

## Marcel Duchamp | Philadelphia Museum of Art

The exhibition accompanying the fortieth anniversary of the first public unveiling of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (through November 29, 2009) introduced photographs and related erotic objects previously not shown before. Accompanied by a symposium and a massive 450-page catalogue, the exhibition proved quite good as a factual tour de force, yet several questions regarding *Étant donnés* remain unanswered.

First, from 1925-55 PMA's architecturally trained director Fiske Kimball built period rooms with architectural remnants seamlessly embedded into the museum's structure. He ought to be credited with transforming the PMA into the first "experiential" museum à la Disneyland. Did this director's unusual approach to presenting art, which was already in play by the time Duchamp first visited the PMA (in 1933 he met with patrons eager to purchase a Brancusi for the museum), arouse Duchamp's desire to install his own period room? By period room, I mean a Duchamp room culled from art and ephemera (life as art as a period in itself deserving of its own room) plus a special "ride" for the eyes, situated behind a wooden door reminiscent of the backdrop for rides found in Disneyland's Frontiertown or Knott's ghost towns. Even if *Étant donnés* (1946-66) was still a twinkle in his eye during early PMA visits, Duchamp would have felt a natural kinship with the one director whose exhibition strategies most matched his own experiential proclivities, as first evidenced by the 1938 "Exposition internationale du surréalisme." Kimball's 1952 request for Katherine Dreier's *Large Glass*, cemented into the floor two years later, made the Duchamp room a *fait accompli*.

Second, five Walts--Pach, Arensberg, Knott, Disney and Hopps--each significantly influenced the other in chronological order. Pach organized the 1913 Armory show and advised Arensberg on his collection. Knott built ghost towns for his summer-long county fair known as Knott's Berry Farm and Disney built Disneyland, which opened in 1955, one year after the Arensberg collection premiered at the PMA. Although the Arensbergs died while Disneyland was under construction, they may have visited Knott's Berry Farm. Engrossed with *Étant donnés*, Duchamp was no doubt intrigued by the real/unreal divide where *Étant donnés* and Disneyland/Knott's Berry Farm meet. This is, after all, just another way to play the game of making works that are not art. No one would have imagined back then that Knott's "fake" ghost towns, let alone real ones, would attract tourists. Of course, this is also Disney's legacy, brilliantly summarized in Baudrillard's *America* (1986).

Third, Hollywood's love of illusion was already in full swing (Grauman's Egyptian Theatre, etc.) by the 1920s. Dalí, who worked with Disney in 1946, may have mentioned Disney's "theme park" plans to Duchamp. Duchamp, who spent 12 days in 1949 visiting the Arensbergs, William Copley (artist and L.A. gallerist between 1947-48), and Man Ray must have noticed SoCal's fascination with the unreal. Can it be any surprise that Hopps presented Duchamp's first survey in Pasadena in 1963? As some scholars have pointed out, Duchamp's postmodern strategies (most specifically *Étant donnés*) were proto-Californian through and through. Only months before his death, Duchamp convinced William Copley and Noma Ratner to use funds from their Cassandra Foundation to purchase *Étant donnés* and donate it to the PMA. In a 1969 essay, co-authored with Anne d'Harnoncourt for the museum's magazine, Hopps discussed *Étant donnés* in conjunction with the assemblage and kinetic works of Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Ed Kienholz, Robert Rauschenberg, George Segal, Jean Tinguely and Robert

Whitman. Since Duchamp's diorama precedes these artists' works by more than a decade, exhibition curator Michael Taylor emphatically rejects Hopps's assertions. One must admit, however, a widespread fascination with the quotidian had been underfoot since the mid-1950s, as architects, artists, musicians, and dancers were actively dismantling modernism's detached, privileged vantage.

Fourth, it should be noted that Duchamp didn't let anyone spin his bicycle wheel--a point that art historian Elena Filipovic's symposium presentation breached. Hopps told me that in 1963 Duchamp invited him to tug on the wheel, but so far as he knew he was the only person Duchamp afforded this chance. From everything I've read, Duchamp did not welcome participatory art, even though his art paved the ground for this approach. For Duchamp, "completing the work" is strictly an act of the imagination, except in the more literal case of *Le Bruit secret* (1916). Incidentally, Hopps also told me that he once opened up the PMA's *Le Bruit secret* to see what was inside. He wouldn't tell me what he found, but he said it was obvious (my guess is a metal nut).

Fifth, as much as Taylor et al. discuss the pink, punctured, parchment-covered plaster cast of Maria Martins's body, it's truly odd that there's no analysis of why she lies at a 135-degree angle, or why two 1946 sketches feature body hair. To explain the "bald" nude, Taylor notes how Duchamp's first wife commented on his aversion to female hair. If this were totally true, he would have omitted hair from earlier sketches. Taylor spends a lot of time discussing peepholes, but never the physics of sight that two holes facilitate. Supplanting the erotic oculist theories Rosalind Krauss proposes, Duchamp's binocular door facilitates depth perception. Superceding the vanishing point and origin of perspectival vision that struck Jean-François Lyotard in 1977, Duchamp staged her so that her torso's pivot aligns with that of the *pendu femelle* (female hanged body) in the *Large Glass*. In the *Green Box* (1913), Duchamp remarks that the *pendu femelle* hangs at 45 degrees (seen at 35 or 40) perhaps to "express the necessary and sufficient twinkle of the eye." Were one to extend the axis of the *pendu femelle*, it would cross the X-axis at 135 degrees, just as the "bald" nude does. Although Taylor accredits the figure's placement with Duchamp's need to obscure her damaged right arm, Duchamp seems to have slid her leftward, rather than rotate her several degrees counterclockwise, preserving the very twinkle that attracts so many looks.

Sixth, back to the door of *Étant donnés*: I have been at pains to explain to my Philadelphia-based nieces the difference between Disneyland and this door (and its contents behind the peephole). As I held up a three-year-old (now 15) eager to peer through, I specifically asked her not to kick the door, since repairing art is infinitely more expensive and time-consuming than repairing "fake" doors à la Disneyland, which noticeably employs far more workers per patron than any museum could afford. Being a "real," weatherworn door from Spain, makes its repair even more complicated.

Sue Spaid