

Maria Martins: the Open Secret of Étant donnés
Review of “Marcel Duchamp. Étant donnés”
Philadelphia Museum of Art, August 15-November 29, 2009

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In 1997, Chris Grandlund (from the BBC) revealed Marcel Duchamp's affair with the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins in his film, *The Secret of Marcel Duchamp*. The story reached an additional audience when Francis Naumann drew at length on this sentimental story in his 2001 *Art in America* article, “Marcel and Maria.” The secret of the film title had already been the subject of scrutiny by the art historian Juan Antonio Ramirez, who in 1993 assembled the pieces and demonstrated that the creative process of *Étant donnés* relied upon two important female companions and artistic partners of Duchamp's life: Maria Martins and Alexina/Teeny Duchamp.¹ In 1996 Calvin Tomkins underscored the importance of Maria Martins, as well as that of Mary Reynolds, to whom the French review *Étant donnés* dedicates a recent issue (#8, 2009).² Previously it presented a large dossier on Duchamp's last work (#3, 2001), the focus of the exhibition “Marcel Duchamp. *Étant donnés*” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (August 15-November 29, 2009).

What can possibly be new in the current show that has not been uncovered either by critics, the popular art press, or the museum itself? In the 1987 reprint of the *Museum Art Bulletin* that accompanied the display of Duchamp's installation in 1969, Anne d'Harnoncourt and Walter Hopps unveiled Duchamp's photographs of the studio where he began to assemble *Étant donnés*, as well as a preparatory study for the nude of *Étant donnés*, a gouache on plexiglas.³ Three years earlier, without Duchamp's knowledge, Maria Martins herself sent, to the 1966 London Tate retrospective on Duchamp, what is considered the first study of *Étant donnés*.⁴ By this very gesture, the female Brazilian sculptor challenged Duchamp's secrecy and suggested her

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artistic participation in the installation, a project she followed and then saw before its public display, long after their separation.

The novelty of the exhibition resides less in its material than in the decision on the part of the Museum and Duchamp's heirs to no longer retain information or to limit reproductions. What had been concealed by Duchamp for twenty years—to which the family added a moratorium of fifteen years during which no photograph of the installation could be taken or published, literally a “Duchampian” delay—is now in the open and acknowledged as such by the museum where Duchamp's major works are gathered. That which could for fifteen years only be seen through the two holes in the famous Catalan door in Philadelphia, on the spot, is now on display in works and details of all kinds. The scientific examination of the making of the nude is spread out in a voluminous catalogue that no longer hides anything: you will know that the envelope of the nude is not pigskin but parchment, and hence connected to the role of Mary Reynolds, Duchamp's artistic and sexual partner with whom he collaborated in the making of many books. You will have confirmed for you that *Feuille de vigne femelle* (1950), *Not a Shoe* (1950), and *Objet dard* (1951) are works that Duchamp kept after breaking his plaster nude. This means that Duchamp offered the fragmented cast of his previous lover's genitals as a wedding present to his bride Teeny: *Coin de chasteté* (1954). You will read Duchamp's letters to Maria Martins, published for the first time in the catalogue of the exhibition (previously only alluded to or partially quoted by scholars). You will also discover that Salvador Dalí, whose work Duchamp defended at several instances during his career, signed 35 prints of the landscape on fabric in 1959 and therefore knew about the project long before William Copley or other late close friends of Duchamp did.⁵ As is well known, the Catalan door comes from Cadaques, Dalí's fiefdom. Dalí's intervention is also in line with a similar installation titled *Paradise*, which is close enough to Duchamp's last work that Charles Stuckey calls it the “world's other *Etant Donnés*” in his article “Dalí in Duchamp-land.”⁶ The art historian describes the “two peepholes: the upper for adults, the lower for children. The peepholes reveal an elaborate installation never reproduced and scarcely mentioned in the many books on Dalí. In the immediate foreground is a huge stuffed toy bunny, but the crux of the scene is an old metal bedstead situated in a trellised arbor, with plastic grape leaves dangling overhead, resembling the tendrils of ever-growing ivy on the original version of *Rainy Taxi*, or even recalling the Bacchic self-portrait painted when Dalí was about 17. The sheets are disheveled, and there is something like a lump of plaster on the bed.” It is a shame that Dalí, so present in the Philadelphia museum in 2005, suddenly became so invisible despite the importance of the unveiling of his signature. This is certainly a new piece of information displayed in this exhibition.

