“Mind Canaries”
Robin Blaser

Many of us have difficulty when first challenged by an exhibition such as this. Some ask, “What is it?” And others, “What does it mean?” Along with earlier work, the show comprises a ten year labour—interrogative and creative—begun in 1976: a sequence of collages, in which, as the artist says, “everything comes from the real.” That aspect of collage—one of its marvels insists upon the relationship of chance to meaning—is not against imagination, but it is against stereotypical imagination. Collage points to the materiality of its mean which are, as Apollinaire noted, “already steeped in humanity.” The “real” here includes photographs, art works, odd pieces of paper, things found in the lane behind Dikeakos’ studio, strands and spoons of thread, coiled, wrinkled and pressed kitchen foil, and so forth—things scattered, sometimes haphazardly dropped, other times carefully assembled, become a labyrinth of meaning, as if the left hand had drawn wrongly what the right hand had meant, or vice versa. I notice more than once in the sequence the effort “to bust out,” as the artist would say, of the labyrinth, the puzzle, the confusion, in order to organize what the works are most sensitive to: the disorder of public and private meaning in our lives.

This desire to be on top of things, even abstractly, is particularly noticeable in the first triptych, Praxis Makes Perfect. The Icarus theme of human flight, introduced at the beginning of the sequence in Explorer I and in Poster Icaria, becomes a failed transcendence. The subject, Icarus practising for his flight, is one composition changing three times, “constructivist exercises,” as the artist explained in conversation, but that practise is also a play of headstands, semispheres, Otto Lilienthal’s glider, squares within squares, which brings us back to the labyrinth of the Daedalus-Icarus story and the failure to transcend. These “exercises” are only momentarily self-referential in their foregrounding of an ancient Greek myth, a tale of Dikeakos’ ethnic background, which is also an astonishing paradigm of our own civilization with its fragmented transcendentalism of religion and reason. This problem of a human relationship to space, whether of earth or sky, haunts the entire sequence from the space-ship qualities of the Duchamp-Kiesler Explorer I to the final collages which present the changing face of Vancouver, Three Muses in Distress and Terminal City (1986)—I note especially the photograph of Joe David’s sculpture of his people’s traditional welcoming figure, its hands now dropped to each side, the gesture that once greeted the visitor, the white man, gone. Beginning with Duchamp, then—to whose place in Dikeakos’ thought I will return later—the problem of space is fundamental to the meaning of these works. In Poster Icaria, it is a matter of drifting, soaring, floating; in Praxis Makes Perfect, this becomes change, flux, entropy—one composition changing three times, but composed by gravity. Thus, again, we are back in the labyrinths designed by Daedalus, and from which he and his son, Icarus, were to escape by means of artistic wings. One implication is that the question is put to art itself, just what can it give us of a world-image, given that the traditional Hebraic-Christian cosmology and ethics are insufficient? The arts have long worked with the crisis of meaning in the Western tradition, only now and again at ease with its idealism or its materialism. If anything identifies twentieth-century art as set apart from the past, it is a full consciousness—sometimes regretful and nostalgic—of this crisis. Every contemporary artist enters this condition, and I am particularly interested in what Dikeakos does with it, whose use of myth and ancient gods is not nostalgic or simply literary. Instead, there are extraordinary elements of disappearance and absence in his work. It is this that many a viewer, including a part of myself, wishes not to understand.

Now, to return to the question, “What is it?” Collages that have been photographed (photography, that realistic illusion and closure of meaning that was thought to improve on painting), enlarged, and then painted, an act that returns these works to painting. The artist chose photographic oils of the kind that were used, before colour photography, to tint the portrait or the scene “realistically”—the lips scarlet, the eyes blue, the cheeks flushed, the tree greener than most. Dikeakos’ colours are startling—at time festive, a circus of intensity, gliter and gilt; or harsh and dramatic, as in a wonderfully drawn comic strip, say Flash Gordon, or lyric with lavenders and green sense, greens and blues. Now and again, the brightness suggests the colours of Greek statues, as if we had found them unworn, with the white and creamy marble freshly painted—the gaud of colour. These collage-paintings are in the mainstream of twentieth-century concern, and not simply because they quote by way of photography and shape (constructivism) and involve us in Dikeakos’ long meditation on the work of Duchamp.

