

Marcel Duchamp Write Me Often, Just a Line or Two

It's July 1942, and the artist Marcel Duchamp has recently arrived in New York City after fleeing the Nazis in Vichy France. As he settles in, he writes to his longtime friend and fellow artist Man Ray, who is living in California. In this casual letter, Duchamp asks Man Ray for help. He needs buyers for his latest artwork: a suitcase containing miniatures of many of his most famous pieces, from the mass-produced urinal he signed his name to and called art to his mustachioed Mona Lisa. He ends with a short, cryptic note about his romantic partner, Mary, who has stayed behind in France to join the resistance.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, you'll meet the man behind some of the most controversial and influential artworks of the 20th century. Anna Deavere Smith voices the letter. Host Tess Taylor unpacks Duchamp's wit, his decades-long friendship with Man Ray, and how he used his archive to create new works of art. Photographer Dayanita Singh shares her experiences mining her own archive and art historian T. J. Demos weighs in on the artist's life and legacy.

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Transcript

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Anna Deavere Smith: You win: You've written to me while I am still in a state of bewilderment and idleness. I did write you 2 or 3 times at your sister's in NY about a year ago. I don't think you ever got anything, same as I never got anything in France from you. Did you write?

Tess Taylor: What does it mean to make art, when you're determined to change what art is? What do you make when you've had to flee the country you called home? And what might it mean to put everything you've ever made—or hope to take with you—into just one suitcase?

Welcome to Season 2 of *Recording Artists*, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art

and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called *Intimate Addresses*, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs the letters as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as makers collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's letter is from Marcel Duchamp—an artist who may be best known for hanging a urinal upside down and calling it art. But this letter comes nearly three decades after that. He is writing to his friend Man Ray.

It's 1942. Marcel Duchamp is 55 years old. World War II has just scattered his community in Paris, as well as artists and intellectuals from across Europe. Duchamp had fled Paris after the German occupation began in 1940. He's been in the South of France for the past two years, most recently in a displaced persons camp. After a wild scramble to get a visa, he is safe in New York. Not long after arriving, he sends a short note to Man Ray, an avant garde photographer and multimedia artist, and his friend of nearly thirty years. He hasn't seen Man Ray since before the Nazis marched on Paris. Man Ray has since moved to Hollywood. Duchamp cannot afford to visit. Duchamp is not quite asking for money, but he's looking for help finding patrons. And he makes it clear he has no cash to spare. This letter, like most of Duchamp's correspondence, is terse, composed in navy fountain pen in loose sloping hand on a small piece of torn-out notebook paper. Duchamp seems dazed, and he has every reason to be: he's finally out of Vichy France.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith reading the letter.

Deavere Smith:

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Dear Man,

You win: You've written to me while I am still in a state of bewilderment and idleness. I did write you 2 or 3 times at your sister's in N.Y. about a year ago. I don't think you ever got anything, same as I never got anything in France from you. Did you write? I don't think I'll be going to Hollywood. Walter must have told you about it. On the other hand, I've brought enough material to make about 50 boxes (all finished except for mounting and assembling the leather suitcase, still to do) and I'm staying in NY to get started on manufacturing these 50 boxes. In fact, 20 will be deluxe containing an original, and the other 30 with no original. You see, like the rest, here I am asking you a favor. Do you think you could find one or 2 (or more) buyers for this box among your friends. I've asked the same thing of Walter. The price is approximately \$200 for the boxes with originals and 100 for the others. On the one hand, if I can sell them easily (which could happen) I would like to choose between my buyers and not promise boxes to just anybody. You said you might like to keep one for yourself. But I don't know how your finances stand? The snag for me is that to produce just ten boxes I have to spend several hundred dollars, as if I don't buy all the leather (for the 50) now it's likely I won't be able to find any more in six months time. Anyway, write me often, just a line or two and maybe we'll meet up in Omaha. Affectionately, Marcel

Mary is doing everything she can to come over here. But it's impossible for her to leave Paris without authorization from the Germans and her brother is trying to have her exchanged for a German diplomat here. And in fact, I know nothing more than that.

T. J. Demos: He's not really talking about any of the momentous stuff that's happening at the time. He's really focused on, you know, practicalities.

Taylor: That's T. J. Demos, professor of art history at University of California Santa Cruz. He wrote an entire book on Duchamp's artistic response to the unsettlement of two world wars.

