

Étant donnés: Hardware/Software

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[Introduction]

Understanding the conceptual aspects of *Étant donnés* can be as daunting as deciphering the enigma of Marcel Duchamp himself. This is in part due to the fact that *Étant donnés* is an enormous work made of many complex parts that function as a larger whole. As such, there is a useful parallel between this *Étant donnés* and a network of *software* and *hardware*. Inspired by the novel *gedankenexperiment* conducted by Dieter Daniels in his essay *Duchamp: Interface: Turing: A Hypothetical Encounter between the Bachelor Machine and the Universal Machine*, I will depart from traditional analysis of *Étant donnés* (e.g. as the first example of Installation art). I will “map the network” of *Étant donnés* through a close examination of the piece in a broader context that includes many known *software/hardware* aspects—from the physical work, *The Waterfall* and *The Illuminating Gas*, *The Manual of Instructions*, the secret and clandestine labor, the mass illusion of the abandonment of art for chess and the relationship between Duchamp and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Beyond the masterpiece of *Étant donnés*, what are the greater implications of Duchamp's work in terms of *software* and *hardware*? This *software/hardware* analog does not exist between Duchamp and the piece; it is a useful and absolutely necessary tool for us to grasp the vital conceptual and physical components of *Étant donnés*. These software nodes are part of the large framework that makes up Duchamp's secret masterpiece and they are a vital interface between the viewer and the piece. A desktop computer and the software embedded therein do little to describe the larger abstract possibilities brought forth with the addition of a human user (particularly when the user interacts with other users). What does *Étant donnés* become when one is able to simultaneously view the panorama of concepts, ideas and technical aspects with which Duchamp was working? If Duchamp is not merely “the first Installation Artist” but rather the original proto-Media Artist and a father of complex conceptual art, where and how can we place him or *Étant donnés* within the context of the turbulent and misunderstood world of New Media/Art, Science and Technology?

[Hardware]

Erotic Tableau Vivant

During a period between 1943 and 1965 during which the entire art world believed that he had forsaken art-making forever, Marcel Duchamp secretly created a complex work that would become his masterpiece. In a small studio on 14th street in Greenwich Village, Duchamp labored away at a large sculptural tableau, entitled *Étant donnés* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*, French: *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage*.) This piece is conceptually related to *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*), which consists of two part of one whole, commonly referred to as *The Large Glass* and *Green Box*.

Étant donnés is a complex installation consisting of a brick wall, a wooden door and an interior diorama. Though the wooden door cannot be opened, it has two inviting peepholes placed at an average height and interocular width enabling the viewer to see the interior of the piece. Daniels draws the connection between these peepholes and virtual reality glasses, and the comparison is accurate: the viewer is a pure voyeur viewing a scene that is as simulated and remote as any realistic VR experience. The interior section contains the figure of a nude woman in a supine position, glass, a gas lamp, twigs, linoleum, velvet and a painted and photographed landscape. This figure is the immediate center of the tableau, to which Duchamp referred affectionately as “my woman with open pussy” in his letters to Maria Martins (sculptor, lover and partial muse for the piece).¹ *Étant donnés*, Duchamp's “erotic tableau vivant” is a logical bookend to the enigmatic *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (the Large Glass)*]. Whereas *The Large Glass* featured a portrayal of a bizarre apparatus and *Green Box* filled with cryptic notes and diagrams, *Étant donnés* is clear and abrupt sexuality.

Duchamp died before *Étant donnés* could be installed in a museum, but in July of 1969 it was permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This posthumous installation was made possible partially through an exhaustive set of instructions prepared by Duchamp and bound in a three-ring binder, entitled *The Manual of Instructions*. This volume included text, diagrams and photographs describing step-by-step how to assemble or disassemble the piece. The volume contains odd specifics, such as instructions on how and when to photograph *Étant donnés* and provides a unique perspective for close examination of the piece and of Duchamp himself. Beyond simply a large dioramic installation and accompanying manual, *Étant donnés* is an elaborate scheme that stretched over a twenty

year period. This scheme would involve a great deal of planning, from Duchamp clandestinely “going underground” (to work on the piece) to a secret sale of the work in the mid-1960s to the Cassandra Foundation.