And to return to the question, “What does it mean?” One must first imagine an activity of meaning that does not satisfy with resolution or stasis, because there is no traditional meaning that answers to twentieth-century violence and injustice. Our thoughtlessness of the way in which all of Western tradition is implicated in the events of the twentieth century—that the Western search for wholeness, completion and order has within it the potentiality of the practise of Nazism or Stalinsm or Maoism or Campucheanism or Cubanism can hardly be explained as the work of singular madmen (and it is clear that however corrupt Castro is in terms of freedom, he is not a madman). In the past—and now with continuing hangovers—we have tried to take art out of the politico-social commotion and privilege it in order to leave material concerns to the politicians—few of whom are even speakable. This left art to engage an identity, but identity is exactly that aspect of reality that has failed, whether we mean the Platonic, the Cartesian, the Hegelian or the Marxian variety. Or a failure within art itself suggested that it was only a matter of self-expression—which leads me to ask just how many private and personal ownerships, whims, griefs, jokes and joys does one want written on the public wall? The writing on the wall (see Daniel V. 5 or Timothy Findley’s Famous Last Words) is always prophetic. John Russell, writing in 1981, makes the point clearly:

“It is difficult to think of today’s world in terms other than those of crisis and emergency. What is at stake is the survival of the earth as a place fit to live on, and of the human race as something that will bear scrutiny. It was not in conditions such as these that the masters of early modern art grew to manhood; and a certain sympathetic indulgence should, I think, be accorded to those who aspire to be their successors. ‘What can we know for certain?’ is a question which has haunted modern art ever since it was first posed by Cézanne. If it has lately been answered primarily in terms of art’s own nature—if art, in other words, has aspired primarily to define itself—the lesson in self-knowledge which we can draw from it is nonetheless valid for being metaphorical...

Art is there to make sense of the world, and it should surprise nobody if over the last 50 years this has become progressively more difficult. In 1936, when Max Ernst...
the whole earth. Technology is a reality so powerfully real — visible, palpable, audible, ubiquitous — that the real reality has ceased to be natural or supernatural: industry is our landscape, our heaven and our hell. A Mayan temple, a medieval cathedral, or a baroque palace were something more than monuments: sensible points of space and time, privileged observatories from which man could contemplate the world and the transworld as a totality. Their orientation corresponded to a symbolic vision of the universe; the form and arrangement of their parts opened a plural perspective, a veritable crossing of visual paths: upward and downward, toward four points of the compass. Those works were not only a vision of the world, but they were made in its image: they were a representation of the shape of the universe, its copy or its symbol. Technology comes between us and the world, it closes every prospect from view: beyond its geometries of iron, glass, or aluminum there is exactly nothing, except the unknown, the region of the formless that is not yet transformed by man.

Technology is neither an image nor a vision of the world, it is not an image because its aim is not to represent or reproduce reality; it is not a vision because it does not conceive the world as shape but as something more or less malleable to the human will. For technology, the world presents itself as resistance, not as archetype: it has reality, not shape. That reality cannot be reduced to any image and is, literally, unimaginable. The ultimate purpose of ancient knowledge was the contemplation of reality, either sensible presence or ideal form; technological knowledge aspires to substitute a universe of machinery for the real reality. The artifacts and utensils of the past existed in space, which is radically altered by modern machinery. Space is not only populated by machines that tend toward automatism or are already automatons, but it is a field of forces, a knot of energies and relations — something very different from that more or less stable expanse or area of the former cosmologies and philosophies. . . . The constrictions of technology — factories, airports, power plants, and other grandiose establishments — are absolutely real but they are not presences; they do not represent: they are signs of action and not images of the world. . . . "15

I have quoted at length because these issues seem to me central to our understanding of contemporary art and, on this occasion, to our reading of Dikeakos' collage-sequence.

If it be accepted that our increasingly technological culture pushes us toward the "unknown" and the "formless," then it is exactly this that contemporary art must address, since its care can no longer float in the transcendent or curl around the old humanism, Paz again:

"Erected on the formless like the signs of technology and, like them, in search of a ceaselessly elusive meaning, the poem [the collage-painting] is an empty space but one charged with imminence. It is not yet presence: it is a swarm of signs that seek their meaning and whose only meaning is that they are a search.

The consciousness of history seemed to be modern man's great atainment. That consciousness has been transformed into a question about the meaning of history, a question without an answer. Technology is not an answer. If it were, it would be a negative one: the invention of weapons for total annihilation interdicts every hypothesis or theory about the meaning of history and the supposed reason inherent in the movements and struggles of nations and classes. But let us suppose that those weapons had not been invented or that the powers possessing them decided to destroy them: technical thought, lone survivor of the philosophies of the past, would not be able to tell us anything about the future either. Technology can foresee these or those changes and, up to a point, construct future realities. In this sense technology can produce the future. None of these marvells will answer the only question that man asks himself as historical being and, I must add, as man: the why and wherefore of changes. This question already contains, in germ, an idea of man and an image of the world."16

Yet, Paz insists that, "We have ceased to recognize ourselves in the future."

"The loss of the image of the future, Ortega y Gasset said, implies a mutilation of the past. So it is: everything that once seemed loaded with meaning now appears before our eyes as a series of efforts and creations that are a non-sense. The loss of meaning affects the two halves of the sphere, death and life: death has the sense that our living gives it; and the ultimate meaning of our living is being life in relation to death. Technology can tell us nothing about this."17

But art undertakes to do so.

