THE APPARENTLY MARGINAL ACTIVITIES OF MARCEL DUCHAMP

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This study focuses on a series of fugitive operations (or what I am calling “activities”) that Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) incited in order to test, theorize, position, and even make his work as such. Not conventionally “artistic” in nature, even if intimately connected to the collection, presentation, reception, and valuation of art, these activities include Duchamp’s role as administrator, archivist, art advisor, curator, publicist, reproduction-maker, and salesman of his own oeuvre. Rather than merely procedural, auxiliary, or incidental, they might be thought of as constitutive, resulting in a still understudied but profoundly influential output by an artist who redefined so much of what, henceforth, would be called art. Here, those most iconic of Duchamp’s inventions, the readymades, although not the central objects of this study, are understood as significant insofar as they were not simply “nominated” to become artworks, but more importantly, because they were curated. It is precisely through curatorial operations—relative to much of Duchamp’s production, and constituting one of the central activities that this dissertation explores—that the artist rendered the discourse, institutions, marketing, and presentational strategies of art into something like his cardinal “medium.”

Tracing Duchamp’s perennial relationship to photography, reproduction, the museum, and the archive, and spanning the period between 1913 and 1969, three chapters closely examine a number of undeniably material things: chapter one considers the artist’s boxes of photographically replicated notes, the *Box of 1914* (1913-14) and *Boîte verte* (1934); chapter two examines documentation of ephemeral exhibitions, recording Duchamp’s curatorial interventions as well as suitcases filled with miniature
reproductions, the *Boîte-en-valise* (1938-42); and chapter three is dedicated to a permanent installation, *Etant donnés 1. la chute d’eau, 2. le gaz d’éclairage* (1946-66). However, the premise of this dissertation is that all of these gain a new significance if studied in relation to the elusive activities that actually constituted them as artworks. Together, they formed a counter-conception of the role of the artist, articulating—and complicating—the conceptual stakes of much of what is known of his practice and thickening into what Walter Benjamin called the artist’s “theory of the work of art.”
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Introduction

A HISTORY OF MARCEL DUCHAMP AND OTHER FICTIONS
INTRODUCTION

His story is by now well known. Marcel Duchamp, youngest son of a bourgeois family, began his artistic career as a painter. Oil on canvases, regularly sized, filled with rather conventional imagery (portraits of his sister or mother, tree-lined landscapes, concentrated chess players...) and relatively little formal invention—they did not hold much revolutionary potential. Certainly, his paintings followed some of the more avant-garde developments of his time, exploring the formal implications of Cubism and Futurism, for instance. He even experienced minor celebrity with one of his paintings, *Nu descendant un escalier* (Nude Descending a Staircase), made in 1912 and first rejected for exhibition by his fellow Cubists, only to be singled out the following year as the most publicized work at the Armory Show in New York. But as the ever-growing literature on Duchamp will tell you, had he not “abandoned” painting in favor of nominating store bought stuff as art or erecting the polysemic enigma that is the *Large Glass* (the two works most cited as examples of this new approach), we might not need to speak much about a certain Marcel Duchamp, the 20th century’s most celebrated artistic figure and lodestar to the generations of artists that came after him. Still, the story we tell about him is largely a story of things: artworks invented or handmade, original or in copy, revolutionizing in some cases, and influential, too. Some of these objects might not even look much like works of art, but all are resolutely material, quantifiable, collectable, historicizable.

The artists of a subsequent generation were perhaps the first to understand that there might be a problem with this Duchamp story: “Marcel Duchamp is all but impossible to write about,” Robert Rauschenberg once claimed, adding, “Anything you
may say about him is at the same time untrue…”¹ The poet David Antin put it slightly differently, but the point was something of the same: “any reading for a duchamp [sic] work is too stable for it.”² So it is. To cement in print yet another authoritative interpretation for a “duchamp work” would be to build an edifice of thought more rigid than the instabilities that the artist built into any one of them, not to mention that the lines around what counts as a “duchamp work” could themselves be notoriously slippery in the hands of someone interested in ideas trumping “visual products.”³ Indeed to define the historical relevance of an artist and his oeuvre predominantly through the discrete objects that remain of his practice seems to go against the very specificity of Duchamp as subject. Let me explain: By interrogating originality, aura, authorship, and autonomy, Duchamp put the very notion of what an artwork is and does into question; by regularly involving himself in seemingly extra–artistic activities (according to the standards of the day) as part of the very “making” of an artwork, he equally put the notion of what an artist is and does into question. Intimately connected, Duchamp’s twinned destabilizations of artwork and artist call for us to look as carefully at what he orchestrated around the artwork and at what he did in place of conventional art-making as at the artwork itself. Perhaps for this reason, his close friend Henri-Pierre Roché claimed

² David Antin, “duchamp and language” in Marcel Duchamp, ibid.,114. Itself a piece of conceptual poetics, Antin’s center justified, stream of conscious reflection in typewriter-style font, lacking both punctuation and capital letters, offers what remains one of the most insightful texts to date on Duchampian language, proclaiming such things as: “by building defectiveness into any reading duchamp ensured the instability of it…the defects drive his machine.”
(or was it a warning to the future historian?) that the artist’s “finest work,” was not this or that element of his material output, but instead, “his use of time.”

That “time” was hardly spent conforming to the expected behavior of the artist. Widespread is the perception of Duchamp as someone who, after 1913 (or 1923, depending on who you ask), “went around for the rest of his life resolutely and masterfully not being an artist.” Such accounts were replete with references to his supposed defection from art-making in favor of chess playing, amateur tinkering, or even ironic detachment—all of which suggested alternatives to the traditional image of the “creative” artist. But if anecdotes of these various pastimes served as fascinating fodder aimed at satisfying a desire to know about the life of the artist, this study focuses on pursuits of another kind and to a different end. The activities here examined are not meant to illuminate the artist’s person, but his work. They are altogether more mundanely practical and yet inseparable from institutions of art (museum, gallery, archive, art history), and they are entirely related to the recognition, valuation, and understanding of the work of art as such. Motley as these activities are and including Duchamp’s role as administrator, archivist, art advisor, publicist, reproduction-maker, and salesman of his own oeuvre, they coalesce around his repeated and engaged role as curator from the 1910s to the end of his life.

Although the profession of the “curator” was hardly very defined or prevalent when Duchamp first began, and he would never explicitly use the term for himself, it

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progressively became concretized in the half-century during which he adopted curatorial operations as part of his artistic practice, solidifying into its present day sense of an art professional associated with the manifold tasks connected to the care-taking of art and its public exhibition. Still, the “curator,” no matter how one defined that role specifically, had aims and responsibilities quite distinct from that of the artist, and vice versa, making it all the more unusual that Duchamp so frequently and insistently engaged in the tasks associated with curatorial work—from documenting, administrating, and constructing discursive apparatuses for his artworks to testing out whether institutions would feature them in exhibitions; from archiving to collection management; from backdoor negotiating with collectors and museum boards to designing the catalogues for and elaborate scenographies of exhibitions.

Throughout the 19th and 20th century, it was not altogether unusual for artists to be involved to some extent in the presentation and dissemination of their work; on a few occasions, some even have taken an exceptionally active role (think Gustave Courbet’s 1855 production of postcards of his paintings and self-financed rogue pavilion staged across the street from the official Paris salon as a response to the rejection of his work by the salon selection committee). Yet more than occasional occupations or undertakings ancillary to the “actual” work of the artist and the artwork, Duchamp arguably made

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6 In the 1920s, and parallel with the development of museums and public collections devoted to modern art, several important examples of museum director-curators emerged, including Alexander Dorner in Europe and Alfred Barr, Jr. in the United States, each of which helped forge a model for what the modern curator could be. For more on the development of the notions of curator, exhibition, and museum in the modern period and Duchamp’s relationship to them, see chapter two.

“curatorial” tasks a veritable lifework and the pivotal catalyst through which to understand and expose the artwork as such.⁸

How, then, to recalibrate the understanding of Duchamp’s oeuvre so as write this and other related activities into its history? Indeed how to tell the story of a figure whose life-long preoccupation with these fugitive actions contravenes, precisely, the convention of an oeuvre understood overwhelmingly in terms of solidified, medium-specific things? If again and again Duchamp held that he had “abandoned painting” and had turned instead to “breathing,” there might nevertheless be a clue in his curious insistence—suggesting that we not only attend to his production of objects (paintings, for instance) but that we also pay attention to elusive but nevertheless vital actions that “produced” his work in another sense.⁹

Consequently, this study focuses on the production of a still understudied but profoundly influential output, some of it tangible, some of it ephemeral, and all of it rendered through the diversity of apparently marginal activities of an artist who redefined so much of what, hence forth, would be called art. To do so, this study does closely examine and contextualize a number of obdurate things—whether boxes of replicated notes, suitcases filled with miniature reproductions, documentation of ephemeral exhibitions, or even a wholly permanent and immobile installation. It is neither the disavowal of these objects, or constellations of objects, as quantifiable artifacts nor the

⁸ It was arguably Duchamp’s pioneering stance that set the foundations for subsequent generations to develop what came to be called Conceptual Art’s “aesthetics of administration” (to use Benjamin Buchloh’s formulation) and Institutional Critique, for which curatorial and administrative tasks were a central part of artistic labor. See Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” October 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143. Aspects of this are discussed more fully in each of the chapters that follow.

⁹ Duchamp regularly described himself as a “breather” in lectures, panels, and interviews, see, in particular, Serge Stauffer, Marcel Duchamp, Interviews and Statements (Stuttgart, Editions Cantz, 1992), 85 and Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 69, 78.
refutation of Duchamp’s undeniably material impulse that is at stake here. Instead the premise is that their full significance might only be appreciated by studying the activities that accompanied and even “made” them in a certain sense.

“Marginal” in several senses of the word, these activities have been hitherto largely marginal to an object- and masterpiece-focused scholarship for which *The Large Glass* or the readymades were long the primary subjects. Likely also they have been considered marginal because ephemeral “activities” remain difficult to classify and amorphous, or, more precisely, because they eschew conventional categorization according to those epistemological systems that long governed art historical scholarship (and which reached its apogee in Greenbergian Modernism). Duchamp’s activities, it is important to point out, did not declare themselves as art (as, for instance, Fluxus gestures, performance art, or the activities of artists whose work would later be gathered under the relational aesthetics tag), nor were they necessarily “framed” as such (with a public, or at an announced time or place). And finally, they may have been regarded as marginal because instead of seeming to create artworks themselves, they instead produced peripheral supports or framing devices for other, more properly “bona fide,” artworks. In turn, the marginality of these activities often led to a kind of marginalization of the material objects that relate to or emerge from them; the *Box of 1914* or *Etant donnés*, to take two examples, in very different ways each escaped being fully inscribed in the histories of their epoch and, moreover, largely escaped fully signifying as the mordantly critical objects that they are, a fact that this study seeks to appraise in detail.

A central argument here is that through Duchamp’s deep preoccupation with the institutional sites, mechanisms, and conventions that accompany and ostensibly lie
outside of the artwork, he radically shifted the artwork’s terms (and not solely, as has been so long thought, through an act of “nominalism” that transformed a urinal into *Fountain*). Of course, to say that Duchamp was interested and engaged in the workings of the institutions of art will seem superfluous, so affirmed may the notion be in readings of the avant-garde. Indeed, the assertions here may at first appear both downright elementary and already long processed by art history. Yet, so inured are we to the idea that Duchamp managed to transform the ontology of the artwork that many histories have failed to wonder by what processes and agency this was maneuvered. These pages thus insist on the critical agency of many of the artist’s activities which are not, traditionally, considered part of an artistic practice *per se*, and all of which refuse conventional conceptions of authorship and objecthood, yet provide the basis for understanding what Walter Benjamin, in an unpublished draft to one of his most influential texts, called Duchamp’s advancement of a “theory of the work of art.”

This study therefore proposes a methodological path in which the fugitive operations (or what I am calling here “activities”) that Duchamp incited in order to test, theorize, contextualize, and position his work might be thought of as constitutive rather than merely procedural, auxiliary, or incidental. It focuses on a shift from the stable category of medium specific objects to the precarious status and ambiguous ontology of acts, which attempted to refigure the making and positioning of the artwork as such. Duchamp’s conception of the work of art through curatorial, archival, administrative, and other activities, would have worked against Clement Greenberg’s understanding of Modernist art as essentially determined by its medium specificity, its ability to constitute

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10 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I 3, S. 1045f; included in “Paralipomènes et variants de la version definitive” (variants and notes for the “Work of Art” essay), *Ecrits français*, 179-80 (Mss. 394). Benjamin’s reading and theorization of Duchamp’s work is discussed further in chapter one and two.
itself in relation to the particular and characteristic qualities of its materials (“unique to the nature” of the medium in question).\(^{11}\) It is no wonder, then, that Duchamp’s ordinary-objects-elevated-to-art, chosen on the basis of “visual indifference, and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste,”\(^{12}\) with all their medium aspecificity, remained in so many of Greenberg’s accounts the paragon of the corruption of the pure, autonomous form on which the critic’s own understanding of Modernism was built.\(^{13}\)

The questions this study raises with regard to the treatment of an artist’s “activities” were first insinuated through the historicization of the readymade begun in earnest in the 1960s. Importantly, at the time, critics and scholars did not read the readymade, to take the example of *Fountain*, for instance, as a porcelain object to be formally compared and discussed alongside the development of other sculptural forms. Instead it was recognized as an artwork whose importance lay elsewhere: in its radical act of selection (or, alternately: declaration, nominalization, invention) that claimed an ordinary industrial thing as “art” and in that act’s revelation of the institutional forces determining what counts as art.\(^{14}\) Previous to this, and fortified by both the Greenbergian

\(^{11}\) See Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” written in 1960, one of the most influential of his essays, where medium specificity is most programmatically laid out, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O’Brian, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

\(^{12}\) Duchamp in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 48.


\(^{14}\) Mentioned without recourse to naming any of the artist’s “manufactured objects,” the readymade is evoked in André Breton’s 1922 essay “Marcel Duchamp,” reprinted in Robert Motherwell’s 1951 *Dada Poets and Painters*. The first sustained essay on the readymades appeared in the 1945 special issue of *View* magazine devoted to Duchamp, shortly after the artist’s *Boîte-en-valise* first brought them into wide circulation. Following that, it was Robert Lebel’s 1959 monograph on the artist that helped spur scholarship and interest among artists in 1960s, helping to give the readymade the foothold that it has had subsequently on the history of 20th century art.
doctrine of Modernism that held so much sway during the critic’s extraordinary reign of influence in the United States (whose heyday was the 1950s and ‘60s) alongside the Museum of Modern Art in New York’s own acquisition and narrativization of Modernism, the history of modern art was largely told through a progressive, teleological account of objects taken to be formally pure and autonomous. Consequently, the recognition of the paradigmatic shift that was contained in the readymade made the art historical project of reformulating the history and theory of art and the evaluation systems it employed a vital necessity, which carried over into readings of new art being made in the 1960s and ‘70s.

Or was it the other way around? If, as Hal Foster suggests, “'influence' can flow backwards too, at least in interpretation,” perhaps Duchamp’s readymades only thickened into something legible in the 1960s because of new practices that allowed critics to unthink the presumed autonomy and medium specificity of the artwork. Richard Wollheim’s influential 1965 article “Minimal Art,” appearing on the heels of Duchamp’s 1964 re-edition of his readymades, provides an important case in point: it makes a claim for the fundamental importance of Duchamp’s reconception of the notion of “work” in the “work of art.” Wollheim’s reading highlights the shift from making (as in manufacturing) to choosing (as in decision making), a shift that was visible, he argued, in

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the works of “recent” art that relied on similarly “minimal” gestures and means. Old or new, either might have helped in the reading of the other, no matter which came first chronologically.

Artists in the 1960s and 70s, whether Neo-Dada, Pop, Conceptual, or Minimal, frequently claimed the readymade’s influence; but it is also the case that scholars and critics regularly discussed art production of the time in relation to the readymade, regardless of whether the creators of the artworks acknowledged an affinity to it. Still, the understanding of the significance of act over object, while it became crucial to the reading of the procedural and immaterial gestures of the generation that followed Duchamp, did not readily (or retroactively) apply itself to other Duchamp works (endowing the readymades with a status that almost holds them apart from his larger oeuvre). Moreover, Duchamp’s so-called invention of the readymade must itself be qualified, and the little discussed, but more labored and layered, set of activities that were crucial in historically positioning the readymade must be highlighted, as I propose here. In this telling, the readymade is not only an object selected and nominated but, perhaps even more importantly, it is curated. And it is precisely the curatorial operations not only of the readymade, but also of so many other Duchamp works, that turn the discourse, institutions, marketing, and presentational strategies of art into the artist’s cardinal if

fugitive “medium”—in the way that Irene Small has argued that the “institution” could be said to be the medium of Institutional Critique.  

Three chapters, collectively spanning the period between 1913 and 1969, follow Duchamp’s first active experiments with reproduction and archiving to the year after his death, when his monumental, semi-posthumous intervention was installed in a museum. Chapter one focuses on activities related to his purported invention of the readymade and to the Large Glass: Duchamp’s note-writing, archiving, photographing, and publicizing, resulting in various boxes of photographically replicated notes beginning with his Box of 1914 (1913-1914) and continuing through his Boîte verte (1934). It includes an examination of the peculiar transgressiveness of the methods and media chosen by Duchamp as well as the discursive operation the notes enact in their circulation and posited relationship to other things more readily considered works “of art,” shifting and even determining, one could say, those artworks’ reception.

Chapter two focuses on Duchamp’s curating, dealing, reproducing and publicizing. These activities point to the ways in which art is made visible, valuable, meaningful, or even, at a more primary level, recognizable as such, through acts of exchange, presentation, replication, and dissemination. The chapter addresses Duchamp’s participation in, or orchestration of, exhibition contexts, his marketing and sales of artworks, and conception of the Boîte-en-valise (1938-42), envisaged as a series of multiple, miniature monographic retrospectives of his work.

As Small notes, “The practice of institutional critique produces institutionality as a medium just as the medium of the institution allows for a configuration of elements to form into institutional critique.” Irene V. Small, “Medium Aspecificity/Autopoietic Form,” 117-25.
Chapter three contextualizes Duchamp’s replicating, photographing, administrating, and curating as part of the clandestine construction Etant donnés: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. le gaz d’éclairage [Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas] (1946-1966), a curated exhibition of sorts, that the artist meticulously arranged to have installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art after his death. Long misread as a return to figuration and an abandonment of the critical impulse that had driven Duchamp’s much-lauded readymades, and thus subsequently ignored or insufficiently contextualized with contemporaneous works, Etant donnés is revealed here as a complex exploration of some of the most formative ideas advanced by the artist’s relatively meager output, undergirded by a trenchant criticality and rendered all the more subversive by insinuating itself so carefully into exactly that seat of institutional power and adjudication that it sought to question.

Inevitably, this is a study of art’s institutional apparatuses. The museum, that display space/institution/authority that Duchamp probed when constructing ephemeral exhibition displays for the Surrealists, the Boîte-en-valise, and Etant donnés, remains a central protagonist in this story. So, too, is the museum’s institutional pendant, the archive, at once evoked and mocked in the artist’s multiplied boxes of torn and fragmented notes. But other facets of the institution, such as discourse, the market, and presentation strategies also play their role. Accordingly, the history of Duchamp’s œuvre can also be written as a history of the artist’s perennially engaged relationship to the framing sites and discursive or presentational procedures that help construct something as a work “of art” and for which the artist took on the various roles that are the subject here.
This is also a study about photography and reproduction in an age in which the primacy of the original only began to be questioned. “Reproduction,” that treacherous word, a threat to the notion of the authentic artwork, plays a signal role in this study, as it did in Duchamp’s entire oeuvre. First there were the scribbled notes that he began photographing in 1913-14, then there were more notes and actual artworks that he spent the rest of his life returning to and replicating with painstaking precision, not to mention a final, posthumously released work that would announce the index and reproduction as having been motors for the artist’s thinking all along. The pressure of photographic reproduction’s response to painting (that “original” and auratic museum-worthy object par excellence), the decontextualization of the reproduced artwork, the refunctionalizing of the object, the shifting of the experience of the artwork: this is what the various boxes actualize. Duchamp’s serial reproductions (of notes, of his own artworks), perhaps more than any other project to emerge from the early 20th century, anticipated and tested the most pressing concerns of Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility.”

Finally, this is also a study about the uneasy reception of a specific segment of Duchamp’s practice. It is about the curious ways in which, despite being claimed as a pivotal figure of the 20th century with countless publications dissecting his oeuvre, Duchamp has nevertheless not been fully accounted for in relation to the radical particularity of his practice: his construction of discursive accompaniments to his artworks, first crucial experiments with photography and reproduction, his life-long

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relationship to exhibition-making, the ways in which he actively participated in the construction of his own legacy, and, finally, the complexity of the administrative and curatorial gestures involved in his final work’s commentary on the museum. Through them we see that Duchamp understood well that meaning derives just as much from what is outside and around the artwork, as from the subject, technique, and presumed content held within the neat contours of the frame or atop the pedestal. Such intangible and transient, context- and situation-specific details (of the presentation) of the artwork are, however, intrinsically difficult to acknowledge and perhaps even more difficult to historicize (they do not sit still as the object itself does). The elision or marginalization of these activities and subsequent misreading of some of their related, quantifiable output thus points to a blind spot of sorts.

As such, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp* takes its namesake as its explicit subject, but it might also serve as a case study of the relationship between an artist’s agency and the institutional imperatives relative to the construction of an oeuvre, as seen through one of modernity’s most pivotal figures. So, too, might it add another layer to the story of Duchamp we have inherited (and which he himself arguably had some hand in constructing) of a lapsed painter, obsessive chess-player, occasional cross-dresser, and one-time librarian who “abandoned” art-making in 1923, spent the rest of the 1920s inventing optical contraptions and, throughout the ‘30s, seemed (according to even his most ardent supporters) to be merely “vacationing” in his past. To tell his story, one must speak of the roles of administrator, archivist, art advisor, curator, publicist, reproduction-maker, and salesman that Duchamp repeatedly and obstinately inhabited. Crucially, it is in his apparently marginal activities that Duchamp is at his most
profoundly critical, blurring the lines between curatorial and artistic practice in a way that would forever shift notions of artwork and artist alike.
Chapter 1

NOTES FOR A THEORY OF THE WORK OF ART
A Moment of Critical Change

It was the year 1913. Marcel Duchamp asked himself a question whose brutal simplicity belied its radical implications: “Can works be made which are not ‘of art’?”¹ That same year would mark his most famous gesture, the so-called invention of the readymade, as seen in his *Roue de bicyclette* (Bicycle Wheel), (1913) and the handful of carefully selected and, in fact, highly manipulated industrial objects that followed in the years after (about their manipulation or, better, curation, see chapter two). It was the year as well of his creation of a musical composition dictated by nothing more than chance, *Erratum Musical* (1913), and *Trois stoppages étalon* (Three Standard Stoppages, 1913), an odd-ball attempt to create alternate standards for that most standardized form of measurement, the meter. It was, as Duchamp later underscored, his “moment of critical change.”² And although the various experiments of that year seemed to radiate out in many directions, sitting in the background of all of them was the construction of an elaborate discursive operation, at once remarkable and seemingly slapdash, and entirely connected to that most ingenuous but fundamental of questions about how to think about the very nature “of art.”

Duchamp had begun, just prior, to make loose notes punctuated with hastily written thoughts, and by 1913 he decided that the scrappy jottings should be documented and archived, photographically replicated and distributed, a highly unusual move for the period. That project, since titled *Box of 1914* by historians (but repeatedly dated to 1913-14 by the artist himself), constitutes a mordant commentary on the work of art,

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¹ First written in 1913, the note would not appear in print until more than half a century later, in the notes assembled in *À l’infini* or the *Boîte Blanche* published in 1967; translated and reprinted in *In the Infinitive: A Typotranslation* by Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk of Marcel Duchamp’s *White Box*, trans. by Jackie Matisse, Hamilton, and Bonk (Northend: The Typosophic Society, 1999), 1.

² See *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy*, unpaginated.
authorship, and originality and marks the beginning of Duchamp’s concerted interest in both the transgressive potentials of reproduction and the discursive parameters of art. It accompanied and informed his thinking about both the readymade and the Large Glass, not to mention his experiments with chance and measurement, inaugurating a life-long interest in those gestures and things that surround or frame an artwork and that might only equivocally appear to be works “of art” in and of themselves. This chapter is about those early replicated notes and their later progenies and here examined through the lens of various disciplines, including literature, collage, photography, and painting to which they relate and undermine in turn. What emerges is the revelation of their primacy as a project that articulates—and complicates—the conceptual stakes of so much of Duchamp’s practice, founding nothing less than the terms of what Walter Benjamin called the artist’s “theory of the work of art.”

THE BOX OF 1914

“Marcel,” he told himself in October 1912, “no more painting; go get a job.” The scribbling of Duchamp’s notes, which first date to 1912, thus coincided with his self-prescribed departure from painting and suggests that an evasion of strict (artistic) productivity in favor of meandering thoughts nevertheless should accompany the

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3 Repeatedly, Duchamp would locate the notes production to 1913-14, calling them “Box of 1913-14” in his conversation with Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp, 42; or, using the title, Box of 1914, but dating them to 1913-14 in Robert Lebel’s first monograph on the artist, Sur Marcel Duchamp (Paris: Trianon Press, 1959) and his first retrospective catalogue, De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Sélavy (Pasadena: Pasadena Museum of Art, 1963).

4 Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, 13, S. 1045f; included in “Paralipomènes et variants de la version définitive,” (notes for the “Work of Art” essay), Ecris français, 179-80 (Mss. 394).

business of finding paid work. His good friend Francis Picabia found him some through his uncle Maurice Davanne, who directed Paris’ prestigious Bibliothèque Saint Geneviève. A library position appealed to Duchamp because it involved, as he saw it, “a sort of grip on an intellectual position, against the manual servitude of the artist.” His decision was also, he admitted, in defiance of the dogmatism of the Cubists who had refused to exhibit his *Nude Descending a Staircase* in their *Salon des indépendents* earlier that year: “as a reaction against such behavior coming from artists who I had believed to be free, I got a job. I became a librarian.”

In fact, he spent the winter of 1912 enrolled in courses on paleography and library studies at the Ecole Nationale des Chartes and then went on to become assistant-librarian at the Saint Geneviève research library. His training introduced him to the logic of the archive. Literary works were plotted along lines of chronology, sequentiality, authorship, and theme; Duchamp learned to follow these so as to put books, manuscripts, and documents in their place. Perspectival manuals, philosophical treatises, and countless books were at his disposal. We know he studied some, even jotted notes about them. Through the end of 1914, his job was to keep and create order in this bastion of the recorded past. The archive with its categories, hailed as nothing less than a normative model for the ideal production of knowledge, literally surrounded him.

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6 Duchamp in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp*, 41.
7 Ibid., 17.
8 By November 1912, he was sitting-in on the course on “bibliography and the organization/classification of libraries and archives.” See François Le Penven’s *L’art d’écrire de Marcel Duchamp: À propos des ses notes manuscrites* (Nimes: Editions Jacqueline Chambon, 2003).
9 Notes written in this period but only published much later in *À l’infinitif* (1967) make explicit reference to various scientific studies such as Henri Poincaré, *Thaumaturgus opticus*, Jean-François Nicéron, *La perspective curieuse ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux*, and Esprit Pascal Jouffret, *Traité élémentaire de géometrie à quatre dimensions*, among others.
10 The stakes of classification were more serious than the mere practical arrangement of information in the name of tidiness. As French commentators well into the post-war era consistently spelled out:
Word about his new occupation got out, even to the press. “Having become a librarian at the Saint Geneviève library, he arranges books,” the Paris Journal of May 19th, 1914 declared, as if appalled; “and that is why for two years already one doesn’t see any paintings anywhere by Marcel Duchamp.” What few knew at the time, however (although they likely would have thought little of it even if they had known), was that throughout his training for, and during his work at, the library, Duchamp was very busy writing.

He scribbled on just about anything: torn scraps of paper, the back of a gas bill, hotel letterhead, the underside of a Camembert cheese label, etc. On these he mingled descriptions of futile sexual advances and mechanical frustration; he depicted complex, layered details of machine parts, pullies, and levers; he advanced hesitant speculations, pseudo-scientific theorems, ridiculous analogies, and random ideas for future productions. He penned them in a prose full of misspellings, word-play, crossed out phrases, underlined words, multicolored marginal annotations, and, no less quirky, included numerous instructions on how these very “texts” should be written at all. There was nothing precious or composed about his handwriting nor anything refined about the scraps he wrote on. 

“Classification and ordering are, by definition, the direct descendants of the method Descartes defined as ‘the only path to arriving at knowledge,”’ and, through it, he mapped out the analytic process while saying, ‘divide each difficulty into as many pieces as possible so as to resolve them…and direct thought through order…Make divisions so that the whole and its categories are so general that you are sure to omit nothing.” Thérèse Leroy, Méthodes de classement: la Science de la classologie (Paris: Guy Le Prat, 1945), 13 (translation mine).

12 As art historian Mark Pohlad writes: “Leonardo’s notes were published in an immense French translation and facsimile reproduction between 1881 and 1889 by Charles Ravaisson-Mollieu. It was considered such an achievement that the Académie Française awarded it the Prix Bordin…[and] triggered a sustained public interest in the Renaissance master.” Mark Pohlad, The Art of History: Marcel Duchamp and Posterity (Ph.D dissertation, University of Delaware, 1994), 90. While Duchamp surely knew about Da Vinci’s notes
However distinct from those writers whose note-taking on random scraps of paper suggests a decided sense of economy, also seen in their effort to fit as many lines on a page as possible (think Robert Walser or Walter Benjamin), one has the sense that Duchamp had simply decided to casually write on what was at hand when an idea came to him, and then to preserve this fundamentally ephemeral output.\textsuperscript{13} Hundreds of scribbled, cryptic lines on hundreds of pieces of loose paper “document” his thinking process. As he acknowledged:

> These notes are from just about the time, 1912, when I absolutely changed my life, so to speak, in regard to art and decided to completely forget about the Nude and forget about the Futurisms and so forth. So they are with the intention of doing something else which I did not know at the time what it was going to be, naturally. They were jottings, you see, on a piece of paper. Whatever idea came to me, I would put it on a piece of paper, any piece of paper, so those papers have all kinds of shapes, torn shapes. They are general, without any destination to speak of, just an idea that comes to you when you dream a bit or read and I put them down for eventual use if necessary.\textsuperscript{14}

The effort to “forget about the Nude and about the Futurisms,” which is to say, to forget about painting, and the taking up of note writing went hand in hand. Against conventional painting’s too insistent appeal to the eye, the notes were the bastions of thought. They held out ideas.

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\textsuperscript{13} Benjamin’s desire to fit as many as one hundred lines of script on his carefully made manuscripts, as well as his attachment to particular grades of paper, notebooks, and the paraphernalia of writing are described in Ursula Marx and Erdmut Wizisla et al., eds., \textit{Walter Benjamin’s Archive} (London: Verso, 2007). Some of Robert Walser’s infinitesimal shorthand, called “micrograms” and written on meticulously cut-out pages from commercial calendars, are assembled in \textit{Escrito a Lapiz/ Writing in Pencil (Microgramas I (1924-1925) / Microgramas I (1924-1225) (Toledo: Siruela Ediciones, 2005).}

\textsuperscript{14} Duchamp in “Some Late Thoughts of Marcel Duchamp, from an interview with Jeanne Siegel,” \textit{Arts Magazine} 43 (December/January 1969), 21.
Duchamp’s jottings would compose an idiosyncratic score to accompany and prepare the way for an immense work on glass: the enigmatic visual epic of failing machinery and frustrated sexuality that would be considered by many his most important and inscrutable artwork, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even [1915-23]), also known as the *Large Glass*. Although he only began physical labor on the *Large Glass* in 1915, in a strange act of conjuring an object that was not yet visible, the artist gathered a small sampling of his missives in 1913–1914 in order to reproduce and disseminate them.\(^{15}\) Some of the selected notes bear obscure references to the yet unbuilt glass work, even if countless others not included are more directly haunted by it. Having decided upon his selection, Duchamp made photographic copies of the notes and thus inaugurated an affair with reproduction that would consume him to the end of his life.

![Figure 1.2](Marcel Duchamp, *Box of 1914, 1913-14*]

For the process, Duchamp laid out his notes like playing cards from a deck and reproduced them one by one photographically, as contact prints from large glass plate negatives (13 x 18 cm), rendering a result identical—or almost so in some cases—to their original size.\(^{16}\) He made five silver gelatin prints of each of fourteen selected notes, as well as of photographic documentation of his 1913 assemblage-experiment, *Three Standard Stoppages*, and of one drawing from 1914, *Avoir l’apprenti dans le soleil* (To

\(^{15}\) It is noteworthy that this first of what will be a number of projects replicating and boxing his notes over a lifetime is the result of a selection. Why these sixteen notes and not others? With the edition of each set of note projects starting with the *Box of 1914* until the last, *A l’Infini*, published shortly before his death, Duchamp would deliberately include some and exclude others, even leaving a folder of numerous unpublished notes behind when he died. And yet, he never fully explained his reasoning. To Serge Stauffer in 1961 he said of the *Box of 1914* that they were “simply a reunion of notes written at random.” Duchamp, to Serge Stauffer (28 May 1961). Cited in Ecke Bonk, “delay included,” in *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp... in resonance* (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, 1998), 98.

\(^{16}\) See Ecke Bonk’s excellent “delay included,” in *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp*, 98.
Have the Apprentice in the Sun), making sixteen elements in all. He then trimmed and mounted the photographic copies (leaving, however, the torn and irregular edges of each note visible) on individual but uniform mat boards and placed each of the respective sets in an empty commercial cardboard box that originally held 18 x 24 cm glass negative plates produced by the companies Kodak or Jouglia. The result was an edition of five boxes with five sets of copies of the same scrawled and at times almost illegible writing. He distributed them as well as the originals (which he similarly mounted and boxed) among friends, cherished patrons and family, keeping a set for himself. And almost as soon as he had distributed them, they entered a shadow space, somewhere between being forgotten and almost (but not quite) recognized—a place where they were definitely not treated as the ground-breaking gesture that they were: photographically, conceptually, or otherwise.

