

Bethan Huws
Research Notes on Marcel Duchamp

Since the mid-nineties, Bethan Huws has increasingly occupied herself with Marcel Duchamp.

One of her first works directly related to Marcel Duchamp is a watercolour titled *Duchamp's Turn* (1996), drawn with a compass rather than by hand, which hypothetically traces the path of the urinal from its vertical position of the wall to its horizontal position on the plinth, thus starting to reflect on Duchamp's logic. This gesture in itself recalls Duchamp's avoidance of personal taste and his rejection of the painter's hand. In his novel *Victor*, Henri-Pierre Roché recounts an episode where Duchamp is drawing: "Avec un compas et une règle, il traçait une courbe en escargot : il ne voulait pas que son goût intervînt, ni aucune habileté de sa main, il en avait horreur, il demandait à la géométrie et aux mathématiques de l'aider à s'approcher d'un absolu". ("With a compass and a ruler, he drew a curve in the shape of a snail: he did not want that taste intervene or any manual ability, he detested it, he asked geometry and mathematics to help him to get closer to an absolute.").

In 2009, Bethan Huws completed a film called *Fountain*, inspired by her time spent in Rome and could be said to be the first work to be based on these research notes that will be presented for the first time in the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 2014. The film investigates the poetic place of nine French idiomatic expressions in Marcel Duchamp's last important work *Etant Donnés* by featuring a selection of fountains in Rome.

The 8th idiom, which concerns the gas lamp that the female figure holds in her hand, refers to "Tomber sur un bec de gaz". And, as viewer, we hear: "Word-for-word: to fall on a 'Bec Auer' gas lamp / Which means: to encounter an important difficulty." And by an association of ideas, Bethan Huws closes the film in opening another problematic, close to Duchamp: "The number nine is a multiple of three, which etymologically has a second, figurative sense and simply means a small number or amount: 'trois fois rien', three times nothing."

In 2011, in the context of a personal exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, Bethan Huws presented seven wall texts corresponding to seven works by Duchamp – belonging to different periods – from 1914 with *Avoir l'apprenti dans le soleil* to 1968 with *Morecaux choisis d'après Courbet*. In this work, Bethan Huws combines famous works as *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919 with less known works such as *Untitled*, 1965 (Brown Paper Bag).

Still marked by the first interest in French idiomatic expressions, these short texts draw in a very minimalistic way (through notes) the multiple layered aspects that Bethan Huws has observed in Duchamp's work.

For example, for *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, we can read:

"L.H.O.O.Q. (Five letters five points) / When each letter is pronounced separately in French, it results in: / The French idiom / 'Elle a chaud au cul' (She has a hot ass) Which has two values not one: / 1. The one that's invariably quoted: to have a hot ass in an erotic sense. / 2. To be closely pursued or chased, for example by the police. / In 1911 Guillaume Apollinaire spent a week in prison, accused of stealing the 'Mona Lisa', an event that greatly marked him. He wrote several poems on the subjects. / In 1919 Duchamp has just arrived back in Paris from Buenos Aires, where several

months earlier he learnt of Apollinaire's death – two days before the armistice – and a month before that, of the death of his brother, the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon. / Apollinaire never saw *Apolinère Enameled*, 1916-1917, the work Duchamp made in homage to him.”

For the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Bethan Huws presents a selection of her research notes and reconstructs in the institution her own private work space, displaying the A4 notes on the walls and the tables where the viewers can circulate and manipulate the files by themselves, allowing them by this process to form their own connexions between the works but also between art history, literature, language, religion...

Formally, the A4 notes combine different materials such as drawings, writings, collages, postcards, photocopies from dictionaries, reproductions of Duchamp's works... They are both unique and belong to various times and stages of the research. – founded and nourished by Bethan Huws's reading of Duchamp's various writings (the notes, the interviews, the correspondences).

The research notes are divided in two categories that Bethan Huws respectively calls 'general files' (on the tables) and 'individual works' (on the walls), both based on a meticulous analytical methodology. The 'general files' consist of observable themes in Marcel Duchamp's works such as Colour (green, violet, yellow, orange, red, red-green, red-blue, black, white, black-white); Geometry (circle, half-circle, square, triangle, rectangle, hexagon, lozenge, spiral...); Number (3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 32, 50...); Painting; Chess; Christianity; Greek and Latin myths; Father; Mother; Hair; Teeth; Sex; Spirit; Tree; Guillaume Apollinaire... where the artist collects each occurrence of the subject within a specific context in order to understand its place within Duchamp's system. In the 'individual works', Bethan Huws examines in details and layers each work and tries to put them into the larger discourse of Duchamp and into the more general context of French culture.