

Marcel Duchamp – *Étant donnés*: The Deconstructed Painting

Picasso (1881-1973) and Duchamp (1887-1968) were more or less contemporaries. Both artists lived to a ripe old age and had strong links to Paris and European modernism, and both are referred to as 'artists of the 20th century.' Despite this, the two developed, artistically speaking, into almost diametric opposites.

Duchamp's name is well known and highly regarded within the inner circles of art and art institutions, although he is less known in more peripheral, art-interested circles. One of the reasons for this is probably that Duchamp's total production is quite limited and most of his works have been donated to a single museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. This means that it is not possible to study some of Duchamp's works in the original, or in reproduction, anywhere in Denmark.

Practically everyone, on the other hand, is familiar with the name of Picasso. Paintings flowed from his hand, and every modern museum with any self-respect has Picasso represented by one or several works. With great virtuosity, Picasso goes on a pilgrimage through modernism's many '-isms', or styles, keeping the human form as a constant point of departure for the majority of his paintings. Even though Picasso never completely abstracts himself from reality, his art has almost become synonymous with modern, abstract painting. Picasso abstracts himself, via diverse styles, from the motifs of reality, turning the painting itself, or the style, into the real motif.

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Figure 1a

View of the front door for
*Etant donnés: 1^o la chute
d'eau / 2^o le gas d'éclairage,*
1946-66 © 2000 Succession Marcel
Duchamp ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

Duchamp was also originally a painter and, like Picasso, he went on a pilgrimage through diverse idioms of modernism's many '-isms' of painting. Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism are names that can be applied to Duchamp's early paintings. Similarly to Picasso, the human form is almost always in focus, as a motif or point of departure, in his early paintings and later works. As his career advanced, Duchamp turned his back on painting. Instead of abstracting himself from the motif, as the majority of Duchamp's fellow painters were doing, Duchamp abstracted himself from the ground plane of painting, and thus from art in its traditional sense.

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Figure 1b
viser det indre af
Étant donné.
© 2000 Succession
Marcel Duchamp
ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

Étant donné (in English: *Given*) is Duchamp's last major work. It was produced in secrecy over a number of years after the Second World War, from 1946 to 1966, and, after Duchamp's death in 1968, was permanently installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. *Étant donné* may therefore be considered to be Duchamp's artistic testament, his conclusion to art. The old wooden door of the work, the immediate 'facade' of *Étant donné*, meets the onlooker in a small room behind the large, well light exhibition room, where the rest of the Duchamp works are found. The small room is a kind of 'appendix' to the large room. It does not lead anywhere and, at first glance, only contains the door, behind which the rest of the work is installed. When you enter the small room and look to the left, there is a stucco wall that stretches from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall. In the center of this stucco wall there is a large, arched brick doorway that forms a frame around the old wooden door. It is obvious that the door cannot be opened, but in the middle of the door, at eye-level, there are two

small peepholes⁽¹⁾.

This article can be seen as a short introduction to the hypothesis, problems and conclusions raised in relation to *Étant donné*. Specifically I begin with the work's actual physical form, and use, in this connection, sketches of the work, that the French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, has made for his book *Les TRANS formateurs Duchamp*.