Uncovering a great wealth of information, this new exhibition contrasts with the previous curatorial choice of secrecy. But let's not be fooled: so many of Duchamp's women cannot be unveiled without the complementary and opposite gesture of concealing a lot about these very women, about their presence and their role. Let us begin with the main discovery that the show has to offer, and that passed unnoticed in all reviews of the show: Duchamp's sculpture of the nude is hollow. The plaster, first enveloped by parchment, was intentionally broken. The nude was hollowed out. This is why one can see the nineteen cracks in the back-lit skin, which Paul Matisse scrupulously counted as he assembled the piece in the Philadelphia Museum after it left Duchamp's studio, following the artist's death.⁷ The skin is strengthened with putty and metal rods. The casts of Maria Martins only remain in discarded pieces and fragments that became the works listed above, mainly the imprint of her genitalia covered with a "coin" (wedge), or exposed. As for the genitalia of the nude of *Étant donnés*, they are far from being anatomically correct, as numerous critics have noticed. My interpretation is that this is not a sex, but a rictus, a rictus of death, of love, that took twenty years to be mourned, but which leaked from Duchamp's tomb.

The open secret of *Étant donnés* is that of an open tomb. Because of all the secrecy that surrounded Duchamp's installation—no reproduction of the work except the door that hid it, no press release—the New York Times critic John Canaday concluded his review of Duchamp's installation in 1969 with this comment, "the impression is just as if we had discovered the tomb of another Pharaoh. Very interesting, but nothing new."⁸ It is precisely because of this dimension that there is no need to uncover the dirty pictures of the *Black Dahlia* (and their so-called similarity to surrealist aesthetics) as a possible source for the work, an approach firmly discarded by Michael Taylor in his essay.⁹ One could argue that the "*fait divers*" is part of the description of a key manuscript by Duchamp in which the title of the work appeared for the first time.¹⁰ Duchamp drew upon the iconography of such crimes in the kind of popular literature that documented them, and as a way to further debase Maria Martins. This is literally legible in the fact that the nude, first standing, passed into the horizontal position of a corpse—after the separation from Maria and at the time of the Black Dahlia case. I am not convinced that Duchamp "used" the photograph of the Black Dahlia, but that the work in its essence relates to the genre of the tabloid and the "*fait divers*." Scholars who focus on the identity of another victim, the romanticized Black Dahlia, participate in the Duchampian "erasure" of Maria. My intention is different: I want to unveil the artist's desire to make Maria Martins disappear, as a woman, artist, and an inspirer and collaborator, thereby justifying the removal of her name from the original title of the work which, in 1946, read: *Étant*

donnés, Maria, la chute d'eau, et le gaz d'éclairage.¹¹ The murder, as Freud would put it, is symbolic; it is that of mourning, of coping with the separation from a woman whose artistic personality not only attracted Duchamp but strongly influenced his work. He could not bear that she would return to her husband (on his retirement in Brazil) instead of isolating herself in the “cage” that Duchamp had reserved for both of them, and where he finally conceived *Étant donnés* in almost complete solitude.¹² This artistic retreat and other facts prompt Michael Taylor to compare Duchamp to a hermit, a figure which Dalí comically incarnated in his obsession for the hermit crab.¹³ It is also a convenient means for excluding Maria Martins’ participation in Duchamp’s creative project. When Duchamp described the sex of the nude that he had so much trouble working on, he called his model “the woman with the open pussy,” as many male scholars hastened to repeat, probably applauding this kind of perception and language. In doing so, none of them, the curator of the show included, mentioned the beginning of Duchamp’s sentence. That open pussy is the “*porte de sortie*” from frustration, an exit door.¹⁴ How can one omit this crucial “detail” when the main element of the installation is a door, an omnipresent door, which for so long was the only part of the installation to be seen in reproductions! In fact this door is still today hidden in its overexposure in reproductions. One does not see what is under one’s nose. This *Étant Donnés* affair is the equivalent of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Purloined Letter.” No one notices that the public photograph of this door is inaccurate. If you enter the room of *Étant donnés*, the light behind the Catalan door automatically turns on and will stay on for five minutes, which means the apertures should be visible in a photograph. Instead, the door is photographed with its two nails in place. What is always described as “peepholes,” or holes that act as lenses of a diorama, are just holes. There are no lenses, and for this reason at least this installation differs from the *Large Glass* (1915-1923) and *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918). The lenses only exist metaphorically as peepholes: the holes in the found door were caused by nails, and not Duchamp. The nails functioned to hold the door together, and served as a *camouflage* which prevented anyone who would have invaded Duchamp’s studio from suspecting the scene that it hid. In the original visual concept of this installation, the viewer, as Paul Matisse once described, should first remove the two long nails of the door and then place his eyes where the sharp nails were and stare.¹⁵ Stare, and remain standing with one nail in each hand. In other words, the viewer has the power of altogether unveiling and dissimulating the scene. This gesture is twofold. Today these impressive iron nails (the longest is 4 ½ inches) are on display, elements of the open secret I am pointing to.¹⁶ These nails are under a case, near the erotic objects of the broken plaster body parts, to which they have no relationship. One understands that we don’t want

them to be stolen, but a replica of these nails and that the viewer would be invited to reinsert in their original location would have respected more faithfully the conceptual structure of *Étant Donnés*. After all, isn't Duchamp the forerunner of conceptual art?

