

Art, Language and Machines

The Interrelationship between Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Raymond Roussel (under Roussel's spell)

ABSTRACT

The age in which the twentieth century French avant-garde visual artists Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia created some of their most inspired and influential artworks was one that would indomitably and inextricably be linked to the concept of the machine and the increasing onslaught and advent of new technology. Within the twentieth century, whatever these artists accomplished was achieved due to their engaging in a dialogism between art and the newest forms of technology. This dialogism would arise from their endeavors to sidestep traditional aesthetic criteria to critique a new world of machine technology, which they would link integrally to a fresh exploration of language. Much of the inspiration behind this would be provided by the literary influence of French writer Raymond Roussel (1877–1933), whose revolutionary literary individualism strongly influenced Picabia's and Duchamp's artistic development. One of Duchamp's major innovations, which he made by redefining the boundaries and categories surrounding art in the early to mid –twentieth century was his declaration that anything can be art, if the artists says so. A great deal of this was made possible and achievable by following Roussel's spirit of anarchy in tandem with the artistic 'alliance' he would form with Francis Picabia. This paper discusses how the spirit of Roussel's ideas would help point both Duchamp and Picabia in a new direction and inspire them to create a unique art that would open the doors of perception for future avant-garde artists. To do this, this paper discusses the importance of language in Francis Picabia's and Marcel Duchamp's art with a particular emphasis on the literary influence of Raymond Roussel upon on their work.

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The whole apparatus, made of metal, looked at first glance distinctly like a loom. In the middle of it, parallel to the current, was stretched a horizontal warp, consisting of an infinite number of blue threads, placed side by side in a single row, which took up no more than six feet by reason of their extraordinary fineness...In front of them a batten, a sort of huge metal comb...

—Raymond Roussel, *Impressions d'Afrique*

One of the most significant yet undervalued figures to influence the creation of early avant-garde conceptual art in the early twentieth century was French Surrealist writer Raymond Roussel (1877–1933). Roussel ideas and experiments greatly inspired and united the art making practice and experiments of visionary visual artists Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia within a period of Modernism in art in the twentieth century helping shape a new aesthetic language for the art experiments that were to take place from this time right up to the present. As William Clarke has stated: “Roussel is on the sharp point of a whole anti-tradition in French writing which influenced modern art and modernism at a very fundamental level” (Clark, 2008). Within the early to mid-twentieth century, new symbols linked with contemporary life were emerging in the culture and machine technology co-existent with life became the new deity. Roussel's world of machines in experimental novels such as *Impressions d'Afrique* ('Impressions of Africa') had, through their surreal literary techniques opposed much of this. This paper attempts to unveil aspects of Roussel's literary influence upon French Modernist visual artists Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp who significantly have impacted upon the development of Modernist, High Modernist art and the contemporary art of today.

I. Raymond Roussel's 'Impressions of Africa'

In 1912 at the Theatre Antoine in Paris, both Marcel Duchamp's and Francis Picabia's attendance of the writer Raymond Roussel's play *Impressions of Africa* (Foucault, 1987: 193) would almost immediately herald in their art a period of superior originality, innovation and purpose in contrast to what both visual artists had done previously. During the early to mid-twentieth century, the seductive charm of Roussel's ironically precise machines as well as his complex descriptions of uninteresting and mundane objects would become deeply embedded in Duchamp's and Picabia's art making processes and thought experiments. It is important to note that between 1910 and the autumn of 1911, Picabia and Duchamp had first met. While

there are some conflicting accounts of their meeting, according to Duchamp, they were introduced at the *Salon d' Automne* in 1911, and “Duchamp was immediately taken by Picabia’s ebulliently negative spirit” (Tomkins, 1996: 57–62). Although both artists had been circumspectly pursuing their individual approaches to art before witnessing Roussel’s play, after seeing his creations and following his spirit their artworks began to take a turn to increasingly reflect each other’s. Years after attending the play, Duchamp recalled its bizarre *mise en scène*: “It was fantastic. There was a manikin on stage and a serpent which moved a little. It was absolutely the madness of the extraordinary” (Samaltanos, 1984: 65).

