

looking into
Étant donnés
Marcel Duchamp after 1940

Ed Zawora | History of Modern Art ARH-3331-190

Étant donnés is typically glossed-over in the histories of Marcel Duchamp, his Ready-made artworks getting the lion's share of attention. *Étant donnés* was Duchamp's final major work of art, meticulously created in secret during the last twenty years of his life and gifted to the Philadelphia Museum of Art after his death. It was largely ignored, even panned by critics at its unveiling. *Étant donnés* is controversial in subject matter and misunderstood in attempts to interpret its meaning. Duchamp did not leave detailed notes for this piece as he did with *The Large Glass*, so we are left to decipher this mystery by ourselves. This paper will attempt to provide an analysis of *Étant donnés* by examining selected samples of Duchamp's works after his return to New York. Duchamp's post-1940 activities were rife with clues to the existence of *Étant donnés*, and hints that can help us determine its meaning.

The Game Begins

In a gallery at the far end of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's modern art wing, a small room holds a secret. It is almost unnoticeable, the dimly lit corridor and room at the back of gallery 282. Standing in this enclosed space, the museum patron confronts a set of weathered antique wooden doors. Upon closer inspection, they may locate a pair of holes, at eye level, in those weathered doors. It is an invitation to look, to peep, if you will, into the mind of a genius. We see behind the doors a work of art that no photograph can reproduce and encounter a psychological experience that you can only have the first time you see it. You see, the artist is playing an intentional game with us. We had to find our way to this hidden place in the museum; it would have been easy enough to have just walked by this gallery or dismiss the old doors. But we stopped. We decided to investigate further by looking through the holes. We played the game correctly and made all the right moves to get to this very place, to discover this secret, to win this game. As our eyes focus on the scene, we begin to realize that the artist, Marcel Duchamp, has us in check-mate.

What the museum patron sees behind the doors is *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) (figure 1) the final work by Marcel Duchamp. *Étant donnés* is a diorama-like installation featuring a realistic full-scale female nude figure constructed by casts made from two important women in Duchamp's life, Mary Martin and Teeny Duchamp. The figure's legs are spread, presenting her most intimate area, which is somewhat malformed. The figure is lying on a bed of twigs in a brightly lit, wooded, and hilly landscape made from a collotype collage of images captured during Duchamp's travels in Switzerland. The landscape also includes a waterfall that appears to move using a mechanical wheel punched with holes that allow light to pass through. The figure's left

arm reaches back toward the waterfall as her hand holds a small flickering gas lamp of the Bec Auer type. The scene is framed by a wall of bricks that Duchamp collected from a construction site near his studio. The brick wall acts as the picture plane in what is a three-dimensional painting. We look at *Étant donnés* from a fixed view. Only one person can look at a time. We must observe it in the exact way that Duchamp planned it; he controls our experience.

The Chess Master's Strategy

Étant donnés was constructed in total secrecy over twenty years, from 1946 to 1966 when Duchamp claimed to have given up creating major works of art for chess. Duchamp believed that artists should remain underground and are best working slowly. In his interviews with Calvin Tompkins, he stated, "I think the great man of tomorrow in the way of art cannot be seen, should not be seen, and should go underground" and "great things of importance need to be created slowly."¹ To borrow terminology from the game of chess, his disengagement from creating significant works of art was a *swindle*, a ruse. He was secretly and methodically working on his magnum opus, to be revealed only after his death. However, in a true Duchampian manner, he coyly left us clues along the way.

A Complex Series of Moves

As the female figure is arguably the focal point of *Étant donnés*, Duchamp spends time perfecting the art of casting and sculpting the figure. Maria Martins, Duchamp's girlfriend, served as inspiration and the model for the figure in *Étant donnés*. Likewise, Duchamp cast one of her breasts for the exhibition catalog of *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (figure 2). The original cast is now located just ten feet from *Étant donnés* in the Duchamp gallery at the Philadelphia Museum

¹ Tompkins, Calvin. *Marcel Duchamp the Afternoon Interviews*. New York Badlands Unlimited, 2013

of Art. Foam rubber bra inserts or “falsies” based on this plaster mold were inset by hand in black velvet on each of the 999 covers for the exhibition with the humorous title “*Please Touch.*”

