

## **Index and Icon in the Work of Duchamp and Dalí**

*by Margaret Iversen*

Both Duchamp and Dalí challenged the conventions of traditional pictorial representation, but they did so in quite different ways. My analysis of this difference makes use of the work of the American founder of the science of signs, Charles Sanders Peirce. By viewing the two artists' work through the lens of semiotics, it is possible to specify the nature of the divergence of their approaches as well as to demonstrate the convergence of their ultimate aims. As we shall see, Duchamp evaded conventional artistic mark-making by employing the index, while Dalí subverted pictorial representation by undermining the icon. In their differing ways, they both anticipated postmodern critiques of representation.

### **Peirce on Signs**

Peirce understood the sign as a tripartite entity binding together the sign itself, the thing signified and the cognition or feeling produced in the mind of the interpreter. His work is best known for his division of signs into three types: icon, index, and symbol. Although he was not particularly interested in aesthetics, Peirce was unusually attentive to what might be called the affective aspect of signs, that is, how they work upon the interpreter. For instance, he described the *index* as the most 'forceful' type of sign: it signifies by establishing an existential or causal link to its referent, either by directing our attention to something or by being physically impressed or affected by it.<sup>1</sup> A pointing finger and the demonstrative pronoun 'this' are indices of the first kind, while a finger print is an example of the index as trace. While pointing fingers and demonstrative pronouns must be simultaneous with and adjacent to their objects, the other sort of index is a mark or trace of some past contact. I'll refer to these two types as deixis and trace, respectively. For Peirce,

what chiefly characterizes the index is the way it forces our attention: “The index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.”<sup>2</sup> The index is the one type of sign that is actually affected by its object. As one commentator put it, “the concept of the index... seems to acknowledge the invasion of the semiotic system by the real.”<sup>3</sup> This is why indexical strategies have been adopted by artists who are interested in opening up their work to contingent, accidental or traumatic phenomena.

According to Peirce’s typology, the *icon* signifies by resembling or by sharing some quality with its object – a painted portrait is an obvious example of an iconic image – but a life or death mask is both an icon and an index. Photographs are also hybrid signs. Pierce regarded the diagram as a sub-specie of the icon because there is a relationship of similarity between given logical or temporal relations and the spatial relations of the diagram. Pictures often display logical relations diagrammatically, as when the most important figure in a composition is depicted larger or centrally positioned. The final type of sign, the *symbol*, refers to its object through habit or convention: examples include phonetic linguistic signs, Arabic numerals and colour-coded traffic lights. Pierce declared that it is the least compelling of the three: “a symbol, in itself, is a mere dream; it does not show what it is taking about. It needs to be connected with its object. For that purpose, an index is indispensable.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Duchamp and Indexicality**

In her influential article ‘Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America’ (1977), Rosalind Krauss drew attention to Duchamp’s practice of employing indexical signs. She calls his *Tu m’* (1918), a virtual “panorama of the index,” and observes that Duchamp apparently signalled its all-over indexicality by giving the painting a title consisting of two deictic indeces (called ‘shifters’ in

linguistics) -- ‘you’ and an abbreviated form of ‘me’. As if to announce the importance of this sign-function, a naive sign-painter’s depiction of a hand with a pointing index finger takes centre stage. Furthermore, the ten-foot expanse of the canvas is filled with what looks like distorted shadows cast by readymades, which were formed by projecting images of them on the canvas and tracing them with a pencil. Krauss also notes the indexical aspects of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23), including the dust accumulated on its surface which Duchamp used to colour the sieves. In addition, she reminds us that Duchamp’s notes on the *Large Glass* and on the readymade signalled their quasi-photographic status, one as a ‘delay in glass’, and the other as a ‘snapshot effect.’<sup>5</sup>

Krauss also discusses the work of Duchamp’s friend and frequent collaborator, the American photographer Man Ray, whose attraction to the index was most clearly manifested in his experiments with camera-less photography. While all photography is indexical, the Rayograph, as Krauss observes “forces the issue of the photograph’s existence as an index.”<sup>6</sup> She describes the images that result from putting objects directly onto light sensitive paper are described as the ‘ghostly traces of departed objects.’ Man Ray himself put it beautifully when he called the Rayograph ‘a residue of an experience... recalling the event more or less clearly, like the undisturbed ashes of an object consumed by flames.’<sup>7</sup> Although Krauss refers to the photogram as a ‘ghostly trace’ of past presence, what is crucial about the Rayograph, for her, is the way its physical genesis seems “to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representation of most paintings.” The photogram, like other indexical signs, “could be called sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things.” The index as both deixis and trace emerges here as a deliberate regression aimed at undoing the traditional conventions of painting.

