

## Bethan Huws

Undaunted by the fact that Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) occupies a pre-eminent position as one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, Bethan Huws is conducting her own, very complex investigation into this much-admired and widely studied figure, who pioneered new ways of thinking about art and also counts among her conceptual forebears. Huws carries out her studies in exhibitions and related artworks, but above all in *Reading Duchamp* – what may tentatively be described as a particular kind of artistic research. Among the plethora of approaches to Duchamp’s thinking and practice, Huws’ investigation stands out even just in terms of its encyclopaedic scope. *Reading Duchamp* took shape between 2007 and 2014 and, in its book form, comprises more than 600 panels of montaged images and texts. These printed “Research Notes” are, however, only the chronologically arranged, concentrated essence of a much larger whole, which consists of several thousand A4 sheets. Huws also produced a supplement in 2017.

Huws is compiling her own ‘atlas’, as this compendium on Duchamp might be termed with a nod to Gerhard Richter; she maps a continent that has been explored by many others before her, and in doing so discovers an independent organism of relationships, correspondences and translations. To this end, she is prepared to embark on iconographic test flights and to take the occasional risk. Huws’ research is multilingual in the truest sense of the word. Numerous illustrations and photocopied entries from dictionaries and encyclopaedias are stuck onto her notes, opening windows onto multiple fields of art-historical knowledge and scholarship. A note on Duchamp may consist of a single, photocopied extract from a standard work (along with a precise reference to the relevant source), or take the form of a reflection written and annotated in pencil, occasionally interrupted by passages in pen. Some comments are emphasised by being written on Post-it Notes in various muted colours, creating the impression of comet-like flashes of inspiration. These sticky notes sometimes conceal parts of the montaged images, acting like shutters in an information transfer system, while curved lines or more conventional underscorings are used to signal connections. Huws’ unmistakeable handwriting serves as a key mediating agency in this *orbis pictus*. Its slightly leaning, almost cursive style seems to be rushing to keep up with the artist’s thoughts, but nevertheless consists mainly of quite formal-looking capital letters; sometimes, for the sake of speed, she intuitively combines upper- and lower-case letters. In order to notice this, however, we have to look – or ‘listen in’ – very closely, as when we are dealing with an interlocutor who speaks an idiosyncratic dialect. With her carefully structured texts, lists and tables, Huws often sets herself quite far apart from her idol; she generates her own, free associations, only to return time and time again to the ‘pacesetter’ Duchamp, whose iconic signals she enthusiastically retraces with a view to grasping their essence. This retracing or outlining is as much a kind of respectful internalisation as it is an act of liberation through appropriation. *Reading Duchamp* is also a meaningful ornament, not without its own ‘retinal’ charms.

The ‘reading’ referred to in the title involves studying, interpreting, but also presenting, as there is a performative aspect to this undertaking. The mode of interpretation is *sine ira et studio*, however, because

Huws' work is an (open-ended) exploration of "Duchamp's pluriverse", to borrow Hans Rudolf Reust's apt description – "universe" seems too small a word for this artists' artist and his global reception. And despite the ambitious scope of Huws' undertaking, it does not convey know-it-all certainty; while the overall tone of her approach is serious, it also has an occasional undertone of humour and irony that is rare in contemporary art. This derives not only from Huws' unconventional use of texts and images, but also from the pictures themselves, which include examples of Duchamp effectively staging his own image. In 1965, for example, he basks in the glory of his late-career success: *scherzo*. Huws contrasts this image of the jovial master looking out from behind a curtain, holding a cigar in his right hand like some self-important functionary, with Lucas Cranach's *The Fountain of Youth*; she also singles out one figure from his painting – a woman who, having emerged rejuvenated from the water, is stepping behind a curtain to return to the small, paradisiacal garden beyond. A photograph of Duchamp on vacation (a colour slide taken by Man Ray for the family album), which shows him reclining rather awkwardly in a hammock, wearing short trousers and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, is juxtaposed across two pages in a dynamic diagonal arrangement with another figure in a hammock. In this painting by Gustave Courbet, a sleeping beauty is dreaming herself into some imagined realm. Huws annotates the visual citations with her own associative research as well as precise information on Courbet's work (*Le hamac*, 1844, oil on canvas, 71 x 97 cm). Despite its occasionally scholarly appearance, *Reading Duchamp* is ultimately an artistic investigation, or indeed an 'artwork' with a claim to autonomy. The danger – or, more precisely: the temptation – lies in reading the "Research Notes" as eye music, as a musical score, if you will: a *Symphonie fantastique* with Marcel Duchamp as the *idée fixe*, where the narrative flow is structured by the corresponding expositions, executions and reprises. His *Large Glass* alone takes up almost 60 panels in the printed "Research Notes"; viewed from a musical perspective, this would be Bethan Huws' *Grosse Fuge*.

Huws has offered insight into her Duchamp encyclopaedia in three exhibitions to date. The first of these was shown at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 2014, and was accompanied by the publication of selected "Research Notes" as a sumptuous artist's book with an enlightening introduction by Hans Rudolf Reust. The second, expanded presentation was shown at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, in 2017, and the third exhibition was at Kunstsäle Berlin in 2019. In retrospect, these presentations seem like interconnected textual and visual spheres where the associative flights of fancy – the imaginative visions prompted by a once-in-a-century artist and his work – are assembled into folders and laid out on tables for visitors to leaf through, while the iconographic signals (see above) and their reflective potential are distributed across the walls like items in a placard newspaper. Because only now do we notice that Huws' montages in some ways resemble newspapers – melting pots of topical reference, missing only the headlines...

Reinhard Ermen