Duchamp also produced a series of erotic-based casts *Not a Shoe*, *Female Fig Leaf*, and *Objet dard* (figure 3). *Not a Shoe* and *Female Fig Leaf* are casts of female genitalia, likely Maria Martin. The “fig leaf” representing prudery or censorship to cover up nudity, is a concept that will be challenged by the explicitness of *Étant donnés*. In 1956, the cover of *Le Surréalisme No. 1* (figure 3) featured a photograph of the *Female Fig Leaf* which Duchamp selected because the *Female Fig Leaf* appears as convex; the result is remarkably similar to the genital area of the figure in *Étant donnés*. *Objet dard* was a by-product of the casting process for the female figure in *Étant donnés*, a support piece near the breast; the object appears phallic; its title is a pun alluding to objet d’art and “dard” or “dart” suggesting penetration. These erotic themed casts were clues, like pieces of a larger puzzle, left by Duchamp of his hidden project. Perhaps, the most direct clue was featured in Richard Hamilton’s 1966 exhibition “*The Almost Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*” (what a prognostic title!) where Maria Martins provided Duchamp’s, “small but elaborate study for the nude, (see figure 4) modeled in gesso and covered with vellum. This study, which comes very close in pose and treatment to the figure in the finished work, is signed and dated 1948-49 and accompanied by directions for lighting it and for repairing it if damaged.”² It was indeed a study for the figure in *Étant donnés*, so by 1949, it seems Duchamp was working out the conceptual and technical process of casting and creating the model for his final masterwork. The casts and their later copies never revealed his secret,

² D'Hamoncourt, Anne, and Walter Hopps. "Étant Donnés: 1° La Chute D'eau, 2° Le Gaz D'éclairage: Reflections on a New Work by Marcel Duchamp." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 64, no. 299/300 (1969): 6-58.

only after the post mortem unveiling of *Étant donnés* was the connection made. Through these erotic-themed sculptures, Duchamp was exposing his Queen in the game, but it was all a set-up for his final move.

Duchamp produced mini-museums or suitcase collections of his works called a *Boîte-en-valise* (*Box in a valise*). Gifted to friends and associates, they contained originals and reproductions of his most famous works. The boxes were full of visual surprises, miniature replicas, fold-out and slide-out elements, and clever reveals. The original artworks contained within the boxes also provided clues to *Étant donnés*. For instance, a *Boîte-en-valise* from 1946, given to Surrealist Enrico Donati, included a sketch of the female figure's foot (figure 5). The foot sketch dates to the same time as an early full-body study of the *Étant donnés* (see figure 4) sent to Maria Martins as a gift. Duchamp also created a collage that features the female figure's torso straddling a tree, both a study for the background and figure of *Étant donnés*. In a series of etchings called *The Lovers*, (figure 5) Duchamp once again features a study from *Étant donnés*. Duchamp's catalogue raisonné provides one more hint, as the cover design featured a Ready-Made of a common Parisian real estate sign, *Eau & gaz à tous les étages* (figure 6), which means, Water and Gas on All Floors. Gas and water, of course, were a direct connection to themes in *Étant donnés*.

Perhaps the area that best reflects what Duchamp was working out for *Étant donnés* during this period was his Surrealist exhibition designs and window displays. Duchamp understood the power and thrill of creating physical experiences beyond the works displayed in the gallery. *Étant donnés* was a planned installation, and Duchamp was using the Surrealist shows as a testing ground for his ideas. He attached *Twelve-hundred Coal Bags* (figure 7) to the ceiling for one show, essentially turning the room upside down. He used string to ensnare patrons with his

installation *Sixteen Miles of String* (figure 7). With *Coin Sale* (figure 7), he created a chicken coup in the corner of the exhibit—*Coin Sale* was a play on the French term, dirty corner, a derogatory term for female genitalia. Surrealism's 1947 exhibition featured *The Hall of Superstitions*; it was a gallery with a cloth wall that undulated around the patrons. Duchamp had an installation made called *Rayon Vert* (figure 7), which featured an image of water, land, and sky lit from behind in a manner similar to the waterfall in *Étant donnés*, it creates an illusion of a sunset on the horizon. Spectators would “peep” through a perfectly cut hole in the fabric to view this optical illusion. Duchamp also designed book store window displays for Surrealist books, where he worked out the technical challenges of creating dioramas in tight spaces. He enjoyed the idea of window displays and related them to his feelings on sexual experience; the allure of the unobtainable objects behind the glass, the thrill of eventually possessing them, and the regret once obtained, coition through a sheet of glass as Duchamp said. The display for Andre Breton's *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* featured a wire sculpture by friend Isabelle Waldberg (Figure 4). Created under Duchamp's supervision, the wire sculpture's pose is the same as the figure of *Étant donnés*, too coincidental to ignore. Additionally, they placed this sculpture under what appears to be a Bride's veil.

