

Funding for this issue of the *Bulletin* has been provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Mary Cushing Fosburgh and James Whitney Fosburgh, B.A. 1933, M.A. 1935, Publication Fund.

ISSN 0084-3539
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 Yale University Art Gallery
 P.O. Box 208271
 New Haven, CT 06520-8271
artgallery.yale.edu/publications

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Bulletin editor: Susan B. Matheson, the Molly and Walter Bareiss Curator of Ancient Art

Bulletin guest editor: Frauke V. Josenhans, Curator, Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, and the former Horace W. Goldsmith Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Bulletin managing editor: Tamara Schechter, Assistant Editor, Department of Publications and Editorial Services

Bulletin photo editor: Jennifer Lu, Editorial and Production Assistant, Department of Publications and Editorial Services

Copyeditor: Stacey A. Wujcik
 Proofreaders: Livia Tenzer and Stacey A. Wujcik
 Designed and typeset by Katy Homans in Adobe Garamond
 Printed by Meridian Printing, East Greenwich, R.I.

FRONT COVER: Anger, fig. 2; Fiduccia, fig. 1

BACK COVER: Ferrari, fig. 1

PAGES 136–37: Mori Kansai, *Wooden Sliding Doors (Itado)* (detail), Japan, Edo period, mid-19th century (p. 158)

NOTE TO THE READER

Throughout the *Bulletin*, circa (ca.) is used to denote that a work was executed sometime within or around the date given. For all objects, principal medium is given first, followed by other media in order of prevalence. Dimensions are given in inches followed by centimeters in parentheses; height precedes width. For three-dimensional sculpture and most decorative objects, such as furniture, height precedes width precedes depth. For drawings, dimensions are of the sheet; for relief and intaglio prints, the matrix; and for screenprints, planographic prints, and photographs, the image, unless otherwise noted. For coins and medals, weight is given in grams, axis in clock hours, and diameter in millimeters. If an object is shaped irregularly, maximum measurements are given.

	THE SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME AT 100	77	Suzanne Duchamp, Katherine S. Dreier, and “Semi-Abstract” Painting TALIA KWARTLER
5	The Société Anonyme at 100: Reconsidering an Iconic Collection — Instigating New Avenues of Research FRAUKE V. JOSENHANS	87	Katherine S. Dreier, the Société Anonyme, and Italian Futurism LUCIA COLOMBARI
19	Eroding “Material Perfection”: Layered Surfaces and Composite Constructions in Joaquín Torres-García’s New York Work, 1920–22 FRANCESCA FERRARI	95	The Hungarian MA Circle in the Société Anonyme Collection: Sándor Bortnyik, László Moholy-Nagy, and László Péri CARLOTTA CASTELLANI
29	“A True Individualist”: Louis Michel Eilshemius and the Société Anonyme CHOGHAKATE KAZARIAN	105	The Société Anonyme Collection and the Finer Forces of the Conservation of Modern Paintings CYNTHIA SCHWARZ
39	Marthe Donas: Between Der Sturm and the Société Anonyme JENNY ANGER	115	Advancing the Art of the Future: Katherine S. Dreier and the Guggenheim Collection MEGAN FONTANELLA
47	Katherine S. Dreier’s Promotion of German Modernism and the Russian Avant-Garde ISABEL WÜNSCHE	125	Avant-Garde Collecting Strategies: The International Modern Art Collections of the Société Anonyme and the “a.r.” Group MARCIN SZELĄG
57	Marthe Donas’s Tactility JOANNA FIDUCCIA	133	Contributors
67	Stefi Kiesler’s Typo-Plastics as Fundamental Comments on De Stijl HELKE SMET	137	SELECTED ACQUISITIONS
		200	Credits