When the mute index displaces traditional painterly conventions, the repressed symbolic aspect of art tends to return in the form of notes, accompanying texts, and captions. As Krauss puts it, the index “heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign. A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled by the addition of a text.” And so we find, alongside Duchamp’s work, a compensatory hypertrophy of detailed, if puzzling, notebooks. She declares that the altered relation between sign and meaning manifested in Duchamp’s practice amounts, to “a trauma of signification,” brought on by the rise of abstraction, on the one hand, and photography, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Krauss has next to nothing to say about Duchamp’s practice of casting, although it is obviously also an indexical procedure, beyond noting that *With My Tongue in my Cheek* (1959), is part cast, part drawing of the artist’s profile and so split along the semiotic axis of icon and index. Yet he was working extensively with preliminary plaster life casts and plastilene press-molds during the lengthy period of his work on the female figure in *Étant donnés*, 1946-66. The ground-breaking exhibition, *Part Object Part Sculpture* (2005) took Duchamp’s late mould and casts as a starting point - particularly the odd erotic objects he made such as, *Female Fig Leaf* (1950), the plaster cast of female genitalia. Duchamp was clearly interested in the erotic connotations of the cast with its concavities and convexities, its snug fit of object, cast and mold. The exhibition explored the impact of these objects on subsequent artists.<sup>9</sup>

The central claim of “Notes on the Index” is that the apparent plurality and diversity of practices characteristic of Seventies art masks a deeper affinity that has to do with the widespread use of indexical procedures. In Part 2 of her essay, Krauss demonstrates that Duchamp set an important precedent for later artists. Her account of Duchamp’s impact, however, differs substantially from the one outlined in *Part Object Part Sculpture*. This is so because she stressed

Duchamp's use of deixis (or the shifter, to use the linguistic term) rather than trace. The effect of the use of deixis as an artistic strategy is well-exemplified by one of Krauss's examples: Lucio Pozzi made two-coloured painted panels affixed onto walls where they replicated an abrupt colour change on the original school wall (*PS 1 Paint*, 1976).<sup>10</sup> It is as though the panel had absorbed the given configuration of colours on the wall behind it and, as a result, the autonomy of the work is compromised. Krauss concludes that these "paintings are understood ... as shifters, empty signs (like the word *this*) that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent, or object."<sup>11</sup> In other words, a work's character as a shifter renders it site-dependent; an intervention is made in the fabric of the building and is inseparable from it. A more recent example of indexical site-dependence is Rachel Whiteread's temporary sculpture *House* (1993). It was a cast of the interior of the last remaining house on a street being demolished in London's East End to make way for a 'regeneration' scheme; clearly, being *in situ* was intrinsic to the meaning of the work.

### **Dalí and the Simulacrum**

"Notes on the Index" stakes out Krauss's position with regard to the state of art after modernism. Her appropriation of Peirce's tripartite division of signs foregrounds indexicality and, to a lesser extent, the symbol, but the third type of sign in the typology, the icon, features only as a missing term. It is missing, I suspect, because the icon is the type of sign most closely associated with what is traditionally understood as pictorial art, including modernist painting. It is tempting to suppose that, while Duchamp dedicated himself to disrupting the field of pictorial representation by eliminating the icon, Dalí preserved and perfected it. But this would be a misunderstanding, for he too subverted pictorial representation, not by eliminating the icon, but

by undermining its claim to being a reliable representation of a pre-existing reality. In this way, he, like Duchamp, anticipated post-modernist critiques of representation and art practices.

When Dalí joined the Surrealists in 1929, their favourite mental illness was hysteria and they privileged phenomena such as hallucination, dream, and automatism. In the 1930 essay, “L’Ane pourri” (“The Rotten Donkey”), Dalí argued that while hallucination and dream have only an evanescent reality, the paranoiac can pick up minute indications and make connections that, as Freud often observed, display a subtlety and quickness of mind and also contain an undeniable kernel of truth.<sup>12</sup> Paranoid perception may be likened to Leonardo's technique of conjuring up images in damp stains or in clouds, but the experience is more intense. It was this compelling, objective quality of paranoiac perception that appealed to Dalí: “It suffices that the delirium of interpretation be able to connect up the meaning of heterogeneous images which cover a wall for it to be already impossible for anyone to deny the reality of this connection.”<sup>13</sup> Double-images are acutely paranoiac: “It is by a clearly paranoiac process that it is possible to obtain a double image, that is, the representation of an object which, without any figurative or anatomical modification, is at the same time the representation of another absolutely different object.”<sup>14</sup> Dalí refers in this context to the “visage paranoïaque” published in the journal *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* in 1931.<sup>15</sup> He relates how, taking a postcard of a tribal village from a drawer, he immediately ‘recognized’ it as a head painted by Picasso. Dalí’s *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* is an exemplary double image, but an image is capable of being more than double, as demonstrated by his *Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion, etc* (1930) and *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach*, the latter of which, a quintuple image, includes a giant dog (and a tiny duck/rabbit near his signature, if I’m not mistaken). Dalí’s aim of simulating the objective quality of paranoid perception explains his

