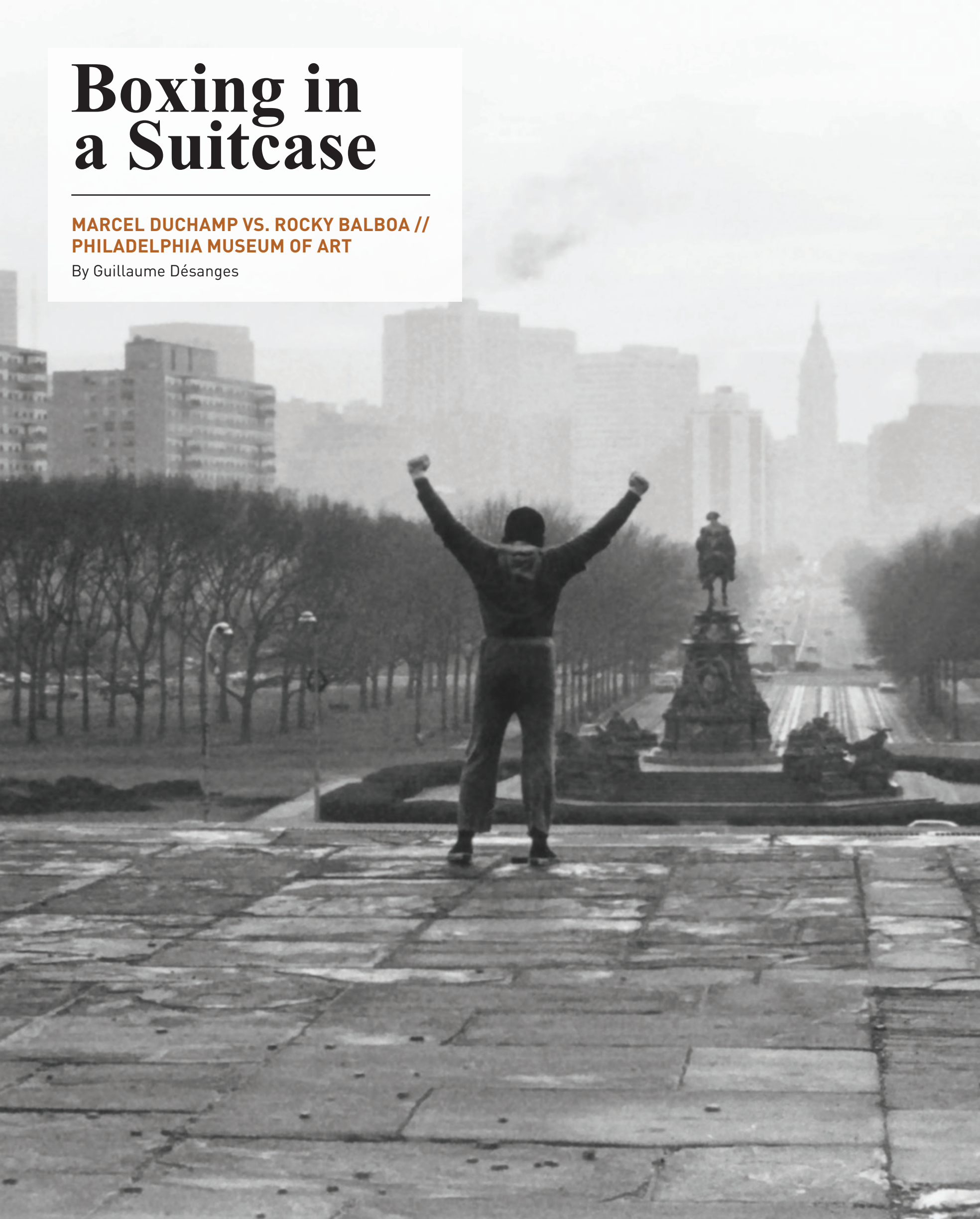
