

The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

SoHo Weekly News

April 13, 1977

Duchamp Video Hoax

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The Last Videotapes of Marcel
Duchamp
John Sanborn, et al.
The Kitchen
March 31, 1977

"I was merely adding corroborative detail to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."—The Lord High Executioner

The Last Videotapes of Marcel Duchamp was a hoax, a type of artwork considered respectable in Dada circles, I'm told. John Sanborn and his fellow perpetrators all insist that Duchamp himself would have approved.

If your sixth sense told you that there was something funny about all those posters and postcards of the old fox standing in his corner, smirking at someone else's expense, no doubt, and holding an old Sony camera; then your sixth sense is in good working order and can be trusted with future assignments.

It was a complicated deception, involving the production of a body of evidence tending to support belief in the existence of authentic Duchamp videotapes, as well as the spurious tapes themselves.

About two months ago, Sanborn told me that he had decided to make a videotape according to his idea of the kind of tape Duchamp would have made if he had just picked up a camera, even to the point of imitating Duchamp's voice; and that he would be showing it at The Kitchen in March. There was no suggestion of an actual hoax at that time, and no injunction of silence. I forgot about it, in fact, until I saw one of the Kitchen's press releases, announcing Sanborn's show and outlining a plausible narrative revolving around Bell Lab's attempt to develop a video system that would work on existing telephone cable; the acquisition by them of a number of early Sony portapak; and how, through the offices of David Tudor and John Cage (more perpetrators), one of these found its way into the hands of the Master, who made four 20-minute videotapes and stored them in the bottom of a box. Nowhere on the press release was there a hint that this was merely an exercise, or that Duchamp had not made the tapes. Up at the top it said that Eric Bogosian could be contacted for further information; the names of Russell Connor and Electronic Arts Intermix were used to provide internal verification. Down at the bottom was the support of the NEA and the NYSCOA. Would Heidi lie? Perhaps I had misunderstood, and the tapes were

authentic.

I asked to preview the tape, and Sanborn sent me a copy. The tape was in three parts. The first part of the tape consisted of an excerpt from a 1964 television interview of Duchamp by Russell Connor, which served to establish Russell as a source of Duchamp information and to introduce Duchamp himself into the procedure. The next sequence features Russell, 14 years later, substantiating the material in the press release and providing an appropriate art historical context for the following tape. He gulps a little as he repeats the more obvious lies, but to a casual observer he is utterly credible.

The third part is Sanborn's edit of the tapes. They are gray, and a little unsteady. They begin with blurry interior surface examinations of neutral objects; plants, a cracker box, the radiator, the window molding; then, through a wrought-iron fence, a view of West 11th Street, and a walk down to the Patchin Place Post Office. Sanborn would have us believe that Duchamp was unable to focus the camera or hold it still. Cars and pedestrians pass us, unrecognizable blurs. Aha! The camera flits by a Ford Pinto. Even out of focus its peculiar shape discredits the Sixties immediately. There is a fuzzy passage in the Marshall Chess Club, and a lot of walking shots of fences and newell posts. After a while we notice that he is not such a naive cameraman, just a blurry one. The sound track: wind blowing through the microphone, with faint voices in the background, accompanied by buzzes and hums of the sort usually associated with faulty cables.

I referred back to Sanborn. Yes, he had shot the tapes last summer on an old CV portapak, purposely blurry. He was going to try to take out the Pinto in time for the performance, but aside from that he felt it had an authentic feel of someone, perhaps Duchamp, using a portapak for the first time. He said he was doing this to provide some kind of link between Duchamp and video.

Hoaxes, of course, are perpetrated on all of us daily; it seems a little gratuitous to ask us to put up with another one merely to demonstrate a connection that doesn't exist. Video doesn't need Duchamp, and has probably benefited enormously from his neglect. If these tapes had been authentic, they would have set video back 20 years.

On the evening of the performance there were 450 people trying to get into the Kitchen. By 8:15 about three hundred of them had paid their \$2.50 and crowded into the main room, leaving the rest milling about in the street. It wasn't a regular video crowd. There were some Duchamp experts and art historians, I understand, but most of them seemed to be students accompanied by their professors. All had come with the expectation of seeing an authentic Duchamp videotape, and when it was over many of them seemed convinced that they had.

Dubious Duchamp

If not a hoax then a well-researched spoof, "The Last Videotapes of Marcel Duchamp" were shown at The Kitchen in March. Introduced by video maven Russell Connor's short video interview with the real Duchamp (d. 1968), the tapes allegedly made by Duchamp did look vaguely Duchampian—they were jerky architectural close-ups shot in his old Village neighborhood. In fact, however, they are the work of video artist John Sanborn (and distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix). Robert Stearns, director of The Kitchen, felt no fraud was perpetrated, despite a press release explicitly attributing the tapes ("recently found at the bottom of a trunk") to Duchamp. Stearns said he assumed that art world cognoscenti would have been skeptical.

Art in America May/June '77