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**DUCHAMPIAN REFLECTIONS ON  
DESCARTES**

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## Abstract

The work of Marcel Duchamp occupies a unique and enigmatic place in the history of modern Western art. Starting with his striking cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Duchamp quickly turned modern art upside down with the succession of *Readymades* that followed. These culminated in *Étant Donn *, presumably an environmental sculpture but more accurately an environment that incorporates the viewer. Using this as a model for a parallel analysis of Descartes' *cogito*, the claim is made that a similar presence is implicit in the method of doubt, and that this renders Descartes' argument circular. Recognizing this exposes the error of objectification in both cases and confirms the contextual character of art and knowledge.

## Keywords

Circularity, Descartes, Doubt, Duchamp, * tant Donn *, *Meditations*, *Readymades*, *Voyeur*.

## 1

The reputation of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) as a controversial artist has persisted for more than a century following the New York Armory Show of 1913 in which his "Nude Descending a Staircase" was first displayed, and his notorious "Fountain," one of a succession of "Readymades," that was first exhibited in 1917. Duchamp's art was shocking both in conception and execution, and continues to be enigmatic. Standing outside the conventional expectation of how painting and sculpture should look, these works remain difficult to assimilate into the history of visual art. Little has happened in the art world since then that can be considered more anomalous. Rather than ascribing these works to the scandalous intent of Dada, they have greater significance in the history of art. This is not so much as exceptions to the gradual unfolding of the technical and perceptual possibilities of painting and sculpture, but because they prefigure a dramatic change in our understanding of the experience of appreciation.

Duchamp's art is striking on many counts: it is enigmatic, disconcerting, even disruptive, yet strangely fascinating. Appearing near the close of Cubism and moving in the bizarre and even satirical direction of Dada, his work is both the culmination of that of his predecessors and an anticipation of what would follow. Duchamp's artistic innovations require more than minor adjustments to new forms of representation and execution. His art is deeply disturbing; it attacks us viscerally. His innovations prefigured many of the late twentieth century conceptually and perceptually disconcerting effects that art would come to have on the benign convention of aesthetic appreciation and the world that art evokes. Even given his originality, it may still seem strange to think of Marcel Duchamp as an environmental artist, much less one whose work has philosophical implications. Is there a master key that opens the many doors to Duchamp's art?

I would like to suggest that a hidden factor vitalizes Duchamp's art, a factor that it is important to recognize, not only in order to understand the art but, in point of fact, to complete it. While it figures in his early work, this factor is most dramatically present at the culmination of his creative trajectory. His late work, *Étant donné*, is the door, both literally and metaphorically, that provides the entry to his artistic project. A clue may be found in Duchamp's reflective comment on having largely given up painting after the *Nude Descending a Staircase*: "I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products."<sup>1</sup> From his late work *Étant donné* we can read back to a guiding artistic insight in the succession of Readymades and even to the early *Nude*. Moreover, this factor has philosophical significance of overriding importance. But more of that later. Let us begin at the end with some observations on *Étant donné*.

*Étant donné* (literally, *Being Given*) preoccupied the artist from 1946 to 1966. It followed and was contemporaneous with the succession of Readymades, Duchamp's distinctive artistic innovation. *Étant donné* can indeed be thought of as the fulfillment of that artistic project: a more complex and complete Readymade. Consider how we encounter it. Approaching this work,<sup>2</sup> one is confronted by a heavy Spanish wooden door Spanish wooden door<sup>3</sup> with a pair of holes located at eye level in the center. Nothing else is visible until one approaches the door and looks through the holes. There the viewer encounters a physical scene<sup>4</sup> consisting of a female nude lying supine directly before one's eyes, sprawling disheveled on a bed of twigs and vegetation. She is holding a gas lamp in her extended left hand while, just beyond in a distant landscape, a flowing waterfall produces a misty vapor. It is left to *the* viewer to interpret the scene, but more than interpret it, for by peeping through the holes, *the* viewer inadvertently participates in the environment as a *voyeur*. Sometimes conveniently called an assemblage, *Étant donné* is better considered an inclusive environment comprising the observer, the door, and the scene beyond it. This is a disconcertingly clever construction.