characteristic hyper-realistic style of painting. His paintings, however fantastical, produce an undoubted ‘reality effect’. In *The Conquest of the Irrational* (1935), he declares that the only way to create “images of concrete irrationality” is to use the pictorial means of Velásquez and Vermeer. He also describes his painting as “instantaneous and hand-crafted colour photography.”<sup>16</sup>

In “The Rotten Donkey,” Dalí calls the images produced by paranoid perception ‘simulacra’. The simulacrum is a species of iconic image defined precisely by its ‘reality effect’, that is, its ability to convince a viewer of the reality of the depicted object. However, it’s superficial likeness lacks any essential, internal relation to a model.<sup>17</sup> The concept of the simulacrum became, for a group of philosophers, artists and critics in the 1970s and early 1980s, a means of undermining the very distinction between model and copy, original and reproduction. While mimesis claims faithfully to represent the real, the simulacrum undermines the notion of a stable reality. Dalí’s paintings subvert the claims of pictorial representation, and visual perception itself, by making all the possible readings of his double or multiple images equally valid: “It would be curious to find out what it is that the image under consideration really represents, what is the truth; and right away doubts are raised in our minds regarding the question of whether the very images of reality itself are not merely products of our own paranoiac capacity.”<sup>18</sup>

In his book, *Simulating the Marvelous: Psychology, Surrealism, Postmodernism*, David Lomas persuasively argues that Dalí can claim to have anticipated the clutch of French thinkers, including Derrida, Deleuze and Baudrillard, who were interested in the simulacrum’s challenge to the Platonic hierarchy of original and copy. His work, according to Lomas, precipitated “a perturbation in the order of mimesis, that hierarchy of model and copy that governs all of

Western metaphysics.”<sup>19</sup> Lomas demonstrates Dalí’s contemporary relevance with a discussion of the British painter Glenn Brown who simulates other artists’ paintings, including Dalí’s. Dalí also anticipated the activities of the well-known grouping of Appropriation or Pictures Generation artists, such as Cindy Sherman. Her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) are simulacra of film stills which mime other photographs, creating an infinite regress of simulacra.<sup>20</sup> As Douglas Crimp put it, in his influential “Pictures” essay (1979), “underneath each picture is always another picture.”<sup>21</sup> Amelia Jones, tracing the history of body art, positions Sherman in the context of a generation of artists set on subverting the ‘authentic’ bodily self that was projected by performance artists of the 60s and 70s. The younger generation of artists projected a “simulacral self, where ironic disillusionment replaces the self-proclaimed belief in ‘authenticity.’”<sup>22</sup> The value of appropriation art, according to this line of argument, is its demonstration that, just as reality is a reality-effect, so also personal identity is an identity-effect.

### **Jasper Johns**

I have argued that, while Duchamp’s strategy was to evade pictorial conventions by replacing iconic with indexical and symbolic signs, Dalí’s strategy was to undermine the very cornerstone of iconic representation, that is, its resemblance to a pre-existing reality – through the creation of simulacral, double and multiple images. While Duchamp neatly side-stepped the iconic sign, Dalí exacerbated it. Yet, it is curious, given the striking differences in their approaches, that both Duchamp and Dalí related their practices to photography. This is possible because of photography’s hybrid nature as both indexical and iconic sign. When Duchamp refers to the ready-made’s ‘snapshot effect’ he is alluding to the medium’s instantaneity and indexicality and its consequent association with contingency, chance, and automaticity. When Dalí refers to his ‘handcrafted colour photography,’ he is alluding to photography’s compelling verisimilitude as



well as its capacity to capture phenomena otherwise inaccessible to vision. Yet, from a certain point of view, the two artists' approaches are perfectly aligned: their work does not quite count as proper mimetic, pictorial representation. The cast or the readymade is too close to the object to represent it, for an imitation cannot correspond exactly to the model. As Georges Didi-Huberman noted in a discussion of wax models "Wax, in the matter of resemblance, goes too far."<sup>23</sup> The same goes for illusionistic and *trompe l'oeil* painting – it captures, deceives, tricks the eye, casting doubt on the reliability of visual perception and representation. The two artists also shared an interest in optical illusions, perspective, and stereoscopy, all of which complicate any simple conception of depiction's relation to its object.<sup>24</sup>

