The Politics of Equivocation: Sherrie Levine, Duchamp's 'Compensation Portrait', and Surrealism in the USA 1942–45

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In 1981 the American artist Sherrie Levine re-presented a slightly blurred reproduction of a reproduction of Walker Evans' FSA-period portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs as a work by herself, titling it 'After Walker Evans' (Fig. 1). It was one of a sequence in which she could be seen as usurping canonical images by modernist Masters of photography for femininity. More broadly it could be seen as instantiating the Duchampian strategy of appropriation as a defining hallmark of postmodern art production. Applying another twist to the principle of the readymade, Levine asserted that pre-existing works of art now stood to be lifted wholesale out of history and re-authored.1

What many people did not realise was that Levine’s strategy had already been pre-empted by Duchamp on two fronts. In 1942 the same Walker Evans image had been symbolically stripped of its author and presented as one of a set of Compensation Portraits which functioned as surrogate images of members of the Surrealist group. In this case the sharecropper’s wife’s features stood in for those of the English Surrealist writer and painter Leonora Carrington (Fig. 2). The context for the Compensation Portraits will be supplied in due course, but it suffices at present to say that Duchamp—in league with André Breton—probably made that choice. As part of the same batch of Compensation Portraits, Duchamp presented one of himself, making use of a section cut from a Ben Shahn photograph of another victim of the US Depression (Fig. 3). In doing this, he re-presented part, if not all, of another artist’s work. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Levine was to make her dialogue with Duchamp much more overt by producing sculptural versions of the ‘Bachelors’ from his Large Glass or producing shiny bronze versions of Fountain (1917). What is clear from the above is that even her socially-inflected FSA appropriations had had an oblique relation to the intricacies of his output.

The true author of Duchamp’s Compensation Portrait, Ben Shahn, was, like Evans, synonymous with a Left-orientated ‘documentary’ aesthetic credo in 1930s America. But as well as appropriating a politically-affiliated artist’s work, Duchamp chose, by invoking the social ‘transparency’ of a photographic image, to implicitly identify himself with the subject of Shahn’s work, namely a flesh-and-blood victim of social catastrophe. For those accustomed to thinking of Duchamp as the arch-dandy of twentieth-century art, the ultimate Ironist of strenuously-defended ‘positions’, this overt referencing both of Left commitments and human suffering, however apparently tangential to his wider output, must open up important questions. Was it simply an opportunistic joke? Or does it reflect more deep-seated concerns? It is remarkable that the gesture has gone relatively unremarked for so long. But then Duchamp, of course, chose not to meet the political (or social) head on, but, like Levine later, to negotiate his relations with the bluntness of social fact via his habitual use of the quotational, the apparently marginal or glancing.

In After Walker Evans Levine effectively takes on Duchamp at his own game. If one of the outcomes of his adoption of Ben Shahn’s image had been to bring

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about one of his characteristic gender shifts, she re-appropriates his manoeuvre, re-feminising the authorial relation to the subject of the Evans photograph. It is also important here to see Levine as a respondent to 1980s discourses centred on the interplay between the iconic and indexical properties of photographs and thus making a subtle point about documentary photography. The documentary aesthetics of Walker Evans had been characterised by late 1930s supporters such as Lincoln Kirstein as predicated


Fig. 2. Compensation Portraits, selected for 'First Papers of Surrealism' (New York, 1942). Calas Papers, The Young-Mallin archives, New York. Photograph by John Schiff. (Courtesy of Judith Mallin.)

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paradigmatic. For photography, see especially p. 203.


4. Such readings borrow their impetus from Craig Owens’ seminal interpretation of works by Levine and her contemporaries as fundamentally ‘allegorical’. Hence he writes: ‘Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery. [The allegorist] adds another meaning to the image.’ Elsewhere he asserts that ‘allegory occurs when one text is doubled by another . . . [the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest].’ See his ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism’ (Part 1), October, no. 12, Spring 1980, pp. 79–80. Howard Singerman has recently contested the ‘thickness’ of Levine’s early work, arguing that Owens, although accurate, was ‘premature’; see his ‘Sherrie Levine’s Art History’, October, 101, Summer 2002, p. 98. For Singerman, it is Levine’s sculpture of the 1990s which can best be characterised in terms of ‘thickness’ which he sees as connoting ‘a sense of the fullness of history, or its effects’ (p. 119). To substantiate such claims Singerman also looks to an aspect of Levine’s dialogue with Duchamp, examining in some depth the combined allusions to Brancusi and Duchamp at work in Levine’s 1990s re-workings of the latter’s Fountain (pp. 106–13). Ironically this essay will find in Levine’s After Walker Evans images precisely the historical density that Singerman ascribes to later works, whilst finding it useful to invoke his own earlier characterisation of these images as ‘transparent’.

5. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Living with Contradictions’, p. 128.

Fig. 3. Marcel Duchamp, Compensation Portrait, from the catalogue ‘First Papers of Surrealism’ (New York, 1942), 10 3/4 × 7 1/2 ins. Collection Mme Duchamp. (Copyright Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP Paris and DACS, London 2002.)
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Hence, as he says, ‘Her standing with those who have been taken, rather than across from them, can be read as a gesture of solidarity. Levine positions herself—or is positioned—as an object on the side of the picture over and against a viewer who marshals the distancing separating conjuction of vision and theoretical knowledge.’ In a sense, of course, Levine also restores the rights to (female) selfhood that were symbolically usurped by Duchamp in his Shahn appropriation. But how effectively does she return us to the subject who is, so to speak, ‘behind’ the photograph, and how much is her ability to do this modified by her (self-imposed) obligation to engage with the historical Duchamp? If the game with Duchamp is necessarily one of cross-referentiality, of virtuoso discursive shuffling and re-shuffling, what if she has overlooked some move or other, missed a trick? Recent critical writing on Levine, notably that of Singerman himself, has dwelt on her art-historical acuity, but to what extent might history be said to rebound on her?

This question can only be answered adequately later, but it initially opens up the need for a more nuanced historical account of Duchamp’s Compensation Portrait. The bulk of this essay will therefore be an exercise in re-establishing the various coordinates of this gesture, which entails placing it in two political frameworks: firstly that of Surrealism, as it emerged from a decade of frustrated dialogue with Communist Party ideology, and secondly, that of 1930s ‘documentary’ photography and its ethical commitments.

