

# Duchamp's last work of art

*A fireplace designed by the artist remains intact in his Cadaqués home*

MARINA OROZA 11/08/2008. *The corner fireplace designed by Marcel Duchamp was discovered last year in Cadaques, where the artist spent his last summers and was inspired to create his artist's book "Cheminée Anaglyphe". If authorship is confirmed, the fireplace would be the last creation produced by the great master of contemporary art.*



Duchamp's fireplace.  
Photo: Man Ray

The discovery took place in the 'objective chance' style surrealists enthused over, during the same summer we buried the ashes of my father Paco –or stepfather as some say, though I dislike it. We scattered the white ashes on the roots of a holm oak. Cupping some water in his hands, my son Lucas remarked, "I didn't know the ashes were so white and so pretty". That same day an Italian man came by my mother Lupe's apartment in Cadaques, accompanied by a well known villager. "We think Marcel Duchamp lived and designed a fireplace here. Is there a fireplace here? May we see it?" Astonished, my mother let the men in. The fireplace was filled up to its chimney with tennis shoes, old newspapers, plastic bags and board games. "We'll call you soon", they said but never called back or returned. My mother thought the men had not found what they were looking for, and only made a passing comment to me. Thinking of the white ashes and overflowing with strange emotions, I recalled the many times I had suggested that my mother use the fireplace, in spite of the hassle of dealing with the firewood...

We had forgotten all about the matter when one day, on our way back from the market, Lucas and I met a friend, an art expert, who spends his summers in Cadaques.

We explained where we lived. "But where exactly?", he asked, "in the apartment with Duchamp's fireplace or the one next door?" Someone had told him, "Vicenç, la xemeneia de Duchamp ¡existeix!" ["Vicenç, Duchamp's fireplace actually exists!"] With wide open eyes, Lucas and I listened to what would happen if the fireplace was really Duchamp's: The Philadelphia Museum of Art would purchase it, and we would be able to buy a house... a house, a fireplace, a hearth. In my mind I kept shouting, "We must light the fireplace!" So suddenly the fireplace seemed more beautiful to us, shining like a raw diamond being polished in front of our eyes.

Our art expert friend dropped by and chatted with my mother in the terrace, I served them drinks and covered her with a shawl, for she was cold but had not noticed it. First, he explained, we had to confirm that Duchamp had really lived here, and then whether the fireplace was a work of art. If it was not, we could produce a special edition and include it in an industrial design catalogue. But if it really was Duchamp's fireplace... "Art is invaluable", the expert told the owner, "and I will always stand by you." He later suggested we leave the matter in the hands of an art dealer friend of his.

Had the fireplace belonged to any other artist, no doubts would have arisen. However in Duchamp's case any doubt is a source of inspiration. Decontextualised, turned upside down, given a title, and signed, the fireplace might have become another ready-made. But Duchamp was short on time; the fireplace was his last work. Evidence shows that he did live in this apartment and embark on the building the fireplace. He asked Emilio



Richard Hamilton behind the corner fireplace.  
Photo: Huc Malla

Puignau to build it, and dedicated a drawing to him, “Un souvenir d’une cheminée de coin au coin de la cheminée” (“a memento from a corner fireplace in the fireplace corner”). The wire frame he put together to show the exact shape he wanted was photographed by Man Ray, and, supposedly, buried under the finished structure. Marcel Duchamp left Cadaques, and died shortly after.

Lucas was in awe scrutinizing the hearth while my sister was rambling about starting to charge an entrance fee. “And what will we put in that corner if they take it away?,” she asked. “A little Ikea table, darling,” answered my mother.

Richard Hamilton also came to visit. He confirmed the apartment and the fireplace were the ones he had known. He even shed a few tears and let himself be photographed leaning on the chimney.

The art dealer found an artist’s book called “Cheminée Anaglyph”, of which Marcel had made 100 copies. The book included blueprints of the fireplace and a pair of 3-D glasses to visualize them. And sure enough, through the colored cellophane we could see our fireplace’s conical chimney (“la mateixa fandilla”). When lit, it resembles a woman’s skirt with a fire burning under it. The sexual connotation is always

present in Duchamp, the artist who relinquished art for ideas.

We are now awaiting the visit of Duchamp’s legatee who will decide whether the fireplace is a work of art. The legatee is Jackie Matisse, his stepdaughter –just as I was Paco’s.

The fireplace is very beautiful, white, of extremely simple lines, it draws well, it breathes. As I recall, the leaden plug Duchamp made for his shower drain (to block foul smells) is not a plug anymore. It became an art piece and is shown in museums to this day. Perhaps our living room corner will end up fireplace-less, but the corner will survive. In any case, whether they take it away or leave it there, everything we see shall outlive us.