Demos: He's been really mixed up in different travel arrangements, trying to escape from German Nazi-occupied France, making his way to the South of France, getting to New York, trying to communicate with friends, fellow artists in Europe, still, or in the States.

Taylor: For photographer Dayanita Singh, who herself collects and presents her art in boxes, the remarkable thing about the letter was that Duchamp still had his eye on his patrons:

Dayanita Singh: Duchamp is making these suitcases. And he desperately needs the money. But he still wants to decide who sort of deserves his boxes. He says, "On the one hand, if I can sell them easily, which could happen, I would like to choose between my buyers and not promise boxes to just anybody."

Taylor: When Marcel Duchamp died in 1968, 26 years after this letter to Man Ray, the New York Times described him as "the most destructive artist in history." Yet in this letter, we meet him partly as an exhausted traveler and harried craftsman, stretched too thin to meet one of his dearest friends in Hollywood. He's passing on what news he has of his life-partner, Mary Reynolds, a bookbinder and resistance fighter, who'd refused to leave occupied France with him. And as Duchamp writes to his close friend in the middle of the Second World War, the world they knew has shattered.

Yet Duchamp's work had already been a shattering, exploding how people thought about what art is, in his moment and beyond. Even so, Duchamp would say in 1952: "Everything important that I have done can be put into a little suitcase."

As this letter shows, Duchamp wasn't being metaphorical. In fact, he *had* been putting his life's work into little suitcases, or boxes, as he called them, for over a decade, while he fled a home to which he'd never return.

Deavere Smith: I've brought enough material to make about 50 boxes (all finished except for mounting and assembling the leather suitcase, still to do) and I'm staying in NY to get started on manufacturing these 50 boxes.

Taylor: The series of boxes Duchamp is describing here is called the *Boîte-en-valise*, which translates as box in a suitcase. But there are other boxes—*The Box of 1914*, the *Green Box*, *The White Box*—which he made in different series to share with collectors over the course of 54 years. As much as anything else he ever did, Duchamp was a box maker. His boxes are painstakingly produced, painstakingly reproduced. They are both art and craft, artisanal and mechanical. Some of them are fascinating reproductions of his archive. Others are dollhouse-like miniatures of his artworks.

Dayanita Singh—who distributes her own images in boxes—feels an affinity with Duchamp's work. I asked her how she felt seeing Duchamp's boxes for the first time.

Singh: When I finally saw Duchamp's suitcases, I thought that was his most brilliant contribution to the arts in the twentieth century. I think he was very clear about the power of dissemination, and the fact that the work is in museums and galleries is not enough for him. And I think he understood the privilege of being in the domestic

archive. Of course, it's a great privilege to be in a great museum. But when you're in a domestic archive, your work is alive.

Taylor: To understand why these boxes, or suitcases, might be the most revolutionary works in a boundary-breaking career, we need to understand how Duchamp got to this point.

Marcel Duchamp was born to a family of six children in 1887 in Blainville-Crevon, a classic village in Normandy not far from where the novel *Madame Bovary* was set. His family was bourgeois and artistic—his favorite sister, Suzanne, was a painter, and two older brothers, Raymond and Gaston, practiced art in Paris. Marcel joined them there, working first as a cartoonist for newspapers. He mingled with artists and attended salons with people like poet Guillaume Apollinaire, historian Jacques Barzun, and painter Jacques Villon. Rapidly changing styles to follow the trends of the moment, he painted impressionist, fauvist, and cubist canvases. He exhibited well-received works. But in 1912, a series of events altered his career forever. His brothers visited him at his studio and asked him *not* to display a recent painting, called *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. They felt it was irreverent to cubist art. Here's T. J. on this painting:

Demos: In some ways, it's about the challenging of painterly genres and ways of representing the world, including Classical iconography like a nude, descending a staircase, but within this way that imports photographic conventions, that are completely antithetical, at that time to painterly sensibilities.

In the Paris context, I think it was really offensive to people within Cubist circles because it didn't adhere to the apparently agreed-upon institutionalization of Cubism, even though Cubism was still quite young at the time and was known, from the very beginnings, of being a challenge to representational conventions.

I think he was unwilling to accept the inviolable rules of Cubism as the game that he wanted to play.

