

Article

The Difference of Indifference: Marcel Duchamp and the Possibilities of Dialogical Personalism

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Abstract: Joseph Kosuth, one of Concept Art's influential practitioners, credited Marcel Duchamp in an important 1969 essay, "Art After Philosophy", with instigating the shift from the visual to the conceptual by means of indifference and dematerialization. Duchamp's approach to art was not limited, however, to the realm of artistic intention but also included the (re)contextualization provoked by his readymades. This (re)contextualization elucidated the embodied, dialogical encounters of the artist-artwork-audience, what I identify as an "aesthetics of difference". This designation sets forth a framework of meaning that draws upon a burgeoning subset of early-twentieth-century personalist philosophy called dialogical personalism in order to offer a more suitable plausibility structure than the usual explanations of Duchamp and his approach to art, which typically revolve around nihilism, absurdity, and a solipsistic understanding of freedom. In doing so, Duchamp's artistic approach retains not only a more viable ontology for continuing to question the nature of art, but also has important epistemological and ethical implications.

Keywords: Marcel Duchamp; Concept Art; Martin Buber; Mikhail Bakhtin; dialogical personalism; nihilism; difference; the other



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1. Introduction

"Those [perceptions] that do have that effect [of provoking thought] I set down as provocatives. . .". —Socrates

Dressed in sleek black suits, sauntering to the tune of a funeral dirge, the two elder Duchamp brothers, Jacques and Raymond, delivered a proposal by the hanging committee of the 1912 *Salon des Indépendants* Paris exhibition to Marcel at his studio in Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris. If Marcel's painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, were to be included in the Cubist room of the exhibition, he needed to make what seemed to be "minor" changes or withdraw. "The Cubists think it's a little off beam", his brothers remarked. "Couldn't you at least change the title" in that "it was too much of a literary title, in a bad sense—a caricatural way?" Marcel had nothing to say, only somewhat indifferently remarking "all right, all right" as he left to take a taxi to retrieve his painting while containing whatever embarrassment, humiliation, or disillusionment he might have felt (Seitz 1963, p. 112).¹

Marcel concluded, after reflecting back in 1966 upon this experience in a multifaceted conversation with Pierre Cabanne at the same studio, that this incident was an important turning point in his life, which eventually led him to abandon painting altogether. It was, as Marcel surmised, "people like Gleizes, who were, nevertheless, extremely intelligent, found that this 'Nude' wasn't in the line that they had predicted" because "they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it, foreseeing everything that might happen. I found that naively foolish" (Cabanne 1971, p. 17). Rather, Marcel sought to excise such attitudes as he had a deep "distrust of systematization", never one "to accept established formulas, to copy, or to be influenced, to the point of recalling something seen the night before in a gallery window". This sentiment, expressed in "the repetition of the same person four or five times" in *Portrait (Dulcinea)* and *Sonata*, both completed in 1911 prior

to *Nude*, “was primarily intended, at the time, to ‘detheorize’ Cubism in order to give it a freer interpretation”, so Marcel maintained (Cabanne 1971, pp. 26, 29).

The Cubist Salon seemed to sense Marcel’s critique through his *Nude*; but, where exactly did Marcel demur, especially given his involvement with the burgeoning Parisian Cubism at the time? Marcel seemed to think it was in identifying the artwork in the genre of a French nude that precipitated the ultimatum, not to mention the literary nature of the title itself: “To do a nude different from the classic reclining or standing nude, and to put it in motion. There was something funny there, but it wasn’t at all funny when I did it”. Those of the Cubist Salon at the time didn’t seem to find it all that funny either. Marcel was, nevertheless, fixated on the concept of movement: “I wanted to create a static image of movement: movement is an abstraction, a deduction articulated within the painting, without our knowing if a real person is or isn’t descending an equally real staircase. Fundamentally, movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting” (Cabanne 1971, p. 30).² And, therein lies one of the more important distinctions between Marcel and the Cubist Salon—the idea lodged in our memory is purely the object of the painting rather than the painting itself.³

This shift in the focal point of art from what Duchamp called the “retinal” to the conceptual has compelled many art historians to identify him as the progenitor of the art movement called Conceptualism, which materialized in the mid-1960s. One of Concept Art’s influential practitioners, Joseph Kosuth, credited Duchamp in an important 1969 essay, “Art After Philosophy”, with changing “the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change—one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’—was the beginning of ‘modern’ art and the beginning of ‘conceptual’ art” (Kosuth [1969] 1993, p. 18). The foregrounding of ideas, moreover, by means of indifference and dematerialization was not necessarily limited to the realm of artistic intention; rather, the (re)contextualization provoked by Duchamp’s readymades (think Socrates’ “provocatives”) began blurring the lines between art and life, illuminating new dimensions of meaning and elucidating the embodied, dialogical encounters of the artist-artwork-audience. Duchamp framed it this way: “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” (Duchamp 1975c, p. 140).

One way of thinking about these relationships expressed by Duchamp, with implications for Concept Art, might be what I call an “aesthetics of difference”.⁴ This designation sets forth a framework of meaning that draws upon a burgeoning subset of early-twentieth century personalist philosophy called dialogical personalism that developed in Germany through Hans Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner, and Martin Buber; in Russia, through Nikolai Berdyaev and Mikhail Bakhtin; in France, through Gabriel Marcel; and, in Scotland, through John Macmurray.⁵ While Duchamp was indeed on the periphery of these philosophical conversations, a mutuality exists between Duchamp’s understanding of the creative act and the disposition of dialogical personalism that suggests broader explanatory power than the usual explanations of Duchamp and his approach to art, which typically revolve around nihilism, absurdity, and a solipsistic understanding of freedom. As such, I maintain that dialogical personalism, understood broadly as the formation and understanding of human beings that emerge through encounter, through a dialogical relationship of activity and passivity, offers a more suitable plausibility structure to understand the artistic disposition of Duchamp, and by extension Concept Art, with epistemological and ethical insights. Before substantiating this thesis, let’s turn to explicating the contours of Duchamp’s artistic development as it foreshadows and reverberates into Concept Art and then to elucidating the difference of Duchamp’s indifference, a pivotal step for positing dialogical personalism as a more suitable plausibility structure for understanding Duchamp’s disposition toward art and his contributions to Concept Art.

2. Duchamp and the Foreshadowing of Concept Art

Duchamp begrudgingly retrieved his *Nude, No. 2* from the *Salon des Indépendants* Paris exhibition, but this would not be the only opportunity Duchamp would have to exhibit *Nude, No. 2* along with another similar painting, *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*, announcing his love affair with chess. A mere one month after being rejected by the Salon Cubists, Duchamp's *Nude, No. 2* featured in a prominent avant-garde gallery in Barcelona, Galerie Dalmau, without much fanfare. In the fall of 1912, the same Salon Cubists organized another exhibition in Paris at the prestigious Galerie de la Boétie, admitting both of Duchamp's paintings amidst over two hundred other Cubist paintings and sculptures as a sort of token gesture of reconciliation (Witham 2013, p. 74). Nevertheless, Duchamp's sardonic disposition toward the Salon Cubists and determination to be free from their strictures and politics propelled him to develop his own distinctive approach that deemphasized the materiality of artworks in order to foreground ideas, especially through carefully constructed titles, the notion of indifference, and a mechanical process. Capturing these impulses, Guillaume Apollinaire, one of the leaders of the Salon Cubists and avid proponent of Cubism, described Duchamp as an "Orphic Cubist", one who created completely new artworks not on the basis of what is seen, but new artworks "created by the artist and invested by him with a powerful reality" that, while perceptible, "has a meaning, the subject, which is sublime" (Apollinaire 2004, p. 26).