[Software]

The Decoy, Going Underground, The Rouse of Abandon [1949]

Étant donnés is chronologically after Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (box in a suitcase). These portable collections contained miniature versions of many of Duchamp's works, of which he completed approximately 20 between 1935 and 1940, with later editions in the 1960s. Aside from a few window designs and a magazine cover or two, Duchamp's major art activities were few and far between. Whatever the speculation about why Duchamp chose to create *Étant donnés* obscured by absolute secrecy, it is easy to conclude that this was his preference. And Duchamp went to great pains to keep *Étant donnés* secret. Rather than attempt to merely elude friends, biographers and fellow artists, Duchamp sought to completely dupe those around them (with the exception of his wife, Teeny). Taking as a second studio in which to meet and socialize, Duchamp convinced everyone around him that he was truly doing nothing.ⁱⁱ No one would have suspected that this studio was a decoy, employed solely to hide his real purpose and to give him the pure freedom he so greatly desired. Believing Duchamp to have given up art in favor of his other passion, chess, his closest confidants were completely taken in. Although Duchamp labored daily at *Étant donnés*, he nevertheless took frequent breaks to puzzle over a chess move and competed with a large degree of success in chess competitions. Duchamp was “going underground,” as he referred to it—pursuing his work in solitude, free from outside influence or the torrent of visitors he would have surely encountered daily if he had made his project public.ⁱⁱⁱ

One must properly contextualize the significance of Duchamp's work on *Étant donnés* with this concept of “going underground.” Having withdrawn from the art world almost completely (with the exception of a small project or collaboration here and there), Duchamp was able to not only build *Étant donnés* in solitude but to also to work at whatever pace he found necessary. Free from deadlines or expectations, Duchamp sculpted both physical piece and concept in a near vacuum. To him there was no other choice for the contemporary artist; his material needs were few and he apparently lacked any desire for support or encouragement. This becomes especially powerful when coupled with the knowledge that Duchamp would not live to show this piece to more than a few people and would never see it

in the home for which he had so carefully designed it.

Anyone can look at the events of Duchamp's early career and see what impetus he might have had to simply ween himself from the art world and work in secrecy and solitude. Duchamp's "failures" seem to have either created a sense of distance in him or merely created a series of opportunities to choose an alternative path to that chosen by many of his contemporaries. Duchamp failed the entrance exam to École des Beaux-Arts in 1905 and then *Nude Descending a Staircase* was rejected by The Independents in 1912—soon after Duchamp rejected Cubism and then Paris. He traveled to Munich, where he enjoyed great solitude, and upon returning to Paris made his famous comment at the Salon de locomotion aeriennne to his companions, Fernand Léger and Constantin Brâncuși, "Painting is over and done with. Who could do anything better than this propellor? [obviously referring to one of the many airplanes exhibited at the Salon] Look, could you do that?"^{iv} It is amusing to conjecture about what Duchamp might have become had he enjoyed early, typical success in his work or had he been admitted to École des Beaux-Arts—would he have become the resolute iconoclast that "destroyed the art world?" Perhaps the early rejections and failures made an indelible mark on Duchamp. Maybe it isn't so strange that he would choose to "go underground" and work on *Étant donnés* in secret. Though so much of his personal life is obscure or only apparent in the now-published love letters to paramours like Maria Martins, it is no stretch of logic to conclude that Duchamp possessed a rare quality among artists: he seemingly needed no encouragement or validation from artists or art critics. So perhaps we must now frame Duchamp psychologically as something unusual—a rogue, an Island—a technician tinkering away while the art world thought he had sublimated into retirement.

With all these facts and theories stated, the link between this rouse and *software* can be made. The nature of Duchamp's methodology, including the secrecy and solitude, can be seen as a valid interface between Duchamp and *Étant donnés*. It is possible that he could not have successfully produced a work so contrary to his own stated beliefs and the trajectory of forty years had he worked in plain sight. Certainly he would have been burdened by visitors daily, questioning his plans for exhibition and every detail of what would become a deeply personal homage to his passion for lust, sex, the form and presence of women. Many state that *La Mariée* present in *Étant donnés* is the figure of sculptor Maria Martins or his wife, Teeny, but in a larger view she is the embodiment of a number of concepts and emotions with which Duchamp had been toying for years, if not his entire life. Therefore, part of the necessity to "go underground" with this work may have been to simply be alone with it—to experience daily intimacy that is only present in years of monastic and secret labor that leads to mastery.

Schema for Maximum Accuracy [1946-1965]

Simultaneous to the complex creation of *Étant donnés*, Duchamp populated a three-ring binder with dozens of pages of diagrams, schematics, photographs and instructions on the assembly and disassembly of the *tableau vivant* that would come to be known as *The Manual of Instructions*. In many ways the opposite to the abstruse meaning behind the contents of *Green Box*, *The Manual of Instructions* is a concise and complex algorithm for the proper assembly and exhibition of *Étant donnés* and would eventually serve as an important resource in examining *Étant donnés* and Duchamp himself during his final years. *The Manual of Instructions* is the work of a master who will not be content with a reasonably accurate assembly of his piece—he painstakingly describes through words, pictures or diagrams how to properly place each component, going so far as to label each brick in the wall and to use an elaborate x-y grid system to ensure that each brick is in its proper place. Duchamp experimented with brick placement, attempting to see what the viewer would see and optimize the experience of the *tableau*.