The interrogation of Duchamp’s political outlook is long overdue. Throughout his life Duchamp reiterated a fundamental antipathy towards ideology but this is far from saying that his works and behaviour lacked a political inflection. His studied indifference to social exigencies has made him appear coolly unmoved by the causes that exercised his contemporaries and it is not surprising that social historians of art have tended to skirt warily around Duchamp’s brand of negativism. In a short article of 1996, T. J. Clark finally gave voice to a sense that Duchamp’s legendary sangfroid might actually be an index of an underlying fraudulence. Designating Duchamp the ‘Edgar Allan Poe of the twentieth century’—a judgement which sets up an analogy with the sheer enormity of the nineteenth-century writer’s influence whilst neatly hinting at a leaning towards the mystificatory or occult that both men shared—the parallel ultimately rides on Clark’s sense that Duchamp’s status, like Poe’s, is unearned. In Clark’s view the name Duchamp has come to be identified with a principle of negation which might more productively be aligned with, say, Berlin Dada, or certain moments within Constructivism. So far, counter-arguments to this kind of position—such as Benjamin Buchloh’s denunciation of the ‘increasingly instrumentalised rationality of social art history’ which proves ‘incapable of recognising the complex circumscriptions of aesthetic objects’—have been pitched at too abstract a level. Just as Levine has made highly specific, if often oblique, contributions to the historical unravelling of Duchamp, so a reading of Duchamp’s politics must take into account his disdain for the grand statement and his preference for the seemingly offhand but heavily over-determined intervention within the archive. What is required at base is an analysis of how Duchamp’s equivocations, on both aesthetic and political levels, were themselves responses to the cross-currents of ideology. This essay addresses several instances of that process at work.

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In October 1942 Surrealism was launched officially in an American context with an exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid mansion, Fifth Avenue, New York, entitled

7. See Howard Singerman, ‘Sherrie Levine’s Art History’.
8. One of Duchamp’s most scathing dismissals of politics occurs during the Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp conducted by Pierre Cabanne (trans. Ron Padgett, London, 1971, p. 103): ‘I don’t understand anything about politics and I say it’s really a stupid activity, which leads to nothing. Whether it leads to communism, to monarchy, to a democratic republic, it’s exactly the same thing as far as I am concerned. You’re going to tell me that men need politics in order to live in society, but that in no way justifies the idea of politics as a great art in itself. Nevertheless this is what politicians believe; they imagine themselves doing something extraordinary! It’s a little like notaries, like my father. I remember my father’s legal papers; the language was killingly funny.’
For a thorough discussion of the staging of the exhibition and the implications of the use of string see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvellous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí and Surrealist Exhibition Installation* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 2001), pp. 166–214. An interesting recent study of this episode is T. J. Demos, ‘Duchamp’s Labyrinth: First Papers of Surrealism, 1942’, *October*, 97, Summer 2001, pp. 91–119. Neither of these authors makes anything of the catalogue for the show, or of the Compensation Portraits, which are my concern in what follows. Demos, however, reads Duchamp’s labyrinthine installation, in line with a 1936 text by Georges Bataille, as a ‘de-structuring anti-architecture’ (p. 116) which serves to metaphorise the geographical and political displacements undergone by artists of the period. Hence: ‘the “namea” of the labyrinth also identifies the experience of loss or threatened loss of nation-state identity and consequent dislocation’ (p. 115). This sits very well alongside the points I make below about the thematics of the Compensation Portraits taken en masse.

11. *First Papers of Surrealism*, ex cat., Co-ordinating Council of French Relief Sources, New York, 17th October–7th November 1942, unpaginated. The concept of ‘Compensation Portraits’ seems to have come from Duchamp, although both Duchamp’s and Breton’s names appear beneath this statement.

12. Something of the confusion surrounding the origins of the images is suggested, for instance, by the discussion of them in Dickran Tashjian’s *A Bootload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde* 1920–1950 (Thames and Hudson: New York and London, 1995). At one point Tashjian acknowledges that they were ‘supposedly chosen at random’ (p. 216) but the images are captioned as ‘Selected by exhibitors for “First Papers of Surrealism” (New York, 1942)’ (p. 217), implying more deliberation and choice on the part of individual artists. Similar confusions persist elsewhere in the relatively scant literature.

13. For an account of the shotgun-firing incident, see Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995), p. 225. As she says, it is profoundly ironic that Duchamp possibly used the shotgun with which Seligmann committed suicide twenty years later. (Seligmann is also among the Surrealists represented by the Compensation Portraits.)

14. The *Network of Stoppages* was produced by using each template of the 3 Standard Stoppages (1913–14) three times. Along each of the resultant ‘Capillary Tubes’, the positions of the ‘Nine Malic Moulds’ (Bachelors) were established by marking circles. For a more detailed account of these intricacies of the Large Glass see entries nos. 282 and 292 in Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 2 (Thames and Hudson: London, 1997), ‘First Papers of Surrealism’. On show were works by Surrealist émigrés who had recently arrived in the USA to escape regimes in their home countries. These émigrés included Surrealism’s ‘Pope’, André Breton, and the painters Max Ernst and André Masson. Other figures who were represented, such as Miró, remained in Europe, whilst politically volatile associates, such as the poet Benjamin Péret, were dispersed in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

In the catalogue for the show, the group’s presences and absences were dramatically underlined. The exhibition itself had seen Breton solicit the services of his old friend Marcel Duchamp. Newly arrived back in the city of his Dada exploits, Duchamp dropped his habitual distrust of ‘official’ Surrealist activities and obliged Breton with an installation for the exhibition’s opening in which the gallery space was criss-crossed with a mile of string.11 In the case of the catalogue, he came up with a highly multivalent concept. Since most of the Surrealists were unavailable to be photographed, they were represented alongside their works by what Duchamp described as ‘Compensation Portraits’. These were published, in the words of a statement in the catalogue, in lieu of being able to offer an ‘adequate photographic image of each of the contributors’.12 Normally passed over even in the literature on Surrealism, the images raise fascinating questions concerning the ways Surrealism’s dispersal was coped with and rendered visible. As already indicated, they also provide a springboard for examining Duchamp’s relation to Surrealist politics.

Laid out for convenience in a grid (Fig. 2), and therefore not shown in the clusters in which they were reproduced in the course of the catalogue, the ‘Compensation Portraits’ constitute a disparate set of found prints or photographs, each one identified with the name of a Surrealist group member. There is some confusion as to how the images were selected. Some historians accept the view that they were chosen at random, probably by Breton and Duchamp, but this essay is predicated on the likelihood that, far from being the outcome of chance, their implications were carefully orchestrated by this pair, particularly Duchamp.13 However, in terms of their placement in the catalogue, where they were scattered in eccentric configurations through several pages, a complex allusion to chance does seem to be involved.

