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Marcel Duchamp's and John Cage's Chess Intermedia

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Abstract

Chess played an important role in the life and art of both Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, it became a "becoming-chess" in the generative sense of an immanent transformation onto the being of a qualitatively new kind or with qualitatively new functions, in the sense of how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari understood their concept of "becoming". The following paper reveals the chess realizations, appropriations and inspirations of two influential artists in the context of their large and intense work as well as in the broader interdisciplinary context of the art, philosophy, and aesthetics they helped form in the 20th century.

Key words

Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, chess, art, painting, music, performance, intermedia, becoming

I wasn't really playing chess, I was just being with Marcel.
John Cage

On 5 March 1968 a remarkable event had its premiere at the Ryerson Theatre, Toronto: John Cage played chess with Marcel Duchamp and Alexina "Teeny" Duchamp on an amplified chessboard constructed for them by Lowell Cross, accompanied by electronic music generated *in situ* and *in real time* by David Behrman, Gordon Mumma, and David Tudor. Cage titled his scenic piece *Reunion* and, as it later came to light, it was an important milestone in the history of interactive arts; the intermedium conceived for two chess players, special electronic chessboard, and undetermined number of musicians performing electronic sound sources. The work has neither score nor scenario, its course and length are determined by the real duration of an actual chess game, that is by the ideas and decisions of both players.

Reunion was not the first of Cage's pieces to be inspired by chess. As early as 1944 he made the painting *Chess Pieces* for the group exhibition "The Imagery of Chess" organised at the Julien Levy Gallery, New York by artists Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst along with the gallerist Julien Levy (12 December 1944 – 31 January 1945). It is an ink and gouache painting on masonite board (approx. 48 x 48 cm) divided into 64 squares of the same size, painted alternately light or dark green-blue. Handwritten (in white or black ink) in each square are fragments of Western musical notation (notes on 5 staves) that in whole create a piano composition with 22 segments. Since there is no apparent musical-logical connection between the segments, many writers, musicians, and theoreticians assumed for a long time that the painting was not a coherent composition, considering the chessboard arrangement of autonomous segments but rather a foreshadow of Cage's later indeterminist compositional method. Not until 2005, shortly after the work – long considered lost – was found in a private collection in Chicago, pianist Margaret Leng Tan consistently analysed the painting to discover that it is a factual score, consisting of twenty two twelve-bar segments or "miniature chess pieces", as she called it.¹ Having transposed them into sound form, the modal character of the whole structure as well as tectonic congeniality with Cage's other piano pieces of the same period appeared. Moreover, discovery of the composer's manuscript draft from 1943 in the New York Public Library contributed to the convincing musicological identification of the composition moving the date of its origin one year back compared with the more famous painted version. Correspondences between the musical and fine art versions of the piece are rather free; it is not clear, in what successions and repetitions the segments should be played, as these "parameters" differ in the two versions. Anyway, *Chess Pieces* are clear evidence that Cage's compositional poetics was not related solely to the sounds but also to the means of visual, gestural, or motion representation. He did not limit composition to a medium, he understood it as a process. As he often emphasised, for example in the writings *Composition as Process* (1958), *Composition* (1952-58) and *Composition*

¹ *Chess Pieces: piano solo by John Cage*. New York/London/Frankfurt/Leipzig: C. F. Peters Corporation, 2006, p. 4. Score.

in *Retrospect* (1982), for him the composing was the creative filling of an empty structure with a chosen means of expression and organising them in such a way to create “a freely moving continuity within a strict division of parts.”² And that can be – as a later series of Cage’s watercolours from 1988 and 1990 and especially his “composition for painting” *STEPS* from 1989 prove – also accomplished by organising brushes, colours, and prints.