The process of writing, selecting, reproducing, and disseminating these notes just about coincided with the choosing of industrial objects, eventually nominated “readymades,” many of them inscribed with their own elegant, nonsensical poetics (a 1915 shovel became In advance of a broken arm, a 1916 comb became 3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n’ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie). Language had begun to infect everything Duchamp engaged in. It goes without saying, then, that what his notes say is important even if it is not the mere conveyance of information in the form of words that is their point. And although language is operative in both his notes and readymades, one kind of inscription is, nevertheless, omitted in the notes. Duchamp left each nearly identical set of reproduced notes undated, unsigned, and untitled. Later, for simplicity’s sake, this

17Duchamp’s memory of the total number of sets he made was either decidedly faulty or willingly evasive. He only recalled two or three sets, when asked, although at least five are known to have existed and four are currently in public collections, with one thought to be lost.
editioned set of reproduced notes came to be called the *Box of 1914* by scholars. But it is striking that they had to designate a title for it at all, which is to say that Duchamp hadn’t done so himself. In diametric contrast to those industrially made, store-selected objects “invented” at roughly the same time—each with no detectable sign of the artist’s touch in their manufacture, but which would go on to bear a signature, title, and date as anchors to their work-of-art-ness—these notes so literally bespoke the artist’s hand that Duchamp seems to have dispensed with any additional mark: It was as if the scribbled script itself was its own signature and proof of authority.\(^\text{18}\)

![Figure 1.3](Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, 1915)

![Figure 1.4](Marcel Duchamp, *3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n’ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie*, 1916)

It might seem an incongruity that at the same moment that the readymades consciously avoided the hand—or, *la patte*—of the artist that Duchamp so condemned in painting, his scribbled notes made a show of it.\(^\text{19}\) The seeming contradiction, however, did not end there: while the notion of the author was so resolutely questioned with the readymade, Duchamp both reinstated the author in his notes, since they were, after all, made from the artist’s hand script, and, in replicating them over and over, put the author in question again.\(^\text{20}\) Reproduction—photographic reproduction, more specifically—potentially ad infinitum, would make a mockery of even the most seemingly personal

\(^{18}\) In fact, it is interesting that although Duchamp had brought the profane objects that would become his “readymades” into his studio as early as 1913 (for the stool mounted with a bicycle wheel and, a year later, an unmodified bottlerack), it wouldn’t be until 1915—after the reproduction of his notes—that he would both find the term that would give his objects a genre and begin to conceive of them as things deserving of a signature, title, etc.

\(^{19}\) Literally, an animal’s “paw,” *the patte* was the artist’s characteristic, unique, and thus “signature” touch, a term Duchamp used often with reference to painting. See Jane Blackwell interview with Marcel Duchamp for the BBC, June 5, 1968. Reprinted in Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1999), 302.

\(^{20}\) Thus even if we cannot overlook today the ambivalent celebration of aura that Duchamp’s notes advance, it still remains that “to copy,” as Foucault once said so astutely, so damningly, “is to do nothing.” Michel Foucault, “Fantasia in the Library,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 109.
manifestation of an artist’s trace. Authorship, in both projects, was a deeply ambiguous notion for the artist, both the readymade and the notes simultaneously elevating and disavowing the cult of author or aura.21 The copied notes became, then, a related gesture, ostensibly at odds with but, in fact, conceptually allied with the readymades, which were in their time singular examples of potentially limitless industrial objects while the copied notes were multiple examples of that most uniquely singular of traces. Both were the product of a similar probing.

Both strategies queried the foundational premises of what an artwork is and does, what defines and determines it, but also how that most modern of phenomena, mechanical reproduction, might make or unmake the category from within. For Duchamp must have known that if each of his notes remained unique, they would likely never be considered more than that: an artist’s doodles—doodles that were, moreover, merely signs for something else—announcing, encircling, and describing ideas and future artworks, but not artworks in themselves.22 Ironically, it is precisely in their reproduction that Duchamp heralded them as more than mere scribbles, as something worthy of the effort of his selection, collection, and replication, and thus, the attention of others. He

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21 The notes arguably inaugurated a number of other authenticating devices in Duchamp’s work: legal certificates, the use of notary publics, and last but not least, fingerprints. See discussion of Duchamp’s use of legal documents elsewhere in this chapter. Throughout his oeuvre, Duchamp used the fingerprint to signify and parody “evidence” of authorship. On a few occasions, he offered his handprint(s) as a kind of self-portrait or signature. For example, as part of Dr. Lotte Wolff’s 1935 Minotaure article on the information inscribed in the lines of the hands, Duchamp supplied his handprints as an illustration. In 1948, Duchamp dedicated his left handprint and Breton his right handprint to Teeny Duchamp; twelve years later the two reproduced these same handprints as the frontispieces in the exhibition catalogue for Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters’ Domain. Duchamp’s (or his alter-ego, Rrose Sélavy’s) signature and fingerprint figured also in Rrose’s signed fingerprint on the copyright notice in Anémic Cinéma (1925–26), a thumbprint signed by Duchamp at the top of the 1936 program and subscription form of the Cycle systématicque de conférences sur le plus récentes positions du surréalisme, and Duchamp’s signed handprint could be found on Max Bill’s 1960 poster for the exhibition Dokumentation über Marcel Duchamp.

22 Indeed as Duchamp had described the project to Cabanne, the boxing and multiplication of the notes was specifically thought in relation to the Large Glass since the notes were meant to serve as a kind of catalogue or guide to it. Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, 42-43.
doesn’t seem to have made any effort in the period to attempt to exhibit them as artworks in their own right (as he would, just a few years later, with his readymades), but he did devote a significant effort to multiplying and distributing the five sets. Later he proclaimed, as he would even more vociferously about his second set of replicated notes that followed the *Box of 1914*, that they had been meant to act on the *Large Glass* and shift how it was seen. This first set of replicated notes might thus have been, in their own way, a “test” of sorts, an attempt to see if they could effectively change the perception of the artworks they evoked, or whether they could even themselves *be taken for* works “of art”. Duchamp, as we will see, enacted many such tests.

Figure 1.5 [Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913]

Figure 1.6 [Marcel Duchamp, *Bottlerack*, 1914]

“If ideas were what mattered,” as Duchamp’s most astute biographer has noted, “why wouldn’t he have wanted to make those as clear as possible—for example by getting rid of inconsistencies and contradictions?” Calvin Tomkins goes on to speculate: “One reason could have been that the ideas themselves were not as important as the process by which they had come into existence—the *passage* from a thought’s conception to its later development.” This process and passage was, clearly, a messy one, revealing the improvised, erratic movements of thought as it made it to the page. In other words, if the original notes could be said to be an inventory of ephemeral thought, the data or evidence of conceptualization, then Duchamp’s photographic copies are documents of documents of process.

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24 Ibid.
Yet if their form and function in some way evokes an archive of documents, these boxes of replicated notes nevertheless problematize that resemblance.\textsuperscript{25} In creating them, Duchamp hardly emulated the docile archivist. The flow of words in his notes does not help relate one scrap to the next, and neither do the boxes’ undated, unpaginated, unbound pages suggest any logical sequence or order. The fact that the containers hold loose contents underscores all the more a deliberate randomness. For there is no system that indicates a predetermined sequence by which the notes are supposed to be put into the box and no logic determining why a particular note makes sense in the whole at all. They looked like they just “happened” to have been included.

Duchamp’s ambivalent position regarding the idea of the archive was also reflected in his decision to counteract the exactitude of the photographic reproductions with how he decided to contain them. He chose readymade boxes and modified their labels, adding his own first name in pencil, underlining words or striking them out with black marker (on at least one occasion, he crossed out the word “industrial” on a box that bore the printed advertisement “photographies industrielles” and underlined the word “photographies” three times), or affixing additional labels to certain box covers. Duchamp’s manufactured labels thus seem to offer up more accurate classification (call them photographs, yes, but \textit{not} industrial photographs), even as their scrawled corrections and partial provision of information decidedly refuse to approximate the standards of archival labeling.

\textbf{Figure 1.7} [Marcel Duchamp, \textit{Box of 1914} (box cover), 1913-14]

\textsuperscript{25} “Order, efficiency, completeness, and objectivity are the principles of archival work,” the editorial introduction to \textit{Walter Benjamin’s Archive} proclaims. Ursula Marx and Erdmut Wizisla et al., eds. \textit{Walter Benjamin’s Archive}, 2.
Evading narrative, rejecting chronological flow, and held together without the benefit of either thematic or alphabetical order, the project was less a product of ironic detachment than a revision of the rules of the archive. If Duchamp’s day job at exactly that moment involved archival classification at the Bibliothèque Saint Geneviève, his other vocation involved breaking it down, constructing a kind of counter-archive, one built not on systematicity, linear time, or progression, but instead on haphazard arrangement, repetitive return, and tentative process.

It is evident that something about the bureaucratic archive seduced Duchamp. Indeed, late in his life he admitted that during his youth he had actually considered becoming an official notary, that bureaucrat par excellence, like his father. And, when he went to the United States for the first time in 1915, despite the succès de scandale of the Nude Descending a Staircase just two years prior, he vocally declared that he didn’t want to make his money from anything like artistic work. (“I would willingly live in New York...But only on the condition that I could earn my living as a librarian or something analogous,” he told Walter Pach, who was helping to arrange his stay.)

Maybe it is no coincidence that when Frederick Kiesler questioned him in the 1940s about the trajectory of his life and work, the architect’s schematic notes from the conversation recount: “he retired from exhibiting to a Library St. Genevieve, where Picabia had an uncle–Librarian. (from Oct. 1913-1915) than [sic] left for America. Made Filing-cards-exact (no typewriter).”

The comment is telling, for in any number of interviews from the 1930s

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26 “When I was 16, I thought for about six months that I’d like to be a notary like my father,” Interview with Francis Steegmuller, “Duchamp: Fifty Years After,” Show (February 1963), 28. Cited in Francis Naumann, “Money is no Object,” Art in America, n. 3 (March 2003), 67.

27 Duchamp, letter to Walter Pach (April 2 [1915]), reprinted in Naumann and Obalk, eds., Affectionately Marcel, 34.

28 Duchamp, interview with Frederick Kiesler, presumed to date from 1945; a photocopy of Kiesler’s handwritten notes are preserved in the Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Foundation Archive, Vienna. Viewable
onward, Duchamp frequently claimed that he had left the art world for chess or, simply, for breathing, but in this oral history he was an artist who gave up his creative practice for administration—to make filing cards.

The use he would make of the appearance of bureaucracy over the years is striking and pioneering: he employed a notary public (to certify the “authenticity” of \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.} [1919] years after he made it), used the aesthetic of the classification binder (for the structure and format of \textit{Some French Moderns Says McBride}, 1922), created official-looking rubber stamps (for \textit{Tzank Check}, 1919 and \textit{Some French Moderns Says McBride}, 1922), used official gummed paper French revenue stamps (to “authenticate” his \textit{Monte Carlo Bond} [1924] and numerous miniature reproductions of his paintings made in the late 1930s), and made numerous, even larger archive-like projects (later note boxes but also, most extensively, his \textit{Boîte-en-valise}, 1938-42).\footnote{It is no coincidence that a generation of conceptual artists, many of whom would follow Duchamp’s rejection of a visual imperative and critique of the institution, would also turn to collecting notes, arranging indexes, making file folders, and presenting documents in place of traditional forms of mark making. In short, they constructed what Benjamin Buchloh has termed an “aesthetics of administration” in place of a more traditionally conceived or even apparently avant-gardist version of the work of art. See Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” \textit{October} 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143 and also Buchloh’s discussion of the “aestheticization of the bureaucratic with the bureaucratization of the aesthetic” with regard to Marcel Broodthaers in: “Marcel Broodthaers: Open letters, Industrial Poems,” \textit{Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 97. There is still a history to be written about the connections between Duchamp’s photographic and textual operations of recording and documentation in the guise of an archivist-administrator (as seen in his various box projects, including the \textit{Boîte-en-valise}) and certain practices from the ’60s and ’70s, exemplified in works such as Robert Morris’s \textit{Card File} (1962) and \textit{Box of its Own Making}, Mel Bochner’s exhibition of binders of photocopies, \textit{Working Drawings and Other Visible Things…} (1966), Dan Graham’s \textit{Homes for America} (1966-7), and also the work of Art & Language, not to mention Broodthaers. A discussion of how the curatorial aspects of Duchamp’s practice may be read in relation to many of these same artist’s role in what has been called “Institutional Critique” is explored in \textit{three}.}
simultaneously evoked and contravened so as to offend what has been called “the
categorical power of the archive as the principal insight into a truth.”

In line with what would be a lifetime of flirting with administration, Duchamp’s
note project sets up layers of administrative ambiguity: how can a seeming testament of
artistic process (notes for the “making of” artworks) effectively be such a thing if one
cannot gain a sense of how one thought or idea leads to another? Without chronology,
taxonomy, narration, cause–effect, or any another (even if highly personal) order to
follow between the notes, how can one derive meaning from them? And, what, anyway,
was the criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of a note? The (photographic) archive’s
ordering and preservation—indeed, construction—of truth, historic coherence, and
knowledge is simultaneously evoked and undermined by Duchamp’s equivocation.

It should be said that informal textual notes by artists were not, of course, unique:
artists often included speculations or instructions illustrated with drawings in their
sketchbooks. And while the history of art is full of recourse to these “peripheral” artistic
materials in order to understand an oeuvre, the difference here—and this difference is
essential—lies in the more public nature of Duchamp’s scribbled scraps. In insisting on
their replication and distribution (even if only for a small circle of intimates in this first
test-run for the subsequent, much larger editions that addressed themselves to wider,
unknown publics), and by including them much later in his first monographic and retrospective exhibitions, Duchamp decidedly wanted to bring attention to his notes. This is all the more striking given the artist’s notoriously estranged relationship to the preservation of traces: ridding himself of most books once he read them or of any correspondence once he responded to it, and even deliberately destroying vestiges of his romantic liaisons, Duchamp was not someone invested in preciously guarding everything for posterity. Thus his meticulously constructed “public” copies of his notes and, later, his carefully preserved administration of the costs, quantities, and locations of his artworks for the production of other archive projects are, as it were, all the more noteworthy.

**LITERATURE**

“A box containing a dozen or so aphorisms or pseudo thoughts” is how Duchamp described the *Box of 1914* and the nature of the notes it includes. Those range from reflections on the act of looking, military service, electricity in art, linear perspective, photographic registration, to the equivalence between art and shit. In them much is left to interpretation. After all, what does his proposed “world in yellow,” “painting of frequency,” or “electricity edgewise” mean? Pithy, instructional or cryptic, these missives lack pretensions to profundity (implicit in the “pseudo” of Duchamp’s description of the “thoughts” traced by the notes) as much as they evade any real connection between each other. One thing that they do is to transgress literary norms.

From a literary standpoint, the audacity of Duchamp’s gesture remains still underestimated. The notes have been largely ignored except as a source for citable information, and are rarely examined in light of either the literary or artistic context in which they were first forged. Yet the avant-garde rethinking of the space of the word and of visual attention is a vital context for registering the stakes of Duchamp’s unusual project.32

Duchamp finished his *Box of 1914* the same year that Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* was published by the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in its revolutionary visual form.33 Unlike Mallarmé’s poem, which bestowed a new plasticity upon language through typographic spatialization, Duchamp’s first “box” project achieved the same effect, but by very different means. It subscribed neither to the Mallarmean *durée du livre*—the particular temporal experience instigated by the sequential unfolding form of the book—nor, say, to Futurism’s *velocitá*, the exploded

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33 Shortly before his death in 1898, Mallarmé showed Paul Valéry a set of proofs laying-out the form that the poet hoped his *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* would re-appear. The visual artifact was quite different from the initial, compromised version published just a year earlier by the review *Cosmopolis* (May 1897), and which, in the author’s mind, did “not at all break with tradition.” It would not be until July 1914—years after his death—that the *Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF)* agreed to publish the text in the large format edition with text on double pages that faithfully captured Mallarmé’s intent. The publication was immediately seen as a poetic and typographic revolution and it is in the *NRF* form that the text is now most famously known. See A.M. Christin, *L’Image écrit ou la derision graphique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 111-19 and *Poétique du blanc: vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l’alphabet* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999). On Mallarmé’s importance to Duchamp, see the interview with James Johnson Sweeney, “The Great Trouble with Art in this Century,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, v. XIII (1946), 21, as well as Duchamp’s 1915 inscription of “Quand bien Même…” (a reference to a Mallarmé poem) discussed in Molly Nesbit and Naomi Sawleson-Gorse, “Concept of Nothing: Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg,” in Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, eds., *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 134-6 and Nesbit, *Their Common Sense*, 193.
graphics and gestural dynamism with which it was also contemporaneous. Instead, Duchamp’s loose, boxed pages insisted on another kind of linguistic and formal unfolding and another engagement on the part of its beholder.

Figure 1.13 [Stéphane Mallarmé, Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1914)]

Whether or not Duchamp saw Mallarmé’s fresh-off-the-press poem in 1914 is not really the point. Although the artist repeatedly admitted to being deeply interested in Mallarmé’s writing and even used a reference to one of his poems in a work from 1915, the groundbreaking version of Un coup de dés… was published just too late to have influenced the literary form of Duchamp’s first notes. The poem might even have come out too late to affect the artist’s decision regarding the physical format of the Box of 1914, so simultaneous was the “publication” of the two projects. Thus the comparison with this and other examples of contemporary avant-garde writing aims primarily to sketch the landscape into which Duchamp’s notes were released, rather than to suggest genealogies of thought or form. Mallarmé, for example, worked against the expectation of linguistic order with a radically antigrammatic form, although he paired it with a highly recherché language that insisted on itself as nothing if not the modern inheritor of a high tradition of poetry. Alternately, one might evoke concurrent Futurist texts that emerged from 1912 onward, which, with a play of onomatopoeia and dynamic form,

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35 Still, the work clearly impressed Duchamp once he did discover it. By 1918, he would declare to his friend Henri-Pierre Roché that nothing new had been written since Un Coup de dés…. See Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, Ephemereses on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy (Milan: Bompiani, 1993), March 26, 1918, unpaginated.

36 On Mallarmé, see Johanna Drucker, The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Typical of such studies, thorough and period-specific though they may be, is the complete absence of Duchamp’s work with and relation to the word and the written page.
freed themselves from the Symbolist tradition and passéist grammatical conventions, but nevertheless held on to such literary staples as simile and poetic aspects of free verse. Duchamp, on the other hand, avoided any literariness at all.

“One can see seeing…” and “Arrhe is to art as merdre is to merde…” Duchamp’s photographed notes declared in their meager, calligraphic way. Thus even if one considers the most irreverent of Futurist, Zaum, or Dadaist poetry, little in the associated language strategies of “making strange” or disrupting of sense is operative in Duchamp’s textual output. Instead, he opted for more pedestrian phrases and words and even dictionary citations, theorems, and formulas. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Mallarméan and, to some extent even Futurist, graphics, depended either on printed letters—Roman type—a sober and strictly vertical form that is visually stable, or on italic’s forward slant for dynamic contrast; but both rely on legibility and stability. Nothing could be further from Duchamp’s note project.

A tension between legibility and illegibility lies at the center of all of Duchamp’s efforts to reproduce and publish his notes. This is not, however, a consequence of mere messy script or sloppy graphics. These do play a role, but not a singular one. The notes are composed neither of strings of unrelated words nor of playful meaninglessness. Instead, Duchamp’s language often does make sense. His words convey information, conjure images, provide instructions for the construction of objects or propose actions.

37. “A typographic revolution” was what Marinetti called for. “I call for a typographic revolution directed against the idiotic and nauseating concepts of the outdated and conventional book, with its handmade paper and seventeenth century ornamentation of garlands and goddesses, huge initials and mythological vegetation, its missed ribbons and epigraphs and roman numerals. The book must be the Futurist expression of our Futurist ideas. Even more: my revolution is directed against what is known as the typographic harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and movement of style. Therefore, we will employ three or four different colored inks and twenty different typefaces on the same page if necessary. For example: italic face for a series of similar and rapid sensations, boldface for violent onomatopoeia, etc., A new concept of the pictorial typographic page.” Marinetti, “Typographic Revolution,” (1913) appendix to “Mots en liberté,” cited in Drucker, The Visible Word, 114.
But for every bit of “information,” and every ostensibly stable meaning, there is another note or even a verso side that seems to undo it. Slyly, emphatically. There is no plainer way to say it: Duchamp’s notes erode their own assertions.38

Even the fact that the artist would, throughout his life, so fiercely reject what he called the “retinal” (that superficial appeal only to the eyes prevalent in the history of painting and epitomized, for Duchamp, in the work of Gustave Courbet)—and he would use the notes in support of this challenge—is seemingly countered by the fact that he insisted on so exactly replicating the visual appearance of his original notes. Relying on the gestural traces of his handwriting, the artist marked his phrases with hesitancy, incompletion, evasion and absence, punctuating his phrases with “misspellings,” inkblots and effaced words or letters. So much so, in fact, that the anchors that tie down meaning are lost. For his was a language replete with contradictions, ambiguities and renvoi to other notes (that may or may not have been present in the bunch), and with their orderless

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38 “Published” the same year that James Joyce began his infamous revolution of literary form that is Ulysses, the Box of 1914 might be read in the context of a shared interest in revitalizing language through its disruption. Joyce’s linguistic tendency has been characterized as “derailment, deviation, dislocation, omissions, chance delays, collisions, accidents—failure itself.” I am struck by the fact that, however different the projects of Joyce and Duchamp, and however unaware each may have been of the other’s work in 1914 (they would have the chance to come to know each other’s work not long thereafter), the two offered modernity a model of language that performs its own lapse and failure. See Fritz Senn, “Joyce’s Misconducting Universe,” in Gottlied Gaiser (ed.), International Perspectives on James Joyce (Troy: Whitson, 1986), 164, cited in Craig Douglas Dworkin, Reading the Illegible (Ph.D. University of California Berkley, 1999), 128.

39 Duchamp repeatedly expresses his disdain for the retinal impulse in painting in numerous interviews and conversations, particularly in the postwar period where he defined his own approach as anathema to Courbet’s, in which, “the emphasis has been on the eye, the retina. Colors and forms only, always on the surface.” Duchamp, quoted in Anonymous, “Art was a Dream…” Newsweek, v. 54, no. 19 (November 9, 1959), 118. That same year, he reiterated his position: “Courbet’s revolution was mainly visual. He insisted, without even mentioning it, that a painting is to be looked at, and only looked at, and the reactions should be visual or retinal, not much to do with the brain. A plain physical reaction in front of a painting. This is still in vogue today, if I might say so.” Duchamp, interview with George Heard Hamilton, BBC radio (January 19, 1959). Both interviews cited in Michael Taylor, “Resisting Courbet’s Retinal Revolution: Marcel Duchamp’s Etant donnés and the Erotic Legacy of Cubist Painting,” in Stefan Banz, ed., Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010), 112-131.

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scrawls and multiple layers of writing and rewriting, the reader is prevented from mastering or comprehending with certainty anything that is given.\footnote{My approach to the textual failures of Duchamp’s notes here is indebted to Craig Dworkin’s inspired readings of the “illegibility” in certain 60s and 70s poetry and artists books—readings for which Duchamp’s literary practices loom like a specter but are only evoked, as he admits, \textit{en passant}. Dworkin, \textit{Reading the Illegible}.}

It is hardly surprising, then, that shortly after he had begun his first note project, Duchamp composed a poem, “The” (1915), in which star-shaped forms took the place of what would otherwise have been each instance of the eponymous article, “the.” Then, a year later, blank spaces marked strategically missing letters in the words inscribed on the metal surface of the sculpture, \textit{With Hidden Noise} (1916). Also in 1916, he typed four index cards of discontinuous phrases to make up \textit{Rendezvous de Dimanche 6 février à 7 h 3/4 après midi} (1916).\footnote{As Duchamp explained: “There would be a verb, a subject, a complement, adverbs, and everything perfectly correct, as such, as words, but meaning in these sentences was a thing I had to avoid…the verb was meant to be an abstract word acting on a subject that is a material object, in this way the verb could make the sentence look abstract. The construction was very painful in a way, because the minute I did think of a verb to add to the subject, I would very often see a meaning and immediately [if] I saw a meaning I would cross out the verb and change it, until, working for quite a number of hours, the text finally read without any echo of the physical world….That was the main point of it.” Cited in Arturo Schwarz, \textit{The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp} (New York: Delano Greenridge, 2000), 642. For a discussion of the printing history of “The,” see Nesbit and Sawleson-Gorse, “Concept of Nothing,” 137-8.}

Attacking legibility, continuity, and syntactical systems, these projects (like the notes), operate in that infinitely contracted space-time between the articulation and dissolution of language.

Yet the notes are—decidedly—meant to be read. Duchamp’s English translation of each of the notes contained in the \textit{Box of 1914} for his patrons Walter and Louise Arensberg (who sponsored the construction of the \textit{Large Glass} in the later teens and were meant to have owned it) insists that the notes not be considered as merely visual material.
Duchamp appended a set of typewritten translations to the boxes’ mounted photographs—and this even though both Walter and Louise read French fluently. His action underscores his insistence on the notes’ importance as something to be read, even by the Anglophone public visiting the Arenbergs’s home. Duchamp was, perhaps, imaging them laid out, casually available near the Large Glass itself and any number of other Duchampian works, fingered by bourgeois American ladies who should, he thought, be able to understand them, or at the very least read them so that they would know that their lack of understanding was not due to a lack of French comprehension. Thus, however much they might seem to put readability at stake, it is the explicit intent of the notes to accompany the works they evoke. The notes are, whatever else they might be, a discursive apparatus.

COLLAGE

One of art history’s Duchamp stories, told with varying degrees of sympathy, resolves to the following: unable to rival Cubism despite a number of painterly efforts, Duchamp fails to meet modernism’s challenge in general and Cubism’s in particular. Consequently, he has virtually no choice but to find an alternative and in the process invents the

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42 The artist wrote dozens of letters to his patrons over the years and, well into the 1940s, these were always in French, and in the same characteristic scrawled script. These facts dispel our imagining that Duchamp worried that the Arensbergs would not be able to understand the original French or would need help deciphering his hand script.

43 It must be stressed that Duchamp understood well that his notes would be in the context of one of the most significant gatherings of his oeuvre, including, as he thought at the time, the Large Glass. It was only when the Arensbergs decided to move to the West Coast in the 1921 that Duchamp negotiated with Katherine Dreier to buy it from them so that the fragile glass work would not be at risk due to the long distance travel.

44 Some of Duchamp’s linguistic practices with regard to the readymade are discussed in David Joselit, Infinite Regress, 73-85. Despite Joselit’s focus on the linguistic, he nevertheless passes very quickly over Duchamp’s notes, leaving their connection to the end of Cubism and the beginning of the readymade, for example, unexplored.
readymade, thereby gaining a foothold on lasting acclaim.\textsuperscript{45} The context of Cubism in relation to Duchamp’s earliest painted work and passage to the readymade is thus frequently evoked, but his multiple, reproduced notes are never considered in relation to Cubism in general or Cubist collage in particular. The problem is perhaps, at least partly, an ontological one: the notes most often serve as citable sources from which anecdotes, evidence, or information about Duchamp’s oeuvre or thinking is extracted; they are rarely seen as aesthetic objects, or as objects proposing theoretical problems in themselves. They tell, but they do not do anything. On the other hand, as Clement Greenberg tells us in no uncertain terms, the advent of collage “was a major turning point of Cubism….and therefore a major turning point in the whole evolution of modernist art.”\textsuperscript{46} In this light, what could Duchamp’s first publication of a handful of scribbled notes have to do with Cubism’s—not to say Modernism’s—most triumphant developments?

\textsuperscript{45} Most striking in this regard is Thomas B. Hess’s “J’accuse Marcel Duchamp,” \textit{Art News} LXIII, n. 10 (February 1965), 44-45, 52-54 and Clement Greenberg’s “Counter Avant-garde,” \textit{Art International} 15, n. 5 (May 20, 1971), 16-19. If Greenberg’s rejection was vocal and repeated, it was subsequently left to Michael Fried to carry the torch. The latter’s reading of American painting through the lens of Duchamp and Dada’s “failure” is telling: “it is important to bear in mind that, at bottom, Dada in any of its manifestations and modernist painting are antithetical to one another. Where the former aspires to obliterate all distinctions between work of art and other kinds of objects or occurrences in the world, the latter has sought to isolate, assert and work with what is essential to the art of painting at a given moment. It would, however, be mistaken to think of Dada—the most precocious of the movements—as opposed to art. Rather Dada stands opposed to the notion of value or quality in art, and in that sense represents a reaction against the unprecedented demands modernist painting makes of its practitioners. (It is, I think, significant that Duchamp was a failed modernist—more exactly a failed cubist—before he turned his hand to the amusing inventions by which he is best known).” Michael Fried, \textit{Three American Painters} (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1965), 47 (italics mine). Cubism figures differently in some exceptional publications, such as Thierry de Duve’s discussion of Duchamp’s shift from pictorial practice to “naming” in \textit{Pictorial Nominalism: Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade}, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). See also David Joselit’s discussion of the ways in which Duchamp recodes Cubism’s suppression of the body in exchange for a conception of vision as an entanglement of carnality, seeing, language, and painting. Joselit, \textit{Infinite Regress}, 9-70.

\textsuperscript{46} Clement Greenberg, “Collage” (1959) in \textit{Art and Culture} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 70-83. Greenberg’s writings have, since the early 1970s, come increasingly under attack by the generation of art historians that followed him, and his essay “Collage,” has been particularly blighted in art historical scholarship. Yet if his particular methods and investments have been questioned, his estimation of Cubist collage’s primacy has nevertheless stood. See Lisa Florman, “The Flattening of ‘Collage,’” \textit{October} 102 (Fall 2020), 59-86 and Rosalind Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” in \textit{The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 23-41.
Duchamp often declared that by the latter part of 1912 he had decided to “avoid all contact with traditional pictorial painting which is found in Cubism and in [his] own Nude Descending a Staircase.” As it happens, the “Cubism” being made, shown, and sold at the time that Duchamp was writing his notes (1912-13) and photographing and then boxing them (1913-1914) corresponds exactly with Picasso and Braque’s “synthetic” phase, in which layered images composed of glued pieces of paper, newsprint, and debris introduced what were called papiers collés.

Duchamp’s replicated notes and Cubism’s papiers collés are not only perfectly contemporaneous, they could be said to share a medium: both are collages of sorts, collections of cut or torn scraps mounted on a backing—artworks declaring themselves as such while evading all markers of high art (through their mundane materiality, everyday references, and avoidance of technical skill), rejecting the traditional medium of oil on canvas, and ambivalently positioning themselves between image and text. Yet, the historian counters, the comparison is risible, a preposterous stretch: Duchamp’s copied notes simply do not grapple with the fundamental issues that Cubist collage does, in other words, its meditation on and rejection of the conventional pictorial means of Western representational painting, including perspectival recession, anamorphic distortion, chiaroscuro modeling, or distinction from decoration. The historian would be right. And

47 Duchamp in Cabanne, Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp, 37.
48 Duchamp likely knew of these through Guillaume Apollinaire, a crucial conduit for information about the developments of Cubism both amongst artists and to the public. Through the encouragement of Picabia, Apollinaire became increasingly interested in, and close to, Duchamp by late 1912 (even if the critic and poet had virtually ignored him in his reviews of 1909-11). The writer was particularly interested in the artist’s place within his reading of Cubism. Given this and Duchamp’s repeated visits to both Daniel Kahnweiler’s gallery on the rue Vignon and Gertrude and Leo Stein’s 42 rue Fleuris apartment, it is difficult to imagine (however one construes Duchamp’s developing indifference to the art world) that the artist did not know Cubism’s papiers collés in the immediate aftermath of their invention. Although, when speaking to Cabanne, their discussion addressed the early Cubist paintings more than the later collages per se, Duchamp nevertheless mentioned that he “sometimes went to Kahnweiler’s gallery on the rue Vignon” and that “it was there that Cubism got me.” See Cabanne, Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp, 25.
yet the *Box of 1914* does traffic in some of the same reference points as the *papiers collés*: Duchamp’s typography might not mimic printed type as did Picasso or Braque’s, but in refusing the machine press type (even as he uses the means of reproduction to disseminate it), the *Box of 1914* cannot help acknowledge it, too; the replicated notes might not reference mass production through the use of bits of newspaper or ticket stubs, but their dependence on photographic means cannot help evoke that culture. Additionally, there is the way in which both examples, *papiers collés* and replicated notes, struggle with that most modernist of concerns, *flatness*. Moreover, the *Box of 1914* addresses some of the same questions that the *papiers collés* raised—regarding the orientation of the picture plane (vertical versus horizontal), the potential objecthood of the pictorial, the relationship between word and image, fragmentation, and the rarefaction of the artwork. Importantly however, if both artistic projects applied themselves to certain parallel issues, Duchamp’s insinuated altogether different—although arguably just as damning—consequences for the artwork as it was then being conceived.

The import of the Cubist collage to art history, emerging in part from, and immediately following, Picasso’s experiment *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), was supposedly not only the introduction of mass cultural detritus into the artwork, but also a revision of the strict verticality of the two-dimensional painting, in other words, the insistence on reading as opposed to “mere” looking. As Yve-Alain Bois has pointed out:

> Painting’s vertical section and completely covered over surface were always opposed to the horizontal and diagrammatic space of writing (with few exceptions man reads seated at a table, especially since the invention of printing), but Picasso annulled that antimony by a 90-degree pivoting (this is the radical gesture of his *Still Life With Chair Caning* of 1912, a canvas that asks to be read as the horizontal plane of a café table, seen from above): for him the picture
had become a system structured by arbitrary signs; henceforth his canvas became a written page.49

If *Still Life with Chair Caning* can be called a “written page” of sorts, it was one that nevertheless still deployed the grammar of painting—even taking recourse to a frame, albeit one made of rope—and it was ultimately intended to be viewed in its place on a wall. So too did the *papiers collés*; those works that would seem to approach still more insistently the status of objects to be read—in their remove from the world of oil, turpentine and gloss finish, in their unapologetic paper-ness, and in their deployment of newsprint and proliferation of words—leave no ambiguity about how one is to read them: like a picture.

Figure 1.17 [Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, spring 1912]
Figure 1.18 [Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*, late autumn 1912]
Figure 1.19 [Pablo Picasso, *Glass and Bottle of Bass*, spring 1914]
Figure 1.20 [Views of Picasso’s studio, Boulevard Raspail, Paris, autumn 1912]

Many of the paper components of the collages bear holes from the straight pins that Picasso and Braque used to temporarily affix them to a backing while they visualized and repositioned the scraps before finally gluing them down. If the scraps and their backing had been worked upon while lying on a table, the pieces could have been rearranged infinitely without needing to be affixed. But, the visual “test” for which the pins were needed was that of verticality—of being held up to a wall, that surface upon which painting traditionally hung. Indeed Picasso’s inclusion of a combination of *faux* gilded picture frames, museum labels, and wallpaper background in a series of collages from spring 1914, including *Pipe and Sheet Music* and *Glass and Bottle of Bass*, reinforced and self-consciously mimicked the resolute verticality of (museum) painting.

Thus, for all of Picasso’s and Braque’s efforts with their collages to undo the traditional modes of making and presenting something as a picture, many of painting’s most stalwart conventions nevertheless remained safely in place.