This concern with chance underlines the fact that Duchamp had a central role in designing the catalogue. Its cover, which is also by him, consists of a photograph of the stone wall of Kurt Seligmann’s barn at Sugar Loaf, New York, at which Duchamp had randomly fired a shotgun to produce five indentations (these indentations are replicated by perforations in the cover at appropriate points).14 (Fig. 4). There can be little doubt that these holes allude to those which he had earlier produced as an outcome of firing paint-tipped matchsticks from a toy cannon at the top section of the Large Glass as an ironic enactment of the Bachelor’s ‘shots’ (Fig. 5). Inside the catalogue, Duchamp’s own Compensation Portrait (Fig. 3), to be discussed shortly, was placed beneath a diagramatic study by him for the Network of Stoppages, a further chance-related element of the Glass which helped dictate the positioning of the Bachelors in the bottom left section of the work. Such an arrangement suggests that the Compensation Portraits consciously played on the relations between chance and identity.15 Identity here becomes defined in relation to varying registers of contingency. Physiognomies are shown to have no fixed relation to names. At the same time, random similarities of physiognomy across geographical boundaries (as emphasised by the marked racial diversities figured in the Compensation Portraits) appear to hint at the geographical dispersal of the Surrealists occasioned by the war, a dispersal itself ordained by the outbreaks.
of violence for which Duchamp’s random shots are analogues. (Duchamp’s back cover of the catalogue, which confusingly bears the title and dates of the exhibition, incidentally depicts holes in Gruyère cheese, a reversal from hard stone to soft edible matter but also an obliquely sardonic bodily metaphor) (Fig. 6). To pursue these links further, the connotations of chance in relation to the Network of Stoppages summon up the clustering of the Bachelors as, according to Duchamp’s notes for the Glass, ‘the cemetery of uniforms and liversies’.16 This suggests that two linked lines of thought are in operation. On the one hand identity is released from physiognomy and made fluid. On the other hand, it hardens into a social mask.

Beyond this esoteric rationale for the presentation of the group en masse,

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In the 1920s and 1930s the Surrealists routinely presented themselves en masse using mug shot portraits. The first notable instance of this is the page of *La Revolucion Surrealiste*, no. 1, December 1924, in which they are shown, alongside figures they admired such as Freud, surrounding the anarchist, Germaine Berton. Other important usages of the format are Man Ray’s *Surrealist Chessboard* (1934) and the layout in *La Revolucion Surrealiste* no. 12, December 1929, in which the group, with eyes closed, surround Magritte’s *je ne vois pas la (femme) cachée dans la forêt*. Beyond this, the group were often photographed standing or sitting together. Interesting variations on the latter tradition occurred in early 1942 when George Platt Lynes produced a few group photographs for the ‘Artists in Exile’ exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York (March 1942) in which the Surrealists now appeared alongside fellow exiles such as Fernand Léger and Piet Mondrian. Later in the year, at some point after Duchamp’s arrival in June, a variation of this group portrait was taken with each row of protagonists oriented in a different direction as though dramatising the doctrinal divergences at work among the émigrés. Among the group are Leonora Carrington, Max Ernst, Kurt Seligmann, Duchamp, and Breton, and it is fair to assume that the Compensation Portraits, in so far as they allude obliquely to the dispersal of the Surrealist group at this point in time, have a distinct relationship to this genre of group portrait. Arguably, however, the historically removed or ‘exotic’ aspect of certain of the Compensation Portraits has its precedent not in mainstream Surrealism but in what Simon Baker has seen as a pre-emptive parody of the Surrealists’ group portrait of December 1929; the collage of photographs (of the likes of Johann Strauss and Samary and Got in ‘Voyage to the Moon’) which accompanies Georges Bataille’s ‘La Figure Humaine’ in *Documents*, no. 4, 1929 (See Simon Baker, ‘“The thinking man and the femme sans tête”: collective perception and self-representation’, *Res* 38, Autumn 2000, pp. 194–5.) As yet, it has proved impossible to identify many of the actual personages who appear in the Compensation Portraits, but research continues in this area. Certainly, this essay is predicated on assuming the special significance, or political urgency in 1942, of a few of the images over and above the rest.

17. Some of the choices are playful. Matta, for instance, as the youngest member of the Surrealist circle, is represented by a boy in a sailor suit in the middle of the second row. Giorgio De Chirico, third row at right, is represented as a statue. Miró, second from right at the top, is confusingly represented by a photograph of a couple with the implication that the anglicised version of his first name, Joan, sparks gender confusion. In other instances the portraits exaggerate a characteristic of the artist concerned. That of Max Ernst, therefore, in the top left corner, makes much of his prematurely whitened hair and adds to the...
mythology of his capacity for 'dépaysement'. In yet further cases, the portraits seem to have been selected because of physiognomic links: this is the case with Masson's stand-in, in the centre of the bottom row, an unidentified Inuit. In this instance, however, an oblique tribute to the Surrealists' fascination with Oceanic and Eskimo art might also be at issue, whilst the 'portrait' of the Cuban-born Wifredo Lam (second row down at right), who was undergoing a profound re-orientation during this period, having returned to his native Cuba after a lengthy immersion in European culture, no doubt feeds off his recovery of an 'African' identity. In the case of Duchamp himself, the compensation portrait (second from right, second row)—which has already been identified as a section from a photograph by the American Ben Shahn of the wife of a tenant farmer—bears a striking likeness to certain photographs of the lean-faced Duchamp of the mid 1930s (Fig. 7). But beyond this its significance is overdetermined to a degree which now needs to be unpacked.

The first determining factor, which initially only needs to be touched on briefly, is the discourse around gender identity which characterised much of

Fig. 7. Beatrice Wood, Photograph of Duchamp with Louise and Walter Arensberg, Hollywood, 1936. (Current whereabouts unknown.)

Andre Breton wrote a short but significant essay in 1941 registering the shifts in Lam's sensibility: 'Wifredo Lam: The long nostalgia of poets ...' in Surrealism and Painting, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Icon Editions: New York, 1972), pp. 169–71. Lam's self-discovery was to find visual expression in his key 1943 painting The Jungle. Subsequently the fullest account of his personal odyssey was Pierre Mabille's essay 'The Jungle', Tropiques, no. 12, January 1945, reprinted in translation in M. Richardson (ed.), Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean (Verso: London, 1996), pp. 199–212. Discussing Lam's encounter with Picasso in Paris in 1938, Mabille wrote: 'The Master, in the prime of his genius and glory, still powerfully marked by the revelation of negro art, saw standing before him a black man who had known Western values ... but who, far from having been absorbed by Europe, had gradually regained an awareness of himself and his own means.' (Richardson, Refusal of the Shadow, p. 208.)