A Given in Glass

While this paper focuses mostly on later works (post-1940) of Duchamp, from the period when he was creating *Étant donnés*, it is impossible to not compare *Étant donnés* to the earlier *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (figure 8). It is not the goal or purpose of this paper to analyze *The Large Glass* in detail. Still, it is necessary to provide an overview of its major components to understand their relationship better. In his collection of notes, called *The Green Box* prepared by Duchamp as a guide for understanding *The Large*

Glass, we find the first mention of the title for Duchamp's final work:

Preface:

Given 1st the waterfall

2nd the illumination gas ³

“Étant donnés . . . could be described as the alter ego of the Large Glass.”⁴ The shared symbolism is well known. The Large Glass is an allegory of erotic desire conceived and created by Duchamp between 1915–1923 after he decided to abandon painting. Using mechanical objects made out of lead, wire, and dust sandwiched between two panes of glass it evokes male and female subjects in a composition about machines, science, sex, and love. The Large Glass is divided into two realms: the realm of the Bachelors' and the realm of the Bride. They are separated by lines that create the horizon line with vanishing point for lower panel—and also represent the bride's garment. The lines prevent the bachelors from reaching the Bride, but an invisible erotic-energy still connects them. Nine malic molds represent the bachelors; their sexual energy is processed by a machine that consists of a waterwheel, waterfall, parasols/sieves, and a chocolate grinder. Their energy/gas is converted into an erotic liquid that passes through the mirror-like Oculist Witness and falls on the top panel as nine shots, represented as drilled holes. The Bride is a Wasp-like Machine who exudes a cloud that represents her blossoming sexuality. It is an experiment in ways of seeing. The bottom features traditional three-dimensional, perspective-based art, while the top is ethereal and implies that the images are based upon a projection of a four-dimensional space. The erotic aspects of The Large Glass are

³ Duchamp, Marcel, Michel Sanouillet, and Elmer Peterson. 1989. “The Writings of Marcel Duchamp.” New York: Da Capo Press.

⁴ D'Harnoncourt, Anne, and Walter Hopps. “Étant Donnés: 1° La Chute D'eau, 2° Le Gaz D'éclairage: Reflections on a New Work by Marcel Duchamp.” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 64, no. 299/300 (1969): 6-58.

invisible; the narrative needs an explanation for us to understand its importance. The erotic content of *Étant donnés* is very much explicit while the narrative still remains elusive.

In its most straightforward interpretation, *Étant donnés* represents the Bride of *The Large Glass* recreated as a realistic three-dimensional sculpture. She has been stripped bare and has fallen into an erotic landscape. The bachelors' energy is still emanating through the flame of the small gas lamp, a malic mold, and the movement of the waterfall. The lines that prevented access to the Bride are now the old Spanish door, placing the observer in the position of the bachelors, separated from the fallen Bride. "This is not necessarily to suggest that Etant Donnes . . . represents a sequel in time or in narrative to the events (or frustration of events) adumbrated in The Large Glass, but to propose that it is an alternative vision of the same elements."⁵

Reflections of the Infrathin

Duchamp invented a term to describe what he observed as mynute and unexplained phenomena in the physical world. He called this term infrathin (infraslim) or inframinse. Infrathin is a concept that Marcel Duchamp did not clearly define; it is mysterious. Duchamp stated it is always an adjective, never a noun, and is a concept that reveals itself in multiple ways. As Marcel described in his notes:

"Magnifying glass for touching infrathin.

The warmth of a seat (that had just been vacated) is infrathin.

When the fumes of tobacco also smell of the mouth that exhales it, the two odors commingle by way of infrathin.

2 forms cast in the same mold differ from each other by infra thin separable amount.

*The condensation or moisture on polished surfaces (glass, copper) is infrathin."*⁶

⁵ D'Harnoncourt, Anne, and Walter Hopps. "Étant Donnés: 1° La Chute D'eau, 2° Le Gaz D'éclairage: Reflections on a New Work by Marcel Duchamp." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 64, no. 299/300 (1969): 6-58.

⁶ Duchamp, Marcel, Paul Matisse. "Notes." Paris: Flammarion, Stampa.

He also described Infrathin as the sound made by the ribs in corduroy pants as they slide over each other or the shape taken by pants of the person who wore them, like a cast or “crease molds” of an original. Infrathin seems to have a basis in subtle transference between objects. Duchamp believed infrathin held the key to passing between dimensions. Infrathin, especially mirrors and molds, plays a part in many of the themes in Duchamp’s post-1940 works.

Duchamp described mirrors as infrathin in his notes. “Mirrors, or any reflecting surface, for that matter, play a substantial role in the construction of human identity and the fashioning of self-image.”⁷ A mirror image reflects the person, but it is also not an identical image; it is reversed. A subtle difference associated with the infrathin, as Duchamp noted “mirrors reflect our images, but not ourselves—it is a renvoi (send back) with an infrathin delay included.”⁸

Duchamp experimented with the infrathin in one of his first pieces after his “mirrorical” return to New York. *In the Manner of Delvaux* of 1942 (figure 9), a collage featured a small inset mirror with a reflection of female breasts. The mirror is set upon a pedestal and wrapped in a large white fabric bow. An image that some viewers may recognize Duchamp copied from Paul Delvaux’s *Aurore*, a Surrealist painting that features a similar mirror with reflected breasts. While similar, they are different, “slight differences, so slight as to be infrathin.”⁹ The image is both an authentic work of Rose Sélavy (Duchamp) and a forgery. It was a genuine forgery. *In the Manner of Delvaux* is at once a reflection of Duchamp’s interest in the infrathin and the foundation of the erotic themes of his work yet to come.