For Duchamp, the verticality of display was not the destination of the notes. Instead, his boxed fragments of writing incite another form of engagement. Looking at them necessitates taking them out of the box and thus handling them as objects. Still, looking is what one is meant to do because, after all, they are photographs and Duchamp deployed the medium precisely to foreground that his reproduced notes are not to be treated as mere literary specimens.

The apparent conflict between textual reading and aesthetic looking is a particular hallmark of Cubism’s papiers collés. Lined with bits of newsprint and textual fragments, like so much encrypted innuendo, these collages invite decoding. So much so that scholars literally have begun to read “what the papers say” in search of the “true” meaning of the collages. Nonetheless, the very fragmentation of that language (partial words or phrases such as “Le jou,” “urnal,” “Un coup de Thé,” “Trou ici,” etc.) edges the collages toward the pictorial, because, as Rosalind Krauss argues, “deprived of a linguistic context in which to perform,” these partial words or phrases are primarily designed to operate as part of an image.

50 “It is, of course, in Cubism,” as Benjamin Buchloh pronounces, “that elements of language—the legacy of Mallarmé—surface programmatically within the visual for the first time in the history of Modern Painting and that a parallel between the emerging structural analysis of language and the formalist analysis of representation is established.” Buchloh, “The Aesthetics of Administration,” L’Art conceptuel, une perspective (Paris: ARC, 1991), 41. This accepted understanding of Cubism as the only valid or “programmatic” contemporaneous aesthetic response to the literary invention of Mallarmé symptomatically overlooks Duchamp’s Box of 1914.


Duchamp’s notes, on the other hand, are too often treated as nothing but linguistic articulations, works so much about words that the ways in which they are also pictures is overlooked. It is no accident that over the years Duchamp’s notes have been cited (in order to explain something else, a presumably more meaningful artwork) while Cubism’s collages have been deciphered (with the specific aim being to describe how the text offers a more complete interpretation of what the collages mean as pictures).

More than a mere combination of the textual and the visual, Duchamp’s notes arguably constitute a reconsideration of aesthetic attention and spectatorial experience through a reorientation of the picture plane. One might think of the way Leo Steinberg discusses Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet’s work as having radically reconceived the surface of painting, and reoriented the positionality of the viewer through a reconception of the flatness of the artwork. Steinberg signals a “something” that “happened in painting around 1950...pictures [which] no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals...a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.” And for this, Steinberg argued, Duchamp was perhaps “the most vital source.”

Although the figure of Duchamp (without any specifically named artwork) maintains an anticipatory place in his genealogy, Steinberg’s “different order of experience” is, in fact,


54 Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 85.
arguably first performed with the notes. Through them, Duchamp rendered scanning the flat page—*reading*—the operative mode of aesthetic engagement at the same moment at which he transformed the disordered, haphazard and tentative (documentation of process) into the artwork itself.

While the *Large Glass* would go on to stand erect in space, reflecting the upright spectator in its glass diptych segments, the various notes undermined its verticality as they aimed to keep the piece grounded in the horizontal on which we read and write. More than that, the replicated notes furthered a process begun in 1913-1914 and continued in later reproduction projects, which would make of the work of art a thing to be handled, shuffled, laid down—contrary to the way that Cubist collage engaged its spectators. Each note thus offered itself as a “work surface that cannot be construed into anything else,” and thus wound up as “a verification of its own opaque surface.” It was one way for Duchamp to take the conventional idea of the artwork *down*, literally.

“Sans colle” (without glue), one of Duchamp’s notes, written in this period but only published posthumously, announces defiantly, mysteriously. On the heels of Cubism’s most fertile investigations and decidedly rejecting its practice of gluing everything in place, Duchamp offered the *papiers* without the *colle*. Of course, the photographed notes were, in fact, glued down on individual mat board supports, but they were not glued together. The individual notes remained materially disconnected.

55 Ibid., 84-5. In his analysis of the limits and inherent suppositions of the Greenbergian “truth to materials,” Steinberg conceives the notion of the “flatbed” in a brilliant reading of the radicality of the work of artists such as Rauschenberg and Dubuffet. Steinberg says of Rauschenberg’s work from the early 50s: “he proposed the flatbed or work surface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience.”

56 Such is Steinberg’s formulation of Rauschenberg’s flatbed picture plane operation. See *Other Criteria*, 85.

fragments. In addition, their language prevented the disparate pieces from ever seeming to connect too readily or to offer linguistic continuity. Compared to the way in which each Cubist collage remains literally unified—with one composition integrating all fragments and assembling them onto a single planar surface (no matter that what that surface actually pictured contradicted this unity)—Duchamp’s readiness simply to present a series of disconnected elements in a box can be understood as an emphatic pursuit of fracture and dissolution, strategies that Cubism claimed as its own.

The discrepancy between the historical treatments of the two parallel efforts is striking, and while the two might not immediately look comparable, their commonalities make comparison not only possible but also an expedient way of better understanding the context and contours of each. Perhaps the most significant distinction between them, however, is the following: the papiers collés, however unluxurious and however linked to a mass cultural reality, remained unique and rarefied in their originality even as they advertised their skimpiness; by contrast, Duchamp’s multiple, photo-chemically copied scraps refuse both Cubism’s originality and its ultimate resolution. In their differences, it also becomes evident that the turn in Duchamp’s practice—marked by his reproduction of notes—does not reflect a “failure” to continue down the path of Cubism, as has so long

58 It is indeed this essential difference that might have sealed the notes’ fate for, as Alexander Alberro is right to note, “there are few things more problematic in the history of modern art than the concept of the copy” and, perhaps as a result, scholars have hardly considered how these two concurrent projects might be usefully compared. Alexander Alberro, “Meaning at the Margins: The Semiological Inversions of John Knight” in John C. Welchman, ed., Institutional Critique and After (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), 60. Alberro further mentions: “‘Until the 19th century,’ as Jean Baudrillard notes, in ‘Gesture and Signature’ (1972), the copy of an original work had its own value; copying was a legitimate practice. In our time the copy is illegitimate, inauthentic: it is not longer ‘art’.” Cited in Alberro, “Meaning at the Margins,” 60. While it is true that Duchamp and in particular his readymades would, by the 1960s, begin to revise the terms of the cult of the singular, authentic work—“an original”—still long prevailed. Interest in the readymade only partly changed that, for however much the Fountain or In Advance of a Broken Arm, to take two examples, might seem to argue for the celebration of anonymity, industrial reproduction, the artwork as potentially replicable ad infinitum, they also worked to further solidify notions like the author, hand-craft, originality, and authenticity, and so much so that gestures like the Box of 1914, almost as a consequence, slipped into the cracks of history, standing as it does for both and neither at the same time.
been claimed. Instead, through his note project, Duchamp pressured a number of issues that were, in fact, the very mainstays of Cubist collage. In so doing, the artist’s photographically reproduced and boxed scraps can be said to perform an interrogation of the limits of the traditional work of art that is, while different from Cubist collage, even more far-reaching in some respects.59

**Photography**

It should be stated, for once, in no uncertain terms: the *Box of 1914* is a set of photographs. It is odd that this most obvious and technically irrefutable fact, one with vast repercussions has not much registered in the history of Duchamp, or of photography, for which it could easily provide an important, pioneering object of study. The influence of “the photographic,” as scholars such as Jean Clair and Rosalind Krauss have importantly argued, is everywhere felt in Duchamp’s oeuvre even if, as they rightly admit, the artist rarely made photographs himself or directly employed the medium.60 However, in studying the numerous painterly expressions of the *iconography* of early photographic technologies—the chronophotography in *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the electrical halo or aura-like emanation painted in *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel* (1910), or

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59 One might say that the failure of Picasso to be considered today the most influential artist of the 20th century resides in the fact that his practice, however innovative and important, refrained from undermining the very foundations or definitions of the artwork itself. That proposition has been made by a number of thinkers, including Octavio Paz, who declared: “Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso…are perhaps the painters who had the most influence on our century: Picasso for his artworks (oeuvres), Duchamp for a body of work (oeuvre) that is the very negation of the modern notion of an artwork” (translation mine). Octavio Paz, *Deux Transparents, Marcel Duchamp et Claude Levi-Strauss*, trans. Monique Fong-Wust (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 9.

even the shadow-like silhouette and stop action quality of the early ink drawing of his sister in *Play?* (1902)—Clair, like most scholars, leaves Duchamp’s most complexly developed and richly provocative experiments such as his replication of notes—experiments, in short, *actually deploying photography*—curiously understudied. And this even though Duchamp’s publication of all his notes, beginning in 1914, relied so heavily on photography in particular (and reproduction as a paradigm in general) that the artist’s entire project cannot feasibly be considered independent of the photographic medium.

The reasons for the omission are likely technical as much as conceptual: in looking for the ways in which Duchamp was influenced by the conceptual implications of the photographic—the way in which it related to his explorations of delay, shadows, and the index, even as he avoided becoming a “photographer” or making the medium itself a prominent feature in his work—scholars often fail to acknowledge that rare moment when he actually used photography, literally. It is as if the directness of Duchamp’s photographic gesture with the *Box of 1914* blinded scholars who were looking for “the photographic” and, as a result, missed the photograph. In the process, they overlooked not only the repercussions of the artist’s first major experimentation with the medium, but also the ways in which it laid the foundations for so much of what historians, in fact,

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61 Despite the centrality Jean Clair assigns to the photographic in Duchamp’s oeuvre, going so far as to call it the artist’s “primat technique,” few are the studies that treat the question of Duchamp and photography any differently than Clair initially set out more than three decades ago. Exceptional are Krauss’s brilliant essays on the subject, although not one of hers mentions the *Box of 1914* at all. So, too, the exhibition and catalogue essay by Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’Empreint* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997) argues for Duchamp’s foundational role in the reconception of the singular original through his deployment of the *empreint*—a nearly untranslatable term that approaches “impression” and implies reproduction or replication through touch, while, surprisingly, the *Box of 1914* remains barely addressed. For a reading of the connection between the readymades and photography, although, again without serious reference to the *Box of 1914*, see Craig Adcock, “Marcel Duchamp’s *’Instantanés: Photography and the Event Structure of the Readymades’*,” in “Event” *Arts and Art Events*, Stephen C. Foster (ed.) (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988), 239-66.
found important in his later works. The irony is that in studying the ways in which the “logic of photography” was a central motor of Duchamp’s work, preeminent scholars of the subject almost solely focused on works that existed as singular originals: note Krauss’s interest in Tu’m, the Large Glass, and With Tongue in My Cheek, or Clair’s focus on the paintings Nude Descending and Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel. In so failing to seize the opportunity to take the logic of photography to its final conclusion, they neglected not only to examine Duchamp’s very first work to exist in multiple copies, but to tackle head on the problem of the photographic.

Figure 1.21 [Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, 1912]
Figure 1.22 [Marcel Duchamp, Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel, 1910]

The fact is, Duchamp’s reproductions of his notes are rarely, if at all, examined in relation to the development of an avant-garde history of photography (never, for instance, has the Box of 1914 been shown in photography exhibitions about the era). Yet Duchamp’s use of the medium arguably reveals more about how the very limits of photography were pushed than almost any other project of the period. The artist’s deployment of photography in order to replicate bits of paper bearing his hand script was neither Dadaist prank nor nihilistic provocation; it was the beginning of a long—obstinately pursued—theoretical inquiry. In using the medium as no art photographer in his time would, and claiming the result as an artwork in itself and simultaneously as a supplement to, or discursive accompaniment for, another artwork, Duchamp put his finger on the troubled role photography played in relation to the contemporary notions of

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62 Beginning with his Box of 1914, and continuing through the succeeding “note” projects, the Boîte verte (1934) and À l’infini (1967), and his project to reproduce his entire artistic output, the Boîte-en-valise (1938-42), the undermining of a singular original via reproduction becomes a central preoccupation in Duchamp’s œuvre. Francis Naumann’s excellent Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Ghent: Ludion, 1999) is invaluable on the subject although, surprisingly, it also fails to underscore the primal importance of the Box of 1914 as the very first of Duchamp’s projects to use both photography and reproduction programatically.
the artwork. In his hands, photography is not so much a medium entrenched in its own traditions and history, but instead one that evacuates the conditions of the aesthetic medium by becoming a “theoretical object,” as Krauss would claim as a potential of photography. This is part of what makes Duchamp’s *Box of 1914* so provocative: against a sense that photography’s primary function lies in its technical capacity to arrest and inscribe what is held in front of the camera, the artist uses it as a conceptual vehicle, where accepted ideas of photography’s use, utility, and significatory dimensions are challenged through a rupturing of the conventions attached to it.

In interview after interview, Duchamp acknowledged his interest in Étienne-Jules Marey, whose chronophotography the artist remembered observing in illustrated magazines around 1911. Marey, the chronophotographer of the successive *instantané*, the physiologist-inventor who devised a means to photographically capture the movement of galloping horses and women descending staircases certainly inspired one aspect of Duchamp’s photographic impulse. The *Nude Descending a Staircase*, for instance, cannot be considered outside the influence of chronophotography. But if Duchamp’s life-long and complex relationship to the photographic is to be fully understood, it cannot be

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63 Although Rosalind Krauss locates this in “1960s photography,” she suggests that “photography’s emergence as a theoretical object had already occurred at the hands of Benjamin in the years that elapsed between his ‘A Small History of Photography’ in 1931 and his more famous text of 1936…the radically deconstructive position Benjamin would take five years later, in which photography is not just claiming the specificity of its own (technologically inflected) medium, but, in denying the values of the aesthetic itself, will cashier the very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography.” See Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, n. 2 (Winter 1999), 289-305. In so far as much of this chapter argues for ways in which the *Box of 1914* anticipates and tests out concerns that would become Duchamp’s and Benjamin’s shared preoccupation in the mid 1930s and that would be further realized in the practices of the generation of artists starting in the 1960s influenced by Duchamp, the use of Krauss’s notion is not meant to be anachronistic but instead to suggest the critical potential already inscribed in this prescient work.

64 See Douglas Gorsline’s 1962 discussion with Duchamp in which the latter recalls that when he saw Marey’s chronophotography in a magazine sometime towards the end of 1911, the impact was “immediate” and he “felt that this visual strategy might be [his].” Mss. of interview and notes housed in the Douglas Gorsline Collection at the East Carolina University Collection Guides Special Collections Joyner Library, East Carolina University (Manuscript Collection n. 901).
entirely encapsulated by the *aesthetics* of chronophotography. Instead, another aspect of Marey’s project might have been just as influential: the creation of concrete documents through mechanical (photographic) means. For Marey’s utilization of photography was actually little concerned with aesthetics as such (even if he was most likely well aware that the woman, photographed walking naked with a pitcher of milk, happened to be pleasant to look at); in his pursuit, the photograph was *evidence*. It is this documentary, evidential aspect that seems to have been crucial to Duchamp’s complex engagement with the archive, first announced in the *Box of 1914*.65

Figure 1.23 [Étienne-Jules Marey, *Untitled* (Chronophotographic study of man pole vaulting), 1890-91]

The scholarship regarding Duchamp and photography (or even concerning his brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon’s use of photography) consistently focuses on the visual effects of chronophotography.66 We know that Duchamp indeed had been exposed to chronophotography through Duchamp-Villon, who as a medical student had worked with Marey’s protégé Albert Londe, the staff radiologist and photographer under Dr.

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65 Another figure who likely had an influence on Duchamp’s and Picabia’s shared interest in and perception of the possibilities and uses of photography was Picabia’s maternal grandfather, Alphonse Davanne (1824-1912), with whom the young Picabia and his uncle Maurice Davanne lived throughout the artist’s youth. Davanne senior was a businessman, accomplished amateur photographer, writer of numerous treatises on early photographic techniques, and friend of Daguerre. No less than 30 volumes penned by Davanne or involving his photographic research were published between the 1850s and 1903. Active in the promotion, explanation, and dissemination of photography in the early years of its development, and founding member of the *Société française de photographie*, Picabia’s grandfather was a crucial figure responsible for countless lectures on photography, the teaching of photographic techniques to Paris landscapers, bridge and road builders, and the organization of photographic exhibitions representing France at home and abroad at the *Expositions Universelles* (notably in 1867, 1873, 1878 and 1900). His was less the championing of art photography as such than a championing of the technical aspects of photography as applied to science and the documentation of construction sites. It was thus Davanne *grandpère* who urged Picabia to become a photographer, predicting that color photography would eventually replace painting, to which his grandson famously retorted, “you can photograph a landscape but not the forms I have in my head.” Photography historian Michel Frizot first suggested the possible connection between Alphonse Davanne and Duchamp to me in relation to his use of photography.

66 See *Duchamp-Villon, sculpteur* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1999) and *Duchamp-Villon, dessinateur et photographe* (Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1999), 10-11.
Charcot at the Hôpital Salpêtrière. However, it may have been, in fact, the banal documentary possibilities that were a more important shared concern of the two brothers. In the early teens, Duchamp-Villon used photography to document his own sculptural production and thus Duchamp would have likely found in his brother a useful instructor and/or accomplice in the apprenticeship of photography. Still, whereas Duchamp-Villon would use photography to make a practical record of his artworks, his youngest brother would endeavor to turn the document—even more, the copy of the document—into an artwork.

One should not forget that, at the time, photography had little hope of actually rivaling the place of painting because its indexical quality was inimical to the expectation of transcendence, originality, and autonomy of the modern artwork. However, if the photograph couldn’t hang like the transcendent canvas in the transcendent gallery, the beginning of the 20th century did nevertheless see the birth of an emerging category of “art photography.” The 1910s experienced the apex of the Pictorialist movement in photography, with its aspirations to firmly root photography in the sensibility and aesthetic of painting. Diametrically opposed to the Pictorialists (with which his work

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67 In fact, Londe not only directed the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* from 1888 to 1914, a medical journal premised on its “objective representation” (so stated Dr. Charcot) of the pathologies observed at the hospital (an objectivity mirrored in the journal’s extensive use of photography as evidence of clinical findings), but he was also himself inventor of a camera that could capture about ten consecutive movements in space on a single sheet of film.

68 Photographers such as Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Alvin Langdon Coburn are amongst the most celebrated proponents of the Pictorial movement’s desire to elevate photography to an art form equal to painting (with Impressionism being a particular inspiration). It is little coincidence that the fervent defense of photography as a bone fide artwork of “personal artistic expression,” as the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1911 put it, was voiced only after Kodak’s release of the first hand-held amateur camera available to the masses in 1888. It took some time for the movement’s ambitions to be confirmed, but by 1910, a short time before its demise, a major purchase of fifteen photographs by the Albright Gallery for its permanent collection ensured that the movement had made its mark on institutional collections. See Paul Lewis Anderson, *Pictorial Photography: Its Principles and Practice* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1917) and Peter Bunnell, ed., *A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography 1889-1923* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1980).
was concurrent), Eugène Atget produced the bulk of what he specifically called his photographic “documents” between 1898 and 1914. His work offers perhaps the best example of a photographic practice that self-consciously strived to eschew a purely aestheticist logic during these crucial years that inaugurate photography’s “modern period.” One could list Alphonse Bertillon’s photos of criminals, Albert Londe’s photos of hysteria patients, and Karl Blossfeldt’s photos of plant specimens in addition to Marey’s photos of galloping horses or Atget’s photos of Parisian streets: each has a concrete “documentary” purpose for which their evidential quality offers testimony. Yet, before World War I, as Molly Nesbit attests, the documentary was considered antithetical to the aesthetic: “When Atget started working, documents occupied the lowest scale in the hierarchy: artists used documents, but their works were not like documents.” Yet, that was precisely what Duchamp was making: photographed copies of notes that approached the appearance of being documents—not artworks—even as they quietly worked towards both embodying and undermining each of the two categories.

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69 Between 1898 and 1914, Atget received commissions from and sold photographs to various archives, city bureaus, and even the newly created Musée Carnavalet dedicated to preserving a record of the history of Paris. Into the 1920s and before Bernice Abbott and the Surrealists would discover him, he also produced records for a clientele of stage designers, architects, publishers, and artists, always insisting that his work was mere documentation. But his example is rare and few were the photographers who were determined to present their work as something wholly outside of the category of art. On Atget, see Molly Nesbit’s landmark study Atget’s Seven Albums (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).


71 Molly Nesbit, “Le photographie et l’histoire, Eugène Atget,” in Michel Frizot, ed., Nouvelle Histoire de la Photographie (Paris: Larousse, 2001), 399-409 (translation mine). After the war, the proliferation of new photography and similigravure brought people to look at the document through a different angle, considering it an extremely fecund genre for modern artists. This new conception of the document would seduce Walter Benjamin, Moholy Nagy, André Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bernice Abbot, and the Surrealists, among others, but not before Duchamp would have already turned to photography precisely for its documentary potential.
Duchamp’s boxes of black and white photographs of notes housed in five boxes for photographic glass plates engaged photography neither to colonize it as high art in itself, nor to claim it as an avant-gardist medium with the potential to shock. Instead, the boxes initiated a sustained exploration of the charged intersection of photography and painting, of documentary and aesthetic creation, and of production and reproduction. Before the First World War, when the avant-garde as we currently conceive it was but a nascent phenomenon, it was only Futurism that directly used photography, capturing blur on film in order to immortalize movement. In 1914, Dada, not to mention its radical experiments with collage and photomontage, had not yet begun. Thus, during a period when photography was trying to exalt itself to the status of high art, and before the avant-garde would inaugurate photographic collage and montage as modes to deconstruct photography’s pretensions to aesthetic autonomy, Duchamp had already begun an operation that would complicate the status of the photograph.

Entirely rejecting the conventions of art photography of the day, Duchamp used the camera as if it were a copying machine, in other words, a photocopier avant la lettre:

72 A characteristic example, Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s Photodynamic Dactylography of 1911 translated the productivity of the modern office into photographic terms through the juxtaposition of the solidity of the dactylograph and the ghostly multiple image of fluttering, typing hands. See Giovanni Lista, Futurism and Photography (London: Merrell: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 2001).

73 Some years after Duchamp’s project, when the avant-garde did finally begin to turn to photography in the 1920s and ‘30s, they, as Jeff Wall rightly points out, embraced photojournalism and the anti-aesthetic look of the documentary image as a way to refute the slippage of the photographic into the bourgeois category of “Art.” See Jeff Wall, ““Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” in Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975 (Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles, 1995), 247-67. See also David Campany, “Conceptual Art History or a Home for Homes for America,” in Rewriting Conceptual Art, Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds. (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 123-39.

74 To give some further perspective to the idiosyncrasy of Duchamp’s photographic act, one should not forget that even if Picasso he had already begun to photographically record his work off and on since he first bought a camera in 1906, and Brancusi would begin in the 1920s taking the photographs of his sculpture for which he is now known, neither treated the photographs of works as artworks in themselves, neither included them in their retrospectives (as Duchamp would go on to do), and neither was photographing anything as atypical (for the photographic conventions of the day) as notes in order to make two-dimensional facsimiles in multiple copies.
the still nascent medium was being widely used to make portraits and landscapes, not to photograph pieces of paper and even less those with random ideas scribbled on them. Thus with his very first box, Duchamp developed a model of the photograph as a flat and flattened copy, and the camera as an emphatically neutral recording instrument. Neither window nor mirror (as the photograph was so often metaphorized), Duchamp’s utterly artless and spatially depthless photos of flat scraps of paper seem not to have the slightest regard for the conventions of the medium.

More akin to the world of archiving and administration than to art photography, these photographs convey information: one can read Duchamp’s characteristic hand script; one identifies the tears and irregularities of their different pages. Yet the photographs are often over lit, under lit, or black-shadowed and they hardly hide the marks of an amateur approach to the medium. In manifest neglect of specialized skill, Duchamp did not, for instance, photograph his notes under glass, a known technique for eliminating those shadows that almost invariably show beneath the crumpled corners and warped pages of his various notes.75 Instead, Duchamp’s photographs of his notes show their edges; they announce themselves as nothing more than reproductions of notes—which the artist nevertheless presents as an artwork.

Through the medium of photography, Duchamp’s sixteen notes, copied five times each, unmoored the unique original paramount to traditional contemporary conceptions of the artwork. Indeed, this, the artist’s very first project using photography, is arguably the foundation for his lifelong engagement with reproduction and the questioning of originality. Not only would Duchamp’s photographic paradigm undermine the

authenticity and singularity of the work of art; it equally came to question what the photographic could mean.

The replicated notes were thus the perfect ambivalent objects, performing and undoing multiple categories of art and the expectations associated with them. Simultaneously, they also offered sixteen-times-five copies of handwriting, which, like the artwork in a larger sense, is the very graphic trace that is ostensibly inimitable: an original that cannot be copied. What audacity, then, to reproduce hand script by way of that modern medium which was rivaling painting and showing up its mimetic capacities. What perversity to turn the manuscript into a photograph, in short, to turn the scrappy note into a glossy image that pictorializes writing even as it turns that emblematic mark of authenticity—hand script—into a photographic copy.

Photography, so typically an arbiter and conveyer of three-dimensional space, was made to contravene this quality by becoming emphatically about flatness and inscription. For Duchamp’s notes bear neither the signs that were often used to argue for photography as art, such as depth of field, illusion and accurate rendition of detail, nor do they convey a sense of the captured instant, a narrative or symbolic interest. Instead, the photochemically replicated notes willingly exist in a no man’s land in which their apparent offering of factual testimony is undermined by an unresolved sloppiness that demonstrates a reticence to actually deliver either pristine, archive-worthy documents or “art-like” photographs.

After photographing his notes, Duchamp trimmed and mounted each on loose cardboard backings, thereby turning these textual artifacts into something more akin to images. In fact, one of the series (explaining how he will go about making Three
Standard Stoppages, bearing the underlined phrase at the top “L’idée de la fabrication” [“The idea of fabrication”]) is composed of two photographs mounted edge-to-edge on a mat board so as to depict one document which, in turn, is composed of four little scraps of paper carefully aligned to look—although hardly convincingly—like one continuous text. In other words, Duchamp tried to pass off a grouping of little scraps as a single document that would factually qualify as coherent information, yet their constructedness (literally, their visible fabrication) makes that more than questionable: these four little pieces of paper never actually were one page; they only appear as such because they are rendered as a picture. Each is a picture of what a document is supposed to look like, but, simultaneously proves to be not what it represents: it is not quite a document, just an image, a fabricated one at that.

Several of the boxes into which Duchamp collected his photographed notes in 1914 bore the label “Extra-rapide,” a term Duchamp would also frequently cite in his notes: in the world of photography at the time, it was a proclamation of how swiftly light-sensitive photographic paper could collect the inscription of an object placed before the lens. Yet the “extra fast” working paper was, in Duchamp’s hands, illogically used to reproduce things that were slower than slow, since the note paper and the letters scribbled upon them couldn’t have been more immobile or patient subjects to be captured on film. Duchamp thus used photography neither as a sign of his savvy application of an advanced technology nor so as to make an art object to be hung on the wall, but as a means for recording, documenting, in short, for blatantly reproducing, all the while insinuating that that, too, could be art.
It would not be until the late 1950s that cinema theorist André Bazin would publish “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” but his theory of photography nevertheless resonates with what Duchamp seems to have been grappling with all along:

Painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the processes of reproduction. Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation…The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, disoriented, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.  

Indeed, against either an artistic practice that claimed the photographic as legitimate rival to painting or a commercial photographic practice that insisted only on photography’s anti-aesthetic, which is to say, its dispensable, marketable, mass-cultural role, Duchamp’s reproduction of his notes eschews what was in the period considered properly photographic—either a rational, technical precision or an aesthetics of artfulness. Through this, the artist effectively gets to the heart of what could be called the conditions of the photographic, in essence, Bazin’s idea of the photograph as “the model of which it is the reproduction.”


77 If one accepts Hubert Damisch’s claim that photography is “nothing other than a process of recording, a technique of inscribing, in an emulsion of silver salts, a stable image generated by a ray of light,” the contents of the Box of 1914 are, then, records recorded, inscriptions inscribed. Doubly inscriptive, or rather, records also about recording, they reveal themselves to be about photography and its relationship, above all, to a logic of reproduction.
The exploration of this condition, posited by Rosalind Krauss as one of Duchamp’s defining contributions to 20th century art, resides, following her argument, in the manifold ways in which the Large Glass and other Duchampian works would silently refer to and deploy photographic, indexical means. Her reading is right, although to it I would add other examples and objects of study, the first being the Box of 1914 and ending with Duchamp’s final and most resolutely indexical work, Etant donnés (discussed in chapter three). Concentrating on the former for the moment, if we fail to consider the significance of the Box of 1914, not only for the specific ways it deploys the index (in the process deliberately attempting to position the Large Glass), but also for its role as matrix for Duchamp’s life-long exploration of the logic of photography, we might easily overlook those ways in which the artist called for a radical rethinking of the entire definition and valuation of the work of art as a singular, unique, hierarchically stable, and undeniably authentic repository of artistic originality. Before he had given a name to the everyday already-made things he had brought, like stray animals, into his studio, indeed before he had begun the operation that would use those things to test the robustness of art, Duchamp’s replicated notes offered a model of reproduction that sat uneasily between being things in themselves and references to other artworks, opening an altogether different but related set of questions about where the lines are drawn between and around that thing we call a work “of art.”

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79 As Krauss attests, Duchamp was “less preoccupied by realization of the photographic than by a reflection of the nature of it” (translation mine). This might seem to explain Krauss’s and others’ silence about the Box of 1914, however, in so doing, scholars invariably marginalized a veritable matrix for so much of what would come after in terms of Duchamp’s interest in the photographic. See Krauss, “Duchamp ou le champ imaginaire,” Le Photographique, 75.
80 See Krauss’s seminal discussion on the original and copy in “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” and “Sincerely yours,” The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 151-70 and 175-94.
“Even a few words I don’t feel like writing. You know exactly what I think about photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable. There we are. Affectionately, Marcel Duchamp. 17 May 1922.”

Such was the annoyed proclamation of the artist to photographer Alfred Stieglitz’s questionnaire, “Can a photograph have the significance of art?” directed at a select group of artists in 1922. Duchamp had just returned to New York to recommence work on the Large Glass and the conflicted relationship of photography and painting was not far from his mind.

Painting and photography—Duchamp’s comment hardly suggests a love for either. But no matter how one construes his words, the artist was deeply engaged in a practice that interrogated both. And the development of both mediums in coexistence was, following Benjamin Buchloh’s logic, central to the avant-garde’s various reconceptions of painting. Buchloh’s models include not only Duchamp but also Alexander Rodchenko’s development of a photomontage aesthetic concomitant with the latter’s definition of pure pictoriality around 1921, Robert Rauschenberg’s exploration of the photographic in his work at the same moment that he engages with the paradigm of the monochrome in 1949-51, and eventually, Gerhard Richter’s development of a particularly imbricated practice of painting and archiving photography in the early 1960s.

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81 The replies of artists questioned by Stieglitz were published in MSS [Manuscripts] n. 4, New York (December 1922), 2. Duchamp’s response is reprinted in Affectionately, Marcel, 109.
82 Buchloh, Gerhard Richter: Painting After the Subject of History (Ph.D., City University of New York, 1994), xviii.
For the art historian, to have continued to paint while ignoring the import of photography was tantamount to missing the boat. Picasso, according to Buchloh, missed it:

It is the disaster of Picasso after Cubism not to have recognized the historical viability of photography. You cannot work against photography, outside photography, or in denial of photography and pretend that painting remains viable all through the 20s and 30s, when there is an extraordinary photographic culture springing up around and developing in every single country in the most amazing ways. And here is this man who pretends that there is no relevance to be considered and no issue to be addressed.83

Contra Picasso, Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* and his use of (chrono)photography in the context of his painterly praxis is claimed as exemplary of the imbricated practice Buchloh champions as progressive.84 It is striking, however, that he does not discuss the *Box of 1914*, because it is there that Duchamp was less obviously, but with more far-reaching consequences, truly reckoning with the conditions of photography, simultaneously with, and explicitly in relation to, the preparation of the “precision painting” that is the *Large Glass*.85 The *Box of 1914*’s “flat” use of photography as a profane copying technology (in order to replicate the apparently unreplicable: handwriting) provocatively brings the medium to its degree zero—concurrently with the artist’s continued engagement with painting. For, whatever one might call the *Large Glass*, it still is a unique, signed, framed, and titled pictorial representation displayed in a vertical manner (a traditional diptych of sorts, no less) and,

84 Buchloh says: “Duchamp’s particular fusion of the indexical traces of chronophotography with the painterly category of the female nude seemed to enact that very contradiction integral to the dialectic of enlightenment operative in the project of cubist painting.” Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter*, 68-9.
85 One might contrast Duchamp in this regard with Picasso and Matisse who, as Buchloh suggests, “embody that typically anti-photographic stance,” each reigning over “an art practice that has never even once admitted its inevitable proximity to mass culture and its imbrication with the photographic.” See Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter*, 47, n. 3.
in this sense, evokes painting. At that point, in the early teens, both painting and photography play a vital role in Duchamp’s practice and he seems concerned with questioning the implications of both. In fact, the artist situates himself at the center of the painting/photography dialectic, while undermining both, and refusing to acknowledge his engagement with either.

Figure 1.26 [Marcel Duchamp, La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (Large Glass), 1915-23]

It may not be easy to determine Duchamp’s strategic objectives within this contested field, but one thing seems clear: he wanted to see photography affect painting. For many reasons, the Large Glass plays a crucial role in this, making it, as George Baker suggests, an example of “photography by other means.” For photography is repeatedly evoked in what is essentially a massive, standing glass plate, constructed during the period when photographic negatives were typically glass plates upon which an image was inscribed. Not only are the notes relating to the Glass “dominated,” as Jean-François Lyotard has written, “by the photographic analogy,” with references to snapshots, time-lapse poses, and “extra-rapide” exposures, but the actual use of photography was instrumental in devising some of the motifs on the Glass.