Fig. 8. Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp Dressed as Rosé Sélavy, c.1923–4, gelatin silver print. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Samuel S. White III and Vera White Collection. (Copyright Man Ray Trust / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2002.)
Duchamp’s previous output. In 1921 and 1923–4 he had collaborated with Man Ray to produce photographic images of himself in the guise of Rrose Sélavy, his female alter ego (Fig. 8). Clearly, the woman in the Ben Shahn photograph represents some further manifestation of Rrose, although here female identity has not so much been assumed as hijacked. Feminine identity becomes a kind of available vessel, a conceit which might be linked to the Freudian commonplace whereby women are symbolised as vessels in men’s dreams. At the same time, photography becomes the vehicle for a kind of transmigration of souls. There is plenty of evidence that this was a period in which Duchamp was preoccupied with the ontological implications of photographic inscription. In one seemingly offhand gesture, published in the
1945 issue of View magazine devoted to him, he presented a contemporary photograph of himself aged fifty-eight which was captioned with the date 1972 and the information 'Marcel Duchamp At The Age of 85' (Fig. 9). Ageing here is brought on by photographic angling and lighting (Duchamp in fact died in 1968). Beyond these conceptual games lie the political resonances accruing from Duchamp's hijacking of an image saturated by social hardship. At this point, then, it is useful to examine the photograph and related images by Ben Shahn from which Duchamp derived his work.

The source for the surrogate portrait was a photograph of Rehabilitation clients in Boone County, Arkansas, taken by Ben Shahn in October 1935 (Fig. 10). Duchamp's cropping of the image obviously emphasises the link with his own features, but de-emphasises the social context which was Shahn's subject. The woman's skinny crossed arms as she appears to hug herself, the gap between herself and her children, the pose of the girl faintly echoing that of her mother, all emphasise the tensions wrought within the family as it has to weather the effects of the US Depression. Such a family was one of many thousands in the American South displaced during the mid 1930s as a result of a combination of natural disaster and enforced reductions in employment for sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Shahn's second wife, Bernarda Bryson, was to provide a written account of the living conditions of a similar Arkansas family: 'They had been resettled on submarginal land; it was almost solid rock. There were no windows in their home, a dirt floor and no water. What water they had was hauled from a great distance. Their cash crop of that year: $1.40.'

Shahn, established as a socialist mural painter having worked with Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Mural in the early 1930s, was unemployed by the mid 1930s and joined the government-sponsored Federal Art Project under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Working as a photographer between 1935 and 1938, he was employed under the documentary wing of the

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22. The best recent account of Shahn's photographic output is Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times (Fogg Art Museum and Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000). As the title implies, the book largely concentrates on Shahn's New York output, but Deborah Martin Kao's essay 'Ben Shahn and the Public Use of Art' (pp. 39–73) is very useful for his overall attitude to photography in the 1930s. See also Susan H. Edwards, 'Ben Shahn: The Road South', History of Photography, vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 13–19.


27. He worked with a small Leica camera equipped with a right-angle viewfinder which allowed him to photograph his subjects unaware. In the case of the image in question, there are several related photographs in existence which show him honing in on the troubled psychology of the mother.

Quite how Duchamp came to know Shahn's work is uncertain. In the 1930s Duchamp had largely been resident in France, and much preoccupied with chess, although he visited the USA for a brief period at the end of 1933 and for longer in late 1936. The Depression was then at its height. One reporter who interviewed Duchamp whilst he was visiting his patron, Walter Arensberg, in Los Angeles, recorded the French artist's view that California seemed like a 'white spot in a gloomy world'. More specifically, in a 1960s interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp revealed some knowledge of the FSA, although he appears profoundly unsympathetic: 'there was an official organisation called the WPA—or something like that—which would give every artist about thirty or forty dollars a month [Cabanne notes that it was more like a hundred dollars] on the condition that he give his paintings to the State. This was so he could live. It was a complete fiasco. The State's storerooms became filled with all these artists' rubbish.' Of course, he may simply have thought of Shahn's work as rubbish or ephemera, hence the readiness with which he eventually appropriated it. It is interesting, though, that one of Duchamp's closest contacts in New York after he emigrated there in June 1942 was the Surrealist-associated dealer Julien Levy. Levy had actually worked with Lincoln Kirstein on the Museum of Modern Art's 1932 exhibition 'Murals by American Painters and Photographers', selecting the Photo-Murals section of the show, and thus establishing a relationship with Shahn which would lead to his showing Shahn's paintings (as opposed to his photographs) at his New York gallery in May 1940. Although Levy and Shahn fell out shortly after this, the event represented a significant alliance between an artist synonymous with social realism and a dealer broadly committed to Surrealism—and from this we can assume that, once established in America, Duchamp would have had plenty of reason to take note of Shahn.

The above returns us to the question of Duchamp's stance on political engagement. Since it seems likely that Duchamp knew very well what Shahn and his art represented, what was at stake, ideologically, in appropriating one of his images? To focus this question properly we first need to ponder more closely the relationship between the set of Compensation Portraits and the title of the exhibition and catalogue for which they were produced, 'First Papers of Surrealism'.

Those Surrealists who entered America in the early 1940s had enormous difficulty obtaining entrance papers. It took two years of diplomatic manoeuvring by Duchamp's American patrons Walter Arensberg and Katherine Dreier before his papers were deemed suitable for a smooth entry into America, whilst Max Ernst, once he had got to America after several periods of imprisonment as an 'enemy alien' in France, spent a lengthy period detained on Ellis Island. In a sense, the Compensation Portraits (Fig. 2) summon up the idea of the Surrealists entering America under assumed identities with false papers. (Duchamp had in fact assumed the identity of a wholesale cheese merchant in order to transport materials for his Bûtes-en Valise through the German-occupied zones of France in 1941. This adds to the associations of the close-up photograph of Gruyère cheese on the back cover of the 'First Papers of Surrealism' catalogue, investing the publication's contents...
with connotations of avant garde smuggling.) Many immigrants to the US around this time found it helpful to ‘modify’ their identities, frequently Americanising their names, and in this respect the fact that several images represent archetypes of recent American subculture is interesting. The portraits of Breton and Picasso, for instance, at second from left, top row, and top right respectively, have distinct gangster or ‘film noir’ connotations. Kay Sage (bottom right corner), the wife of Yves Tanguy, is translated into a figure from a Wild West costume drama. The implication is that Surrealism offers a return to America’s pioneer spirit, or that it is the province of the socially dangerous and marginalised.

