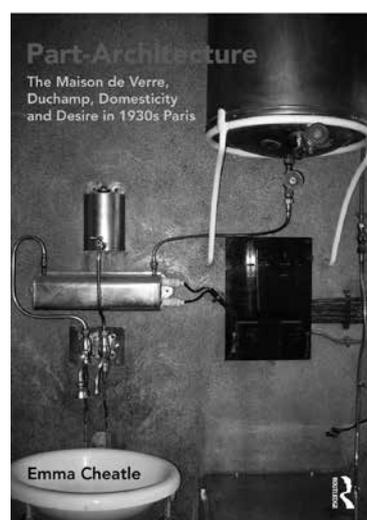


‘...this suite of materials [...] Glass, dust and air...’  
 ‘...resituating the emergence of our partial  
 knowledges about architecture...’

## Hélène Frichot on vibrant material stuff



### Part-Architecture: The Maison de Verre, Duchamp, Domesticity and Desire in 1930s Paris

By Emma Cheadle

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Reviewed by Hélène Frichot

*Part-Architecture: The Maison de Verre, Duchamp, Domesticity and Desire in 1930s Paris* commences with a single speculative gesture by placing Pierre Chareau's *Maison de Verre* in conjunction with Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*. Both are ambivalent aesthetic samples lifted from modernity. The conception of each, historically and geographically, draws attention to the metropolitan context of Paris between the wars, and for Emma Cheadle's purposes, to desire and domesticity. The result of this conjunction, held at the threshold of coitus, is as beautiful as the chance encounter of an umbrella

and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.

Cheadle speculates on whether the artist Duchamp and the architect-cum-interior and furniture designer Chareau might have at some point met, but the archive does not answer her. This does not discourage her, as she is able to demonstrate that they orbited in the same ellipses and circles,<sup>1</sup> and this includes their shared acquaintance, even membership with a progressive Parisian avant-garde, and specifically their association with members of the surrealist movement. Such an association merits the deployment of chance and the free association of images, materials, and ideas in Cheadle's work, but this is not at all to say that the connections she makes are either random or arbitrary.

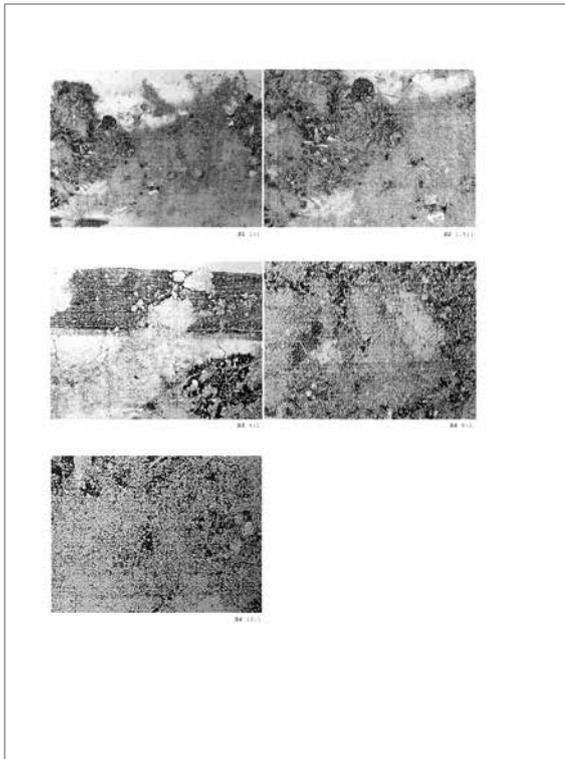
The surrealists were greatly inspired not only by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, renowned for venturing into the dark territories of the unconscious, but also by such marginal literary sources as Comte de Lautréamont's poetic novel, *Les Chants des Maldoror* (1868). Especially compelling for the surrealists was Lautréamont's fleeting line that compared a young man with the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. Here desire is collapsed into a bizarre collage of instruments, suggesting a machinic technology of desiring production, which returns us to Duchamp and his astonishing work, the *Large Glass*. Although the machinic figures of the bride and bachelors of the *Large Glass* will never consummate their union, and

the women who visit Dr Jean Dalsace's gynaecological clinic in the *Maison de Verre* will terminate their unwanted pregnancies, in both cases other opportunities for sexual expression are liberated from oppressive norms.