Taylor: This dust-up with the Cubists made a big impression on Duchamp. He agreed to remove his painting from their salon, but the sense that something as radical as Cubism had become downright dogmatic left him uneasy. He even swore off a career in art all together and began training to be a librarian. But he also allowed his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* to be shown in New York's 1913 Armory Show.

Then, something extraordinary happened: the painting—so novel, so different, so shocking—became an overnight *success de scandal*, a talk of the town. Over the course of a month, almost 90,000 people came to see it. At age 26, Marcel Duchamp was suddenly famous.

Rather than becoming a librarian as he'd planned, Duchamp began to produce calculatedly dramatic gestures—cultural signals that resonate even across a hundred years. With all eyes on him after the Armory show, Duchamp presented, as his next piece of art, a bicycle wheel attached to a stool. Duchamp then took absolutely ordinary objects—a snow shovel, a bottle rack, and most famously, a urinal—and offered them for display. Duchamp called these objects his "readymades." He sometimes gave them clever titles or signed them with silly names—the urinal was famously signed "R. Mutt." If *Nude Descending a Staircase* had accidentally shocked, the Readymade emerged prepared to trouble the boundaries of art. Here's T. J. again:

Demos: An artwork, in other words, didn't have to be beautiful, it didn't have to be

original, it didn't have to be expressive; it could simply be a mass-produced commodity object that someone who calls themselves an artist calls art, and is presented in these architectural spaces that are called art galleries. The art becomes divorced from or cut off from sensual visual pleasure.

Everything is becoming increasingly artificial and just simply, sometimes, a matter of a linguistic construct. I think that's this playfulness and this understanding of art and creation almost as a kind of conceptual game.

Taylor: Duchamp, the lifelong chess player, was playing with the idea of art itself. And he extended his irreverence to the real world too. When called up for mandatory military service in 1905, he discovered a little used legal clause by which he could avoid serving if he claimed to be an "art worker." As part of his demonstration, he printed off some of his grandfather's engravings and was thereby exempted from enlisting—apparently by an officer who was horrified that anyone would use art as a way to avoid serving their country in war.

But war was coming. By 1914, the year after the New York Armory show, 2.9 million French men had been conscripted into the First World War. This time, Duchamp received a medical exemption from serving and began a life of dislocation. T. J. again:

Demos: He wanted to have no part of the kind of nationalism and patriotism that was leading to war at that time, which led to lots of problems for him as an able-bodied man of the right age to be drafted.

He tried to escape from the rush of patriotic war fervor that was spreading first in Europe, in France; then he encountered that, as well, in New York, and wanted to again escape, once he got to New York. And he went to Argentina during World War I.

Taylor: In some ways, packing a suitcase was an antinationalist gesture for Duchamp. T. J. argues that Duchamp's refusal to accept hyper-nationalism is linked to his refusal to accept the pre-ordained rules of Cubism point blank. There's a slipperiness and rejection of dogma in both the work and the life. Maybe this anti-nationalism is one of the keys to why Duchamp's suitcase-boxes still feel so revelatory.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Back in Paris in 1915, Duchamp packed his *actual* suitcase for New York and began life as an expatriate. In New York, he was hailed as a "missionary of insolence." This did not seem to hurt his reputation. He was quickly introduced to important friends, collaborators, and patrons. He met Walter Arensberg—the Walter in the 1942 letter—who'd lend him his apartment for the summer of 1915 and become a central life-long patron. That same year, Duchamp also met Man Ray on a beach in New Jersey. The two became fast friends.

Man Ray had been born Emmanuel Radnitsky in Philadelphia in 1890 to Jewish parents. Like Duchamp, he'd begun as a painter, but turned to photography to remake the boundaries of art. Duchamp and Man Ray were comrades in arms—making jokes, making art, throwing parties—traveling back and forth to France once the peace came in 1918. In the wake of a shattered world, the two played absurdist art games together. Some were prankish: Duchamp signed a postcard of the Mona Lisa with a moustache and the letters LHOOQ. When you pronounce those letters in French, LHOOQ, it sounds like a phrase meaning "she has a hot ass." Man Ray photographed it. Some of their games were genderbending: Duchamp dressed up as his feminine alter ego Rose Selavy, a pun on the French saying "eros c'est la vie," or Eros is life. Man Ray photographed it. Together the two wanted to kick art off its pedestal, and replace it with series of questions, vandalisms, and jokes. If Duchamp's

snow shovel was art, he was also ready, as he put it, to “use a Rembrandt as an ironing board.”