From the outset, Roussel’s novel *Impressions of Africa*, unveils the author’s unusual treatment of the form of the twentieth century novel, which would create the basis for his play’s revolutionary individualism and surrealism, which Duchamp and Picabia had witnessed in 1912. Featuring a wide variety of strange and unusual machine-like contraptions, it tells a surreal story of a group of Europeans shipwrecked on an island off the African coast where the tribal Emperor Talou VII holds them prisoners for ransom. The group plan a ‘gala’ day to celebrate the day the money will arrive as a way of distracting themselves from their capture. Each group member nominates a unique way they can impress the Emperor in order to be given back their freedom. They each do this by attempting to impress him with a strange machine invention/mutation or ‘contraption’. Much of the buffoonery and strangeness in the novel was also presented in the stage version that Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia had attended—as an unaccredited newspaper notice written on 11th June, 1912 (nearly a week after the play had closed) reveals:

...No more will we see the black monarch Talou, the scientist with the umbrella and the folding stool, the Englishwoman with the conventional accent, the blind fiancée, the blacks, the whalebone corset statue rolling along calves’ marrow rails, the zither-playing earthworm, the Alcott brothers...(Brotchie and Green, 1987: 13)

While Roussel’s novel provides a catharsis and excuse for the author’s manic besotments, detailed descriptions, arguments, estoteric storytelling, wit, reference and innuendo—something at which he excels, it also presents an ironic commentary on the idea of ‘flawless’ machine technology which was being promulgated by such important figures as F. T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists from 1908 (Lynton, in Stangos, 1995: 97). However, in contrast to Marinetti, from reading *Impressions of Africa*, it is reasonable to assume that Roussel had felt that machines, which feature in it as naïve and primitive mutants of sartorial precision were a menace to mankind. After seeing Roussel’s play, both Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia’s artworks would also subvert the idea of the machine as the epitome of perfection in many of their most important and significant artworks.

Roussel’s Language

To be sure, many of Roussel’s ideas for his unusual machines had derived from the unusual methods for writing he would employ, which would effect a new direction for both

Marcel Duchamp's and Francis Picabia's art making soon after 1912. In *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres* ('How I Wrote Certain of my Books', published posthumously in 1935), Roussel defined how the images he produced within his narratives were created. He explained that in order to generate the structure of his plots, surreal prose style and texts he had adopted an overall principle or formula derived from several different complex linguistic devices to produce the foundations of a new logic, which he often carried to extreme. Through this, complicated intricate word games and phonetic distortions would exploit the homonymic nature (Hopkins, 1992: 323) and complex relation of French words; and by selecting a random phrase, and distorting it, he would create previously unimagined images. As he had stated:

I chose two almost identical words. For example, *billard* (billiard table) and *pillard* (plunderer). To these I added similar words capable of two different meanings, and thus I obtained two almost identical sentences. (Brotchie and Green, 1987: 60)

As for the origin of *Impressions d' Afrique*, it consisted of re-conciling the words *billard* and *pillard*. The "pillard" was Talou; the "bandes" his warlike hordes; the "blanc" Carmichael (the word letters was dropped). Expanding this method, I began to search for new words relating to *billard*, always giving them a meaning other than that which first came to mind, and each time this provided me with a further creation. (Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, 1935: 5)

By jostling the meanings of words in *Impressions of Africa* in this way, as a way to form his various images and characters, Roussel created the Breton Lelgoualch, who uses his tibia from his own leg as a flute and similarly, in his other novel *Locus Solus* (1914), he created a "balloon-powered paving apparatus" that fashions a mosaic out of extracted teeth. As Roussel writes in *Impressions of Africa*: "A month later, Lelgoualch received a black case lined with velvet, which contained the bone of his leg, fashioned into a flute, whose tone was strangely clear" (*Impressions of Africa*, 1910: 68). Such ideas derived from experimenting with language would point the way for Duchamp's and Picabia's particular dalliance with language and strange objects beginning soon after 1912 which is to be found in Duchamp's readymades and Picabia's language paintings from around this time.

Also existing in Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* is his use of the idea of the 'double'. This is to be found in certain relationships, existing as complementary halves, which provide a notion of 'doubleness', which Duchamp and Picabia would also intrinsically position into their art soon after 1912. In *Impressions of Africa* Roussel employs the use of complimentary halves: primitives-civilized, black-white, male-female and virtually all the scenes in the novel are described twice. The first half of the book contains plans for a number of executions, which Talou VII has decreed as punishment for angering him; the remainder of the novel contains a systematic rendering of the bizarre and surrealistic scenes described earlier.