Dikeakos' work is widely engaging in its entanglement and collage of discourses: artistic, mythological, scientific and philosophical. I notice the constant ease of meaning that is yet — for me, spectator that I am — close to non-sense, that principle that plays inside all contemporary meaning. Max Ernst was to say of collage: "It seems to be that one can say that collage is a hypersensitive and rigorously true instrument, like a seismograph, capable of registering the exact quantity of possibilities for human happiness in each epoch."18 Master collageist himself, he does not there mention the "illicit amorous tie" of happiness and terror so often figured in his collages (see Une Semaine de Bonté) — and that I, in turn, note here in the work of Christos Dikeakos. For the latter, that terror is both the disappearance of the world-image and the non-sense of ourselves. This is a realm of feeling that cannot exactly enter discourse. As Hannah Arendt remarked in Men in Dark Times, "Whatever cannot become the object of discourse — the truly sublime, the truly horrible or the uncanny — may find a human voice through which to sound into the world, but it is not exactly human."19 This is also a realm of feeling on the "borderland between reason and unreason," where humour dances, as G.K. Chesterton noted in relation to Lewis Carroll's non-sense and which I wish to place in this context in order to suggest the kind of terror I find in Dikeakos. Two stanzas from Carroll's great non-sense epic, The Hunting of the Snark:

"I engage with the Snark — every night after dark —
In a dreamy delicious fight.
I serve it with greens in those shadowy scenes,
And I use it for striking a light;
But if ever I meet with a Boojom, that day,
In a moment (of this I am sure),
I shall softly and suddenly vanish away —
And the notion I cannot endure!"

(The Baker's Tale.)
Martin Gardner, in his wonderful Annotated Snark, catches precisely what I am trying to catch in Dikeakos:

"This is the great search motif of the poem, the quest for an ultimate good. But the motif is submerged in a stronger motif, the dread of ultimate failure. The Boojum is more than death. It is the end of all searching. It is final, absolute extinction. In a literal sense, Carroll’s Boojum means nothing at all. It is the void, the great blank emptiness out of which we miraculously emerged; by which we will ultimately be devoured; through which the absurd galaxies spiral and drift endlessly on their nonsense voyage from nowhere to nowhere.

Paul Goodman’s novel, The Grand Piano (1941), closes with its hero, Horatio Alger, wiring an explosive to the piano key of B flat... just below the center of the keyboard. The idea is to play a composition in which the tones cluster around the death-note, never touching it, but always calling for it as a resolution.

This is, of course, precisely the wild demonic music that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are now playing, and in which other, less skilled musicians will soon be joining. It is this background music that gives to Lewis Carroll’s poem, when it is read today, a new dimension of anxiety."  

No wonder that André Breton’s first surrealist manifesto (1924) claimed Carroll for modern thought, and no surprise that Louis Aragon translated the poem (however unsatisfactorily), La Chasse au Snark (1929).

I gaze again, wandering among the pieces of Dikeakos’ work, from its beginning in the tinted Poem Figevre, Marcel Duchamp in His Studio (Kiesler, 1945 & Dikeakos, 1976; to Explorer I and Explorer II (1979-1984); to Medusa Hair (1985); to Context of Medusa: Explorer III (1986), with its mock-temple façade, decorated with biological problems, its doors open for entrance or exit, and two life-size children, Perseus Emmanuel Dikeakos and Perseus George Dikeakos, artists dressed as warriors, standing before them. This antepenultimate piece seems to bring the curling, turning, entangling sense and non-sense to full measure. For all the charm of the children, the centre cannot be the old humanism, so much in question. Indeed, there can be no centre: this work, as the artist has said, is “multi-thematic,” made of many discourses of the real, which at times collapse helplessly into one another; yet, those discourses also describe with clarity the realms of love and strife, which interpenetratingly shape our condition, culturally and individually.

Let us stop over some of the details of this Temple (I will return to consider Explorer I in a moment): we see the backs of two persons with smallpox; interchanging figures of death and sleep; at the centre, a collage within the collage of the Lebanese Civil War; hands whose gestures suggest benediction, but parts of these hands are missing; diseased tongues stick out of the terror. Within this overwhelming gathering of terror, we see — and must look at — Medusa, the “cunning” Gorgon. As the artist remarked to me in conversation, these wild and fierce elements do exist at the edge of existence. The two boys are placed here in confrontation with these mysterious forces which undo life. Joseph Campbell is useful in this context:

“In the legend of Medusa... though it is told from the point of view of the classic Olympian patriarchal system, the older message can be heard. The hair of Medusa, Queen of Gorgons, was of hissing serpents; the look of her eyes turned men to stone. Perseus slew her by device and escaped with her head in his wallet, which Athene then affixed to her shield. But from the Gorgon’s severed neck the winged steed Pegasus sprang forth, who had been begotten by Poseidon and now is hitched before the chariot of Zeus. And through the ministry of Athene, Asclepius, the god of healing, secured the blood from the veins of Medusa, both from her left side and from her right. With the former he slays, but with the latter he cures and brings back to life.