Yet even as he goofed off with Man Ray, Duchamp worked steadily on one piece: *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*), also known as *The Large Glass*. This glass and metal work is about nine feet high and offers a difficult allegory about unfulfillable desire. Here’s T. J. describing it:

Demos: There’s these schematic diagrams on both halves. It’s monochromatic, largely. There’s maybe some yellows and browns. You might confuse it for a kind of nineteenth century science experiment. Or at least the, like, the abstract diagrams of some kind of mechanical contraption. It challenges narration, to try to describe what’s going on.

Taylor: *The Large Glass* is a conceptual stained-glass window, changing based on the slant of light and what is passing on the other side. It has transformed in other ways as well: in 1926, three years after it was completed, the glass cracked in transit, even collecting dirt in the cracks. Rather than fret, Duchamp famously allowed cracks and dirt to become part of his work. For Duchamp, making art that would evolve was part of the process.

As it happened, *The Large Glass* then became the occasion for another, endlessly transforming work of art: Duchamp’s *Green Box*. In 1934, Duchamp created a “valise” or little suitcase purporting to contain a “companion archive” to *The Large Glass*. A narrow briefcase sized box, covered in green velour, he called it *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box)*, or simply *The Green Box*. It consisted of 93 loose but painstakingly reproduced documents which he made in an edition of 300, though for some special patrons there were “deluxe” editions that had unique works of art, documents which were originals for which there was no copy. As his 1942 letter shows, he’d repeat this tactic of including “originals” in his *Boîte-en-valise*, continuing to play with the concept of original and copy.

The Green Box is a bit like being in a clever madman’s attic. There are sheets that seem to come from many notebooks, and a tender mix of journal entries, songs, possible process notes. There are rips, tears, grids. There are photographs and diagrams. There are different colors of ink. And it’s not just notes and jottings that are reproduced, but scratch outs and thumbprints and the stationery of the Hotel de l’Opera.

Dayanita described the experience of seeing one of the Green Boxes for the first time:

Singh: The boxes that I saw, each one of them felt like an invitation into his studio, really revealing to me his sources and where things came from, giving me clues, but also hiding. Playing with me, and yet giving me the impression that he was sharing a part of his world with me—which he was. But it’s not like he’s telling me everything. It’s not all completely serious.

Taylor: I also recently had the chance to open and examine a Green Box in person. I was struck by found poems amid the notes, cryptic shards that read: “to classify combs by the number of their teeth,” or “Infrathin, the spider web, the pearlescent, the iridescent in general,” and “Among the articles of lazy hardware, we recommend a faucet which stops running when one doesn’t listen to it.” Looking at these preserved tatters I found myself thinking about the way that Duchamp’s archive plays with the idea of where art begins and ends. Is art in the object itself, or

somehow in the note that precedes the object? If it is in the note, where does *that* art start or end? Is it the text itself, or also the doodle? The thumbprint? The smudge? And then, can art be transmitted in the *copy* of the smudge?

There's also just something really fun about boxes. I had to admit, while the snow shovel feels arch, and the Mona Lisa feels campy, the box is spontaneous. Opening and shutting, it changes, dancing between preservation and ruin, misdirection and clues. It also holds a copy of Man Ray's photograph of Duchamp's works already covered in dust. The box archive anticipates its own demise. But while it lives, it can be endlessly recombined in new constellations.

Dayanita described the suitcase-boxes this way:

Singh: A form between an artwork and a book is, I think, what the suitcases accomplished. It has all the information, all the content that you would want from a book, but then it also has the very physical, haptic quality of a miniature exhibition. Each of those suitcases is an exhibition, as well as an archive. The archive makes you join the dots. But the dots are valid for that time only. And then ten years later, you find other dots to join. So it's pregnant with endless possibilities.

Taylor: During the years he was making *The Green Box*, Duchamp was living with Mary Reynolds, who actually *was* an artisan bookbinder. She was an American widow whose first husband died in WWI. Like certain daring women of her generation, she moved to Paris after the war to begin a new life. Duchamp and Reynolds entered an open romantic partnership in the Paris of the twenties and deepened their life together in the thirties.