II. Language and Machines in Duchamp and Picabia's Art (1912–23 app.)

Francis Picabia and Language

Inter-referencing Duchamp, soon after seeing Roussel's play *Impressions of Africa* in 1912, Picabia began copying machines almost playfully from industrial catalogues imbuing his paintings with language, bestowing them with esoteric and mysterious captions, which would form a constitutive part of the artwork itself. Picabia's increasing interest in language from this period is to be found in paintings such as *Procession Séville* (1912) and *Figure Triste* (1912). Prior to Picabia's attendance of Roussel's play, the titles of his paintings had existed only beyond the frame in inscriptions, which only function as interesting titles in that they do not always describe the subject of the artwork. Yet, soon after 1912, Picabia's inscriptions increasingly mirror an enchantment with word games and various anagrams and are to be found in his paintings *Udnie* (1913), *Edtaonisl* (1913), *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* (1915), *Daughter Born without a Mother* (1915), *Portrait of Marie Laurencin* and in many others. In 1948, Picabia had revealed that he had been playing with words in his paintings from 1913 (Samaltanos, 1984: 69). Mirroring the spirit of Roussel's language experiments which would provide his work with new interpretative depth, Picabia derived the word *Udnie* for his painting *Udnie* from 'une dimension' meaning 'one dimension' (Samaltanos, 1984: 69). Similarly, Picabia would inscribe the letters *Edtaonisl* which is made up of e-t-o-i-l and d-a-n-s referring to 'star dancer' (meaning leading dancer or celebrity) into his painting *Edtaonisl* (Samaltanos, 1984: 69). *Edtaonisl* was the first anagram to appear in Picabia's paintings—and another one of his playful titles from around this time is *Catch as Catch Can* (1913). In his painting *Portrait of Max Jacob* (1915), in addition to containing an assortment of slogans and puns Picabia would inscribe the Latin phrase *Nec Plus Ultra* meaning 'superb' or 'the very finest'. Through his selection of machine objects and esoteric labels and descriptions in these paintings, Picabia, like Duchamp in many of his works would satirize the notion of machine precision mirroring Roussel's spirit of irony and ironic detachment.

Marcel Duchamp's Language and Machines

While the visual references in these paintings by Picabia would appear to derive from randomly chosen mundane objects from the everyday world, after attending Roussel's play, in looking for new ideas, Duchamp's sardonic selection of literal objects in their raw form, resulted in his *objets trouvés* or readymades, (such as *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, and *Bottle Rack* of 1914, for example). These have been cited by visual theorists and art historians as a significant influence on avant-garde conceptual art ideology and production for scores and scores of artists up to the present day ever since their enunciation as artworks in the gallery. Like Picabia's aforementioned paintings, Duchamp had furnished these with esoteric and ironic titles formed out of the linguistic puns that parody Roussel's ironic descriptions of

mundane objects—galvanizing a new *synesthesia* between art and language within the sphere of art for future generations of artists. With their obscure though playful sounding titles, Duchamp's readymade *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) for example, is simply a snow shovel and *With Hidden Noise* (1916) is simply a ball of string fixed between two brass plates held in place by four elongated screws which protrude at the bottom forming four long legs. Also in the same year, Duchamp would produce his metallic *Comb* (for dogs 1916)—(a comb would also feature in one of the unusual machines Roussel describes in *Impressions of Africa*) ('Impressions of Africa', 1910: 89).

Also mirroring Roussel's descriptions of the machines in *Impressions of Africa* Duchamp's major work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1913/15–23) (Aka *The Large Glass*) is generally acknowledged as one of his most profoundly complex. Indeed, the title of the *Large Glass* characteristically forms part of a sardonic and sarcastic metaphor or word game as the word 'even' translated from the French word *même* is a pun which evokes the notion of love as the word *même* phonetically becomes *m'aime*, which can be seen as posing the question: 'love me?'. Such language experiments would conveniently parody Roussel's own ironic language in his writing. Duchamp's *The Large Glass* is largely comprised of two glass panels held by a metal frame with a wooden base. A notion of 'doubleness' is reflected in the complimentary halves of the work. The upper half of the work can be seen to represent the bride, which is made up of insect-like monochrome geometric forms. In the bottom half of the work are the bachelors which are comprised of various materials and cylindrical shapes which, tube-like, link to a mechanical device—in this case a chocolate grinder, which parallels the spirit that would surround the inexplicable outrageousness of Roussel's machines inventions and objects. Also mirroring Roussel's portrayal of the functionless machine Duchamp's bachelors do not appear to function well. Duchamp's selection of glass as a material for the work would come almost immediately after seeing Roussel's play. Indeed, a similarly unusually disparate and enigmatic selection of objects and materials would make their appearance in one of Roussel's machines in *Impressions d'Afrique*:

