ABSTRACT

The Maison de Verre (Pierre Chareau) was completed in Paris in 1932 for Dr Jean Dalsace, his wife Annie and their two young children. The façade, a skin of glass, conceals a family home and a gynaecology clinic. Information on the building’s 1930s inhabitation is missing leaving an archival gap.

Proposition In 1933 there were two visitors. He attended the weekly Salon gathering. She secretly visited the clinic.

They were lovers, the artist Marcel Duchamp and bookbinder Mary Reynolds. Duchamp’s artwork, the Large Glass (1915–23), suggests a glass premonition to their interactions.

The writing or drawing out of a story of possible inhabitation is, in the end, the potential of architecture. In this account, I reconstruct the Maison de Verre’s interior as a history through modes of text and drawing that combine spatial analysis with imagined occupation. New plan drawings with theoretical and fictional text combine images, routes, passages. In the first part, ‘The Glass Look’, the building seems to survey the salon visitor (Marcel), as instances caught in glass. ‘Regarding’ positions Annie Dalsace’s mediating presence, traced into her ambiguous circulations around the upper floors. In the third part, ‘Dust’, I speculate on Mary’s visit. Searching the building as if its housekeeper, I find little to suggest she was there, just the uncertainty of dust particles. In ‘Horizontal Passages’ I follow Mary’s imagined route through the ground floor clinic and trace her body through its remainders, dust particles and smears.

THE GLASS LOOK

The Maison de Verre was built as a modern glass container – its gynaecology clinic on the ground floor and family home on the two floors above.1 Following architectural modernism’s desire for clarity and light, both functions were housed in a free-plan, thinly surrounded by a single skin of ‘Nevada’ glass lenses.2 The social context was contradictory – the outward perception of Paris as a hedonistic, free society was challenged by 1920 and 1923 anti-abortion and contraception legislation aimed at raising population numbers and curtailing female sexual freedom.3 Dr Dalsace’s reputation and interests suggest his clinic was involved in birth control practices.4 The function, design and materiality of the building, then, both indicate and challenge the social and architectural contexts.

1 The function, design and materiality of the building, then, both indicate and challenge the social and architectural contexts.

Emma Cheatle: University College London, UK.
The façades of the Maison de Verre are composed almost entirely of glass, with transparent planes below the gridded skin of translucent lenses. In the early twentieth century, glass epitomised openness and clarity. Sighed Giedion, writing in 1928, expounds transparent glass as an invisible plane opening the interior to light and air – revolutionary for the domestic setting. In Paris, its modern potential was most apparent in public spaces as the large shop window, encouraging a culture of window-shopping and increasing consumption through the desire of looking. Large panes of transparent glass reflect the observer as well as revealing the interior display. The shopper watches her image reflected on the outside, transposed onto her desire for the beguiling goods inside. Marcel Duchamp recasts seeing a chocolate grinder in a shop window in Rouen. Recasting it in the mirror, the self is identified for the first time as a unified and exteriorised image/object. Jacques Lacan's famous ‘mirror stage’. Following the infant's identification with his reflection in the mirror, the self is identified for the first time as a unified and exteriorised image/object. This sense of entirety transposes his fragmented ‘body’ – of interior parts and images – formerly composed through the mirror.

Duchamp was fascinated by the shop-window quality of things. In an early note for the Large Glass on ‘The question of the shop window’ he suggests the aim was to ‘put the whole bride under a glass case or into a transparent cage; a show case with sliding glass panes – place some fragile objects inside.’ The resulting artwork is a large glass construction displaying floating images of Bride and Bachelors as strange mechanisms, as if behind a double-paned shop window. The observer sees her reflection incorporated into the glass as she tries to decode its strange historical narrative. Duchamp claimed the Large Glass was a ‘delay in glass’ rather than a painting. Reading it as a kind of history, this ‘delay’ suggests the plane of glass both plays out and delays the Bachelor’s desire and possession of the Bride hovering out of reach above. It depicts Duchamp’s own bachelor desire, resistant to the ‘trappings’ of marriage. The ‘preening’ Bride, displayed in the glass by her friends, epitomises early twentieth century French society’s wish to lure the Bachelor into a marriage of financial and social convenience, resulting in possession rather than conjugal pleasure.

