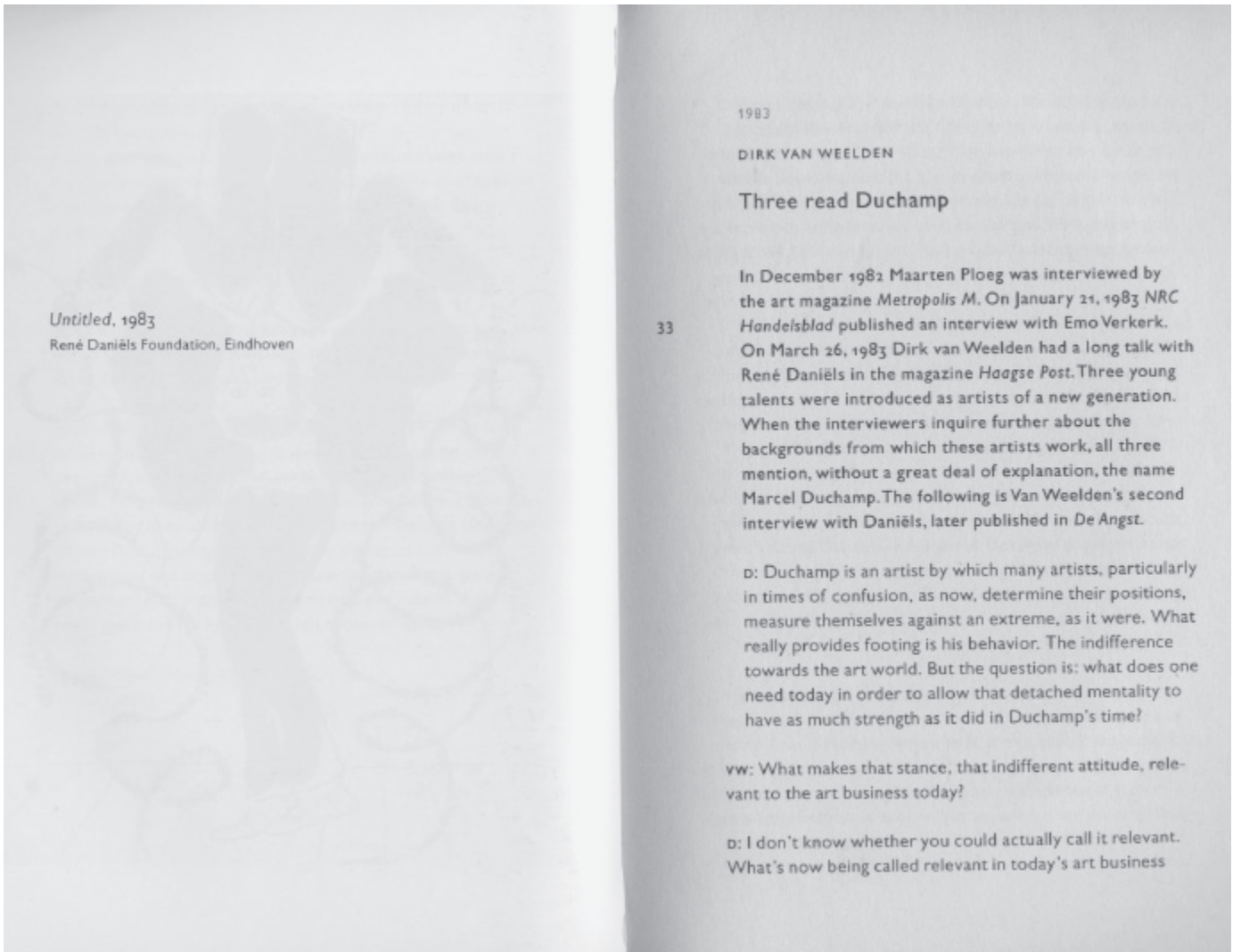


# METRO PICTURES

Van Weelden, Dirk. "Three read Duchamp." In *Sputterance*. De Pont museum of contemporary art, Tillburg (2007): 33-38.



is anything but indifferent. The striking thing is that, now of all times, a number of artists in the Netherlands share Duchamp's lack of interest. This, of course, gives rise to the matter of what their motives are. Duchamp himself deliberately remained aloof from the commercial circles of the day after having exhibited *Nu descendant un escalier*, because in a very aristocratic and haughty way, he did not wish to stoop to competitive warfare with other painters. Rather than taking a road already travelled, he began to experiment with all sorts of materials in order to give his art new meaning. His work is very exceptional; each work has so many facets. It's really what you could call 'fine art'. That word fine or *feine* reminds me of a painting by Immendorf. In it you see an infant with a brush in hand, saying: *Feine Tunst machen*. Wonderful! This, in turn, being an elegant move in itself: fine art. The work of Duchamp is pure, unaffected by commerce. It's art that you want to have, not art for the history books. And that's an entirely different criterion in comparison to collectors wanting to have something because it will later become very valuable. The work of Duchamp has so many links with life; to me, it has the same power as a fetish, an amulet, that you always want to carry with you. Something that gives you strength.

**vw:** From what you say it seems that, in Duchamp's work, you see a focus on the practical value of art, which is important to you. Because, in a pure way, a relationship with many facets of life are brought about in those works. As opposed to other art, which derives its qualities from a functionality aimed at the circulation of images and money, at what you call commerce, where the concern is art's exchange value.