Prior to the "conciliatory" exhibition in Paris by the Salon Cubists, Duchamp spent several consequential months during the summer of 1912 in Munich that shaped his emerging approach to and understanding of art. While Duchamp's accounts of his time are vague and only dotted by brief correspondence with his family, he produced two paintings and four drawings, one of which was the first explorations of his magnum opus, *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, often referred to as *Glass* or *The Large Glass* produced from 1918 to 1923. Much of his time in Munich was spent in solitude, though he did connect with his friend, Max Bergmann, whom he had previously met in Paris and who helped him settle quickly in Munich (Tomkins 1997, pp. 102–3). As such, Duchamp was a passive observer of the vibrant art scene in Munich (second to Paris), choosing not to engage with local artists, including Wassily Kandinsky whose 1912 book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, which sought to articulate his drive toward abstraction as an exploration of art's "inner meaning or resonance", had been published earlier that year. Through these observations, he expanded his "idea" palette as he attended the Bavarian Trade Fair and wandered in and out of Munich's galleries and museums. Despite not having engaged with Kandinsky while in Munich, Duchamp likely read his book and would later express indifference for Kandinsky's style and vision of art as pure abstraction. And yet, Kandinsky's opening salvo in the introduction against the smugness, commercialization, and pettiness of the contemporary artworld did resonate with Duchamp's experience in Paris (Kandinsky [1912] 1977, pp. 18–19; Witham 2013, pp. 78–79). Munich, nevertheless, "was the scene of my complete liberation", as Duchamp would later recount (Duchamp 1964, p. 11; cf. Friedel et al. 2012).

After his "silent retreat" in Munich, Duchamp returned to Paris in October of 1912 with an ever-growing sense of his artistic independence, feeling emancipated from painting itself: "From Munich on I had the idea of *The Large Glass*. I was finished with Cubism and with movement—at least movement mixed up with oil paint. The whole trend of painting was something I didn't care to continue" (Tomkins 1965, p. 24). And yet, others, particularly three Americans looking to upend the art scene in the United States by acquiring the latest in modern art for their exhibition, "The International Exhibition of Modern Art" or what would later be called the "Armory Show", were not finished with Duchamp. In November 1912, Walt Kuhn and Arthur Davies met up with Walter Pach in Paris, a local American artist who knew all the major players in the city. They viewed artworks by Matisse, Gleizes, Picabia, Picasso, and Braque, along with many other artists. Pach also had an affinity for Jacques Villon's paintings and especially the sculpture of his brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon.

So Pach took Kuhn and Davies to Jacques' and Raymond's studio in Puteaux. It is there that Davies became enamored with the paintings of Marcel Duchamp, who was not present at the time, remarking in an aside to Kuhn and Pach: "That's the strongest expression I've seen yet". The three Americans would acquire four of Marcel's paintings for their show—*The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*, *Sad Young Man in a Train*, *Portrait of Chess Players*, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Tomkins 1997, pp. 114–15). These, along with numerous other avant-garde artworks, would form the basis for introducing modern art to America, an epiphanic moment in American art history that would eventually shift the center of the artworld from Paris to New York.⁶

Duchamp, though, was completely unaware of these developments and his newfound notoriety. Not only was the news not reaching Paris, he had sequestered himself at the Sainte-Geneviève library where he devoted his attention to developing his "masterpiece", *The Large Glass*, by perusing the plethora of materials on the principles and techniques associated with the science of perspective and reading non-Euclidian geometry, Leonardo da Vinci's notes, and about the "fourth dimension".⁷ He also returned to studying the ancient Greek philosophers, finding his way to an obscure mid-fourth to mid-third century BCE artist-philosopher, Pyrrho of Elis, who surmised that "things themselves are equally indifferent, and unstable, and indeterminate. . ." (Eusebius n.d.). Likewise, Duchamp found Pyrrhic echoes in the nineteenth century German, post-Hegelian philosopher Max Stirner, who concluded that the human being "...must first become...so altogether indifferent to the world...before he could feel himself as worldless; that is as spirit" (Stirner 1995, p. 22). This sense of indeterminacy, indifference, and suspended judgment resonated with Duchamp as he developed his understanding of art, making several references in his notes to the "beauty of indifference" (Duchamp 1975d, pp. 26–71), which would come to animate his approach to art from this point forward. Calvin Tomkins, noted Duchamp interviewer and biographer, put it this way: "After 1912 this [remaining within the conventions of oil painting] was no longer the case. Not only traditional methods and materials but the whole notion of the artist's sensibility as the guiding creative principle simply disappeared from his approach, to be replaced by mechanical drawing, written notations, the spirit of irony, and experiments with chance as a substitute for the artist's conscious control" (Tomkins 1997, p. 123).

As he embodied these notions in his artwork, Duchamp's approach, encouraged further by his close association with Francis Picabia and his wife Gabrièle Buffet-Picabia as they introduced him to the bohemian lifestyle of Paris nightlife, took on a burlesque cynicism, particularly toward Parisian culture and the Salon Cubists. Several of the Salon Cubists had painted two of the most prominent features of the Parisian skyline at the time—the Eiffel Tower and the Great Ferris Wheel. While these architectural feats served as odes to French ingenuity, technological advancement, and scientific know-how, Duchamp in the meanderings of his life saw them as playful, mischievous opportunities (Witham 2013, p. 93).

On his way back to his Saint-Hippolyte studio sometime in 1913, he obtained the front wheel of a bicycle and mounted it on top of a stool, not to be displayed in some exhibition but rather as "something to have in my room the way you have a fire, or a pencil sharpener, except that there was no usefulness. It was a pleasant gadget, pleasant for the movement it gave" (Duchamp 1965, p. 50). Duchamp would come to identify this "art object" as *Bicycle Wheel*, parodying the Great Ferris Wheel. Similarly, his "sculpture", entitled *Bottle Rack*, which he had obtained in a rummage sale in 1914, sat in a corner of his studio, mocking the Eiffel Tower. During the same year, his "painting", *Network of Stoppages*, also captured the randomness of three measured strands of thread in one-meter lengths dropped from the height of one meter onto a blank canvas, satirizing the scientific solemnity of the iridium-platinum rod that served as the definitive measurement of one meter for all of France (Witham 2013, p. 93).

A spirit of playfulness, animated by chance and indifference, is palpable in these pieces. To be sure, the incorporation of chance into works of art is not new. Artists have

always employed chance in their art practice, whether knowingly or not. Duchamp, though, foregrounds this aspect of the artistic process at a time when it was not common practice, although some were considering its systematic usage (Tomkins 1997, p. 132). Commenting on a previous version of *Network of Stoppages* called *Three Stoppages*, Duchamp noted the importance of chance and indifference to his burgeoning artistic practice: “In itself it was not an important work of art but for me it opened the way—the way to escape from those traditional methods of expression long associated with art. I didn’t realize at the time what I had stumbled on. When you tap something, you don’t always recognize the sound. That’s apt to come later. For me the *Three Stoppages* was a first gesture liberating me from the past” (Tomkins 1997, p. 131). Interestingly, Duchamp would later note Stirner’s influence when he filled out a questionnaire in 1953 for the inclusion of *Three Stoppages* in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Under the section titled “Significance”, Duchamp remarked that the work was part of his abandonment of the retinal, parody of the meter, and an amusing use of Euclidean geometry. He concluded with an oblique cross-reference to Stirner “Le moi et sa propriété”, implicating Stirner’s (1845) book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, translated into French as *L’Unique et sa propriété* (Molderings 2010, p. xii). By foregrounding chance and indifference as part of one’s artistic practice, Duchamp used these tools to explore the question: “Can one make works which are not works of art?” (Duchamp 1966, p. 74). This foregrounding of a critical, questioning disposition about the very nature of art itself would become the very spirit of modern and contemporary art moving forward.