Marthe Donas's Tactility

JOANNA FIDUCCIA

On August 14, 1912, King Albert I of Belgium visited the Antwerp Stock Exchange, where the finer quotients of the city had assembled for a ceremonial reception in his honor. The king had barely begun his speech when a woman plunged through the glass ceiling above the crowd.¹ Marthe Donas (1885–1967), twenty-six at the time, had snuck onto the upper floor of the stock exchange for a better view of the ceremony, neglecting to note the glass canopy underfoot. Miraculously, she sustained only a pair of broken wrists and a concussion in her fall, but the incident was nevertheless life altering: as she convalesced, Donas resumed the art classes she had abandoned as a teenager, broke off her engagement, and embarked on a promising career as an artist.² Yet if her accident diverted her from the conventional path that once lay ahead, it also proved inauspicious. Donas had broken the glass ceiling, but she broke it in the wrong direction.

For a time at the start of her career, Donas was a member of the international avant-garde in Europe. She was promoted by Der Sturm (The Storm) gallery in Berlin

and included in the 1920 exhibition of the Section d'Or in Paris, mentored by Alexander Archipenko and praised by Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian, and featured on the covers of *De Stijl* and *Mécano*. Despite these successes, her career sputtered out in the early 1920s following a sequence of setbacks: a serious illness in 1921 and relapse in 1923, a marriage that drew her away from the company of other artists, and a surprise pregnancy that left Donas a new mother at age forty-five, at the very moment when she had resolved to resuscitate her art career. These events are the unexceptional accidents of life—the kind that befall many people but tend to impact more profoundly lives not annealed by the status conferred by wealth, maleness, and whiteness, especially in combination. In Donas's case, they marginalized her presence in art-historical accounts of the avant-garde. Yet they also made her a model protagonist in the story of modernism told by the collection that holds five of her works today: the Société Anonyme Collection at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Under the steering hand of Katherine S. Dreier, who acquired Donas's works from Herwarth Walden's Der Sturm in the early 1920s, the Société Anonyme, Inc., pursued a pedagogical mission as well as a persuasive line: to initiate middle-class Americans in the advanced art of the age by presenting the

Fig. 1. Marthe Donas, *Still Life with Bottle and Cup*, 1917. Collage; lace, sandpaper, cloth, netting, and paint on composition board, 20⁷/₈ × 15³/₁₆ in. (53 × 38.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Collection Société Anonyme, 1941.429

“most complete and most representative expression of the various modern movements.”³ The organization, founded in 1920 by Dreier, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, aimed to demonstrate to the American public that European modernism was not the labor of a few apostates and innovators, but rather the work of a whole generation of artists. “It is the ‘many’ who create a movement,” Dreier wrote in 1950, “not the isolated leaders.”⁴ The Société Anonyme’s rhetoric was collectivity, not exceptionality, and this accounts for the collection’s breadth, rich holdings of women artists, and international scope. The organization aimed at a polyphonic presentation of modernism as a group effort.⁵

Modernist originality, achieved through common striving: such an account makes the figures at the fringes of the canon, Donas among them, most critical to Dreier’s representation of modernism. Dreier conceived of the movement as made out of the “many,” produced by an impulse shared across a broad cohort of artists. Instead of presenting modernism as the result of a great rupture with convention, the Société Anonyme proposed aesthetic advancements made through smaller breaks and deviances; and instead of lauding a few great renegades for their once-and-for-all rejection of an aesthetic norm, it collected artists whose lives were patterned with interruptions and swerves, some artistic and others quotidian.⁶ Most lives, after all, are full of interruptions.⁷ They structure careers; they are the mark of a shared vulnerability and encounter with the world. Interruptions also have much to tell about the art-historical constitution of modernism itself. “The quality of a cut . . . indicates qualities of the given material,” wrote Richard Shiff in his phenomenological account of modernist painting and collage.⁸ How might we understand this statement, not only as an observation about the physicality of modern artworks but also as a claim for modernism as a whole? This would be a modernism whose qualities are revealed through attention to its interruptions, to the shape and concerns of its fringes.