I dreamt I was scuba diving inside the fireplace, and that my son, who was downstairs, dreamt too. But not of a new house, he dreamt of a yacht –he does not feel uprooted in any way. It seems the fireplace, the hearth, has already become a part of our unconscious, breathing on, far from the art world. Marcel Duchamp said he preferred breathing to making art.

That summer I was working on a book, a long poem, which I finally titled Duchamp’s Fireplace, the sky’s womb in the midst of the Tramontanas, the north winds. *Together with the smoke I rise to the hearth that awaits us, and descend to the white ashes.*

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# Is it art because it belonged to Duchamp?

*Experts celebrate the discovery of a fireplace designed by the artist in Cadaques*

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Duchamp in the apartment.  
Photo: Archive Pere Vehí

“In answer to whether the fireplace is a work of art or not I will respond with one of Duchamp’s own questions: ‘Is it actually possible to create a work that is not artistic?’”, says Juan Antonio Ramirez, Art History lecturer at Madrid’s Autonoma University and author of *Duchamp. Love and Even Death* (Siruela, 2000). “It draws attention because Duchamp designed it, but also because it could be his last ever piece and the only original in Spain. If they built a little altar around it all the Duchampians roaming the earth would come in droves to see it. It would become the relic of the great secular saint. And you can be sure I would be among the first to venerate it”.

The object in question is a discreet corner fireplace designed by key 21st Century artist Marcel Duchamp (France, 1887-1968). It was discovered in a Cadaques apartment after the art world lost track of its whereabouts following the artist’s death. Gloria Moure, curator of the first Duchamp retrospective in Spain in 1984, expressed a relative surprise: “When I was organizing the show, Tenny Duchamp (the artist’s wife) even showed me a Polaroid of the finished fireplace, I’m sure I still have it somewhere. But at the time we didn’t consider it interesting enough to include it in the show”, she recalls. “Duchamp didn’t set out to create an art piece; he built the fireplace just as he would’ve an awning or any other object. But, of course, it is still something he designed, a vestige of his years in Cadaques. Personally, I don’t think of it as an art piece, but that is for his daughter Jackie Mounier Matisse to decide. She is the one who handles the rights”.

For Ramirez it is not the legatee “but the art world who should decide whether it is work of art.” There seem to be documents confirming the fireplace was built after Duchamp’s death, an “irrelevant” fact, in the historian’s opinion. “Even if it was built afterwards it followed his design; therefore it is just as important.” The myth has been set in motion. “This is a typical 21st Century romantic tale, not unlike the Incorrupt Finger”, comments Bartomeu Mari, head of Barcelona’s Contemporary Art Museum. “Duchamp turned myth into matter, and in many cases created a piece from a simple anecdote. From this point of view we might say this is one of Duchamp’s objets. Even if it isn’t looked upon as a piece until now, we will surely end up turning it into a work of art.”

Art critic and historian Victoria Colombalia had also heard of the fireplace, though she had not seen it. “If Duchamp had it built it is doubtlessly a Duchamp”, she says. “However, there are a several similar plain, austere fireplaces in Cadaques.” Art critic Estrella de Diego states somewhat more cautiously that “even if some doubt the authenticity of the piece, you’ve got to admit it’s a great a great story.” “We’re talking about the author of *Fountain*, so it’s absurd to discuss whether it’s an original or not. That only matters to the art market and the museums.” And adds, “The beauty of it is that it’s such a Duchampian joke, finding something he made without any artistic pretensions, and watching it become a cult object.”

Jose Guirao, historian and director of Madrid’s Casa Encendida, states that if that turned out to be the case, which is unlikely, the piece could be moved elsewhere, “or remain in its current emplacement after coming up with some kind of system to allow visits.” Guirao believes “it is the typical Duchampian piece and its value stems from his authorship. If it were anyone else’s it could be considered anecdotal. In his case, however, it is an art work. No doubt about it.”

Of those consulted only Vicenç Altaio, writer and current head of the Santa Monica Art Centre in Barcelona, has seen the piece and is fully involved in researching it. “Duchamp taught us that it is process and research that matter, that the piece itself is secondary”, he explains. “His work is contrary to idolatry and fetishism. We all wanted to see the fireplace and the apartment it was built in, and I see two possible interpretations: the first is cultural and symbolic: its importance as a place of memory; the second, the piece’s market value, if it has any. Duchamp said a work of art is not such until the artist says so.”

However, everybody agrees that if the piece is really Duchamp’s it should be conserved. They also agree on the fact that all this fuss has Duchamp chuckling in his grave.