Thus in Medusa the same two powers coexisted as in the black goddess Kali of India, who with her right hand bestrides booms, and in her left holds a raised sword. Kali gives birth to all beings of the universe, yet her tongue is rolling long and red to lick up their living blood. She wears a necklace of skulls; her kilt is of severed arms and legs. She is Black Time, both the life and the death of all beings, the womb and tomb of the world: the primal and only, ultimate reality of nature, of whom the gods themselves are but the functioning agents.”

I would say that the gods are the functioning vocabulary of that ultimate reality. The confrontation with all those forces that undo life — social, economic, political, psycho-physical and biological — is necessarily felt by us, and such is Dikeakos’ sense of the “fundament.” So, the kids look straight at you, young as the Hellenes who named the Gorgons, and alive to penetrate great illusion and great awfulness. Of course, the judgement is no longer God’s, but our own upon our own works. Wars and injustice, on the other side of our biological chances, are no longer God’s judgement; rather, they are a matter of our own processes. The trouble is that we have to do with an art that has to do with the unrepresentable.

I want now to return to the beginning of this collage-sequence: to the Kiesler-Duchamp and to Explorer I. The first of these is a photocopy of Frederick J. Kiesler’s photo-montage entitled Les Larves d’Imagie d’Henri Robert Marcel Duchamp: M.D. emeritus for chronic diseases of the Arts — the word “Larvae” carries both its biological meaning and the Latin for ghost, spectre, mask; and the word “Imagie” combines the words image and magic. Kiesler’s black and white montage is a triptych which, he explains in a note, “when unfolded represents three walls of Duchamp’s studio on 14th Street in New York.” It is closed and open, a dense and clever homage to the life and work of Duchamp up to 1945, when it was published in the Marcel Duchamp issue of View: two cut-out flaps on the left and the right may be folded inward and interlocked over the figure of Duchamp, thus transforming the centre of the triptych into a “vision” of the Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even), which Duchamp left “finally unfinished” in 1922.22 On the right volet of the open triptych, Kiesler writes “POEME ESPACE dédié à H(éronymus) Duchamp,” and signs his name. It is a little masterpiece itself, the three walls joining in a concave of space, floating on the traffic of New York and disappearing in wavy lines on the left and the right. Christos Dikeakos has simply taken the Duchamp studio of the open triptych, tinted it gently with dawn colours, and signed his name at the left with the date 1976. This act compounds the find that Duchamp is for him as a painter with both Duchamp’s own act of signing ready-mades and Kiesler’s assembling of his homage. The act of painting this photograph, which is also a collage, is a first principle of Dikeakos’ work, which, as I’ve already noted, returns the whole project to painting; the colours are reminiscent of Duchamp’s gentle colours in the Large Glass with the added
imaginative touch of the blues, as if one had looked through the ‘Glass’ — as one can in Philadelphia. And Dikeakos’ colouring also tends further to specialize the work of Kiesler. Even Kiesler’s quick reference to Hieronymus Bosch in the dedication vibrates in Dikeakos, whose interest in the great triptychs is of long standing — The Garden of Earthly Delights (Madrid), The Hay Wain (Madrid) and The Temptation of St. Anthony (Lisbon). The riddle of them is demanding, and their density of meaning suggests that this painter, who died in 1516 — one step ahead of the Reformation, so to speak — and who could paint within the tradition, had to depart from convention in order to say something radical and critical. I think particularly of Of the Garden of Earthly Delights: open, the left volet presents the garden of Eden; the central panel, an intense and continuous paradise; the right volet, Hell and the loss of earthly delights, especially terrifying in the figuration of the hell of the musicians. The whole panorama is informed by an affirmation of bodily delights. In fact, the body had to be reclaimed from original sin and the dogmatism which so denigrated it. Closed, the volets represent an unfinished universe, the third day of creation. Wilhelm Fränget comments:

‘... while night is fading into dawn, and the sea brings forth from its womb the disc of the earth, while rock and soil become alive with vegetation, and plant-life changes into animal-life, torrents of rain are about to fall from the highest heaven to fertilize Paradise, the navel of the earth ...’

so that Adam may appear. For us, whatever has happened to Adam, it is difficult to say. For now, I want only to point to Dikeakos’ interest in radical and critical re-visioning, and to his repeated use of triptych and diptych forms in the sequence. It is interesting that Kiesler and Dikeakos share this original source. Though Bosch’s Adamic beliefs cannot be forwarded, his use of extraordinary means can.