As a guiding motif for the Société Anonyme’s alternative account of modernism, the interruption—or, in visual terms, the cut—is distinct from the definitive and unambiguous terms of modernist rupture, on the one hand, and from the meaning-making sutures of montage on the other. To see the cut in all its subtlety and ambivalence, one need only examine the works by Donas in the Société Anonyme Collection. The compositions in her collages and paintings from the late 1910s, such as *Still Life with Bottle and Cup* (fig. 1), are generated from cuts in material and style, which transform the objects passing through them. Though her pictorial idiom is cubist, Donas pursued a different operation from those theorized in major accounts of Cubist collage: rather than seek to sublimate the opposition between the literal and depicted surfaces, Donas emphasized texture as the orchestrator of perception.⁹

Texture was a vital quality for interwar advanced culture.¹⁰ As theorized by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Vladimir Markov, László Moholy-Nagy, and others, tactility emerged in those years as an alternative form of communication or as an *ur-language* shared between artistic media and practices. Both of these capacities were foregrounded in Duchamp’s highly particular installation design for the inaugural exhibition of the Société Anonyme in 1920. Duchamp lined the floors in gray industrial rubber, papered the walls with pale-blue oilskin, and hung each painting atop a lace doily—a combination of materials that frustrated the viewers’ ability to determine the gendering or class associations of the exhibition space.¹¹ Yet these textured materials also offered a way for visitors to encounter the artworks intimately through their appeal to touch. This appeal to tactile values can be seen in Donas’s early works as well. They encode in formal terms the Société Anonyme’s historiographical value: its capacity to describe modernism as a collective movement made out of, and not in spite of, interruptions.

The first phase of Donas’s career was marked by discontinuities and changes of direction. After her family home in Antwerp, Belgium, was half-destroyed in the German invasion in the fall of 1914, Donas moved to Dublin, where she joined the stained-glass studio of Sarah Purser. Following the Easter Rising in 1916, Donas relocated again, first to the English coast and then to Paris. That winter an exhibition of André Lhote’s work “won her over completely to Cubism,” as she reported in her autobiographical notes, and she began taking classes with him in February 1917.¹² By the spring, Donas was in Nice, where she met Archipenko, who became her foremost champion. In a letter to Walden in 1919, Archipenko urged the gallerist to exhibit Donas’s works, describing her as “the very talented modern painter ‘Tour Donas’” and adding, “he is my best student.”¹³ (Tour Donas, in fact, was one of a series of pseudonyms that Donas adopted in the late 1910s to dissimulate her gender.) This introduction led to Donas’s exhibition at Der Sturm in the summer of 1920 and, ultimately, to Dreier’s acquisition of Donas’s works through the gallery.¹⁴

Archipenko held critical importance for Donas’s career and her investigation of the human figure, yet estimations of his influence have overshadowed discoveries Donas made independently in the late 1910s. In 1917 Archipenko was occupied with his “sculpto-paintings,” panels that he barnacled with wood and sheet metal, and painted by turns to emphasize and to suppress their real projections into space (fig. 2). For Archipenko, the novelty of the sculpto-paintings lay in their capacity to synthesize the painted ground with these projections. Sculpto-painting amounted to an entirely new art, he explained, “due to its specific interdependencies of relief, concave or perforated forms, colors and texture. . . . No boundary can be drawn between color and real form because esthetically and technically they are reciprocally integrated.”¹⁵ It is generally accepted that this body of work galvanized Donas’s



Fig. 2. Alexander Archipenko, *Woman at Her Toilet (Woman before Mirror)*, 1916. Oil on wood, sheet metal, and cardboard, mounted on wood panel, 33⁷/₈ × 25³/₈ × 2 in. (86 × 64.5 × 5 cm). Tel Aviv Museum of Art

production, encouraged her more experimental use of materials, and inspired her depiction of figures interpenetrated by cavities and analyzed into tubular or conical forms.¹⁶ Yet while Archipenko sought a middle course between two- and three-dimensional work, Donas remained invested in the problems of surface. In 1917 and 1918, that preoccupation intensified: Donas worked with shaped canvases and scored sections of her paintings to generate the illusion of brushed metal, fiber, and fringe—a technique that simultaneously solicited tactile engagement and reinscribed the planar aspect of the painting. Whereas Archipenko used smooth materials that could

be dissimulated or “reciprocally integrated” into the ground, Donas began to incorporate into her paintings textiles that echoed their substrate: lace, mesh, burlap, linen—all avatars for the canvas.¹⁷