Réflexion à main (Hand Reflection) is a fascinating piece that Duchamp included in a *Box in a valise*. The image features a sketch in pencil of a hand holding a handle at the top of which is a

⁷ Singer, Thomas. 2004. “In the Manner of Duchamp, 1942-47: The Mirrorical Return.” *The Art Bulletin* 86 (2): 346–69.

⁸ Duchamp, “Notes.”

⁹ Singer, Thomas. “In the Manner of Duchamp”

circular die cut, backed by a mirror that reflects the viewer's image. The sketch of the hand holding that mirror was identical to the hand in a photograph of a plaster cast study for his female figure (figure 10). It seems in the early version of *Étant donnés* Duchamp likely intended the female to hold a mirror, as opposed to a lamp. *Étant donnés* was a mirror that would reflect the viewer/voyeur's image of themselves engaged in observing the erotic.

Caught in the Act of Looking

Regardless of the symbolism used in this explicit scene behind the door, or its relationship to Duchamp's previous works, *Étant donnés* certainly appears to be a commentary by Marcel Duchamp on institutional museums. Duchamp did not look favorably on museums; he said he had little use for them and concern for why only particular works are "consecrated by posterity."¹⁰ Still, he selected a museum as a place to gather his life's works. The gallery in Philadelphia was personally selected and designed by Duchamp. He made the arrangements, supervised installations, and gathered his collection together in one place. This gallery would become his final *Boîte-en-valise* and *Étant donnés* his last clever reveal. Duchamp even took measures to make sure the installation opened with little fan-fair, he wanted the element of surprise to remain intact. To access his final piece, you need to pass through the museum with all of its Greek revival architecture with works presented on white gallery walls and categorized by genre or production date. "Duchamp chose the museum—that institutional apparatus intimately connected to the validation of the work of art—not only as *Étant donnés* "site" but as its frame (of reference) and arguably also its very subject."¹¹ Even the Duchamp Gallery and its presentation of works conform to this standard, perhaps part of the set-up—part of the game of

¹⁰ Duchamp, Marcel. 1957. "The Creative Act." presented at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts, April.

¹¹ Filipovic, Elena. 2016. *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mit Press.

discovering it (figure 12). “Duchamp was interested in critically using the institutional framework of the museum as a language.” The roots of such institutional critiques are found in his Ready-mades when they invaded the revered space of the art gallery. Looking through the holes in the old Spanish doors shatters everything we have come to expect to see in a museum. We ask, did Duchamp create a peep show in the hallowed halls of institutional art?

We visit museums to observe the art, we are anonymous spectators and paintings that feature nudity are typically presented in a respectful manner, they are demure. Indeed, many artists have created works with explicit themes before *Étant donnés*, Manet’s *Olympia*, or Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* come to mind. Duchamp is not as subtle with the nudity of *Étant donnés*, he used no strategically placed hand to cover up, *Étant donnés* confronts the viewer. Duchamp likely wanted the spectator looking through the “peepholes” to experience the shock of what they are seeing; he wants to make them feel voyeuristic, that perhaps they should not be looking. Gerard J. Pape used a psychoanalytical review of Duchamp’s life to suggest an intriguing idea that the explicit view behind the doors relates to Freud’s castration anxiety and Duchamp’s desire to be female because his mother favored his sisters. In fact, the vagina of the female is not anatomically correct; it is malformed, like a wound, coincidentally strikingly similar to *Luminaire* (figure 11), a sculpture by Isabelle Waldberg from her time collaborating with Duchamp. The viewer is not seeing a true representation of female genitalia but what their mind infers is there, the audience completes the work of art. Duchamp believed “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”¹² Regardless of the psychological manifestations it induces, looking at the scene, the viewer is

¹² Duchamp, Marcel. 1957. “The Creative Act.” presented at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts, April.

bound to feel self-conscious. Who is standing behind me? Is there anyone watching me? The out-of-body feeling of being present looking at the art while at the same time having your mind transported to the space behind you is inextricable. There is the “checkmate” of Duchamp’s game. We feel what it is like to be looked at, to be caught in the act of looking. It is the art museum turned inside out, where art puts us on display.