In the case of Duchamp’s portrait, these associations get extended to the issue of America’s socially disadvantaged—and this is reinforced by the fact that Leonora Carrington, the estranged partner of Max Ernst who had suffered a mental breakdown after escaping France for Spain, and eventually got to America via Lisbon, is presented by a further example of FSA photography, Walker Evans’ portrait of Allie Mae Fields Burroughs (second from right, third row), the wife of a southern sharecropper. This image had initially appeared in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, the classic marriage of documentary photography and text by Walker Evans and James Agee, published the previous year—another factor which overdetermines the strategic nature of the choice of Compensation Portraits, and establishes Duchamp’s and Carrington’s as being particularly loaded. Ironically, of course, the fact that Duchamp and Carrington are presented here under the very imprimatur of ‘documentary’ photography, means that their Compensation Portraits double back precisely on the question of ‘truth telling’ or veracity. If these are false passport photographs what they in fact say about their undercover subjects might be said to be predicated, at least by virtue of links to documentary aesthetics, on the notion of ‘honesty’.

Here we begin to enter deep water. For in appropriating such imagery, which in the case of Duchamp amounts to him usurping the identity of someone from a very different class position than himself, should we assume that some spurious identification with America and its socially disadvantaged is being set up—from the standpoint of Surrealism in general or Duchamp in particular? Certainly the catalogue for ‘First Papers of Surrealism’ appears to have a dual strategy in terms of cultural politics. On the one hand Surrealism is shown to represent a continuation of certain currents endemic to American literature, so that in an essay by R. A. Parker entitled ‘Explorers of the Pluriverse’ American literary figures such as Poe and Melville, and eccentrics such as Benjamin Paul Blood and Charles Hoy Fort, are seen as Surrealists avant la lettre. On the other hand, much is made of the movement’s galvanising impact in the US: in his foreword to the catalogue Sidney Janis talks of the conditions being propitious for ‘this persistent and magnetic domination’. Avant garde domination was exactly what Breton, his authority diminished by his enforced exile, dreamed about.

Were the Surrealists trying to have it all ways, asserting avant-garde hegemony for themselves on foreign soil whilst identifying with an indigenous community of the socially subversive or downtrodden? It is necessary here to think about Surrealism’s political position at this time. The early 1930s had been characterised by the movement’s attempt to align itself with international formations of Communist artists and writers but, after 1934, when Russian ideologues had sanctioned Socialist Realism as the official cultural policy of international Communism, the Surrealists grew increasingly alienated, and in 1935 broke completely with the Party. By the late 1930s, despite short-lived
groupings around journals such as ‘Contre-Attaque’, which saw Breton enter an alliance with his old enemy Georges Bataille, the Surrealists’ lack of direct party-political affiliation had deprived them of any official outlet for their views. Eventually, in 1938, Breton made a trip to Mexico where, in league with the exiled Leon Trotsky, he produced an important manifesto laying out the Surrealists’ position on the compatibility of artistic experimentalism and revolutionary politics. As part of the jointly produced ‘Towards a Free Revolutionary Art’ Breton and Trotsky launched a withering attack on Socialist Realism: ‘The official art of Stalinism mirrors with a blatancy unexampled in history their efforts to put a good face on their mercenary profession… In the realm of artistic creation, the imagination must escape from all constraints and must under no pretext allow itself to be placed under bonds.’

In this context it is interesting that Duchamp should wish to literally identify himself with the work of an artist, Ben Shahn, whose sympathies in the 1930s had very much inclined towards Socialist Realism, (although it should be noted that in 1935 Shahn had severed his previous editorial connections with the Communist-oriented Art Front, desiring of in-fighting between Stalinists and Trotskyists, and had begun to adopt the moderate liberal position which would eventually see him endorsing New Deal policies). Duchamp’s literal identification with Shahn in the Compensation Portrait could be seen as deeply ironic in relation to Surrealism. No doubt Duchamp was well aware that, in the mid 1930s, Louis Aragon, who had famously split from the Surrealists in 1932, had forcefully advocated a return to realism in art as opposed to what he termed the ‘anodyne arabesques’ of experimentalist modes of art production. Significantly, in an essay published in both Paris and in America in the pages of Art Front Aragon had aligned his project with the potentialities of photography. Aragon had made a point here of denigrating Man Ray—accused of sterility, of being detached from life and too heavily dependent on Fine Art idioms—in favour of Henri Cartier-Bresson, seen as a photographer of the people, of movement rather than stasis. In effect, he sketched the emergence of two traditions of photography, a modernist one and a ‘documentary’ one; the latter, of course fulfilling his aesthetic requirements. Significantly, it had been Duchamp’s art dealer friend Julien Levy who had first shown Cartier-Bresson’s work in America when, in 1933, he had pre-empted Aragon by aligning it with a group of news photographs as an example of what he termed ‘anti-graphic photography.’ It was precisely this work which proved inspirational for Ben Shahn, about to embark on a stint as a photographer.

This suggests that Duchamp’s implicit identification with the documentarian Shahn made an extremely telling point in relation to photographic discourse. If we recall that Duchamp’s Compensation Portrait constituted a reincarnation of Rrose Sélavy, his female alter-ego, the photographer responsible for capturing the elusive image of Rrose had originally, of course, been his friend Man Ray, the butt of Aragon’s anti-modernist photographic critique. By now deftly placing the imaging of Rrose in Ben Shahn’s hands Duchamp registered a shift in photographic debates which simultaneously placed Surrealism’s doctrinal rifts of the early 1930s firmly under the spotlight.

All of this could be seen as markedly satirical at the Surrealists’ expense, but a modification of the argument might hinge on the fact that Duchamp’s Ben Shahn appropriation does not stand alone among the Compensation Portraits. Taking into account the additional presence of the portrait of Leonora Carrington—which utilises Walker Evans’ FSA photograph—the intention may have been a more concerted attempt to reinstate, albeit ironically, the
Surrealists' leftist credentials. In this sense the images do indeed become a form of compensation for the Surrealists' failure to achieve proletarian identifications, a failure which would have been felt particularly acutely by the émigré Surrealists at a time when certain of their ex-associates in France were actively lending support to the Resistance.

It is interesting in the latter respect that the 'First Papers of Surrealism' exhibition was actually organised under the auspices of a French Relief organisation—the Coordinating Society of French Relief Societies—which, for reasons of political expediency, was pro-Vichy. This even extended to entrants at the opening of the exhibition being obliged to pass a life-size bust of Marshall Pétain. It is surely possible to see Duchamp strategically capitalising on the embarrassing position which 'official Surrealism' found itself to be in. If this is the case, he was, for the first moment in his career, squarely involved in political debate, mobilising his selection of 'Compensation Portraits' to point up the Surrealists' inability to, as it were, assume the identifying features of political struggle. By contrast Duchamp demonstrates a willingness to over-identify with the downtrodden, to the extent of abandoning his own gender. This, of course, evokes the image of a more invested Duchamp than we are used to. And it must be added that all this is far from being finite as an interpretation. In line with the equivocation so fundamental to Duchamp's personality, it would be entirely appropriate to posit a further level of content. There may be an essentially cynical attitude towards economic cycles of boom and bust at stake here. Duchamp's alter-ego Rrose Sélaty, once a high-class femme fatale, a denizen of the pages of Vogue, has undergone an economic slump. Perhaps Duchamp simply found it amusing to position himself among his earnest Surrealist colleagues wearing the trappings of the social.