Still Life with Bottle and Cup (see fig. 1) includes no fewer than seven different fabrics in addition to a narrow strip of sandpaper. A green glass bottle stands alongside a teacup, book, and carafe on a wooden table that is draped with lace runners. Two collaged materials reach into the contours of the bottle: a cloth patterned with a subtle wave that emulates the grain of a wooden tabletop, and a textured fabric in the rich red of a mahogany chair. Both have been overpainted in the emerald hue of the bottle, so that the viewer seems to see through the glass to the far edge of the table and the curved chairback placed behind it. These two collaged materials appear both “before” and “behind” the bottle; first pasted down and then overpainted, they are both the temporal and spatial antecedents of the bottle. Other textiles, however, sit alongside it, neither ground nor cover. A panel of canvas with a loosely painted blue floral motif and a swath of lace, cut to the precise contour of the bottle, adjoin seam-to-seam the wavy and red textiles. Contrary to the art historian Herta Wescher’s claim that Donas’s “objects virtually dissolve in the veil-like weaves of the cloths,” this collage both asserts the contours of the still-life objects and renders them transparent to each other—not despite, but because of their overlap.¹⁸ This point is most elaborately made in the region of the work without any objects whatsoever, in the lower-left corner where a lace panel lies on top of a scrap of burlap, both of which have been painted with highlights and shadows to mark the edge of the table (fig. 3). The fabrics play simultaneously table and runner, local color and texture, ground and grid, or magnified canvas weave and schematized brushstroke—depending on whether the viewer reads their shape, color, texture, or everyday function as their primary feature.

Moreover, the tactile values in Donas’s work never assert the simple facticity of the surface of the painting or the solidity of the still-life objects. Consider *Still Life* (fig. 4): A vertical seam divides the composition, aligning the cuts of collaged fabrics, splitting planes of color and various modes of depiction. At the center of the work, the line bisects a pale green vase and a line drawing of a lamp. A third object, a butter-yellow lamp base shaped like a chess pawn, is superimposed on these two objects, and all three are gathered in an ellipse formed by two more collage materials: a curved band of ribbed cloth and two scraps of the reddish textured fabric from *Still Life with Bottle and Cup*, suggesting the bottom edge of a lampshade and the lip of a table. At the very center, the vertical seam dissipates; all three objects—the vase, lamp, and base—become wholly transparent to each other, an effect that activates the two textiles on either side of this zone, rendering them even more substantial.

Transparency, in fact, is a radically unstable and destabilizing quality in Donas’s works from this period. The objects in her compositions elude the viewer’s grasp, or her compositions render that grasp of the object ambivalent. In *Still Life with Coffee Pot* (fig. 5), the viewer alternates between a tactile understanding of the still life and a conceptual distillation of its components—directed, as one reviewer commented in 1923, to “the evocation of an idea superior to the material object she wants to present.”¹⁹ To understand this interplay between ideal and tactile form, one needs a conception of tactility that accounts for both its sensuous, mimetic nature and its role in generating unified mental conceptions of objects as distinct bodies. Touch has frequently been understood as an agent of reciprocity, a sense that dissolves the distinctions between the toucher and the touched.²⁰ But as the philosopher Edith Wyschogrod noted, the tactile sensation itself has a wandering quality. While “I” am always present in the sensation of touching, precisely where I am is mobile; I am present in the expe-



Fig. 3. Detail of fig. 1, showing the lower-left corner of *Still Life with Bottle and Cup*

rience, less “as an inert subject [than] as an origin of activity, as an ever-changing but unified whole.”²¹ Because of this mobility, what Wyschogrod called the “tactile body” provides the foundation for a theory of sense. This theory conceives of the sensing self not in opposition to the world, standing apart from it at the receiving station of sensory information, but as something that comes into being alongside the world and in proximity to it: a body that resolves into an “I” only through its contact with other things. Donas’s early works stage this becoming-in-proximity, transforming each

moment of division or cut in the composition into a place of communication between tactile contact and mental act. One is never ulterior to the other, nor are they ever merged into an image of total contact or indifferentiation.

