The Posthumous Exile of Marcel Duchamp

On the Series

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The Posthumous Exile of Marcel Duchamp

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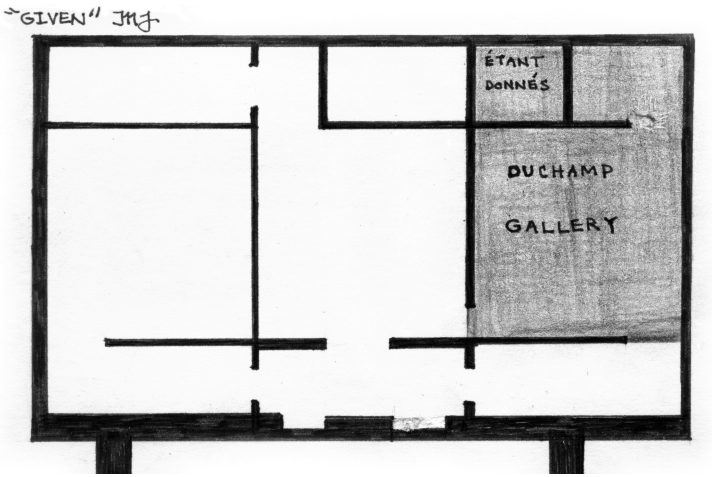
In his book *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, T. J. Demos attempts to locate the art of Duchamp in relation to the condition of exile, specifically focusing on the projects that were made while traveling and/or in exile during the two World Wars. Duchamp lived much of his life in the USA, where he achieved an artistic notoriety that was beyond any recognition from his home country of France. According to Demos: "Duchamp crystallized the experience of exile within the structure and phenomenological conditions of the artwork itself, sometimes by projecting it into a state of mobility, at other times by materializing an internal liminality" (3). Although Demos makes a compelling argument for considering Duchamp in relation to the condition of exile, he overlooks possibly the most significant example of exile in Duchamp's work: the choice to establish a major collection of his artwork in the United States and not France.

Throughout his career, Marcel Duchamp played a fundamental role in both the collection of his own work and the final establishment of the Duchamp gallery at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where his most significant works are presently housed. Most notably, virtually all of the artworks that Duchamp has become known for can be seen in this single collection, namely: *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* or *The Green Box* (1934), *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), *Fountain* (1917), *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* or *The Large Glass* (1915-23), and his final installation *Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas* [*Étant donnés: 1º la chute d'eau, 2º le gaz d'éclairage*] (1946-66). Since Duchamp produced a relatively small output of artwork over his career – especially in comparison to an artist like Picasso – the fact that so many of his works ended up in a single collection is significant. In fact, this major collection of his work within the Philadelphia Museum of Art was the result of a highly developed strategy on Duchamp's part, one that involved the coordination and cooperation of a number of individuals. This can be seen most prominently in the close and lifelong relationships that Duchamp nurtured with two major American collectors who literally made the formation of the Duchamp gallery in Philadelphia possible.

The first of these relationships was with Walter and



Floor Plan of the Duchamp Gallery (with Étant donnés)
Modern and Contemporary Art Wing
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Louise Arensberg. Duchamp first met the Arensbergs in 1915 during his visit to New York; the three met following Duchamp's success at the Armory Show, due to the scandal caused by *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. After the Armory Show he became an infamous artist within America, a status that was never equaled within his home country – this represents a likely rationale for Duchamp's decision to establish a major collection of his work in America and not France. As major collectors of contemporary art, the Arensbergs attended the Armory Show – where they purchased a number of works – although it would be years later before they would buy *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* after missing the chance to purchase it in 1913. From this time until their deaths in 1953, the Arensbergs were close friends with Duchamp, who also served as their artistic advisor, helping the couple amass the single most important collection of his work in the world. This collection, which included thirty-six artworks by Duchamp, was donated to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1950, becoming the foundation of the Duchamp gallery.

