Christos Dikeakos: Patisserie Duchamp / Puis-je fumer

Christos Dikeakos, *VIEW* magazine; 51 x 41 cm, inkjet photo collage on watercolor paper from the clamshell portfolio “Patisserie” Duchamp après que Christos Dikeakos pâtissier, 1987/2008

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Introduction

This exhibition, conceptualized and created by Christos Dikeakos, combines drawing, collage, photography, and sculpture, which unpacks Dikeakos’ 40-year interest in the work and thoughts of French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). The parallel subject is smoking—as social behaviour, its cultural dimensions and implications—but the objective is neither to celebrate nor demonize. Rather, Dikeakos channels the narcotic and erotic aspects of a now socially unacceptable habit through Duchamp, metaphor, visual indiscretion and the play of words.

The organizing principle of Dikeakos’s project is drawn from the two Duchamp “boîte” editions; the so-described Green Box of 1934—a loose accumulation of notes for The Large Glass (1915-1923)—and the Boîte-en-Valise produced between 1941 and 1967. (An edition from Series F, 1967, is in the collection of the McMaster Museum of Art; the remainder of the edition was issued posthumously.) Dikeakos referenced these in two prior works of a locality-anthropological nature, Athens (1887-1996), and Vancouver: Sites and Place Names (1991-1994). As an inventory-in-miniature of his career, the replicants that constitute the boîte are sometimes interpreted as Duchamp’s “fine disregard” for the preciousness and veneration ascribed to “unique” works of art—or to distance himself from his own production as an artist. Yet he embraced every aspect of its elaborate production. Through the carefully ordered arrangements, the boîte is a work about work, and a “portrait” of the artist at work. In a wry fashion, it also takes the curator “out of the equation,” although some aspects of the display of the contents are left to the “owner of the boîte” to determine. At the same time, any attempt to display every element is thwarted because of its construction and design.

Dikeakos’ undertaking is, likewise, a total work—including smoking artifacts and ephemera that he has collected over the years, as well as works by Duchamp—that presents the model of museum within a museum, and the framework for his visual and cultural research. In doing so, it can also be described as a “theatre of the museum” in which the topic is a story of human behaviour and the human condition, yet achieved with humour and wit. Being able to laugh at ourselves is one way of learning.

Ihor Holubizky
Senior Curator, McMaster Museum of Art

Christos Dikeakos: Patisserie Duchamp/Puis-je fumer has been organized by Museum London in partnership with McMaster Museum of Art.
This project developed from ongoing work that dates from 1974/1994; a body of work that was left in a time capsule, in storage, and the ideas and sketches of my unfinished master’s thesis on *The Large Glass* by Marcel Duchamp. It is combined with another related work, *May I Smoke/Puis–je fumer*, which is also aligned to Duchamp and my preoccupation of cigar smoking as a working studio pastime/activity and pseudo addiction.

Smoking tobacco has played a role in art as both an inspiration and a psychoactive mood altering substance. Tobacco and coffee, which were introduced in 17th century Europe from the New World, are natural stimulants that can increase alertness and the ability to concentrate, but also induce craving and the pleasures of addiction. Tobacco smoke, especially in the early 20th century, proliferated in the social and private spaces of artists. This smoke-filled air of cafes and restaurants was also the odour of noteworthy artists’ egos. Now in the 21st century, we are witnessing the end of tobacco as a psychoactive force; it is prohibited in public places, marking a *fin de siècle*. By the 1990s the manufacturers of tobacco became unpopular. Big Tobacco fortunes changed for the worse when cigarette makers misrepresented the dangers of their products. Ultimately four tobacco companies settled for more than a whopping $200 billion in settlements. The consequence today is that most governments heavily regulate tobacco manufacturers. The legal defeat in the U.S.A. was also the end of the popularity and culture of tobacco. The title *May I Smoke/Puis–je fumer*, therefore, is a grammatically potential optative with a less positive expression of the future or
the present, requiring the permission of others, as it is no longer a desirable or imperative action.

I consider Duchamp’s work to be proto-conceptual, first and foremost because of his interest in and play of language. As an art history student, I also noticed that his literary and written approach—the ironies and meta ironies of language—was the work of an outsider, an independent artist with an autonomous streak. For most of his life, Duchamp had a studied disdain for, and avoided, the artistic public. And when researching 1960s magazine interviews, I came across a testimonial in which Duchamp stated that he was more influenced by the writer Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) than modern painters.