The other hidden element is Maria Martins, who is indeed falsely present. She is introduced as a "*femme fatale*," even a torturer, based on one of her poems. We see a sentimental Duchamp who draws a red heart below a French standard inscription begging (her?) not to crush it.¹⁷ More interestingly, in his letters, Duchamp acknowledges her role in the technical making of the nude. A gifted sculptor, she advised Duchamp to use a paraffin counter mold to keep the parchment in place, especially in the delicate genitalia and armpit, areas of the nude which were difficult to cast. She is nonetheless absent in the catalogue, where the curator insists on calling the *nude* (Duchamp's words) a "mannequin." Michael Taylor's motivation is to put emphasis on the surrealist nature of the installation. And indeed, this nude that seems to have been dumped outdoors holds a Bec Auer, which evokes the idea of mannequins aligned in a street like prostitutes in the 1938 surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Beaux Arts.¹⁸ Let's add to this gallery the wax mannequin that Dalí placed at the center of his autobiography in a scene of murder and coprophagy. However this nude does not have the appearance of a mannequin; it is not industrially manufactured but laboriously handmade; it is unique, and conveys the resemblance of two women (Teeny and Maria), even three in spirit (Mary Reynolds). Furthermore, it is hollow parchment. The more the nude is presented as a *mannequin*, the more it loses its originality, its symbolic function (mourning) and its aesthetic quality, and the less Maria Martins is present; she becomes anonymous. Duchamp, after *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912) and *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, confronts himself with the question of the academic nude. Like Picasso's late works, he ends his career in addressing the issue of the female model and muse. This model had a name, a specific body, and was not a universally abstract entity.

Furthermore, too little is said about Maria Martins' work, her sculptures and poems, and her recognition by Breton and Michel Tapié.¹⁹ She was an established artist before her meeting with Marcel Duchamp. Her works were acquired by MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum as early as 1940 and 1941. André Breton discovered her work in 1943 at the Valentine Gallery, New York when he saw the show "Amazonia," that combined poems and sculptures dedicated to numerous Brazilian goddesses. Her work offered Surrealism a contemporary mythology comparable in its inventiveness and sense of poetry to the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. Her attention to luxuriant vegetation, celebrated by all art critics, also probably exerted an influence on the disproportionately enlarged green landscape of *Étant Donnés*. In 1947, André Breton praised her creative strength and expression of desire in his presentation of

her exhibition at the Julien Levy gallery. As for Michel Tapié, it was her sense of magic that retained his attention when her work was exhibited at the Galerie Drouin in Paris in 1948.

The destiny of one of her sculptures in the Philadelphia Museum, on the occasion of this exhibition, deserves to be noted. Duchamp had a window made in the Philadelphia Museum so that Maria's sculpture *Yara*, goddess of the river—"in love with love," as her accompanying poem states—would be seen through the *Large Glass*.²⁰ During the show, this window was blocked by a fake wall. Some years ago the sculpture fell on its nose or was vandalized (it is not clear) and was put away. When the exhibition opened, the curator states that the sculpture was still waiting for its "mask" and only made its appearance a month later for the two-day symposium. It was no longer outdoors but placed inside the museum, at the entrance of the show. As Francis Naumann privately confided, it was not repaired and its face was disfigured. It did not look bad, but more like a Gauguin.

What is more bothersome is that this new scenography discards Duchamp's conception. In the original context of the installation, one faced the *Large Glass* and *Yara* (placed outside). The viewer had to then turn 180 degrees to face the door of *Étant donnés* and view what remained of the representation of Maria Martins' body. In other words, with today's new placement of the sculpture, Duchamp's intended "*retour miroirique*" no longer operates. Instead the viewer is invited into a small nearby room closed by a dark curtain to see a video by the artist Hannah Wilke.²¹ Enacting the mannequin so strongly desired by the curator of the show but that does not exist in Duchamp's project, Wilke displays poses of a top model and performs a striptease behind the *Glass* after sculpting her chewing gum and chatting with the other woman who participated in the curatorial ceremony of the "open tomb/open secret" from its very beginning: Anne d'Harnoncourt. The then-assistant curator who, at the age of twenty four, was in charge of the installation of *Étant donnés*, passed away a few months before the opening of the exhibition and is now present in memoriam. For the second time, the exhibition of *Étant donnés*, forty years after its installation in the museum, is posthumous. Death again has the last word.