John Cage’s relationship to chess was not as profoundly conceptual as was his mentor Duchamp’s relationship to it. Meanwhile for Duchamp, who was an excellent and passionate chess player,³ the chess was helpful in his effort to reveal the philosophical aspects of painting and elevate it to a legitimate reflexive tool. Cage, a below-average player, used the royal game only as a pretence for regular meetings with his admirable master, to be in the imminent impact of his personal aura as often as possible to enjoy the charm and esprit of the extraordinary artist. Duchamp was of course aware of Cage’s false intention, however he agreed to teach Cage chess, but he did it prudently; mostly he left Cage to play against his wife Teeny, sporadically commenting on the uncertain or failed moves of the unconcentrated. The only inherent connection between the chess game and musical thought in Cage’s work is the same number of chessboard squares (64) and hexagrams of the ancient Chinese divination text *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*) that he started to use intensively while composing aleatoric music since the early 1950s. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1970s, after Duchamp’s death, Cage still succumbed to his passion for chess. He took his new “hobby” so seriously that he paid for lessons with the respectable chess master and teacher John Collins, thanks to whom he improved his openings. He financially supported young chess players and chess organisations himself and, on the recommendation of Teeny Duchamp, he was even appointed a member of the American Chess Foundation’s advisory committee. Besides Mrs. Duchamp, he played regularly with the artist William Anastasi who became his most frequent chess partner. As the main reason for his chess comeback Cage indicated in 1986 his desire to “*make a balance with my use of chance operations. Because if I make a wrong move with my knight, I lose. Games are very serious success and failure situations, whereas the use of chance operations is very free of concern. It’s like being enlightened.*”⁴

Contrary to Cage, Duchamp viewed chess as an inherent activity of life and an organic part of his art. He assumed that all chess players were in a way artists and though he resigned to the status of painter after 1923, he stopped differentiating between his own chess and art performances and outputs. For years he unforcedly transferred his own chess competence to the art world until he succeeded to fade the border between Duchamp-artist and Duchamp-chess player. As an artist he was trying to adapt or even subordinate his creative practices and representational ways to chess strategies, to transpose the chess

2 CAGE, John. *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, p. 18.

3 Duchamp’s chess style was influenced by Cuban champion José Raúl Capablanca whose perfectionism he much admired. In 1925 Duchamp was proclaimed Master of the French Federation of Chess. From 1925 he was a member of the French team with which he participated at four Chess Olympiads (The Hague, Hamburg, Prague, Folkestone) between 1928–1933. From the end of the 1950s Duchamp was a member of the Board of Directors of The American Chess Foundation.

4 KOSTELANETZ, Richard. *Conversing with Cage*. London/New York/Sydney: Omnibus Press, 1989, p. 31.

game tactics into unrealizable, unrealized, or partly realised art visions, as a chess player, on the other hand, he conceptually stylized or aestheticized pragmatic chess algorithms. The skilled handbook *L'Opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées (Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled; 1932)* that he wrote with Ukrainian-French chess player Vitaly Halberstadt could be a suitable example. Duchamp himself executed the graphic layout for the book and his later commentary “*chess endings that never happen*”⁵ indicates that we can regard the book as a legitimate piece of conceptual art. The chess problem it solves could occur with such a small probability that the professional chess players totally ignored the publication. At the aforementioned exhibition “The Imagery of Chess” Duchamp exhibited a miniature readymade *Pocket Chess Set* (1943). He also designed a poster and catalogue for the show. The work consisted of a commonly available pocket chess set in a leather case, but Duchamp exchanged its former pieces for handmade celluloid pins with depictions of chess piece symbols on them. He added a rubber glove to the object and hung it on the gallery wall. Playing with words, the artist literally pinned the pins to the leather lining of the case with short pins, referring wittily to the chess tactic of “pinning”, serving to immobilise the opponent's pieces.

A superior and unconventional relation to chess is apparent already during Duchamp's painting period when he created traditional works of fine art, in search of his own style. In two versions of the oil painting *Portrait of Chess Players* (1911) – and in six studies for it – he depicted a multiplied duo of players pondering over a chessboard with disposed pieces. A young artist, just coming to terms with actual manners of pictorial representation, did not aim to depict a familiar social situation (at that time he often played chess with his brothers and other artists), but instead attempted to visually represent the invisible mental interactions between chess game partners. After many years he described his brave attempt in the lecture *Apropos of Myself* that he delivered at the City Art Museum of St. Louis in November 1964: “*Using again the technique of demultiplication in my interpretation of the Cubist theory, I painted the heads of my two brothers playing chess [...] in indefinite space. On the right Jacques Villon, on the left Raymond Duchamp-Villon, the sculptor, each head indicated by several successive profiles. In the centre of the canvas, a few simplified forms of chess pieces are placed at random. Another characteristic of this painting is the grey tonality of the ensemble.*”⁶ Thanks to the multiplication and dissemination of figures and pieces “in indefinite space”, the painter succeeded in evoking an impression that the chessboard, where an invisible mental struggle is transposed, is the canvas of the painting itself. It is clear from preparatory sketches that he carefully planned the space and narrative anomaly of composition, aware of the rules of traditional vanishing-point perspective. In the oil painting *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* (1912), and several sketches that accompany it, Duchamp replaced the portrayed chess players from the painting from the previous year with two crucial chess pieces. Such reanimation can tell us much about the artist's increasing interest in the phenomenon of speed, represented by the contrast

5 Quoted in AFFRON, Matthew. *The Essential Duchamp*. Philadelphia/New Haven/London: Philadelphia Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2018, p. 75.