Art, for Duchamp, appeared to function at the service of the mind. He produced a body of distinct and unique aesthetic, which I have taken the liberty to rework and, indeed, Duchamp provided something of a licence for others to do so. Another cue for my “working Duchamp” came while visiting Lyon, where I noticed a shop named “Patisserie Duchamp.” As a found sign, having the appearance of an epiphany, I was reminded of Duchamp’s Boîte-en-valise. This edition could be considered as Duchamp’s embellishments of his canonical works, for sale at a reasonable price—delicious, mind provoking and eye catching, like patisserie. With Duchamp’s passing I would then become the pâtissier, the pastry cook.

This accidental encounter became the inspiration to complete my work many years later. The work is an edition of two of twenty photo collages in a clamshell folding box using the illustrations of The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp by Arturo Schwarz as a source. My interest and purpose was to continue the wit and further the play making of his work as an intimate and consecrated site of procedural inventiveness. For example, I make direct reference to Duchamp’s poem “Infrahance,” published on the back cover of the 1945 View magazine, in two of my works. A summary translation of the poem—tobacco smoke is rough going in, but aromatic coming out and perfected when exhaled; a consummation married in the mouth as a mental and physical process.

Smoke is also a way of inhaling and exhaling abstract and physical space (of dreams and oblivion) where the addiction/obsession of cigar smoke—from Duchamp, to American artists Phillip Guston and Frank Stella, and then to Mayan priests—produced a psycho activeness, a false state of lightness, and well-being. Smoking also participates in the circulation of desire and ideas.

Within the larger assembly of works and objects of varying media, the idea of merging photo-based work in the production of original and hand-made drawings by an artist—myself, known primarily as a photographer, and in Christos Dikeakos, Self Portrait with pipes: “Le Semainiere” a week’s worth, 2010, one shot sign paint on MDO board, edition of 3; 42 x 42 x 2 cm
collaboration with hired draughtsmen—is *my* conceptual exercise. It also shows how drawing has a different field of attraction to that of photography. The *Rauchschwaden* (cloud of smoke) drawing is a poetic quote from Duchamp’s 1967 poster edition for Galerie Givaudan (also included in the exhibition, but not installed in a binary comparison). The drawing of smoke made with charcoal is now seen in graphic terms as if the ashen (carbonized) tip of that cigar draws itself on paper. The hand with the smoking cigar is gesturing protection. The smoke rises to form the erotic circulation of desire, and above the mushroom bomb cloud of a smoker’s oblivion; Thanatos, the universal death instinct that is often paired with Eros.

Duchamp’s interest in Eros and Thanatos, love and death, is a theme that connects these two exhibition ideas.

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**Postscript:** quotes from Luis Buñuel in our present age of the prohibition of tobacco, cigarettes and cigars in public spaces:

- “People smoke to celebrate a happy moment or to hide a bitter regret.”
- “Whether you are alone or with friends, it’s a joy for all the senses.”
- “He smoked until the dying hours of his life, ever faithful to the pleasure that killed him.”

It must be emphasized that these ruminations on tobacco (and by extension and association, alcohol)—the lure of the delicious, of abiding friendships and fertile reveries—must come with advice and a caveat. Don’t drink and don’t smoke; it’s bad for your health.

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**Christos Dikeakos** was born in Thessaloniki, Greece in 1946, and moved to Vancouver at age ten, and where he continues to live and work. Dikeakos studied fine art at the University of British Columbia, and has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions since 1969 in Canada, the U.S.A., Europe and Australia. His work is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Vancouver Art Gallery, Mendel Art Gallery, MOCCA Toronto, the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at UBC, Surrey Art Gallery, Canada Council Art Bank, and the Vorres Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens.
Why Duchamp Matters
excerpt from an essay by Robert Belton

In 1880, American sculptor Harriett Hosmer wrote an essay entitled “The Process of Sculpture” to respond to criticism of “artists who do not do their own work.”

The relevance of Hosmer’s insight to the question of why Marcel Duchamp matters is that Duchamp’s earliest experiences with art were informed by a similar widespread misconception. Although he passed, albeit briefly, through an Impressionist phase, he concluded that Realist and Impressionist painters, in terms of both their practices and their reception in history, were primarily preoccupied with the painterly transcription of the effects that light and modern life had on the eye. Duchamp quickly came to the conclusion that this “retinal” art was propped up by the same underlying attitude—that painters, preoccupied by matters of the hand and eye, were essentially unintelligent. There was even a nineteenth century proverb that captured the idea precisely: “bête
"comme un peintre" was a figurative expression used to signify diminished mental capacity, much as we might say “dumb as a bag of hammers,” or some such thing. Duchamp hated this idea with a great passion. 3 He explained in an interview with Pierre Cabanne that his attitude came “From too great an importance given to the retinal. Since Courbet, it’s been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone’s error.”4 Instead, Duchamp wanted “to get away from the physical aspect of painting…I was interested in ideas, not merely visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind.”5 But he did it in ways utterly unlike that of Hosmer.