By representing a piecemeal approach to the subject, a refusal of visual primacy, and an appeal to a common ground between internal bodily experience and bodily

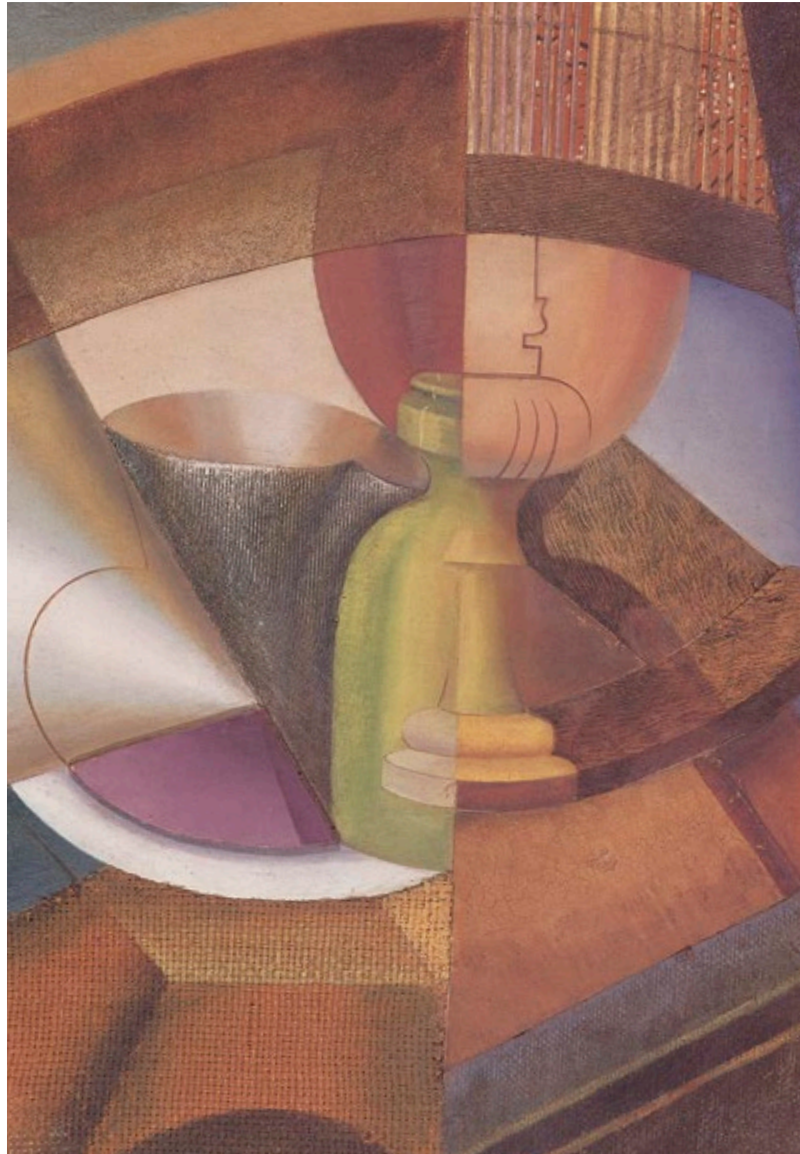


Fig. 4. Marthe Donas, *Still Life*, 1917–18. Oil and collage on cardboard, 20¹/₆ × 15³/₄ in. (52.5 × 40 cm). Private collection

gestures, tactility suggests an encounter with the artwork that is, as Shiff has remarked about modernist touch as a whole, “more social and shared than individual.”²² If this is so, it is not merely because a sense of commonality is bound to spread from work to beholder, from beholder to other people, but

because tactile qualities in an artwork alert the beholder to a combination of fellow-feeling and distinction that is integral to collective experience. This combination is central to the Société Anonyme’s presentation of modernism as a movement composed of many breaks with convention and many lives that sustained their own distinctive, sometimes devastating interruptions.