**d:** Yes, that chemistry between his work and his life is so strong with Duchamp that it doesn't occur to him to produce a whole series of something, that it might sell well. He never had any concern for this, just needed enough money to live on. When he arrived in the United States the collector Arensberg gave him food and a place to live in exchange for a work of his. That was enough. A kind of 'easy-going' attitude.

**vw:** And that reference to Duchamp which is now coming up all of a sudden has, in your view, to do with the search for footing by painters who feel threatened by the demands of the art business. That footing can then be found in Duchamp's purity, in his attitude based on a freedom with respect to all of the styles, movements and trends surrounding him. Avoiding everyone and yet leaving behind a strong, consistent body of work: that's what they admire about Duchamp.

**d:** That's right: art historians and the art business are now making implicit demands of artists. As if you can demand anything of an artist. Here I find the statement by Joseph Beuys very illustrative: *'Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet.* (Marcel Duchamp's silence is overrated.) That I see as the lament of someone who realizes that Duchamp's behavior just isn't an option anymore. That it no longer applies to the times. It seems as though he is jealous of Duchamp's independence. A statement like this also suggests that Beuys believes it's time for work, not for wasting time on pleasant repose. Maybe that's why it does seem to be a typically German statement. Art-historically speaking, Beuys did of course need the work of Duchamp; he had to give different meaning to a form that Duchamp once conceived.

That's actually why he started out with Fluxus. Beuys's statement is, as it's called in psychology, patricide.

There is something else that matters with that Dutch concern for Duchamp. It has to do with the fact that his work is not the result of a struggle to rise above something, as you often see with expressionists. At the moment, there is practically nothing left to struggle against. To me, that's an important distinction: art that emerges from a certain struggle, and art that doesn't have that struggle at all. In literature there is, for instance, Louis Paul Boon, whose work is based on the struggle of laborers against rule by the clergy. That gives rise to a different image of culture than that of Duchamp's art. His subject is not a struggle, but the imagination itself, ideas, experience.

Right now the fashionable, commercial revival in art is reducing everything to a single common denominator, so that this distinction is becoming less obvious and vanishing. That's not a good thing, since it happens to be an important distinction when you're looking at art and judging it. You can't simply omit it. You shouldn't think that the whole thing is about imagination. There is a great deal of art which reflects a struggle, a social struggle. And that is presently disappearing from view in art.

**vw:** Does your interest in Dada go back to this? A linking of new forms of imagination, new art forms and social awareness?

**o:** My interest in Dada and Duchamp is nothing exclusive; in the Netherlands, Barbarber and K. Schippers have already been dealing with that intensively. That aside. But yes, Dada was clearly associated with struggle, due to World War I.

This generated all sorts feelings that weren't socially acceptable; people had to contend with these. Perhaps commerce has assumed the role of war. Thank heavens for that.

The paintings of Constant are at their best right after the war, when they're still directly related to the struggle against a sense of oppression, against cruelty.

That connection began with Dada. Duchamp and Picabia are people who didn't have strong ties with that. They escaped a linking of imagination and struggle, relating imagination to a social situation. This is why their work initially wasn't seen, but received attention only later.

In making that distinction, I'm not trying to say anything for one thing or *against* another. What matters to me more is the idea that art critics are writing about art without any criteria. It's too much like a consumption of pictures, without any reflection on them. No one wonders where anything comes from, what its cultural origins are. This has a bad influence on the way art itself is made.

Along with that first distinction, you could also question, as part of better art criticism, the role of commerce in art. Such questions come up plenty of times in literary criticism, but not in art criticism.

**vw:** How influential is your interest in Duchamp? Is he the friendly gardener who has marked off an area where you can play, but where he has determined the paths?

**o:** I want to lay a path myself, carve out a road for myself, but that road is an extension of what others have done. And almost nobody can do without Duchamp. It's a diamond with so many facets; his work holds such a wide range of things. And it goes so much farther than painting alone. That, in fact,

is how he differs from Picabia, who actually concerned himself much more with painting. Whereas the achievements of Duchamp lie more, of course, with the expansion of potential ways to make art. In order to abandon the paint and the brush. And instead, to use everything that life has to offer. To use the former no man's land between literature, visual art and life.

But mostly I think about my own work of course. That admiration for Duchamp shouldn't become too great; that would be dangerous. That's obvious.

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PIETER HEYNEN

### A Cat on the Piano

*Surrealistic Impulses in the Netherlands*

39

Though surrealism seems to feel more at home in Latin countries, it appears that certain surrealists do have an influence on the Dutch art world. Apart from the magic-realist variant of surrealism that has come into vogue along the North Sea, several Dutch artists now seem to be arriving at an understanding with surrealism through a more critical stance. Taking some distance from the original source, René Daniëls provides his contemporary view on surrealism.

René Daniëls (slightly amused): And now the cat is walking across the piano. You do hear it clearly, but you don't see it. The essence is the mixing of images with words and of images with ideas. Edgar Allan Poe, Marcel Duchamp, René Magritte, Marcel Broodthaers. Here I mention several names of deceased artists in whose work I recognize something mutual and whom I admire greatly. What those four people have in common is the lucidity of unique thought.

I think that making a big label of surrealism is a mistake. The psychological interpretation of surrealism via Freud, by Dalí for instance, is too limiting in my view. I try to conceive of a balance of reality in which very earthly and more exalted things continually interrelate. Perhaps this is, in fact, where the mixture of word and image can be found.