The Great War between France and Germany broke out in July 1914. Pach was in Paris in late 1914 due to the urging of his Armory Show colleagues, including Marcel’s brothers, in an effort to expand upon the exhibition’s success. Upon Pach’s arrival, however, Marcel’s brothers had been called up to serve in the French army, muting efforts to acquire more artworks to exhibit in New York. Marcel took up the mantle for his brothers and was the consummate host. After many conversations, Pach invited Marcel to join him in New York. After all, Picabia had enjoyed New York, surely Marcel would too. Duchamp was hesitant as he did not want to live “the artist’s life in search of glory and money” as a “society painter”, but would rather leave Paris “on the condition that I earn my living there [in New York]” (Tomkins 1997, p. 141).

Pach returned to New York without Marcel and in January 1915 Marcel was called up by the draft board to enlist in the army. Upon medical review, however, his enlistment was denied due to a heart condition. Given his skepticism toward the war, he was not terribly disappointed with this outcome; yet, he was derided by Parisians who did not know his condition, expecting him to be fighting in the trenches or serving the war effort in some capacity. Consequently, Duchamp did not venture out from his flat and continued working on *The Large Glass*, experimenting with various techniques, finalizing his overall sketch, and organizing his notes. His discontent with the Paris artworld continued to grow as he expressed to Pach in his subsequent letters, seeing no future in Paris. So, he took up Pach’s previous invitation to come to New York, leaving Paris in June 1915, where he would reconnect with the Picabias and meet other influential American artists like Man Ray (Witham 2013, pp. 96–99).

One of those (re)encounters was with the Swiss artist, Jean Crotti, whom he likely knew from Paris and was his roommate for a few months at the Lincoln Arcade. During the winter of 1915, they dipped into a nearby hardware store where Duchamp purchased a snow shovel, a mass-produced tool he and Crotti had never seen before. After returning to their studio, Duchamp wrote on the blade “In Advance of a Broken Arm” and signed it “[from] Marcel Duchamp 1915”. He then hung it by wire from the ceiling (Tomkins 1997, pp. 156–57). It was at that moment that Duchamp had an epiphany and wrote a letter to his sister, Suzanne, in Paris:

And I have a plan concerning this so-called bottle rack. Listen to this: here in N.Y., I bought various objects in the same taste and I treat them as “readymades”. You know enough English to understand the meaning of “ready-made” that I

give these objects. I sign them and think of an inscription for them in English. I'll give you a few examples: I have, for example, a large snow shovel on which I have inscribed at the bottom: In advance of the broken arm, French translation: *En avance du bras cassé*. Don't tear your hair out trying to understand this in the Romantic or Impressionist or Cubist sense—it has nothing to do with all that (Duchamp 2000, p. 44).

It was at this moment that Duchamp coined the term “readymade”, applying it to several previous pieces and using it henceforth. It was this term that seemed to capture his burgeoning disposition toward art in contrast to more “traditional” understandings. If, then, as Duchamp insists, we are not to understand these “readymades” in a Romantic, Impressionist, or Cubist sense, how are we to understand his choosing of an object, especially if aesthetic appeal is not a delimiting factor?

Duchamp answered a similar question in his conversations with Pierre Cabanne in 1966, saying: “You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste”. This was indeed a difficult decision, according to Duchamp, as he “. . . had to beware of its ‘look’ . . . because at the end of fifteen days, you begin to like it or hate it”. It was a “game between I and me” (Cabanne 1971, p. 48; Roth 1998, pp. 33–48). And yet, he wondered how different his approach really was, “since tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are ‘readymades aided’ and also works of assemblage”. Nevertheless, Duchamp’s burlesque cynicism, visual indifference, dematerialization, and literary use of words “meant to carry the spectator to other regions more verbal” had coalesced in the idea of “readymades” (Duchamp 1975a, p. 141) and became “a form of denying the possibility of defining art” (Tomkins 1997, p. 405), culminating in what many art historians identified as “anti-art” (Richter 2016, pp. 81–100).

Decades later, Concept artist, Joseph Kosuth, in his essay “Art After Philosophy”, would credit Duchamp with the beginning of Concept Art, as previously mentioned. Kosuth also exposed the tautological nature of art by demonstrating that a particular kind of artwork (e.g., painting, sculpture, etc.) presumes a tradition that embodies certain aesthetic criteria and a priori assumptions about the general nature of art itself.⁸ Hence, “being an artist” after Duchamp “means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. . . . And this questioning of the nature of art is a very important concept in understanding the function of art” (Kosuth [1969] 1993, p. 18). If readymades embody this critical, questioning disposition of the nature of art by means of visual indifference and dematerialization, as Duchamp, Kosuth, and others surmise, what does Duchamp mean by indifference, and more specifically his phrase the “beauty of indifference?” Are we to conclude that indifference leads to nihilism, absurdity, and solipsism—dispositions that actually undermine critical inquiry; or might there be another possibility drawn from Duchamp’s (re)contextualization of art that opens on to what I am calling an “aesthetics of difference?”

3. The Difference of Duchamp’s Indifference

Duchamp went to the Théâtre Antoine in Paris two months prior to his time in Munich in the spring of 1912 with the Picabias, and likely Apollinaire, to view a performance of an avant-garde play, “Impressions d’Afrique”, written by the obscure and eccentric French novelist and playwright Raymond Roussel based on his 1910 novel by the same title (Roussel 1910). The play opens with a European ship bound for Buenos Aires that becomes shipwrecked off the coast of Africa where passengers, taken hostage by the local tribal chief, attempt to distract and amuse themselves with bizarre theatrical performances that eventually involve their captors. While a simplistic plot unfolds, each scene based on various word plays consists of fantastical and incongruous happenings where “machines that perform human functions, new metals that defy the laws of physics, puns and verbal distortions, absurdly illogical actions [are] described in coolly logical terms”

(Tomkins 1997, p. 92; Seigel 1995, pp. 75–85). And yet, what lay behind these scenes, as well as Roussel's novels, is a complex, symbolic system of puns, illusions, and double-entendres that resonate with the forthcoming Dada and Surrealist movements.

While contemporary critics were initially dismissive of the play, Duchamp had a favorable impression. So much so that he credited Roussel with being the primary influence on his magnum opus, *The Large Glass*: "It was fundamentally Roussel who was responsible for my glass, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. From his *Impressions d'Afrique* I got the general approach. This play. . . helped me greatly on one side of my expression. I saw at once I could use Roussel as an influence" (Duchamp 1975f, p. 126). Precisely how Roussel influenced Duchamp is difficult to determine, but Duchamp seemed to suggest Roussel's influence had more to do with disposition, praxis, and outcome rather than the content itself. Both had a deep appreciation for the use of language to confound and surprise, whether it be Duchamp's curious titles for his paintings and readymades or Roussel's language games that distorted one's sense of reality in favor of the fantastical.⁹ In a later interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp indicated that he did not really "remember much of the text" as "one didn't really listen". Rather the performance "was striking" because it was "absolutely the madness of the unexpected" that delighted Duchamp (Cabanne 1971, p. 33). It's this sense and pursuit of delight in the unexpected, which is constrained by dogmatic adherence to socially constructed artistic norms and the subjectivism of the artist, that Duchamp would later capture in his *Green Box* notebook with the turn of phrase, "the beauty of indifference". He began to internalize this sentiment during his "silent retreat" in Munich, which would shape not only his understanding of art but life itself.