In a letter to van Doesburg in 1920, Donas wrote admiringly of his work’s purity and simplicity but expressed doubt in its

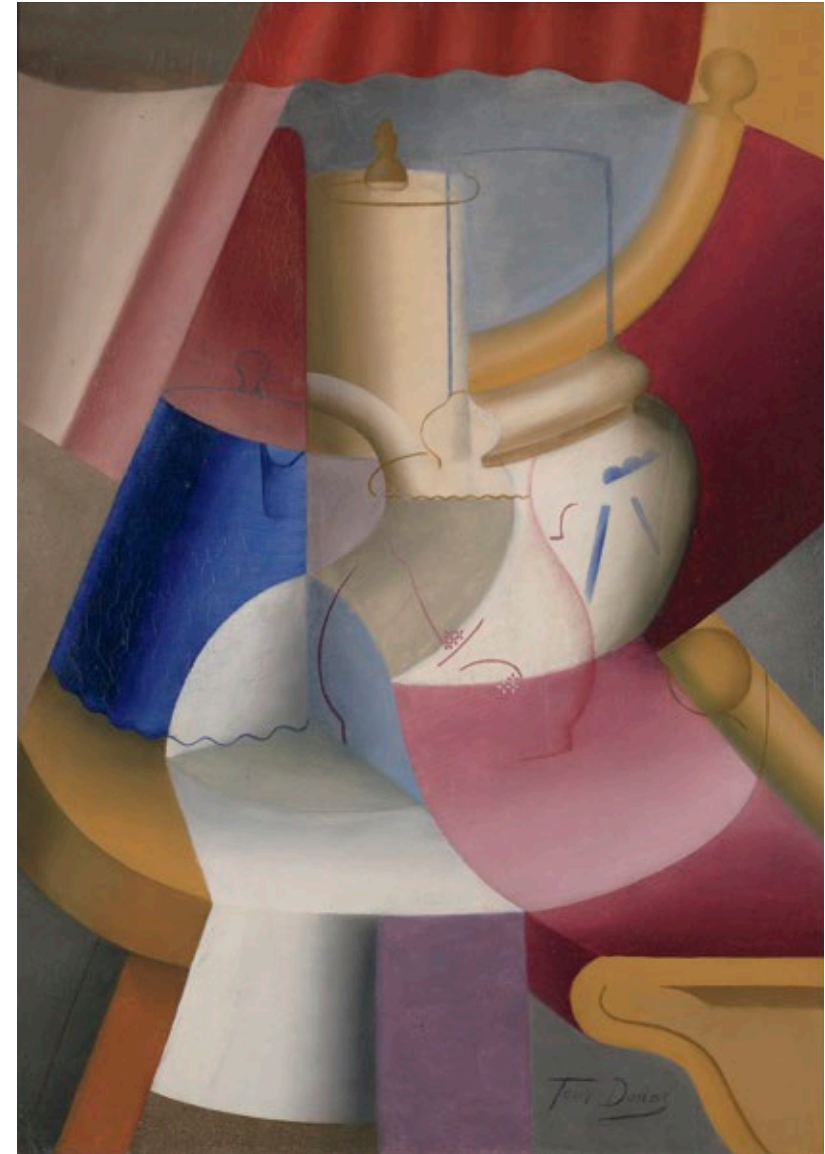


Fig. 5. Marthe Donas, *Still Life with Coffee Pot*, ca. 1917–18. Oil on composition board, 20¹/₆ × 15 in. (51.6 × 38.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Collection Société Anonyme, 1941.430

timeliness: “Isn’t this going too fast? This art will only be good in a few centuries, once the world has understood that it, too, is part of the unity, that each individual is not a personality but also a part of the group, that there is solidarity among all things and that we are infinite.”²³ Donas foresaw this unification with others and with the world, but she nevertheless believed it was a long way off. Until that moment, centuries in the future, solidarity would have to be expressed through heterogeneity and discontinuity.