Afterward

That feeling of voyeurism was precisely my personal experience with *Étant donnés* and the reason I selected this subject. An art history novice, I was unfamiliar with the piece and missed seeing it the first few times I visited the museum, never venturing past *The Fountain* and *The Large Glass*. Once discovered, I still remember the experience to this day, the self-conscious feeling of being watched, even though no one was there. I can’t recall any other work of art that made me feel that way. Understanding it was likely part of Duchamp’s diabolical plan, perhaps his final parting joke, makes it all the more interesting. Duchamp said that art deteriorates over time. He said that his *Nude* was once so shocking but having been looked at so often has become boring. Duchamp remarked, “Oh, that’s the Nude again.” [laughs] It’s detrimental to the poor thing.”¹³ It is true, while I appreciate the importance of *The Fountain*, and the other works in his gallery, the novelty of the idea behind the Ready-mades are no longer that shocking. I revisited the museum gallery as part of this paper’s research, but *Étant donnés* was closed due to Covid 19. After so much research, I had hoped to observe it again and record my feelings for the piece. Would it still have the same impact? Would I still feel as self-conscious? Duchamp’s work is always full of surprises. He is a riddle. His art is both simple and insanely

¹³ Tomkins, Calvin. 2013. *Marcel Duchamp the Afternoon Interviews*. New York: Badlands Unlimited.
. 2014. *Duchamp: A Biography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art

complicated to understand. Serious and a joke. Recently there was a theory that the entire installation of *Étant donnés* acts as a giant camera obscura that reflects an image of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy. The installation does indeed project some kind of shape, but the evidence of the Rose Sélavy image is dubious. The one thing we can be sure of related to the camera obscura theory is that Marcel Duchamp, if alive today, in true Duchampian form would have likely laughed at the notion and then neither confirmed nor denied it was true.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berlot, Uršula. 2011. "Duchamp and the Notion of Optical Tactility." University of Ljubljana.

Daubner, Ernestine. 1995. "Étant Donnés: Rose/Duchamp in a Mirror." *Canadian Art Review* 22 (1/2): 87–96.

D'Harnoncourt, Anne, and Walter Hopps. "Étant Donnés: 1° La Chute D'eau, 2° Le Gaz D'éclairage: Reflections on a New Work by Marcel Duchamp." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 64, no. 299/300 (1969): 6-58.

Duchamp, Marcel. 1957. "The Creative Act." presented at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts, April.

Duchamp, Marcel, Paul Matisse. "Notes." Paris: Flammarion, Stampa.

Duchamp, Marcel, Michel Sanouillet, and Elmer Peterson. 1989. "The Writings of Marcel Duchamp." New York: Da Capo Press.

Filipovic, Elena. 2016. *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Julian Jason Haladyn. 2010. *Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés*. London: Afterall.

Naegelel, Daniel. 2006. "Duchamp's Doors and Windows." *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations* 85.

Pape, Gerard. 1985. "Marcel Duchamp." *American Imago, The Johns Hopkins University Press* 42 (3): 255–67.

Shearer, Rhonda. n.d. Toutfait Marcel Duchamp Online Journal. <https://www.toutfait.com/>.

Singer, Thomas. 2004. "In the Manner of Duchamp, 1942-47: The Mirrorical Return." *The Art Bulletin* 86 (2): 346–69.

Tomkins, Calvin. 2013. *Marcel Duchamp the Afternoon Interviews*. New York: Badlands Unlimited.

Tomkins, Calvin. 2014. *Duchamp: A Biography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 1:
Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2°
le gaz d'éclairage (Given: 1. The
Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas

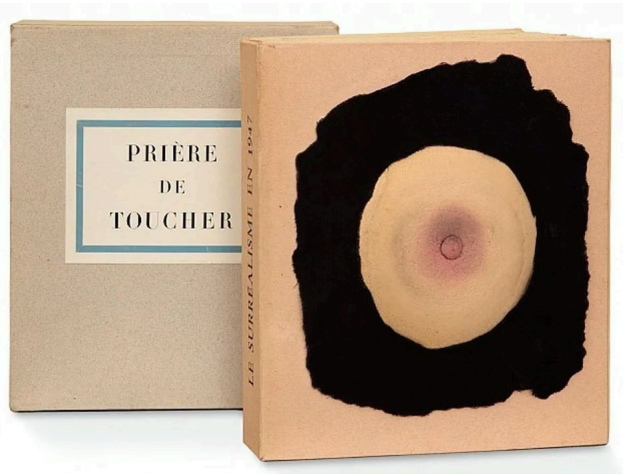
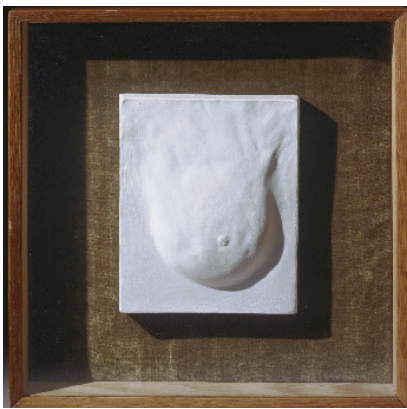


Figure 2:
Maria Martins Breast Cast and Le
Surréalisme en 1947, Please Touch.



