

My Funny Valentine: *Étant donnés*

Étant donnés—the troubling *tableau mort* that Marcel Duchamp worked on in secret for two decades—is one of the great conundrums of twentieth-century art, its specular drama seemingly antithetical to the artist's anti-retinal precepts, its meaning contested and elusive. Taking stock of a wealth of new information revealed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art's recent exhibition "Marcel Duchamp: *Étant donnés*," curator and art historian HELEN MOLESWORTH considers her own long and complicated engagement with the work and proposes a startling resolution to the puzzle of Duchamp's late masterpiece.



This page: Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* in the artist's studio, New York, 1968. Photo: Denise Hare.
All works by Marcel Duchamp © 2010 Estate of Marcel Duchamp/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.
Opposite page: Paul Cézanne, *Les Grandes Baigneuses* (The Large Bathers), 1906, oil on canvas, 82 1/4 x 98 3/4".



“You’re my favorite work of art . . .”

AS YOU MAKE YOUR WAY toward Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, you walk down a long hallway with Paul Cézanne’s *Les Grandes Baigneuses* (The Large Bathers), 1906, squarely in your sight line. For all its iconic status, it is a bizarre canvas. Its scale is monstrous and not particularly in keeping with its ostensible subject matter: nudes at play in a pastoral landscape. The nudes (or shall we call them women?) proliferate, seated and standing; they arch toward one another like so many windswept trees, forming parentheses around the core of the painting, which remains awkwardly but decidedly empty. The void suggests that something about the very idea of this painting struck Cézanne as potentially ridiculous. It’s as if he knew the jig was up: naked women in a landscape? Really? In 1906?

Hang a right at the Cézanne, head down the long, barrel-vaulted hallway, and modernism unfurls before you. Let’s face it, the PMA has one of the finest collections of twentieth-century art in the country: Arthur Dove, Man Ray, Constantin Brancusi. This unfolding of the avant-garde dead-ends, as it were, in gallery 183, the room that contains Duchamp’s last and most abiding work.

Étant donnés is installed alone in an unlit room whose floor is covered with a worn sisal carpet. You approach a set of massive, weathered wooden double doors, doors canted ever so slightly inward, so that your feet have room to plant themselves as you lower your head a bit to peer through the two peepholes situated just slightly below eye level. Looking through them, you see a nude woman in a landscape bathed in a warm, glowing light.

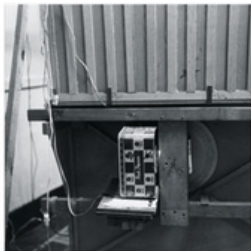
But I have gotten ahead of myself. Just on the other side of the doors there is a brick wall with a ragged hole broken through it. And it is through this *second* aperture that you witness the *mise-en-scène*: a headless female mannequin nestled in a pile of dead branches and leaves, legs awkwardly open, labia curiously misplaced as if sliding up the left thigh, left arm outstretched and lifting away from the body, left hand grasping a lantern. The background is an exercise in pastoral kitsch, containing, dutifully, trees against a horizon, clouds, blue sky, a lake, a waterfall. The falls’ moving water is simulated by a flickering light that looks as if it were made with dime-store glitter. It is the only movement in the tableau, its glow echoing that of the lantern. Yet even though both the waterfall

and the lantern are included in the work’s full title, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau, 2° le gaz d’éclairage . . .* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas . . .), neither is the source of the otherworldly, or cinematic, light that illuminates the landscape, the splayed body, and the brick wall.

First-timers often pull back in shock. Those who have been there before frequently linger, puzzled. What is this an image of? Can we even rightly call it an *image*? What does it mean? How was it made? Can it really be that Duchamp produced, of all things, a diorama? Why did the great advocate of the anti-retinal, the inventor of the readymade, the progenitor of Conceptual art and institutional critique, make *this*?

Étant donnés has been a great mystery for many years. Installed at the PMA in 1969, it was immediately subject to a photographic moratorium: After numerous unsatisfactory attempts to capture the work on film, the curators at the time (notably the late, much-admired, and now deeply missed Anne d’Harnoncourt) decided not to allow any photos of it, concluding that no picture was capable of conveying the visual and physical complexity of the piece. One enduring effect of this decision has been that the reception of the work, by both artists and art historians, has been slow, subject to the hearsay of who saw what when. Ultimately, this contemporary iconoclasm meant that the work hovered like air: crucial but unremarked. Even when the ban was lifted and images of the work began to circulate, people remained quiet—leading Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, in an introduction to a 1994 special issue of *October* dedicated to Duchamp, to bemoan “the near total silence surrounding the hidden enigma in Philadelphia.”