Radiating from the interruption, the objects in her paintings come into themselves just as we come into ourselves: vulnerable to what touches us, but oriented by how we make contact.

I extend my sincere thanks to Jane Miller, former Senior Museum Assistant in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Elissa Watters, former Florence B. Selden Fellow in the Department of Prints and Drawings, at the Yale University Art Gallery for facilitating my access to the works discussed in this article.

1. Although some papers described her as a “young girl” when reporting the incident abroad, Donas was, in fact, twenty-six years old at the time. Henry Maret, “Les fêtes d’Anvers,” *Le radical* (Paris), August 16, 1912; and *La lanterne: Journal politique quotidien* (Paris), August 17, 1912.

2. Donas saved the press clippings that covered the accident. Peter J. H. Pauwels notes that she appears to have taken advantage of the attention to publicize her identity as an artist. Peter J. H. Pauwels with Kristien Boon, *Marthe Donas: A Woman Artist in the Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (Brussels: Ludion, 2015), 16.

3. Katherine S. Dreier, introduction to Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp, *Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920*, ed. George Heard Hamilton (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery for the Associates in Fine Arts, 1950), xv.

4. The statement was included in a response to the critic Aline Louchheim Saarinen’s review of Dreier and Duchamp’s 1950 catalogue of the collection (see n3) in the *New York Times*. Dreier continued, “It is this [collectivity] we have emphasized which makes the Collection of such historical value.” Katherine S. Dreier, letter to Aline Louchheim Saarinen, May 8, 1950, box 31, folder 895, Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; quoted in Jennifer R. Gross, “An Artists’ Museum,” in *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, ed. Jennifer R. Gross, exh. cat. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 2006), 3.

Notably, this aim differs from Duchamp’s intentions for the collection, which he described retrospectively to Dreier in a 1948 telegram: “TO SHOW INTERNATIONAL ASPECT [of modern art] BY CHOOSING IMPORTANT MEN FROM EVERY COUNTRY UNKNOWN HERE [in America]”; quoted in Gross, “An Artists’ Museum,” 5.

5. The characterization of the collection as polyphonic belongs to Kristina Wilson. Describing the Société Anonyme’s *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926 to 1927, Dreier maintained that it was “not the work of one person, but really represents the modern group of Europe.” Kristina Wilson, “‘One Big Painting’: A New View

of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum,” in Gross, *Société Anonyme*, 82–83.

6. Compare this with George Baker’s claim that the Société Anonyme Collection “defined modernism as an operation of the misfit, the exception, the anomaly”—a position that identifies the Société Anonyme’s departure from standard narratives of modernism, as well as its interest in deviation as an aesthetic principle, yet marginalizes the collective and “representative” aspect of the movement that Dreier hoped to promulgate. George Baker, “Leather and Lace,” *October* 131 (Winter 2010): 119.

7. On this basis, the historical value of the collection may outstrip mere representativeness, to become in itself a model for liberating the historical object from the homogenous time of modern historicism. For Walter Benjamin, this was a task accomplished through the dialectical image, which reorganizes history around nonchronological experiences of time. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 220. Seen through the dialectical image, “change is not what happens to things, it is a part of what things are, which means for historical materialism the continual interrupting or rupturing of the homogenous time of historicism.” John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 32.

8. Richard Shiff, “Constructing Physicality,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 45.

9. Lisa Florman, “The Flattening of ‘Collage,’” *October* 102 (Autumn 2002): 59–86.

10. The significance of tactility for modernism has been recognized by scholars like Janine A. Mileaf, Abbie Garrington, and Laura U. Marks. See Janine A. Mileaf, *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects after the Readymade* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2010); Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); and Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

11. See David Joselit, “The Artist Readymade: Marcel Duchamp and the Société Anonyme,” in Gross, *Société Anonyme*, 33–43; and Richard Meyer, “Big, Middle-Class Modernism,” *October* 131 (Winter 2010): 69–115.