The contraption consisted of a sort of large grindstone, which was worked by a pedal and which set in motion a whole system of wheels, rods, levers and springs, forming an extricable tangle of metal; from one side extended an articulated arm, which ended in a hand armed with a foil. (*Impressions of Africa*, 1910: 35)

In Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, a glass box is displayed that contains an electric motor attached to a mechanism, which controls and adjusts the temperature. In another part of *Impressions of Africa* a student loses the use of her lungs after inhaling gas fumes during a laboratory experiment. This she remedies by replacing her collapsed lungs with a set of rubber tubes, which connect to the needles attached to her uniform..." (Samaltanos, 1984: 66). Duchamp himself would declare in 1946 that:

...it was fundamentally Roussel who was responsible for my glass, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.... I saw at once that I could use Roussel as an

influence. I felt that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter. And Roussel showed me the way.... (Paz, 1990: 11)

While not exactly focusing on the machine theme, another of Duchamp's *objet trouvés* *Why Not Sneeze?* (1921), would provide another example of his experiments with language, which also mirror Picabia's and Roussel's own and like Roussel's descriptions, the pun in the title is visually and linguistically deceptive. In *Why Not Sneeze?* the white blocks comprising the work are made of cold marble—the work containing a thermometer for measuring the marble's temperature, has been placed there to provide the idea of 'coldness' (Drot, 1995). Yet this functions as a kind of deception between the idea/(physical act) of sneezing and the question posed by the title: 'Why not Sneeze?' since sneezing is not a voluntary act (Drot, 1995). Another pun by Duchamp which shares in the same spirit as Roussel can be found in the title of Duchamp's painting *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). Picabia's work *The Double World* (1919) would also contain the letters L H O O Q which he inscribed in the work.

Francis Picabia's Machines

From 1913 onwards, like Duchamp's art experiments, Picabia's paintings would link the theme of the machine as a broken and faulty mechanism to a new dimension of exploration and commentary on the troublesome relations between the sexes, which would also occupy Duchamp from 1913 in the aforementioned *The Large Glass*. Corresponding to a negative view of machine technology, which, as mentioned previously Roussel also appears to have had, as France drew nearer to War, Picabia became increasingly interested in portraying the negative impact of machines upon humankind, and often in Picabia's machine portraits, is the notion that men become women giving birth to machines, whilst machines: 'the daughters of men', become 'machine women'. Mirroring Duchamp's motif of the useless machine Picabia's drawing *Daughter Born without a Mother* (1913) forms yet another portrait of his indictment of machine technology. The concept of a 'daughter without a mother' invented completely by man which reflects the central theme of Picabia's work had also reflected the central theme of the French writer Apollinaire's play of 1917 *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* who had been with Picabia and Duchamp at their attendance of Roussel's play in 1912 (Foucault, 1987: 193). According to David Hopkins, Apollinaire's play had reflected current fears "of a newly autonomous female type—the *femme homme*—transgressing the categories male-female, nature-culture, human-machine; renouncing her child-bearing role and thus provoking compensatory fantasies of male filiation" (Hopkins, 1992: 323). (For Picabia, this concept of 'woman as machine' would reveal the machine as an object capable of producing or manufacturing commodities as 'offspring').

In addition, Picabia's pistol and target in his machine painting *Behold Her* (1915) as well as the mechanism depicted in *Behold the Woman* appears to reflect the notion of machine precision (or 'questionable' machine precision) and 'doubleness' that is, the use of complimentary halves also found in Roussel. *Behold Her* is a drawing of a pistol and a target linked by a device or mechanism, which appears to allow a rhythmical and repetitive activity,

and *Behold the Woman* (1915), like the structural-motif in Duchamp's *Large Glass* and Roussel's atypical machines is a mechanism divided in two and juxtaposed. In the foreground of *Behold the Woman* is a hollow cylinder—the upper part consisting of a piston emblematic of male and female.

