

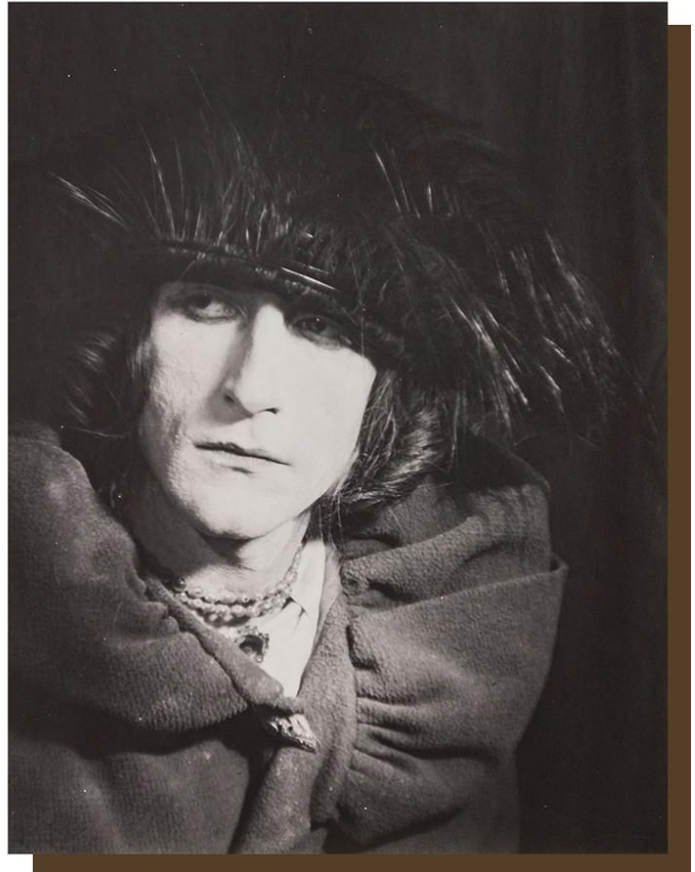
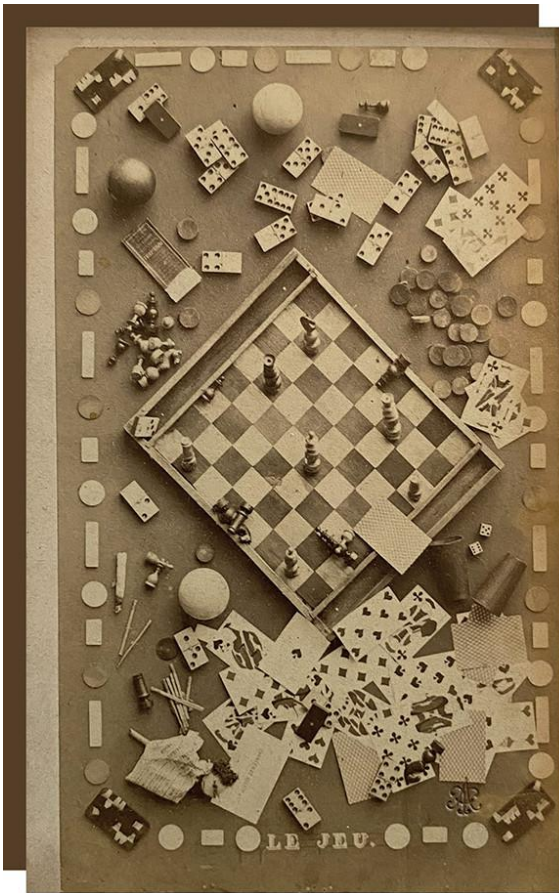
L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

Collezione Ettore Molinaro : Dialogues #37 : Allain De Torbéchet & Cie – Man Ray

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Ettore Molinaro

August 22, 2024



This is the 37th dialogue of the **Collezione Ettore Molinaro**. We talk about Marcel Duchamp and his passion for chess, but above all we talk about the roles that play on the chessboard of life and art. A great “jeu”, this challenge, as suggested by the carte de visite of Allain De Torbéchet & Cie. A game I would never want to stop.