12. Marthe Donas, autobiographical sketch, ca. late 1950s; quoted in Pauwels with Boon, *Marthe Donas*, 37.

13. “Je vous recommande [*sic*] bien fort d’inviter pour votre salon un peintre moderne de grand talent ‘Tour Donas.’ C’est mon meilleur élève.” Alexander Archipenko, letter to Herwarth Walden, August 17, 1919; quoted in Peter J. H. Pauwels, “Marthe ‘Tour Donas’: Eine belgische Avantgarde-Künstlerin und Der Sturm,” in *Sturm-Frauen: Künstlerinnen der Avantgarde in Berlin 1910–1932*, ed. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein, exh. cat. (Cologne, Germany: Wienand; Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2015), 76. Author’s translation. Archipenko’s French was far from flawless, but it is reasonable to assume that the misstatement of Donas’s gender—“*mon* meilleur élève”—was intentional. In addition to Tour Donas, Donas’s pseudonyms included M. Donas, the pseudo-aristocratic Tour d’Onasky, and Tour-Donas. Adopting a pseudonym to conceal gender was a tactic used by numerous contemporaries, including María Blanchard, Tamara de Lempicka, and Hélène Oettingen.

14. See Pauwels with Boon, *Marthe Donas*, 115. On this exhibition and Dreier’s purchase of Donas’s paintings, see Jenny Anger, “Marthe Donas: Between Der Sturm and the Société Anonyme,” in the present volume.

15. Alexander Archipenko, *Archipenko: Fifty Creative Years, 1908–1958* (New York: Tekhne, 1960), 40–41.

16. Greta van Broeckhoven, “1916–24: A New Reality in Spirit and Form,” in Greta van Broeckhoven and Sergio Servellón, *Modern Art from the Interbellum: Collection of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp*, exh. cat. (Kontich, Belgium: BAI, 2016), 10–11. Pauwels acknowledges that although Donas had likely already experimented with collage in Paris the year before, Nice was where she took to the technique “in earnest.” Pauwels with Boon, *Marthe Donas*, 58–61. Herta Wescher records that Donas spent 1917 assembling colorful wooden reliefs in his style, though it is unclear what works these may be. Herta Wescher, *Collage*, trans. Robert E. Wolf (New York: Harry Abrams, 1968), 42.

17. That Donas worked primarily on board in those years further heightens this relationship of additive to substrate.

18. Wescher, *Collage*, 42.

19. Quoted in Michel Seuphor, *Abstract Painting in Flanders* (Antwerp, Belgium: Fonds Mercator, 1974), 124. Compare this to Maurice Raynal’s description of Cubism in 1912: “Conception makes us perceive the object under all its forms and it even makes us receive objects that we would not be able to see. . . . If one wants to approach truth, it is necessary to consider only the conceptions of the objects, only those created

without the help of the senses, which are the source of inexhaustible error.” Maurice Raynal, “Conception et vision,” *Gil Blas* (August 29, 1912); quoted in R. Stanley Johnson, *Cubism and la Section d’Or: Reflections on the Development of the Cubist Epoch* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 15.

20. Mileaf, *Please Touch*, 3; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 21.

21. Edith Wyschogrod, “Empathy and Sympathy as Tactile Encounter,” in *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy’s Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 170. This is compatible with Laura U. Marks’s claims for a “tactile epistemology,” which proceeds through mimesis as opposed to symbolic representation—an imitation of the subject grounded in, but not reducible to, material contact with what is encountered. Marks, *Touch*, 145.

22. Shiff, “Constructing Physicality,” 47.

23. Marthe Donas, letter to Theo van Doesburg, September 16, 1920, RKD Netherlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, The Hague, Archief Theo en Nellie van Doesburg; quoted in Pauwels with Boon, *Marthe Donas*, 194.