A 1933 visitor to the Salon at the Maison de Verre (Figure 1, blue) might have been Marcel Duchamp. He enters the courtyard at 31 rue Saint-Guillaume, and approaches the floating lensed façade. On the ground floor the façade is divided into two halves. The left half is a line of large, framed transparent windows – like shop windows. These are highly reflective, doubling the surrounding eighteenth century context rather than yielding any interior views. As the visitor gets closer, the repellent nature of the glass reflects his own image (Figure 2). This narcissistic image imprisons him like a momentary photograph. Fascinated, he stands in front, absorbed, separated from reality and alone with himself as image. To the right, the façade is a plane of lenses, set back, through which he notes fragments of light and ghostly shapes. Façade delays interior.

The front door, at first concealed, sits perpendicular to, and separates the inner and outer layers of the façade. The sole entrance and exit to the building, it is of transparent glass, more like a window. He enters through it into an uncertain space, a kind of interior three-sided glass vestibule. The inner surfaces of the front glazing to the left and behind on the glass door catch him as reflection; a cast, wired-glass sliding door panel to the right blues and facets his image occluding his passage into the main body of the house. Ahead, a length of corridor along the inside of the façade peers darkly at him.

He slides open the wired-glass door and moves along an interior corridor. To his left is another plane of repeating cast, wired-glass panels, blurring and puckering his view. At the end he rotates to his left and, facing the front façade again, rises up the main stair to the salon. He knows that the rest of the ground floor, although visible, is out of bounds. Halfway up, suspended between two floors, he is struck by the sharp light coming from below and above (Figure 3). The only solidity is the floating floor plane. At the top, the salon is a huge hall, a hub, which collects the building’s many visitors. It is overwhelmed by the vast glass façade of 940 lenses, with no views out and no transparency or reflection. This repetitive glass vertical surface is soft in form yet thin and brittle. It oscillates between part and whole, fragmenting and blurring the visitor into each facetted translucency. The visitor, it seems, never quite enters the house, instead being delayed on or in the glass façade. He has left his narcissistic view on the transparent glass downstairs, and upstairs in this great room his body is rendered back into pre-mirror stage parts – scattered corporeal fragments pressed into the translucency of each glass glob.
The mistress of the house will look at your eyes and she will see all your crimes in them.\(^{17}\) After its completion in 1933 architect Pierre Vago remarked: ‘It is indispensable for men of the 20th century to spend their days, their hours, of leisure and rest in a glass box, among randomly placed columns, with their rivets exposed, in a laboratory open on all sides.’\(^{18}\) The layout of the Maison de Verre, though, when scrutinised as an interior traced by the now absent inhabitants, suggests something altogether more veiled was going on. The woman of the house, Mme Dalsace, was particularly a constellation of presences, watching the house behind the scenes (Figure 1, maroon). Mediating the spaces she observes, she is inscribed in – becomes even – the building. In the evening she appears at the top of the main stair to greet visitors.\(^{19}\) The strong light from behind creates her as a silhouette image, inscrutable (Figure 4). At the base of the stair the visitor is seen out by Jean Lurçat’s portrait of her on the wall opposite. She also appears inside the doctor’s consultation room as a bronze head looking sternly down from a shelf behind the patient.\(^{20}\) Having supervised much of the building’s design it is not surprising to find her circulations guiding the layout (Figure 5).

Mme’s influence springs from her seemingly enclosed boudoir on the first floor.\(^{21}\) With a curved wall identical to that of the reception office below, the room initially appears a retreat, in opposition to the circulation and overlooking described above.\(^{22}\) Like most spaces in the house though, it is interstitial. Its three corners reconnect with the house through strange devices suggesting the transitional meeting-place erotics of the eighteenth century boudoir. The innermost one secretes a rotating secretive passe-plat, a pivoting semi-circular shelf in the wall. Hidden from view behind a small door; it provides an internal connecting plate between the habitable kitchen storage – extending along the party wall to the dining room – and the corner of the boudoir. Refreshments, or other pleasures – for instance, ‘a glass cake box with a silver lid […] filled with delicious cinnamon biscuits’ – were discreetly passed from servant to mistress.\(^{23}\) The rotative offerings’ elusive appearance is playful and flirtatious, evoking the Chocolate Grinder of the Large Glass.\(^{24}\) Further, as the passe-plat is set slightly back in an alcove, the corner of the room retreats. It creates a pocket within a pocket. The opposite corner of the room is connected by a retractable stair, which rises against the glass façade to the master bedroom above. The stair, precarious and steep, was an internal mechanism connecting Mme Dalsace (and perhaps her visitor) upstairs with her bedroom. The Doctor has a parallel stair from his office (adjacent to Mme’s boudoir) to his clinical suite for sexual health below. Where his stair marks his relation to his profession, hers removes her from the clinical suite and reconnects her with domestic sexuality.