Crucial to the development of Duchamp's notion of the "beauty of indifference", as previously mentioned, was the ancient Greek painter turned philosopher, Pyrrho of Elis, whose writings Duchamp studied while employed at Sainte-Geneviève library, post-Munich and pre-New York. Pyrrho's philosophical approach surmised that "things themselves are equally indifferent, and unstable, and indeterminate and therefore neither our senses nor our opinions are either true or false. For this reason, then, we must not trust them, but be without opinions, and without bias, and without wavering, saying of every single thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not". And, thus, ". . . there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action" (Eusebius n.d.). Pyrrho's embrace of indifference (*apathia*) was not an "indifference for indifference's sake" but sought the telos of "imperturbability" (*ataraxia*), a calm, collected, composed state of being: "All the external circumstances of human life are of their nature indifferent (*ἀδιάφορον*), it becomes the wise man to preserve in every event complete tranquility of mind and to permit nothing to disturb his equanimity" (Stöckl 1914, p. 153).

The only other philosopher Duchamp credited with influencing him, Max Stirner, would also shape his understanding of indifference. Stirner, interacting with Pyrrho's thought as representative of the ancients, found it noble that through indifference "the ancients worked toward the *conquest of the world* and strove to release man from the heavy trammels of connection with *other things*" in order to attain imperturbability. And yet, the ancients "tired themselves to death in ever-renewed attempts at revolt. . . to get behind the world and above it" such that, "among their last sighs, was born to them the *God*, 'conqueror of the world.'" Moderns, therefore, no longer need to conquer the world but rather "to get behind God who is 'spirit'", whereby "the activity of the spirit, which 'searches even the depth of the Godhead', is *theology*. If the ancients have nothing to show but wisdom of the world, the moderns never did nor do make their way further than to theology" (Stirner 1995, pp. 26, 29–30).

This milieu traps modern humanity and necessitates an egocentric individualism: "My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* [*das Meinige*], and it is not a general one, but is—*unique* [*einzig*], as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!" (Stirner 1995, p. 7). Creativity is rooted, then, in one's radical, egocentric uniqueness: "If I concern myself for myself the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: All

things are nothing to me" (Stirner 1995, p. 324; cf. Welsh 2010). While there appear to be reverberations into Duchamp's thinking and way of life, Tomkins rightly questions to what extent: "It is hard to believe that this relentlessly humorless and repetitive tract could have been a major influence on Duchamp, who managed throughout life to keep his own ego under strict control, but reading Stirner may very well have encouraged him to persevere in his own thoughts and inclinations" (Tomkins 1997, p. 123; cf. Rabaté 2004).

Pyrrho's and Stirner's philosophical musings, nevertheless, seem to resonate with Duchamp's growing skepticism and pursuit of the "beatitude" of imperturbability.¹⁰ These Pyrrhic and Stirnerian reverberations were evident in his antagonism toward the conventions of the Salon Cubists and political machinations of his Parisian artworld, his criticisms of the commodification of art, his choice of readymades in the "game between I and me", and his constant use of irony and sarcasm to attenuate any opinion or position to which he seemed to commit. In the same aforementioned, lengthy conversation with Cabanne, Duchamp, when asked what he believed in, retorted: "Nothing, of course!" Since "the word 'belief' is another error. It's like the word 'judgment,' they're both horrible ideas upon which the world is based". Cabanne would press further, inquiring whether Duchamp believed in himself, to which he replied, "No". Continuing, Duchamp remarked: "I don't believe in the word 'being.' The idea of being is a human convention. . . . It's an essential concept, which doesn't exist at all in reality, and which I don't believe in, though people in general have a cast-iron belief in it. No one ever thinks of not believing in 'I am,' no?" (Cabanne 1971, pp. 89–90).

These kinds of statements by Duchamp about the nature of being and belief in nothing suggest that Duchamp was a nihilist. Duchamp's amenable posture towards the ethos of the early twentieth century avant-garde art movement, Dada, also seems to suggest as much: "Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with 'literature.' It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic" (Duchamp 1975e, p. 125). Duchamp's penchant for this "sort of nihilism" that disregards and deconstructs binaries like being/non-being has led many an art historian, like William Rubin, to characterize Duchamp and his approach as "intellectually oriented nihilism toward art" (Rubin 1968, p. 185).¹¹ Yet, what kind of nihilism is this exactly, particularly in light of other statements by Duchamp that seem to declare the opposite: "I am anti-nothing. I am against formulating"? Or others where he affirms life and the nature of belief: "But at any rate you know that I am interested in the intellectual side, although I don't like the word 'intellect.' For me, 'intellect' is too dry a word, too inexpressive. I like the word 'belief.' . . . To live is to believe" (Marquis 1981, p. 311; Duchamp 1975b, p. 137). Is Duchamp's nihilism existentially oriented in that all of life is meaningless and as such "art is dead" as we once knew it? Is it descriptive or prescriptive; or is it something else altogether?

Art critic and historian, Thomas McEvelley, contends that Duchamp's "sort of nihilism", while "a renunciation of all esthetics, in the ordinary sense of the word", was *not* an "esthetic nihilism". Rather, Duchamp sought to countermand the prevailing Kantian aesthetic of Modern Art: "For Duchamp. . . art was not a link to the universal and permanent, a channel toward the sublime, but a device with which to break mental and emotional habits, and to discourage the projection of one's self and one's opinions, or one's culture's opinions, as absolute" (McEvelley 1988, pp. 124, 26). In short, Duchamp seems to acknowledge intuitively the mystery, situatedness, and finitude of human persons, while conversely noting our human proclivity to absolutize our own perspective, cultural or otherwise, to the exclusion of others. As such, Duchamp's incorporation of language into his artwork via titles and lengthy accompanying notes presses viewers to consider whether art is just as much conceptual as it is perceptual. His introduction of readymades—of whether a urinal was art or a bottle rack an apt representation of the Eiffel Tower—cast considerable doubt on the universality of human taste, that presumably unchanging, noncognitive human faculty through which human beings encounter art. In other words, if the Kantian notion of human taste is an unchanging universal, an "essence", then nothing exists in *this* "ordinary

sense of the word”, in this Kantian understanding of aesthetics (Kant 1914, pp. 45–228; Crowther 2010; de Duve 1996).

The identification of Duchamp as nihilistic lends itself, then, more to an apophatic mode, disposition, and process that not only blurred lines between art and life but also veiled his anti-nihilistic impulses, exhibited in his search for imperturbability and freedom from the dogmatic absolutism of artistic convention. His apophaticism as distinct from nihilism embraces the limitations and failures of human artistic creation, while implicitly acknowledging the mystery and ineffability of human beings, human relations, and reality itself. Interestingly, this apophatic disposition echoes the apophatic theology of Russian Orthodox theologians like Sergius Bulgakov and Vladimir Lossky, both of whom were in exile writing in Paris after Duchamp returned from New York in 1923. These apophatic theologians believed that all language fails in its efforts to speak of God because God is ineffable, wholly Other, beyond human understanding; and yet, they arrive at this apophatic moment only by going *through* human language, the cataphatic moment when human speech seeks to “say” God, who he is and what he does. When paired together, the apophatic and the cataphatic acknowledge that something can be said of God but that human language ultimately fails in doing so, suggesting a sense of epistemic humility about what is actually said (Aldea 2013; Turner 1998). With this echo, the apophatic moment seems evident in Duchamp’s artistic approach, most clearly in his readymades, but is there a cataphatic moment in his approach?

Duchamp’s apophaticism does seem to have a rationale for his deconstruction, though he was reticent to systematize it. Briony Fer’s assessment of Dadaism offers important parallels to discerning the cataphatic in Duchamp: “Many Dada pictures are clearly ironic and others are, so to speak, only ironically clear, some are intentionally confusing but are not necessarily the product of confused intentions”. As such, “the picture of Dada that emerges is not one of pure negativity and generalized destruction. Randomness, chance, the unplanned and the contingent functioned as significant elements within a theorized critique of a particular culture” (Fer 1997, pp. 45, 34). Duchamp’s own use of “randomness, chance, the unplanned, and the contingent” led to what Fer calls “calculated displacement” designed “to draw attention, not to the intrinsic beauty of bicycle wheels and bottle racks but to the conventions, habits and prejudices underlying our expectations of art and of the circumstances under which we normally view it” (Fer 1997, p. 35). The exposure of delimiting artistic conventions that led to new understanding, to new concepts and ideas about art and its function, is the cataphatic moment for Duchamp, not to mention his inability to stop talking about “nothingness”, particularly in his exploration of the fourth dimension. Nevertheless, this new conceptual understanding ultimately fails for Duchamp, as he eventually falls artistically silent.