This silence may now be broken thanks to the enterprising and extraordinary recent exhibition “Marcel Duchamp: *Étant donnés*.” Organized by the PMA’s curator of modern art, Michael R. Taylor, the show—which marked the fortieth anniversary of the installation of the work at the museum—was at once overdue and timely, bringing us as close as we are ever likely to come to this most reticent of artworks. It gathered every known document, drawing, and object relating to the work, many of which had been sequestered, unknown to the public, in the museum’s collection or in the hands of the artist’s family for



This page: Views of Marcel Duchamp's studio and of *Étant donnés* in situ, New York, 1968. Photos: Denise Hare.
 Opposite page: Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés: 1^o la chute d'eau, 2^o le gaz d'éclairage* . . . , 1946–66, wooden door, bricks, velvet, wood, leather, metal armature, twigs, aluminum, iron, glass, Plexiglas, linoleum, cotton, electric lights, gas lamp, motor, 95 1/4 x 70 x 49". Interior view.

decades. The indispensable and beautifully written catalogue, while purposely light on critical interpretation, outlines the production and reception of *Étant donné*s in exhaustive and riveting detail, as well as reproducing a crucial passage from Duchamp's personal correspondence. The combined effect of the exhibition and the catalogue not only sets the record straight; it makes possible a new conversation.

When it comes to *Étant donné*s, I, too, have been part of the quiet multitude, even though the work has haunted me for years. I first saw it as a teenager on a trip to Philadelphia with my mother and my best friend from high school. I returned to it frequently during the course of writing a dissertation on Duchamp's readymades (although, in the finished dissertation, I never mentioned it!) and later became obsessed with it while working on an exhibition of postwar and contemporary sculpture made in the "tradition" of Duchamp's so-called erotic objects of the 1950s. In the catalogue for that exhibition, "Part Object Part Sculpture" (2005), *Étant donné*s casts a shimmering shadow on the whole project; nonetheless, I still couldn't confront it head-on. Taylor's exhibition and catalogue have enabled me to face what has beguiled and disturbed me over these many years.

What disturbed me most was that, evidently, I wasn't disturbed *enough*. In other words, I never found *Étant donné*s "offensive" or "shocking." As a feminist, I have listened to many a bilious diatribe against it (for many viewers, it is the aftermath of a rape or murder), and I have never *really* been able to articulate why I did not find it antifeminist or misogynist. Certainly, I was able to reproduce Jean-François Lyotard's handy arguments about the piece linking the scopophilia of patriarchy to the development of perspective itself, resulting in

the immortal aphorism "*Con celui qui voit*" (He who sees is a cunt). I was also familiar with accounts of the work that read it through the matrix of Lacanian desire; here the figure is centrally marked as castrated, and the viewer is implicated in this abyss of lack. And I was able to convince myself, mildly, of the work's doubly transgressive nature, its simultaneous positioning of the viewer "as essentially carnal," as Rosalind Krauss has phrased it, and insistence on representation as such. (It's not a woman—it's a sculpture of a woman!) But to be honest, I have always secretly found such accounts, with their insistence on "desire + looking = voyeurism" as the work's primary equation, a bit academic. *Étant donné*s's intense radicality, indeed its consummate mystery, seemed to elude such formulations. That being said, I shared the sentiment that the work's radicality stems from its evocation of desire—desire for art, for bodies, for images, for sex. Yet beyond that art-historical truism, my thoughts and feelings remained inchoate, particularly when I found myself in its presence.

"Is your mouth a little weak? When you open it to speak, are you smart? . . ."

SOME FACTS: Among the previously unknown materials revealed by the exhibition is a suite of black-and-white photos of *Étant donné*s installed in Duchamp's studio on Eleventh Street in downtown Manhattan, not long after his death in 1968. They were taken by Denise Hare, the photographer and artist portraitist, at the request of Duchamp's widow, Teeny, in advance of the work's laborious piece-by-piece dismantling, then transfer to and reassembly at the PMA. (It was the second time the work had been moved in less than five years. Duchamp had relocated from his longtime studio on Fourteenth Street in 1965, a victim of rising

rents.) The photos are clean and modernist in feel, maintaining a respectful distance even as they knowingly break open Duchamp's great secret. They show us the studio of Duchamp the *bricoleur*, accumulator of junk, hardware-store scraps, and old chairs, and they give us *Étant donnés* as jury-rigged apparatus: We see the two-by-fours, the drapery, the tangle of coiled and bunched electric wires, the lights, motors, and fans. We see, as well, the full wig of the otherwise headless figure, Duchamp's signature on the body's right arm (until now, hidden from view), and the "empty" studio with its secret door. That's right, a secret door. Duchamp would have people over, and they would leave knowing nothing of his twenty-year project, because all the work was sequestered behind this portal.