*Étant donné* is further significant because it can be understood not only as a participatory environmental construction but as the elaborate and explicit culmination of the series of Readymades that preceded it. For in recognizing the Bicycle Wheel,<sup>5</sup> the viewer supplies the context of a bicycle in the manner of conceptual art, just as viewing the snow shovel of *In Advance of a Broken Arm*<sup>6</sup> requires the implicit presence of a shoveler to complete the work.<sup>7</sup> In a similar way though perhaps with a disconcerting twist, *Fountain*<sup>8</sup> implies a potential user to complete the context. This piece in particular can be seen as a vivid instance of what the perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson called an "affordance," a design or environmental feature that invites a certain behavioral response in the perceiver.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that these works anticipate conceptual art, for they need to be experienced as tangible parts of larger, more extensive virtual works contributed by the awareness of the appreciator. Viewing Readymades in the conventional way as contemplative objects not only obstructs the appreciative experience but misses the point. Moreover, there are also overtones here of found art and of performance art,

later twentieth century innovations that Duchamp remarkably prefigured. Taken collectively, moreover, these works may be understood most comprehensively as environments that incorporate the appreciator as a participant. *Étant donné*, then, makes explicit by overt behavior what is implicit in the extended series of Readymades that were fabricated during the twenty years over which it constructed.

Perhaps one may even suggest that Duchamp's early work, *Nude Descending a Staircase*,<sup>10</sup> was a graphic anticipation of the same intention to bring the viewer into the work. For encountering this painting can be a somatic experience. Because of its large size, the scene physically confronts the viewer, and the motility of the nude is represented with such dramatic intensity that the figure appears not only in motion but about to walk out of the painting.

## 2

These observations may be taken as a commentary on Duchamp's art. But we can go further by suggesting that it also has important philosophical significance. Let us turn to a different case, one that provides an improbable comparison with Duchamp. There is a curious parallel between Duchamp's innovative *oeuvre* and the strikingly original argument of an earlier transformer of Western culture, the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes. Although Descartes lived three centuries before Duchamp, the influence of his innovative ideas grew over the intervening period to become, in the twentieth century, one of the dominant cognitive features of Western culture. In comparing their distinctive contributions, both men seem to offer parallel situations apparently in inverse form: While Duchamp revealed a hidden participant in the aesthetic encounter, Descartes made a case for the subjective self-substantiation of cognitive consciousness.

This is not the place to review the long tradition of subjectivism in Western philosophy, a history that had its beginnings in Plato's *eidos* and underwent various transformations over the centuries that followed. During that period, subjectivism became an entrenched and powerful influence in Western thought, achieving its consummation in the *cogito* of Descartes. From the seventeenth century on, subjectivism pervaded philosophical thought, culminating in the transcendental metaphysics of Kant and the pure phenomenology of Husserl.

Descartes' argument, reiterated by Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), stands as an exemplary statement of the basic claim for the subjective foundation of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> As he recounted it in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes resolved to review, under the most stringent conditions, the foundations of his belief. He did this by applying the test of doubt to every opinion he held. Only that which he could conceive clearly and distinctly and without a trace of doubt would he be justified in accepting as true. And conversely, whatever he found that he was able to doubt, he must reject as insufficiently dependable to be accepted as true belief. And so, on the basis of the *dubito*, Descartes began his inquiry by rejecting the veracity of nearly everything he had come to believe as true. At this impasse he found that there is only one thing he could conceive clearly and distinctly, one thing he could not doubt. That is the fact that he is doubting and,

consequently, that he exists as a thinking being. From this he proceeded to reconstruct the world with the reassurance of a God who could not deceive him.

Descartes thus proceeded by employing doubt methodologically: the *dubito* became the standard to judge the truth of an idea. From the uncompromising application of the standard of doubt to all beliefs and, with the reassurance of a God who would not deceive him, Descartes' inability to find a single belief which he could not doubt itself provides him with one: the fact of his doubting is the only thing he cannot doubt.<sup>12</sup> His rigorous method thus appears to have been successful, and Descartes was then free to reconstruct his familiar world. Most crucially, he ultimately arrived at a clear and distinct idea of his personal existence.