One of the Duchamp’s innovations was to select and identify as “artworks” a number of things that absolutely repudiated the notion of artist as fabricator. He chose something whose manufacture he had nothing to do with—an object already made by other agents with non-artistic interests—and imbued it with a new, intellectual significance. He did this at first by simply putting a commercially available thing into an artistic context normally foreign to it. Perhaps the most notorious example of what became known as “readymades” is arguably Fountain (1917), an upended urinal on which he scrawled the fake signature “R. Mutt 1917” and which he attempted to exhibit in a non-juried exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. Because the work was not well received, it was hidden during the show. Its subsequent meaning in history has thus become a function of that context. That is, since the exhibition organizers claimed they would show everything submitted, Fountain is essentially about the idea of hypocrisy.6

Duchamp developed the readymade into ever more complicated types of artworks by bringing individual readymades into incompatible, yet expressive alignments with each other. Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy? (1921), an example of these so-called “assisted readymades,” features fake marble sugar cubes in a birdcage with a thermometer and a cuttlefish bone. Later works like The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (1915–1923) went even further, requiring spectators to wade through Duchamp’s notes, ideas, speculations, fantasies, and other contextual evidence in order to make sense of the work as something more than merely a mute object.7

In this way, Duchamp explicitly declared that the artist was a kind of thinker.
rather than maker. Moreover, he also insisted that viewers were complicit in the creation of meanings in artworks, an idea that he most famously expressed in a short essay entitled “The Creative Act” in 1957. He began by acknowledging two important things—that artists are sometimes not fully aware of their intentions in creating a work and that posterity, not artists themselves, will determine what ensuing generations will deem meaningful and worthy of veneration. He concluded, “All in all, 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. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.”

This principle has been clearly borne out in history: Jan Vermeer was forgotten after his death, but his rare works are now very highly prized. Vincent Van Gogh is in the same boat.

Perhaps the reader will feel that this doesn’t yet say why Duchamp matters. Well, the answer is as simple as saying that if posterity had ignored Duchamp, he would have had no influence. Yet he has had enormous influence, partly because his notion that art is about ideas makes it possible for the “high art” world to distinguish its objects of intellectual interest from an ocean of objects produced by unreflective, manual thing-makers. What Duchamp recognized and predicted was an art world in which context—circumstantial information one brings to the work—was as or more important in understanding it than whether or not it was merely pleasing or a good likeness. He anticipated a kind of cultural as opposed to natural selection—a kind of creative-intellectual Darwinism in which ideas circulate, transform and—if the selective pressures of posterity allow it—reproduce. He realized this decades before Richard Dawkins coined the word “meme” to refer to a hypothetical unit of cultural transmission, from one mind to another, analogous to the gene.

So—Duchamp matters because history has made him matter. (Even though she had a related concern, Hosmer obviously had less success in this regard.) Duchamp’s memes have succeeded in being replicated whether we like them or not. You can’t go to a credible contemporary art museum without seeing his offspring at least somewhere in the mix.

2 Ibid, 375
5 Ibid, 11, note 10
Robert Belton received his PhD from the University of Toronto and taught art history and theory at the University of Western Ontario, McMaster and Queen’s Universities. Most recently, he was the creator and first Dean of the unique Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at UBC’s Okanagan campus. Belton is the author of *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture*, and several other works.
Mind If I Smoke
excerpts from an essay by Jane Rankin-Reid

The state sanctioned oppression of adults’ right to smoke is hardly news. Author Iain Gately’s *La Diva Nicotina; the Story of How Tobacco Seduced the World* (Scribner UK 2001) provides a wealth of fascinating tobacco history. Gately relishes the unpopular King James’ “Counterblaste,” a 16th century royal outburst on the evils of smoking. And under his reign, the king wrestled the right to tax tobacco from English physicians and increased taxation by a massive 4,000%. Economically, hypocrisy has always surrounded the use of tobacco. King James’ actions were a foretaste of what was to come. Adolf Hitler hated smoking with a passion. Under the Nazi regime, posters showing smokers’ heads being crushed by jackboots were commonplace, yet Germany’s per capita intake of tobacco increased between 1932 and 1938, from 570 to 900 cigarettes annually, making it the world’s largest tobacco importer throughout the entire war. Lucrative tobacco taxation fuelled the Third Reich’s treasury, contributing up to 12% of the wartime revenue. Simultaneously, German scientists were discovering links between smoking and lung cancer.