Some more facts: Duchamp—who as early as 1921 claimed to have abandoned artmaking for a life of chess and in 1961 infamously stated that he thought the artist of the future would have to "go underground"—worked on *Étant donnés* from 1946 to 1966. During those years, he let only two people know of its existence: his lover the Brazilian artist Maria Martins and, after that relationship ended, his wife, Teeny. A few works relating to *Étant donnés* did make their way into public view in the '50s, but without any indication that they were connected to the clandestine project. Of these, the best known were the erotic objects: *Feuille de vigne femelle* (Female Fig Leaf), 1950; *Object-dard* (Dart-Object), 1951; and *Coin de chasteté* (Wedge of Chastity), 1954, all of which were copied in small bronze editions and reproduced in catalogues as well as exhibited in the '50s and '60s. *Wedge of Chastity*, a bubble gum–pink base with a copper-colored wedge inserted in it, was given to Teeny as a wedding present. When the wedge is lifted, a shocking pink interior, remarkably vaginal in nature, is revealed. According to Duchamp, Teeny used to take it with her when they traveled, leading him to suggest that it was "like a wedding ring." *Female Fig Leaf* looks like a mold of a woman's pussy and was originally given as a gift to Man Ray so that he could make multiples of it for some much-needed cash. *Dart-Object* is perhaps the most curious of the trio, simultaneously phallic and scatological, oddly lumpen and inanimate.

Once *Étant donnés* was completed in 1966, a highly select group of PMA trustees and supporters was allowed to see it in order to ensure that it would be accepted into the permanent collection and, further, to guarantee that the work would be placed on permanent public display at the museum, which contains the world's largest collection of works by Duchamp, including the early and crucial *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (aka *The Large Glass*), 1915–23. The work was installed, the fifteen-year photo moratorium was handed down, and gallery 183 was opened. Once it was revealed to the public, it became clear that *Female Fig Leaf* and *Dart-Object* were by-products of the casting of the central figure. *Wedge of Chastity*—which is not technically

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a by-product of *Étant donnés* but, given the way it traffics in playful eroticism and secrecy, belongs among the work's satellites—on the other hand, remained a closed mystery. (The first photo of it "open" was in the "Part Object Part Sculpture" catalogue.)

"Your looks are laughable, unphotographable . . ."

JUST AS HARE'S PHOTOS expose some of the physical properties of the work in the studio—as does a series of oddly less evocative photos taken by Duchamp for his meticulous assemblage-instruction manual in 1965—the host of heretofore unknown objects in the exhibition quite literally fill in pieces of the puzzle. Among them are casts of a hand holding the lantern, working body fragments, an array of preparatory drawings, and a marvelous cardboard model of the work with an eye toward its installation in the PMA. The catalogue continues the process of revelation by reproducing not only Hare's and Duchamp's photos but all of Duchamp's letters to Martins, dating from 1946 to 1952, precisely the period he was at work on the large mannequin. The letters are those of a forlorn lover (please write me) and of a consumed artist recounting his labors in the studio. Every once in a while, they are peppered with revelations of Duchamp's slightly melancholic temperament: "Autumn is quite beautiful here but all the same has a funeral air, like all beautiful autumns—something like a funeral relaxation of things."

One of the most persistent pieces of received wisdom about Duchamp is that he was a paragon of indifference in matters both personal and aesthetic. But this narrative belies another central quality of his character. He had three major romantic relationships: a multidecade affair with the bookbinder and American expatriate Mary Reynolds (she helped the French Resistance during the war), the short-lived affair with Martins, and, late in life, the marriage, by all accounts exceedingly happy, to Teeny. These relationships did not overlap, although Duchamp maintained correspondences and friendships with Reynolds and Martins after their amorous relations had ended. Indeed, he traveled to Paris to be at Reynolds's bedside when she was dying of cancer. Duchamp was nothing if not loyal.