Explorer I is again Kiesler, coloured and enlarged. The collage of beautiful details begins: perhaps the most important are the wings and the labyrinth. We enter the puzzle or the space-ship of the artist. Duchamp is seen as an explorer of unknown arts in a continuous space, an endless room. Dikeakos’ entrance with colour and collage begins the narrative of sequence. The wings, as I have already noted, are suggestive over and over again of our effort and failure to transcend contemporary conditions. Here, they are also poetic emblems of the artist’s effort to envision a world-image. The labyrinth, its fine intricacy suggestive of Duchamp’s chessboard, brings forward the first artist, the mythic Daedalus. Thus, by a thread, so to speak — important for getting through the labyrinth — collage of elements brings together Duchamp, Daedalus and his son Icarus, and Dikeakos to enter the continuous, contemporary puzzle of art: what it is doing and what it can do. Icarus, as the artist has stated, becomes ‘an extended metaphor of man’s unlimited imaginary boundaries versus his physical and moral limitations.’ The theme of the first artist begins the mythic structure of the sequence, which is later pushed back to the third millennium B.C. with the photograph of the Cycladic harper — a Homer before Homer, from a once flourishing culture located on rocky islands between the coasts of what is now Greece and Turkey. Myth in these works is astonishing and unsentimental, a kind of retrieval system by way of collage, which reaches into the archaic of human nature. This is, of course, a modernist concern that has been much misunderstood. The effort to find a way in art has repeatedly returned to the history of human consciousness, and, by way of myth, to that which overwhelms us. The play — or should I say plight — of myth in Dikeakos — Apollo, Zeus, Hera, Eros, Sphinx, Morpheus or Thanatos — tends to re-open each of the realms that they command into a largeness, not necessarily beyond human nature, which is not under the control of the human will. If the concern is marriage or death or knowledge, the play of meaning is both large and small and in meaning: Speedy Apollo Pizza is a case in point; the gods become a pantheon of pizza-makers, and Apollo’s name is given by way of an advertisement for a Greek plumbing company. I have, I believe, suggested enough to leave another spectator to make his or her own reading.

I want, however, to say a little about the presence of Duchamp here in Explorer I and of the consequences for all of these collage-paintings. This involves us in the central affirmation of Dikeakos’ work. We still need some guidance where Duchamp is concerned, and, as it happens, we do have three splendid guides in André Breton, Robert Lebel and Octavio Paz. Breton, writing of the Large Glass [La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (Le Grand Verre, 1915-23)] in his essay, ‘Lighthouse of the Bride,’ reflects: ‘No work of art seems to me, up to this day, to have given as equitable scope to rational and the irrational as La Mariée mise a nu. ... It is wonderful to see how intact it manages to keep its power of anticipation. And we should keep it luminoously erect to guide future ships on a civilisation which is ending.’ This predication of a ‘civilization which is ending’ is, of course, surrealism dogma, but it should not, for all that, be dismissed — Breton is too important a thinker ever to be dismissed. I have tried in this essay to indicate that this is the concern of a wide current of modern and contemporary art — what I called the insufficiency of our traditional meaning in the face of twentieth-century experience. It is not apocalyptic — that moment once and for all — and the depth of this experience of disappearance is unrepresentable, posed as it is between the past and a future which is unknown — a blank. Since it is my purpose to consider Duchamp in the context of contemporary Dikeakos, it is well to keep in mind Jean François Lyotard’s remarks on the ‘postmodern artist and writer’:

‘... the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. ... Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.’

This is also applicable to Duchamp’s work in which a number of important artists and writers have found a “lighthouse.”

The use of the term postmodern is interesting in this context because, though it is much misunderstood and theoretically shaky, it does indeed point to the necessary, ongoing dialogue with modernism that artists at the end of the twentieth century have undertaken. It is a mistake of both modernism and postmodernism that some of its participants propose a being beyond the past, as with the former, or a being beyond the modern, as with the latter. An informed, radical and critical dialogue is what is required. Sadly, few have worked from a profound knowledge of modernism itself, so that some aspects of postmodernism fail in a positivism of language and the sign that is simply another dead-end.

For the present occasion, I will adapt the shorthand of Octavio Paz, whose book on Marcel Duchamp seems to me a major document of contemporary thought, to read something of this dialogue:
Picasso has rendered our century visible to us; Duchamp has shown us that all the arts, including the visual, are born and come to an end in an area that is invisible. Against the lucidity of instinct he opposes the instinct for lucidity: the invisible is not obscure or mysterious, it is transparent. . . . The rapid parallel I have drawn is not an invidious comparison. Both of them, like all real artists, and not excluding the so-called minor artists, are incomparable. I have linked their names because it seems to me that each of them has in his own way succeeded in defining our age: the former by what he affirms, by his discoveries; the latter by what he negates, by his explorations. I don’t know if they are the ‘greatest’ painters of the first half of the century. I don’t know what the word ‘greatest’ means when applied to an artist.”  

(My italics.)