Duchamp’s opposition to a Kantian aesthetics, therefore, is not to suggest that he operated without aesthetic sensibilities. It was an apophatic sensibility predicated on difference. It was an intuitive sense that all artistic creation is insufficient to account for the mystery of the other, whether human or otherwise. As such, he sought to rid himself of taste developed on the basis of habit, “the repetition of something already accepted” (Cabanne 1971, p. 48), through aesthetic indifference, chance, mechanical drawing, the ironic, and the sardonic, all in pursuit of imperturbability. Art critic, Alice Marquis, laments Duchamp’s penchant for the “need to overthrow the subjective element” no matter how “tortuous and painful, from the emotion-laden ties of family and childhood”, to repress the “perhaps unconscious, emotional storm, inside an emotionally neutral, and increasingly icy, aesthetic statement” (Marquis 1981, pp. 76, 80, 96). Such psychoanalysis by Marquis and others suggests, according to McEvilley, “that his inner problems were not resolved but hidden by his ongoing repression”, evidenced “by the paucity of his oeuvre, its mute lack of self-expressiveness, its mocking ironic distance, its unnaturally prolonged enfant terrible rebelliousness, its hints of repressed sexuality, its subterfuges of critical evaluation, its determined absurdity, its solipsism, and so on”. And yet, while acknowledging the subjective connections between art and artist, the psychoanalytic approach to Duchamp,

McEvilley maintains, adds little to understanding Duchamp's influence on modern art because "it subjects Duchamp to the very affliction he sought to remedy for art: it removes his work from its context in the world of ideas. Seen within such a context, the work acquires a directness and a coherence that are altogether rational" (McEvilley 1988, p. 123).

Setting aside for the moment the question of whether Duchamp could actually jettison his subjectivity or be disinterested, the fact remains he *tried* to do so, similar to other modes of inquiry like philosophy, religion, and science that sought disinterested investigation or ways of being. Duchamp's form of disinterested art praxis took shape through the criterion of indifference but not in isolation. As McEvilley insinuates, Duchamp's use of indifference to achieve imperturbability makes sense within the "the world of ideas" as he questioned the a priori assumptions about the nature of art by (re)contextualizing the mundane artifact, that is readymades, rather than remaining constrained by the system of habits, construed as absolute, of a particular art practice, namely Salon Cubism. As art curator Daniel Marzona surmises, "the question of what art is becomes a question of the *context* in which ideas, objects, and pictures are produced and perceived" (Marzona 2005, p. 11; emphasis added). This (re)contextualization provoked by the indifference of Duchamp's readymades leads to what I am calling an "aesthetics of difference", where the embodied, dialogical encounters of the artist-artwork-audience open onto new dimensions of meaning in humanity's search to make sense of a non-sensical world, and in this instance a world that was upended by the Great War.

Whether Duchamp would understand or describe his aesthetic sensibility in this way is debatable. His retrospective accounts of his work in a 1957 speech, though, given at the American Federation of the Arts in Houston, entitled "The Creative Act", do suggest the significance that difference plays in his indifference. He begins: "Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity" (Duchamp 1975c, p. 138). He continues by positing the concept of an "art coefficient" that seeks to account for the gap or difference, often unbeknownst to the artist, between intention and realization, which comes about "through a chain of totally subjective reactions". This art coefficient is in an incipient form, "which must be 'refined'...by the spectator". As such, "through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale" (Duchamp 1975c, pp. 139–40). While his use of "transubstantiation" is theologically peculiar, Duchamp concludes that "...the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (Duchamp 1975c, p. 140).

This trifecta of artist-artwork-audience, to be sure, continues Duchamp's countermanding of Modern Art's Kantian aesthetic by the "...belittling of the Modernist conception of the art object's internal self-sufficiency in favour of a sense of its dependence on contingent, external factors as audience participation" (Hopkins 2000, p. 41). And yet, it is Duchamp's understanding of the internal-external encounter between artist and audience through the artwork that inaugurates a "transubstantiation", a becoming in the world that necessitates interpretation. *This encounter is predicated on difference*. So, we must ask what difference Duchamp's indifference makes, and turning to dialogical personalism can give us aid in elucidating an answer to this question.

The Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1979 essay, "The Aesthetics of Verbal Art", put it this way:

The work of art, like a rejoinder, seeks a response from other(s); it seeks their active comprehension, which eventually functions as an educating influence on the readers, as an influence on their world views and on their critical response. ... In various situations of speech communication which exist in a culture, a work of art anticipates the retaliatory positions of others. A work [of art] is the link in the chain of communication. (Bakhtin 1979, p. 254)

The necessity of the artist-artwork-audience relation, then, is crucial to understanding a creative encounter, as Bakhtin retorts in his response to a question from the *Novy Mir* editorial staff in a 1970 interview: “In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, space, and culture” in that “our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*”. As such, “a meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures” (Bakhtin 1986a, p. 7). This “outsidedness” is the condition for dialogue and creative understanding between artist and audience through artworks that preserves the particularity of those in the conversation while acknowledging the meaning potential of the artwork itself. If this is the case, what might the possibilities be for an alternative metaphysical framework that accounts for the difference Duchamp’s indifference makes without defaulting to nihilistic and/or solipsistic caricatures?

4. On the Possibilities of Dialogical Personalism

Bakhtin’s remarks in the 1970s concerning aesthetics, difference, and dialogue were rooted in some of his earliest writings in the 1920s, such as “Art and Answerability” ([1919] Bakhtin 1990a), *Toward a Philosophy of Act* ([1919–21] Bakhtin 1990c), “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” ([1920–23] Bakhtin 1990b), and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* ([1929] Bakhtin 1984). While Bakhtin was adamantly opposed to systematization, similar to Duchamp, his corpus, even into his later writings like *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Bakhtin 1981) and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Bakhtin 1986b), developed around a number of key themes that not only resonate with Duchamp’s thinking, but are also generative for aesthetic theory and for understanding art and art praxis beyond the literary criticism for which Bakhtin is most well-known. Some of these key themes include answerability, outsidedness, chronotope, polyphony, heteroglossia, dialogue, and unfinalizability.¹² Like Duchamp, identifying Bakhtin as a forerunner to post-structuralist thought given his criticisms of Kantian aesthetics and even expressivist theories of art seems plausible; yet, Bakhtin remained committed, through his engagement with Hermann Cohen and the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, to the binary subject-object relation, which was crucial to his dialogical imagination. Nevertheless, like Duchamp, Bakhtin rejected the notion of “art-for-art’s-sake” and advocated for an “art-for-life’s-sake” whereby art and life interpenetrate and are answerable to one another, to lived experience: “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. . . . Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability” (Bakhtin 1990a, p. 2).