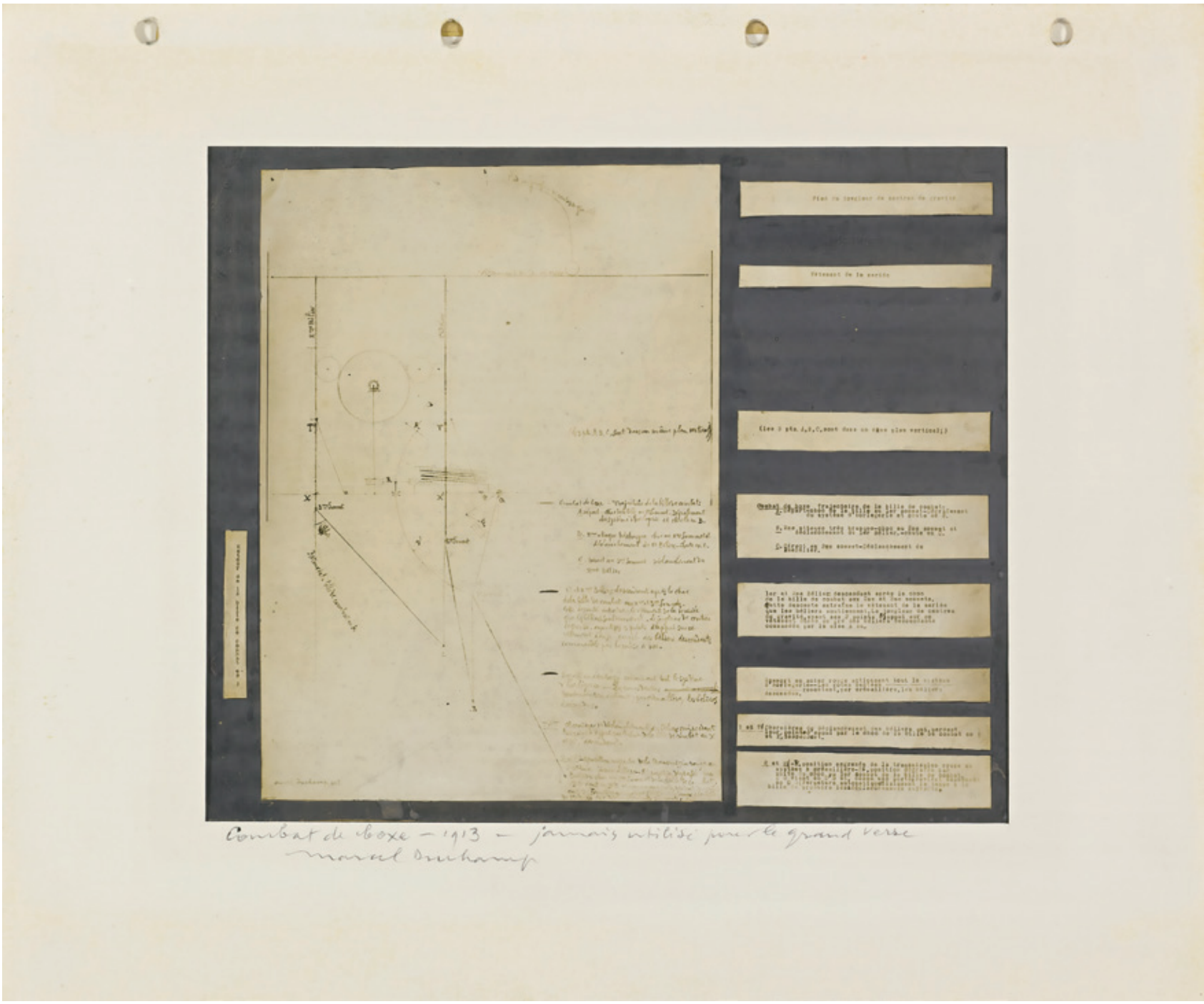
Boxing in a Suitcase