From Taylor's remarkable account of the work's fabrication, we learn, for the first time, that after Reynolds died, her brother provided Duchamp with a trust that gave him enough money to live modestly without having to work; further, Taylor surmises that Duchamp's use of parchment in the molding and casting of the female figure was due to the influence of Reynolds's work as a bookbinder. We also discover that the figure was cast from Martins's body and that the original hair on the mannequin was brown (like Martins's) and was replaced with blond hair after his marriage to Teeny (whose hair was blond). Finally, we learn that one summer it was so hot in New York that the arm holding the illuminating lantern melted and





Above, from left: Marcel Duchamp, *Untitled (Erotic Object)*, 1959, copper-electroplated plaster, approx. 3 x 7 1/2 x 2 1/2". Marcel Duchamp, *Feuille de vigne femelle (Female Fig Leaf)*, 1950, copper-electroplated plaster cast, 3 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 5". Marcel Duchamp, *Coin de chasteté (Wedge of Chastity)*, 1954/1963, bronze and dental plastic, two parts, combined 2 1/4 x 3 3/4 x 1 1/4". Replica of the 1954 original. Marcel Duchamp, *Coin de chasteté (Wedge of Chastity)*, 1954/1963, bronze and dental plastic, two parts, combined 2 1/4 x 3 3/4 x 1 1/4". Below: Denise Hare, Marcel Duchamp in engineer's hat with Teeny in front of La Caula Waterfall, Figueres, Spain, 1965, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8". Opposite page: Marcel Duchamp, *Second Manual of Instructions*, 1966, vinyl binder with black-and-white photographs, drawings, manuscript notes on paper and on photographs in graphite, colored inks, clear vinyl sheet protectors, 11 1/4 x 9 3/4 x 1 1/4".

fell off. The break was beyond repair, so it was decided that the limb would be replaced with a cast of Teeny's arm. However, Teeny's arm was larger than Martins's, a discrepancy that contributes to the figure's odd, Ingres-like disjointedness. Each bit of new information, of course, deepens our understanding of *Étant donnés*, but it is these details, above all, that seem to me, finally, to pry open the mysteries of Duchamp's great secret.

"Don't change a hair for me, not if you care for me . . ."

OF COURSE, my long-standing thinking about *Étant donnés* as being, in some way, "about" desire places it in a continuum with *The Large Glass* and is in keeping with the common art-historical understanding of Duchamp's entire oeuvre as being "about" desire; nothing new to add here. With this exhibition I felt I was finally able to delineate, in a meaningful way, the stature or quality of that desire. Indeed, the show made me realize the mangy paucity of Duchamp studies (my own included), in that all the talk of desire is always generic (be it capitalist or Lacanian) and never approaches the problem of desire's specificity. It is only now that we can see that "my woman with the open pussy" (from a letter of Duchamp's to Martins) is in fact a complicated composite of three people: Reynolds (the parchment and the money to work), Martins (the original cast and inception), and Teeny (the left arm, the hair, and the completion). The figure is a literal conflation of two bodies, the overall work a palimpsest of, and testament to, three profound love affairs.

An interpretation: I think *Étant donnés* is about love and desire, the kind of love you have with another person with whom you are in a desiring relationship. The work's composite nature suggests to me that our capacity for love is infinite; it is not an emotion we run out of or get filled up with. Certainly, it can fade, and often it does. But its possibility for reemergence is continual and ever-present. *Étant donnés* presents us with a quandary, but not the one that has commonly been perceived. Its question is not, How do we make an image of our seemingly

unending and unfulfillable desire? but, How do we express this desire when it is also bound up with the infinite quality of love? How do we articulate the tension between the obdurately physical and numinously existential nature of this nexus of love and desire? What is our relationship not only to desire per se but to the other as such? *Étant donnés*'s very immobility, its insistence that you see it on its own terms, is the beginning of the answer. It proposes that love and desire are not portable, available to be moved around at your, our, or my whim. Rather, the work spatializes the idea that when one is in the grip of love and desire, one must meet the other on her own terms. Duchamp's terms are literally to pin me in place; the work holds me at a distance, and I am forever craning my neck to see behind the brick wall, only to find myself, oddly, looking down at my shoes. And isn't that how it so often goes? As hard as we try to "know" the other (our lover), we often end up in a narcissistic loop, talking about ourselves when we mean to be listening.