To recount them is to tally up a series of odd-ball photographically-inspired methods: Duchamp photographed a sheer curtain in front of an open window, recording the movement of air and its effect on the piece of cloth over the course of three photographs. He used each photographic transcription of the concrete but miniscule action as the basis for the three irregular forms of the Bride’s “love gas,” called Draft Pistons, on the upper panel of the Glass. Then there were the “Sieves” in the Large Glass, “colored” by the dust that

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87 See Krauss, “Duchamp ou le champ imaginaire,” Le Photographique.
Duchamp allowed to accumulate on the surface of the Glass over the course of several months so that dust gained an equivalency with light on the photographie plate in that it materially and visibly accrued on its surface, thereby leaving what Krauss calls “a kind of physical index for the passage of time.”89 One can also detect the traces of photography in the Glass in yet another way. For on a fundamental level, photography and, concretely, photography as used in the Box of 1914, which is to say, photography as a means of mechanical reproduction, arguably provided the very logic of Duchamp’s approach to the Large Glass as a painting. The artist was unequivocal: he conceived his effort on the Large Glass as “mechanical work,” labor diametrically opposed to what he again and again described as the patte of the painter.90 Contrary to a certain logic of painterly originality, the artist repeatedly called the Large Glass instead a “precision painting,” glossing his use of the term “precision” here through references to mechanicity, image transfer, and a negation of the artist’s touch. He went so far as to call the labor on the Glass a form of “copying,” saying, further, and explicitly, that he wanted it to resemble an “imitation of photography.”91 In no uncertain terms, then, it is precisely the blatant mechanical reproduction—the act of copying—so central to the Box of 1914 that serves

89 As Krauss further suggests, “If Duchamp was indeed thinking of the Large Glass as a kind of photograph, its processes become absolutely logical, not only the marking of the surface with instances of the index and the suspension of the images as physical substances within the field of the picture; but also, the opacity of the image in relation to its meaning.” See Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 1,” 203.
91 As Duchamp admitted in an interview: “It was more recopying, copying some sketches that I’d done on glass already, so there was no creativeness there, no invention anymore, it was just a translation of a thing already done, to my mind at least, onto glass…” Outtake of interview with Richard Hamilton for BBC’s The Monitor program, cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy, 27 September 1961, unpaginated. See also Notes, n.147. Of the Large Glass Duchamp also said: “I wanted to go to a completely dry drawing, a dry conception of art...And the mechanical drawing for me was the best form of this dry form of art.” Unpublished Mss. from James Johnson Sweeney interview, Philadelphia 1955, Cited in Bonk, The Box in the Valise, 9, n. 1.
as the very modus operandi for the Glass, and this no matter how different the status of the “copying” in each.

This is where things get complicated. At a moment when Duchamp is insisting on turning to the mechanical, imagining a massive glass work that uses photography and attempts to refuse the visible patte or “paw” of the author, he had already surrounded the product of this rejection of the hand with scribbled notes—and had already photographically copied them, and would afterwards do so again, using different notes, repeatedly. Perhaps the greatest paradox of the relationship between the two elements—Glass and notes (those contained in the Box of 1914 and those that followed)—is, then, that the Glass is a kind of painting (epitome of the unique, auratic artwork) that attempted and failed to pursue the strategies of the photograph (the epitome of the non-unique, replicable image), yet the Glass is also accompanied by handwritten manuscripts (another epitome of the unique and auratic) that are reproduced (thus non-unique and replicable) and, as such, challenge the idea of a rarified and unique work through their replication.

If photographed notes serve as a model for the Large Glass so as to construct a new, albeit conflicted, model for painting, Duchamp, in turn, uses painting to complicate his approach to photography. He did so, notably, with another project made just a year after beginning work on the Large Glass. In 1916, in order to satisfy Walter and Louise Arensberg’s seemingly unquenchable thirst for Duchampiana and to alleviate their dismay at not being able to possess his Nude Descending a Staircase, n. 2, Duchamp had a true-to-size photograph taken of the original painting, calling it Nude Descending a Staircase, n. 3. He then added washes of metallic gray and green gouache to the black and white image, highlighting the nude’s forms without at all attempting to replicate the
original painting’s color scheme. According to his signature, even its author was a related but nevertheless different replica, a “son,” of himself: “Marcel Duchamp (fils) 1912…1916.” The fact is, what he created was a dubious hybrid, neither true painting nor unadulterated mechanical photography: the hand-colored photographic copy of a hand-painted canvas defied both mediums in one blow. The very originality of painting (in this case, Duchamp’s single most famous painting on canvas) is unsettled in the act of mechanically producing a photographic copy to take its place; yet, conversely, the mechanical reproducibility of photography, the medium’s single most defining feature, is revoked by turning the photograph into a unique, hand painted and—thus newly original—artifact.

Figure 1.27 [Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 3, 1916]
Figure 1.28 [Charles Sheeler, Views of the Arensberg home with the original Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 2 and its photographic copy, Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 3, on display, ca. 1920]

In a trenchant, mocking gesture that can be read as a delayed “conversation” with Duchamp’s 1914 note project and the questioning of authenticity and originality embodied in two Duchampian works from 1919, L.H.O.O.Q. and Tzanck Check, Picabia offered his own reflection on replication, authenticity, and the manuscript on the cover of the November 1920 issue of his journal 391. There, Picabia reproduced what the cover announced as a “copie d’un autographe d’Ingres,” that is, a copy of a hand scripted document as well as its original’s official notary stamp, beginning, “I, the undersigned Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres…..” To the note’s final, validating signature Picabia added his own: “Francis Ingres.” That same year, Picabia, a drawing of the artist’s own signature countersigned by the artist, might similarly be understood in terms of an intense, creative dialogue between Duchamp and Picabia spanning many years and particularly centered, as George Baker compellingly argues, on the question of the copy. Baker advances that “Picabia’s lifelong dedication to the copy” was the shared preoccupation of Picabia and Duchamp, uniting them in an intense series of volleys in a dialogue about authority, reproduction, and originality. See Baker’s The Artwork Caught by the Tail, 75.

The replica was, as Francis Naumann reports, “prominently displayed in the main studio of the Arensberg apartment in New York, and even after the original painting was acquired in 1919, the photographic replica remained on display, as it would in the Arensberg’s Hollywood home in the 1930s and ’40s.” Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art, 20. Duchamp also showed the two side by side at his first retrospective in Pasadena in 1963. One additional hand-colored photograph of Nude Descending exists from the same period, which is even more metal-like in its coloring than the Arensberg’s copy and not true to the size of the original.

The workings of this operation to turn the (photographic) copy into an original (painting) are, in some ways, the mirror opposite of Tzanck Check, an original that sought to look like a copy: in 1919, Duchamp constructed a carefully hand-made, larger-than-life drawing of a check made to look every bit as if it were little more than a banal, commercially printed, bank-issued document of legal tender (complete with the ink-stamped words “ORIGINAL” in red diagonally across the front). The artist specifically concocted the elaborate facsimile to pay his dentist, Daniel Tzanck, to whom the check was made out.
Modus operandi, agent for the questioning of painting, subject to being undermined in turn: reproduction proves to be a complex operation in Duchamp’s oeuvre. Not as a mode of practical publicity or anything like an easy means of dissemination, and never a mere mechanical process, it would play a decisive, even structural, role for him to the end. In 1930, for instance, in response to Louis Aragon’s invitation to contribute to an exhibition entitled La peinture au défi (The Challenge to Painting) organized in March of that year at the Galerie Goemans in Paris, the artist responded with a series of artworks that challenged painting only to then deconstruct the very premise on which the challenge was articulated. Duchamp’s contributions interpreted the show’s title specifically through a presentation of variations on reproduction and the photographic. To arrive at this response was not as obvious as it might in retrospect seem, especially as Aragon himself saw the key to undermining painting elsewhere. For, as is clear based on the accompanying catalogue, Aragon thought the “challenge” could primarily be achieved through what the writer called “collage.”

Not so much a strict category for works made of actual pasted elements, he understood collage as an artistic strategy that embodied a set of qualities—impoverished, unskilled, ironic, critical, intellectually-driven—that were virtually irreconcilable with the bourgeoisie’s bon goût, and that thus made them quintessentially painting’s other. Still, the words “reproduction” or “originality,” so central to Duchamp’s thinking, never appear in the lexicon of Aragon’s catalogue essay.

Among the works Duchamp contributed to the show was Pharmacy (1914), one of his edition of three store-bought prints of an idyllic landscape. Consisting of a stock image bought from an artists’ supply shop and specifically made to be copied by students

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95 Louis Aragon, La Peinture au défi (Paris: Goemans Gallery, 1930), unpaginated, catalogue for the exhibition at the gallery located at 49 rue de Seine in Paris’s chic art gallery district.
learning to paint, Duchamp simply added two small hand-painted dots to the print, transforming a mass-reproduction to be reproduced into an “original” by failing to do what any art student was meant to do with it. The most biting of the artist’s submissions, however, were two related works: *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), a mass reproduced postcard bearing a photographic image of the *Mona Lisa* hand-adorned with a moustache, goatee, and signature by Duchamp (itself arguably a commentary on the auratic museum masterpiece and its commodity reproduction), *and* presented alongside it, a newly minted *L.H.O.O.Q. replique* (1930), a copy of the “authentic” manipulated image of 1919 made especially for *La Peinture au défi*, although considerably larger than the postcard “original” and, again, hand signed and hand altered as *L.H.O.O.Q.* had been. Hanging next to each other (with the second work’s eponymous “replica” status unambiguously asserting its ambiguity), they enacted an audacious provocation. The first *L.H.O.O.Q.* inscribes reproduction at the heart of a critique of painting; its copy reinforces this while simultaneously also announcing that even a defiantly graffitied photographic reproduction becomes, de facto, an “original” at the moment it is replicated.96

Figure 1.29 [Marcel Duchamp, *Pharmacy*, 1914]
Figure 1.30 [Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919]
Figure 1.31 [Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (replique), 1930]

Walter Benjamin makes reference to *La Peinture au défi* in his “Second Letter from Paris.” Written in November 1936, some years after Aragon’s exhibition but at about the same time Benjamin was penning “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility,” his “letter” discusses the contemporary debate about the relationship

96 Indeed in a move that is never as simple as “this will kill that,” with mechanical photographic reproduction annihilating or replacing painting, in Duchamp’s hands, photography and its mechanical reproducibility are undermined in turn.

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between photography and painting. While Aragon consistently speaks about collage’s
defiant relationship to painting in his exhibition catalogue essay, Benjamin insists
explicitly on considering the argument in terms of photography’s defiance of painting. No
mere detail, the difference of position is noteworthy: although Aragon’s understanding of
collage was broad, and his choice of artworks and artists reflected this sweeping
conception, he never emphasized photography or reproduction as such. Instead, much of
what Benjamin attributes to La Peinture au défi seems to be found not so much in a
reading of Aragon’s text than in what may well have been Benjamin’s reading of
Duchamp’s contributions to the show. After all, the only elements in the exhibition that
explicitly used photographic reproduction as the mode by which to “challenge” painting
were Duchamp’s.

As his contributions to the exhibition demonstrate, Duchamp’s endeavor to put
the originality of the artwork (of painting) at stake by means of reproduction, pioneered
with the Box of 1914, had become an increasingly persistent preoccupation for the artist
in the decades that followed. Concurrently, the threat that the specter of reproduction

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the title as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the sense of possibility suggested in “reproducibility” is inscribed in Benjamin’s original use of “technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” for the
German title, which means something akin to “the possibility of technical reproduction.” I have used here and throughout the more recent translation of the title, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,” which comes closest to expressing Benjamin’s desired sense of latency and possibility, ideas no less crucial to understanding the connection between Benjamin and Duchamp’s relationship to replication. For a contemporary review of the exhibition, see Carl Einstein’s “Exposition de Collages,” in Documents 2ème année, v. 4 [1930], 245.

98 For the Exposición Surrealista, held in Tenerife in 1935, Duchamp sent seven works: Pharmacy (1914), a photograph of a Rotorelief, a photograph of Why not Sneeze? as well as photographs of four of his major painted works, Nude Descending the Staircase, Virgin, The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes, Oculist Witnesses. If the reasoning for the choice was merely economic or practical, then he nevertheless
could have easily sent any one of a number of drawings for the Large Glass, some of his prints that were in
circulation, paper studies for other pieces, etc. Yet everything Duchamp sent to represent him bespoke a
preoccupation with photographic reproduction: Pharmacy was itself a biting commentary on reproduction.
posed to the auratic work of art—and implicitly, to the museum that collects, preserves, and displays it—made itself felt with particular acuity in Europe at this time. While Duchamp’s first experiments anticipated many debates that would take place surrounding the mechanical reproduction of the artwork, by 1929 the German museum establishment, for instance, began to sense the acute peril that mechanical reproduction posed to the status of the artwork’s originality, a peril that Duchamp had so consistently been embracing in his practice.

One example is particularly telling: in May of 1929, Alexander Dorner, the visionary director of Hanover’s Landesmuseum from 1923 to 1936, organized *Original and Facsimile*, an exhibition for the Kestner Society composed of 35 works on paper, including ink drawings, watercolors and pastels by recent and canonical artists such as Cézanne, Renoir, Lorrain and Tiepolo. Dorner presented each original artwork next to a high quality photographic facsimile, both placed under glass and framed identically. The show challenged spectators to distinguish between originals and copies, a feat that not one visitor (including numerous art professionals) was able to completely and successfully accomplish. News of it quickly reached the circle of artists around Duchamp and his brothers, perhaps because it had aroused widespread controversy over precisely (as had already been suggested in its inclusion in Aragon’s 1930 exhibition *La Peinture au défi*) and the photographs of objects and paintings suggested their one-step remove from the supposedly auratic original. As the artworks in the official exhibition catalogue were listed according to their appropriate media/classificatory headings, Duchamp’s pieces appear in the exhibition’s list of works under “Fotografías diversas,” *miscellaneous photographs*. These photographs, then, explore the intersection of the photographic and graphic production, an intersection far more uncertain and antagonistic than is normally assumed, one in which the photographs complicate the dialectic operating in his objects between handcrafted and the mechanically produced commodity. See the catalogue *Exposición Surrealista* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1935) accompanying the group Surrealist exhibition that opened on May 11, 1935.

the question of the reproducibility of the aesthetic original. Indeed, the exhibition resulted in over six months of heated debates among museum authorities, art critics, and university professors in Germany and left a long trail of ink in the Hamburg periodical Der Kreis. Typical of the criticism leveled against the show (which resulted in a call to expel Dorner from the International Association of Museum Officials), art historian and Baden Kunsthalle director Kurt Karl Eberlein argued that what was at stake in patrolling the borders between the original artwork and its reproduction was nothing less than the artwork’s sovereignty and, indeed, the very experience proper to art. As he lamented:

But this is just what is so disgraceful and unbearable: that one has to set about explaining why a work of art is a work of art, why it belongs to a different order of production, why it can never be comprehended, represented, or reproduced by the machine and its techniques, why it is not a factory couch, a bicycle, or a toothbrush, and why the experience of art should not ultimately depend upon a well-meaning and commercially clever forgery!

Interesting in this context, but perhaps not surprising, Eberlein’s impassioned plea explicitly characterized the work of art as unlike a factory couch, a bicycle or toothbrush. For those on Eberlein’s side, the mythos of art with its inimitable facture and aura was at stake, so much so that authorities in Berlin even clamored to outlaw facsimile reproductions as “hostile to art.” The photographically reproduced original—like the

100 See the letters from Albert Gleizes to Dorner, discussed further below, and cited in Cauman, The Living Museum, 116.
103 It was the director of the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts, Max Sauerlandt, who opened the discussions on the facsimile “problem” in the September 1929 issue of Der Kreis who also instigated the push to outlaw facsimile reproductions of art. A discussion of the Der Kreis debates can be found in Ockman, “The Road Not Taken,” 94-6, and esp. fn. 35.
industrial, mass produced or banal everyday object—was not only completely incompatible with Eberlein’s understanding of the work of art (one cannot help imagine what he would have thought of Duchamp’s *Fountain*), but indeed, the everyday object was constructed as the exact, and thereby defining, antithesis to the authentic artwork.

Technologies for the reproduction of original works of art were, of course, nothing new (rather convincing mimetic book illustrations and postcards, for instance, had been in circulation for some time). Thus when the complete banning of art’s reproduction was demanded by Dorner’s angry critics, an important, if so far latent, malaise was exposed—for the first time *a museum* was implicated in staging the proximity between authentic originals and their deceptively mimetic photographic copies. The fact that Dorner brought reproduction into the museum made the inherent threat of that technology manifest: the exhibition confirmed the significance of reproduction as a contemporary cultural phenomenon—a phenomenon, however, that called the museum’s very *raison d’être* into question.

These concerns did not escape Benjamin, whose writing, while not directly participating in the Dorner-inspired debates, was increasingly preoccupied at this same moment with the issues of originality, reproduction, the artwork, and photography.¹⁰⁴ The German thinker was attempting to theorize how (photographic) reproductive technologies recast the inherent form, structure, and meaning of the artwork. The very concept of

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authenticity, autonomy and, ultimately, the author, was in question: “The presence of the original” was, prior to the advent of these new technologies, according to Benjamin, “the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” Since then, as he saw it, “Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.” It is perhaps precisely this shared concern—questioning the terms of the aesthetic original—that drew Benjamin to Duchamp’s production.

“Can works be made which are not ‘of art’?” Duchamp had scribbled to himself back in 1913. He must have been wondering if indeed, as an artist, one could escape conventional definitions of the artwork, while still producing or authoring things. After all, what exactly made an artwork “art”? Given his primary activities around the time of writing the query—not only the selection of those infinitely reproducible industrial objects from 1913 to nearly the end of the 1910s, but also the process of replicating his handmade words in 1913-1914 and then again in 1934—reproduction, both industrial and photographic, seems to have been a fundamental motor for the shattering of the precious exclusivity “of art” from the “work of art.” Thus it is not surprising that Duchamp declared late in life that a long-time goal of his had been “to wipe out the idea of the

105 Hannah Arendt, ed., Walter Benjamin: Illuminations, 220.
106 Ibid., 224 (italics mine).
107 For a perceptive reading of Duchamp’s interest in mechanical reproduction with reference to Benjamin, see Sarat Maharaj, “‘A Monster of Veracity, a Crystalline Transubstantiation’: Typotranslating the Green Box,” in Buskirk and Nixon, eds., The Duchamp Effect, 60-91.
108 La Boîte Blanche (À l’infinitif); translated and reprinted in In the Infinitive, 1.
original.”\textsuperscript{109} His critical discussion of “the original,” a notion “which neither exists in music nor in poetry,” made clear that the idea was specifically attached to and propagated by painting, since, as he added, “plenty of manuscripts are sold, but they are unimportant. Even in sculpture, the artist only contributes the final millimeter; the casts and the rest of the work are done by his assistants. \textit{In painting, we still have the cult of the original.}\textsuperscript{110} Duchamp’s endeavor, then, was to make an art that might be rid of exactly the precious, ritualistic aura, which painting, that symbol of art \textit{par excellence}, exudes and the museum, its champion, exalts.\textsuperscript{111}

A work that is not “of art”: Duchamp’s thinking about what that could be coincided with preparations for the \textit{Box of 1914} and his so-called invention of the readymade (whose complex construction \textit{as} invention is discussed in chapter two) even if it is only the latter that is thought of as having explosively pushed at the conventional definitions of the artwork and, as a result, the course of the entire history of art that followed in its wake. Duchamp’s question, exceedingly simple and yet ground-breaking in its implications, to which the artist had emphatically returned in the mid 1930s with his \textit{Boîte verte}, might also be said to define the intersection of his and Benjamin’s shared interest.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., (italics mine).
\textsuperscript{111} The museum’s relationship to and defense of originality is discussed further in chapter two.
\textsuperscript{112} Did Benjamin recognize in Duchamp’s use of language and note-form something that approached the snapshot-like mode of writing, the \textit{Denkbild}, with which the philosopher was so immersed at the time? Nowhere is this preferred Benjaminian mode of writing, at once brief, imagistic (what he calls a ‘thought-image’) and aphoristic, more evident than in the \textit{Passagen-Werk}, or \textit{Arcades Project} notes. Benjamin’s writing is, of course, distinct in many ways from Duchamp’s wildly uneven, often less imagistic and more instructional prose. However, the two modes share similarities in their brevity, their irresolution, and perhaps most acutely in their incapacity (indeed unwillingness) to direct a linear path of thought. If such a kinship escaped the eye of Benjamin, reader of the \textit{Boîte verte}, the utter distinction between Duchamp’s writing and most everything else available in the art and publishing world likely did not. Moreover,
**Boîte Verte**

Although curiously little has been made of the fact, by scholars of either Duchamp or Benjamin, during the same period that the latter was drafting his “Work of Art” essay in Paris, Benjamin was studying the second and most elaborate of Duchamp’s note replication projects and formulating his own theorization of them.\(^\text{113}\) The German writer’s most influential essay, begun in 1935, published in German and French in 1936 and which the author revised through 1939, is at once a treatise on the transformation of the conception of the artwork in the face of reproductive advances, a trenchant critique of that elusive phenomenon called “aura,” and an acclamation for the progressive potential of image reproduction technologies. In the notes, variants, and revisions of his essay, Benjamin devotes a small section to Duchamp, admitting that the “relatively small but influential output” of the artist offered what he considered “one of the most interesting phenomena of the French avant-garde.”\(^\text{114}\) The comment is telling, as the bulk of what the

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\(^{114}\) Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I 3, S. 1045f; included in “Paralipomènes et variants de la version définitive,” (notes for the “Work of Art” essay), *Ecrits français*, 179-80 (Mss. 394). As Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke note in their editor’s introduction to the first English translation of the first version of the “Work of Art” essay, “Benjamin’s repeated rewriting of his essay suggests its importance to him: the successive versions are not so much corrections of his first one but shifts of emphasis.” See Jennings and Wilke, “Editors’ Introduction. Walter Benjamin’s Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the
writer had most likely seen of that “small but influential output”—given that Duchamp was still relatively unknown internationally and had little visibility on the exhibition scene in Paris, with no major publication or solo exhibition of his work for another few decades to come—was, in fact, works deeply engaged with reproduction, such as *Pharmacy, L.H.O.O.Q.* (along with its self-conscious later *replique*), *Bottlerack* and, most importantly, perhaps, the artist’s 1934 follow up to the *Box of 1914.* While none of these use direct photographic means, as the *Box of 1914* did, some of the logic of photography (multiplication, refusal of originality, etc.) and its concrete technologies were vital to each of them.

Specifically, the writing of “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility” came just in the wake of Duchamp’s 1934 edition of note boxes entitled *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même,* also known in its colloquial shorthand as the *Boîte verte* (Green Box). This, the artist’s second note project, followed at a two-decade interval from the *Box of 1914* and remains distinct from its predecessor in its edition size and also in the method used for its production; it was, nevertheless, conceptually enmeshed in many of the same questions that underpin the *Box of 1914.* Based again as it was on Duchamp’s scribblings that date back to the teens and revealing those vagaries of thought and hand that championed the importance of process, speculation, and ideas in relation to other artworks, already realized or not. Importantly, it was a project that explicitly continued the exegesis on the original and the copy begun

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*Work of Art,* *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 6-9. A related conclusion could be drawn from his ample notes and variants, unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime and to date untranslated into English, which trace not only to their author’s careful deliberation of his thoughts in this evidently important treatise, but also the degree to which contemporary developments in culture—including Duchamp’s note project—influenced his thinking on the project, whether they made it into the final draft or not. Benjamin would have seen these pieces in *La Peinture au défi,* either in person or through its catalogue, which he clearly knew, as well as the *Exposition surréaliste d’objets,* held from May 22-31, 1936 at the Galerie Charles Rattan, which he evidently also saw while in Paris.

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with the *Box of 1914*. It should thus be hardly surprising that Benjamin, at the moment of theorizing reproduction, was captivated by the way Duchamp and his *Boîte verte* may have literalized many of the writer’s own questions.

Figure 1.32 [Marcel Duchamp, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même, or the Boîte verte*, 1934 (cover of the regular edition)]

Figure 1.33 [Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte verte*, 1934 (interior)]

Made in an edition of three hundred and ten (as opposed to the *Box of 1914*’s mere five), the *Boîte verte* contains ninety-three (as opposed to sixteen) loose copies of Duchamp’s jottings and one reproduction of an artwork. Rather than being mounted photographs of original notes, these are meticulously-made facsimiles—collotype copies created using photographically-based technologies—that in most cases mimic the size, form, and aspect of their original so as to make them nearly indistinguishable from their model. In this way, the *Boîte verte* notes were quite different in appearance from the contents of the *Box of 1914*, which, as mat board mounted photographs of notes, were never actually meant to be confused with the scrappy originals. However distinct in method, both projects used photographic technologies to complicate the status of the handwritten original, the later box pushing further towards offering replicas so exactly made that they could actually pass as originals. Still, as far as Duchamp was concerned, the *Boîte verte* project was undoubtedly photographic. As he told an American friend in 1934, who he was attempting to interest in the project, “This book, is in fact a box containing photographic reproductions of notes written by hand and photos of pictures.”\(^\text{116}\)

One can imagine, though, that even if the *Boîte verte* was not, strictly speaking, a work of photography and certainly not a painting, it was exactly this

\(^{116}\text{Duchamp, letter to Alice Roullier, cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, “Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy” (16 October 1934), unpaginated.}\)
grappling with the limits of the auratic original through replication that Benjamin considered exemplary of Duchamp’s critical stance. It was a crucial example of aesthetic production that responded to what Benjamin called the then-current “competition between painting and photography.”¹¹⁷

Benjamin’s essay asserts that photography constitutes the “first truly revolutionary means of reproduction” and the photograph of the work of art invariably extracts the artwork from ritualistic function and singularity, thus ultimately undermining the “authority of the object.”¹¹⁸ Acknowledging the implications of photography in the contemporary transformation of the work of art, Duchamp’s various reproductions offered Benjamin’s “contemporary man” an essentially new mode for the experience of the artwork, namely that of “objects disengaged from their functional contexts.”¹¹⁹ In the case of the Boîte verte, the “objects” in question are the notes themselves: meticulously reproduced facsimiles, replicas, that, as artifacts first of all convey a sense of displacement—of being at one distinct remove from authenticity.

The contents of Duchamp’s boxes are, quite simply, not what they seem to be. Like the experience of a performance in a film (rather than in the theater), so goes Benjamin’s wider reasoning, the experience of the replicated notes is quintessentially a mediated one, an experience of the mediated, that is, one offered specifically, and only, by a medium of mechanical reproduction. And it is exactly this experience and aesthetics

¹¹⁷ Benjamin, “Paralipomènes et variants de la version definitive,” Ecrits français, 179-80.
¹¹⁹ Benjamin, “Paralipomènes et variants de la version definitive,” Ecrits français, 179-80.
of the mediated or mechanically reproduced that the writer champions as truly modern and progressive.  

That Duchamp had been working towards a paradigm of the mediated or mechanically reproduced, as an aesthetic *sui generis* becomes evident when one considers the distinctive features and conceptual implications of the *Boîte verte.* He invested what can only be called maniacal attention to the particular modes and incredibly complicated processes of reproduction. As he recounted to Michel Sanouillet, 

Twelve years after finishing, or rather after putting aside my *Glass*, I fell upon my working notes, scribbled at random on some hundred scraps of paper. I wanted to reproduce them as exactly as possible. So I had all of these thoughts lithographed with the same ink as the originals. To find paper of absolutely the same quality, I had to ransack the most unlikely corners of Paris. Then we had to cut out three hundred copies of each lithograph using zinc patterns that I had trimmed according to the outlines of the original papers. It was tremendous work and had I had to hire my concierge to help… 

The sheer effort involved in this prolific reiteration project is dizzying as well as deeply significant. With it, Duchamp asserts what will become a central paradigm in his work and an art historically pioneering gesture—with the *Box of 1914*, the *Boîte verte* is one of the first instances of a multiple or edition (*about reproduction*, no less) that claimed the

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120 This is the basic thrust of “The Work of Art” essay, Benjamin’s most cited and rabidly influential treatise on photography, reproduction, media, and modernity. See The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, Michael Jennings, Thomas Y. Levin and Brigid Doherty, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

121 Unlike the very long tradition of artist’s etchings or lithographs, for instance, which maintained a status inferior or secondary to the original (painting), mere reproductions, Duchamp’s involvement in what was a complex reproductive projects not only attempted to render ambiguous the borderline between original and reproduction, but also insist on the value of his reproductions and editions as *bona fide* artworks, often, in fact, exhibited alongside the models on which they were based. See his display of the photographic copy of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* next to the original in the Arensbergs’s home and in his own first retrospective in 1963, as well as his efforts to insert his *Boîte-en-valise* into and exhibit it in museums and institutions of art, as just two examples. On Duchamp’s other projects involving reproduction, see Francis Naumann’s *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art*. Naumann’s copiously illustrated book is by far the most thorough and well-documented treatment of the multiple and replication in Duchamp’s oeuvre.

122 Interview with Michel Sanouillet, “Dans l’atelier de Marcel Duchamp,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, no. 1424 (December 16, 1954), 5; Arturo Schwarz’s translation in *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass* (p. 6) is slightly modified here.
status of an artwork in its own right, all the while fervently tethering itself to a referent (the Large Glass)—the box contained, after all, notes about something else.

In a letter to the Arensbergs written in early 1934, the artist laid out the main contours of his Boîte verte project, whose details he modified only somewhat along the way.123 The artist had originally planned to produce a regular edition of five hundred of the “boxes” containing nearly 135 notes and about ten (black-and-white) photographs; he also proposed to make a certain number of more expensive “deluxe” versions of the box and to distinguish them from the regular versions via the addition of a color photograph. The cost of making such an edition is likely a crucial reason for the changes that ensued: the regular edition size dropped by two hundred, at least forty notes were held back, and the approximately ten black-and-white “photographs” were replaced by reproductions using the somewhat less pricy (but nevertheless expensive) medium of collotype printing. Perhaps the most important modification, however, was that each of the ten deluxe editions now included, instead of a color photograph as originally planned, a single handwritten note (a bona fide “original” upon which one of the copies for the ensemble was based). No mere economic compromise, Duchamp’s juxtaposition of copy and original, fraudulent and authentic, reproducible and unique revealed a deliberate ambivalence that would, in fact, accompany all of his replication projects.124

By September 1934, iridescent, light green perforated cards announced the publication of Duchamp’s edition of three hundred standard and ten deluxe editions of La

123 Duchamp, letter to Walter and Louise Arensberg (20 February, 1934), reprinted in Naumann and Obalk, eds., Affectionately Marcel, 187.
124 The fact that Duchamp included a different “original” note in each of the deluxe editions of the Box could be said to further complicate the tension between original and copy since he effectively negated the possibility of a “master” original box. By dividing up his originals and dispersing some of them over ten deluxe editions, no single box could contain all the aural notes from which the copies were made.
Mariée mise au nu par ses célibataires, même, the full name for a box that underscored its central reference.125 Each green, flock-covered box contains ninety-three loose slips of paper describing the details, preliminary ideas, and projects mostly related to the Large Glass, including a doctored photographic reproduction of the piece itself (as seen while it was first exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926), copies of plans, elevations, and drawings pertaining to sections left incomplete, a copy of Man Ray’s photograph of Dust Breeding (picturing the dust accumulating so as to impart “color” to the area of the Glass known as the “Sieves”), and eight reproductions of artworks related to the Glass.126 Each scrappy shard of paper, quickly sketched diagram, and half-finished phrase was torn away from some other context and, like in its predecessor, the Box of 1914, the notes sit in their container without any prescribed order.

While the mere fact of making such an edition would be enough to acknowledge the inherent reproducibility of the artwork, the content of the boxes exponentializes that notion: Duchamp’s three-hundred and ten copies of ninety-three originals amounts to more than 30,000 acts of replication for this one edition of boxes alone. For it should be emphasized that, while being mechanical in some sense, the actual techniques of reproduction that Duchamp specifically chose involved procedures that required painstaking manual labor and were intensely time-consuming. To fabricate his facsimile reproductions, his selection of original notes were individually photographed in order to

125 Duchamp actively worked on selling his box of notes, his engagement in its circulation and dissemination was part of the work: in addition to the special “subscription” form for ordering it by mail, he offered his Boîte verte at a special rate to institutions and made sure that the most avid collectors of his work also had their own copy.

126 Those works include: Coffee Mill, Passage from Virgin to Bride, Chocolate Grinder, Bride, Oculist Witnesses, Glider Containing a Water Mill in Neighboring Metals, 9 Malic Molds, and To Be Looked at (from the other Side of the Glass) with one Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour. Duchamp used the complicated pochoir method for only a single one of them, the Nine Malic Molds, and ordered mere black and white collotypes for all the others, curiously reserving the much more elaborate and pictorial form of pochoir color reproduction for his notes and not the bulk of his actual paintings.
be reproduced using a combination of collotype printing, or, as the French say, *phototypie*, and hand-stenciling, or *pochoir*, coloring.¹²⁷ For this, the artist enlisted the help of a pochoir studio in Paris to reproduce the chromatic idiosyncrasies of his habitual scribbling.¹²⁸ They had an assembly line-like set-up so as to hand-stencil the colors on the prepared collotypes. An individual zinc stencil was hand cut for each strikethrough, underlining, or other colored mark and then a watercolor wash was applied by hand over each stencil in order to simulate the original note. Each reproduction delivered to him from the pochoir studio was then hand-cut using a set of zinc tear-templates the artist made in order to mimic the particularities of the irregular tears or frayed edges of its “original.” And when the artist tired of doing the work himself (there were after all, tens of thousands of little bits of paper to cut), he hired, as he willingly admitted in interviews, his apartment building concierge to complete the task. But the whole tedious operation evidently appealed to the artist, for even if enacted with factory-like repetition, each of his copies was borne from application by hand, resulting in inevitable variations; the effect was a perfect *simulation of originality* even as each is, necessarily, slightly distinct—from each other and from their model. Original copies they were, leaving behind a minefield of questions regarding their status as “reproductions.”

Figure 1.34 [Marcel Duchamp, Zinc elements for making the *Boîte verte*, 1934]

Figure 1.35 [Marcel Duchamp, Replicated notes from the *Boîte verte*, 1934]

¹²⁷ *Phototypie*, also known as collotype printing, was invented and patented by the Frenchman Alphonse-Louis Poitevin in 1855 and was the most accurate method of photomechanical reproduction available in its time. The French term *phototypie* etymologically bears its connection to the photographic process, and indeed it was one of the only methods available to allow printing from an ordinary photographic negative, a fact that could not have escaped Duchamp. See “Collotype and Pochoir,” Arnold Fawcus and Trianon Press (process description press release) as well as Ecke Bonk’s “delay included,” in *Joseph Cornell/ Marcel Duchamp*, 101.

¹²⁸ It seems Duchamp introduced a number of probably deliberate deviations from the exactitude of his replicative mission. Comparisons between some original notes and their replicas reveal small but perceptible—and seemingly willed—differences in size, paper type, or ink color.
It is, for still other reasons, symptomatic of Duchamp’s critical project that he should have chosen the combination of photomechanical reproduction and hand coloring. Several letters written by Albert Gleizes and the French Cubists to Alexander Dorner in 1929 and 1930, likely in response to the exhibition *Original and Facsimile*, suggest that news of the show made it to Paris and, in particular, to the circle of artists Duchamp knew well through his brother Jacques Villon. The letters evince that discussions of the artwork and its copy had been ignited in Paris, where what Gleizes calls the “recent development” of the new technique of “phototypie finished with pochoir coloring” allowed artists to generate new possibilities for the dissemination of their work. As Gleizes underscores, the method resulted in copies “as real as the painting itself because produced in the same way and from the same material.”\(^{129}\) The letters also confirm not only that the French artists around Duchamp were then debating the value of this newly developed method—and of the reproduction of artworks *tout court*—but that there was a fervent sense that of all the available reproductive methods, the pochoir technique was the most like “painting itself.” Whereas Gleizes and the other French Cubists were considering the method as a way of circulating their painterly production precisely because of its apparent fidelity to the original, Duchamp’s entire project challenges the very idea of what fidelity to an original might mean. He conversely saw the method’s equivocal quality and therefore its critical potential: the pochoir technique, more than any other, maintained a highly ambiguous relationship to mass reproduction while retaining the closest (and thus most conflicted) relationship to “the original.”