MARCEL DUCHAMP VS. ROCKY BALBOA // PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

By Guillaume Désanges





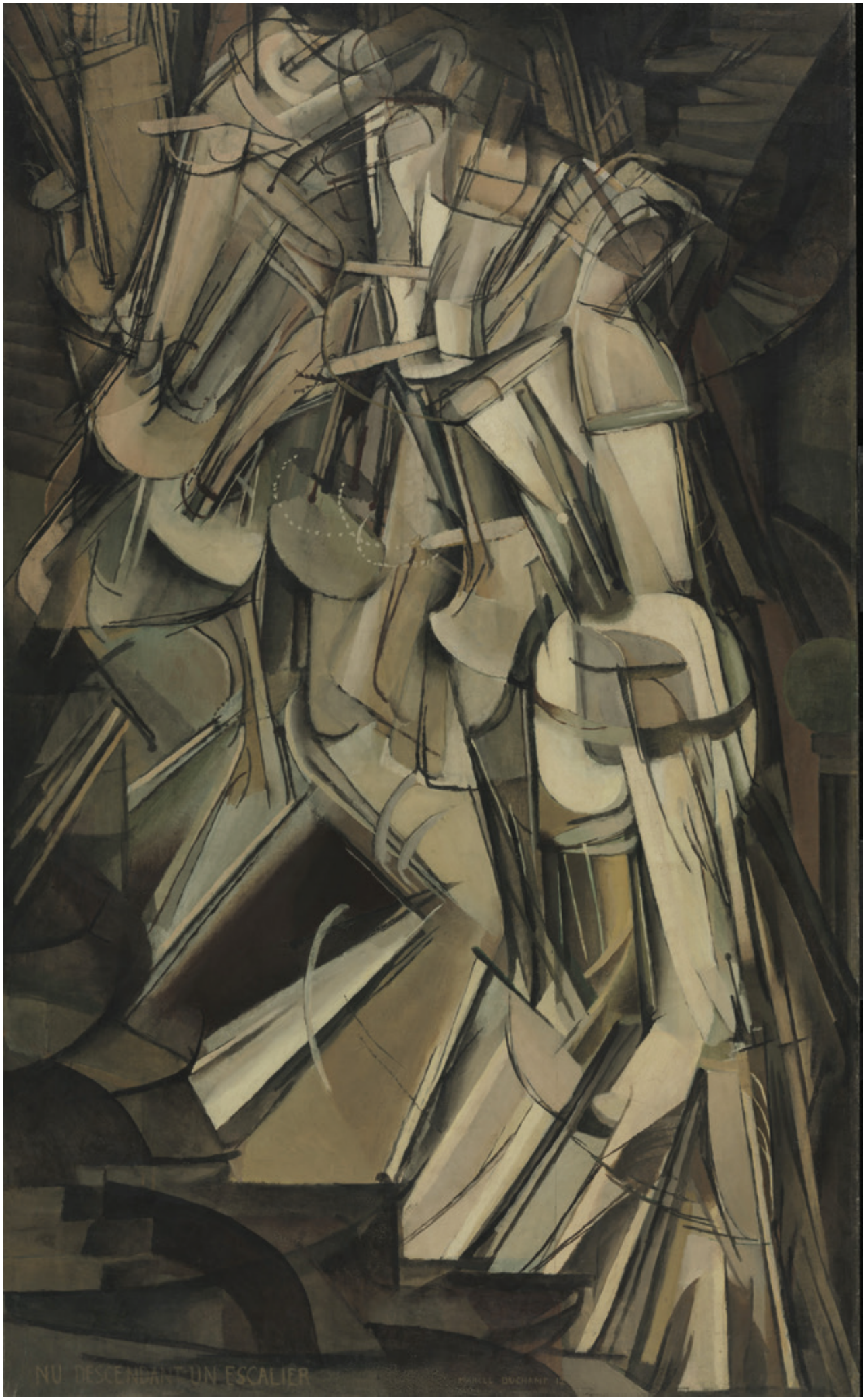
“Genius is nothing but an extraordinary manifestation of the body.”

—ARTHUR CRAVAN, 1914

This text applies a Duchampian methodology: that of imaginative chance, or how meaning is created by coincidence. ——————————————— In 2011, an exhibition at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich, Germany was based on Marcel Duchamp’s brief stay in the city in 1912. The show proposed to reveal, by way of extensive research, the essential matrix of the artist’s work. Could the achievement of such a proposition be proved either true or false? This was not the question. Rather, the exhibition suggested that through the mere anticipation of searching, the viewer would be placed in the position of finding something. Indeed, this could be the lesson revealed by Duchamp’s art practice—to launch random hypotheses, and appropriate what emerges from its results. ——————————————— Let us approach this theory from another side.

