par égards mais avec mais, le souci d’abrégé*”); Seurat yes 71% (“*Oui calmement en harmonie*”); Marx yes 65%; Nietzsche yes 60%; Mallarmé yes 59%; Balzac yes 56%; Goethe yes 50%, no 50%; Poe no 56%; Chateaubriand no 59%; Verlaine no 87%; and finally Cézanne no 88% (“*Non rien à se dire*”). See Gooding 154, Audouin 481-2, and Breton, “*Ouvrez-vous?*”
13. On the importance of alchemy and the tarot to the surrealists see Covents 104-108. Breton spoke specifically about the resonances between alchemy and surrealism’s investigations of language. Salvador Dali also produced a tarot game, the “Tarot Universal Dali,” in 1984.
14. Duchamp’s agonistic art challenges the view that a coherent shift can be traced between a purely ludic-focused Dada to the agonistic investigations of the surrealists.
15. As cited by Tashjian Note 30, 82. In this essay Tashjian describes the events surrounding the 1963 Pasadena Duchamp retrospective staged by Hopps. Hopps’s heroicizing Las Vegas story can be found in “Duchamp in Vegas,” in Arman 43-44. His statement is dated 1983, twenty years after the event took place.
16. See for example Lyotard, Derrida, and Kùchler.
17. Arturo Schwarz cites several sources including Truman Capote who recalls Duchamp discussing chess as an “art activity,” and, via Calvin Tomkins, Edward Lasker, who reminisced about Duchamp’s chess-playing style: “He would always take risks in order to play a beautiful game, rather than be cautious and brutal to win.” See Schwarz. Duchamp also commented that chess interested him most as a realm which could realize the beautiful at the New York State Chess Association banquet of 1952. This address is reprinted in the “Ephemerides” entry for August 30, 1952, in Hulton. Finally the entire installation behind

the wooden door of the *Etant donnés* (1946-1966) is built upon a black-and-white-tiled floor, which recalls the horizontal playing field of the chessboard. *Agôn* therefore seems to have remained central to Duchamp's *oeuvre*.

18. For a basic introduction to the "Large Glass," see Hamilton; see also Ades Chapters 4 and 5, 66-121.
19. For a detailed summary of Duchamp's chess activity see Schwarz 57-75.
20. Bradley Bailey traces Duchamp's engagement with French mathematics in his chess- and roulette-related artworks and activities in his paper, "The Dukes of *Hasard*: Marcel Duchamp and the French Probabilists," presented at the Philadelphia CAA conference (February 2002).
21. Caillois wrote on Duchamp's treatise in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (September 1937), as cited in his later essay, "L'imagination rigoureuse."
22. It should be noted that as early as 1936 Duchamp posed for publicity photographs playing chess; the *Los Angeles Times* of August 16, 1936 published a photo of Duchamp at the Arensberg's, absorbed at the chessboard, with his *Nude Descending a Staircase* forming a backdrop. Ironically, the caption read "Artist Views Masterpiece."
23. For example, the *Large Glass*, *Three Standard Stoppages* (1914) and the *Nine Malic Moulds* (1914-15) were all replicas of originals produced or acquired for the Pasadena exhibition. A thoroughgoing critique of the notion of originality, and of the singular and original artwork, is certainly advanced by these works as well. The important subject of the Duchampian multiple is addressed in "Marcel Duchamp and the Multiple," in Arman 31-36; Tashjian 68-69; and by Jones in her chapter "Duchamp's Self-Reflexivity: Art and Object Making after 1959" 94-99.
24. Wasser in fact photographed the entire match between the two. The proof sheet has also been published in the *West Coast Duchamp* exhibition catalogue. See Tashjian 71-74.
25. On the relation of Duchamp's art to the history of chess see Bailey.
26. Schwarz offers no further details about the Babitz/Duchamp game.
27. Babitz, who became a Southern California journalist, did break her silence regarding the match with Duchamp in a 1991 essay. See Babitz. She maintains that Wasser set up the game and photo session without Hopps's knowledge, and that Duchamp made a special appearance at the Pasadena Museum to play the staged match with herself. This photograph and Duchamp's complicity in its staging is a blind spot in Jones's *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*. Jones labels the Babitz/Duchamp photo "notorious" and claims that Duchamp passively acquiesced to participation. She therefore refuses

to acknowledge Duchamp's role in the construction of this image; she is also uninterested in the centrality of chess to his art.

28. On Man Ray's photos of Duchamp/Séavy see Jones, "The ambivalence."
29. Arman's contribution to the Philadelphia Duchamp retrospective catalogue of 1973, in which he inserted notation of a fictional game between Duchamp and Rose Séavy into the actual chess score of one of the games of the 1972 world championship match between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer, cleverly underscores the Freudian dynamics of this final point. See *Marcel Duchamp* 182-84. Arman's fictional notation is also a shorthand *catalogue raisonné* of Duchamp's major works.
30. Games seem to have also served this purpose amid the most horrific circumstances of World War II. Holocaust survivors have told of how they continued to play board games and chess as a means to guard their sanity in the camps.

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