By then, Duchamp was mainly in Paris. He maintained his own studio, but the two collaborated on artworks all over her home at 14 Rue Halle. One wall was painted deep blue, with tacks placed at different angles connected with string—creating an open, changeable network of its own. Here, Reynolds and Duchamp hosted the Paris art set. On nights during the 1930s, artists—Max Ernst, André Breton, and Man Ray included—gathered for dinner and wine in the garden. Once, when Frida Kahlo fell ill while visiting Paris, Reynolds nursed her back to health.

It's hard to know if the shadows gathering over late-1930s Europe made Duchamp consider another, bigger box, one that would hold miniatures of all his work, or whether he simply felt that boxes make for fascinating play. But once he finished his editions of *The Green Box* in the mid-1930s, Duchamp immediately began a new box project, the *Boîte-en-valise*, the box in a suitcase, which he continued to develop as World War II came closer. It's this he's still working on when he writes to Man Ray in 1942.

While *The Green Box* is a mass of mysterious papers, the *Boîte-en-valise* contains miniature versions of the art Duchamp had made and abandoned around the globe.

The *Boîte* has a strange dollhouse quality. Layered trapdoors open to reveal a tiny urinal, a tiny snow shovel, a replica defaced Mona Lisa. Small transparencies represent *The Large Glass*. You examine these ambitious artworks at toy scale, you open and shut the box, you nest and un-nest them. You can literally give each little object its own tiny home.

Duchamp was making these tiny homes while he himself had none. We know from his letters that Duchamp worked as much as he could on the boxes in exile from Paris in the South of France. The 1942 letter shows how he immediately tried to make 50

boxes upon his arrival in the United States.

Yet there's something else about these boxes: they're his longest running work. In fact, once he left France, Duchamp never stopped making suitcases. He produced editions of these Boîtes until his death in 1968.

Even though he was making boxes as he fled his homeland, Duchamp never discussed them as a reaction to a life disrupted twice by war. But Dayanita, who herself creates multiples in order to reach a global audience with her art, saw the immediate and practical need that boxes serve:

Singh: I think the boxes could be also coming from a place of having been displaced and not knowing when one will be displaced again. When Duchamp was making those boxes, he was unsure of the kind of world it would be. He didn't know that there would be no more war. I think he was situating his work in lots of different kinds of places. It's not just one museum that would hold his work, but anyone who bought those boxes had part of his archive.

Taylor: In May 1940, one month before the Nazis marched into Paris, Duchamp fled for the small town of Arcachon, in the Southwest of Bordeaux. A letter he writes from here urges Man Ray, who is Jewish and has already left for New York, not to return to Paris. Duchamp then breathlessly lists friends and colleagues who've also fled, including Samuel Beckett, also in Arcachon, and Salvador Dalí and his family, who Duchamp suspects are in Spain. The letter does not mention an important fact both men would come to know—that Mary had decided to stay behind in Paris. Duchamp would get a travel pass to move between zones, hoping to persuade her to leave. She would not. And it would take Duchamp two more years to escape from the South of France. Any return to Europe was now unthinkable for Man Ray. The three friends were irrevocably scattered, their network torn.

I spoke to T. J. about the correspondence, trying to recapture what this moment in 1940 might have felt like.

He's gonna live a situation in which he's gonna have a certain kind of privilege and freedom to go back and forth to France that's actually gonna become dangerous to his friend, like, right overnight.

Demos: I'm sure that he has somewhere, you know, these feelings; but it's almost like it's—he doesn't need to say it. It's beneath him to even comment on it to a friend like Man Ray. Of course, they probably can assume that they share a similar political perspective here, that what is happening is disastrous, one can only escape. He never did discuss, in any extensive way, his politics or the political situation at the time, or explain his so-called spirit of expatriatism, which he wrote about earlier in the teens in a very brief, abridged way.

Taylor: While his letters to Man Ray may be terse, Duchamp worked systematically in exile as he waited for a visa. Man Ray had often noted that his friend was methodical, and worked, as he once said, "with the patience and obstinacy of a spider reweaving its web." In exile, Duchamp was steady, deliberate. He'd avoided World War I, partly with his grandfather's engravings; now he moved art supplies across borders pretending to be a cheese merchant, disguising the supplies for his boxes as the tools of a traveling salesman. It was a charged moment.