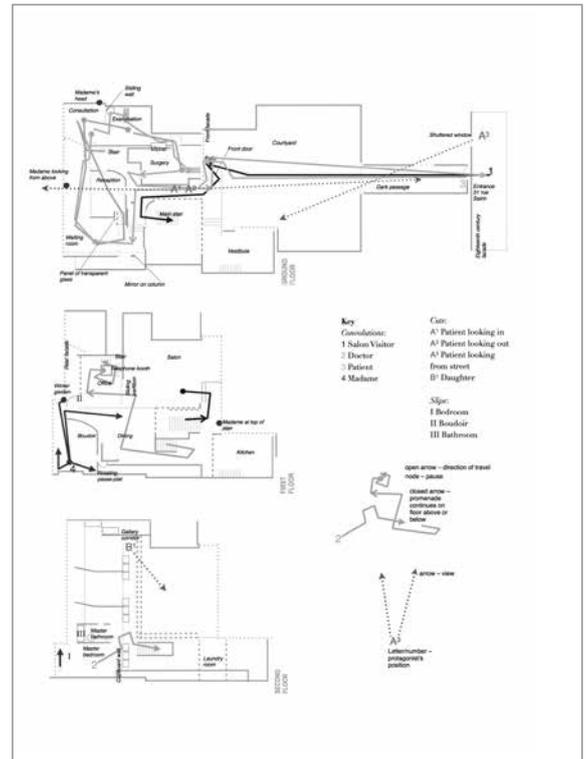
Both designer and artist defy neat classification, as do their works. Chareau's best-known project, according to Kenneth Frampton, whom Cheadle reluctantly cites, is not quite architecture, rather something that approximates an over-scaled item of furniture. Duchamp's *Large Glass* is decisively not painting, defying the expectations of how a canvas should perform in being composed of glass, dust, lead, paint, and substances unclassifiable. Glass is the most obvious meeting place for these case studies, to which Cheadle adds the media of dust and air. Dust materially registers the passage of time, being predominantly composed of the remnants of human bodies as they slough off their dead cells.

Perhaps, Emma asks, the women who once visited Dr Dalsace's gynaecological clinic have left traces of their corporeal passing in the dust? She takes this thought as a provocation to action and sweeps the *Maison de Verre*, documenting her embodied labour of maintenance and care.

Air is the third material that organises Cheadle's creative practice investigation, a project primarily concerned with female sexuality, its liberation and repression, ever in peril of suffocation. Even today. Air is that medium that allows the voice to be uttered and heard. Glass, dust, and air can all be associated with



1 Dust dissection B. Collections and photocopies by Emma Cheadle (2010).



2 New plans of the Maison de Verre through its convolutions, cuts and slips by Emma Cheadle (2010).

modernity, thereby setting the scene for Cheadle's tactful study of female sexuality in relation to both domesticity and the city. She follows this suite of materials in search of something that threatens to remain elusive, some sensitive spot. Glass, dust and air are 'different descriptions of the same thing',<sup>2</sup> enabling her to frame diffracting points of view on the creative conjunction of the *Maison de Verre* and the *Large Glass*. To follow the materials, to sweep, to gather, is not only to perform a speculative gesture, but also a profound act of ethical care. Cheadle is in search of something that even women today cannot be assured has been entirely achieved. Could it be that given contemporary shifts in the new world order taking place as I write that women will lose the hard won right to choose what our own bodies can do? Although Cheadle's work is historically framed by the 1930s, and arcs back into the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with an analysis of the emergence of glass as an architectural material deployed to arouse the desire of consumers, its message concerning female sexuality remains relevant today.