Edging both towards and away from industrialization, mass culture, and technical reproducibility, pochoir replication held onto something of the handmade against the

grain of a mechanically reproduced image. Thus, far from choosing an outmoded or near-
obsolete technique, Duchamp used pochoir in order to formulate a complex response to
his cultural context: it was the method that allowed for copying while retaining a hold on
the status of originality. Consequently, not only do the conditions under which Duchamp
used the method become clearer, but so too does the degree to which his choice meant to
underline the necessary ambiguity of the resulting handmade copy.

Duchamp was interested in a paradigm of the mediated or mechanically
reproduced: this much is evident based on the sheer quantity of reproductions that he
made and the particular, complicated, even fetishistic methods he used to go about the
business of making them. Yet conversely, everything about his project—from his
repeated return to the replication of hand script to his inclusion of actual “original” notes
in the deluxe boxes—attests that the artist was articulating the terms of a practice that
elevated even as it evacuated the traditional status of the artwork, an artwork untethered
from its ties to originality.

It is perhaps no coincidence that after the Box of 1914, Duchamp chose again with
the Boîte verte to replicate his own writing, this time focusing even more insistently on
the autograph. Arguably, Duchamp’s paradigm of mediation was most forcefully (most
perversely) expressed through the signature, that hand-made script that is necessarily
repeatable and simultaneously thought to be incommensurable with the copy. Entirely
bound up in the question of an artwork’s authenticity, the signature’s facture often serves
as either validation of a work of art or the mark that betrays it as a fake. As Jacques Derrida puts it, “In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a
repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must detach itself from the present and singular intention of its
production. It is its sameness which, in altering its identity and singularity, divides the seal.” Derrida,
“Signature Event Context,” in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago
Duchamp’s scribbled writings were precisely the iconic traces that, ironically, supported the idea of the author—this artist—as a unique thinker. So while he pushed ahead in his explorations of reproduction as a modus operandi for his art practice, Duchamp also short-circuited this operation by doggedly constructing aura: the aura of the handwritten, the aura of the delicately handmade and thus in some way always paradoxically unique copy (underscored by the “originals” included in the deluxe editions), and, finally, the aura of hermeticism that he promoted by publicly circulating the relics of an artist’s thinking process.

If aura lies at the center of Duchamp’s endeavor, it also could not have escaped the attention of Benjamin when looking at the Boîte verte, so preoccupied was the German thinker with the ramifications of mechanical reproduction for the unique and auratic work of art at precisely that moment. Benjamin’s unpublished variant for one of the sections of the “Work of Art” essay reveals an astute understanding of the Boîte verte:

[Duchamp’s] theory of the work of art [correction: of the value of art?] which he demonstrated recently (without explaining it) through a series of large boxes, La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même, is pretty much as follows: once an object is looked at by us as a work of art, it absolutely ceases to function as such. This is why contemporary man would prefer to feel the specific effect of the work of art in the experience of objects disengaged from their functional contexts [crossed out: torn from this context or thrown away]…rather than works nominated to play this role.131

The passage is striking for many reasons. The rare commentator of the period that paid attention to Duchamp’s notes (including, most notably, André Breton) found in them

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131 Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomènes et variants de la version définitive;” Écrits français, 179-80 (translation mine).
little more than a story to be disclosed, a citable soap-operatic drama of love, machinery, and frustrated desire. Benjamin, on the other hand, found in them not the unfolding of a narrative but an experience that gives evidence to nothing less than a theory of the work of art. In short, Benjamin saw in the notes something of the formal, linguistic, and theoretical complexity that others too quickly overlooked in favor of a quest for a tale of a Bride and her Bachelors. He does not even, in fact, ever refer to the notes’ subject matter—in other words, he does not read them as if they were to convey information or elements of a “story.” Implicitly understanding that the point is not to put the notes into any such functional order, Benjamin detects other stakes.

The German thinker’s sparse but incisive reflections on Duchamp only begin to suggest the impact that the artist’s preoccupation with reproduction might have had on him by way of artistic example, and this even if his reflections on the artist were

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132 In 1932 and 1933, thus before Duchamp had embarked on the process of replicating the notes in the Boîte verte, the artist shared his notes with André Breton and the writer published a text transcription of several of the notes pertaining to the Large Glass. Prefacing them with a short introduction, he stressed the “considerable value” of the documents and annotating the text with a careful description of the particularities of each of the original notes—including underlinings, cross-outs, and the color of the ink employed. See André Breton, “Marcel Duchamp: the Bride Stripped Bare by Her Own Bachelors,” This Quarter, Surrealist special issue, vol. V, n. 1 (September 1932), 189-91, as well as “La Mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires mêmes,” Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution, no. 5 (May 1933), 1-2. Later, following the publication of the Boîte verte, Breton would go on to write a more extensive interpretative essay, notable in this context for a number of reasons: first, Breton had not seen the actual Glass, so his article is based entirely on a viewing of reproductions and the details gleaned from the notes; secondly, he organized the chaos and fragmentation of the notes into a neat, continuous, and quite conventional romantic story (complete with a list of characters, descriptions of their intrigue, action, motivation, etc.), which he presented as the eloquent legend for the mute map that is the Large Glass (an interpretation that helped influence the reading of the notes thereafter); thirdly, his was the only published essay on the notes to have appeared before the end of the 1950s, when Duchamp’s work and legacy was starting to be reassessed. See Breton, “La Phare de la mariée,” Minotaure 2, n. 6 (Winter 1934-1935), 45-49. Very likely, Breton’s designation of a number for each element or “character” in the Large Glass (visible from a photograph bearing annotations found in Breton’s archive after the writer’s death) was done in preparation for this text. See illustration featured above. Dorothy Dudley’s unpublished review of the box suggests that the American writer also found symbolic value in the notes, a “mechanical-physical set of symbols for the modern artist; just as the Gothic artist had a religious set from which to construct windows and frescoes.” Dudley, alias Clos Vert, “Paris letter,” dated November 3, 1934, unpublished mss., cited in Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art, 116-17.
ultimately not retained in the final, published essay.\footnote{133} For it is hard to overlook the fact that one of the most complex theses in the “Work of Art” essay—that the advent of photography has completely transformed art’s role, that “to an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility”—was perhaps no more exemplified in the art making of the period than in Duchamp’s oeuvre. Even the readymade, “invented” almost simultaneously with the making of the \textit{Box of 1914} and so deeply related to the logic of that note-reproduction project, provides an important gloss on Benjamin’s thesis, being the first of Duchamp’s endeavors to make works that, by dint of their industrially produced nature, are always already \textit{infinitely reproducible}.

\textbf{The Guide for an Artwork}

It is perhaps fitting that the artist’s most involved exegeses on reproduction up to this point came in implicit relationship to his readymades and explicit relation to the \textit{Large Glass}, itself constructed as an undeniably aural masterpiece. When asked, Duchamp recounted in no uncertain terms that he meant for the notes of his \textit{Boîte verte} to serve as a kind of key or guide, a discursive supplement to his inscrutable \textit{Large Glass} (as he had once suggested about the \textit{Box of 1914} as well).\footnote{134} And indeed many of the notes do identify otherwise entirely cryptic or, simply, unrealized elements in the \textit{Glass}, bestowing

\footnote{133} Inevitably, one must wonder why Benjamin didn’t include these reflections in the final essay. Although it can only be speculation, perhaps it was because, when Benjamin was writing, he was on one side of a world war and was looking into the face of another. His reflections, which he wrote and rewrote until nearly the end of his life, on the transformations of the work of art were not the rantings of a nostalgic clinging to an idea of the artwork, but instead someone grappling with the vast social transformations that he was experiencing and wondering what role mechanical reproduction had in all of it. The work of art had a role to play in social cohesion, which was a fundamental concern of Benjamin’s, but which—and perhaps he sensed this—Duchamp was apparently not much interested in, no matter that his replicated notes advanced a theory of the artwork.

\footnote{134} See Pierre Cabanne, \textit{Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp}, 42.
meaning on the enigmatic pictured (and unpictured) motifs, communicating otherwise inaccessible ideas, facts, and “explanations” for the work. For instance, according to the _Boîte verte_, the chocolate grinder in the lower panel of the _Glass_ operated by the nine individually named headless uniforms (the “Bachelors” in this tale) is actually a metaphoric masturbatory device; the insect-like “agricultural machine” in the upper panel, on the other hand, is declared to be a love-gas emitting virgin Bride. The _Large Glass_’ materialization of Eros and its discontents is driven by technologies, both obscure and mundanely mechanical, which power the cycle of an endless amorous striptease that never results in consumption—or so just about any scholarly text written on the _Large Glass_ would confidently tell you.\(^{135}\) This is not based on any visual analysis of the work itself, but instead based on the reading of the notes. Indeed so hermetic is the _Glass_ itself, so unfeasible is it to know any of those narrative “facts,” that many interpreters contend that the work would be completely impenetrable were it not for the notes.\(^{136}\) This is

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\(^{136}\) Craig Adcock suggests, “Looking at the _Large Glass_ alone, the viewer would have almost no inkling of what it was supposed to represent.” Adcock, _Marcel Duchamp’s Notes_, text published to accompany exhibition of the same name (Florida: University Fine Arts Gallery, 1985), unpaginated. The indeterminate status of the notes, however, is suggested by Susi Bloch, who observes that Breton’s important early essay on the _Large Glass_ and the notes, “La Phare de la mariée,” first published in _Minotaure_ 2, n. 6 (Winter 1934-35): 45-49 (and later included in Robert Lebel’s monograph on the artist), is largely responsible for the persistent understanding of the notes as a key rather than a work in itself. “If anything,” she notes, “it is the _Large Glass_ which could be seen as a supplement to the _Green Box_, the incomplete realization of a ruminating idea that could never satisfactorily articulate itself in purely visual terms.” See Bloch, “The _Green Box_” _Art Journal_ 34, n. 1 (Fall 1974), 27.
supported by Duchamp himself, who repeatedly affirmed that without the notes one could hardly understand the meaning and status of the Large Glass as a conceptual—more than visual—endeavor.\footnote{Speaking about the Large Glass late in life, Duchamp observed: “I still have pleasure seeing it again, even though it is not finished or even intended to be looked at. It certainly isn’t L’Embarquement pour Cythère [by Antoine Watteau]. It isn’t even a picture; it is a mass of ideas.” His interviewer Michel Sanouillet probed: “If one accepts your definition of the Large Glass, why did you feel the need to write all the notes which are found in the Green Box?” To which Duchamp retorted: “Certain ideas, to prevent betrayal, call for a graphic language: that’s my glass. But as a commentary, the notes can be useful, like captions, which accompany photos in a catalogue of the Galeries Lafayette. That’s the raison d’être for my Box.” Michel Sanouillet, “Entretien avec Marcel Duchamp” in Les nouvelles litteraires, reprinted in Arturo Schwarz, ed., Notes and Projects for the Large Glass, trans. George H. Hamilton, Cleve Gray and Arturo Schwarz (Thames & Hudson: London 1969).}

Figure 1.36 [André Breton, Annotations on a photograph of the Large Glass used in the preparation of Breton’s various essays about the work and its notes, ca. 1934. Photograph by John Schiff]

Like the Box of 1914 before it, the later notes were to be an accompaniment to an object that shouldn’t even, according to Duchamp, be looked at. Speaking of the work in 1949, he proclaimed: “The glass was not made to be looked at (with aesthetic eyes); it must be accompanied by a ‘literary’ text which is as amorphous as possible and never takes form; both elements, the glass for looking at and the text for listening and understanding, had to complement each other and, above all, prevent the other from acquiring a plastic/aesthetic or literary form.”\footnote{Duchamp, letter to Jean Suquet, December 25, 1949; reprinted in Suquet, Miroir de la mariée, 247.} As Duchamp would have it, it was through his replicated writings that he aimed to undo the accompanying glass “painting” as a mere observable depiction (a painting for painting’s sake), which was tantamount to problematizing painting’s raison d’être (and this at a time when visuality was the quality that legitimated the very existence of painting). The attempt, with the notes, to prevent the Glass from taking on the role of an autonomous masterpiece (or necessarily existing at all: “whether it is there or not, is not important,” as Duchamp said)\footnote{The artist asserted: “…the ideas of the Large Glass are more important than the actual visual realization,” to which he added, “Courbet’s revolution was mainly visual. He insisted, without even mentioning it, that a painting is to be looked at, and only looked at, and the reactions should be visual or} and, most
notably, to keep it from being looked at, is all the more curious when one considers that
the notes were reproduced and themselves rendered public at a moment when the Large
Glass itself was inaccessible to its owner, or any other viewer. It was, in other words,
invisible.\textsuperscript{140}

Figure 1.37 [Katherine Dreier and Marcel Duchamp with the Large Glass in the Dreier home, ca. 1936]

The Boîte verte was thus being replicated and disseminated at a moment when
Duchamp could only imagine the Glass’s potential future presentation such that the notes
would have to serve, at the time, as something like discursive auxiliaries for a then-
unviewable work while also positioned as things which themselves “never take form” and
exist in the absence of their subject. And if Duchamp repeatedly insisted that his various
boxes of notes, Box of 1914 and Boîte verte, were a kind of commercial catalogue for the
Large Glass, the analogy was no accident: product catalogues accompany, explain,
contextualize, even “sell” objects to a potential buyer.\textsuperscript{141} They can entirely determine
how you see (or don’t see) the product on offer. And this, as it happens, has largely
proven to be the case, since almost every serious written account of the Large Glass
retinal, not much to do with the brain. A plain physical reaction in front of a painting... [The Large Glass]
is hardly to be looked at, so whether it is there or not, is not important. Some of the notes, the written
notes, explain what could have been done on it, drawn on it.” George Heard Hamilton, “A Radio
Interview” conducted on 19 January 1959 for BBC Radio. Transcription printed in Duchamp: Passim, A
Marcel Duchamp Anthology, Anthony Hill, ed. (Langhorne, Penn.: G&B Arts International Limited, 1994),
77 (italics mine).
\textsuperscript{140} The fragile glass piece had been shattered while being returned to its owner Katherine Dreier after it was
first publicly exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. The damage, however, was only discovered when
the work was finally uncrated five years later. Thus, when Duchamp released the facsimile edition of notes
in 1934, and announced them as specifically relating to the Glass, it was before repair on it had even begun
(and consequently before the Large Glass could be viewed again).
\textsuperscript{141} “When I made my Glass, it was not my intention \textit{to make a painting to be looked at}, but a painting in
which I had used a tube of paint as an accessory and not as an end in itself... I wanted, then, to add a book,
or rather a catalogue like the \textit{Armes et Cycles de Saint Etienne}, in which every detail would be explained,
catalogued. And this idea to bring these two things together does not at all, in my opinion, have a literary
character...My mix had the advantage of getting rid of the idea of painting for painting’s sake, which, in
1913, had been my point of departure.” Alain Jouffroy, “Conversations avec Marcel Duchamp,” [1954 and
1961] in \textit{Une revolution du regard: A props de quelques peintres et sculpteurs contemporains} (Paris:
makes explicit reference to or acknowledges information that Duchamp set out in order to “guide” its reading (and some accounts, as we know, were even written about the Glass even though only the notes themselves were consulted).142

In their own way, then, Duchamp’s tens of thousands of copies of his notes disseminated in the world to accompany a singular, auratic masterpiece could be seen as another sort of “test”: they query whether the circulation of an archive of accompanying notes could foil the “aesthetic” aspect of an artwork (the Large Glass) and, conversely, determine its reading. The magnitude of such a proposition and its significance for the artist’s larger thinking cannot be overstated: Duchamp was attempting to see whether the discourse that surrounds an artwork—like a proto press release or exhibition guide, in other words, those usually curator- or institution-generated documents—could complicate, if not entirely influence the interpretive destiny of an artwork: positioning it, endorsing a reading, and, ultimately, steering its reception.143 And, as history has shown us, it actually did.

CONCLUSION

From about 1913 onward, Duchamp had repeatedly, and against the auratic artwork’s claim to autonomy and its own self-possessed significance, offered up copies of notes that claim their existence for the purpose of construing surplus meaning for another

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142 Breton notoriously wrote his “Lighthouse for the Bride” without even having seen the Glass itself and on the basis of only Duchamp’s notes and photographs; but countless are the scholars who admit that much of their understanding of the Glass is “furnished” by the notes. See Breton, “Lighthouse for the Bride,” in Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp (New York: Paragraph Books, 1959), 88-94 and the previously mentioned essays on the work.

143 The radical significance of the notes lay in their willfully ambiguous status between autonomous objects themselves and their role as elaborately made discursive apparatuses for an artwork. One cannot forget how unusual it was at the time for an artist to propose ways to access their artworks, something typically only done by people other than the creators of their works themselves—gallerists, curators, critics, or auction sales officials.
artwork. In so doing, their discursive function effectively directed the reception of the *Large Glass*, determining how most Duchamp scholarship to date has understood the notes’ elusive pendant. Yet, ironically, the artist’s project to undermine autonomy (and the original’s aura) did so with handwriting, that most auratic of traces. Duchamp’s simultaneously auratic and multiple, autonomous and contingent photographically replicated handwritten notes present themselves as the perfect “theoretical objects” (to repeat Krauss’s term referring to the potential of photography, as a means by or through which theoretical reflection is made possible).\(^{144}\) It is precisely there, in Duchamp’s notes as theoretical objects, if you will, that the modernist myth of originality, along with its notion of the author (the author being, from its etymological roots, the source of “authority,” the purveyor of the kind of certainty that “settles an argument”), aura, and autonomy, was first established and simultaneously contravened in the artist’s oeuvre. And it is this ambiguous maneuver that reveals itself to be the veritable motor of Duchamp’s entire life project. His photographically inflected copies—strange, audacious, inelegant indexes that they are—represent, then, the first instances of a life-long series of programmatic breaches.\(^ {145}\)

For Duchamp’s replication of notes was an engaged and life-long operation. In 1966, at the very moment when conceptual artists were busy making an art of decidedly

\(^{144}\) See discussion earlier in this chapter and Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” 290-91.

\(^{145}\) One cannot help but think that it is exactly there, in that 1913-1914 act of reproducing his notes (of making documents) that the seeds are sown for the event that would remain crucial to Duchamp’s most powerful and enduring legacy: the 1917 *Fountain*, whose existence as a copy without an original was first announced and made visible because of Duchamp’s careful photographic documentation (and the subsequent publication of the documentation) and, later, by the replication of the piece (on the basis of the documentation). The act of engaging Alfred Stieglitz to photograph the rejected urinal has recently been acknowledged by scholars as the precursor to conceptual photography. However, I would argue that Duchamp prepared for and rehearsed the implications of the gesture through his *Box of 1914* and later through his *Boîte-en-valise*, as discussed further in chapter two. See Mark Godfrey in Jessica Morgan, ed., *The Unruly History of the Readymade* (Mexico City: Jumex Collection, 2008); and Erik Verhagen, “La Photographie conceptuelle: Paradoxes, contradictions, et impossibilities,” *Études photographiques* 22 (September 2008), 118-139.
unauratic documents (perhaps in no small part as a response to the model that Duchamp himself offered), the artist went on to “publish” one final box of notes, called *À l’infinitif*, bringing the total of the artist’s meticulously copied doodles to over 40,000 variously sized facsimiles in all.\footnote{Duchamp’s notes were published under the title “Speculations” in *Art in America* (March-April 1966). One can only imagine that the information in the notes must have spoken volumes to artists working in this period, but even more than what the notes said—in their musings on optical illusion, the photographic, plastic duration, etc.—it was the form these speculative documents took and their role in the discursive administration of the artwork it supposedly related to. The four-page spread in *Art in America* was covered with a scattered carpet of notes—notes that formed the faint background upon which Duchamp’s words from a selection of notes appeared in translation in black bold-faced letters. There were images, too: photographs of Marcel at a desk, Marcel sifting through his notes, Marcel writing, it is striking how much these photos looked like an emerging Conceptualism’s own cherished bureaucratic aesthetic—with their overbidding interest in representing their projects through photographs of desks and chairs, books, and notes. And though, when asked in interviews, Duchamp denied that there were any further unpublished notes, after his death a package of nearly a hundred more were found, carefully laying in wait like some message in a bottle meant to be posthumously sent to sea. They were published more than a decade later under the title, simply, *Marcel Duchamp, Notes* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980).}

*The Box of 1914* is thus the crux of not only the various replication projects that would follow it, but also, and even more importantly, the larger interrogation that Duchamp inaugurated in which the certainty of terms like “autonomy,” “originality,” “aura,” “author,” “artwork,” “discursive apparatus,” “artist,” and even “curator,” came undone.

Despite the limited analysis of Duchamp’s notes as things in and of themselves (rather than mere fodder for reading the *Large Glass*, which is how they were amply used), they forcefully demonstrate several central preoccupations that traverse the entire trajectory of the artist’s oeuvre. These include the undermining of painting’s singularity with photography’s infinite multiplicity, a process that grappled with the very definition of the work of art as such, which Benjamin saw as the artist’s advancement of a “theory of the work of art.” It was a theory whose foundations were being laid in 1913. Already then, Duchamp’s first box of notes (related to, but not quite in themselves collage, literature, photography, or painting) were quite at odds with the artistic production of...
their time. As a result, the attempt to set them into context with the avant-gardist developments amongst Duchamp’s Cubist, Futurist, and other contemporaries may have foundered, causing them to be generally omitted in histories, which have largely failed to account for their prescient and far-reaching significance.

It was perhaps their means of operation as much their indeterminate status as autonomous objects, in other words, what they did and how they did it, as much as what they were, or weren’t, that rendered them so long unaccounted for in histories. Almost curatorial in nature (more than traditionally artistic), they made it just one small leap, then, to move from thinking about the production and circulation of notes that are meant to accompany and shift perception of an artwork to thinking about the exhibition spaces that said artwork finds itself in—which would become, increasingly, Duchamp’s concern in the years that followed.
Chapter 2

“I MYSELF WILL EXHIBIT NOTHING”
PRINCIPLES

About few things had Duchamp been so defiant, so seemingly categorical. “I myself will exhibit nothing, in accordance with my principles,” he wrote to his friend and most dedicated collector, Walter Arensberg, in 1918.¹ At issue was whether or not the artist would show any of his own work in the Cubist exhibition that he was attempting to organize in Buenos Aires during his short stay there. In the end, the exhibition never materialized, but Duchamp’s “principles” remained in effect; directing Arensberg from afar, he instructed the collector not to loan any of his work for other exhibitions being planned in New York at the time. A few years later, his answer to his brother-in-law Jean Crotti’s solicitation for artworks to be exhibited at the 1921 Salon Dada was perhaps even more explicit. “Balls,” he answered, in a telegram with, obviously, no works to follow.² Still later, in a 1925 letter to another one of his patrons, Jacques Doucet, Duchamp declared, “All exhibitions of painting or sculpture make me ill. And I’d rather not be involved in them.”³ Again he sent orders not to lend one of his pieces—a copper and metal motorized contraption titled Rotative Demi-Sphere (1924) then in the hands of the collector—if requested for exhibition, because, as the artist explained, he didn’t want

¹ Duchamp, letter to Walter Arensberg (November 8, 1918). Reprinted in Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, eds., Affectionately, Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp (Ghent: Ludion, 2000), 64.
² “Pode bal,” literally, the “skin of the ball” means “nothing” or “not at all” or, in more vernacular French, “Balls (to you).” Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973), 180. The Telegram to Crotti was the second of Duchamp’s refusals to participate in the show. His sister Suzanne (Crotti’s wife) had previously asked the artist to partake in the exhibition, to which Duchamp replied that “exposer” (to exhibit) rang too much to his ears like “épouser” (to marry). Needless to say, after receiving his telegram, Crotti and his Dada colleagues understood not to press him; in fitting Dada fashion, they responded by displaying empty frames in the space that had been reserved for Duchamp. Recounted in Marjorie Perloff, “Dada without Duchamp / Duchamp without Dada: Avant-garde Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Stanford Humanities Review 7, n. 1 (1999), 48-78, and http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/dada.html (accessed January 2, 2012).
³ Duchamp, letter to Jacques Doucet (19 October [1925]). Reprinted in Naumann and Obalk, eds., Affectionately Marcel, 152.
people to see in it “anything other than ‘optics’.” Which is to say, he didn’t want anyone to get his or her own ideas about what category of object it was. A thing’s location and mode of display, its placement in the context “of painting and sculpture,” his reticence suggested, has consequences. After all, people might just take anything shown in an exhibition to be a work “of art.”

Duchamp’s infamous early history of rejection at the Parisian Salon des indépendents was the catalyst, so the self-perpetuating myth goes, for his critical attitude towards institutions of artistic judgment and presentation. Yet only a few years after his fellow Cubists quietly asked him to withdraw the Nude Descending a Staircase in 1912 from their exhibition, and despite his seemingly unequivocal declaration of “principles,” he went on to be actively involved in many shows, not only as an exhibiting artist but, perhaps more surprisingly, as advisor, organizer, curator, and even quasi-dealer. Indeed, in various ways over the course of more than half a century, Duchamp would make the exhibition a vital component of his thinking about the work of art as such.

This chapter examines Duchamp’s active involvement in exhibitions and the function of these within his oeuvre. One senses in studying them, that Duchamp

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4 Ibid. Duchamp would later relent, allowing this and other optical works to be displayed in exhibitions of painting and sculpture.

5 Duchamp had exhibited his early paintings at the two main French salons of the period, the Salon d’automne, from 1908 to 1912, and the Salon des indépendants, from 1909 to 1912. At the Salon des indépendants of 1912, Duchamp experienced perhaps his first real brush with artistic rejection when the hanging committee of the Cubist room (which included his artist brothers) asked him to withdraw his Nu descendant l’escalier. As the notes of Frederick Kiesler’s conversation with the artist several decades later reveal, the wound of that rejection had not been forgotten, their gesture had “made him mad” and as a result, according to Duchamp, “he retired from exhibiting.” Duchamp, as recorded in Kiesler’s notes, presumed to date from 1945, a photocopy of which is preserved in the Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Foundation Archive, Vienna and reprinted in http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_5/collections/kiesler/popup_p6.html (accessed January 2, 2012).

6 Parts of this chapter’s examination of the role and importance of exhibition-making to Duchamp have appeared, in earlier forms, in: “Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,” in Raymond Spiteri and
obstinately, programmatically, refused to reduce the artwork to a discrete, auratic thing onto itself. His perennial involvement in exhibitions in roles other than participating artist in the traditional sense and his repeated adoption of an amateur curatorial role suggests that he comprehended all too well that the display, dissemination, and even sale of the artwork not only construct its value and meaning, but also determine the conditions for when, how, and if at all, it enters history, thereby constituting the work in a certain sense. Indeed, the centrality of Duchamp’s relationship to the exhibition—that is, the ephemeral organization of ideas and objects in (an institutional) space—suggests that it is imperative to write the artist’s relationship to exhibitions and his role as curator into the history of his oeuvre. This demands attention not only to his orchestration of opportunities to present his works in particular exhibition configurations and his frequent participation as curator of exhibitions from the 1910s into the 1960s, but also to his construction of an object literally as an exhibition (or an exhibition as an object, depending on one’s point of view) with his Boîte-en-valise, a decisive agent in the construction of the legacy of the artist’s entire oeuvre.

EXHIBITION AS TEST

That Duchamp understood public exhibitions to be sites with the power to announce the work of art as “art,” and in turn to create the conditions for its entrance into history is perhaps first articulated in relation to the readymades. As we know, those everyday industrially made objects eventually land in the annals of art history. But the chronicle of how and when they actually made it there is essential, though still somewhat under-

discussed. For to tell this story, one must shift one’s attention away from the traditional object and toward the curious series of Duchampian procedures that made their entrance into history possible.

We know that, by 1913-1914, Duchamp had a number of yet-unnamed readymades in one of his first Parisian studios. They remained there while he temporarily moved to New York, until, in his absence, his sister Suzanne threw them all into a dustbin while cleaning up. In a letter sent to her in early 1916 (it arrived too late to save the stuff), Duchamp explains his new category of object and the concept for what he called, then, for the first time, the “readymade.” He accompanies it with the request that his sister sign his name, inscribe his chosen title, date them, and send them to him.7 (After all his labor replicating his notes just two years before, it is ironic that the actual hand script of the author was here of little importance, although that there should be an author named was, clearly, crucial). Much later, in the 1960s, the artist stated that he had begun fiddling with these objects as a mere “distraction,” even claiming that they had begun as “a very personal experiment that [he] had never intended to show to the public.”8 But in actuality, by 1916, he had decided to title each one of them, to sign and date them, and

7 Duchamp’s first mention of the category/title/genre name, “readymade,” can be found in a letter to his sister (January 15, 1916): “... you saw the bicycle wheel and a bottlerack in my studio. I bought that as an already finished sculpture. And I have an idea about the bottlerack: listen. Here in New York I have bought some objects of a similar style and called them ‘readymade.’ You know enough English to understand the meaning of ‘already finished’ that I have assigned to these objects—I sign them and put an inscription on them in English. I'll give you a few examples: I bought a big snow shovel upon which I wrote ‘In advance of the broken arm...’ Don't try too hard to understand this in a romantic or impressionistic or cubistic way—it doesn't have anything to do with that; another 'readymade' is called ‘Emergency in favor of twice’... This whole preamble is one for reason: Go get the bottlerack. I am making it into a readymade from afar. On the inside of the bottom ring you will write the inscription I will give you at the end here, using small letters and painting them on with a brush and silver-white paint, and in the same lettering you are to sign it as follows: Marcel Duchamp.” Reprinted in Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, eds., Affectionately Marcel, 43.

even to attempt to show them in public exhibitions. In short, he treated them as works of art, even as he repeatedly and vehemently denied their artfulness.9

Duchamp’s radical act embodied by the readymade was not merely to select a non-art object and treat it as art, because, and as he quickly understood, like a tree falling in a forest with no one but him to witness it, few might notice, and little about anyone’s understanding of art would change; even his sister, after all, hadn’t recognized the objects’ status enough to have not thrown them out. Instead, for the profane things that he had selected to “switch function,” as he once described the procedure, and to occupy the place of an artwork, yet another act was necessary.10 The conditioning factor that allowed the readymades to enter a wider historical discourse was not so much, or at least not only, that they were selected or nominated objects, but, instead, it was the curation that Duchamp orchestrated for them to eventually take up position as the landmarks that they are today. As objects that lacked uniqueness, evidence of technical skill, romantic impulses, and ultimately, had unquestionable authorship—precisely because they were store-bought things and thus not auratic—they required these curatorial operations. In

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9 The paradoxes of this assertion are inescapable: whilst Duchamp endowed his readymades with many of the signs of being artworks, he fervently and repeatedly claimed that they were not aesthetic objects, in fact. As he declared in a public lecture: “A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these ‘readymades’ was never dictated by aesthetic delectionation. The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anaesthesia.” Lecture published as “Apropos of ‘Readymades’” (1961) in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 141. As a further example of his numerous assertions on this topic, he told interviewer Philippe Collin: “The fundamental truth is that it [the readymade] should not be looked at. It just is there. One’s eyes merely convey the fact of its existence. But it is not to be contemplated as if it were a painting. The very idea of contemplation is evacuated. There is just a taking note that it is a bottlerack, or that it is a bottlerack that has switched function.” Collin, Marcel Duchamp parle des Ready-mades (1967) (Paris: L’Echoppe, 1998), 14 (translation and italics mine). Complicating these assertions, in another interview Duchamp claims: “A ready-made (laughs), is first of all the invented word I used to designate a work of art that is not one. In other words, that is not hand made. Handmade by the artist. It’s a work of art that becomes so by the fact of my or the artist’s declaration of it as a work of art, without there being any participation of the hand of the artist in question to make it.” See Guy Viau, Interview with Marcel Duchamp, “Changer de nom, simplement” on Canadian Radio Television (17 July 1960) transcribed and printed in Fin n. 5 (Galerie Pierre Brullé, June 2000): 12 (italics mine).

10 Collin, Marcel Duchamp parle des Ready-mades, 14.
other words, they needed to be put on public exhibition, be documented and administered in some way, successfully appear as art in an art context, and be connected to a larger artistic oeuvre. These efforts are the vital and yet little acknowledged backstory to the readymades and their complex relationship to art history, nowhere more explicitly evident than in the peculiar reception and historicization of that most iconic of the bunch, *Fountain*.

Contrary to the usual discussion of the readymades as an “invention,” one should, then, more precisely, speak of their *curatorial construction*. The shift is more than a question of semantics, but rather one of implications: instead of being the result of immediacy or a genial discovery, as the use of that word implies, it insists on the labor implied in the administrative, non-artistic aspect of the curatorial. This shift of terms connects the readymade both backwards to the artist’s replicated note projects/archiving—with their own attempt at a kind of discursive accompaniment to the *Large Glass*—as well as forward to his active involvement in exhibitions, sometimes even in the explicit capacity of curator. All of these roles testifying to Duchamp’s lifelong preoccupation with the apparatuses that surround the artwork.

The series of curatorial gestures that bring the readymades into being, as it were, has a prologue: In April 1916, just two years before he first made his grand declaration that he would prefer not to exhibit at all, Duchamp tried to get more, not less, of his works shown. When invited to exhibit one of his paintings in a group show at the Bourgeois Gallery in New York, Duchamp bartered with the gallerist, agreeing to participate only if two of his readymades could also figure in the show (“I will give you a
painting to show but let me have my readymades also”). The readymades were subsequently placed, without indication or fanfare, in the coat and umbrella stand area near the entrance. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they went totally unnoticed (“Nobody knew what was there. There was no description, no denomination, no label”). As Duchamp biographer Bernard Marcadé suggests, “Duchamp, at the time, hardly bent over backwards to get his readymades seen, let alone admired. All that was important to him was that they figure in the show.” Why, one must wonder, did he insist so fiercely on showing them at all?

Duchamp, it seems, was venturing to see if his readymades might, by dint of being situated in an art space, get noticed or if, effectively, he had determined a kind of artwork that could court invisibility and thus, in a way, both become and simultaneously cease to be art. The fact is, he didn’t label the two readymades, didn’t insist on having them in the exhibition space proper, where visitors expected to find “art”; he didn’t present them in a way that would signal their status as art (by placing them on a pedestal, for example), and he didn’t orchestrate any documentation of the act (as he would, to an extent, a year later with his store-bought urinal); he did not even point out the two pieces to anyone in a way that would have generated discussion about them. And in interviews, when recounting the story in passing, decades later, he never mentioned with any consistency which two readymades were shown. And yet, under No. 50 in the exhibition checklist and recorded below the heading “Marcel Duchamp” one could find

12 Ibid.
13 Marcadé, “Concept of Nothing,” Voids, 236.
14 See the discussion of this exhibition and Duchamp’s inconsistency about which readymades were included in Thierry de Duve, Kant After Duchamp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 102.
the mention of “Two Readymades,” so a trace of their presence in the exhibition and of
the new object/category/genre he devised was deliberately set (no matter that at the time
few probably knew or understood what the term meant).\(^\text{15}\) The exercise seems a kind of
“test” from which Duchamp might have learned that an object only appears as a work of
art under certain conditions, one of which is to be formally and explicitly \textit{on exhibit}—
with all the administration (labeling), protocol (pedestal, frame), and contextualization
this entails (among other bona fide artworks and decidedly in an exhibition space)—and
not just the area near an exhibition space.