The above dilemma—hinging squarely on Duchamp's attitude to 'commitment'—can be cast in a different light by turning to another, profoundly untypical work produced by Duchamp early in 1943, just a few months after the design of the First Papers catalogue. The artist was asked by Alexander Liberman, the editor of Vogue, to submit an entry for a competition his magazine was holding to produce an image of George Washington for the cover of the magazine's 'Americana' edition of February 1943. Duchamp came up with an assemblage entitled Allegorie de Genre ('Genre Allegory' or 'kind of allegory') (Fig. 11) in which the profile of George Washington is conjured from a section of shrivelled bandage gauze. This has been stained with iodine to evoke dual connotations of wounds and the stripes of the American flag, and studded with a scattering of disconsolate stars. Turned sideways the image suggests the shape of the United States.

For various reasons the image was rejected by Vogue's editors. It seems that the stained gauze evoked associations for them of used sanitary towels. This is interesting in so far as the production of the first American Flag—sewn together from separate pieces of cloth by Betsy Ross in 1777—had had connotations of 'women's work', and Duchamp in a sense preserved the home-made quality of that initial gesture as well as actually employing thirteen stars, emblematising the union of the original thirteen US colonies (possibly his concession to historical exactitude given the 'Americana' theme). Perhaps Vogue's editors, acutely conscious of their magazine's largely female readership, elided knowledge of these 'feminine' origins for the US flag with discomfort at the blood-stained appearance of the assemblage. The 'sanitary towel' association becomes more significant, however, in relation to the fact that three years later Duchamp produced a small work, to be included in one of his Bôîtes-en-Valise, consisting of a splash of his own semen on black.
Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, Allégorie de genre (Portrait de George Washington), 1943, assemblage: cardboard, gauze, nails, iodine, and gilt stars, 53 × 40.5 cm. Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre National d’Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris. (Copyright Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2002.)
satins, entitled, pointedly enough, ‘Wayward Landscape’. The two might almost be read as indexical pendants of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ bodily production, but at some further level these gestures, and particularly the *Allégorie*, seem to play off the political—in so far as that comes to be configured in terms of terrain or land mass—against eruptions or breaches of the body’s boundaries. Given that the USA entered the Second World War about a year prior to the production of *Allégorie de Genre* it is safe to assume that the work commented on the way America’s sense of nationhood was inextricably bound up with bloodshed. The stars, attached as they are to the ends of long nails, physically puncture the gauze. In this respect, they undoubtedly echo both the Bachelors’ ‘shots’ which had been drilled into the *Large Glass* over twenty years earlier and the actual shots fired by Duchamp at Seligmann’s barn wall and replicated in the cover design for *First Papers of Surrealism* (Fig. 4).

Such allusions to the role of firearms in American culture help explain the work’s radical unsuitability for the ‘Americana’ edition of *Vogue*. But the butt of Duchamp’s irony would have been far from clear. In fact the work actively thematises equivocation in terms of its play on doubleness. Another feature of Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, although one which was only speculated on in the notes for the work, had been a diagrammatic reformulation of what Duchamp called the ‘Lincoln-Wilson system’: a kind of double portrait utilising the alternating facets of a concertinaed surface, which, seen from one angle reads as President Lincoln and from the other as President Wilson. You can look at things one way, Duchamp implies, or you can look at them another, and this phlegmatic acceptance of the relativism of one’s position pervaded much of his output, (think for instance of the gender-specific nature of *Fountain* or the enforced aspects linked to the New Deal programme. Quite possibly Duchamp was also familiar with a type of print, circulated by monarchists during the French Revolution, in which the outline of a classical urn could also be read inversely as the profiles of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, thus signalling secret allegiance to the royal couple (Fig. 12). Duchamp’s gesture is equally hermetic but in no way harbours clandestine assent to a cause. It is also far from coincidental that, included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* catalogue accompanying the Museum of Modern Art’s large exhibition of 1936, had been a trick portrait of Roosevelt, produced in 1933 by the graphic artist C. C. Beal (Fig. 13). Captioned ‘Find What Roosevelt means to the USA in this picture’, the image was made up of figures and objects symbolising various measures linked to the New Deal programme. All in all, this establishes that Duchamp’s seemingly casual appropriation of a New Deal-associated photograph by Ben Shahn, only months prior to the *Allégorie de Genre*, was heavily over-determined politically.

It is also possible to assert that, in the wake of *Allégorie de Genre*, Duchamp produced two further politically-tinged gestures. The first of these, which underlines the anti-patriotic reading of the *Allégorie* was a cover design for the Surrealists’ *VVV Almanac* (nos. 2—3) of March 1943 in which Duchamp simply re-presented as a readymade an anonymous etching of an apocalyptic horse rider, allegorising death, wearing the Stars and Stripes of the US flag (Fig. 14). The second gesture was far richer in terms of its implications and returned more squarely to the relations between Surrealism and America as originally dramatised by the *Compensation Portraits*. Asked by André Breton to produce a cover for his 1946 poetry collection ‘Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares’, Duchamp came up with a dust jacket design bearing an image of the Statue of Liberty with a hole cut in the position of its face and filled with the...
The Politics of Equivocation: Sherrie Levine, (female) zone of the Glass. It seems very likely that a connection exists here with Wayward Landscape, as discussed above, not least because this drop of semen, rather than having an ‘invisible’ biological destiny during coition, has been fixed two dimensionally as an optical ‘smear’ (a blurred photograph might well be a further analogue for this ‘dazzling’). All of this suggests that Wayward Landscape and the Allegorie de Genre, as well as having landscape and/or political associations, are post-facto recapitulations of earlier ideas bound up with ineffable metaphysical inversions of visuality and gender identity.

42. Duchamp’s desire to avoid side-taking, to cultivate an ‘irony of indifference’, has been linked by Thomas McEvilley to the early Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Ellis (c.365–275 BC) on the basis that, in one conversation with Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp spoke positively of his writings: see Thomas McEvilley, ‘Empyrichial Thinking (And Why Kant Can’t)’, Art Forum, vol. 27, no. 2, October 1988, especially pp. 120–7. In a sense, the fixity of the spectator’s position ordained by a work such as Etant Donné acts as a counterpoint to this refusal of viewpoint. Certainly the gender-specific nature of the readymade Fountain has led, in recent years, to a revised sense of the exclusivity of address in certain areas of Duchamp’s output. See, for instance, my ‘Men Before the Mirror’, and Paul B. Franklin, ‘Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” and the Art of Queer Art History’, Oxford Art Journal, vol. 23, no. 1, 2000, pp. 25–30.