The third corner projects beyond its expected edges into a tiny vestibule winter-garden. It is here that Annie’s true role becomes visible. A full-height framed transparent window overlooks the double-height circulation space to the waiting room into the clinical suite on the ground floor. Mme

\[^{17}\text{REGARDING}\]

The mistress of the house will look at your eyes and she will see all your crimes in them.\(^{17}\)
can look down and askance into the entrance of the clinical room sequence. If the patient entering the consulting room were to turn around and look up, she would see a framed image of Mme looking down at her. The angle of the glass creates reflections and distortions, leaving her blurred and darkened. The glazing behind renders her figure silhouetted, a negative apparition on the glass. For the same reasons, the patient’s identity would have been equally hard to distinguish, leaving her and Mme with only an impression of each other. Overseeing patients’ entry into the suite of surgical rooms suggests that Annie Dalsace mediated the gynaecological examination. Her potential presence brought seemliness. Yet her appearance is curtailed: her view refracted and cut off by the glass. Imprisoned behind the same glass, like Duchamp’s Bride she is apparently suspended and mute, a procreative question mark. Her role is as ambiguous as the architecture’s dissolved corners and the dislocation of the view.

A further instance, though, reinforces the erotic relation between the gynaecologist’s practice and the couple’s own marriage. Mme’s boudoir and the Dr’s office share the same threshold. From here, two doors slide (Figure 6), recalling Brassaï’s description of the brothel Suzy in Paris from the 1930s: ‘there could be a whole system of sliding doors, curtains, trap doors [...] to protect one customer from ever meeting another.’

The first door, of wired glass, slides in and out of a fixed cross shape in plan, made of four panels of roughcast glass. This door, by sliding through the cross shape into the doctor’s office, allows access from the dining room into Mme’s boudoir. When the door is open to her room, his view of the winter-garden is obscured, perhaps signalling that his wife is not present in her boudoir. When she is in the room she slides the door closed – to listen to music, or receive guests – revealing to him the projecting winter-garden through the framed transparent glass. As well as a communicative device, it is potentially a tease. Madame retreats with her guests into a room flirtatiously connected with her bedroom. She can also assess her husband’s movements. By entering the corner winter-garden she can look across into his office as well as down toward his consulting room. If he is in his office, their eyes may meet across the void to the floor below. They cannot speak as the layer of transparent glass lies between them with its doubling reflections.

The second sliding door, opaque, is to the side of the Doctor’s office and perpendicular to the boudoir door. When both are open a last diagonal view connects the two rooms. These doors act as interchangeable silent signs of visual communication and suggestion. Pockets, overlaps and glass reflections create double images and folded sliding space. The occupants become the erotic glass planes slipping between outer and inner, opening and closure, presence and absence, knowing and seeing.
Sigmund Freud wrote that the role of psychoanalytic research is ‘merely to uncover connections by tracing what is manifest back to what is hidden.’27 In the context of the illegal and increased penalties of promoting or using contraception and abortion between the wars, the instatement of a gynaecology clinic in glass was a bold one.28 Although, the Maison de Verre is hidden from the street, the clinic shares the same entrance with and is open in parts to the interior of the house, even overlooked by it. The materials between home and clinic are seamless. Given the social rules, women seeking advice and assistance may have visited. Female autobiographical writing of the time suggests that a significant number sought to pursue professional and erotic lives without the weight of childbearing.29 The visitors to the clinic and practices carried out, though, remain unknown, as archival material was never collected. The building is empty of history, cleaned out. What if Mary Reynolds – bookbinder; and lover of Marcel Duchamp from 1923 to 1941 – visited the clinic? Duchamp was certainly opposed to what he called ‘trappings’ – ‘a wife, children, a country house, an automobile’.30 Did Reynolds have cause to seek advice from someone like Dr Dalsace? In the 1930s, the Dalsaces and Mary Reynolds were part of Parisian avant-garde artistic and intellectual networks. Both held regular Salon evenings at their homes. In common their gatherings included the following figures: couturiers and collectors Paul Poiret and Jacques Doucet; writers Jean Cocteau, Paul Éluard, André Breton, Louis Aragon; Walter Benjamin and Max Jacob; bookbinders Pierre Legrain and Rose Adler; art dealer Julian Levy; artists Jacques Lipschitz, Alexander Calder and Max Ernst; and collector and publisher Jeanne Bucher.31 It seems probable that Reynolds, as well as Duchamp, were at least acquainted with the Dalsaces through these overlapping circles. Yet surveying for traces of their occupation in the Maison de Verre, one merely finds dust. Nothing concrete suggests they were there. What if the dust is the answer? After all, it is the body’s slough combined with materials dropped off buildings.