Étant donnés offers us the encounter with the other in a way that makes it plain we cannot know her. She will remain forever separate. Her muteness is compounded by our inability to remember her accurately, which is how I read the problem of the misplaced labia—as a physicalization of the distortions of memory. Not only is the work unphotographable, it cannot be reproduced in the mind's eye, either. One tends to remember the initial encounter in a general way rather than the kinds of details typically revealed by prolonged looking. Truth be told, long looking is difficult, worried as you are by the thought of being watched by others in the gallery. This is one of the often-remarked ironies of the work—instead of looking at it, we are conscious of being looked at. In the context of this exhibition, I was more conscious than ever of the possibility that I was selfishly taking "too much time." I was acutely aware that when I was looking through the peepholes, someone else couldn't be, and this one-at-a-timeness is analogous to the structure of the monogamous couple, in which only one person can occupy your heart and mind at a time. And coupledness is at the heart of the matter, for no matter how "shocking" or radical



Étant donnés is, it also suggests that we are never free of the societal conventions of such amorous arrangements, be they the conventions of the affair (Martins was married when she and Duchamp became lovers) or of the marriage—just as we cannot be free of certain pictorial arrangements, whether perspectival viewing or the kitsch of the landscape-as-backdrop.

In *Étant donnés* there is no completion, only encounter. In this sense, it's not so much that the work is shocking (i.e., in some pornographic fashion), but rather that it is shattering, in Leo Bersani's sense of the term. As Bersani says in *The Freudian Body*: "Human sexuality is constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self—a threat which perhaps only the masochistic nature of sexual pleasure allows us to survive." More interpretation: I think *Étant donnés* is an attempt to create an aesthetic experience of shattering that is similar to the alienation from the self we encounter when we fall into the space-time continuum of love and desire. *Étant donnés* is trying to articulate how we arrange ourselves in relation to our own desire for the other. This is where the love part comes in. When we are talking about desire, we easily start talking about objects, for desire is inherently objectifying. When we talk about love, we are discussing the radical interface of (at least) two subjects. With *Étant donnés* we are, it seems to me, a long way from the punning schoolboy humor of Duchamp's early work. We are deep into the problems of adulthood—the time when love and desire are intertwined, the time when our objectifying desire is complicated by the ethics of love.

The work's sensibility is dark. The body is situated among dead branches, and as lifelike as the mannequin is, she is also dead. The viewer is pinned facing the door. Although I think *Étant donnés* is about love and desire (and their working through in coupledom), I also think it produces a kind of tension and ambivalence analogous to marriage's equal summoning of the hope of eternal love and the truth of inevitable death. After all, *Wedge of Chastity* sat in plain view, establishing both the matrimonial bond and the lie of omission. The secret was established: The couple knows that which those outside it cannot, but internal to the couple there are secrets as well, things that cannot be known. The work's title begins with *Given*, as if a mathematical proof—it begins with the one thing that is irrefutable, the aspect of the problem that cannot be solved but must rather be accepted, as one accepts bedrock. Love and desire are the given; the arrangement we make of them is the challenge. The feminist implications of the work might

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be that when we come to believe that loving and desirous relations with the other constitute a radical encounter with the self—and not, as we so often think, a completion of the self—we are acknowledging our lack of control and authority. The putative violence of the work is possibly a reminder that when we lack control and authority, we risk being damaged or marked—if we return to the *mise-en-scène*, we will be marked by it, just as we will mark it, leaving our smudged oil marks on the door, an indelible record, a palimpsest of our having been there.

On the walk back, the walk away from *Étant donnés*, nothing looks the same. One glimpses Jasper Johns's sculptures in vitrines, marvelous Cornell boxes, and Jim Hodges's curtain of flowers, and all of it carries the charge of this encounter with *Étant donnés*, with the given of our aloneness and the funereal quality of our love and desire. *Étant donnés*'s only joke might be about the genre of the nude in the landscape, wherein the rupture of the conventional patriarchal arrangements of women's subservience to men, allegory, aesthetics (just fill in the blank here), cracked open by Cézanne, is completed by Duchamp. If in the Cézanne we see an artist's crisis of faith with such an enterprise, then in *Étant donnés*, a work born of love and desire, completed slowly, in secrecy, and with commitment, we see the great dilemma and shattering pleasure of what it means to be a *subject* of love and desire. It is the viewer who may feel the jig is up and that the task at hand is no longer to produce an image of love and desire, but to render our capacities for those feelings ever more complicated and infinite.

"Each day is Valentine's Day..."

SOME MORE FACTS: As of this writing, thirty-one of the United States of America have legislation that specifically prohibits same-sex marriage. Only five permit same-sex marriage: Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The federal government does not recognize the same-sex marriages of these five states, nor does it recognize the same-sex marriages performed in California during the period from June to November 2008, when California deemed it legal for same-sex couples to marry. □

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