44. See Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism, ex cat, ed. Alfred H. Barr Jr (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1936), cat. 523. The catalogue entry is followed by a lengthy legend explicating the constituent elements of the image. It is significant, also, that the catalogue as a whole contains a number of double-images ranging from works by Archimboldo (cat. nos. 6 and 7) to Bracelli (cat. no. 53). In many ways, this device sets the tone for the publication, and finds its realisation, in terms of Surrealist usage, in the ‘paranoiac-critical’ double images of Salvador Dali (for example, cat. no. 320). Dali’s use of the technique continued to dominate his canvases of c.1938–40, but this was precisely the period when his ambiguous attitude towards Fascism alienated him decisively from Bretonian Surrealism. In this respect, Duchamp’s sudden utilisation of a Dali-associated technique in 1943 is curious. In his important résumé of Surrealist achievement, ‘Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism’ of 1941, Breton had taken pains to place Dali’s achievement in the past: ‘[his work] from 1936 onwards has had no interest whatsoever for Surrealism’ (see Breton, Surrealism and Painting, p. 76). Quite possibly...
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libertarian project to America. The fact that Breton was to return to France in April 1946 added to the nest of ironies.

The Statue of Liberty had, of course, been imported from France in the first place. Sculpted by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, it had been presented to the US by France in 1877 as a symbol of the spread of French Enlightenment ideals. More specifically, it embodied shared republican principles, and was displayed, in fragmentary form, at the 1876 world fair in Philadelphia to mark the anniversary of America’s split from Britain after the War of Independence. (Duchamp’s likely sensitivity to the historical roots of allied French-US political ideals resonates with his attention to detail in deploying thirteen stars in the portrait of Washington for the Allégorie and the sense in which the image takes an ironic cue from the monarchist prints circulated during the Revolution. No doubt he was also aware of the extent of French involvement, on the side of the Americans, in the War of Independence.) Duchamp was willfully signalling some degree of solidarity with the Surrealist outcast (who, needless to say, does not figure in the set of Compensation Portraits). Duchamp and Dali appear in fact to have got on very well, first in 1933 when Duchamp visited Cadaqués, and again in the middle of 1940 when, together with friends and lovers, they listened to the fall of France on a radio in the town of Arachon near Bordeaux. Certainly, later in life the two men became close friends. Dawn Ades has recently noted their shared fascination with perspective and anamorphosis: see ‘Dali’s Optical Illusions’ in Dawn Ades (ed.), Dali’s Optical Illusions (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000), p. 22 and passim.


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ruthlessly parodies Breton's inability to broker cultural alliances between France and the US (an enterprise rendered absurd in any event by Breton's stubborn resistance to learning English), and the reading is compounded by Marina Warner's observation that at one time a placard stood next to the entrance of the Museum of Immigration by the statue's plinth bearing a painted image of the statue through which visitor's could poke their heads. They could then purchase a snapshot of themselves as Liberty with the added caption 'My Ideals'. Duchamp's play on the equation between Breton and Liberty amounting in the end to little more than tourist kitsch was simultaneously poignant and damning.

Whether or not Breton was stung by his friend's merciless irony is...
unclear. But there is a further aspect of Duchamp's depiction of Breton which suggests that it carried the stamp of the equivocations on questions of engagement which have been noted above. When contemplating his book cover commission, Duchamp must surely have had in mind the final lines of Breton's painstaking exposition of the Large Glass, 'Phare de la Marieé', which had originally appeared in Minotaure in the winter of 1935 but had been reprinted in America, in a translated version, in the Surrealist journal View of March 1945. Here Breton had talked of 'La Marieé mise a nu' as constituting a kind of beacon which should be kept 'luminously erect, to guide future ships on a civilization which is ending'. Breton's choice of metaphor could be seen as obliquely linking Duchamp's Bride to the personification of Liberty on Ellis Island, partly by reference to Duchamp's own previous movements between France and the US, and partly by reference to America's strong socialist and anti-Fascist currents of the mid 1930s.

Breton also knew that the Large Glass contained imagery which could be related to Liberty's Beacon, namely the 'illuminating gas' produced by the Bachelors in its Lower Domain. What he most probably did not know was that the origins of Duchamp's use of such imagery lay in a drawing of a humble 'Bec Auer' hanging gas lamp that had been produced as early as 1903–4. Around 1946–7, having designed Breton's book cover, Duchamp began work on what was to be a form of translation of the concerns of his Large Glass into three dimensional terms. In this final elaborate assemblage-cum-installation, Etant Donnés, he placed a real Bec Auer lamp in the hand of an otherwise ravaged Bride-striped-bare, now fallen to earth. He stipulated that the piece eventually be installed permanently in Philadelphia, aware no doubt of the city's links with the beginnings of the US republic. All of this suggests that, whatever other symbolic allusions were at play in the installation, there may well exist a buried allegory of social liberation. And it suggests that he remained haunted by what Breton, however misguidedly, had stood for. Robert Lebel once noted that, reflecting on Breton after his death, Duchamp was moved to an uncharacteristic burst of lyricism. Breton, Duchamp said, had been 'the lover of love in a world that believes in prostitution'.

As with the Compensation Portrait utilising Shahn, the cover of Breton's book was to become a marginal item of Duchampiana, its significance only apparent to a few initiates, but an elaborate version of Allegorie de Genre was eventually reproduced in the Surrealist review VVV in February 1944. In many ways it is a precursor to a later reflection on patriotism, Jasper Johns' Flag painting of 1954–5. Flag has also been seen by commentators as overtly thematising equivocation, and it is odd that the possibility of Johns either consciously or unconsciously recapitulating what he may have seen in a copy of VVV has barely been entertained given his subsequent near-obsession with Duchamp. However, if Flag projects a kind of undecidability as to the relative claims on art of the aesthetic and the social, at a time when McCarthyism made it strategic for Left-inclined artists to play mute, Duchamp's work acquires a quite committedly anti-American resonance by comparison. All of this suggests that the early to mid 1940s was a period when Duchamp allowed himself to hint at social opinions, or even political affiliations, that he normally kept well hidden.