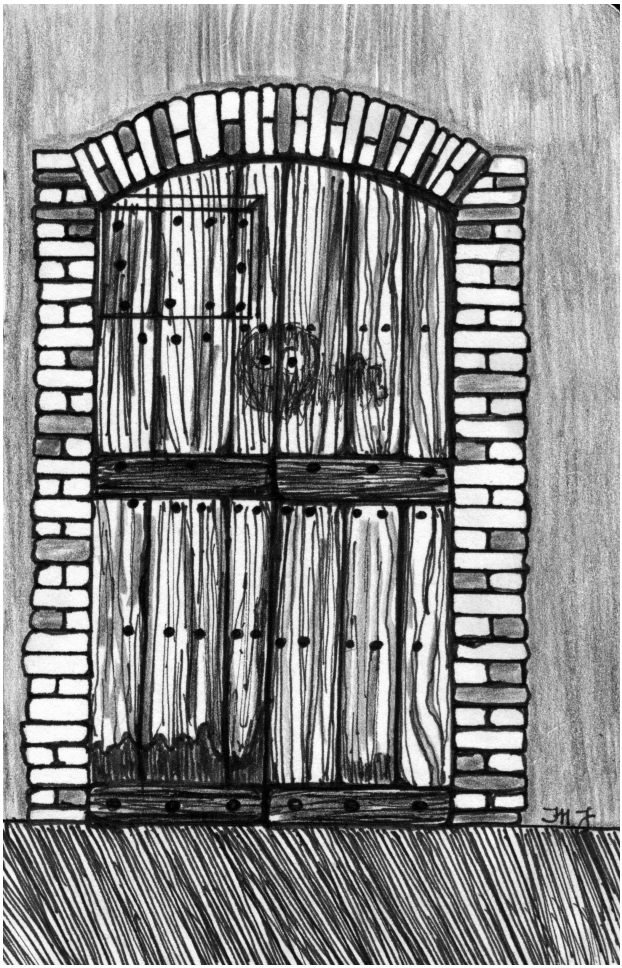
Although the Arensbergs' collection included almost all of Duchamp's most significant works, it was missing one key project: *The Large Glass*. This work was in the collection of Katherine Dreier; another collector Duchamp was a close friend with until her death in

1952. Duchamp and Dreier worked together organizing the Société des Indépendants' non-juried exhibition of 1917, for which Duchamp submitted a readymade urinal titled *Fountain* that bore the signature of R. Mutt, a paying member of the society; significantly, Dreier was one of the members on the board who voted against the inclusion of the work, of course without the knowledge that R. Mutt was actually Duchamp. As an avid collector of contemporary art, Dreier acquired a number of Duchamp's works, most notably *The Large Glass*. In fact, it was under her initiative that the broken work – which has shattered during transport – was reassembled piece by piece by the artist, finally held together between two full sheets of glass. Soon after the establishment of his collection, Duchamp had informed Dreier of his desire that "*The Large Glass* rejoin its 'brothers and sisters' at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it would serve as the capstone to the Arensbergs' unrivaled collection of his work" (Tomkins 380). Dreier consented, donating the work to the museum, where it stands as the focal point of the Duchamp gallery.

As a result of the donations made by the Arensbergs and Dreier, Duchamp was able to form a major collection of his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In addition to aiding in the literal collection of his work, Duchamp also presided over the actual arrangement of the works within the Duchamp Gallery – as was

the agreement between Fiske Kimball, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Arensbergs. This aspect of Duchamp's involvement is of particular interest for two main reasons. First, his participation in the establishment of the Duchamp Gallery makes clear the manner in which he wished his work to be presented, specifically his desire to present many of his works together and in dialogue with each other. Second, this active involvement enabled him to incorporate his final work *Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas*, a secret room-size installation unveiled only after his death – an arrangement made with Kimball and the Cassandra Foundation, run by William and Noma Copley, which purchased *Given* in the spring of 1966. Because of the requirements of the installation, which has literally been built into a small room off of the main gallery, it is apparent that Duchamp's participation in organizing the exhibition space allowed him to situate this final major project among his other works in order to fulfill the narrative that is his major collection.

In her text "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," Mieke Bal discusses the act of "collecting as a narrative; not as a process about which a narrative can be told, but as itself a narrative" (87). Duchamp's act of collecting his own work, specifically through his association with the Arensbergs, Dreier, and finally the Copleys, forms the means through which his narrative



Marcel Duchamp
Étant donnés: 1º la chute d'eau, 2º le gaz d'éclairage
[*Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas*]
view of exterior door
1946-66

Marcel Duchamp
Étant donnés: 1º la chute d'eau, 2º le gaz d'éclairage
[*Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas*]
view of interior installation
1946-66

is accomplished. But what is the narrative itself? We speculate that a major clue to answering this question can be seen in two elements: first, Duchamp's decision to situate his collection in the United States (rather than France) and second, his posthumous inclusion of Given.