What has changed today? In countries like Australia and Canada, close to two decades of social engineered anti-smoking “health” campaigns have reconditioned citizens to become actively intolerant of smokers. Demoted to the doorsteps of our communities, these uncelebrated taxpayers are outcasts, culturally exiled and toxically so unpopular, we might as well hang from public squares. Although smoking cessation success rates have become static in both Canada and Australia in the last decade, even hijacking cigarette packaging for gruesome advertisements of smokers’ missing teeth and ulcerated feet has done little to shift an apparently stagnant 18% of the Canadian population’s need to light
up according to the Canadian Cancer Society. As author Richard Klein noted, “historically, the laws that are devised to suppress [cigarettes] fail to do so, may in fact produce the opposite effect of what they intend and this paradox gives rise to suspicions about the motives and attitudes that underlie their imposition. “Cigarettes are Sublime” (Duke University Press, 1993: 182)

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I’ve always taken smoking extremely personally. The “right to smoke” was an issue I became aware of in childhood, growing up in Tasmania. Anecdotal histories linked “the ladies in lavender” with my family’s smokers protesting for women’s right to vote. One grandmother started smoking while campaigning alongside factory workers. Many continued smoking after women won the right to vote. These were my heroines in childhood and they still are. Can I claim I inherited my fixation with tobacco? Born in the 1950s, I’m often told that I should have been aware of the dangers of smoking. But how might I have accepted nicotine’s future perils when everyone around me looked suddenly beautiful with cigarettes in their hands? So it’s natural that we would view smoking as a glamorously elegant relaxing moment in the lives of our busy farming parents beset with nature’s prevalence and mortgage demands. For us children, the moment our parents lit up was the moment the world attained a peaceful state of calm.

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Some nights, Dean Martin seemed to do little else on his television show—which ran from 1965 to 1974—but lie, smoking
on his famous couch, saturating a beloved song with the louche animalism of his private right to precision sinning. His cigarette ash would lengthen dangerously before disappearing off camera with a barely detectable flick of his wrist.

Dean Martin smoked heavily throughout his entire career and eventually succumbed to the painful indignity of lung cancer. But his perma-tanned jaw line retained its trim iconic youthfulness, and nicotine smoke lent intrigue to Martin’s lustrous status as one of the best bad boys in 20th century screen culture. With the passing of years, the legend of Dean Martin’s career and manic nicotine habit has mellowed in public sentiment. To me, this demonstrates the unique forgiveness behind the US entertainment industry’s continual rediscovery of hidden annuities of cool, tucked away in the nightstands of Middle America’s media-dependent cultural heritage. Contemporary mercy for prior sins of crass social irresponsibility is a vital ingredient for this rejuvenative process to function effectively. Re-packaging family friendly entertainment figures like Martin blesses Americans’ faith in television's central authority in socially engineered taste-making, a cyclical key to success in the US marketplace.

Yet once upon a time, some mothers told their daughters that Dean was a dangerous man. My parents regarded him as feverishly anti-establishment, a kindred spirit, a fellow traveller, a bohemian even. His shady jokes and suggestive body languages were a shining example of un-American behaviour in our first years of television viewing. In the late 1960s, American TV’s tidy screen kingdom of

According to Dr. David Kessler, former Commissioner (1990-1997) of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Y-1, the new breed of tobacco contains up to 50% higher levels of nicotine: “You don’t insert nicotine without the intention of controlling it…”


More recently, Dr. Kessler has asserted that; “The FDA should quickly move to reduce nicotine levels in cigarettes to non addictive levels. If we reduce the level of the stimulus, we reduce the craving. It is the ultimate harm reduction strategy…The law prohibits banning of cigarettes and reducing nicotine levels to zero, this policy does neither.” *Legacy for Health Foundation (US) media release* 16.6.2010.

US President Barack Obama finally signed legislation giving the FDA full regulatory powers over cigarette’s ingredients, in mid 2009. This news should have made headlines throughout the free world, but the epic victory in the protection of smokers passed with little comment. Ethical contradictions flourish in the war against smoking. Even television is required to tell us whether animals have been injured in the testing of products or pranks. Unlike Clairol or Kellogg’s however, tobacco companies are still not legally required to disclose their menu of chemical contents on their packaging.
sanitary family values didn’t wash with my folks. Instead Dean Martin’s lounging insolent charisma and obvious talent for pulling the head off a bad joke were the kind of survival skills our parents felt we’d need in life ahead.