Dust is history in the making, always in the past. It is the passage of time.

Fifteen years earlier, Duchamp deliberately collected dust onto the Large Glass for 4–5 months. Called Dust Breeding, he adhered it to the glass with varnish to make the Sieves. These traced desire, now signifying onanistic seminal fluid, dried up, useless.32 In buildings, dust was anathema to modernity, marginal, ordinarily cleaned away or hidden. Yet it remained, and remains, undeniably present. Its presence, both familiar and distasteful, is always of the body. The Maison de Verre had a dedicated servant wing: a projecting three-floor space, each approximately 6 x 4.5 metres, accommodating a vestibule on the ground floor connected by a stair to a kitchen on the first, with a laundry and live-in bedroom on the second floor. The occupant of this wing was the housekeeper.33 As a key figure organising and cleaning the house, she kept herself and the dust, a sign of the body’s presence, out of sight. Her domain was screened by sets of glossy black lacquered valve doors, or matt duralumin walls. Thus unseen, it seems that she had strategic visual points for overseeing the home. She monitored visitors’ entry to the house from the courtyard through a full-height framed glass panel set back in shadow beyond the outer lensed face of the servant wing on the ground floor and from a slit window on the first floor (Figure 7). Once in the house she watched from her inner dark corridor. From her second-floor laundry she had a prime double view: a large interior picture window overlooks the salon; a smaller adjacent window has full view of the entrance courtyard. Here, the monitoring of inside and out occurred simultaneously, split by the thin perpendicular edge of the front glass façade. Her presence at each of these points was masked by reflections bouncing off the glass, the relative darkness of the space she looked from, and the unseen role of service. If Mme moderated the house’s activities, the housekeeper collected signs of those activities with her sweeping eye.

The interior of the Maison de Verre was literally and figuratively a dust trap: fluid, shifting and layered; of sliding doors and overlapping zones; rotational and staggered open spaces creating nooks and crevices. With bespoke furnishings and many visitors, endless corporeal particles could collect.34 And as Walter
Benjamin repeatedly says, the bourgeois salon of the nineteenth century — with its casings and dust covers for preserving traces, its shelves and ornaments gathering dust (the body’s remainder) — is the perfect setting for a detective story. 1 The building, then, is an archive, the traces operating as a kind of index or marker as clues to a crime, a mystery — a history.

HORIZONTAL PASSAGES

Going back in time, I become the housekeeper of the building in 1933. Repelled and attracted at the same time, I get close to the dust ingrained in its surfaces — in the lenses’ concavities, on cracked rubber and travertine floors and under furniture. I imagine the faint stain of blood, pus and other messy corporeal materials splattered on clinical surfaces and fabric; soap residues in baths; excreta trodden into floors. The resonance becomes both more compelling and less clear. Collecting the clues of inhabitation, I move between then and now, in turn detective, researcher and cleaner; to recount Mary’s story (Figure 1, pink).

The entrance floor was brushed down four times each day as even a light wind would blow the dirt across the courtyard into the hallway. It was trampled inside with people’s feet. Between the raised circles, the white rubber trapped every speck. We had many visitors in those days, patients during the day. Even Mme’s friend Mary came to the clinic several times. She seemed, well, not herself. The entrance was swept under the carpet, as the English say. But it was not just the abortion or birth control that were secret. Working women were caught near the world of prostitution. If a baby had lost me my job that was the only other way I could have made money. The bourgeois had the easier life but had the politics and the church to deal with. We kept quiet.

I alone had to clean the clinic; the maid was barred from those areas. I knew there were lists and records but I heard the doctor talk of changing names or removing them as time went on. In later years, I think the intervention was swept under the carpet, as the English say. But it was not just the abortion or birth control that were secret. Working women were caught near the world of prostitution. If a baby had lost me my job that was the only other way I could have made money. The bourgeois had the easier life but had the politics and the church to deal with. We kept quiet.

I imagine her explaining — as many women had done — that her menses had not come for the second month. That while he was out she boiled the cannula to start the process the day before. I knew to keep very quiet. Everywhere the intervention was swept under the carpet, as the English say. But it was not just the abortion or birth control that were secret. Working women were caught near the world of prostitution. If a baby had lost me my job that was the only other way I could have made money. The bourgeois had the easier life but had the politics and the church to deal with. We kept quiet.

Every morning, early, I require the maid to polish away marks to the mirror, glass and black lacquer on the white rubber trapped every speck. We had many visitors in those days, patients during the day. Even Mme’s friend Mary came to the clinic several times. She seemed, well, not herself. The entrance was swept under the carpet, as the English say. But it was not just the abortion or birth control that were secret. Working women were caught near the world of prostitution. If a baby had lost me my job that was the only other way I could have made money. The bourgeois had the easier life but had the politics and the church to deal with. We kept quiet.