6 Quoted in d'HARNONCOURT, Anne – McSHINE, Kynaston (eds.). *Marcel Duchamp*. New York/Philadelphia: The Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art/Prestel, 1963/1989, p. 254.

juxtaposition of the static chess pieces at the edges of the composition and the flowing flock of indifferent forms amidst them. The author himself later commented on his decision as follows: “*It is a theme of motion in a frame of static entities.*”⁷ Both works – *Portrait of Chess Players* and *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* – are the actualization of the virtual creative concept occupying Duchamp's mind towards the end of his painting career. In a short text fragment from the period when he conceived his cardinal art piece *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1915-23) he formulated this concept as “pictorial nominalism” without ever having explained it verbally. However, it is more than probable that he meant subordination of the hand-crafted aspect of fine artwork to train of thought and conceptual formulation. Having connected a common term of art theory with ontological conception, denying a real existence of universals, he expressed his loss of trust in depicting painting and emphasised the thought that between painting and philosophy there is an inherent relation that he intended to explore through his work.

Attempting to achieve as least as possible “retinal” representation, or even a projection of the fourth dimension onto the three-dimensional form, Duchamp tackled the amateurish study of mathematics and geometry (Esprit Jouffret, Henri Poincaré, Bernhard Riemann, non-Euclidean geometry) as well as new imaging technologies (X-ray beams, chronophotography). From this aspect, the *Portrait of Chess Players* was a very successful step towards a conceptualization of painting, deprived of mimetic ambition and undesirable, the viewer's attention diverting sensual effects. The painter used chess as a suitable vehicle for the representation of movement – a physical as well as mental one – the stimulus to fine art treatment of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in his pretentious ambition to come up with a trick of how to paint the invisible. When in December 1911 he completed a final version of *Portrait of Chess Players*, it suddenly became clear to him that he could neither rely on his own hand any longer as it became the “enemy” of his mind, nor on the retina of viewer's eye as it was oversaturated with conventional visual representations. Discontent with the existing state of painting, tightly attached to visuality, Duchamp put aside the brush and palette and began searching for a way to avoid painting while remaining a fine artist at the same time. In the 1946 interview with James Sweeney he revealed that he wished to “*to put painting once again at the service of the mind.*”⁸ The French term *esprit* he used in this context does not mean only the mind but also intelligence, smartness, wit, i.e. the meanings and virtues the royal game usually evokes. In 1912 he made his last conventional paintings and started to conceive and construct his paintings rather than painting them, which finally led him to the heretical anti-art gesture – the readymade, the radical parting with aesthetics and the tradition of fine art. Since the creation, resp. choice of a readymade, resigns to the visual and emphasises the substantial aspect of artefact and its perception, its purpose is therefore not fine art or art but philosophical. From this point of view, it is closer to chess than to art. After all, one of the Duchamp's most sophisticated readymades *Trebuchet* (1917) – short board with four coat hangers fixed not to the wall but

7 Ibid., p. 260.

8 Quoted in SCHWARZ, Arturo. *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*. London: Tames and Hudson, 1969, p. 21.

to the floor – was inspired by chess tactics and terminology; its French title refers to English meanings “trap” and “to stumble”. The French verb “trébuche” also stands for the chess manoeuvre when a pawn is offered to an opponent with the aim of trapping his successful progression.