ASCENDING AND DESCENDING THE STAIRCASE.

The city of Philadelphia, as a site, is a place of pilgrimage for at least two reasons; the first is Rocky Balboa—the anti-hero boxer, whose persona was brought to life by Sylvester Stallone—and the other is Marcel Duchamp, at once the most important and secretive artist of the twentieth-century. The two iconographic figures, each globally recognized in their respective disciplines, have had an immense impact on my personality (albeit, at different periods of time). However, the synthesis of their mythologies takes place not in this essay, but rather on the grounds of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, whose stairs Rocky scaled throughout the emblematic film series, and whose walls host the most significant concentration of Duchamp's works, including his masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, also known as *The Large Glass* (1912–23). As Rocky ascends the staircase, Duchamp's infamous nude does the opposite. While positioned out of the view of the camera, this piece and others remain within the context of the film—hidden just beyond the site where the boxer stands, defiantly throwing his two arms in the air. The solitary image of Stallone—a contemporary collector and amateur artist—climbing the stairs of this museum could be said to open an aspirational, and perhaps even more subliminal, parallel between athletic and artistic practice. And in any case, what could this coincidence produce as its hypotheses, especially in the context of such an elusive—and literally ungraspable—oeuvre? ———————— ———————— In 1918, Tristan Tzara declared, "Every man must shout and use his fists." [1] In fact, the modern act of boxing, born alongside Duchamp in the late-nineteenth-century, was popular in artistic circles at the time, including his best friend, Henri-Pierre Roché—both a practicing boxer and theoretical supporter of the sport—but also Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Man Ray, and Pierre Bonnard. For the Dada movement especially, whom Duchamp was part of, boxing represented a jubilant, yet subversively violent, dialectic. Likewise, Arthur Cravan, a poet, fellow boxer, and Dada performer, was admired by Duchamp, for his ability to embody its excessive, exhibitionist, and brazen characteristics across his work. Perhaps, an over-zealous investigation of the parallel between these two acts—modern art and boxing—could uncover a more subliminal motive for Duchamp's practice. Indeed, the two counterparts are cited in a small collage, entitled *Combat de Boxe (Boxing Match)* (1913), included in the *Green Box* notes. The collage follows the same mechanical dynamics and patterns of the *The Large Glass*—the text along its perimeter describing speed, jolts, and jabs.


NU DESCENDANT UN ESCALIER

ROTATIONS AND READYMADES: THE BODY AS A MACHINE.

This Duchampian method of figuration belongs to the reification of the individual. It is a method of representation that depicts the body as a vehicle, subjected to a series of absurd functions and fluctuations—such as desire and love—and shares the same conceit as boxing. The repetitive cinematic montages within the Rocky films articulate similar notions of the body as a machine—the circuitous and perpetual motions captured within gestures such as running, jumping rope, or reeling fists against a speed bag, are not unlike pendulum-like state of Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs (Optical Disks)* (1935), or *Roue de bicyclette (Bicycle Wheel)* (1913).

In both cases, the body of the boxer and the figure of the artwork is transformed into a type of 'bachelor machine'—each an engine with no precise intention. In cinema, there is no better personification of this aimless deployment of energy than in Rocky's character. The predictable plotline of the series mirrors yet another aspect of this circulation. Throughout the films, the stakes remain the same, yet the boxer cannot help but go back in the ring—as Rocky states in one scene, "I am made for that"—without the prospect of either success or pleasure in sight. While Rocky is successful in a handful of matches, it is his precise indifference regarding the outcome of the fight that characterizes his personality. The famous finale of the first film reveals the boxer's animal cry towards the desired woman (Adrian); as the first witness of his ability to take the blows. For Duchamp, as with Rocky, the 'work' is a process in its own right—at once laborious and intransitive, it folds in upon itself, occupying the space between penance and vanity. This masturbatory logic, which counters its own argument to fight against itself, can only function within the mode of failure.