Figure 3:
Not a Shoe, Female Fig Leaf, Objet Dard
and Le Surréalisme No. 1 cover.

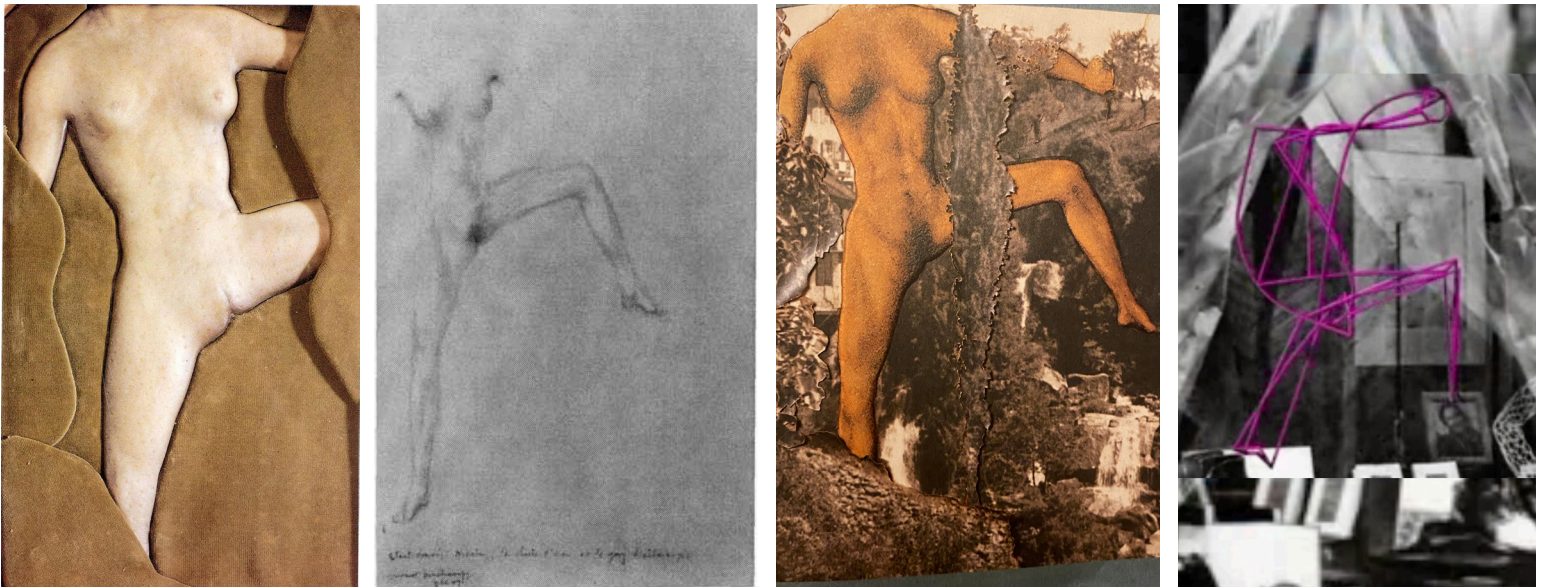


Figure 4:
Comparison: Gesso and Vellum Study, Figure Study in Pencil, Photo collage, and Isabelle Waldberg Wire Sculpture