Less than a year later, an entirely different sort of space served as testing ground
of another sort. While Duchamp never actually called it an exhibition space, and it was in
no way properly public, his first New York studio/apartment was as much a place of
display as it was a place of labor and living. It is best known from a series of small and
grainy photographs, some of them out of focus. A certain Henri-Pierre Roché, a writer,
occasional art dealer, and good friend of Duchamp, took them at some point in 1917;
Roché would go on to write \textit{Jules and Jim}, proving him to be arguably a far better
novelist than he was a photographer. But the images’ aesthetic quality was not really
what mattered. Duchamp kept the pictures and returned to them years later. Reworked
and then left out like his laundry, or like clues, the images would whisper that the
configuration of objects in a space holds some secret to their significance.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[scale=0.5]{Figure2_1.png}
\caption[Views of Duchamp's studio, New York, ca. 1917]{\textbf{Figure 2.1} [Henri-Pierre Roché, Views of Duchamp’s studio, New York, ca. 1917]}
\end{figure}

There isn’t a single photograph among this set shot by Roché that shows the
artist’s studio (in this case also his home) cleaned up. Duchamp’s drawers are open. His

\(^{15}\) Listed in \textit{Exhibition of Modern Art}, the booklet accompanying the show (New York: Bourgeois Gallery,
shoes and pillows are strewn across the floor. Dust has collected in the corners. The supposed cold conceptualist, the man who epilated his entire body because he seemed not to like the unkemptness of body hair (and requested that his partner of the moment consider doing the same), the artist of the industrially produced readymades—lived in a pigsty. Yet Duchamp’s sense of housekeeping is not so much my point as is his arrangement of objects. The photographs reveal that the shiny porcelain urinal on view was not in the bathroom, or even tucked in a corner, but hung over a doorway. Duchamp’s snow shovel was not casually leaning against a wall waiting for use, but suspended near the ceiling. His coatrack, in turn, could be found inconveniently and ridiculously in the middle of the room, nailed to the floor. The disorder of the room might appear careless, except that a urinal, a snow shovel, and a coatrack simply didn’t get to where they were by accident: these were selected objects in chosen positions.

The Roché photos give another indication that Duchamp thought of the readymades as more than mere stuff. The pictures show that these everyday objects, because of the way they were carefully arranged or displayed—indeed, exhibited—could not be practical; their utility was undermined so that they became objects of contemplation, or perhaps of laughter, but not of use. The studio—while decidedly not an art institution and not exactly public—was nevertheless frequented, and it was, in a way, the readymades’ first presentation space, the place that Helen Molesworth rightly calls

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17 It is noteworthy that Duchamp would use several of these display strategies also in more public exhibitions: the snow shovel was repeatedly suspended from the ceiling in various exhibitions throughout his life and he famously placed a replica of the “original” *Fountain* over the doorway of Sidney Janis’’s gallery for the *Dada 1916-1923* exhibition, held from April 25 to May 9, 1953.
the readymades’ “major site of reception.”¹⁸ That site of presentation/reception was a place of enunciation. It declared: this is not (only) a urinal (or apparatus to hang coats, or tool to shovel snow).

Around the same time (although the exact chronological relationship of these two events of 1917 remain fuzzy), a time before the word “curator” was in common use, Duchamp was made president of the “hanging committee” for the Society of Independent Artists’ exhibition set to take place in New York from April 11 to May 6, 1917. The exhibition was open to all comers, and the president of the hanging committee was responsible for the display strategy and structure of the exhibition, which is to say, close to the curator in the contemporary sense. In that capacity, Duchamp devised a curious system for the arrangement of the show, proposing to hang the artworks not according to school, style, chronology or even perceived quality, but alphabetically and, according to chance, beginning the exhibition with the first letter selected from a hat. As it happened, the letter “R” was drawn first and images of the resulting show reveal that paintings were hung edge to edge in two rows, with a label near the works indicating the letter of the alphabet to which their author “belonged.” The New York Times would have none of it, condemning the exhibition as “Pictures by the mile, hung in a go-as-you-please manner, in alphabetical order, instead of the order of merit.”¹⁹ The comment surely amused Duchamp as he had already proposed a long-term plan for the recurrent exhibition, too: in the years after, another letter should be drawn, and then another—thereby ensuring absolutely no favoritism while defying every known system according to which exhibitions were typically organized.

Arguably, it was precisely because Duchamp was president of the hanging committee that he made sure that another gesture he performed would be anonymous: he pseudonymously submitted a store-bought piece of porcelain plumbing entitled *Fountain* to the exhibition. The urinal, signed “R. Mutt 1917,” was, as the famous story goes, rejected. No matter that the exhibition claimed to have “no jury and no prizes” and anyone who paid the six-dollar member and submission fee, as R. Mutt had, was supposed to be allowed to exhibit; and no matter, indeed, that Duchamp, as president of the hanging committee himself didn’t agree with the rejection and resigned in protest, subsequently pulling out of the exhibition the only (rightfully attributed) work of his own that he had planned to show. A urinal revealed the exhibition’s pretense of undogmatic inclusiveness to be, quite simply, a lie.

“*Fountain* may be a very useful object in its place,” so a rare reporter referring to the event recounted, “but its place is not an art exhibition, and it is, by no definition, a work of art.” The verdict was clear: censored from the catalogue and the show, it was hidden by the non-jury “jurors” behind a wall partition where the public would not see it. It was thereafter lost or accidently broken or deliberately smashed or taken—the stories vary wildly—almost as quickly as it had been chosen from among the lavatory supplies at the J.L. Mott’s ironwork and appliance showroom, never to be seen again. Or at least almost.

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20 It is not known which work Duchamp had planned to show, only that he decided not to show any when he resigned in protest of an exhibition that wouldn’t accept to have R. Mutt’s signed urinal in it.  
22 For the most extensive research on the different accounts of *Fountain*, see William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp/Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection, Houston Fine Arts Press, 1989).
As we know, at some point after that fatal judgment and before the object’s ultimate demise, Duchamp had the rejected *pissotière* photographed. That is, he orchestrated the creation of an evidential trace of its existence, while still careful not to reveal that he was the fixture’s “author.” If anyone wondered, they might have deduced at the time that he was acting in his capacity as president of the hanging committee, in other words, producing documentation in relation to the exhibition in which he was involved. But his commissioning of a photographic document was meant to do something more than ensuring that it could, in a Barthesian sense, one day prove that the *Fountain* “had been.”23 For in that case, any photographer—even Roché—would do. Instead, Duchamp engaged the services of none other than the most respected art photographer of the day, Alfred Stieglitz, the very man, as Duchamp knew well, responsible for championing the photograph as art.24 Stieglitz’s carefully lit and artful (even reverential) image of Mutt’s vulgar salon submission, with the application tag to the exhibition still dangling from the work, was published soon after. It appeared with the captions: “Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz” and “THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS” alongside an unattributed editorial and several texts relating to “The Richard Mutt Case” in the second, May 1917 issue of the satirical journal *The Blind Man*, founded and anonymously published by Beatrice Wood, Roché, and Duchamp himself.25 But the circulation of the

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24 Duchamp uses exactly this description of Stieglitz in his 1963 lecture on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Armory Show of 1913. See Duchamp, “Armory Show Lecture, 1963,” reproduced in *Fin* no. 18 (Galerie Pierre Brullé, June 2003), 21-32. For more on Duchamp’s strategic choice of Stieglitz, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 120-123.
25 Beatrice Wood, who accompanied Duchamp on his visit to Stieglitz’s studio, recounts that “After a long conversation and a good deal of laughter, both men agreed that Stieglitz should make a photograph of *Fountain*. But the image should be seen by many. Perhaps, they thought, it would be a good idea if the photograph were reproduced on the cover of an art magazine.” Beatrice Wood, “Marcel,” *Marcel*
little journal was extremely limited, and nowhere was Duchamp’s name attached to the rejected work. Thus few had any idea that he was behind Fountain at all; not even some of his closest friends, patrons, or family knew.²⁶ No one seems to have probed at all about the matter, and Duchamp didn’t publicly mention his connection to the object for decades (“for a period of thirty years nobody talked about them [the readymades], and neither did I,” he later admitted).²⁷ Thus, we cannot forget that, back then, the rejection of Fountain was no more than a footnote to a small, local story. Not a scandal. Not even noticed. Not yet. The so-called invention of the readymade needed, in fact, yet to be constructed.²⁸

Figure 2.3 [Alfred Stieglitz, Photograph of Fountain, 1917]
Figure 2.4 [Marcel Duchamp, Henri-Pierre Roché, and Beatrice Wood, The Blind Man, 1917].

When Duchamp did finally reveal his connection to Fountain, more than two decades later, which is to say, when he began to retroactively acknowledge, contextualize, and create a lineage or genealogy for an object that no longer existed and one that had, moreover, made no impact while it did exist, his revelation was entirely

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²⁶ Duchamp wrote to his sister (even from her he hid the truth) of a “female friend” who had created a scandal with the pseudonymous submission of a “porcelain pissotière as sculpture” that was refused exhibition. He added that he had considered organizing an exhibition of “refusés from the Independents...but it would be a pleonasm!... And the urinal would have been lonely.” Duchamp, letter to Suzanne Duchamp (11 April, 1917), cited in “Affectuesement, Marcel: Ten Letters from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp and Jean Crotti,” Archives of American Art Journal, vol. 22, no. 4 (Spring 1983), 8.
²⁸ I borrow the idea of the artwork “appearing” and being subjected to a “test” from both Thierry de Duve’s brilliant reading of the readymade in Kant After Duchamp and Michael Newman, the latter of which notes: “The ‘original’ Fountain did not appear in the exhibition to which is was submitted, and through its non-appearance showed up the conditions for appearance—or exclusion—of a work of art as both institutional and historical: in that time, in that place, under such circumstances, a urinal could not appear as a work of art, even if it could be conceived as such by an artist.” Newman, “After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan’s Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing,” in Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., Rewriting Conceptual Art (London: Reaktion, 1999), 217. Unlike these readings, however, I would like to insist on the role and even crucial importance of the Boîte-en-valise in the construction of the legacy of the readymade, as discussed in more detail below.
bound up with his thinking about exhibitions, art institutions, and their administration of what counts as “art”. And, as we know, the readymades (and *Fountain* more than any other) have since come to be seen as one of the most uncontestably important artistic gestures of the 20th century. Yet the readymades are arguably the result not only of artistic fiat (invention, declaration, or selection—a logic of “this is art if I say it is”), as it has been long understood, but perhaps even more importantly, of another set of actions: the series of “tests” he enacts between 1916 and 1917 in three very different sorts of spaces (commercial gallery, studio, and supposedly “non-juried” exhibition), the documentation and administration of one key readymade (having it photographed, having that image published), and, crucially, decades later, his construction of a public (even if miniature) exhibition in which he finally, successfully, presents it as “art.”

Who knows how or why exactly Duchamp returned to the idea of *Fountain* when he did in the late 1930s, or at all. He was not, in any case, rushed about the matter. What is clear, however, is that the artist had, in the years after 1917, increasingly turned his attention to the frameworks, institutions, and dissemination systems (both discursive, exhibitionary, and financial) circumscribing the work of art. Starting in 1920, Duchamp had a foundational role, together with Man Ray and Katherine Dreier, in the Societé Anonyme, Inc. (dubbed nothing less than the “Museum of Modern Art” nine years before Alfred Barr Jr. founded another institution that now operates under that name).29

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29 Duchamp’s ambivalence about Dreier’s desire for their venture to constitute a kind of modern museum is made explicit a decade later (as it happens, it was at the very moment that Alfred Barr Jr. was founding a more official “Museum of Modern Art”); the artist told the American patroness that, “according to [his] attitude,” he was not interested in “start[ing] anything in the way of an ‘Art’ museum of any kind.” Duchamp, letter to Dreier (11 September 1929). Reprinted in Naumann and Obalk, eds., *Affectionately, Marcel*, 170. For an account of Duchamp’s involvement in that often overlooked early institution of modernism, the Societé Anonyme, Inc., see Jennifer Gross, ed., *The Societé Anonyme: Modernism for America* (New Haven: Yale, 2006) and Nathalie Goudinoux, “L’Émergence de la Societé Anonyme,” *Etant donné: Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 2 (1999), 22-40.
Duchamp’s official title was “head of exhibitions” and, as such, he wrote nearly all the detailed catalogue entries on artists for the Société Anonyme’s various publications, did studio visits with artists to select their artworks, and decided on the peculiar display details of its short-lived 47th Street exhibition headquarters, including the choice of bluish oilcloth-covered walls, grey rubber flooring, and paper doilies to frame certain paintings. As Kristina Wilson notes, Duchamp’s choice of such unusual elements for the exhibition space had the effect of turning “the gallery itself into an artwork: the art no longer was located simply in the canvases hung on the walls but rather comprised the entire atmosphere of the room.” More than its idiosyncratic exhibition presentation details, Duchamp was responsible for determining and contextualizing the artworks that would be featured in the exhibitions organized at the Société’s headquarters or elsewhere under its banner, a role that he was deeply involved in throughout the 1920s.

Duchamp also carefully surveyed the exchange value of artworks, aware that this, too, had a role to play in the reception and understanding of the object itself. In early 1926, he used his inheritance money for the purchase of eighty of his friend Francis

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30 As she further notes, “These decorating choices also instigated a quintessential Dada challenge to art-viewing precedent: the oilcloth walls created an almost industrial backdrop for the art, and the lace transformed the picture frames from props conferring (masculine) importance and establishment into ephemeral (feminine) accessories.” See Kristina Wilson, “‘One Big Painting’: A New View of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum,” in The Société Anonyme, Inc. Modernism for America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 77.

Picabia’s paintings and the organization of their public sale at Paris’s Hôtel Drouot, an auction house, which is to say, precisely that site where “art’s exchange value is privileged above all other forms of value.” Duchamp designed the catalogue for the sale and, in his personal copy, carefully noted the price he expected each painting to sell for as well as the final hammer price. Just a few months later, he convinced Roché and a rich heiress to join forces to purchase nearly thirty Constantin Brancusi sculptures during the public sale of the Estate of John Quinn, a collector for which Duchamp had been an informal art advisor. Duchamp, as a result, actively involved himself in the promotion and organization of several Brancusi exhibitions (at the Brummer Gallery in New York in 1926 and 1933, and the Arts Club of Chicago in 1933). He became, effectively, Brancusi’s American agent, seeking out exhibition and sales opportunities, even helping to file the initial complaint with the U.S. customs office over the works being levied with import tax because taken to be “articles of utility” rather than sculpture. By 1933, with many of the sculptor’s works still in his possession, Duchamp seems to have understood that his investment, quite literally, needed to be exhibited better, so he immersed himself wholly in the organization of the Brummer Gallery show that year. He drew careful installation plans for the arrangement of each sculpture in space (even cutting Brancusi’s Endless Column down a bit so it would fit upright in the gallery), writing to the Romanian sculptor several times over the course of the show’s preparation, the last letter accompanied by the calculations of all the sales that the show generated (it mattered to


Brancusi what his works sold for, but also to Duchamp, who obviously had a financial interest in the whole affair).³⁴ These activities, like his later sales activities, amounted to nothing more than “small business,” as he insisted in his discussion with Calvin Tomkins when probed.³⁵ But it was business all the same.

Figure 2.7 [Marcel Duchamp, Floorplan sketch for the Brancusi exhibition at Brummer Gallery, New York, 1933]

Figure 2.8 [Installation view, Brancusi exhibition at Brummer Gallery, New York, 1933]

That business included Duchamp’s life-long involvement as art advisor to collectors, organizer of exhibitions for artist-friends, and even quasi dealer of his own oeuvre.³⁶ In the latter case, he ensured that his most dedicated supporters could buy his works once their original owners were willing to part with them, thus facilitating contact between them or even buying works back himself only to offer them for sale to another. Indeed, Duchamp’s art advising was so widespread that critics have rightly suggested, as Roger Shattuck has, “As an advisor to art collectors and galleries and museums, Duchamp had a large influence on the art market in the United States during half a century. John Quinn, Walter Arensberg, Katherine Dreier, Julien Levy, Peggy Guggenheim, Sidney Janis, and Walter Hopps listened to him with confidence.”³⁷ His advice to them was more often than not rather selfless, generously helping to advance the visibility and value of the art of others he believed in, but in a number of cases, Duchamp did successfully manage to capitalize on the fantasies of ownership and desire for

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³⁴ On the staging of Brancusi’s first American exhibitions and Duchamp’s role in the marketing of the sculptor’s artistic production, see the richly documented Marielle Tabart, ed., *Brancusi et Duchamp: Les Carnets de l’Atelier Brancusi/Regards Historiques* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2000).

³⁵ Marcel Duchamp quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 60

³⁶ Among the exhibitions Duchamp formally or informally organized for his artist friends, one must note the first museum exhibition of Florine Stettheimer at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946 and the first solo exhibition of the poet-artist Mina Loy’s work in New York at the Bodley Gallery in 1959.

possession with regard to his own work. In the process, he marshaled private property into public circulation and ensured that the bulk of his oeuvre would remain in the hands of a few patrons who he entreated to then donate the works to respectable museum collections.38 Through all of these gestures, the artist proved that he understood well that the value of an artwork was not self-evident. It needed to be helped along, contextualized, perhaps even created.39

Duchamp’s “tests” arguably went in both directions: he not only attempted to see if everyday objects brought into art exhibitions would get noticed and be taken as valid and valuable, but he also brought idiosyncratic creations to non-art contexts to see how they would be understood there. In 1935, as Roché reports, “[Duchamp] had produced a dozen Rotoreliefs in a large edition…He rented a tiny stand at the Inventions du Concours Lépine, and waited for the crowd. I went to see him there. The disks were all turning at the same time, some horizontally, others vertically, all around Duchamp, who looked like a smiling salesgirl.”40 Later Roché added: “It was incredibly festive, but one would have said that the little stand was shrouded in invisibility. Not a single one of those

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38 Duchamp’s active role in constituting major collections of his own work, beginning with Katherine Dreier and Walther and Louise Arensberg, continued into the 1960s, with the artist funneling many of his remaining pieces into the Mary Sisler Collection, which would have been the largest single collection of his work in private hands had it remained intact, and which he had been led to believe would be kept as a unit and donated to an American art museum (it was not; instead, Sisler sold it off in parts to the highest bidder). See Michelle Anne Lee, “The Puppeteer of Your Own Past”: Marcel Duchamp and the Manipulation of Posterity. (Ph.D, University of Edinburgh, 2010), esp. 226-34. Duchamp also went to considerable effort to avoid having his Large Glass and Tu m’ become part of Dreier’s plans for a “country house museum,” repeatedly insisting with his patron that she instead donate those works to a more visible, centrally located art museum. When Dreier died and left Duchamp as trustee of her estate, he donated the Large Glass to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Tu m’ and several other of his works to the Yale Art Museum, and a handful of remaining important pieces to the Museum of Modern Art in New York on her behalf. See ibid, esp. the chapter: “Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme.”

39 One must add to these Duchamp’s creation of concrete works that explicitly engage with the artwork’s ambiguous commodity status: Tzanck Check in 1919 and Monte Carlo Bond in 1924. For a discussion of these, see Judovitz, “Art and Economics,” 169-194.

visitors, on the lookout for practical inventions, stopped by. A quick glance was all they needed to see that, between the machine to compress and burn garbage, on the left, and the instant vegetable cutter, on the right, this thing wasn’t practical. Duchamp smiled and said, ‘One hundred percent a mistake. At least it’s clear.’ Neither taken to be artistic inventions nor practical ones, Duchamp’s obviously useless spinning disks drew no interest from the public of the inventor’s fair—it being, after all, a site for the dissemination of new pragmatic solutions to everyday life. As this and other of the artist’s quasi-curatorial activities made clear, a thing’s (ontological) status and (cultural or financial) value were not inherent to it, but rather ascribed to it. Details such as how one spoke about it, how and in what context it was presented, and the financial transactions it incited had a formidable role to play.

Figure 2.9 [Marcel Duchamp, Rotoreliefs, 1934]

After his official role as “president of the hanging committee” or “head of exhibitions,” and unofficial role as agent or dealer, by the late 1930s Duchamp would add a new role to his repertoire of apparently marginal activities, that of “exhibition generator-arbitrator” (the term the Surrealists used for him in 1938) which was another way to say, simply, curator. In that role, in 1938 he prepared the first of what would go on to be an elaborate and spectacular series of exhibitions for the Surrealists, which arguably had both the conventions of exhibition-making and the museum, that most authoritative institutional site for the presentation of art, as a counter model. It is precisely at that moment, with curating, exhibitions, and the museum so much on his mind, that Duchamp decided to construct his own personal miniature retrospective, a

“portable museum” of sorts. With the creation of multiple copies of this complex, ambiguous work, which he entitled the *Boîte-en-valise*, not only did Duchamp effectively “curate” the first public exhibition of *Fountain*, but he also used it as the first broad public declaration of his authorship of the work.⁴² This act is arguably the fundamental precondition for its entrance in the annals of history.

**THIS IS A CURATOR, EXHIBITION, MUSEUM**

One might rightfully ask: what was a “curator,” an “exhibition” or, moreover, the “museum,” exactly, in the early part of the 20th century? And what sort of curatorial practice or exhibition form or museum paradigm could have been imaginable for Duchamp at the time? If the art museum as we know it today found its roots in the Renaissance memory-theater and cabinet of curiosities, Enlightenment encyclopedism, and later, French post-Revolutionary fervor, so too did its privileged keeper, the “curator,” find its roots in ancient and medieval origins denoting the “caring” for public

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⁴² In addition to the publication in *The Blind Man*, an oblique reference to *Fountain* surfaced in the chronology section of the catalogue for the 1936 *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Coinciding with Duchamp’s work on his retrospective “album,” the artist allowed his derisory gesture to be known through a passing reference in the catalogue that was published to accompany the large-scale MoMA show. However, for the vast public—professional and amateur alike—that didn’t know that Duchamp was involved in the affair, Alfred Barr’s brief and somewhat enigmatic reference to the artist’s “rejected submission of a readymade piece of plumbing” under the events of “1917” was easily overlooked. Perhaps the only readers who paid any attention to it were the administrators of the Society for Independent Artists, who noticed the mention and felt that their good name was slighted by Barr’s too-brief explanation of the event. Feeling the need to defend their actions, they recalled the questionable nature of the object that was named in Barr’s statement. John Sloan, writing on behalf of the group, insists that the piece cannot be simply seen as a “readymade” like the others, for the Independents could not “be permitted to place in the exhibition an object which by its nature would have aroused such disgust and resentment among the members and visitors of the society as to endanger the continuance of the work which had been undertaken and carried out steadily since [the inception of the organization].” And so, according to his own admission, the act of rejection was not one of “judgment” but rather some sort of public morality policing. Sloan thus objects to Barr putting the Society in the position “of rejecting an exhibit offered as a work of art when, as you know, we were dealing with a matter totally unrelated with art,” a comment that underscores how little changed about the perception of the nonexhibited work in the years between 1917 and 1936. See exchange of letters between Alfred Barr, Jr. and the Society of Independent Artists in 1937 regarding the *Fountain* affair in Clark Marlor, *The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record, 1917-1944* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1984), 37-39.
space or even souls. However much each of these notions—curator, exhibition, museum—became more formalized in the modern period, the types, purposes, and organization of exhibitions and museums in Europe, and the functionary art-guardians that managed their collections, may have seemed as different from one another as the objects within them. Yet, whatever their vast distinctions, many 19th century and early 20th century art museums shared formal, methodological, and ideological premises built into their very logic as secular temples for the public presentation of artworks. These premises, moreover, came to provide a template from which so many other exhibition sites of modernity would model themselves (and which its curator-keepers would be tasked with maintaining). The adjudication of value (both of exhibition and exchange), preservation of authenticity, celebration of patrimony, defense of visuality, discursive contextualization, and didactic edification were just some of these.

The primacy of the “originality” of the artwork to this, as Rosalind Krauss argues, was fundamental:

The theme of originality, encompassing as it does notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art. And throughout the nineteenth century all of these institutions were concerted, together, to find the mark, the warrant, the certification of the original. From this perspective we can see

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44 As various dictionaries confer, the term can be traced as far back as Ancient Rome, where “curators” were senior civil servants in charge of aqueducts, bathhouses, and other public facilities; later, in the Medieval period, the notion gave way to the “curatus,” a priest devoted to the care (or “cura”) of souls, which in turn gave way to the term’s use in early modern law, where the “curator” is the guardian of a minor or someone otherwise deemed incompetent, especially with regard to his or her property.

that modernism and the avant-garde are functions of what we could call the discourse of originality, and that that discourse serves much wider interests—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions—than the restricted circle of professional art-making.46

About the necessary discrediting of the copy that was the flip side of this, “Both the avant-garde and modernism” she would go on to insist, “depend on this repression.”47 And, as the late 1920s controversy around Alexander Dorner’s exhibition *Original and Facsimile* had indicated, the art museum (and the vigilant officials tasked to uphold it) prided itself a bastion for the incontrovertibly original artwork.48

Fast forward, for a moment: whereas one might presume that this 19th and early 20th century art museum—so focused on the maintenance of order, neutrality, rationality, and originality—was wholly different from its later, more modern successors, at least as concerns an almost singular interest in the auratic original, “the original” was evidently still an abiding concern of the museum well into the late 1960s. And this regardless of the revolution that we might imagine Duchamp’s work had by then instituted or that the 1964 re-edition of his readymades should have certainly solidified (and with it Pop art’s almost simultaneous multiplications, Conceptual art’s dematerializations, and Minimal art’s serial repetitions). An anecdote might prove most telling: some time after Mel Bochner’s 1966 exhibition *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art*, the artist-curator attempted to donate the four binders that comprised the exhibition to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The museum rescinded the offer, presumably not seeing the binders as art at all because they were filled with little more than photocopies of art, but not originals in themselves. Instead,

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47 Ibid., 168.
48 See discussion in chapter one.
they proposed to consider the gift for the library, which Bochner refused. *Working Drawings...* is now widely considered both a piece of Conceptual art (by Bochner) that forms the bedrock of Conceptual art history and the first Conceptual art exhibition (featuring the submissions of such artists as Sol Lewitt, Donald Judd, Eva Hesse, and Carl Andre), with the reproduction-filled binders remaining, in fact, a form of “original” trace of both. Yet, as late as 1966, the MoMA was simply not able to conceive of binders with photocopies of artworks as artworks in themselves. With this in mind, one might not have to strain too much to imagine how troubling Duchamp’s various proposals, including his own copies of his artworks, were to the museum and the very idea of the work of art that circulated in the decades even before that.

That the very exhibition walls were not only the ground for display, literally, but also the ground for authority, metaphorically, was certainly another shared tenet of the constellation of institutions tasked with preserving and disseminating art. As Krauss posits:

> Whether public museum, official salon, world’s fair, or private showing, the space of exhibition was constituted in part by the continuous surface of wall, a wall increasingly unstructured for any purpose other than the display of art. It was also the ground of...choice—of either inclusion or exclusion—with everything excluded from the space of exhibition becoming marginalized with regard to its status as Art. Given its function as the physical vehicle of exhibition, the gallery wall became the signifier of inclusion and, thus, can be seen as constituting in itself a representation of what could be called exhibitionality, or that which was developing as the crucial medium of exchange between patrons and artists within the changing structure of art in the nineteenth century.49

The “exhibition,” whose appellation reveals its 15th-century roots in legal terminology as the displaying of evidence, may well in Duchamp’s time still have been depicted as the neutral (evidential) presentation of items to a public within or upon an institution’s walls.

Nevertheless, an exhibition, already then, was more than the series of artworks produced by a list of artists, occupying a given space, and hung more or less high on a wall. Temporary though it is, an exhibition was—then, as now, and whether in a museum, salon, gallery, or inventor’s fair—the context through which art was often first made public, seen, discussed, and circulated. It was also—as Duchamp and his contemporaries seem to have understood well—the relationships created between its contents, the dramaturgy around them, the discourse that frames them, and, importantly, the authority of the site or institution in which it finds itself.

In the mid 1920s and ‘30s, and through the pioneering efforts of exceptional museum directors, including Dorner of the Landesmuseum in Hannover and Alfred Barr, Jr. at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the development of the modern notion of the curator in Europe and the United States began to take shape. Encompassing ancien régime notions of the art historian-cum-museum conservateur, principally preoccupied with the cataloguing and preserving of a collection, and the more discursive and conceptual strategist and maker of exhibitions that Dorner and Barr inaugurated, the foundations were laid for the present day sense of the curator to crystallize in the 1960s. That this figure, the curator, had the role of caring for and making public the artwork meant that he or she was primarily preoccupied not only with policing the borders of the artwork (to ensure the authenticity of what went under its name and to gauge its value for history) but also with creating a discursive context around it, to enact what Buchloh has

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50 Surprisingly, despite the growing literature about museology and exhibition history, there are few historical accounts of the early 20th century development and expansion of profession of the curator as such, and instead mostly only isolated institutional histories or publications focused on the rise of either a single iconic figure, such as Alfred Barr, Jr. or Harald Szeemann or of the curatorial class that came of age between the late 1960s and the 1990s. See Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollack, “From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur: Inventing a Singular Position,” in Thinking about Exhibitions, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996) 231-50.
called the curator’s role in the “transformation [of the work] from practice to discourse.” This discourse included lecturing and writing about and contextualizing the artwork but also carefully positioning it within exhibition contexts so that the understanding of the work might accrue differently, or at all.

Duchamp, whatever he might have thought of these definitions, certainly could not ignore the authority of the museum, the exhibition, or the curator for the artist and artwork, nor that each was in the throes of “modernization” by the 1930s. Some American and European museums had, in the years just prior, taken conscious steps toward changing and “neutralizing” their galleries and modes of display (the inauguration of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 being an important early example, with its sparse hangings and monk cloth covered walls, anathema to the dense skying and cluttered salon interior that had been the previous norm). Yet the year 1937 marked the beginning of an undeniably scientific approach to the museum and an attempt at the universalization of its display aesthetics and exhibition-making in Europe. It was precisely then that the museum, as a crucial tool in the service of history and as a modern enterprise, was officially and publicly “erigé en système,” or, turned into a methodology.

51 “The curator observes his/her operation within the institutional apparatus of art: most prominently the procedure of abstraction and centralization that seems to be an inescapable consequence of the work’s entry into the superstructure apparatus, its transformation from practice to discourse.” Benjamin Buchloh, “Since Realism there was…(On the Current Conditions of Factographic Art)” L’Exposition imaginaire: The Art of Exhibiting in the Eighties (‘s-Gravenhage: Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, 1989), 96-117.
53 L’Amour de l’art, in their special issue devoted to the exhibition, mentioned 1926—when the journal Mouseion was created—as the official beginning of museology, “with its rules and its laws.” However, the exhibition Muséologie, discussed below, and its accompanying literature stressed that the museum, as an institution, had only truly reached a certain stable, formalized place in 1937. See, Exposition internationale de 1937, Groupe I. Classe III. Musées et expositions. Section I. Muséographie, published as a special issue of L’Amour de l’art (no.18, June 1937). The effect of this exhibition can be seen in the subsequent
From May to November 1937, Muséologie, an exhibition organized by the French state, set out to define the burgeoning “science” of museum design and installation techniques. Situated between the various national pavilions at the Paris Exposition Universelle, each with their competing claims to technological, cultural or other advancement, this exhibition insisted that the art museum was not a venture of personal whim (“of either good or bad taste”), not a subjective selection, but rather a complex and precise enterprise of scientific judgment and presentation of museum-worthy, history-making, original artifacts. To demonstrate this, craftsmen created miniaturized dioramas of museum interiors from all over the world—tiny walls lined with tiny paintings, monumental architectures reduced to the scale of dollhouses—all recessed into the walls of Muséologie’s carefully organized display spaces. Signs and diagrams mapped out how spatial organization and installation aesthetics enabled viewers to see and experience an exhibition. Next to these didactic elements, graphics charted facts about the history, role, and importance of the museum, highlighting the number and kind of museums maintained by each nation. It was an encyclopedic exhibition on museums and museum technologies.

transformation of European museum interiors such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which, in 1938, covered the museum’s moldings, plinths, and bricks in a uniform white. All this in time to welcome an exhibition of abstract art (with works by Kandinsky, Brancusi, Van Doesberg, Mondrian, and Taueber-Arp, among others).

54 The heated 1920s and ’30s debates around the question of the modern museum in France (its envisaged function, aesthetic, collecting policy, relationship to conceptions of nationhood, etc.) reveal that the exploration of museology must have been particularly important to this nation with an art capital that did not, by 1937, have a museum devoted to modern art. Cf. the various public enquêtes administered in the period, most usefully, those gathered in: Pour un musée français d’art moderne (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1996) and, Christian Zervos, “Pour la création à Paris d’un musée des artistes vivants,” Cahiers d’Art vol. 5, no. 7 (1930): 337-39. For a reading of the ways in which, in 1937, the displays of art and artifacts of the French museum and the larger Exposition Universelle constituted and contradicted a certain image of the French nation, see James D. Herbert, Paris 1937: World’s on Exhibition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. chapter three.

As a finale, the exhibition offered a full-sized “model” retrospective of the work of Vincent Van Gogh. In it, visitors experienced the optimal museological conditions: noiseless rooms, evenly distributed lighting, studied floor and ceiling treatments, appropriately sober surfaces, standardized labels, effusive wall texts about the artist and works. More than a show to honor the famous painter of sunflowers, it was a didactic “installation type,” a model demonstrating how one should, if one followed scientific principles, ideally exhibit art.56 There, as in the museum in general, proper behavior and disciplined observation was the goal.57

Amplifying the cult of the visual so important to the very conception of the museum, the exhibition of museology unabashedly touted the primacy of vision.58 It is thus not surprising that Descartes, founder of the scientific method in France and considered the quintessential visual philosopher, was omnipresent in this exhibition on exhibition-making. Cartesianism was more than simply insinuated; the curators expressly

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56 The various precision-crafted, ordered and organized parts of the entire museological show, even with a subject as moving and intriguing as the life and work of Van Gogh, apparently did not add up to a scintillating museum experience. “Drying out like steaks in the refrigerator” is how Georges Salles, a curator at the Louvre, characterized some of the objects on view. Describing the whole *Muséologie* affair with biting humor, he acknowledged the “life-size photographs, optician’s charts, synoptic graphs serving as the background to hygienic vitrines, painted over in white,” adding, “we could approach everything without danger and examine them [the objects] without emotion: they were sterilized.” His sentiment is clear: the scientification and systemization of display had sucked all life out of the art. The spectator, like the work, was left anaesthetized. Georges Salles, “Le Musée,” *Le Regard* (Paris: Plon, 1939), reprinted (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992), 51.