Indeed, it is this precise quality of failure that characterizes both Rocky and Duchamp, carrying with it a certain grandeur in defeat. The initial rejection of Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase, No.2* (1912) from the Salon in Paris—a work also contained within the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection—was the first and inaugural refusal, precipitating what transformed into a regime of purposeful withdrawal and failure over the course of his practice. What one could call this "shy power" an attribute granted to the Bride in *The Large Glass* (modeled after Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia),[2] is persistent throughout the Duchamp's solitary practice. Through a similar lens, we view Rocky's silence in stark opposition to the brazen demonstrations of his opponents, whose performance acts out the overtly virile and public display of masculinity.


DO NOT SPIT OR
THROW GUM
ON THE FLOOR
WIN
"ROCKY"
WIN

ART AS BOXING: AGILITY, WEIGHTLESSNESS, CLARITY, AND PRECISION.

If silence is a type of invisibility, the refusal to be seen can be said to operate as another gesture in boxing—the "side step"—also known as the elegance of the dodge. For Duchamp, art seems to be an affair of "sliding," in the sense that no frontal contact is made through the work, but rather a fluid evasiveness that escapes any given determinations the viewer may attempt to impose. As the artist stated regarding chess, "A position is beautiful, not in itself, but through the multiple possibilities it presents." Indeed, it is in this way Duchamp constructed his work; each piece exists in a constant, yet unstable, relation to the others. This method of choreography is in part guided along a path of chance, yet does not encroach on the possibility of precision. In fact, the rare blows delivered by Duchamp's work are definitive and searing. Each decision is a determination. For both Duchamp and Rocky, the absence of talent is mitigated by a genius approach to desynchronization, concluded by an unsuspecting strike. Against the gesture of the virtuoso painter, Duchamp proposes two radically subversive temporalities: the first is the immediate and unjustified form of the readymade, and the second is the vast complexity of works that are steeped in time, such as *The Large Glass* or *Étant Donnés* (1946–66). Either too fast or two slow, the artist's polarizing approach to appropriation and time catches viewers on their heels. ———————————— Of course, despite the comparison of this synthesis, Rocky is not Marcel Duchamp—yet following the intangibility of the artist's practice, an interpretation of such unpredictability and coincidence functions as a valid exercise of critique. Then again, that the artist's work has always resisted firm analysis recalls the inconspicuous and radical power of the boxer. In Duchamp's battle against art, while his manner of defiance is characterized by permanent elusion, there is also the search for exhaustion. As the artist once stated, "what interests me most is full indifference." This radical indifference is not far from a K.O. sensibility. Fatigued, blinded, and dizzy, the spectator of Duchamp's work (a Blind Man?)[3] must invent their own resources in order to orient their own rough perception. This is for the better. For, by removing facile visibility—an act that echoes the gesture of slicing the viewer's retina—the artist immediately accentuates our other senses: intelligence, affect, intuition, alertness. In the face of the uncertain impact to come, the viewer is trained to never lower their guard.

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Translated by Stephanie Cristello.

Thank you to the Association Marcel Duchamp, and Jean-Marc Huitorel.

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—ARTHUR CRAVAN, 1914

1 Boddy, Kasia. "'Dada and the Critical Instinct of 'Knock-Out'." *Boxing A Cultural History*, Reaktion Books, 2013.

2 Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, the wife of Duchamp's friend Francis Picabia, was his mistress and is said to have inspired the figure of the bride in *The Large Glass*.

3 "The Blind Man" is the title of a journal published by Duchamp and Pierre Roché as part of the Dada movement in New York, in 1917.

TITLE PAGE:
Sylvester Stallone, *ROCKY*, 1976, film still.

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PAGE 49:
Marcel Duchamp, *Boxing Match (Combat de Boxe)*, 1913, Graphite, colored pencils, and typing ink on ten strips of buff-colored wove paper adhered to brown paper, 16.5 x 12.25 inches, © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp.

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PAGE 50:
Sylvester Stallone, *ROCKY II*, 1979, film still. (c)United Artists. Courtesy: Everett Collection.

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PAGE 51:
Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912, Oil on canvas, 57.875 x 35.125 inches, © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp.

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PAGE 52:
Marcel Duchamp, *Rotoreliefs*, 1935. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp.

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PAGE 53:
Sylvester Stallone, *ROCKY*, 1976, film still.

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OPPOSITE PAGE:
Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951, Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 51 x 25 x 16.5 inches.