In the same vein as Roussel, and Duchamp, Picabia's paintings *Marie 1917* and *Ass 1917* both reveal the image of a ship's propeller. *Ass* is of an image, which is reminiscent of both a ship's propeller and an ass's head. In parallel to Duchamp, the pun would consist in the relationship between the image and its title (Camfield, 1970: 26). (Interestingly, one of the objects in Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* is a propeller operated by the eldest son of the Emperor Talou VII). Also in 1917, in parallel to Duchamp, Picabia produced a series of different sketches of *Bride*, (similar to Duchamp's *Mariee*, 1911–20—Duchamp's drawing plans for his *Large Glass*). As in Duchamp's *Large Glass*, and Roussel's use of complimentary halves, Picabia's *Bride*, divides itself into two spheres: the male linked to the lower wheel and female to the upper wheel. Yet, while Picabia's work appears to allow an ardent lovemaking action it is also void (as is also the case with Duchamp's *Glass*), of the function of reproduction and is incomplete and faulty like Roussel's machine mutants.

In addition to these paintings by Picabia, like Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, the motif of wheels would be prominent in Picabia's art. In *Impressions of Africa* wheels had been an integral part of the machine technology Roussel had described and from 1916 until around 1919 for Picabia, the concept of wheels as a visual metaphor directly related with the 'sexual act' would extend to a whole series of other works which can be seen in his *The Fiancé* (1916), *Daughter Born Without a Mother* (mentioned previously), *Machine Turn Quickly* (1916–17), and *Portrait of Marie Laurencin* (mentioned previously). In the latter painting, although more complex mechanically than some of his earlier machine portraits, the basic division of female and male would exist in a similar way. In the upper part of the painting, a ventilator representing the female element appears to rotate the 'cogged' lower wheel which in turn conveys the movement through a chain that appears to be from part of a bicycle, a coil or spool of some kind. A similar mechanism can be found in *Impressions d' Afrique*:

A solid wheel, as in a hurdy-gurdy, passed like an endless bow across a long cord, stretched over a sound board; on this string, with its pure note, automatic hammers fell like the fingers of a virtuoso, and then were raised gently, producing all the notes of the scale without a gap. (*Impressions of Africa*, 1910: 42)

Concluding Remarks

During the early to mid-twentieth century, a vital relation had taken place between Duchamp and Picabia which can be linked to Roussel's experiments in language. As such, Roussel's work should be seen as being extremely important to the development of Modern art since it had been an influence on Duchamp and Picabia's experiments in art making during the early to mid-twentieth century. This influence unveiled new discursivities for the

artists who came after them and showed them just how wide the category of art could be. Duchamp's formulated intentions in particular made it entirely permissible and valid that one could become an artist without being a painter, sculptor, poet, filmmaker or architect. Duchamp's own new category of art based on the rejection of tradition and formulaic disciplines was first inspired and reinforced by his spiritual liaison with Francis Picabia. During the twentieth century and beyond, Picabia and Duchamp's ironic collective language and semantic propositions would be reactivated by a whole group of (anti-artists) successors in the Modern art world from the Dadaists, Surrealists, Assemblagists to the Nouveaux Realistes. Their ideas and practices would reach into the latter part of the twentieth century. By 1969, the influential avant-garde conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth would adopt the *pseudonym* of 'Arthur r. Rose' paralleling Duchamp's own *pseudonym* *Rrose selavy* ('eros, c'est la vie') (Archer, 1997: 78). Like Kosuth, in other various ways, many significant and influential artists involved in Modern art practice following the Duchampian, and for that matter the 'Picabian' tradition of using language, would incorporate linguistic puns and riddles and continue to experiment with the language and art relation. Conceptual artists such as Robert Morris, Terry Atkinson, John Baldessari, Michael Baldwin, Robert Barry, Jean-Michel Basquiat, the Fluxus artists, Dan Graham, Gary Hill, Jenny Holzer, On Kawara, Mary Kelly, Sol Le Witt, May Stevens and Sue Williams in no particular order and scores of others such as the Pop Artists—particularly the Americans Robert Indiana, Warhol and Lichtenstein would follow the examples set by Duchamp and Picabia and experiment with a relation between art and language. These experiments strongly influenced much that was central in the conceptual art practices and in the post-conceptual art practices which would concern "...itself to a great degree with an examination of what art was..." (Archer, 1997: 76). To be sure, after the unorthodoxy, creativeness and originality of Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp and Raymond Roussel, the art world was forever greatly transformed.

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