For the better part of his life, Bakhtin found himself amidst a tumultuous history, living through the Great War, the Russian Revolution and subsequent civil war, exile in Kazakhstan, World War Two, and the oppressive regime of Stalin. While these events and personal tragedies shaped his life and work, the influence of Martin Buber’s writings during his formative years while in Vilnius, Lithuania and Odessa, Ukraine was seminal to his thinking. In an interview discussing Nicholas Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, and Jean-Paul Sartre, Bakhtin counted Buber as “the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, and perhaps in this philosophically puny century, perhaps the sole philosopher on the scene. . . . And I am very much indebted to him. In particular for the idea of dialogue” (Kaganskaya 1984; cf. Friedman 2001). Buber’s notion of dialogue, in its embryonic form, emerged in an early work entitled *Daniel: Gespräche von der Verwirklichung* (Buber 1913) where he seemed to transition from poetic mystic to philosopher of dialogue; yet, his renowned work, *Ich und Du*, which he began in 1916 and completed in a fully revised version in 1923, gave expression to the contours of human intersubjectivity embodied in dialogical, I-You, or monological, I-It, relationships. These relationships are not to be construed in psychological

terms as in the “meeting of the minds” but rather as beings-in-relation. What matters is not the internal or external experiences but what happens in the *between*. What characterizes these relationships, then, according to Buber? How might they help us better understand Duchamp’s perturbations that compelled him toward readymades, questioning the very nature of art itself?

Buber penned an essay in 1936 titled “The Question to the Single One” where he levied a critique of Søren Kierkegaard’s understanding of the exclusivity of the “Single One” to God, which downplayed the relationship between persons and rendered those relationships as irrelevant. In the same essay, Buber harshly criticized Stirner as a “pathetic nominalist and unmasker of ideas” whereby “the Unique One” embodies such an “exclusive I” that “the question of an essential relation between him and the other is eliminated as well”. The only relationship is to oneself. This is problematic for Buber because such a notion ensures the abdication of responsibility and truth (Buber 2002, pp. 47–48). And yet, Buber affirmed Stirner’s criticism of modernity, “. . . that intending to destroy both basic ideas he [Stirner] has destroyed only their routine forms and thus, contrary to his whole intention, has prepared for their purification and renewal”. What Stirner destroyed were false notions of responsibility and truth, “the fictitious responsibility in the face of reason, of an idea, a nature, an institution, of all manner of illustrious ghosts, all that is in essence is not a person and hence. . . cannot really make you answerable” (Buber 2002, pp. 51, 52–53).

Two years later, Buber continued his criticisms of modernity in a 1938 lecture entitled “What is Man?”, a direct response to the same question posed by Kant. He criticized Kant for beginning with the solitary individual as the basis for understanding the self, knowledge, and reality by overcoming one’s solitude through universal reason, whether in individualist terms where the self is subsumed into itself or in collectivist terms where the self is subsumed into society. As Buber vividly noted, “with the former man’s face is distorted, with the latter it is masked” (Buber 2002, p. 267). Likewise, Buber, in the same lecture, offered an extended, complex critique against his antagonist, Martin Heidegger. In essence, he concluded that “Heidegger isolates from the wholeness of life the realm in which man is related to himself, since he absolutizes the temporally conditioned situation of the radically solitary man, and wants to derive the essence of human existence from the experience of a nightmare” (Buber 2002, p. 200; cf. Novak 1985; Gordon 2001; Herskowitz 2020, pp. 128–74). Buber envisioned these criticisms, as well as others captured in a collection of his essays titled *Between Man and Man*, as extensions of his understanding of the dialogical principle he laid out in his seminal work, *Ich und Du*.

By contrast, Buber began with concrete, lived experience oriented toward understanding the wholeness of humanity in relation to and in the presence of others, whereby “only man-with-man” can overcome its alienation. Buber characterizes these relationships using two word pairs: I-You (*Ich-Du*) and I-It (*Ich-Es*). “I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of the human being”, according to Buber, “does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It” (Buber 1970, p. 54). As such, I-It relationships are “monological” because they see the other as a malleable object and “lets the other exist only as his own experience, only as a ‘part of myself.’” This does not mean, however, that I-It encounters are unimportant in that they possess use value allowing for classification and gradation, particularly with respect to scientific knowledge, and thus, at their best, can gesture toward and leave open the possibility of I-You relations. A sense of objectification, of detachment in space and time, is always present, though, in I-It relations and cannot be the basis for overcoming alienation (Buber 2002, pp. 25–28). I-You relations, in contrast, are predicated on mutual, reciprocal participation in the life of the other—presence—such that a dialogue ensues in the turning and opening towards the other whereby persons—in the between—become truly human. As Buber remarked, “the concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter. . . . No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed

as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur" (Buber 1970, pp. 62–63).

Dialogical I-You encounters occur, then, within three spheres of life: life with nature where the relation remains at the threshold of language, life with other persons where the relation enters into language, and life with spiritual beings where language is created. *Life with nature*, while it can be dissolved as an object into classifications within space and time, is characterized by movement and resonances that reverberate up to the verge of speech when nature's exclusivity with all its particularity seizes us in relational wholeness. As Buber notes, "the tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation; relation is reciprocity" (Buber 1970, p. 58). *Life with other persons*, while it can be instrumentalized, is a passive and active encounter where whole beings actualize their unique presence, confirming the other by seeing and being seen, by hearing and being heard. "When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him", as Buber maintained, "then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. . . . For You is more than it knows. You does more, and more happens to it, than it knows. No deception reaches this far: here is the cradle of life" (Buber 1970, pp. 59–60). *Life with spiritual beings*, while it too can be instrumentalized and dissected, is a mode of existence that lacks and at the same time creates language whereby human beings are addressed by an "eternal You". This eternal You calls us to behold the *mysterium tremendum* "that appears and overwhelms" but also "is closer to me than my own I" and "reveals itself as language" in order to compel us toward "meaning[ful] action in the world" (Buber 1970, pp. 127, 51, 64). As such, in the fullness of every dialogical sphere, the eternal You is present: "Extended, the lines of relationship intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You" (Buber 1970, p. 123). This dynamic, dialogical personalism serves, therefore, to shape Buber's understanding of aesthetics, epistemology, and ethics.

Like Duchamp and Bakhtin, Buber does not systematize his thinking on art and aesthetics but rather, as more of an occasionalist writer, contextualizes and proceeds from a philosophical anthropology that touches on his personalist ontology (Allentuck 1971, pp. 35–38; Cohen 1980, pp. 51–73). In his 1951 essay, "Distance and Relation", Buber remarked that "art is neither the impression of natural objectivity nor the expression of spiritual subjectivity, but it is the work and witness of the relation between the *Substantia humana* and the *Substantia rerum*, it is the realm of 'the between' which has become a form" (Buber 1965, p. 66). This form is an artwork that emerges in the between of *Gestalt* that "appears to the soul and demands the soul's creative power" such that if an artist commits and speaks her whole being to the *Gestalt* that appears "the creative power is released and the work comes into being". The artist often cannot describe, but only actualize this presence that is "radiant in the splendor of the confrontation, . . . not as a thing among 'internal' things, not as a figment of the 'imagination,' but as what is present". The artwork, then, is an act of discovery. To be sure, it becomes a part of the world of things to be described, experienced, aggregated—the I-It world—yet, "the receptive beholder [*Schauen*] may be bodily confronted now and again" as part of the aesthetic presence of the I-You encounter that humanizes and turns what seems to be superfluous into necessity through the act of perception (Buber 1970, pp. 60–61; cf. Buber 1965, pp. 149, 60).¹³ This act of perception is hermeneutical in nature and is predicated on the fundamental orientation located in the open, dialogical relationship between I and You, between audience and artwork. The relationship is existential, however, not logical. The goal of such interpretation ". . . is not to explicate the artform (as we do in cases of geometric symbols), but to describe it as it exists in relation to the human being" (Biswas 1996, p. 236; cf. Biswas 1995, pp. 43–68; cf. Anderson 2022, p. 9). This confluence of artist-artwork-audience springs, therefore, from the presence of the dialogical self, not in its solipsistic individualism but in its mutuality with the other.