Yet on reflection, Descartes' argument is fundamentally circular. This is because his proof of his personal existence as a doubting, i.e. a thinking being follows, not from using the method of doubt, but from his decision to adopt that method. That is, doubt cannot be exercised before being recognized and accepted as a mode of thought. And doubt as mode of thought must be assumed, before it can be used. Doubt cannot prove its own existence; it must first be stipulated. The readymade *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, the snow shovel, cannot stand alone but presumes a situation of use by a prospective user. Similarly, doubt does not just appear in consciousness. It is a response to a previous perception, belief, or other thought. Just as Duchamp's art implies an omnipresent participant in relation to the readymade, so Descartes' doubt implies a doubter in order to be exercised. Each has a correlative participant. As the snow shovel presupposes a shoveler, so doubt presupposes a doubter. Thus in Descartes' *cogito* there lives a thinker present "in advance of doubting," so to speak.

The purity of Descartes' rationalism is impressive. Because his procedure rests on assumptions and leads to conclusions congenial to the tradition of subjectivism, it has been remarkably convincing. Yet the logic of Descartes' train of inferences is defective. While apparently plausible, it is inherently circular because it rests on assuming (a doubting being) in support of what he intends to prove (the existence of a doubting being).

Thus doubt cannot be a starting point because it presupposes a thinking being, just as Duchamp's art projects a participant, and the parallel of Descartes with Duchamp is not inverse but exact. A human presence is implicit in philosophy as it is in art. Nor can a mind begin the reconstructive process since, despite persistent mythologies, "mind" is not a free-floating entity but a concept that hypostatizes self-conscious awareness and inheres in biological, historical, cultural beings. The situation thus precedes the event. Similarly, Duchamp's art requires a user for its completion. It exhibits a mastery of aesthetic reciprocity, of what, in logic, would be called circularity. Like the *cogito*, it is self-justifying.

Can art be a guide to philosophy? Perhaps it may be concluded that circular thinking leads to sounder art than philosophy. It took three centuries for one French cultural revolutionary to comment so eloquently on another. Who, then, is the voyeur in the *Meditations*?

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<sup>1</sup> Duchamp, as quoted in "Eleven Europeans in America," James Johnson Sweeney (ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (New York), vol. 13, no. 4/5, 1946, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Étant donné* is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>3</sup> <https://philamuseum.org/images/cad/mediaDecks/1969-41-1v1-pma-CX.jpg>, accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.philamuseum.org/image\\_bank/site\\_use/etant\\_donnes/clip\\_image002.jpg](https://www.philamuseum.org/image_bank/site_use/etant_donnes/clip_image002.jpg), accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> <https://uploads4.wikiart.org/images/marcel-duchamp/bicycle-wheel-1913.jpg!Large.jpg>, accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> <https://uploads1.wikiart.org/images/marcel-duchamp/in-advance-of-the-broken-arm-1915.jpg!Large.jpg>, accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The choice of a snow shoveler to illustrate the claim of circularity in "On the Circularity of the Cogito" was a complete (and serendipitous) coincidence. See endnote 11.

<sup>8</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/dd/Marcel\\_Duchamp%2C\\_1917%2C\\_Fountain%2C\\_photograph\\_by\\_Alfred\\_Stieglitz.jpg/459px-Marcel\\_Duchamp%2C\\_1917%2C\\_Fountain%2C\\_photograph\\_by\\_Alfred\\_Stieglitz.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/dd/Marcel_Duchamp%2C_1917%2C_Fountain%2C_photograph_by_Alfred_Stieglitz.jpg/459px-Marcel_Duchamp%2C_1917%2C_Fountain%2C_photograph_by_Alfred_Stieglitz.jpg), accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966).

<sup>10</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/co/Duchamp\\_\\_Nude\\_Descending\\_a\\_Staircase.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/co/Duchamp__Nude_Descending_a_Staircase.jpg), accessed December 29, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> This account summarizes the analysis offered in Arnold Berleant, "On the Circularity of the Cogito," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXVI, 3 (March, 1966), 431-3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6JW1F>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.432.