*Part-Architecture* successfully argues for the mixed and messy methods that superimpose

history writing with fiction with transdisciplinary theories and creative practice explorations, including drawing, collage, and sound recordings. Having had the opportunity to witness Emma present her work, what has struck me is her meditation on the limitations of the archive and how knowledge is propounded according to the function of the 'factish', as Isabelle Stengers would put it.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, knowledge is composed *in situ*, in response to specific problems, but this is not to diminish its function or usefulness, neither is it to propound 'alternative facts'. Knowledge fabricates us at the same time as we fabricate it;<sup>4</sup> at the same time both real with real material implications, and artefactual, or created through practices of knowledge formation. And like a crystal ball, or upheld palm, the archive will sometimes reveal what you want to see, or else its silence will prove more powerful than its readily available documents. At the limits of the archive, what direction does the creative practitioner take next as she ventures into the uncharted territories of the anarchival?<sup>5</sup> That seething disorganised stuff from which the archive draws its sustenance, suggesting encounters and adventures yet to be had that fruitfully align us

with 'life's living'.<sup>6</sup> Emma Cheadle takes extraordinary care to build her case. She places all the relevant historical personae and artefacts and material remnants in play, and places herself in the scene too, but what she cannot tell us is exactly what she most desires to know. Who visited Dr Dalsace's gynaecological clinic? What took place there? What was the relationship between the clinic and the domestic quarters? Did the gynaecologist perform terminations, and what are the stories of the presumably privileged women he may have assisted in this way? If we handle them delicately, and acknowledge our own embodied role as researchers, then the part-objects of architecture and art may well lead us back down paths toward repressed stories that are yet to be told.

Cheadle then holds up Duchamp's *Large Glass*, not to reveal a looking glass world, but to track patterns of diffraction that lead her back and forth between the *Maison de Verre* and the *Large Glass* and the questions that arouse her. She demonstrates that glass is less a transparent material than a slow substance likely to capture the light, produce reflectivity and glare, or else patches of dust mote laden opacity. Glass also congeals as the figure of the desiring subject, especially where glass,

dust and air, and objects of desire, are brought into relation.

As Cheatle explains, her central concept-tool and method, part-architecture, derives from psychoanalytical theory, specifically from the notion of the part-object. She draws on the theories of Jacques Lacan primarily, as well as Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, to develop her approach. The part-object is a thing outside the protean subject in formation, a present absence gesturing toward something primordial that the subject has lost and continues to desire: a breast, a belly, a mother. Aching for the thing that is irrevocably lost (which may in fact never have existed), the part-object is recomposed as physical objects, parts of the body, as well as interior feelings and memories. Beyond the ache of unrequited lack that the part-object attempts to soothe, Cheatle explains that it is a concept positioned 'between loss and creativity'.<sup>7</sup> It is the productive promise of creativity that leads Cheatle to

her innovative part-architecture, emerging between the human subject's personal autobiography of objects lost and remembered, present, absent and dismembered, and the pull of societal norms, including the norms of capital 'A' Architecture. Her part-architecture extends this diagram of relations of the part-object, as she seeks to listen to and follow the materials, and in the process to undermine the hard-boiled assumption that materials are mute, an assumption that willfully overlooks that we fragile humans are temporally made up of material stuff in continuous differentiation with our immediate (architectural) environment-worlds. What Cheatle succeeds in doing is immersing us in this vibrant material stuff,<sup>8</sup> and thereby resituating the emergence of our partial knowledges about architecture.

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## Notes

1. Emma Cheatle, *Part-Architecture: The Maison de Verre, Duchamp, Domesticity and Desire in 1930s Paris* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 161.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
3. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. Andrew Murphie (ed.), *The Go-To How-To Book of Anarchiving* (Montréal, Canada: The Sense Lab, 2016), <<http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/upcoming-distributing-the-insensible-dec-10-20-2016/the-go-to-how-to-guide-to-anarchiving/>> [accessed 3 February 2017].
6. *Ibid.*
7. Cheatle, *Part-Architecture*, p. 47.
8. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

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