1 Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Duchamp: el amor y la muerte, incluso* (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1993). English edition, Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Duchamp: Love and Death, Even* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 1998).

2 Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: H. Holt, 1996).

3 Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Bulletin* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum, 1987). Plate 43 reproduces the c. 1950 preparatory study for the nude figure.

- 4 Michael R. Taylor and P. Andrew Lins, eds. *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Published in conjunction with the exhibition “Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés” shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The study of *Étant donnés* (1946-48) is reproduced in plate 19 of the catalogue.
- 5 Ibid. Dali’s signature is reproduced in fig. 2.33. The signature is located on the back of *Landscape* (study of *Étant donnés*, 1959), which is reproduced in plate 52. Commentary on the signature can be found on pg. 271.
- 6 Charles Stuckey, “Dali in Duchamp-land: The Philadelphia Museum’s Extensive Duchamp Holdings Provide a Richly Instructive Foil the Centennial Dali Retrospective Currently on View There,” *Art in America* (May 2005): 148-155.
- 7 Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*. Fig. 3.15 reproduces *Drawing of Cracks in the Mannequin’s Skin* (1969) by Paul Matisse.
- 8 John Canaday, “Philadelphia Museum Shows Final Duchamp Work,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 1969.
- 9 Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Bayliss, *Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2006). See also Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Étant donnés: 1° l’art, 2° le crime: la modernité comme scène de crime* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2010); Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Étant donnés: 1° l’art, 2° le crime. Duchamp criminel de l’avant-garde,” *Interface* 14 (1998). Rabaté is the first scholar who questioned the impact of the Black Dahlia case on the conception of *Étant donnés* in the French journal *Interface*. His article bears almost the same title as the book he published ten years later.
- 10 Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*, plate 1. The preface of the notes of the *Green Box* begins with the title of *Étant donnés* in which Maria’s name does not appear, given the date of the manuscript (1934). In the notes that follow, Duchamp writes: “Nous déterminerons [...] une succession de *faits divers*”. The expression « faits divers » (a surrealist motif) is circled in red by Duchamp. The Black Dahlia case is an example of “fait divers,” an obscure crime that makes the headlines in the newspaper. As noted by Jean-Michel Rabaté, the literal translation “various facts” is erroneous and has important consequences into what turned, he says, into a “Duchamp industry.” Jean-Michel Rabaté’s remarkable analysis uncovers the literary context which from Mallarmé (*Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire*) to De Quincey informed Duchamp’s work. See Rabaté, *Given: 1° Art 2° Crime. Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture* (Brighton, England/Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 65-77.
- 11 Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*. See plate 14.
- 12 Ibid., 76. For this reason Jean-Michel Rabaté distinguishes the “tabloid ready-made.” “This category would include “Given” insofar as it uses a tabloid photograph to get rid of personal and emotional overtones, like having to say farewell to Maria Martins, who left Duchamp when she returned to Brazil.”
- 13 On Dali and Duchamp, see my article “Duchamp at Dali’s Mercy,” in *Marcel Duchamp and Eroticism*, Marc Décimo, ed. (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), as well as Stuckey, “Dali in Duchamp-Land.”
- 14 *D’ailleurs nous l’avons toujours dit la porte de sortie est ta sculpture et ma femme au chat ouvert*, 408. See Duchamp’s letter, April 7, 1948, in the exhibition catalogue. Earlier in the letter, Duchamp expresses the desire to exit the cage of false friends.
- 15 Paul Matisse, “Les portes d’Étant donnés,” *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp*, 3 (2001) : 39.
- 16 Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*. See plate 68.
- 17 Ibid. Plate 22 reproduces *That is for Maria* (1946).
- 18 Ibid., 71. As noticed by Jean-Michel Rabaté, modernity, according to Walter Benjamin, can be

“summed up by prostitution, the sewers and the invention of the gas lamp: Paris had turned into a *ville lumière*, but at the cost of having banished its Romantic shadows.”

19 Graça Ramos “Maria Martins: Excultora dos Tropicós,” *Artviva* (2009); André Emmerich Gallery, *Maria: the Surrealist Sculpture of Maria Martins, 19 March-18 April 1998, André Emmerich Gallery, New York* (New York: André Emmerich Gallery, 1998). Both works provide additional information on Maria Martins. In the gallery catalogue, Francis Naumann presents her career, and essays by André Breton, Michel Tapié, Ozenfant and Christian Zervos are translated into English.

20 This sculpture was exhibited in the 1943 New York exhibition *Amazonia*. Her first version was made in 1940.

21 Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*. Fig. 4.8 reproduces *Hanna Wilke Through the Large Glass* (1976).