57 In this new type of museum, comportment was prescribed, for example by marking distances between displayed object and visiting subject; visual attentiveness was stimulated, sensation rationalized and modes of perception and contemplation managed. Indeed, the aims of the “new evolution of museums” were unequivocal, for, as the *Muséologie* organizer stated, “it no longer suffices simply to tolerate the visitor and problems he brings with him: one must attract, seduce, force and direct his attention.” Rene Huyghe, “L’Évolution du Musée,” *Revue des deux mondes* (October 1937).

58 See the various pages of photographs and diagrams in *L’Amour de l’art*, official “guide” to the museology exhibition, which reproduced the interior of the *Muséologie* exhibition along with sketches of visitor’s “vision lines.” *L’Amour de l’art*, esp. 22-23, and 28. For an elaboration of the primacy of the visual in the museum from nineteenth century to the present, see Tony Bennett, “Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics,” *Configurations* 6.3 (1998), 345-371.
conceived the Muséologie exhibition “under the patronage of Descartes.”\(^{59}\) It formed part of France’s celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of the Discours de la méthode, a text that included La Dioptrie and contained the thinker’s most extensive examination of optics and vision. Cartesianism, science, reason, truth, order: these were all mobilized to uphold the museum’s authority, as exemplified in the whole of this unusual presentation at the Exposition Universelle—very likely the first show ever to explicitly take the museum exhibition as its theme.\(^{60}\)

Meanwhile, the proclaimed scientificity of the whole museological enterprise neutralized the museum’s judgments—the arbitrariness of its artistic choices or the partialness of the narratives it validated; yet, its stakes were just beneath the surface. It was a moment, we should not forget, when Europe was witness to the period’s most terrifying collusion between aesthetics and politics—for which both the museum and the art exhibition writ large were fundamental instruments (think of Hitler’s July 1937 opening of the monumental Nazi museum, the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich, and

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\(^{59}\) See Albert S. Henraux’s preface in the special issue of L’Amour de l’art, 1. Commenting on the breadth of the publicity surrounding the Exposition Universelle’s celebration of Descartes’s Discours de la méthode, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis notes, “the tricentenary which assembled an international congress of philosophers in Paris was marked by the publication of numerous newspaper articles as well as special issues dedicated to Descartes in prestigious French and international journals from Milan to Buenos Aires, and from the Hague to Berlin and Bucharest” (translation mine). Rodis-Lewis, “Préface” in Discours de la méthode (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 8. Descartes’s relationship to French ocularcentrism is discussed in Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

\(^{60}\) And, as Albert S. Henraux, a museum specialist emphasized, for the public to be “attracted, educated, and kept in place, it is necessary to find the proper means to fix their attention as well as to conserve and present artworks, following certain rules […]” (translation and italics mine). Henraux, “Préface,” Exposition internationale de 1937. L’Amour de l’art, 1937, 1. Links between modern subject formation and the development of the museum more generally are integral to understanding the way this exhibition on exhibitioning functioned; cf. Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics (London: Routledge, 1995) and Donald Preziosi, “Art History, Museology, and the Staging of Modernity,” in Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1992) and “Modernity Again: The Museum as Trompe L’Oeil,” in Deconstruction in the Visual Arts, Peter Brunette and David Wills, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
the simultaneous staging of “Great” and “Degenerate” art exhibitions). All of this formed the witting or unwitting backdrop to the Paris Exposition Universelle’s assertion, central to the newly formed discipline of “museology”: that a museum’s evaluation of artworks and presentation of history is grounded in empirical and objective truth.

Figure 2.10 [Installation view, Grosse Deutsche Ausstellung, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 1937]

Figure 2.11 [Installation view, Entartete Kunst, Archaeological Institute, Munich 1937]

EXHIBITIONISM

On the heels of the 1937 Paris Exposition Universelle’s celebration of the rigor and rationalization of the museum, indeed, at the precise moment when the modern art museum was becoming an undeniably solidified, “scientific” progeny of the Enlightenment, Duchamp was, as we know, busy interrogating the functions and protocols of exhibitions and museums in a full-scale exhibition and not only a miniaturized one. Moreover, the artist’s preoccupation with responding to and defying the conventional form and terms of the art exhibition was deeply connected to both his simultaneous work on Boîte-en-valise and, more generally, his conception of the artwork,

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61 While little of the museum’s imbrication in ideology or politics was explored explicitly in the Muséologie exhibition, visitors were left to come to their own conclusions regarding the connection between the museum as machine for the construction of subjects, and the state as primary controller of the museum and, of course, its subjects. One cannot help but recall the centrality of the museum and art exhibition as strategic tools in the Nazi aesthetico-political program in this period: it is hardly a coincidence that the museum was the first architectural edifice Adolf Hitler ordered built when he came to power. The implications of this for a larger European conception of the modern museum must be underscored here. For, even before it was officially opened in Munich in 1937, Hitler’s Haus der Deutsche Kunst (House of German Art) was proudly displayed as a miniature maquette at the German pavilion of the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1937, just a stone’s throw from the Muséologie exhibition. The French artistic, literary, and quotidian press of this period would bear witness to the role the exhibition space came to play in the edification of belligerent nationalism. Escalating into terrifying proportions, the heights of this fanatical patriotism in exhibition-making were the simultaneous Nazi exhibitions of “Great” and “Degenerate” art, opening in July 1937. Cf. Cahiers d’art, La Revue de l’art, Mercure de France, and Le Temps, for the period 1937-8.
inextricable as the latter was from his complex relationship to various institutions of art, including the museum.

One can imagine him walking the vast fairgrounds of the 1937 *Exposition Universelle*, marveling at the displays of scientific technologies, museological gadgetry, and industrial machines. He had made plans to meet friends at the opening, but he disappointed them by missing the festivities. Regardless of whether or not he attended the fair later, like most French, he likely took notice of what the popular and art press, as well as verbal accounts heralded: 1937 was a formidable moment in the constitution of the modern museum. The dismantling of the *Exposition Universelle* had not yet begun when Surrealist leader André Breton and poet Paul Eluard convinced Duchamp, at the end of 1937, to begin to conceptualize the installation of what was to be the first Parisian *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*. The Surrealists had been invited by Georges Wildenstein to stage a collective show at his Galerie Beaux-Arts and had been given *carte blanche* for the event that was held (after several date changes) from January 17 to February 24th, 1938. It did not go unnoticed by the Surrealists—nor, surely, by...

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63 The publicity around the 1937 *Exposition Internationale* was widespread, and Duchamp would have certainly learned about its various components, if not first-hand, then either from the general and specialized art press or from friends who attended. The museology exhibition, we know, did not go unnoticed by those who frequented the same circles. Notably, Georges Salles, a curator, collector, and friend of Robert Lebel was there, and published his thoughts on the show in a 1939 collection of writings, and Georges Bataille, too, spent time there, as evidenced in his essay on the *Muséologie* exhibition’s model Van Gogh show. See Salles, “Le Musée,” *Le Regard* and Bataille, “Van Gogh Prométhée,” *Verve*, 1ère année no. 1 (December 1937), 20.

Duchamp—that the Galerie Beaux-Arts was among the most respectable galleries of the period, an appendix to the venerated art journal *Beaux-Arts* (also owned by Wildenstein), and practically an annex to the French national museums. The invitation, as the artists knew well, thus couldn’t have been innocent: if Wildenstein was interested in Surrealism, the movement’s self-styled radical position was losing its potency. Perhaps for this very reason, Breton and Eluard assembled a team with Duchamp at the helm so as to create an exhibition that would position itself against the very bastion of bourgeois good taste that had had the good taste to invite them.

Duchamp’s official title was the exhibition’s “générateur-arbitre” (generator-arbitrator), a peculiar neologism for the time, announcing his importance as motor for and referee of the ideas of the overall display. In his capacity as, essentially, curator, Duchamp’s interventions were rather simple, even if spectacular in effect and radical in implication: he imagined Wildenstein’s top-lit, cream-colored, elegantly appointed eighteenth-century interior as a dark “grotto.” He covered the ornate moldings, ceiling, and banks of lights with suspended coal sacks (1,200 of them, he insistently claimed).

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65 More than simply one of Paris’s most fashionable galleries, the Galerie Beaux-Arts often organized shows in connection with those offered simultaneously at French institutions. Owner Georges Wildenstein was even awarded the State’s *Légion d’honneur* in 1938 for his efforts on behalf of official French culture. Thus the resulting Surrealist exhibition was not something that the frequenters of the Galerie Beaux-Arts and readers of the well-respected *Beaux-Arts* magazine were used to finding at Wildenstein’s august establishment. The gallery’s prior show, visitors remembered well, had been the highly-acclaimed exhibition of the work of El Greco. Still, Wildenstein (who seems not to have been interested in Surrealism *per se*, but in an exhibition to end a series of surveys of modern art movements), gave Breton and fellow poet Eluard free hand to organize a collective exhibition in his gallery. Hardly a contemporary critic failed to point to the Surrealist group’s decision to hold an exhibition in Wildenstein’s gallery as evidence of the end of the once-radical movement. Like the exhibition invitation’s request for “tenue de soirée,” the ironic and critical aspects of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*’s staging of the imbrications of commerce, art, exhibiting, and bourgeois complacency at this particular temple of art were lost on nearly all of the critics.

66 Even if Duchamp positioned himself explicitly as uninterested in politics and even if the Surrealists knew better than to approach him to sign their various manifestoes and declarations (he never was an official member of the group), Duchamp’s sustained critique of art was vital to the Surrealist effort in 1938. The political stakes of the exhibition space in the period is discussed in my “Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,” 179-203.
Not even justifiable worries about the flammable nature of the coal sacks or an insurance executive’s warnings could move Duchamp to significantly alter his project (emptied of their coal and filled instead with equally flammable newspaper, all the residual soot remained). Duchamp installed an electrified iron brazier at the center of the main hall to serve as the show’s dim, central source of light. In their inversion of interior and exterior, up and down, the sacks initiated an unsettling of the gallery’s architecture, while the faint lighting throughout did everything to refuse an art exhibition’s typical clarity. He had department store revolving doors rented for the occasion and brought into the exhibition space in order to use them to hang paintings and drawings on. In one fell swoop, art and commerce and the art gallery, and the department store (the primary sites for revolving doors at the time) were incisively conflated. And this while the ceiling above undulated, darkness prevailed, the blackened walls refused the clean, white neutrality of the modern art exhibition, and coal dust invariably fell onto the finery of the exhibition’s guests. More than the insertion of any particular object or detail, Duchamp’s determination to comprehensively remodel the entire gallery was a challenge to the unassailability of “those walls accustomed to semi-official exhibits.”

As a result, the 1938 installation looked little like the group’s previous shows or, for that matter, like any other art exhibition held during the period. The mise-en-scène Duchamp initiated was considerably different from the relatively sober and even

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conventional displays that characterized the group’s previous exhibitions, such as the *Exposition surréaliste* of 1925 or the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London in 1936. Even the 1936 *Exposition surréaliste d’objets*—despite its heterogeneous mix of Surrealist constructions, lava formations, mathematical models, African artifacts, and other found objects that shook the taxonomies of the art gallery and museum—did not radically reconceive the exhibition space as such; indeed that show could be said to have mimed as closely as possible (with vitrines, pedestals, and an ordered display) some of the most visible codes and systems of art institutions. On the other hand, in 1938 these presentational codes were called into question for the first time when the Surrealists asked Duchamp to conceptualize and, effectively, curate their exhibition. The result introduced a perceptual and performative undermining of the gallery space and exhibition conventions, an endeavor that subsequent Duchamp-curated Surrealist shows took up as their cardinal principle.69

Figure 2.15 [Installation view, *International Surrealist Exhibition*, Burlington Gallery, London, 1936]

Figure 2.16 [Installation view, *Exposition surréaliste d’objets*, Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, 1936. Photograph by Man Ray]

In the weeks before the opening, Duchamp’s initial ideas for the exhibition design served as an inspiring catalyst for the other participating artists. Salvador Dalí, for example, parked a taxicab—occupied by a begoggled mannequin surrounded by live

68 See Janine Mileaf, “Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton,” *Rex*, no. 40 (Fall 2001), 239-55.
69 According to an unlikely agreement, one review after another denounced the exhibition—one grounds that its bizarre environment had been orchestrated too well or not well enough, that the art was too academic or not “real” art at all, that the Surrealists were hopelessly occult or the latest darlings of a bourgeois elite. The exhibition was regarded as a spectacular failure, and for those who were not perturbed by its unrest or perversity, it seemed a harmlessly disorganized version of the *Salon des Arts* that everyone knew. For others, the exhibition’s *mise-en-scène* seemed to be a cover-up for a lack of artistic aptitude. As François Fosca, writing for *Je Suis Partout* put it, “If the work of the Surrealists had any real interest, this whole staging wouldn’t have been necessary. It is hard to imagine Corot, Delacroix or Degas running around in this way; it is obvious that those artists had talent.” See Fosca, “Les Arts: La duperie du Surréalisme,” *Je Suis Partout* (January 28, 1938), archived on microfilm at the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.
snails and vegetation—just outside the gallery. Inside the gallery, a collectively designed faux urban landscape was the first thing to greet visitors. This streetscape featured fictive Parisian street signs and served as the backdrop for sixteen mannequins, each “dressed” by a different artist. From here one proceeded towards a simulated lake and four elegantly appointed beds in the main hall (that the exhibition interior evoked a brothel was not lost on journalists attending the vernissage) carpeted, by dint of Wolfgang Paalen, with dead leaves and dirt. A soundtrack consisting of “hysterical laughter recorded at a psychiatric asylum” and “the lockstep of a German army procession,” as several artists described it, filled the air. One cannot help imagine that in the twinned evocations of hysteria and the German army, Hitler’s Munich shows were not far off in anyone’s mind. Alongside this aural disruption, the visitors’ olfactory senses were simultaneously stimulated: behind a screen, roasting coffee beans sent the invitation’s promised odeurs du Brésil wafting through the air. The lights were turned off, creating near-obscurity throughout. For the opening night, a dancer was hired to simulate hysteria, thrashing about from the exhibition’s beds to the lake and on to the floor with a live rooster in her hands. Dirty, dark, loud and lugubrious, the 1938 Exposition

70 See Jean with Mezei, Histoire de la peinture surréaliste and Man Ray, Self-portrait.
71 See my “Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,” 179-203.
72 The hired dancer simulated “hysteria” in successive acts during the exhibition’s opening night. Dalí and several other Surrealists choreographed the haptic gestures, high-pitched screams, and erotic gyrations that made up dancer Hélène Vanel’s performance entitled, L’Acte manqué. In mimicking the signature contortions of the hysteric, Vanel’s dance was as much about celebrating this revered figure dear to the Surrealists (admired for her supposedly unmitigated access to the unconscious) as it was about aesthetic subversion and bourgeois derangement, and, it must be noted, the particular valence of such hysteria—at this particular moment—as a pointed subversion of the Nazi ideal. With her tattered white nightgown, bared breasts, and live rooster in hand, Vanel writhed in and out of the crowd of exhibition onlookers. Hissing, screaming, and splashing visitors with mud and pond muck, she moved between floor, pond and the exhibitions’ quartet of beds. Like so many aspects of the Surrealist installation, the performance assaulted the spectator and the codes upon which exhibition viewing typically depended; it shattered the phonic vacuum of the gallery-museum, and sounded the “purity” of the exhibition space. Within the walls of the Galerie Beaux-Arts, Vanel as body/object—live, convulsive, ecstatic and seemingly irrational—
Internationale du surréalisme’s installation “destroyed,” as Man Ray recalled, “that clinical atmosphere that reigned in the most modern of exhibition spaces.”

Figure 2.17 [Helène Vanel, performance for the Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

Figure 2.18 [Helène Vanel, performance for the Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

Even though the wildly fantastic overall scenario might appear at first glance and in retrospect more Surrealist in spirit than Duchampian, the various elements not only remained important to Duchamp, but also anticipated work on his own grotto-like final work, *Etant donnés*, begun years later. More importantly perhaps, by insisting on the fundamental destabilization of the conventional art space and terms of display, Duchamp deepened his own complex engagement with exhibition-making.

It was in this space that his *Pharmacy, Neuf moules mâlics* (Nine Malic Molds), *La Bagarre d’Austerlitz, Rotative Demi-sphere*, one readymade, and his alias’s contribution to the “rue surréaliste” found a temporary showcase. The mannequin “by”

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74 For the Surrealist movement, so committed to disturbing rational and aesthetic categories and to blurring the borders between dream and reality, the exhibition as a whole reflected these desires. And even if the Surrealists differently expressed the nature of their ideological commitments, the collective recasting of the gallery space seems to have been as important to the Surrealist project as it was to Duchamp. The artist explained his participation to Pierre Cabanne as follows: “I had been borrowed from the ordinary world by the Surrealists. They liked me a lot; Breton liked me a lot; we were very good together. They had a lot of confidence in the ideas I could bring them, ideas which weren’t anti-surrealist, but which weren’t always surrealist, either.” Duchamp in Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 81. Benjamin Buchloh asserts—and T.J. Demos reiterates—that Duchamp’s exhibition installations for the Surrealists were covertly and specifically aimed against Surrealist aesthetics and practices. I see Duchamp’s position as being more ambivalent, given the fact that the artist frequently and actively expressed his admiration for Surrealist production as the only contemporary art that managed to avoid pure retinality, and given his continued support for a diverse array of painters and painting by select artists, not to mention his active complicity in Surrealist exhibitions into the mid 1960s. Rather, Duchamp’s point of attack in his installations is at once more general and more specific: exhibiting with the Surrealists allowed him the opportunity to construct elaborate shows that systematically pressured painting as an unquestioned practice, as well as the museum and the notions that turned around them, such as unexamined modes of viewing and the uniqueness of the work of art. See Buchloh, “The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers,” 46; and Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 127-88.

75 Jean with Mezei, *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste*, 281.
Rrose Sélaïvy was among the sixteen rented storefront mannequins poised behind rope against the walls of the Galerie Beaux-Arts’ corridor, each a kind of assisted readymade dressed by a different artist, and each a life-sized dummy next to the name of the street. Wearing Duchamp’s coat, shoes, and hat, with a red illuminated light bulb in its pocket and the signature “Rrose Sélavy” scribbled across its pubes, Rrose’s mannequin (like the other scantily clad figures on darkened street corners) simultaneously evoked Parisian prostitutes and signed, labeled, roped-off museumified objects. The message was striking: the art object, commerce, the art institution, and desire were entwined, a conflation that appeared not only elsewhere in the exhibition but persistently in Duchamp’s larger body of work.76

Figure 2.19 [Roger Schall, Press photographs of the Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

Figure 2.20 [Raoul Ubac, Photograph of Duchamp’s Rrose Sélavy mannequin at the Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

Just as significant to an understanding of the exhibition’s role in Duchamp’s thinking is an element that was not realized. The artist had originally wanted a system of electric lights to illuminate each painting and object in the exhibition individually, but only when triggered by a viewer’s approach. When that proved unrealizable, Man Ray in his capacity as “Master of Lighting,” proposed a practical alternative: he turned out the gallery’s main lights and forced visitors to view the work on display illuminated by

pocket flashlights handed out at the entrance.\textsuperscript{77} Hence it was gloomy during the opening night, and sight—that sense so privileged in the typical art context—was distinctly troubled. May Ray’s solution was largely faithful to Duchamp’s original intention: the viewers brought themselves close to the works, hunching forward to focus their handheld electric lights. Thus, even in its adapted form, one notes in this lighting strategy a concern with perception and a continuation of that questioning of visual autonomy found throughout Duchamp’s oeuvre—from his efforts to circumvent retinality in painting to his various experiments with what he called “precision optics” to, ultimately, the hunched corporeal looking that would be provoked by his final work.\textsuperscript{78} The artist’s attempt to create obscurity could not be further from the “enlightening” tenets of the gallery and museum. Engaging the entire body so directly in the act of art viewing, Duchamp’s darkness rendered palpable his insistence that seeing and knowing are explicitly corporeal affairs.

\textbf{Figure 2.21} [Visitors with flashlights, \textit{Exposition internationale du surréalisme}, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

\textbf{Figure 2.22} [Joseph Breitenbach, Photograph of visitor leaning to view by flashlight, \textit{Exposition internationale du surréalisme}, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938]

Duchamp’s experimentation with exhibition-making continued when, after the exodus of many Surrealists from Europe during the Second World War, Breton called on

\textsuperscript{77} As Marcel Jean recollected, “Duchamp had thought of installing ‘magic eyes’ so that the lights would have gone on automatically as soon as the spectator had broken an invisible ray when passing in front of a painting.” Marcel Jean, \textit{History of Surrealist Painting} (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 281-2.

\textsuperscript{78} In her sustained work on Duchamp’s optical games, Rosalind Krauss, extending the analysis of Jean-François Lyotard, has underlined the ways in which the artist’s vision experiments and optical illusions work to “corporealize the visual,” offering themselves as counter positions to those very notions of good form and pure opticality central to aesthetic modernism. See in particular, Krauss, “The Im/pulse To See,” 51-75; and, “The Blink of an Eye” in David Carroll, ed., \textit{The States of “Theory”: History, Art, and Critical Discourse} (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 175-199. Also see Lyotard, \textit{Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp} (Paris: Galilée, 1977). Among the examples of Duchampian optics in this Surrealist show, reproductions of a Rotorelief and the 1935 Minotaure cover (picturing a montage of Dust Breeding and a Corolla disk) were visible along the gallery corridor behind Rrose Sélavy’s mannequin while his Rotative Demi-sphere (the optical machine that Duchamp positively had not wanted Jacques Doucet to show in art exhibitions just a decade earlier) swirled and pulsed in another room.
the artist again, this time to install the first international Surrealist exhibition in the United States. Titled *First Papers of Surrealism*, after the application papers that most of the émigré artists had to submit upon entry into the United States, the show was held from October 14 to November 7, 1942 at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion on Madison Avenue in New York as a benefit event for the French Relief Societies. For it, Duchamp devised a simple, economic solution to act against the mansion’s faux Florentine interior with its gilded moldings, ornate ceiling paintings, crystal chandeliers, and other opulent architectural details. Having acquired for the installation what he claimed were “sixteen miles” of ordinary white string, the artist engaged the help of several friends to enmesh the exhibition spaces with it, resulting in a crisscross of white webbing. In the end, they used only a fraction of the artist’s overzealous purchase (after, that is, the initial installation, which entangled several chandeliers among other furniture such that the string was accidentally destroyed by “spontaneous combustion”), but the invocation of colossal numbers already evident in the “1,200 coal sacks” of 1938 remained, and the title for the installation was fixed: *Sixteen Miles of String*. The twine traversed the mansion’s former drawing rooms where Duchamp had hung paintings on a series of portable display partitions (paintings being the overwhelming majority of what was on show), thus enacting a far simpler, although no less spectacular, revision of the conventional exhibition than he had conceived previously.

Figure 2.23 [John Schiff, Photograph of Duchamp’s *Sixteen Miles of String, First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York, 1942]

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79 Duchamp speaks about the exhibition preparation, the string purchase, and the spontaneous combustion of the first webbing of string in his interview with Harriet, Sidney, and Carroll Janis, 1953. Typescript, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Duchamp Archives; and see also: Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 86.
The tangled mesh did not cut off vision completely—it was the frustration, not elimination, of sight that Duchamp desired. Still, the entwinement between and in front of so many of the things supposedly “on display” constituted a vexing barrier between the spectator and the works of art. As critic Edward Alden Jewell of the New York Times reported:

The show, installed in what used to be the Whitelaw Reid’s drawing room and in adjacent rooms of his Florentine palazzo of the Eighteen Eighties, constitutes a very diverting and flavorsome event. The décor is phrased in just the unexpected sort of labyrinthine wit that we should expect from Marcel Duchamp, who has engagingly entangled this miniature Surrealist “pluriuniverse” in sixteen miles of innocent white string. No use trying in a matter-of-fact way to describe what he has accomplished. The net result, geometrical at least by implication, in its interlacing and festooning, is appropriately weird and devious. It forever gets between you and the assembled art, and in so doing creates the most paradoxically clarifying barrier imaginable. But if this ingenious investiture of Duchamp’s clarifies the present occasion by so perversely enmeshing it in a shroud of irrational logic, it also helps make imperative one’s effort to determine just what Surrealism really is, how inclusive and to what extent exclusive, is its empire; whether “inner vision” and

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80 A recent article takes position against the descriptions of contemporary critics and the analyses of the event that subsequently followed based on those descriptions, arguing instead that neither vision nor physical movement was as dramatically hindered as has been long suggested. Positing that the obstruction in the exhibition was exaggerated and emphasized more than it actually operated in reality, John Vick bases his evidence on the two known photographs of the exhibition, floor plans of the Whitelaw Reid mansion, and on his own visit to the premises. While his point is potentially convincing, the conclusion of his exposé and refusal to acknowledge that there must have been a reason for so many consistent “exaggerations” is not. That there was some exaggeration of the reality of something as strange and shocking to visitors as all that crisscrossed string in front of artworks is hardly surprising; however, the fact remains that we know from photographic evidence, eye witness reports, exhibition descriptions, and critical reviews that string was hung from various points in the mansion’s main exhibition space and thus created a mesh that enlaced some partitions on which paintings were hung. Vision and exhibition convention were challenged even if neither was rendered wholly unrecognizable: in other words, of course, visitors could also still see that there were artworks behind the string and, of course, much of the space was still physically accessible to the spectator. This fact in no way undermines either the radicality or the strangeness of Duchamp’s mise-en-scène of the exhibition. See John Vick, “A New Look: Marcel Duchamp, his Twine, and the 1942 First Papers of Surrealism,” http://www.toutfait.com/online_journa... (accessed January 2, 2012).
diabolically serpentine wit are, ipso facto, interchangeable terms.

Several of the artists participating in the exhibition were disappointed that spectators could not properly see their artworks, yet this seemed to be precisely Duchamp’s point. If we are to believe Henry McBride’s report in the *New York Sun*, which appeared just after the opening, Duchamp submitted his own painterly contribution to the exhibition to the same visual impediment as the others, obstructing access to his own work even more: “Even Marcel Duchamp…contributes a hitherto unshown canvas [Network of Stoppages, 1914]. It nestles behind a particularly thick wad of cobwebs…”

As in the 1938 *Exposition*, what was exhibited in 1942 was, in fact, not only a reconsideration of the “art” itself, but the performative operation of making a viewer aware of what stands, in the words of the *New York Times*, “between you and the assembled art,” but also, how an art exhibition typically regulates viewing. Duchamp’s strategies thereby simultaneously recalled and anticipated his fascination with how the viewer sees, suggested by his persistent interest in optical experiments throughout the 1920s (think his *Rotative Demi-sphere* and *Rotative Glass Plates*, in particular), as well as such pieces as *To be Looked at (Close To) From the Other Side for Almost an Hour* (1918), with its very specific instructions for observation and, most forcefully, the artist’s final piece, which is at once an artwork and its own space of display, *Etant donnés, 1. la chute d’eau, 2. le gaz d’éclairage* (1946-66).

Figure 2.24 [Man Ray, Photograph of Duchamp behind his *Rotary Glass Plates*, ca. 1921]

Figure 2.25 [Marcel Duchamp, *To be Looked at (Close To) From the Other Side for Almost an Hour*, 1918]

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The organizers seem to have planned to permeate the air with the invitation’s promised “smell of cedar,” but ultimately, the odor was either omitted or simply went unnoticed by the crowds, since no critic mentions it. For the October 14th opening, however, the eleven year-old Carroll Janis did show up on schedule with five of his friends, in full baseball and football regalia, proceeding to run around playing ball and causing quite a scene among the vernissage’s tuxedo-clad attendees. “Our instructions were to ignore everybody and just play to our heart’s content,” Janis later recalled. And to the visitor’s questions or complaints the children replied, as Duchamp had instructed them, “Marcel Duchamp asked them to come and play there.”\textsuperscript{83} It was another “test” of sorts, an inquiry into whether exhibition visitors would respect the authority of the absent artist-curator, even when abiding that authority meant disobeying the tacit rules of the institution they were in: The children, in Janis’s telling, systematically silenced the adults’ reprimands since “Duchamp,” after all, had been the one who told them they could play there.

While in many ways, First Papers in 1942 was less apparently elaborate than the Exposition surréaliste of 1938, both exhibitions contributed a drastic reordering of aesthetic perception and the protocols of institutions for the presentation of art, consequently marking the exhibition itself to be a veritable medium of art for Duchamp.\textsuperscript{84} To pay attention to the exhibitions’ details is to notice the obvious efforts Duchamp took with them, his consistent commitment to them (he even included two installation views in

\textsuperscript{83} Carroll Janis, in conversation with the author, 2001.

\textsuperscript{84} Only blocks away and concurrently with the First Papers of Surrealism exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid mansion, émigré Viennese architect Frederick Kiesler designed a spectacular, short-lived gallery for Guggenheim. See Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2004).
his 1963 retrospective exhibition and catalogue), and the resonance they have with his final, posthumously released work (discussed in the next chapter), regardless of the exhibition’s still under-mentioned role in critical writing about Duchamp’s consideration of the artwork through its display, context, reception, and dissemination.\(^85\) For, however much the spectacular mises-en-scènes might appear strangely anathema to the supposedly aloof father of the readymade, his involvement in these shows is entirely bound up with the artist’s thinking about how artworks—his own and others’—are affected by institutions, frameworks, and distribution, how they find their way into publicness and, eventually, history.

**The Birth of an Author**

In the background of his curatorial adventures sits Duchamp’s creation of an artwork as an exhibition (or an exhibition as an artwork, it is somehow both at once), the *Boîte-en-valise*. He dated it to “1938-1942,” regardless of the fact that its protracted production actually spanned from 1935 (with his initial conception of the project and preparation for it) through 1936-37 (when the bulk of the actual manufacture took place) to 1941 (when the very first deluxe edition of the project was complete).\(^86\) The artist never quite

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85 Although several studies of the Surrealist exhibitions have been published, few have ventured to read in Duchamp’s curatorial role evidence of his larger thinking about the artwork. T.J. Demos attempts this, although not very convincingly, in relation to the supposed post-nationalism of Duchamp in *Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*; Michael Taylor, on the other hand, does not much discuss the Surrealist exhibitions in relation to Duchamp larger output, including the *Boîte-en-valise*, but does advance a compelling trajectory that connects the Surrealist exhibitions to *Etant donnés* in the exhibition catalogue, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009).

86 In the first monograph on the artist, Duchamp and Robert Lebel provide the following dates for the *Boîte-en-valise*: 1938 (Paris) and 1941-42 (New York), see: Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Trianon, 1959), item no. 173. Likewise, in his interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp dates the *Boîte-en-valise* “from 1938 to ‘42.” Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 79. This dating is repeated in the catalogue for Duchamp’s first American retrospective in Pasadena in 1963 (entitled, *de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Sélavy*, like the Duchampian work on which the exhibition was, in part, modeled), and has become the standard (unquestioned) dating in many Duchamp studies since.
explained the 1938 beginning date or the 1942 end date, and, oddly, no one pressed him to clarify them, even though—despite what he told Pierre Cabanne, Robert Lebel, Calvin Tomkins, and others—there was ample evidence, for example, that the conception and construction of the more than three hundred elaborate boxes containing reproductions in miniature of nearly all of his works began at least three years prior to 1938. This imprecision with regard to fact might have been deliberately strategic, or even decisively conceptual: Duchamp, it seems, wanted to identify the inception of his project (for himself perhaps as much as others) with a series of events that coincided in 1938.

Nineteen thirty-eight, or the beginning he claimed, then, was the year he took on a role as curator of the Surrealist exhibition in Paris (the inauguration of what would be a three-decade long commitment to curating for the movement). Conversely, 1942, or his claimed completion date, was the year of the First Papers of Surrealism show, regardless of the fact that neither year was, strictly speaking, accurate in relation to the production of the Boîte-en-valise. Formally, the chaotic disorientations that characterized those shows could not be more different from the unassuming and seemingly orderly arrangement of the portable cases filled with facsimiles of Duchamp works that would become the Boîte-en-valise. However, if the artist’s contribution to the Surrealist exhibitions responded to the art institution’s dignified space with an intrusion that exposed and shifted the period’s normative notions of display and the aesthetic experience proper to it (whether the more dominant bourgeois salon style as manifest in Wildenstein’s gallery or the still nascent white cube that the Museum of Modern Art was advocating at the time), so, too, did his encased retrospectives respond in their own way.
Continuing a reflection on the nature of art and the space of display, they rendered explicit the terms and conditions of the art institution’s supercharged authority.87

More than that, the year 1938 signals a congruence of other, seemingly related events, for it also marks the moment that the artist initiates the remaking of *Fountain*, which is to say, the moment he returns to questions of the authority of institutions (to decide what counts as art) that his rejected original urinal ineluctably recalled. This is also the moment that his album project begins to take on an exhibition-like configuration, as we shall see. Thus Duchamp might well have understood his “portable museum” (as he would later describe it) as only having properly *begun* at the moment he realized that it could no longer be the “album” or “book” he had once thought it would be, but would necessarily have to be the exhibition space he would finally see it as.88 The boxed form that Duchamp had used previously (on a small scale in 1914 and then later, in 1934, for the *Boîte verte*) contained photographic reproductions of scraps of notes; they were boxes with loose and disordered contents that ambiguously sat between the two- and three-dimensional. Had Duchamp continued in this manner, his *Boîte-en-valise* might very well have ended up as another loose-leaf collection of paper and celluloid reproductions in a box.89 However, in the early months of 1938, shortly after taking up the role of exhibition “generator-arbitrator” for the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Duchamp carefully handmade a miniature replica of the store-bought piece of plumbing he had

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87 Even if the white cube aesthetic that would become the norm just a short time later in many galleries and museums of modern art was not yet prevalent, Wildenstein’s gallery (with its baroquely elegant fittings and velvet-lined walls) was every bit as much an assertion of a certain institutional authority, in this case, modeled on the luxe bourgeois interior and still very much in use by most museums.


89 Indeed, by 1937, Duchamp had already reproduced other objects, such as his *Bottlerack* and *Why Not Sneeze?* in two-dimensional, photographic form for use in his envisioned album.
once called *Fountain*—and this act seems to have changed everything. Against this background, the (false) dating of the *Boîte-en-valise* takes on particular significance.