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Just as Duchamp believed in foregrounding his own (and his viewer's) positionality, Duchamp's 'position', vis-à-vis the imperatives of a socially

46. Mark Polizziotti notes that, although Breton himself professed to like the design, one of his then allies, Charles Dufty, felt that the Surrealist leader was being lampooned. It is interesting that Breton appears to have been oblivious to one of the darker ironies of the title 'Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares' (a title he himself had come upon, by chance, in a horticultural catalogue). At this time Breton's former wife, Jacqueline Lamba, was involved in an affair with the American artist David Hare. See Mark Polizziotti, Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton (Bloomsbury: London, 1995), pp. 518–19.

47. See André Breton, 'Lighthouse of the Bride', View, series V, no. 1, March 1945, p. 13.


49. So far as I am aware Duchamp himself never voiced any preoccupation with Philadelphia's historical significance, and it could easily be argued that he was simply ensuring that his final work joined the other examples of his output in the Arensberg Collection, which was initially bequeathed to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1950. Given the drift of the current argument, however, the choice of Philadelphia may well have been over-determined. For a short discussion of this issue see Tomkivs, Duchamp: A Biography, p. 433.


51. 'André Breton', Arts-Loisirs (Paris), no. 54, 5–11 October 1966, pp. 5–7. As cited by Robert Lebel, 'Marcel Duchamp and André Breton' in Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (eds), Marcel Duchamp, p. 140.

52. VVV, New York, no. 4, February 1944, pp. 65–6. This is an uncut proof of a reproduction of the gauze from Allegorie de Genre with a cut-out black and blue page laid over the image to produce the shapes of Washington's profile and the map of the USA on its side.

53. For a discussion of Flag in terms of equivocation see Fred Orton, Figuring Jasper Johns (Reaktion Books: London, 1994), chapter 2, especially pp. 145–6. Johns' fascination with Duchamp has been well documented. For a
It seems suitably ironic, given the trajectory of this discussion, that among Levine’s more recondite homages to Duchamp has been a series of works playing on George Washington’s profile in which the ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ inscribed within the Allegorie de Genre cryptogram are made overt (Fig. 16). But what needs to be returned to here is the question of how the ethical implications of a work such as After Walker Evans (Fig. 1) are inflected, in advance, by a set of historical pre-conditions, namely—to pinpoint the salient moments in the preceding narrative—the network of discursive bonds that link the Compensation Portraits of Duchamp and Leonora Carrington.

It is clear by now that part of the force of Sherrie Levine’s After Walker Evans resides in its relationship to Duchamp’s Compensation Portrait of himself as another troubled woman from the Depression years and, thus, in Levine’s stance, vis-à-vis Duchamp, as a female appropriationist. Indeed, the whole dialogue here might be seen as turning on the gendering of the act of appropriation. However, one has to ask whether Levine was aware that the Walker Evans image had itself been appropriated as a Compensation Portrait on behalf of the female Surrealist Leonora Carrington. In terms of the complex historical discourse within which she was situating herself, it might be argued that Levine was, in a sense, identifying not so much with the subject of the photograph as with Leonora Carrington; in other words with a symbolic avatar of the appropriative powers of the female author (at least in so far as these powers were claimed, on Carrington’s behalf, by Duchamp/Breton). This would lead us to conclude that, according to the Mobius strip logic of the historical archive, it is Duchamp, despite his resistance to being pinned down to any ‘position’, who achieves the unlikely feat of identifying with the subject of Ben Shahn’s photograph.  

The point here, which has necessitated this final return to Levine, is that the discursive unravelling of Duchamp’s paradoxes, in which Levine participates both knowingly and unknowingly, ends up ‘compensating’ him for the ideological equivocation to which he liked to profess. And this in itself makes a telling point about the possibility of the author maintaining any one-to-one relationship between his/herself and the positionality of social subjects. In terms of the larger framework of this discussion, it sets the discursive contingency of images against the rigidly determinant conditions of a socialist realist aesthetics. In a sense, of course, Levine becomes the catalyst for the emergence of a politically incisive Duchamp, but at the same time she risks appearing merely to be the conduit for his historical ‘completion’. The instabilities of her position as simultaneously art historian and actor in art history place her own (political) agency at risk. Duchamp, with his chess player’s ability to predict conceptual fall-out, comes out of all of this looking both compassionate and committed.

One final point seems worth noting. In her important essay on documentary photography, which itself acknowledges the philosophical limitations of the documentary ethos, Martha Rosler notes that when Evans’ portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs was initially reproduced in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men it was not captioned. In the text, however, the subject of the picture was referred to under a false name, Allie Mae Gudger, in order to offer her real life equivalent some protection. In a peculiar sense, then, this image had always been a form of ‘Compensation Portrait’.

At the end of this trail of false identifications we might ask what it is that is responsive art practice, can finally be gauged by returning, as a coda to this essay, to where we began, namely the phenomenon of his reception by Sherrie Levine.

Fig. 16. Sherrie Levine, President Profile 1, 1979/1993. (Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.)
really being compensated for. Lack, after all, has been summoned up in so many guises throughout this essay. Originary identities and authorial positions, the failure of Surrealism’s political project, the fact of its dispersal...—all of the compensatory ploys discussed so far might appear to lead back irresistibly to the Freudian notion of the fetish as stand-in for lack, particularly as that comes to be figured in the image of an emaciated woman made to act as stand-in for Duchamp’s femininity; an image furthermore that is simply a fragment, cut away from a larger photograph and, by implication, a larger (social) whole.

Should Duchamp’s oft-imputed sidestepping of ideological accountability, his dandyish irresolution in the face of embattled modernist causes, be seen as masking something that was lacking at another level: the ability to distil critique from an endless deferral of meaning? Or was he not, in the instances discussed in this essay, facing up to the double bind of commitment, at least in so far as Surrealism, and the figure of André Breton especially, embodied that dilemma? In the end, Duchamp’s politics emerge as a politics of equivocation, underwritten by mourning. His position takes on an ethical cast. In so far as he chooses to stand in for a woman, or a proletarian subject, or to have that person stand in for him, he suggests it is the experience of standing in the place where the other stands that we crave and can never have.

This essay was delivered as a paper in various versions, at the Association of Art Historian’s Conference, Edinburgh (April 2000), at the Universities of Glasgow, Manchester, York, East Anglia, and Essex, and also at Edinburgh College of Art. My thanks for the many helpful suggestions made on those occasions by colleagues. The title, it has been pointed out to me, could be read as an echo of Denis Hollier’s ‘On Equivocation (Between Literature and Politics)’, October 55, Winter 1990, but that was certainly not my intention. Any thematic parallels that exist are purely fortuitous. I particularly wish to thank Simon Baker for two very helpful items of information, and Simon Dell, who raised several questions that proved pertinent to the final version. I am also grateful to Adrian Rifkin for his help in resolving certain structural questions.