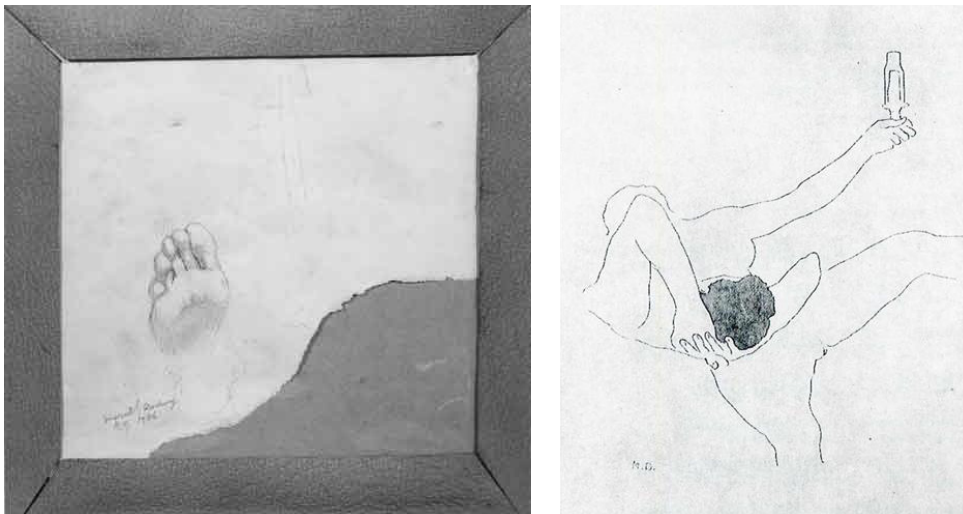


Figure 5:
Sketch of foot and Etching from the series *The Lovers*

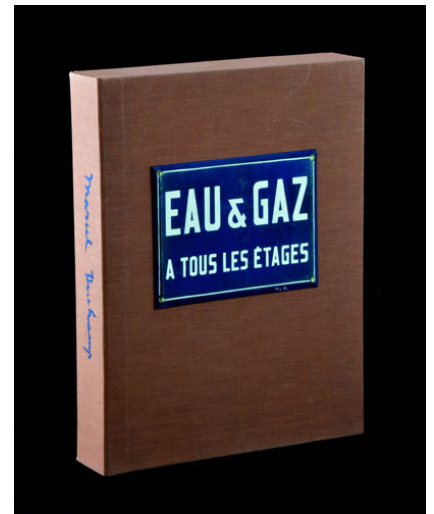


Figure 6:
Eau & gaz à tous les étages.

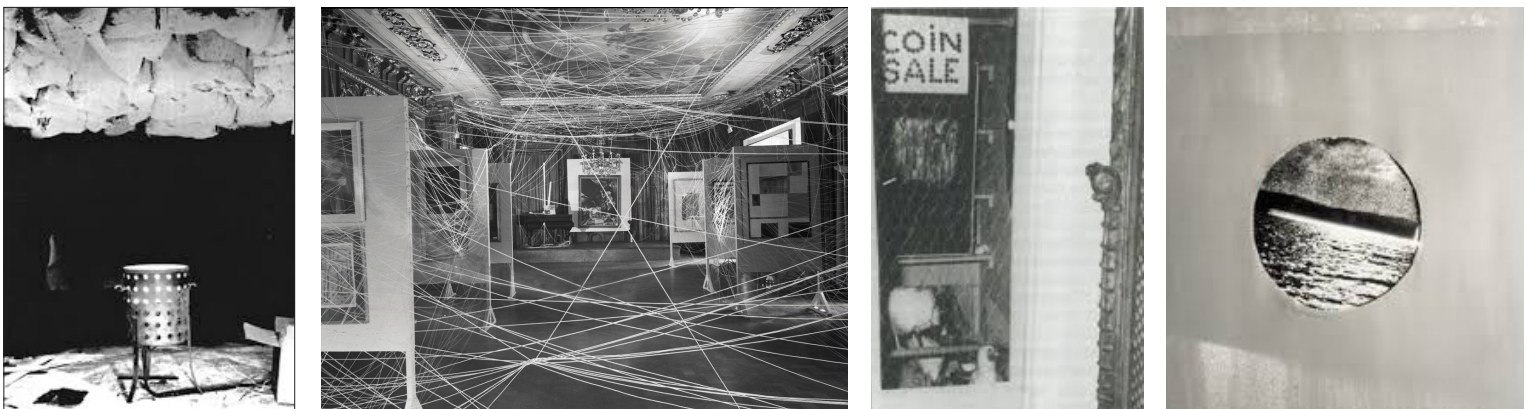


Figure 7:
Twelve-hundred coal bags, Sixteen miles of string, Coin Sale, Rayon Vert.



Figure 8:
The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)