Self as the other serves as a reference point, then, for coordinating Duchamp's and Buber's understanding of art without claiming identity. Duchamp, in his 1957 speech "The Creative Act", traces the contours of his understanding of the self as other through the artist-audience interplay captured in the aforementioned term "art coefficient", all of which belies the Kantian, Romantic, and Stirnerian notions of artist as solipsistic genius. The artist is "like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing", not fully cognizant "...on the aesthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it". The audience "...brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (Duchamp 1975c, pp. 138, 40). While not entirely clear, Duchamp seems to suggest that the audience has an interpretive role in bringing to light the unbeknownst intentions of the artist and latent aspects of the creative process, echoing Buber's understanding of self as other (cf. Seigel 1995, pp. 214–34). If the philosophical basis for Buber's and Duchamp's understanding of art and aesthetics follows from conceiving of artist as other, what epistemological possibilities emerge from this orientation?

Given Buber's two-fold way of conceiving reality based on lived experience as I-You and I-It, Buber contends for two realms of knowing, with I-You being primary and basic while I-It is secondary and derivative. I-You, according to Buber, "cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed. The You encounters me. ... Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness" (Buber 1970, p. 62). In other words, knowledge in an I-You encounter, while both passive and active, is revelatory of Being and is thus beyond conceptual knowledge. And yet, this does not imply for Buber that we cannot say anything about I-You encounters, which he in fact does. Rather, to conceptualize I-You encounters is to enter into the I-It domain, albeit in a diminished form as something is inherently lost in translation from the I-You encounter and cannot be fully expressed. I-It relations, on the other hand, approach knowledge with respect to the subject-object distinction prevalent in modern epistemology whereby justified true beliefs connect with objects in the world, what is typically called propositional knowledge. Such knowledge functions at the level of abstraction, is instrumental and disinterested, can be mastered and manipulated, and is publicly accessible. As Buber notes, "I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. ... This and the like establish the realm of the *It*" (Buber 1970, p. 4). Understanding the interdependent, epistemic relationship between the I-You and the I-It worlds is crucial since much of modern epistemology tends to reduce knowledge merely to the I-It world. To do so, threatens the possibility of knowledge, fosters alienation, and disconnects us from Being, and ultimately from truth itself.¹⁴

To be sure, Duchamp does not articulate a full-fledged epistemology but nevertheless finds resonance, and greater explanatory power if we see these constructs in light of Buber's epistemology, of his desire to remain in a "state of euphoria" (with its erotic connotations) and enter into what many in the early twentieth century called the "fourth dimension, ... a higher reality, a transcendental truth that was to be discovered by each artist" (Tomkins 1997, p. 59).¹⁵ This is precisely what Duchamp tried to capture in his magnum opus, *The Large Glass*, where we somehow see ourselves in two places as the two-dimensional surfaces rotated on a hinge all the while remaining stable. This simultaneity was intended to be disorientating and yet peculiar, perhaps even striking. Similarly, his use of puns and the play on words, not to mention readymades themselves, were used to similar effect, "because of their actual sound and because of unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words. For me this is an infinite field of joy, and it's always right at hand" (Kuh 1962, p. 89). As such, these states of euphoria and cognitive disruptions evoked by encountering works of art were places where human beings were able to go "beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet toward regions which are not ruled by time and space" (Duchamp 1975b, p. 137), places that orient us toward knowledge of the

fourth dimension. What are we to make of this knowledge? Similar to Buber, Duchamp's understanding of the fourth dimension, so it seems, is akin to Buber's I-You world that is "beyond space and time" and perceptible in part through conceptualization, albeit primarily in propositional form for Buber and in ironic and sardonic indifference for Duchamp. What is not explored and cannot be in the scope of this article are questions related to the kind of knowledge art inhabits, though I have alluded to some of the possibilities in considering Bakhtin's notion of creative understanding (Goldie 2007). So, while both make this point in differing ways, they do so by relying on the sociality of knowledge, the necessity of the other. While this may not seem so radical today, it was in the early twentieth century when the solitary individual was considered not only the epistemological but also the ethical fulcrum.

With respect to ethics, Buber again is much more specific about the ethical implications of the I-You and I-It worlds than Duchamp is about his pursuit of imperturbability. For Buber, ethical responsibility for the other emerges out of I-You relations when we first recognize and accept the utter and unique difference of the other. In doing so, our responsibility to the other emerges out of genuine dialogue, in contrast to Kant's rationalist categorical imperatives, where there is "real responding" and desire to understand the other. In the address-response, we are responsible not only for responding to what was said, but to do so truthfully, in a trustworthy manner: "Responsibility presupposes one who addressed me primarily, that is, from a realm independent of myself, and to whom I am answerable. . . . He addresses me from his trust and I respond in my loyalty" (Buber 2002, pp. 18, 52; cf. Buber 1965, pp. 67–69). To do otherwise, is to enter into the ethics of the I-It world where people are viewed instrumentally and treated like objects with only "use" value, according to one's desires and interests. "Opposed to this effort [of answerability]", says Buber, "is the lust to make use of men by which the manipulator of 'propaganda' and 'suggestion' is possessed, . . . which he is indeed eager to rob of their distance and independence" (Buber 1965, p. 69). Buber attributed humanity's contemporary opposition to answerability and inability to enter into genuine relationships to the "sickness of the age", namely the scientific and technological ideology that reduces human advancement to such categories. This ideology of "the unlimited reign of causality" is so pervasive in the I-It world that it enslaves human freedom to biological and historical causes (Buber 1970, pp. 94, 100). Such is the case when the I-It world is disassociated from the I-You world where human beings in relation are considered in their wholeness, unity, and uniqueness.

For Duchamp, the ethical implications of his indifference and questioning of the nature of art are often read through a postmodern lens that construes Duchamp as one ". . . who is a revelation of some fluid and inchoate substrate of human life and consciousness, an uncontainable energy that promises continual disruption" (Seigel 1995, p. 250). To be sure, Duchamp sought via his imagination to liberate these creative, disruptive energies from the constraints of human tastes and systems of habits found within Salon Cubism and other commodifying trends of the Parisian artworld, albeit at times through a self-serving I-It, bohemian lifestyle. His pursuit, though, of the "beauty of indifference", predicated on otherness, suggests he sought a different kind of freedom—the freedom of imperturbability—that belies a Nietzschean creative destruction and Stirnerian egoism, while embracing a Pyrrhonist practice in "an attempt to turn others toward imperturbability by analyzing their views of reality and revealing the unproven assumptions and inner contradictions hidden within" (McEvilley 1988, p. 124). As such, his pursuit of liberation was indeed more personal and inward, often leading to his isolation and detachment, but nevertheless found itself in its longing for relation to others, whether it be in friendship or the drive to understand the fourth dimension. In this sense, Buber's supposition that "the innateness of the longing for relation is apparent even in the earliest and dimmest stage [of life]" (Buber 1970, p. 77) emerges again and again in Duchamp's life. It is this longing for relation that opens us to possibilities if we hear our I in the address of You, whereby we see the promise open to us in the dialogue of the I-You world.

5. Conclusions

As stated at the outset, Joseph Kosuth in his 1969 essay, “Art after Philosophy”, identified Duchamp as the beginning of conceptual art based primarily on his questioning of the nature or function of art by shifting art’s value from the retinal to the conceptual. This shift resulted in the dematerialization of art, foregrounding ideas, such that the aesthetic value came from the contribution an artwork made in expanding and/or nuancing the meaning of art rather than its visual representation or ensuing pleasure. The expansive nature of this shift manifested itself, as I hope this article has demonstrated, in the dialogical encounters of artist-artwork-audience. In the same essay, Kosuth argued by analogy on the basis of Kant’s analytic-synthetic distinction that, after Duchamp, art as analytic proposition is the new philosophy. In other words, when art is viewed within its context as art it provides no new additional knowledge about matters of fact: “A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art”. Art then cannot be a synthetic proposition because it cannot be verified empirically. As such, “in an age when traditional philosophy is unreal because of its assumptions, art’s ability to exist will depend not only on it’s *not* performing a service—as entertainment, visual (or other) experience, or decoration. . .but rather, it will remain viable by *not* assuming a [particular] philosophical stance”. And, while there are parallels to logic, mathematics, and science, “art deals analogously with the state of things ‘beyond physics’ where philosophy had to make assertions” (Kosuth [1969] 1993, pp. 20, 24).