Here's T. J. again:

Demos: Maybe he's playing off of, like, German stereotypes of French people. Maybe

there's even humor involved. It's really very striking, though, that he's able to make it work. And it shows, also, a certain kind of confidence, and even privilege, in his ability to do this without fearing for his life in a way that many other people at the same time would have definitely lots to be afraid of.

Taylor: Duchamp was able to bring his art supplies to the US, and to continue to build his boxes. But his arrival in the US also marked an artistic turning point. He'd spent almost thirty years traveling between countries, living out of suitcases, and revolutionizing art with dramatic gestures. Now he seemed content to settle and replicate, to make and circulate boxes, to draw and redraw his archives. He also played a lot of chess.

Duchamp would make seven editions of his *Boîte-en-valise* over the course of 30 years. Each edition is slightly different. Sometimes this is whimsy. But sometimes this is the result of practical limitations, like war-time shortages he hints at in this 1942 letter.

Deavere Smith: If I don't buy all the leather (for the 50) now it's likely I won't be able to find any more in six month's time.

Taylor: Even as he dealt with material concerns, Duchamp was developing the modern multiple. As his valise art boxes circulated, they influenced everyone from Joseph Cornell, to Andy Warhol, to Fluxus artists like Nam June Paik, who deeply admired him.

For Dayanita, they also proposed a way that an artist, like the proverbial spider, can live in a web of unfinishable possibility:

Singh: I'm not interested in the object; I'm interested in the web. The archive is like a gold mine. When you start to look at the archive, that's when the magic appears, because there are things that you have been photographing without realizing what it is that was drawing you again and again to a certain place. And you start to piece them together. And then at a certain point, you think you'll go mad because the connections are almost unbearable.

Taylor: But for Duchamp, some of the *disconnections* must have been almost unbearable too. For the first few years in the US, as war raged, Duchamp was still working to locate things that would not ever be replaced. Two years after he arrived in New York, Duchamp wrote to Man Ray: "Can you send any documents...retracing our relationship over the past 30 years that you managed to bring back from France? For instance do you have a photo of your portrait of Rose Selavy?"

For much of the same time he was also trying to figure out what had happened to Mary. Back in France, Mary had been followed by the Gestapo. It was months before Duchamp heard news of her harrowing escape to Spain on foot over the Pyrenees. Though they were reunited, their relationship would never be the same. She returned to France in the mid-1940s, her health in decline. Duchamp remained in New York and never returned to live at the house at Rue Halle, where Mary would die of cancer. In 1950, on tiny stationary pocketed from the Terminus St. Lazare, in one of his bitterest and most personal letters to Man Ray, Duchamp would write:

"Dear Man, You will have heard that I went to Paris to see Mary die with minimal suffering. The same rage that I've had in my head ever since the beginning of her illness hounds me now....Nothing like the death of one person to bring home to you the senselessness of the rest of the bloody human race. Write to me. Affectionately to

you both, Marcel.”

Duchamp was famously brusque in his letters. The fury and sorrow in this letter is as full throated as he ever got.

Duchamp remained close to Man Ray his entire life. On October 1st, 1968, Duchamp and his wife Teeny hosted a dinner party at their home, inviting Man Ray and his wife Juliet as well as other friends. After dinner, Teeny found Duchamp in the bathroom, collapsed. She called Man Ray back to Duchamp’s deathbed, and Man Ray photographed his old friend one final time.

As I look at Duchamp’s boxes, I’m drawn to the way they invite me to feel the beauty of archives, and draw me into a web of strange fragments, lost voices, old postage stamps. But I found myself wondering if Duchamp had considered whether his terse letters, with their brief affections, would one day serve as an archive of their own. Whether he considered his letters at all is an open question. “Writing letters bugs the hell out of me,” he once told his sister Suzanne. Even so, in certain correspondence, a wry tenderness shines through. I leave you with a few lines from one last letter, full of his advice to his sister, about how to make a life in art:

Dear Suzanne... I have no faith at all—of the religious sort—in artistic activity as a social value. Artists of all times are like the gamblers of Monte Carlo, and this blind lottery allows some to succeed and ruins others. Everything happens through pure luck. Artists who during their lifetime have known how to make their shoddy goods appreciated are excellent traveling salesmen, but nothing guarantees the immortality of their work. And even posterity is a real bitch, who cheats some, reinstates others, and is also free to change its mind every 50 years.

In two words use less self-analysis, and work with pleasure without worrying about opinions—yours and those of others.

Affectionately, Marcel

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