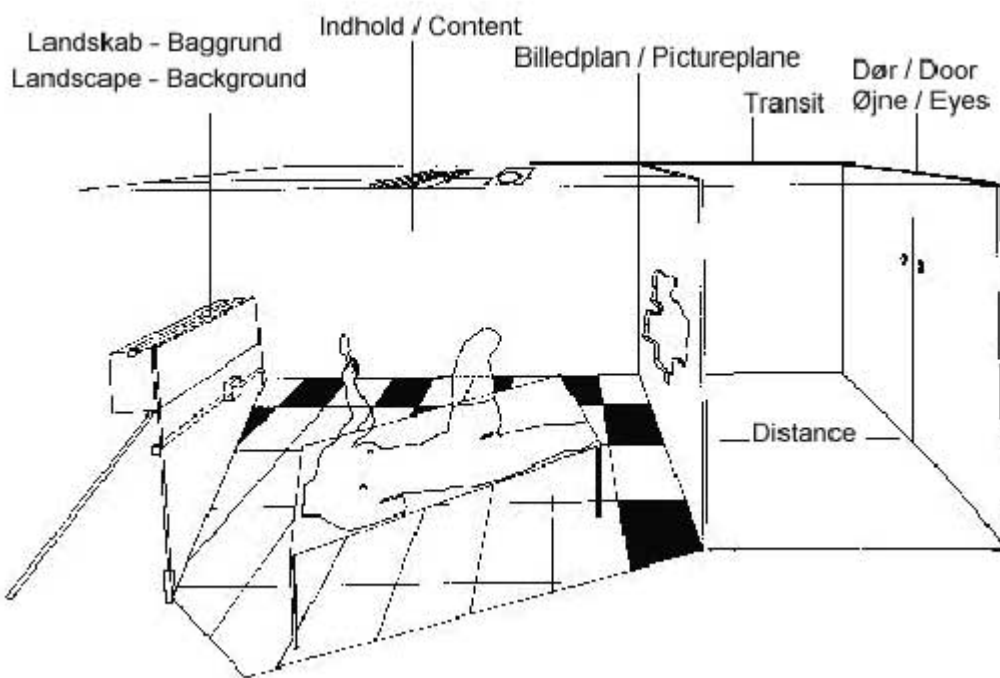


Figure 2

Diagram, the cross-section of the peepshow construction of

Étant donné: 1^o la chute d'eau / 2^o le gas d'éclairage, 1946-66

The illustration was originally done by Lyotard, but the names of the various layers of *Étant donné* have been added. In particular, I would like to emphasize the picture plane, as it is central to the work⁽²⁾. This initial section focuses on the historical picture plane and particular status which the painting acquires during the Renaissance. I continue to investigate the status of the picture plane in the modern era, where the painting liberates itself from the former constraints of history, literature, space and motif, etc. To conclude, I return to the picture plane that Duchamp has

demolished in *Étant donnés* and to the works that are related to this demolition.

From earlier studies of optics and perspective, I have analyzed Duchamp's *Étant donnés*. This thesis can also be seen in relation to the debate that has circulated concerning perspective and questions of the objectivity of perspective. Unlike, Norman Bryson and others, I, along with Duchamp, focus on the perspective look, the Gaze, and deconstruct the classical perspective construction.

Étant donnés' negative status makes it intriguing piece. Duchamp researchers have often ignored the work, or devoted less attention to it than, for example, to the *Large Glass*. Unlike many Duchamp researchers, I consider *Étant donnés* to be Duchamp's masterpiece. Indeed, I see the work as one of the masterpieces of the history of art. It is one of the most challenging works of art that exists anywhere, and in my own words: 'the most thrilling work of art'⁽³⁾.

The work not only constitutes a conclusion to Duchamp's life's work as an artist, but can also be seen as a conclusion to the state of art in the 20th century, in a more general sense. Compared to the *Large Glass*, *Étant donnés* is far closer to the perfect anti-work of art. For in *Étant donnés*, Duchamp successfully produces a work that is not a work of 'art', but rather, what would seem to be Duchamp's lifelong project finally reaching perfection in this work. This paradoxical project would seem to consist of producing a picture without a picture plane, or a painting without a canvas, which is precisely the opposite of what Duchamp's contemporary artists were busy doing. (Duchamp's fellow painters, such as Picasso, abstract their paintings from the traditional motif. They favor the picture plane or the two-dimensional canvas at the expense of perspective and space; illusion.) One could say that, unlike them, Duchamp favors 'perspective,' or rather the perspective look, the Gaze, at the expense of the picture

plane or the canvas.

Therefore, a readymade can be seen as a motif that has not been transformed into the medium of art. In relation to painting, a readymade can be compared to a realistic perspective painting or a photograph. Many of these readymades also have a frontality that appeals to photography⁽⁴⁾.

The initial phase of the project can already be studied in the *Large Glass*, whose transparent glass picture plane has almost disappeared. It is nevertheless present as a ground plan for the figures or formations laid down in the work. The onlooker not only sees through the *Large Glass* but may also look at the glass itself. For that reason, there is still much of Duchamp's old paintings in the *Large Glass*, as the picture plane has not yet been completely negated⁽⁵⁾.

click to enlarge

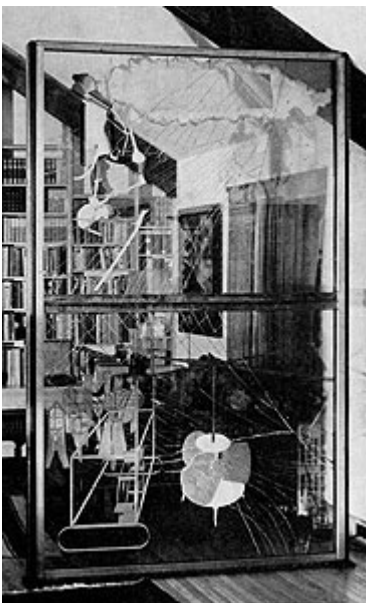


Figure 3
Photograph of Duchamp's
Large Glass (1915-23)
in Katherine Dreier's
living room.