Kosuth’s analogous use, though, of Kant’s analytic-synthetic distinction to countermand the twentieth-century antirealist philosophers by relegating art to the realm of metaphysics may be spurious without further substantiation, especially given W. V. O. Quine’s (1951) influential essay, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, delivered in 1950, that undid Kant’s distinction. Quine argued that all efforts to define an analytic proposition are circular and to be rejected because necessary truths could not be verified empirically, rendering metaphysics dead. While surely not the only reason, we can see why many late modern philosophers like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze resonate with Duchamp’s avant-garde efforts to throw off the shackles of Salon Cubism’s dogmatism and the oppressive universality of Kantian taste. Given this narrative, it is not difficult to read Duchamp as a nihilist who asserted his will to creative destruction à la Stirner or Nietzsche, leading to the very “death of art” in the cacophony of subjective relativism. And yet, Kosuth’s efforts to nurture an “ancient, yet ever-new” metaphysical conversation via Duchamp’s questioning of the nature of art is laudable, since even antirealists are not immune to metaphysics. Sequestering Concept Art to the realm of metaphysics, though, raises epistemological, not to mention ethical questions as to whether it can contribute to the knowledge economy.

If we consider the difference Duchamp’s indifference makes in light of dialogical personalism, perhaps Concept Art might be on more stable metaphysical grounds that allows for continued metaphysical exploration, generating fresh epistemological and ethical possibilities. Such possibilities would nurture what Bakhtin called “creative understanding” where “a meaning only reveals its depths” in the dialogical (Bakhtin 1986a, p. 7), in the encounters of artist-artwork-audience. This “aesthetics of difference” roots itself in the mutuality of the other, what Buber discerned from lived experience and conceptualized in his two-fold understanding of reality as I-You and I-It. On this basis, the artwork is an act of discovery where the artist actualizes her bodily encounter with what is present. While the artwork produced becomes part of the I-It world to be described, experienced, and aggregated, the receptive audience beholds the artwork and is confronted bodily again and again in an I-You encounter. As such, a dialogue ensues that humanizes and turns what seems to be superfluous into necessity through the act of perception, which is intensely hermeneutical. It is here that Duchamp’s “art coefficient” suggests that the audience, through the interpretative process, brings to light the unbeknownst intentions of the artist and latent aspects of the creative process. This aesthetic sensibility, for Duchamp, is an

apophatic sensibility predicated on difference that by means of the “beauty of indifference” delimits artistic conventions and leads to the cataphatic moment whereby new concepts and ideas about art, the world, self, others, and God emerge in the *between*.

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Notes

- ¹ In this interview, Marcel Duchamp is recalling his brothers' remarks from the leaders of the renowned “Cubist Salon” in Paris who were responsible for hanging paintings at the exhibition. The driving force of the decision was most likely made by Albert Gleizes (according to Marcel) and perhaps Jean Metzinger, though Marcel's brothers, both Cubist artists, were also part of the hanging committee.
- ² Duchamp's *Coffee Mill*, a Christmas gift to his brother Raymond in 1911, captures this sentiment well as it “showed him the way to escape from traditional ‘pictorial’ painting opening a window onto something else”. *Coffee Mill* would serve, in large part, as the impetus for Duchamp's renowned masterpiece, *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. See Tomkins (1997, p. 83).
- ³ While it can be argued that Duchamp appropriated the importance of the conceptual over the retinal, as well as chance and audience response from the likes of Gleizes and Metzinger, his radical embodiment of these notions in his artwork provided a break with and contrast to Salon Cubism (Gleizes and Metzinger 1964, pp. 8–9).
- ⁴ While the locution “aesthetics of difference” corresponds to Somers-Hall (2006), the illocutionary intent and perlocutionary effects are markedly different due to Deleuze's delimiting of reality to the immanent frame. Rather, “aesthetics of difference” resonates more with McEvilley (1992) and Biswas (1995).
- ⁵ It is important to note that dialogical personalism was a prominent feature of the European philosophical landscape during Duchamp's early intellectual development and later through the intellectual development of these same figures as well as second generation dialogical personalists like Emmanuel Lévinas, Romano Guardini, Paul Ricouer, and Alfonso López Quintás. For surveys of dialogical personalism, see Beauregard (2021), Buber (2002, pp. 249–64), and Casper (1967).
- ⁶ Tomkins offers an intriguing account of the scandalous nature of the Armory Show, not only for its upending of the American art scene but also for Duchamp's artwork's seeming ability to avoid the more scathing critiques of the show itself (Tomkins 1997, pp. 116–42; cf. Witham 2013, pp. 81–99).
- ⁷ For how the mathematics of the fourth dimension influenced Duchamp's work, see Seigel (1995, pp. 86–114) and Henderson (2005).
- ⁸ In the intervening decades, Duchamp would indirectly shape the Modern Art debate as to whether art should focus on its interiority and self-sufficiency or other alternatives involving apophaticism, performance, encounter, conceptualism, and social criticism (Hopkins 2000, pp. 37–66).
- ⁹ Common reference to Roussel's use of the *billard* (billiard table) in the opening line of his short story “*Parmi les noirs*” (“Among the Black People”) that was later substituted in the final line with *pillard* (pirate or plunder) with circuitous happenings in between to connect the two is exemplary of the transformations produced by Roussel's language games (Seigel 1995, pp. 76–77).
- ¹⁰ In a 1929 letter to his dear friend, benefactor, and fellow artist Katherine Dreier, Duchamp sought to assuage her of any negativity in his embrace of indifference, particularly in his decision to move to New York: “Don't see any pessimism in my decisions—they are only a way toward beatitude” (Marquis 1981, p. 236).
- ¹¹ In addition, some art historians note the influence of the little-known French symbolist poet Jules Laforgue, who also had a significant influence on T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, with respect to Laforgue's “nihilism, irony, and cynical humor” and “his frequent use of puns, alliterations, repetitions of sounds, and made-up word combinations” (Tomkins 1997, pp. 88–90, 191–92).
- ¹² See (Haynes 1995) for an astute introduction to Bakhtin's philosophy of creativity extended to visual arts, specifically painting and sculpture, as well as (Lake 2019) where she draws on Bakhtin to elucidate authorial presence in the novel through our need of the other.
- ¹³ Buber's emphasis on presence and its immediacy in the event of dialogical personalism not only resonates with but provides the philosophical and theological basis for Maria Stavrinaki's recent historical rereading of Dada art (Stavrinaki 2016), whereby presentism “seemed to be the only type of time favorable to the exercise of freedom” that “...could allow another history to surge up, a history emancipated from servile obedience to the past and the chaste utopia of the future” (Stavrinaki 2016, p. 4). One could conceivably make a similar argument for Duchamp.

- ¹⁴ See Sweetman (2001) where he articulates Buber's epistemology in greater depth using Gabriel Marcel to elucidate ambiguities to address various questions related to relativism, the status of theoretical knowledge, whether Buber's epistemology represents the world as it really is in itself, and how to characterize knowledge of the I-You relation. What he does not address, however, is the kind of knowledge communicated in and through art itself, which is one of the issues this article seeks to raise. Cf. Friedman (1954).
- ¹⁵ Duchamp considered the fourth dimension to be a projection, "...something you couldn't see with your eyes... just as the projecting of the sun on the earth makes two dimensions I thought that, by simple intellectual analogy, the fourth dimension could project an object of three dimensions" (Cabanne 1971, p. 40).

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