Paz highlights the most important characteristics of Duchamp’s art, which seem to me directly relevant to our reading of Dikeakos’s collage-paintings. The relationship is not simply formal. Duchamp is first of all a “painter of ideas,” one who “never yielded to the fallacy of thinking of painting as a purely manual and visual art.” With Dikeakos, however strongly his collage technique draws our attention to the materiality of his means, the work also begins with idea, negation and exploration. I note the repeated appearance in these paintings of studies of eye movements (perspective changing) and of Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic studies of human and animal movement, which Dikeakos, in turn, connects with the myths of Icarus and Pegasus. All these may, then, be even further extended by collage relation to other, only apparently, disparate elements — carefully, thoughtfully leading us into a kind of general irony. But the darkness in Dikeakos is too profound for the irony to hold still; thus, the negative “exclusion” turns on itself and becomes a recognition or a series of recognitions of a nameless and unrepresentable condition. And this, we must recognize, is a kind of affirmation.

Making History (1981-84) is, perhaps, the clearest example in which the disappearing temple-shape contains reflections on Greece since the Second World War. This occurs in time levels: the Fascist occupation of Greece, followed by the displacement of democratic government by military regimes, the latter complicated by the fact that the “news” of these events comes through Canadian sources, the C.B.C. and The Vancouver Sun. Indeed, The Sun could, within a few days of one another, run a headline on the imposition of martial law in Greece and a piece on how nice it is to visit that country. Such topicals are laid alongside others in Greece itself: Greek TV with its “logo,” the Phoenix, and a shot of the dictatorial George Papadopoulos — even a Greek cartoon for children; then, above and in the middle, Muybridge’s man and horse in procession, which brings forward the processions of the Parthenon frieze; and in the lower panel, Muybridge, a rocking horse, and surely our thought of the Trojan horse. The images of the destruction of the Polytechnik Schoo in Athens and the resulting student uprising, which turns the Greek people against the Army and the Junta, brings us forward in time to the important memorialized date, November 17, 1973, when it was clear that, as the artist says, “the youths and children created a contagious and public revolution.” Middle-aged Greeks and parents had not forgotten the plight of the children during the Civil War, and, in sympathy, they joined the rebellion. Finally, even the soldiers refused to obey commands to fire. These become centrifugal signals of the end of the Papadopoulos regime. Underneath the image of a donkey, a caption, dated Feb. 5, 1984, states that “the former Greek dictator George Papadopoulos, 63 years old, serving a life sentence for leading the 1967 coup that overthrew democracy for 7 years, has been declared leader of the new right-wing political group and may try to run for election to the European Parliament.” The irony here is also a blank of meaning has a verbal source: Stratis Haviaras’ brilliant novel, The Heroic Age (1984), about a band of homeless children caught in the Civil War which devastated Greece after the Second World War. Dikeakos has said of this novel that it “talks about that aspect of the children at the edge of existence,” which the artist wishes to contextualize. And so he has in the very subject of the piece: paralogenia, Greek for crazy, and alogos, without reason. Suddenly, one notices the image of the Cycadic harper, who returns again and again in these explorations, an emblem of the archaic vitalities that gave us Homer sometime before 700 B.C. I have, unfortunately, simplified the rush of collisions in this collage-painting, but I hope that what I have done does suggest what Paz calls, in Duchamp, “meta-irony”: “It is an irony that destroys its own negative and, hence, returns to the affirmative.”

Dikeakos’s verbal sources are, of course, very different from Duchamp’s. Yet, through Duchamp’s incorporation of his own verbal sources — say, Mallarmé — an artist, such as Dikeakos, who has so thoughtfully meditated Duchamp’s work, becomes, to a considerable degree, a participant in those ideas. It is an error to read either Duchamp or Dikeakos as simply literary, the error of those who think of painting as only manual or retinal. Paz brilliantly notices that the “slow movement of the woman machine” (Nude Descending a Staircase, 1912) is:

“... an echo or an answer to that solenn moment in which Ignot abandons his room forever and goes step by step down the stairs which lead him to the crypt of his ancestor... In both cases there is a rupture and a descent into a zone of silence. There the solitary spirit will be confronted with the absolute and its mask, chance.”

I note, then, the descent in Dikeakos and the chance that is the condition of his subject.

Duchamp is there at the beginning of this collage-sequence — and fascinatingly present throughout — because he represents, more than any other artist, the “break with traditional conceptions of art” — out of necessity, as I have argued. It is this break with which many contemporary artists continue to work because it is both a “breaking out” and a “breaking into.” Paz notices Duchamp’s triple experiment, his physiques amusantes: “a straight thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane and, twisting as it pleases, gives us a new model for the unit of length,” in Duchamp’s words. Repeated three times, these are then preserved in a croquet box as “canned chance.” Paz comments that this instance, other experiments and notes:

“... have the aim of rendering useless our notion of left and right, here and there, East and West. If the center is in a state of permanent seisim [shaking as in an earthquake], if the ancient notion of solid matter and clear distinct reason disappear and give place to indetermination, the result is general disorientation.”