One way of demonstrating the convergence of the ultimate aims of the two artists is via the work of Jasper Johns. Johns's paints readymade motifs, such as the patterns of the American flag and target, as well as numbers and letters, or rather stencils of them. His motifs are not properly representations of something, but rather instances of a given pattern – tokens of a type. Johns's readymade motifs and his casts of objects and body parts demonstrate the extent to which his work is informed by Duchamp's. His twin beer cans, *Painted Bronze (Ballantine Ale)*, 1960, are, after all, perfect readymades. Or, are they perfect simulacra? They are cast in bronze and laboriously painted and doubled so that the difference between original and copy is cancelled. In truth, the distinction between the readymade and the simulacrum is difficult to maintain since both do away with uniqueness and, in any case, many of Duchamp's 'original' readymades are now handcrafted replicas. *Fountain* (1917), for example, only exists in the form of replicas based on a photograph of the 'original' mass-produced urinal.<sup>25</sup> But what are we to make of Johns's preoccupation with double images? To take just one example, *Spring* (1986) from the *Seasons* series of paintings, includes two familiar double images, a duck/rabbit and a young woman/old

crone, as well as a vase with facing negative silhouettes of the Queen and Prince Phillip. Johns's simulacral sculptures and double images seem to engage more with Dalí's preoccupations than with Duchamp's. Yet, *Spring*, also includes indexical signs - a stencilled image of his own shadow and a hand print. In other words, he moves freely, even in the same painting, between Duchamp's and Dalí's favoured strategies suggesting that he saw both as effective means of challenging the conventions of pictorial art still at home in modernist painting.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “Icon, Index, Symbol,” *Collected Papers: Vol. II*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), paragraphs 283-291, pages 161-165.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., paragraph 361, page 211.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers: Vol. IV*, paragraph 56, page 39.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index” (Part 1), *October* 3, Spring, 1977, 70. Reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 1986), 198 -199. (Subsequent references are to the reprint.)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>7</sup> Man Ray, “The Age of Light,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Krauss, “Notes on the Index” (Part 1), 203, 205, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue), Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University and University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005. In 2009, Michael Taylor’s detailed study of *Étant donné* appeared. Michael Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donné*, The Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Krauss took all her examples from the exhibition *Rooms*, 1976, which was the inaugural exhibition in the art space, PS1, now Moma PS1, a disused school building in Queens, New York.

<sup>11</sup> Krauss, “Notes on the Index” (Part 2), *October* 4, Fall, 1977. Reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Standard Edition*, vol. 6, 256.

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<sup>13</sup> S. Dalí, “l’Ane pourri,” *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*, 1, July, 1930, 10. Also printed in *La femme visible* (Paris: Editions surrealists, 1930), 18. Translated as “The Rotten Donkey,” in Dalí, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, edited and translated by Haim Finkelstein (St. Petersburg, Florida: The Dalí Museum, 2017), 223.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> The image was first printed and commented on by Dalí in “Communication, visage paranoïaque,” *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 3, 1931, 40.

<sup>16</sup> S. Dalí, *La Conquete de l’irrationnel* (1935), translated as “The Conquest of the Irrational,” in Dalí, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, 265.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent account of this view, see Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” *October* 27, Winter, 1983, 45-56. This is excerpted from Deleuze, *Logique de sens*, 1969, trans. *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale; ed. Constantin V. Boundes (London: Athlone, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> S. Dalí, “The Moral Position of Surrealism,” (1930) in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, 221.

<sup>19</sup> David Lomas (with Jeremy Stubbs), *Simulating the Marvelous: Psychology, Surrealism, Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 302.

<sup>20</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983). Baudrillard comments on Warhol’s work as follows: “The multiple replicas of Marilyn’s face are there to show at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation.” “The Orders of the Simulacrum,” *Simulations*, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring, 1979), 87.

<sup>22</sup> Amelia Jones, “Survey,” in Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones (eds.), *The Artist’s Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Order of Material: Plasticities, Malaises, Survivals,” in *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Brandon Taylor (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 203.

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<sup>24</sup> See Dawn Ades, “Dalí’s Optical Illusions,” *Dalí’s Optical Illusions*, edited by Dawn Ades (exhibition catalogue), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> See Duchamp’s remarks on the replica in “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp: Salt Seller/ Marchand du sel*, edited by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London, Thames and Hudson: 1975), 141.

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