A point of interest is that while in visual arts Duchamp refused aesthetics and beauty, in chess he permitted them: “*A game of chess is a visual and plastic thing, and if it isn't geometric in the static sense of the word, it is mechanical since it moves; it's a drawing, it's a mechanical reality. The pieces aren't pretty in themselves, any more than in the form of the game, but what is pretty – if the word 'pretty' can be used – is the movement. Well, it is mechanical, the way, for example, a Calder is mechanical. In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It's the imagining of the movement or of the gesture that makes the beauty, in this case. It's completely in one's grey matter.*”⁹ It was not a paradox nor a change of opinion; Duchamp simply did not associated beauty with nice semblance or stylized design, he saw it in deeper, optically inapprehensible connections, seeking it in ephemeral and indifferent qualities of the physical manifestations of things and phenomena of the real world. Even a mimetic representation, so doubted by him in painting, was acceptable when used in reference to the train of thought. The wooden *Buenos Aires Chess Set* and *Traveling Board* (foldaway chess table with built-in chess clock) that he designed and produced in 1919 during his ten month long stay in Argentina indicates how much appreciation he was able to devote to a stylish look. And as his virtual project *Chromatic Chess Set* (1920) proves, he even attached importance to the colors of each chess piece. In 1930 Duchamp designed and handmade miniature chess-piece maquettes out of cardboard with the intention of using them instead of three-dimensional pieces. The acceptance of stylish design in the case of the aforementioned pieces can be explained by the artist's certitude that the beauty of chess rests in the game itself and not in the design of its apparent material parts.

Hand in hand with the effort to conceptualise painting Duchamp developed a process of doubting and rethinking the conventional concepts and categories of language, which finally led him to fragments, neologisms, paradoxes, syllogisms, verbal games, and puns – simply to linguistic equivalents of the readymade – that soon became a legitimate means of expression of a prematurely born conceptual art. Preferring interdisciplinary experimentation to traditional fine art also had social consequences for Duchamp; no longer conformed to the status of fine artist and, frustrated by its unappreciation in a quickly transforming Western civilization, he discovered an alternative manner of thoughtful art in chess. He summed up the similarities and differences between the preferred activities aphoristically: “*Actually, I believe that every chess player experiences a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures, first the abstract image akin to the poetic idea of writing, second the sensuous pleasure of the ideographic execution of that image on the chessboards. From my close contact with artists and chess players I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists*

9 CABANNE, Pierre. *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1987, p. 18–19.

are not chess players, all chess players are artists.”¹⁰ A versatile artist found a meaningful escape from the routine artworld in the game of chess.

Duchamp found in chess an alternative beauty to the refused retinal, the canonised beauty of visual images. The beauty of chess resembled for him the conceptual beauty of poetry: “*The chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem.*”¹¹ The same artist who once rejected an outward appearance in visual arts appreciates the visual design of an invisible alphabet. It seems, retina and grey matter cannot be placed in absolute opposition to one another anymore. The chess pieces resemble a “block alphabet” primarily metaphorically; conceptual devices of the mind tend to associate the perceived material entities with verbal abstractions, and vice versa, the perceived abstract forms with figures or objects known from life praxis. But Duchamp was predominantly attracted by the beauty of mental movements: “*There is a mental end implied when you look at the formation of the pieces on the board. The transformation of the visual aspect to the grey matter is what always happens in chess and what should happen in art. [...] Imagining the movement or the move is what produces beauty in these cases. It is completely in our grey matter.*”¹² Both kinds of movement, the mental ones as well as those happening on the chessboard, can be schematically visualised in cartographic and imaginary ways. Both were proposed by Duchamp himself: “*Objectively, a game of chess looks very much like a pen-and-ink drawing, with the difference, however, that the chess player paints with black-and-white forms already prepared instead of inventing forms as does the artist. The design thus formed on the chessboard has apparently no visual aesthetic value, and is more like a score in music, which can be played again and again. Beauty in chess does not seem to be a visual experience as in painting.*”¹³ He of course preferred the latter that records the invisible projections of the mind. But the dual interaction between sensory and cerebral processes attracted him intensively and remained an important topic in his work.

No wonder, as Duchamp was in a way an adherent of Cartesianism, a method famous for doubting definiteness of all kinds — “*It's a marvellous piece of Cartesianism,*” he said about a game of chess in the 1944 interview — “*And so imaginative that it doesn't even look Cartesian at first. The beautiful combination that people invent in chess are only Cartesian after they are explained.*”¹⁴ His way of thinking as well as his concepts of “painting of precision” (*peinture de précision*) and “precision optics” (*optiques de précision*) were partly mechanistic, though largely influenced by a creative phantasmagory. Flashing between an invisible image of the chess situation in mind and its visualised transposition on the chessboard, e.g. between appearance and apparition,¹⁵ is a special case of dualism of spirit and matter. This transient process has nothing to do with “retinalism” which makes it more

10 Quoted in SCHWARZ, Arturo. *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*. London: Tames and Hudson, 1969, p. 68.