Ettore Molinaro

What reality denies, fantasy eagerly makes its own. So let's try to imagine a chess match between two of the most singular players in history, a woman and a man, a very elegant amazon in court battles and an equally elegant dandy who killed painting and invented different gestures to be an artist. At the sides of the chessboard, Marcel Duchamp, we know everything about him, and Beatrice d'Este, wife of Ludovico il Moro in 15th century Milan and a famous chess player, so much so that she changed its destiny. In fact, Beatrice is responsible for the advancement of the Queen to the most important piece on the chessboard, the only one to radiate her power on every square. After Beatrice, the King, the *Shāh* in Persian chess, is only a prey, a symbol to be protected, captured and killed in the *Shāh māt*, which we translate as "checkmate" but which literally means "the king has no escape".

Also Marcel Duchamp, born a painter, felt that painting no longer had a chance at the beginning of the twentieth century and that not even the cowardly castling technique was enough in the desperate effort to save it. We need to imagine another game, a different scheme, even of personal identity. And to help him in the undertaking that changes the fate of artistic thought in the 20th century are chess. Marcel approached the chessboard at the age of thirteen in 1900. Ten years later Duchamp was a serial player and on Sundays challenged his group of cubist friends, including Picabia. When he moved to New York in 1915, Marcel played with the poet Alfred Kreyborg, the psychiatrist Ernest Southard and the collector Walter Arensberg. The following year he met his lifelong accomplice, in and out of chess, Man Ray. And in 1924, together with Man Ray, Marcel played chess in René Clair's famous film, *Entr'acte*. But the real game was another, on a larger chessboard, and like all victorious wars this one also needed long preparation. In 1912 Duchamp broke up with painting, in 1917 he exposed the idea of the urinal, because the piece itself would be censored, and from then on art was about choosing the object, a ready made one, no longer making it. And then in 1921 Marcel becomes a woman, name Rose, surname Sélavy, Rose Sélavy in French, or *Rose is life* and in the anagram *Eros is life*. Co-author of the transformation that unites the masculine and the feminine, and that makes a living being its photograph, that is to say an object, is Man Ray. Of course, disguise can be seen as a radical denunciation of the crisis experienced by artistic creation in the years surrounding the First World War. Of course, it is the artist-man who becomes the woman-image and calls into question the virility of the creative genius. Of course, if we don't consider chess, that's how it is. But if we remain on the chessboard, if we break it down into the sixty-four black and white squares, perhaps we can attempt a further reading and imagine that Duchamp-Rose Sélavy is King and Queen together, both prey and supreme aggressor, both defence and lightning attack. Let it be everything, in the infinite game of combinations. And in this moving of the pieces, true ready-mades of destiny, in this drawing of trajectories in the air, the chess player is the true artist. Marcel Duchamp said: «Not all artists are chess players, but all chess players are artists».

Exceptions to the rule exist, and the happiest, also due to biographical closeness, is Marcel Duchamp's first wife, Lydie Sarazin-Levassor. A filibuster marriage because Duchamp, in his forties, was penniless and Lydie, twenty-four, was rich. Brief courtship followed by the wedding, Picabia as witness and Man Ray at the camera to film the ceremony, but on the honeymoon the groom spends his time playing chess. One, two, three, every evening, and so on returning to Paris until one night, while her husband is asleep, Lydie glues all the pieces to the board and in her own way declares checkmate. Endgame because games aren't played anymore. Six months after the wedding, on January 28 1928, Lydie and Marcel divorced. He continued to play chess, even in the French national team, and she wrote her memoirs. And at least in our imagination, the prize for the most modern and cruel artist, the one who eliminates every move and silences destiny, goes to her, Queen of Queens.

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