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Like tobacco, television has changed the world in many ways, for better and worse. To me, television shares moral space with tobacco in the cultural battle trenches. Without media’s scrutiny of humanity’s most evil capabilities, wars would be fought differently; some soldiers say smoking helped keep them alive. One of the main differences between television and tobacco is that smoking has yet to undergo any form of cultural re-evaluation in our society. After all,
cigarettes are the only consumer products invented purely to capture permanent public usage through chemically managed addictive ingredients. Tobacco is also the first commercial product to claim a global market, fed on deathly profits. In our emerging smoke free world, the question of how cigarette manufacturers’ commercial insights operate is more relevant than ever. Yet, Big Tobacco’s ugly profiteering and those unhelpful lung cancer statistics predominate.

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Historically, cigarettes individualized modernity’s most consumable imagery. Newly streamlined domestic and corporate interiors were instantly animated by good-looking smokers. Similarly, innovative cigarette advertising introduced the “perception of shortcoming” to the unassuming public, adding social aspiration and stress relief to Big Tobacco’s heady claims. Famous musicians, film-makers, artists, authors and all round hipsters were rarely photographed without a cigarette in their hands or mouths. These days, squalls erupt over whether it’s in the “public’s interest” to publish images of award winning director Ridley Scott with his trade-mark cigar, or the US Postal Service’s image of legendary blues guitarist Lonnie Johnson with his ever present cigarette airbrushed into oblivion. Yet, when we moralize cultural characteristics out of creative expression, we’re literally changing history to suit the limitations of contemporary social purposes. Modernity was often symbolized by the inventive promise and gesture of a freshly lighted cigarette. One of many examples in literature is the bathroom scene in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny & Zooey*, an acutely rendered exploration of the habits of youth. Lying in his bathtub, chastely concealed behind a shower curtain, Zooey and his mother, who is (we tacitly understand) sitting on the lavatory, smoke several cigarettes while discussing his sister Franny’s condition.

Scholars of smoking’s artistic and philosophical legacy may also mourn the disappearance of empathy for Italian author Italo Svevo’s hero Zeno whose diaries detail the intricate histories of his many “last” cigarettes, each finally smoked so as to commence quitting. A further entry into the lengthening list of future disappearances is foreshadowed by New Zealand academic and author Denis Dutton. His “The Smoke Free Carmen” (*The Press*, New Zealand, 15 December 1994), explores a politically correct production of Carmen by resituating Bisset’s classic tale into a sanitized post-smoking world, which has deleted nicotine among other contentious historic influences from Carmen’s existence. Dutton’s acute parody demonstrates that demonizing literary heroes for their lifestyle diseases is little more than sinister cultural revisionism. Whether or not we agree on the ethical parameters of a smoke free society, we surely need to fiercely guard against promoting mistruths in cultural history.

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Smoking is close to ruling my life and has almost certainly played a part in ruining it. Yet, parading the side effects of drug usage in a bid for public sympathy would be a devious rearrangement of reality for a nicotine addict. More accurately, smokers reside uneasily within one of society’s most irreconcilable conflicts; between commercial acceptance and utter denial of their disease. For a
nicotine addict, the moral slipstream provided by mercantile and legislative discrepancies, cultural engineering, not to mention the shrill momentum of public health warnings, is an elegantly acceptable philosophical hypocrisy, fuel for further denial. In reality, you’d have to be desperate to rely upon these dire inconsistencies for survival, but I am. In retesting my thesis of smokers’ marginalisation, I recently made the mistake of volunteering my nicotine research for a television segment on changes in public outdoor smoking legislation in our state. Under the guise of the Hobart City Council’s recently announced “health campaign,” local police were given license to harass smoking teenagers, driving them out of the city centre. Against the backdrop of the now empty smoke free city mall, all mention of the marginalisation of kids, or the civic consequences of medically untrained police administering a heavy handed “health campaign” were completely eliminated from the final TV segment. My extensive interview was reduced to a few nasty seconds on air, with a ticker running across the bottom of the screen, identifying me, not as a critic, writer or fellow journalist, but as “Jane Rankin-Reid, smoker.” Now that’s desperately bad journalism, and although the network eventually apologised, my days as an equal member of society are clearly numbered. But for the anti-smoking lobby, it is an all too familiar victory. My heart bleeds for them.

Jane Rankin-Reid is a Tasmanian-born writer and art critic. She lived and worked in New York from the late 1970s to early 1990s, before moving to London, where she was Senior Curator for the James Moores Collection. Rankin-Reid returned to Tasmania in 2002 to become the arts columnist for the Hobart Mercury, and also lived in India for three years as a writer for the weekly newsmagazine Tehelka.