On the other hand, the picture plane of the 'painting' has quite literally disappeared in *Étant donné*s, where Duchamp first builds up the picture plane of the work as a dark wall – only to demolish or negate it.

Why has Duchamp felt this urge to negate the picture plane? What is the point? Are there not many other significant 'details' to be studied in the work? Yes, of course there are, but I maintain that this 'detail', this demolition of the picture plane – which is normally overlooked, since the picture plane of the work has been looked 'through' – is in fact the work's most important 'detail' and Duchamp's main purpose with the work.

When I call *Étant donné*s a deconstructed painting, it is a reference to the construction, *Étant donné*s, with the aid of which Duchamp deconstructs another construction, most clearly traditional perspective painting. In such a painting, the layers or levels are laid on top of each other, so that they 'melt' into one level that materializes itself with the aid of the picture plane. When one looks at such a perspective painting, one experiences at a more illusionistic level that the picture stretches out behind the plane, behind "Alberti's window", and exposes – if not always a realistic picture of reality. At least something which has a fairly convincing stamp of realism. The abstract painting cannot be deconstructed in the same literal way as the perspective painting. The spatiality which the abstract painting often postulates, despite its strive for flatness, is of a more spiritual or invisible nature. I would claim, even so, that the abstract painting is very much 'part of' or an 'aspect' of this deconstructed painting, this visual work of reference⁽⁶⁾. In fact, it is as if it is precisely the development of the modern abstract painting, and the consequence of this painting, that has been Duchamp's starting point for *Étant donné*s.

It is well known that Duchamp detested the retinal or highly painterly painting, as is expressed in, for example, abstract expressionism. This modern, emancipated painting has liberated itself from everything except its own ground plan and its own material, which is thereby made visible. In doing so the abstract painting has also liberated itself from everything that could formerly appeal to "the grey matter," in other words, to interpretation.

Duchamp must have viewed this trend as anything but liberating. The abstract painting does not free itself from its greatest convention. It does not free itself from its ground plan or of the picture plane; on the contrary, it accentuates it.

In *Étant donnés*, Duchamp liberates the work from the picture plane, but he does it on the terms of the perspective look. In doing so, he praises the potential of the intellectual eye, but in a way that exceeds the possibilities of earlier perspective painting. In earlier perspective painting, perspective and picture plane had arrived at a compromise! The perspective picture was fixed to the picture plane on definite conditions. In *Étant donnés* there is nothing that is fixed to the canvas, wood or wall. It is only the onlooker who can 'fix' the picture (or the painting). Therefore, the work has no sense or meaning without the onlooker. The picture (or the painting) only exists in the mind of the onlooker. Since there is no common or set image fixed anywhere, there cannot be any common interpretation ⁽⁷⁾.

Étant donnés is a complex, anarchistic work that at many levels sends out messages or invites associations. Unfortunately, it is not possible for me in this article to do complete justice to the work. I would, however, like to mention another aspect of the work that has also been 'overlooked'. In *Étant donnés*, the exhibitionist element of the work of art has been exaggerated, since the picture, so to

speak, exposes its own naked genitals in a surprise attack, just as the exhibitionist does. This can only be seen as a comment on the innate exhibitionism of all paintings, or all works of art. So *Étant donnés* can thus be seen as an extreme alternative to the self-absorbed abstract painting. The abstract painting had turned its back on the onlooker and blocked its own traditional function as a medium, and thus cut itself off from its own onlooker's insight or interpretation.

It is thought provoking that the work was produced in the years after the Second World War, bearing the nuclear arms race in mind. *Étant donnés* can be seen as a 'vanitas painting of art (and thereby civilization)'. Meaning that Duchamp must first and foremost criticize artificial (modern) art, i.e. the art that only has itself as its motif. The work praises *Given*, or nature, and negates the artificial, or man-made. It is a self-critical and extremely melancholy work. But that does not mean that it negates the onlooker's experience of the work. On the contrary, the onlooker becomes the (co-) creator and interpreter of the work.