Figure 9:
In the Manner of Delvaux and detail from Delvaux's Aurora



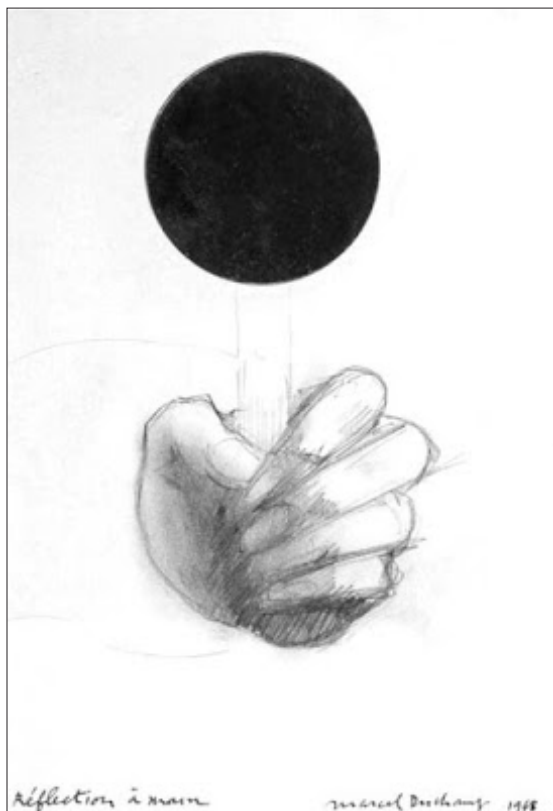


Figure 10:
Réflexion à main and Plaster Study

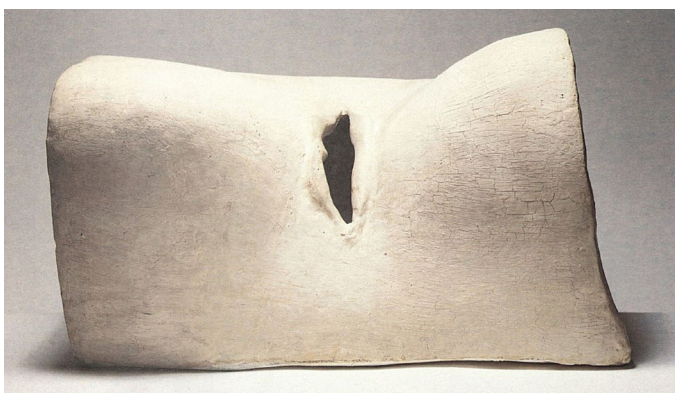


Figure 11:
Isabelle Waldberg, Luminaire

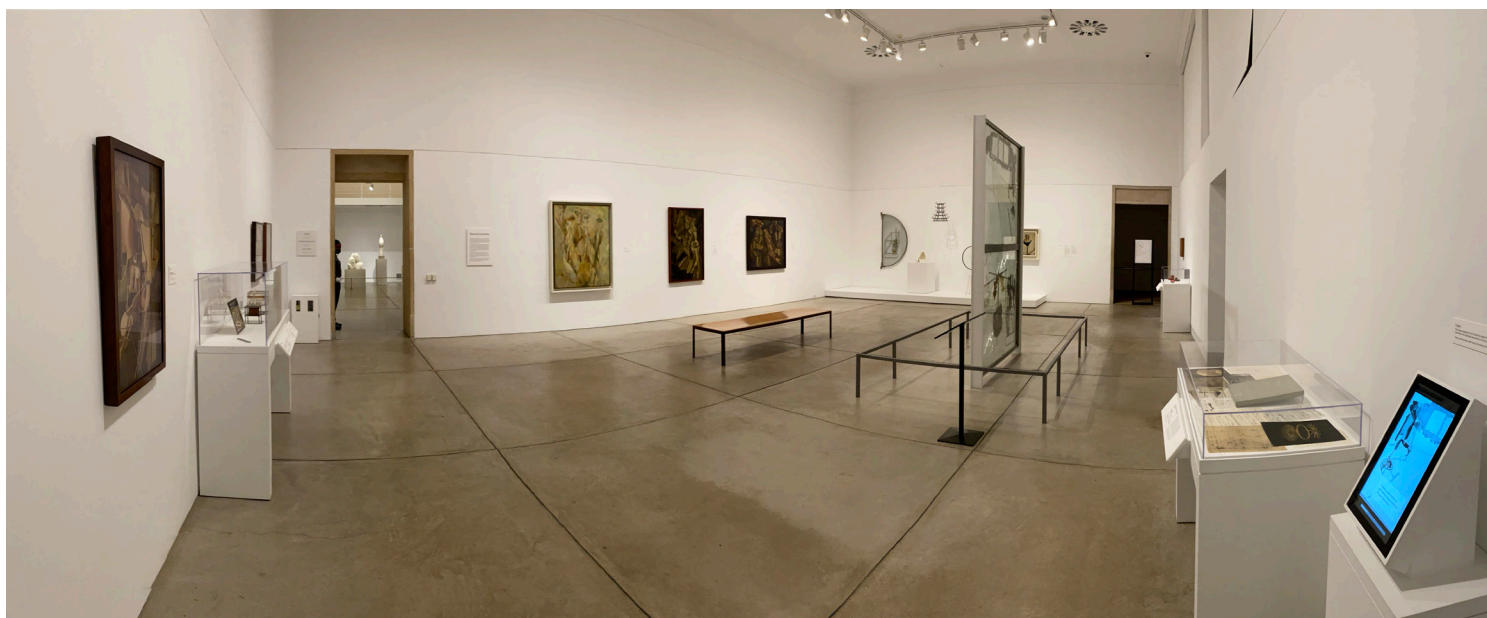


Figure 12:
Duchamp Gallery 11-4-2020