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The receptionist’s office is a white, floating block in front of her. There is a section of clerestory glazing and a very tall black lacquered door to the right in which she can see a reflected blur of her bright scarf. A clear vertical window sits perpendicular to it. Suddenly the doctor appears in this window from inside the office. He slides forward and down, descending an internal stair she cannot see. He is shadowy and the light bounces off the glass fracturing the image of him as he moves across it. The black lacquered door pivots open to swap her image for his. He stands, real, in front of her.

He greets her, and they walk together along the lensed back wall, the sharp heels of her shoes marking out the route. To her right, she catches a long view back through the reception area to the front of the house and into the courtyard. After a discussion in his consulting room she is directed straight through a dark internal examination room into the surgery, filled with light again from another wall of glass lenses. As she lies on the table she is startled to realise where she is. She can see the outline of the entry bell column through the glass. The emptying out of her womb, a denial of consummation, will take place just inside a thin layer of glass almost on view to the outside. Her shame is magnified as she wonders whether someone will come to the front door she entered herself. A little while ago, she saw her shadow in the medical light, like an x-ray caught on glass.

I had a special mixture for the blood on the linens I collected from there. I mixed a paste of vinegar and lemon chinoque from the pharmacy. After soaking the cloths in cold, salted water, I applied to stubborn marks and rubbed until white again. This mixture was also used for the floor.

Once, I watched a man stand outside the lensed wall, staring for a long time, nose pressed against, peering through the grid. Could he see a female body, lying down, receiving? A bride floating horizontally away. He would not quite make out the contours. Just standing, looking, makes him measure his own body stiff, solid. His hand touches glass leaving the prints of his fingers.

presses the bell labelled docteur. 2 I hear its sound and activate the door. As she steps inside I imagine her passage through the building, a passage I have made myself as I sweep and scrub. Entry seems covert; a slippage between inside and in. She passes through layers of glass, like veils. The passageway is darker than expected, the light coming from elsewhere. The rest of the house appears as slices of repeating fragments: the skinny black hanging staircase; curving, layering reflecting screens hiding the main stair; black shiny doors catching reflections. She turns toward the waiting area to be confronted by a square mirror mounted on the orange and black column. The huge portrait of Annie is to the right, watching. As she moves towards the mirror she sees her groin area reflected, if I have set it at the right height. She floats down two steps, her face framed in the same mirror.

She sits in the waiting room at the back of the house, on a leather chair imprisoned by earlier visitors. Before I slide the fabric screens around her, she looks toward the main stair floating into the light. The front wall of glass is repeated softly at the back, delaying her between the two planes of light.

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Irigaray. ‘Indefinite, unfinished/in-finite, searching movements. ’Woman is neither closed nor open,’ says signifying Annie Dalsace’s domestic introversion, emulates her...

Irigaray writes: ‘All figures blur. The closed collection of lines, surfaces, edges, possibilities. ’

NATURAL TEXT

NOTES

1. The best published descriptions of the building are Faliko Funagawa, ed. Loïs de Vienne (Tokyo: ADA Edita, 1988) and Max Velke and Kenneth Frampton, eds. Pierre Chareau Architect and Collector 1876–1950 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985). In the latter Frampton introduces a relation with the Large Glass, which I have taken as a provocation and point of critique. Useful images and plans can be seen at (accessed June 27, 2012) www.chateau-gourdon.com/24807/lou8/tot-16-c-19.jpg and (midwife), or other devices into the cervix. Serious complications (injuries, infections, bleeding) were common, sometimes with fatal consequences, doubling the implication of the English translation, ‘maker of angels’. The abortion was ‘finished off when the woman presented herself’ to a doctor, as described by Leduc so candidly. Such a doctor, with his sympathetic credentials, interest in birth control and discernment of his clients, could have been Dr Dalsace. See Felix Allemand, L’interdiction morale (Paris, 1911).


22. This description is adapted from one similar found in Edward Shorter, The Secret Paris of the 30’s (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 82.


27. See the work of Colette, Violette Leduc, Jan Ryhn and Simone de Beauvoir, particularly Violette Leduc, Roegue, trans. C. Goldman (St Albans: Panther Books, 1969), 394–427.


29. See the work of Colette, Violette Leduc, Jan Ryhn and Simone de Beauvoir, particularly Violette Leduc, Roegue, trans. C. Goldman (St Albans: Panther Books, 1969), 394–427.

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