The idea is that our condition is a kind of “permanent seisim.” This is one implication of that aspect of Duchamp’s work that is wrongly called “anti-art,” the ready-made such as The Fountain and The Snow Shovel, so smartly signed by the artist.

Paz comments:

“The Ready-made does not postulate a new value: it is a
jibe at what we call valuable. It is criticism in action: a kick at the work of art enconced on its pedestal of adjectives. The act of criticism unfolds in two stages. The first belongs to the realm of hygiene, intellectual cleanliness — the Ready-made is a criticism of taste; the second is an attack on the idea of the work of art.”

This seems to me important to our understanding of Duchamp's place in Dikeakos’ exhibition: he is part of an intellectual honesty that is also an effort to return art to its place in public thought. Further, it must be understood that Duchamp's "criticism" of art is also a return to the oldest tradition of art — before it lost its meaning by becoming objets d'art, only an aspect of the mercantilism that controls us. Paz insists that the Large Glass "continues, in its own way, the great tradition of Western painting," and he quotes Duchamp's remarkable statement to that effect:

"It was my intention not to make a painting for the eyes, but a painting in which the tubes of color were a means and not an end in themselves. The fact that this kind of painting is called literary doesn’t bother me; the word 'literature' has a very vague meaning and I don’t think it is adequate. . . . There is a great difference between a painting that is only directed toward the retinal impression — a painting that uses the tubes of color as a springboard to go further. This was the case with the religious painters of the Renaissance. The tubes of color didn’t interest them. What they were interested in was to express their idea of divinity, in one form or another. With a different intention and for other ends, I took the same concept: pure painting doesn’t interest me either in itself or as a goal to pursue. My goal is different, a combination of, at any rate, an expression that only gray matter can produce."¹³

Our public meaning, now more than ever, is invisible, a blank to be filled, an unknown, because it involves us in a more profound knowledge of ourselves, our processes and the cosmos. We are also involved in a "radical skepticism," "open and accepting of the unknown, that moves like a shadow through Dikeakos’ work."³⁴

He has given over ten years to work with this chance of things:

"Chance is only one of the manifestations of a master plan that goes far beyond us. About this plan we know nothing, or next to nothing, except its power over us."³⁵

We have, then, to do with an art that begins with a meditation on Duchamp, especially the Large Glass — that "delay" and exploration of meaning. Even the butterfly images that begin to enter Explorer 1, like disembodied wings trying to escape through the skylight on the left, picks up the "ventilator mixer" (see Duchamp's notes on the "Glass") of the seventh parasol of the Sieve, which has the shape of a butterfly (the lower, male section of the "Glass"). "Bedazzlement," "metamorphosis," "changing forms," "disorientation," the labyrinth — all of them terms that apply to Paz's reading of Duchamp — are at work in Dikeakos in his playing out of the "unknown dimension," which he has made his own. It is necessary to say that we are not, in any sense, entering upon another metaphysics. Dikeakos handles metaphysics as an absence or silence. Paz notes that one critic interpreted a similar characteristic in Duchamp as atheism:

"From the point of view of Christian tradition, his verdict is correct. But our believers and our atheists belong to one and the same family: the former affirm the existence of a single God, a personal Creator; the latter deny it. The negation of the latter makes sense only in the context of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic concept of God. As soon as it abandons these grounds, the discussion loses interest and turns into a quarrel inside a sect. In reality our atheism is anti-theism. For a Buddhist atheist, Western atheism is only a negative and exasperated form of our monotheism. Duchamp has declared quite rightly on a number of occasions that ‘the genesis of the “Glass” is exterior to any religious or antireligious preoccupation.’ (In this context the word ‘religion’ refers to Christianity. The rites and beliefs of the East, for the most part, don’t constitute what we would call a ‘religion’; this term should be applied only in the West.) Duchamp expresses himself even more clearly in a letter to Breton: ‘I don’t accept discussions about the existence of God on the terms of popular metaphysics, which means that the word “atheist” as opposed to “believer,” doesn’t even interest me. . . . For me there is something else that is different from yes, no, or from indifferent — for example: absence of investigation in this area.”³⁶

A term only to be applied in the West. I have quoted at length this important consideration because it is central to the continuing change in our sense of a world-image. The investigation is, however, also continuing to be undertaken. We are inside that which is to be imagined.