In *Étant donnés*, Duchamp has expressed himself 'verbally' by setting up completely recognizable elements or signs (the door, the naked figure, the landscape, etc.) that call out for decoding. This intellectual challenge must also be one of the work's most important aspects, for *Étant donnés* is a work of art, despite its dislike of art and the man-made. Duchamp's last work anticipates the "Return of the Real" that we are witnessing in contemporary art. Just as *Étant donnés* opens up much of contemporary art to an abundance of (relativist) interpretations. In many ways, *Étant donnés* can be seen as a 'hybrid' – an amalgam of earlier perspective painting and present-day installation art. Contemporary installation art can therefore be seen as the natural heir of earlier perspective painting⁽⁸⁾.

Notes

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1. The description of the meeting with the door is based on personal observations, since on two occasions – in July of 1998 and February of 1999 – I visited the museum. I do not want in this article to include ideas about the strategy that would seem to have been worked out in connection with the positioning of the work at the museum. Nor do I reflect on various types of onlookers and their possible advance knowledge of the work. Additionally, I have chosen not to deal with various voyeuristic aspects of the work.

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2. Even though *Étant donnés* clearly has a lot to do with perspective and has also been recognized as a peepshow construction, no one, as far as I know, has paid attention to the fact that the dark brick wall functions as the work's picture plane. For example, the Spanish researcher Juan Antonio Ramírez in his book *Duchamp, Love and Death, Even* (1993), only describes the wall as 'the Brick (or holed) Wall'. Reaktion Books, London, 1998.

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3. It has not been my main intention to praise *Étant donnés* at the expense of the Large Glass... but the work is in need of some tender care, and of being upgraded. In his mammoth work *Downcast Eyes*, the historian Martin Jay writes about the negative attitude towards *Étant donnés* that is (or has been) common among Duchamp researchers; he also describes the work in a more positive light: 'To its detractors the *Étant donnés* is little more than another of Duchamp's hoaxes, "the ultimate bluff against art and the whole superstructure, an obscene diorama pawned off on a reputable museum because of the reputation of the 'artist' and the brilliant literary apparatus lending it prestige.'" To those less hostile, it

represents Duchamp's most profound exploration of the troubled confluence of vision and desire.' Quotation from Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes, The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*, p. 169, University of California Press, 1994.

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4. Rosalind Krauss has also noticed the parallel with the readymade and the snapshot. She writes: 'the readymade's parallel with the photograph is established by its process of production. It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation or selection.' Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*, p. 206, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1993.

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5. The French researcher Jean Clair, in his article 'Duchamp and the classical perspectivists' has drawn attention to Duchamp's interest in the old treatises on perspective. He writes: "An obvious fact which needs to be stressed is that by substituting a plate of glass for an opaque canvas spread on a stretcher as support, Duchamp was doing no more than applying the analysis of the classical perspectivists to the letter in making a real 'parrete di vetro' (wall of glass)." Jean Clair also shows how Duchamp's the Large Glass seems to illustrate the treatises on perspective in the actual design of the glass – both in iconographic details and the composition. Quotation from *Art Forum*, March 1978, pp. 40-49.

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6. When I call the work a deconstructed painting and a visual work of reference, this is due to the form of manifestation of the work, which can be observed as segmented, or as something which has been split apart. I am really only following the deconstruction which Duchamp has already undertaken, so this deconstruction should not be compared too

closely with Derrida's philosophical deconstruction. When I call the work a work of reference, this is also due to the segmentation of the work. Each segment of the work seems to emit a flow of speech – which in relation to the development of painting in the 20th century can be decoded or interpreted in particular ways, at the same time as the work, in the most literal sense, is open to interpretations.

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7. *Étant donnés* has often given rise to various highly imaginative interpretations, and some of these have been rejected as 'incorrect'. I do not, however, think that they should be rejected. In my thesis I have studied Duchamp's interest in stereoscopy and anamorphosis. The previously mentioned French researcher Jean Clair has described the special nature of the stereoscopic picture: 'Because it has no material reality it does not permit symbolic exchange.' The amalgam of the two mother images of the stereoscopic picture also only exists in the onlooker's mind, which must have fascinated and inspired Duchamp. Jean Clair: *Opticeries*, October 5, Summer 1978.

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8. The phrase "The Return of the Real" is a reference to Hal Foster's book of the same name. Foster: *The Return of the Real, the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996.