Though Daniels refers to *Green Box* as a sort of *software*, the connection is tenuous at best. *Green Box* in relation to *The Large Glass* is more analogous to one's own reflection in a funhouse mirror: they are essentially the same thing, just skewed versions of each other. *Green Box* does nothing to make *The Large Glass* operate, though it does shed some light on the conceptual layers with which Duchamp may have been working. In contrast, *The Manual of Instructions* functions as *software* on two fronts—it serves the piece mechanically and fills in many details about the piece as it was produced.

We can infer a great deal while thumbing through the published reproduction of this book. Contained in page after page of notes, sketches and diagrams are minute visions of the piece—metal armatures within plaster cast arms, appropriate wattages of lamps that would illuminate the nude figure, details of the waterfall lighting apparatus constructed from a Peak Freen biscuit tin. Though Duchamp specified that this manual was simply to instruct one in assembling or disassembling *Étant donnés*, it provides a wealth of insight into Duchamp's process. It is a photo journal of sorts; we follow Duchamp as he works through technical and conceptual issues in a manner that seems rare or foreign in relation to our notions of the enigmatic and famous artist. *The Manual of Instructions* is intimate and personal—looking through it, we become an interloper to such an extent that the experience resembles a clandestine peek at a private diary rather than simply reading a “how-to” for *Étant donnés*. In this way *The Manual of Instructions* is the most obvious *software* with which

we may interface with *Étant donnés*—it is the most concrete due to the explicit nature of its contents and Duchamp's wishes for how it was to be used.

Clandestine Deals and Plans Within Plans

In the mid-1960s Duchamp and his wife Teeny contacted William Copley—artist, friend and head of his very own Cassandra Foundation. Duchamp was greatly concerned about the future of *Étant donnés*. It was his desire that the piece be permanently installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art after his death, so in 1965 he showed the piece to friend and fellow artist William Copley. Through the Cassandra Foundation, secret negotiations for the future of *Étant donnés* were carried out between 1965-66 ending in the purchase of the piece for a rumored \$60,000 by the foundation. The piece was then donated after Duchamp's death in 1968.^v

There is another intriguing layer to this aspect of Duchamp's grand scheme for the destiny of *Étant donnés*. In the mid-to-late 1940s, Duchamp was busy negotiating with various museums on behalf of Walter and Louise Arensberg, who intended to eventually bequeath their expansive art collection, which included a large amount of Duchamp's work. The museum in question became the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Duchamp had a rather large hand in the final exhibition of the Arensburg's collection. Adjacent to this exhibit there was a small room which would one day house *Étant donnés*.^{vi} Is it a coincidence that the piece fit perfectly in the room when Paul Matisse (the stepson who had been entrusted after Duchamp's death to disassemble and reassemble the piece) placed it there?^{vii}

Here we find yet another *software* node: using these two points of control, Duchamp was able to “posthumously curate” his own masterpiece within a larger collection of his work, as Elena Filipovic astutely phrased it. Going to such lengths while maintaining deep secrecy portrays Duchamp as one who is able to plan long range, to attain slow and patient goals through manipulation and maneuvering.

Why One Must Look Just So: The Waterfall and The Illuminating Gas

Étant donnés has been widely criticized by detractors due to its figurative nature—perplexing to Duchampians since he had departed from painting in 1912 and slowly thereafter from figurative work. There is a good basis for their confusion. One may see plainly from *Nude Descending a Staircase to Transition of Virgin into a Bride* (both completed in 1912) that very early in his career that Duchamp is working at the edge of figurative art. Also, we see the first appearance of *The Bride* or *la Mariée* in the latter piece. *la Mariée* would return in *The Large Glass* and would be finally “stripped bare” in *Étant donnés*.

Why did Duchamp return to figurative work in this enigmatic piece? Simply put, *who is she?* If *la Mariée* was left physically untouched yet satisfied in *The Large Glass*, is this *Bride* slumped in the reclined position of one recently gratified? If we were conversely presented with a similar scene in an exposed tableau, around which we could move and see different aspects of the piece, how would the experience differ? In other words, what does the presence of a severely limited view through two “peepholes” in a door, do to the scene with which we are presented? Duchamp has put us in the position of the voyeur in a way that is unavoidable—one may avert their eyes after first glance, but regardless of how we subsequently view the piece, our initial experience is one of having seen something we shouldn't. We are thrust into a scene of exposed and outthrust eroticism; links to Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* may seem facile or obvious, but the intense realism that both sought is evident and unites the works.