I do not mind that such long quotations tend to make my essay look like an anthology. Paz, in my experience here, is not well enough known, and Duchamp involves an argument. I have, with Paz’s companionship, made an argument that is meant to inform our reading of Dikeakos. I want to bear this statement of Duchamp’s meaning in mind, as I, as spectator, attempt to read Dikeakos’ collage-paintings:

"The history of modern painting, from the Renaissance to our own times, could be described as the gradual transformation of the work of art into an artistic object: a transition from vision to the perceptible thing. The Ready-mades were a criticism both of taste and of the object. The Large Glass is the last genuinely meaningful work of the West; it is meaningful because by assuming the traditional meaning of painting, which is absent from retinal art, it dissolves it in a circular process and in this way affirms it. With it our tradition comes to an end. Or, rather, the painting of the future will have to begin with it and by confronting it, if painting has a future or the future a painting."³⁷

Both form and space are open. We work, as Paz suggests, with an "absence of meaning and the necessity of meaning" — not by physical possession, but by way of a vision and a possibility that are honest — in "a world that has not yet taken shape."³⁸

This is, so far as I am able to express it — with all the assistance I have drawn from Paz and a few others — the "spirit of the age."

But we are in a period that appears to be going backward, evidence of which can be found among artists and spectators alike. Lyotard calls our attention to this and makes a "demand":

"This is a period of slackening — I refer to the color of the times. From every direction we are being urged to put an end to experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere. I have read an art historian who exclaims realism and is militant for the advent of a new subjectivity. I have read an art critic who packages and sells "Transavantgardism"
in the marketplace of painting. I have read that under the name of postmodernism, architects are getting rid of the Bauhaus project, throwing out the baby of experimentation with the bathwater of functionalism. I have read that a new philosopher is discovering what he drollly calls Judaeo-Christianism, and intends by it to put an end to the impiety which we are supposed to have spread.”

Examples could be multiplied of what can only be backward glances. Lyotard concludes with his “demand”:

“...Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.”

With this I wish to return the spectator to my earlier concern in this essay with Dikeakos’ bits and pieces, edges, threads and intertwining discourses.

I wish to close these remarks on the extraordinary “delay” of our world-image, as I find it in Dikeakos’ work, with what seems to me a brilliant evocation of what we are trying to imagine. Michel Serres, in his collection of essays, entitled *Hermes*, on our contemporary sense of literature, science and philosophy — thus, to name the Greek god of crossways and boundaries — gives us a sense of what we are approaching:

“The realms of the subjective and of the objective are no longer at odds. The observer as object, the subject as the observed, are affected by a division more stable and potent than their antique separation: they are both order and disorder. From this moment on, I do not need to know who or what the first dispatcher is: whatever it is, it is an island in an ocean of noise, just like me, no matter where I am. It is the genetic information, the molecules or crystals of the world, the interior, as one used to say, or the exterior — none of this is important any longer. A macro-molecule, or any given crystallized solid, or the system of the world, or ultimately what I call ‘me’ — we are all in the same boat. All dispatchers and all receivers are structured similarly. It is no longer incomprehensible that the world is comprehensible. The real produces the conditions and the means for its self-knowledge. The ‘rational’ is a tiny island of reality, a rare summit, exceptional, as miraculous as the complex system that produces it, by a slow conquest of the surf’s randomness along the coast. All knowledge is bordered by that about which we have no information. It is no longer necessary to maintain the distinction between introspective knowledge, or ‘deep’ knowledge,
and objective knowledge. There is only one type of knowledge and it is always linked to an observer, an observer submerged in a system or in its proximity. And this observer is structured exactly like what he observes. His position changes only the relationship between noise and information, but he himself never effaces these two stable presences. There is no more separation between the subject, on the one hand and the object on the other (an instance of clarity and an instance of shadow). This separation makes everything inexplicable and unreal. Instead, each term of the traditional subject-object dichotomy is itself split by something like a geographical divide (in the same way as am I, who speak and write today): noise, disorder, and chaos on one side;

complexity, arrangement, and distribution on the other. Nothing distinguishes me ontologically from a crystal, a plant, an animal, or the order of the world; we are drifting together toward the noise and the black depths of the universe, and our diverse systemic complexions are flowing up the entropic stream, toward the solar origin, itself adrift. Knowledge is at most the reversal of drifting, that strange conversion of time, always paid for by additional drift; but this is complexity itself, which was once called being. Virtually stable turbulence within the flow. To be or to know from now on will be translated by: see the islands, rare or fortunate, the work of chance or of necessity.
NOTES

7. Ibid., “Dialogue Between Timandro and Eleanadro”:
414-415, cited in translator’s introduction: 16.
13. Ibid.
16. Ibid.: 243-244.
17. Ibid.
22. See *View: The Modern Magazine*, “Marcel Duchamp Number,” Series V, No. 1 (March, 1945): 24; Kiesler lists in detail the elements in the work. Note that the photograph of New York streets on the page following the folded triptych, above an advertisement for the Pierre Matisse Gallery, is part of the triptych.
28. Ibid.: 5.
30. Ibid.
32. Ibid.: 22.
33. Ibid.: 73-74, citing Duchamp’s “Conversation with Alain Jouffroy,” in *Une Revolution du Regard*.
34. See Paz on these issues: 35.
35. Ibid.: 35-36.
37. Ibid.: 84.
38. Ibid.: 80.
39. Lyotard, *op. cit.*: 71 and 82.