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UNPACKING *THE GREEN BOX* [English Summary]

In the Autumn of 2013, the Cabinet de Livres d'Artiste (CLA) at the Villejean campus of the University of Rennes 2, presented the exhibition *Unpacking the Green Box* accompanied, as is every CLA exhibition, by an issue of *Sans Niveau ni mètre, the Journal of the CLA*, which is reproduced in facsimile on the opposite pages. This box comes from the collection of Ernest T., who for this event also provided the publication with photos of purchase receipts and a bottle carrier, bearing the following inscriptions: "Ernest T. buys a bottle carrier at BHV (hardware store) on the centenary of the birth of Marcel Duchamp" and "On the stand he writes a caption which Duchamp pretends to have forgotten." The ninety-three handwritten notes in the box were unpacked and presented in display cases, to underline the clear intention of Duchamp to place his art in the arena of printed matter and reproducible art, which is one of the main aims of the CLA. The editorial rubric "the other half of the question" refers to Duchamp's comment that for him, "the public represents half of the question" (all these quotes come from an interview by Pierre Cabane, 1966); *Unpacking the Green Box* should explore the hypothesis whereby the 'other' half of the question of Art is, according to Duchamp, linked to the copy, the reproduction,

to printed matter, and thus to the book. *The Green Box* was published in 1934 in a run of 300 copies by Editions Rose Sélavy of 18 rue de la Paix, Paris, containing reproductions of drawings and other documents from between 1911 and 1915 which constituted the preparatory work for *The Large Glass*, itself completed between 1915 and 1923, both works bearing the title *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even*.

The technique used was collotype, a technology then in widespread use to print postcards, some documents were even printed in various colors. This was therefore an industrial procedure. In fact, Duchamp deliberately adopted an "intellectual stance opposed to the manual servitude of the artist" yet spent a great deal of time, including manual labor, to assemble the 300 examples of the box, notably using zinc templates to trim the original documents which had torn edges. However, this manual labor was mostly farmed out to third parties, only the 'first crop' of twenty boxes seems to have been done by Duchamp himself, who also added one original piece to each box (an established procedure by publishers to add value to a more prestigious print run). In 1966, 100 examples (out of 300) had still not been completed; there was a production line, and the completion

of 25 boxes took one month. As with readymades, one of the axioms of esthetic theory is seriously compromised: the work need not be made by the artist himself, even if it is made by hand. *The Green Box*, therefore, would be a trompe l'œil publication: production/reproduction, mechanical/handmade, book/non-book... So, by evoking the Box of 1914, which preceded *The Green Box*, Duchamp made clear that he wished to treat it as an 'album' that the spectator could consult while contemplating *The Large Glass* which, itself, should not be "Looked at in the esthetic sense of the word. You had to consult the book and see them together. The conjunction of the two things took away the whole retinal side that I don't like," as he told Pierre Cabane. A remark of great importance: Duchamp emphasizes the fact that the approach to art through books, documents and the library diverts the experience of the work from its unique inscription in seeing and aesthetics: "everything became conceptual, that is to say that it depended on something other than the retina," he specifies subsequently. The philosophy of art has for a long time been unable to understand that access to the work of this new genre passes through an intellectual game: disguise, pretenses, puns or witticisms, even, simply, the false, the other of the truth. Little wonder then to learn from the artist's mouth that, until 1908, he did not move so much in an environment of painters, but in that of humorists, anarchists and the *Incohérents* [satirical artists] living in Montmartre!

To be sure, etymologically the name "Ernest" means "serious," but Ernest T. specifically maintains the tradition of Duchampian – Platonic? – humor, taken, of course, in the most serious way possible. It is, among other things, for this reason that the research carried out by Ernest T. on Marcel Duchamp questions in a particularly incisive way the meaning of modernity, its values and its limits. Do avant-gardes which, in order to legitimize pictorial abstraction, do not hesitate to flirt with theology (as in Malevitch or Mondrian), renew or betray the modernity which was gradually being constructed over the course of the 19th century? The Unworthy Paintings, French Drawings, Artistic Paintings, and other productions of Ernest T.

provide answers in the spirit of the Witz which is that of the Academy of Derision (the Incohérents), whose long overdue rediscovery after a century of obscurity has profoundly shaken the history of art.

Thus the artist's review *Cloaca maxima*, published by Ernest T. between 1985 and 1988, whose title is borrowed from the famous work of ancient urbanism, the Grand Sewer, channels all that is most filthy and disgusting in the art world by republishing without commentary the words of artists, art critics, politicians, journalists, etc., where we see that the intellect sometimes defends bad causes, that refined theorizing can be nauseating, and that concepts are often driven by commercial interests. Shifting the cursor from art to the intellectual plane, as conceptual art advocated, is clearly not enough to save the values of modernity. Finally, the magnificent book "Henri Rousseau, der Zöllner. Bilder aus der Sammlung Ernest T." (Douanier Rousseau. Pictures from the collection of Ernest T.) shows the value of an artist's copy by presenting a series of lost paintings by Douanier Rousseau, recreated only according to their titles and dimensions, as exhibited in 1994 in Mönchengladbach.

An interview with the art historian Manfred Brunner allows us to better understand the reasons for the choice made by the artist in presenting this missing part of Rousseau's work: profoundly naive, the painter never had a notion of modern art, but in return did have the freedom to choose and develop its means. To be a modern artist is not to follow a movement, but to have this freedom and this spontaneity, which Marcel Duchamp also had, to forge a path against the tide of what the history of art and philosophy have retained of modernity: he renounces "all aesthetics, in the ordinary sense of the word;" demystifying, he does not believe "in the creative function of the artist" and is wary of work, which has become a major factor in capitalist alienation: "to work for a living is a little dumb from the economic point of view." He admits that he never goes to museums, neither to visit, or even to exhibit, and considers art history to be, "probably, the expression of the mediocrity of our time." It is by opposing commonplaces of

modernity that Duchamp constructs a modern conception of the encounter with the work, which emerges as an empty sign, a pure signifier; the signified - the meaning - is always the responsibility of the "OBSERVER." When Pierre Cabanne wants to know Duchamp's own interpretation of the *Large Glass*, Duchamp replies: "I don't have one because I did it without having an idea." We must therefore remain modest when faced with *The Green Box*, because it contains an abundance of ideas whose coherence is difficult to grasp, just like the coherence of the *Large Glass*. If *The Green Box* is a book that is not a book, its copy made by Ernest T. is a reissue which seems to confirm the inalienable place of the book and, therefore, of the library, in the culture of art. (L.B.)