The nude figure in *Étant donnés* remains basically featureless beyond her nude figure and a splash of blonde hair on one shoulder. At the end of an extended arm her hand clasps the gas lamp. Behind this is the waterfall, which is initially an interesting feature simply because it is the only part of the piece that moves. Crafted from a Peak Freen biscuit tin, the waterfall lighting apparatus contains a lamp that casts light through a spinning perforated disk, illuminating the translucent plastics of the waterfall from the rear. The effect of spots falling slowly on the plastic gives a surprisingly realistic water look.^{viii}

It is easy to draw archetypal connections between *la Mariée* and the waterfall—water as a representation of the feminine, as life (again to Courbet), as courtly love. More importantly, however, is that the waterfall was a lifelong symbol to Duchamp, captured in his photograph entitled *Swiss Landscape with Waterfall (I)* and present conceptually at the forefront of *Étant donnés*.

Then there is the mystery of *The Illuminating Gas*. It is a Bec Auer style gas lamp similar to the one Duchamp sketched as a young boy. *The Bride* folds it aloft in the center of the tableau. That much we can say for certain—anything beyond this must be divined from notes in *Green Box* or from educated speculation, due to the fact that Duchamp said nothing about the meaning and left no key to solving this ambiguous representation. Many Duchampians, such as Calvin Tomkins, puzzle about the lack of *Bachelors* in the “bookend” to *The Large Glass*. They question whether or not the *Bachelors* are embodied in this phallic lamp and whether or not *la Mariée* is now in utter control of them, due to the manner in which she wields the lamp. The merit of this line of questioning is irrelevant, but it does point to a possible intentional obfuscation of the conceptual elements of *Étant donnés* by Duchamp.

[Conclusion]

It is easy to focus on the nude figure when discussing or scrutinizing *Étant donnés*, but it is important to remember the title of the piece: *Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*. What is meant by the use of the term “Given?” It reads as if Duchamp is asking us to assume that we have the following premise with which to divine the salient aspects of the diorama with which we are confronted—to pierce the reality of this woman as she lies splayed, legs open, vagina exposed in a bed of twigs and branches. Duchamp insisted that the piece had no definite conceptual message, that it could exist in many ways to many viewers. He only desired that we look at it in a particular way—in person, in the museum, not as a photograph or any other hollow representation that would surely fall short of the impact of seeing the piece the way Duchamp designed it.

Daniels speaks of *Étant donnés* in concert with more modern concepts of Cyber sex and Virtual Reality—that Duchamp predates these technologies conceptually. These connections are valid, but fall short of hitting the mark of what the impact of Duchamp's masterpiece might be: it is a grand example of a large, partially mechanical, sculptural tableau that was designed to be *installed* in a particular space. While these concepts were being explored by early adopters such as Kurt Schwitters and Allan Kaprow, *Étant donnés* is certainly one of the first installations of such a large scope, physically and conceptually. These facts do not christen the piece as Media art or New Media, nor do they impart upon Duchamp any title as “the first New Media Artist.” They do, however, place Duchamp in the

context of being a direct influence on the media artists of the subsequent decade and therefore indirectly influencing the Installation art of the late 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Using the *software* nodes described above (and any others that may turn up in the vast sea of Duchampian research), a study of *Étant donnés*, both as object and process, is a valuable procedure to understand Duchamp and the media artists who now stand on his shoulders.

- i Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp, A Biography, Henry Holt and Company (1996) p. 366.
- ii Elena Filipovic, Exhibition Catalogue, Marcel Duchamp: A work that is not a work “of art”, Museu de arte moderna in São Paolo and the Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires (2008-2009).
- iii Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp, A Biography, Henry Holt and Company (1996) p. 438.
- iv Rudolf Kuenzli; Francis M. Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century, The MIT Press (1989) p. 42.
- v Elena Filipovic, Exhibition Catalogue, Marcel Duchamp: A work that is not a work “of art”, Museu de arte moderna in São Paolo and the Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires (2008-2009).
- vi Elena Filipovic, Exhibition Catalogue, Marcel Duchamp: A work that is not a work “of art”, Museu de arte moderna in São Paolo and the Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires (2008-2009).
- vii Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp, A Biography, Henry Holt and Company (1996) p. 463.
- viii Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp, A Biography, Henry Holt and Company (1996) p. 463.

[*Étant donnés*. Detail of view through peepholes.]



[Étant donnés. Detail of doorway.]



[Swiss Landscape with Waterfall (I)]