11 Ibid., p. 68.

12 Ibid., p. 69.

13 Ibid., p. 68.

14 TOMKINS, Calvin. *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*. Brooklyn: Badlands Unlimited, 2013, p. 40–41.

conceptual and anti-aesthetic in comparison to ready-mades. In terms of art, it is cerebral designing or cerebral sculpturing.

So was Cage's *Reunion*, based on a chess game in real time. The simple performance, the grace of which inheres in the unpredictability and naturalness of common life activity. Only the hypermodern technological design was complex for that time. Cross equipped the chessboard with 16 inputs (4 for each musician), 8 outputs to loudspeakers, 9 contact microphones, and 64 photoresistors mounted in each square and reacting to the pieces' moves. There were no sounds before the game started, when all 32 pieces were in their initial positions, of course except for those environmental sounds for which neither the players nor musicians had liability. The nature of the relation between a chess game and the sounding music was not generative but associative. Musicians were watching the course of the game and produced their own music so the generated sounds could spatially copy the moves at the chessboard. But they did not have any impact on the distribution of sounds into a loudspeaker system. Removal of a piece from one square to another was at the same time removal of sound from its source to one of four loudspeakers allocated to a given square without knowledge in advance to which one. Moreover, the shadows of the movements of the players' hands were scanned which influenced the additional characteristics of the sounds. Though John Cage is the only author of the piece, listeners do not perceive his music but the live electronics of the other authors. Their music emanates from eight loudspeakers where it is randomly mixed by a computer, so musicians and listeners cannot recognize which music they hear from which loudspeaker; precisely according to the spirit of Cage's indeterminist poetics. At that time in Toronto, where Marshall McLuhan was in the audience, they only played two games. In the first one, Cage was defeated by Duchamp in half an hour. In the second game he played against Mrs. Duchamp. They interrupted the game at midnight and later finished it in New York where Cage lost again.

From the very beginning *Reunion* was conceived as a scenic action (event) where the thoughts and gestures of the performers were equally as important as the ancillary and random sounds. It is thus a free form of music theatre, a kind in which, according to Cage, music should naturally achieve a non-stylized intermedia action of a transversal and interactive character, close to a happening. Though Cage as a musician remained silent in the piece, as a composer he conceived and composed an assemblage that joined together on stage his close people, unifying art and commonplace life activities, which is what its title predominantly refers to. As in his last work *One* (1992),¹⁵ the film made collaboratively with Henning Lohner, Cage also worked in *Reunion* with lights instead of sounds, using them this time to illuminate the most important protagonist of the piece – the chess master Marcel Duchamp. But it was chess and Cross' chessboard who were starring in it. Though the game of chess is not based on chance but depends on the intentional decisions of players, Cage smartly used it in the same way he was using

15 In *Green Box* (chapter 22: *Color*) and *Infinitive* Duchamp distinguishes between "appearance" (= retinal impression of an object, or the sum of the usual sensory evidence enabling one to have an ordinary perception of that object) and "apparition" (= mould of an object). See SANOUILLET, Michel - PETERSON, Elmer (eds.). *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1989, p. 70, 84, 85.

chance operations in his music – as an algorithmic means to producing scenic action, accompanied in situ and in real time by generated electronic music.

Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, two pioneers of a new kind of creativity, were not only becoming the others, but chess was also becoming – by means of their art, philosophical visions, and way of life – a “becoming-chess” in the generative sense of an immanent transformation into a being of a new kind or with new functions (nonbeing), as becoming (*devenir*) was once understood and described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In the case of Marcel Duchamp, the roles of artist, designer, performer, actor, thinker, dandy, and transvestite merged with the role of chess player. In the case of John Cage, the roles of musician, artist, performer, thinker, mushroom collector, and expert merged with the role of chess player. They both were visionaries shifting permanently between the media, codes, orders, conventions, interpretations, identities, social roles, and imposing their own visions upon themselves. They were permanently in-between, their multiple roles were contemporaneous, interchangeable but not separable, continually transforming into and traversing one another. Actually, it was not Duchamp or Cage who became a chess (player), it was becoming-chess that produced their versatile personalities and shaped their transversal identities. That’s why “chess” could be an affirmative answer to Duchamp’s famous speculation “*Can one make works which are not works of art?*”¹⁶

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16 Quoted in SANOUILLET, Michel – PETERSON, Elmer (eds.). *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1989, p. 74.

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