There are several obvious reasons for Duchamp's decision to establish the narrative of his collection in the United States. As stated earlier, his artistic success following the Armory Show gave him a notoriety in American culture that was never equaled in his home country. Ironically, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, which became the most celebrated scandal of the show in American newspapers and art circles, had been withdrawn from the 1912 Salon des Indépendants – due to the unfavourable response (delivered by Duchamp's brothers) of the exhibition organizers. While it was included the following year in a major Cubist exhibition in Barcelona and the *Section d'Or* exhibition in Paris, in both cases the work gained little attention. In fact, the American response to the work was a surprise to Duchamp, who would not realize his own success until his visit to New York in 1915. It was not until he left France for the United States that his career as a major artist truly began. Put another way, the American response to his work can be seen as a primary source of Duchamp's artistic motivations, highlighting his lifelong straegic positioning of his artwork and his general

conception of the artist's work as only one part of the process necessary for the creation of the work of art – which, as he makes clear in "The Creative Act," also requires the spectator to complete it.

It is in this sense that Demos directly traces Duchamp's acts of travel, both voluntary and in response to war, to a narrative of exile within his artistic production, citing examples such as *Traveling Sculpture* [*Sculpture de voyage*] (1918) and *Boîte-en-valise* (1941). As a narrative, the rubric of exile serves to highlight the connection between Duchamp's working process and his acts of travel, specifically those away from his home country. For example, his planning of *The Large Glass* and early stages of his conception of the readymade took place on a visit to Munich in 1912 – a trip that was at least partly a response to the Salon des Indépendants rejection. As with his trip to New York, this act of removing himself from the French art scene in which he grew up allowed him to push the boundaries of his artwork, as well as his understanding of modern art generally. The fact that the major collection of Duchamp's work is outside of France seems appropriate and even reflective of his working process.

Yet, it is important to remember that Duchamp never lost touch with his home country. In fact he died in Neilly, France, in October 1968 and his ashes are

buried in the Cimetière Monumental de Rouen with his parents, brothers and sister. He wished for his body to remain in France, specifically with his family, and yet chose to locate his collected work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It therefore seems clear that for practical and/or personal reasons, Duchamp wished his major collection to be situated or contextualized within an American institution of art. If exile is a key rubric for examining the narrative of Duchamp's artistic practice, having America as his final artistic resting place appears to be a fitting end. But Duchamp undermines the finitude of this gesture with his posthumous inclusion of *Given*, which serves to oddly enact through his collection the epitaph he had placed on his headstone in Rouen: *Besides, it is always others who die*.

In terms of the final Duchamp collection in Philadelphia, it is important to ask the question why Duchamp added this final project? And why add it posthumously? Such issues have driven scholars to attempt reconciling the obvious and overt differences between the projects displayed in the main Duchamp gallery and *Given*, most notably the literalness and baseness of the project's imagery – a spread-eagle nude woman peeped at through holes in a door. There has, however, been some mention made of the funerary atmosphere of the installation, particularly because it

is located in a separate lightless room reminiscent of a tomb or crypt, which can be seen as a last will and testament. In this manner, the nude's positioning on a pile of dried twigs holding a gas lamp provides an evocative picture of a funerary pyre, the lamp – a key image in Duchamp's artistic narrative – at once granting light and providing the possibility of the nude's self-incineration incineration. This narrative of death built into *Given*, and therefore into the Duchamp collection as a whole, functions as a form of extreme exile that serves to undermine the finality typically associated with major institutional collections. "Collecting can be attractive as a gesture of endless deferral of death," Bal tells us (98). If Duchamp was attempting to endlessly defer his own death through the collection of his work into a major collection, then *Given* serves to both delineate this narrative and to function as a site of permanent exile for the artist, who is literally inaccessible and yet perpetually present in the collection.

In other words, the act of elaborately collecting his work into the Philadelphia Museum of Art can be seen as the *final* un-finalization of his narrative of exile. It is the last box that thumbs its nose at the certitudes of art history. This gesture is made clear through the inclusion of *Given*, the site of his posthumous exile.

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