The artist turned to the long lost *Fountain* for inclusion in his retrospective project more than two decades after his defiant 1917 act of “selection.” Once he decided to feature it, he could easily have bought a new urinal from any local plumbing shop and photographed it for the *Boîte-en-valise*, as he had done just two years prior with the lost original *Bottlerack*. Alternatively, he could have reproduced an extant photograph of the original object, as he would in 1940 with the equally lost snow shovel, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. After all, the artist had at least two usable photos of the urinal, having carefully held on to both the Stieglitz image and those little Roché snapshots. Instead, and for the first time ever, Duchamp (*re*)made the urinal. He used the Stieglitz photograph as a reference and turned the *Fountain*’s industrial contours into an odd, miniature, handmade, wire-and-papier-mâché sculpture. The result was, as Roché described it in his diary, “a little masterpiece of humorous sculpture, the color of a boiled shrimp, with little holes that are so absurd yet done with such care.”

By the summer of 1938, the artist brought the object, in all its absurdity, to a ceramicist (one of several artisans he would employ for the slow and complicated casting project) to make a mold and porcelain casts for inclusion in the *Boîte-en-valise*. Ironically, Duchamp’s modeling of the tiny object

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90 For reproduction in the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp included Man Ray’s photograph of the second store-bought bottlerack (1936), which was, as the first had been (and as was the case with so many of the quotidian objects-cum-readymades), subsequently lost.

introduced a sculptural act never present in the 1917 industrial lavatory receptacle-turned-Fountain.  

Figure 2.27 [Marcel Duchamp, Reproduction of In Advance of a Broken Arm for the Boîte-en-valise, ca. 1936]

Figure 2.28 [Marcel Duchamp, Reproduction of Bottlerack for the Boîte-en-valise, ca. 1936]

Figure 2.29 [Marcel Duchamp, Papier mâché model of Fountain and first cast reproduction of Fountain for the Boîte-en-valise, ca. 1938]

This act of sculpting (based on a photograph, no less) willingly reversed so much of the radical refusal of artfulness embodied by the readymade “original.” The resulting miniaturized copy was endowed with the artist’s skill and touch (“done with such care”), thus conjuring an auratic object, yet it was reduced to absurdity and based on a mass-produced fixture that was precisely devoid of any aura at its origins. Whatever else this act might have suggested, it effectively and unequivocally constructed Duchamp as author—of a pseudonymously signed object that he had not previously directly acknowledged as his own.  

Since everything in the Boîte-en-valise, its viewers understood, was “by or from” Marcel Duchamp (or his alter ego, Rrose Sélavy), to include Fountain among his other output was a declaration both surprising and extraordinary.

92 Might Duchamp be highlighting this in the urinal’s rotation? The 1917 store-bought urinal was rotated ninety degrees and signed so as to appear as something like a sculpture for exhibition; but later, Duchamp un-rotated the little white cast Fountain—that is, presented it in the usual orientation of a urinal—when he offered it on display in his “portable museum.” Showing his first full-size replica of the Fountain in a 1950 exhibition organized by Sidney Janis, Duchamp mounted the newly purchased urinal un-rotated as well, this one low to the floor and positioned for use, as he put it, by “little boys.” The reversal was subtle but noteworthy: if the first version offered a urinal-as-sculpture, these later models seemed to offer a sculpture-as-urinal. Janis interview cited in Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art, 168.

93 The act almost literalizes Gordon Fyfe assertion: “Art reproduction is exegesis about an original which changes the relationship between the artist and the public meaning of the work of art. It cannot be judged as posterior to the authorship of the original. Reproduction does not translate or encode a pre-established authorship, it is a medium through which authorship is produced. . . If we are to talk about the social construction of the artist then we must also talk about the social construction of impersonal process work. The individuality of the artist has been produced through a struggle to determine the meaning of reproductions.” Fyfe, “Art and its Objects: William Ivins and the Reproduction of Art,” in Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations, ed. Gordon Fyfe and John Law (London: Routledge, 1988), 83-4 (italics mine).
When he remade *Fountain* in 1938, Duchamp dug deep into the past and turned to a memory of the art establishment’s authoritative judgment. To replicate the rejected piece of plumbing was to fabricate an object of institutional critique for posterity. The image of *Fountain* stands today as the paragon of Duchamp’s assault on the art institution, his most iconic and (perhaps 20th century art’s) most important gesture. But—and we cannot forget this—in 1917, the general public had little way of knowing that R. Mutt was none other than M. Duchamp; the “author” and, correspondingly, the critical potential of the shiny porcelain receptacle, did not register.94 *Fountain* simply did not appear on the radar of art history in 1917, nor did it in the several decades that followed.95

This fact cannot be overemphasized since so many of the art historical references to the urinal as the seminal example of Duchampian iconoclasm fail to take note of the work’s lack of publicness in its time. They treat *Fountain* as if it were, already in 1917, the art historical icon that it is today and as if one could properly speak of it without

94 William Camfield’s investigation of the *Fountain* confirms its virtual invisibility in public history throughout the 1920s and 1930s. See Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp/Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection, Houston Fine Arts Press, 1989). Indeed Apollinaire’s June 16, 1918 *Mercure de France* article “Le cas de Richard Mutt,” reporting on art events in New York (likely suggested by Duchamp or one of his entourage without letting Apollinaire in on the details) never once mentions Duchamp in connection with the scandalous “case.” However, if Duchamp solicited little public attention connecting himself and the *Fountain* before the object’s remake in 1938, his authorship was nevertheless spoken about over the years amongst a small circle of his friends, some of whom mention it in their own writings (Anaïs Nin and André Breton, for instance). Additionally, Paul Franklin points to several works by Duchamp and those by his friends such as Francis Picabia and Pierre de Massot, who invoke or make reference to his 1917 affair with the men’s public toilet. See Franklin, “Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* and the Art of Queer Art History,” *Oxford Art Journal* 23.1 (2000), 27-49. The first text to discuss the readymades in a sustained way appears in 1945, Sidney and Harriet Janis’s “Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist” in which they state (evidently having been guided by Duchamp himself): “The ready-mades may be unique as a concept but they are not necessarily intended to be unique as examples. For instance, the bottle rack was lost and replaced by another. Although the original inscription was forgotten and no other substituted, the act of replacing the object itself grants to the product of mass production the same validity as nature grants to any star in the skies or grain of sand upon the earth.” Harriet and Sidney Janis, “Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist,” *View* 5, no. 1 [21 March 1945], 23. Reprinted in Robert Motherwell’s influential 1951 anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1981), 311.

considering the fundamental role that its documentation, administration, and representation in an exhibition (all of which could be called, simply, its “curation”), has had on its contemporary interpretation. T.J. Demos, for instance, contends that in the 1930s with the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp was responding to the “institutionalization of the readymade,” adding: “The earlier readymades, such as *Fountain*, had completed their transformation into an artwork in part through an act of institutional recontextualization (from plumbing store to art gallery),” and “by 1938, it was evident that the original strategy of the readymade...was outmoded.”96 These statements ignore the fact that, before Duchamp’s completion of the *Boîte-en-valise* in the early 1940s, *Fountain* had actually never been shown in an art gallery, museum, or institution of any kind, nor had it even circulated as an image besides its lone appearance in *The Blind Man*, nor, moreover, had it been discussed in any published essay, large or small. And only two or three of Duchamp’s other readymades had been featured in two or at most three exhibitions (one among them being the umbrella stand area of the Bourgeois Gallery in 1916 and, another, the 1936 show of Surrealist objects in which it sat next to lava rocks, mathematical models, and other non-art trinkets), with virtually no attention accorded them by the press, public, museums, commercial galleries, or in art historical accounts.97 Not to mention that not a single readymade had been even temporarily shown in a museum, let alone owned by one, until the 1960s. This reality hardly corroborates the vast and early

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96 Ibid.
97 Although consultation of just about any history book of the period would equally yield similar information, one example perhaps speaks to the critical silence that surrounded the readymades until after the *Boîte-en-valise* effectively staged their exhibition: Clement Greenberg, the most engaged and influential spokesman of Modernism did not even mention Duchamp in his seminal 1939 essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (where the avant-garde art of “Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne” is discussed), although from the 1960s forward he would act as one of the most vocal critics of Duchamp’s practice in his various seminars, lectures, and published essays and hardly miss a chance to deride him. See “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” *Partisan Review* 6, n. 5 (1939), 34-49 reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 529-41.
“acculturation” of which Demos speaks. And while he further claims that, “The effects of institutionalization on Duchamp’s work were more than evident in 1936,” historical evidence shows that quite the opposite is, in fact, the case.⁹⁸

After crafting his miniature Fountain, Duchamp went on to make reproductions of two other reduced-size three-dimensional objects (Air de Paris and Pliant...de voyage); but the construction of a miniature urinal had already testified to something quite remarkable: Duchamp was no longer thinking of developing his monograph either as anything like an “album,” as he had begun describing it in 1935, or even as a simple “boîte,” like those he had made previously. Quite simply, a three-dimensional object requires three-dimensional space. Therefore, even if he may not yet have determined the exact nature of the container for the works, in making the tiny sculpted model of the urinal, Duchamp had already forced himself into a corner, or found a way out, depending on one’s perspective: The container for his reproduced corpus, from that point forward, necessarily takes on an architectonics of some sort, indeed, an exhibition-like configuration. The reproduced Fountain, along with a whole series of other Duchampian objects, could thus come together in what he would eventually call a “portable museum.”

Figure 2.30 [Marcel Duchamp, Drawing of the display mechanisms for Boîte-en-valise, ca. 1940]

The act was necessarily defiant. An industrially produced urinal had no place in an actual museum at the time (outside of the bathroom, that is). As Duchamp had begun to understand in 1917 (and conditions definitely hadn’t changed in the decades that followed), the fate of his Fountain would be to remain virtually invisible, unexhibitable as such. Given that the original of 1917 had never actually been publicly shown outside

⁹⁸ Demos, The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp, 26. It would even be more than a decade after this that the Museum of Modern Art of New York became the first institution anywhere in the world to own a painting by Duchamp; they purchased his 1912 Passage from Virgin to Bride in 1945.
the studio, no one had seen it in an exhibition in the years since its 1917 rejection until its miniature reconstruction in the *Boîte-en-valise*. In fact, it would reappear in a full-size copy only much later, for the first time in 1950, at a Dada exhibition held at Sidney Janis’s gallery in New York, where Duchamp agreed to show a newly store-bought urinal (on which he replicated the *faux* signature and the 1917 date of the “original”). Two more store-bought versions of *Fountain* appeared in 1953 and 1963, respectively, after which the artist manufactured an edition of eight in 1964 with Italian gallerist Arturo Schwarz.\(^99\) Thus, as many post-war accounts have suggested, Duchamp’s most infamous readymade *does* question art’s hallowed institutions, but it does so fully only with extraordinary delay, administered through its sly curation into Duchamp’s retrospective exhibition in a simulated, miniature museum enacted through the *Boîte-en-valise*.

That oft-used Duchampian term *retard*, meaning temporal “delay” or “lateness,” is palpably present in the way in which *Fountain* would eventually perform as a work of art (or, simply, become recognized as such).\(^100\) But how far that delay extended and where exactly it manifested itself, is of some debate. Thierry de Duve emphasizes the role of Duchamp’s photographic documentation of the shiny receptacle, suggesting: “The urinal’s art status was obtained through impeccable, shrewd, and merciless strategy. Once on record, the Richard Mutt case has proven impossible to erase. It has been written into the art history books, which means that it has been registered in the jurisprudence of modern art.”\(^101\) So, too, does Dalia Judovitz, who calls Stieglitz’s photograph “a strategy of delayed exposure…[which inscribes] a temporal dimension onto the perception of the

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\(^99\) On the history of the various incarnations of *Fountain*, see William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp/Fountain*.  
\(^100\) Duchamp’s notes are peppered with references to *retard*. See Thierry de Duve’s discussion of these in *Kant After Duchamp*, 85, 97, 101, 134, and 139.  
\(^101\) De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 135; see also his section “Given the Richard Mutt Case”.
urinal,” adding, that the urinal was “reified through its photographic reproduction, only to come into existence après-coup, as a reproduction that replaces the original.” Duchamp’s photographic documentation is undeniably significant as one element in the operation of its historical inscription, but despite de Duve’s suggestion that the photograph writes the work “into the art history books,” or Judovitz’s claim that it is the photographic “reproduction that replaces the original,” Fountain’s first public appearance in the Boîte-en-valise essentially contributes to that operation, in the process, even more radically extending the temporality of what de Duve calls a “delay in porcelain” (playing on Duchamp’s reference to his Large Glass as a “delay in glass”). For the delayed return of the urinal, as a work of “Marcel Duchamp in a museum, is crucial to the object’s belated anti-aesthetic operation. Thus far from being an intrinsically critical object, as Duchamp’s various “tests” sufficiently demonstrated, Fountain becomes so not only because it was selected, rejected, and then photographically recorded, but importantly also because of the Boîte’s fundamental role in positioning, contextualizing, and theorizing the readymade, for the first time.

102 Dalia Judovitz, Unpacking Duchamp, 127-27, 129. See also, Buskirk in “Thoroughly Modern Marcel,” in Buskirk and Nixon, eds., The Duchamp Effect, 197. The example of the Fountain and its museum thus points to a larger problematic in the teleological narrations of the history of art, and highlights, for instance, the blind spot of Peter Bürger’s reading of the way the avant-garde work and its reception operates, discussed further in chapter three. See Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For a compelling reading of the discrepancies in Bürger’s argument as they relate to the relationship between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices, a reading to which my own here is indebted, see Hal Foster, “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?” in The Return of the Real (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1-32.

103 De Duve, Kant After Duchamp, 134.

104 Indicative of this was the kind of exhibitions that Duchamp was offered before the Boîte-en-valise inscribed Fountain (and with it, other readymades) into the artist’s oeuvre: his first solo show opened in Chicago in 1937 and included twelve oil paintings from Duchamp’s early period (including not a single readymade). The exhibition was not followed by a proper retrospective until more than twenty-five years later, in Pasadena, California. Histories of the avant-garde too often only see the readymades from the vantage point of their current place within art institutions (in art historical narratives and in the art museum), a place that, furthermore, testifies in some accounts to their being compromised as truly radical objects. Benjamin Buchloh and T. J. Demos after him see the Boîte-en-valise as responding to the “failure”
“Approximately all the things I have ever produced”: that was how Duchamp had initially described what he wanted to feature in his retrospective project when the idea first came to him in 1935. It was immediately after his production of the *Boîte verte* and Duchamp quite quickly began to focus on what he was then calling his “albums,” which should represent his artistic output in the way that his boxes of notes represented his scribbled ideas. He first mentioned the project in a letter dated March 1935 addressed to Katherine Dreier, ending his letter with a plea for Dreier’s discretion regarding his project since, as he warned, “simple ideas” are “stolen easily.” No one beat him to the punch, although it is curious to imagine Duchamp nervous that someone else might actually want to embark on such an idiosyncratic project before him. He then commenced preliminary labor on the series of personal “albums” he had in mind.

Although he did not provide Dreier with more details at that point, it is clear that Duchamp was thinking of making something in the order of the *Boîte verte*, except, this time around, he would make loose, paper-backed copies of nearly all of his artworks instead of replicas of his notes. By the end of 1935, the quiet administrative labor that would be the cornerstone of the project had begun: Duchamp drew up lists of all the artworks he had ever made and noted the names of their owners. He wrote to many of the owners, asking to have professional black and white photographs taken of selected paintings, glass works and objects; he made cross-continental voyages to examine the

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106 Ibid., 148.
condition of works and record titles, dates, measurements, and the exact color of those works—whether in public or private collections. He even repurchased or borrowed some pieces to make the required detailed notes about them. The lists were marked with various shorthand codes (e.g., a “Ph” next to the title if the necessary photograph had been taken), and the cost of each step was duly noted. The painstaking labor, like that for his previous note-replication job, was deeply invested in the praxis of the archive.

The meticulous listing and recording prepared the way for the period from 1936 to 1940, during which Duchamp set in motion the actual reproduction. In a few cases, when the artist was invited to contribute an illustration to a book or magazine, he took advantage of such requests by asking the printer to run off an extra three hundred plus copies of the illustration so it could figure in his own album. However, for the greater part of the reproductions, Duchamp opted for complex and labor-intensive methods and avoided burgeoning technologies like color photography, which could not yet faithfully reflect the colors of the photographed original. However, one suspects that Duchamp

107 All these appeared in true Duchampian form—on odd scraps of paper, torn fragments of cardboard, and the backsides of unrelated documents—and were housed in a brown cloth-covered box scribbled with the words, Documents episodaire [chronologique]. Jeux de mots. This box contains an ensemble of chronologies, lists of works, valuations, locations, and several photographs of reproductions, about thirty pieces in all, most of which relate directly to the work and planning for the Boîte-en-valise; for further details see below.

108 This was the case, for instance, for his Coeurs volants, which featured on the cover of a 1936 issue of Cahiers d’art and for which Duchamp had asked the printer run off roughly three hundred and twenty extra copies of the image, or, much later, for the last editions of the Boîte, when he had roughly one hundred extra copies run off of his Réseaux des stoppages-établon when that work was being reproduced in the catalogue to his first retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art, or even his use of the color images of his three “erotic objects” from the 1950s when Arturo Schwarz had them reproduced in 1964 for The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp. See Bonk, The Box in a Valise, 197-256.

109 The makers of colored daguerreotypes that date from the 1840s and the late 19th and early 20th century remained occupied with efforts to test out different processes of coloration and yet still could not produce a faithful chromatic imitation of their original subject. Duchamp may well have known, for instance, about the Lumière brothers’ 1907-1915 experiments with color and invention of the “autochrome” process; while
would perhaps not have employed such a method even if it had proved exact enough. After all, the artist eschewed other more frequently used and expedient processes, including offset lithography (which he had just previously used for the *Rotoreliefs*), in favor of collotype printing coupled with pochoir coloring (which he had employed most extensively in the reproductions for the *Boîte verte*).\(^{110}\)

For many of the chosen pieces, Duchamp made what he called “*coloriages originaux*” (original colorings)—prototypes that had multitudes of annotations and meticulous lines dividing the image into small colored sections, so as to painstakingly simulate the exact colors and details of the painting or glasswork on which they were based. With these prototypes as color guides for the pochoir production, a group of printers would deploy as many as thirty different specially-designed zinc foil stencils, masks, and templates for any one image, manually applying successive chromatic washes until the print was transformed into a satisfactorily faithful reproduction. In other cases, for instance for his cracked glass pieces, the artist individually numbered and marked each one of their originally chance-derived cracks on a photographic version so that these disappointing at first, the process was hailed by the press as a fairly impressive and faithful coloration technique in the early 1920s. However, in 1935, when Duchamp began thinking about how to make color reproductions for his *Boîte*, the technology was not yet widely available. As his devoted patron Walter Arensberg recounted in a letter, “In regard to the colour photographs there seem to be 2 methods, one a three plate method, and one a one plate method, the autochrome. The three plate method is extremely expensive, 50 dollars per picture small size...In addition to these two methods, the photographer from whom I got my advice, tells me that the truest colour notion can be obtained from a black and white photograph hand coloured by some specialist who does work for floral catalogues.” Cited in Bonk, *The Box in a valise*, 148. Duchamp’s use of the pochoir technique employed something of the same manual precision as that of the floral catalogue printer, a technique that the artist would use throughout the making of the reproductions for the *Boîte* despite the fact that photography went on to experience its most important developments in the realm of color in the years 1936-46. See Gert Koshofer and Horst W. Staubach, eds., *Modern Color Photography, 1936-1946*, (Frankfurt: Manfred Heiting, 1986).

\(^{110}\) See the discussion of the pochoir technique in chapter one regarding the reproductions contained in the *Boîte verte*, especially in relation to the 1929-30 announcement by Gleizes and the French Cubists of the “recent development of the ‘pochoir,’” a technique which allowed for an unlimited number of “reproductions” by hand that were, as Gleizes noted, “as real as the painting itself because produced in the same way and from the same material.” Cited in Samuel Cauman, *The Living Museum. Alexander Dorner: Experiences of an Art Historian and Museum Director* (New York: NYU Press, 1958), 116.
could then be methodically replicated. It would take years to complete all of the copies that Duchamp had in mind, a fact the artist took knowingly in stride. Thus, as Ecke Bonk makes clear, to speak of “reproductions” (or even the artist’s other generic term for them, “items”) hardly conveys the intricacy of the handwork involved; the process was precise, painstaking and often, paradoxically, required more labor than the originals had.  

Some reproductions were later separated out from the set, individually signed and even notarized through the use of a thirty-centime French revenue stamp (a “timbre fiscal”) employed in legal matters to authenticate official documents. There can be little doubt that Duchamp’s method, as much as its ambiguous result—somewhere between the handcrafted and mechanically reproduced—is crucial to the subversive operation of the project: as authorized “original” copies of otherwise original works (including some, like the readymades, that were themselves, at their origins, mass-produced industrial copies), the Boîte’s replicas and their manufacture both enacted and evidenced the artist’s complex questioning of the aesthetic original.

Figure 2.33[Marcel Duchamp, Loose reproduction of La Mariée originally made for the Boîte-en-valise, with addition of notary stamp, ca. 1937]

By 1938, the enterprise of copying his artworks via pochoir reproduction alone had considerably changed. At that time, Duchamp had taken up the role of curator of a Surrealist exhibition as he nearly simultaneously worked towards making three-dimensional miniature replicas of a selection of his readymades. It was a watershed

111 My understanding of the details of Duchamp’s monographic project is highly indebted to Ecke Bonk’s exacting, virtually exhaustive, and invaluable study, The Box in the Valise.
112 As Bonk explains in relation to these oddly authenticated copies: “All legal transactions in France—attestations, deeds of sale, contracts of all sorts—require a revenue stamp and the signature of a notary to give them validity.” Ibid., 214. See also, Francis Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Ghent: Ludion, 1999).
moment. Much about the “album” necessarily shifted from that point on. Duchamp, as we know, would retrospectively claim this as the “beginning” of the project.

In all, he had selected a total of sixty-nine of his artworks to be reproduced in one form or another, and, given the magnitude of the edition he envisioned, Duchamp made slightly more than the necessary three hundred and twenty copies of each (just to be on the safe side), a task that was only finished in 1941, or, as the artist recounted to Pierre Cabanne, “at the moment the war began.”114 Duchamp worked undauntedly, and, as his production jottings so faithfully record, the list of specialists called upon was long and included more than a few photographers, print shops, typesetters, and pochoir studios, as well as several carpenters, glassblowers, china craftsmen, ceramicists, and suitcase makers, among others.115 The various components for the Boîte’s “items” then, as Duchamp explained to Cabanne, had to be smuggled by the artist (using the cover of an official document used by cheese dealers, provided by a friend in the business), through occupied France and across the demarcation line to Marseilles, from where he was able to leave for the United States. 116 The artist’s “cheese transportation” was spread over several months in the spring of 1941 and enabled the transport of the material for some

114 Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 79.
115 Ecke Bonk details the full list of the various specialists that suggest the “magnitude of the logistics” Duchamp incited for his project. See Bonk, “Marcel Duchamp,” in Kynaston McShine, ed., The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect (New York: MoMA, 1999), 52-4 and “delay included,” in Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp, 102-05.
116 As Duchamp recounted: “I thought of a scheme. I had a friend, Gustave Candel, who was a wholesale cheese merchant in Les Halles, and I asked him if he could commission me to go to buy cheese for him in the unoccupied sector. He gave me a letter, which I took to the German authorities, and with that letter and a bribe of twelve hundred Francs I got from a secretary that famous little red card, called an Ausweis, which allowed me to travel by train from Paris to Marseilles. I thought I had to be very careful and buy cheese, and probably give an account of my expenses when I crossed the border between two zones, but the Germans never asked me any questions.” Conversation with Calvin Tomkins, cited in Tomkins, Duchamp, A Biography (New York: Henry Holt Press, 1996), 323-4.
fifty of his Boxes.¹¹⁷ The effort presents a picture quite at odds with the frequent treatment of the project as mere idle distraction or negligible endeavor. Indeed, Duchamp’s persistence to see each step through, despite the attendant hardship, material restraints, and difficulty in transporting supplies throughout the early months of the Occupation, confirm his fierce commitment to the project.

With more than three hundred copies of each of the selected items complete and the assembly of the first few cases underway, a “bulletin de souscription,” something like an advance order form, announced the availability of what translates into a “box of pull-outs” filled with “faithful reproductions...the ensemble of which (69 68 items) represents the almost complete work of Marcel Duchamp between 1910 and 1937.”¹¹⁸ The work’s title, by that point, was also set: de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Sélavy had been imprinted between the four thin wood slats that formed an “M” and graced the lid of the work. The descriptive nomination, La Boîte-en-valise, accompanied this official title on advertising literature and became, in the years that followed, the most common shorthand name for the piece.

¹¹⁷ In a curious twist, the various reproduced works that would be presented in a case like a salesman’s wares—thus parodying art’s (and the museum’s) relationship to the commodity—found their way to safety disguised as France’s most banal consumer good, cheese. The irony would repeat when, in order to be transported across the Atlantic, the hundreds of loose “items” were shipped as Peggy Guggenheim’s “household effects.” Again in 1955, when Duchamp tried to ship the loose reproductions for the Boîte back to France, he encountered difficulties over the question of their status and thus the appropriate duty fees. The artist had to call on the services of an administrator from the Bibliothèque Nationale to aid in the release of the items, which were finally labeled “samples”—neither as works of art nor saleable (and thus taxable) merchandise. See Bonk, The Box in a Valise, 178.

¹¹⁸ Marcel Duchamp, “Bulletin de souscription” of the Boîte-en-valise (2 January 1941). In fact, although he had wanted to feature sixty-nine items, and actually made the necessary reproductions, one of the items, the upright standing celluloid reproduction of Glissière (Water Glider), proved particularly fragile and had to be removed from nearly all the boxes on offer, reducing the total number of items to sixty-eight.
Quite contrary to the order form’s deceptive modesty regarding its description of what was on offer, the so-called “box of pullouts” opened to reveal an elaborate collapsible interior structure filled with hand-colored reproductions of certain works affixed to loose sheets of black cardboard that were sheltered in an inner compartment; reproductions of select glass works on transparent celluloid sheets, also hand-colored, were held erect or pulled along sliding rails; a photographic image of Why Not Sneeze? was affixed to a little block of plaster, giving the image a three-dimensional quality; a folding image of Three Standard Stoppages slipped into place like an accordion; and mounted, three-dimensional, palm-sized versions of the urinal, glass ampoule of Parisian air, and typewriter cover were contained in the valise: in the end, the museum in miniature contained sixty-eight facsimile works, all carefully labeled and neatly organized.

Figure 2.35 [Henri-Pierre Roché (?), Photographs of the Boîte-en-valise, ca. 1941]

The first few cases were completed at the end of 1941, shortly after the artist arrived in the United States; the remainder was produced slowly but steadily over the course of subsequent decades. The assembly of the boxes and the arrangement of all its parts took time, and Duchamp, the ultimate precision worker, operated slowly. After the first valises were complete, he employed the help of various friends (including Joseph Cornell, Xenia Cage, and finally, his stepdaughter Jacqueline Matisse) to put together the later boxes. They were assembled in seven groupings or “series” with minute differences between each grouping. The entire edition of more than three hundred would not, in fact, see its completion until several years after the artist had died. Having devised a project so intricate and time-consuming, with an edition size so large, Duchamp probably knew that
his boxed monographs would keep emerging from the makeshift factory he had set up even after his departure from this world.

Figure 2.36 [Marcel Duchamp, Boîte-en-valise (regular model), 1938-1942]

In addition to an edition of three hundred standard copies of the project, Duchamp also conceived to have twenty deluxe models. Nearly all of these special series are distinguished by a reddish brown leather valise, as opposed to the merely cloth covered boxes of the standard models, and through the inclusion of a signed “original” work of art. The artist actually made those deluxe models first, each destined for a specific friend or select patron, and each was numbered and personalized with their name. In many of them, a “coloriage originaux”—one of the prototypes hand-colored by Duchamp used for the creation of the Boîte’s reproductions—served as the so-called “original” item. If the Box of 1914 had inaugurated the then-yet-unnamed concept of the “artist edition”—an artist-produced object in multiple copies—Duchamp had gleefully expanded the notion with the Boîte verte and the Boîte-en-valise. By comparison, the more than three hundred copies of those latter boxes (as opposed to five copies of the Box of 1914) seem practically infinite, as were their potential to reach a wide and unforeseeable audience.

Figure 2.37 [Marcel Duchamp, Boîte-en-valise (deluxe model), 1938-1942]

One cannot ignore the irony in the position of Jacques Villon, Duchamp’s elder brother, on the question of such a large edition of artworks. In a letter to Jean Fautrier from the 1950s about what Fautrier called his own “originaux multiples” (original multiples)—a series of lithographs produced from 1949 to 1953 in editions of three hundred that were individually hand-colored by Fautrier and others—Villon complained, “To make three hundred copies, it’s too much! Every work must retain some originality,
something personal. To multiply it excessively devalues it.\textsuperscript{119} The comment suggests Villon’s likely disapproval of his youngest brother’s various projects toward the multiplication of the artwork. For Duchamp and, later, Fautrier, the devaluing of a certain idea of painting was a deliberate intention of their respective practices. As Fautrier made quite clear:

> In any case, as long as the painter limits himself exclusively to an outdated technique, worn out by four centuries—oil painting—he will end up with an over refined work whose magic no longer provokes the public—the unique work—with all that this implies already, for us, of disgust in its sacred and ephemeral touch; a work which, by virtue of its rarity, stands against the forward thrust of an industrial civilization; by its very rarity leads to this kind of dated showplace—the museum—where it is exhibited in a vacuum.\textsuperscript{120}

As the \textit{Boîte-en-valise} exposes the fault lines menacing the ontological stability of the work of art through its sheer numbers (continuing what his previous boxes had begun), one cannot forget that this—as Fautrier vocally acknowledged—also necessarily implicates the museum, at that time still very much a bastion of the artwork as an authentic, authored, auratic, singular original.\textsuperscript{121} The idea and functioning of the museum, that “dated showplace,” is inseparable from Duchamp’s critical project with the \textit{Boîte}, as we shall see.

\section*{A Museum That is Not One}


\textsuperscript{121} On the museum’s preoccupation with originality, see Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in \textit{The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 162.
“Instead of painting something new,” Duchamp declared, “my aim was to reproduce the paintings and objects I liked and collect them in as small a space as possible. I did not know how to go about it. I first thought of a book, but I did not like the idea. Then it occurred to me that it could be a box in which all my works would be collected and mounted like in a small museum, a portable museum, so to speak.” Benjamin Buchloh has read the work accordingly:

All of the functions of the museum, the social institution that transforms the primary language of art into the secondary language of culture, are minutely contained in Duchamp’s case: the valorization of the object, the extraction from context and function, the preservation from decay and the dissemination of its abstracted meaning...[With it Duchamp] also changes the role of the artist as creator to that of the collector and conservator, who is concerned with the placement and transport, the evaluation and institutionalization, the display and maintenance of a work of art.

This reading is right, though I would add some caveats. A bit like Duchamp’s characterization of the readymade as “a work of art that is not one,” the Boîte-en-valise could be said to be a museum that is not exactly one: not a reproduction of the museum in the traditional sense, even in miniature, it is also not like the museum maquettes that Duchamp might have seen on display in Muséeologie, the exhibition devoted to modern museum techniques at the 1937 Exposition Universelle. Everything about the Boîte-en-valise renounces the awe-inspiring scale and physical presence of the museum. The tentative structure with its Lilliputian dimensions and wobbly frame seems to always renounce the awe-inspiring scale and physical presence of the museum.

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122 “A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp,” filmed interview with James Johnson Sweeney; cited in Dawn Ades, Marcel Duchamp’s Travelling Box, 3.
124 Guy Viau, Interview with Marcel Duchamp, “Changer de nom, simplement,” 12. Nor is it even comparable to something like the 1917 dollhouse that Carrie Stettheimer built and filled with specially commissioned miniaturized works by many of her artist friends, Duchamp included. As his contribution to it, Duchamp made a 9.5 X 9.5 millimeter ink and pencil reproduction of Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2.
remain in the process of constituting itself through an almost infinite variation and mutation of presentation—thus hardly akin to the commanding façades and spaces typical of the museum. The *Boîte-en-valise*, in fact, both invokes and contravenes the museal.

Figure 2.38 [Marcel Duchamp handing the *Boîte-en-valise*, as published in *Time Magazine*, 1942]

In this, the *Boîte’s* inclusion of “walls”—even if collapsing, moveable, and wobbly—were no negligible detail. The functioning of the *Boîte’s* interior structure is suggested in a sketch Duchamp made for Roché in April 1941. The informal explanatory drawing of his box laid out on the back of the Grenoble Hotel Moderne’s stationery conveys with excited lines and axonometric views the various interior components of the complex object that Roché was soon to receive. Little of the specificity of the miniature artworks to be mounted appears; rather, the drawing attends much more to the mobile mechanisms and changeable armatures of display—its exhibition walls, as it were. And yet what became clear in the drawing, as in the presence of the *Boîte-en-valise* itself, is that to expose the art, one needs to unpack the framework; to view the exhibition, one needs to handle the pieces and (re)organize the display. Exhibition walls, in other words, there were, even if unfixed and malleable.

Figure 2.39 [Marcel Duchamp, Drawing made for Henri-Pierre Roché of the display structure of the *Boîte-en-valise*, 1941]

If certain rules had to be followed so as to open and unfold the *Boîte-en-valise* and to reveal its interior, the movements and ordering of so many other aspects of the work’s presentation were left entirely to the viewer’s discretion. Thus, if its boxed structure, complete with handle, suggested that movement and destabilization lay at the core of the project, Duchamp’s multiple retrospectives-in-traveling-cases also displaced the museum’s function of decontextualizing and sheltering the work of art from the outside world. The *Boîte* removes both the “museum” and its artworks to an uncertain
realm where they are exposed to the impure and ordinary space of the everyday. As Dalia Judovitz rightly suggests, “The spectator unpacks this valise on a table and unloads its contents manually, thereby not merely bringing these miniature reproductions into contact with the world but making these works part and parcel of the world.”125 It was another way of abolishing the distance separating the artwork from the viewer and the world (and aura, according to Benjamin, was above all, “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”).126 In its structural aspects alone, then, the exhibition space offered up by the Boîte-en-valise reveals a project that is not about constituting an actual museum—even on a small scale—but instead, it is a “museum” that announces itself as one even as it performs its own negation.

In reality, a museum’s defense of visuality is fundamental.127 As Donald Preziosi has succinctly put it, museums “situate all objects within viewing spaces that evoke and elicit a proper viewing stance and distance. Artworks are spaced, arranged, and composed so as to permit the taking up of proper stances: position for the subject.”128 Duchamp’s portable museum must be considered in the context of the performative operation incited in the “visitor” relative to his museum-on-the-move. The miniaturization of the individual works demands that vision be made haptic—in the handling of objects, in the opening and closing of lidded compartments, in the rubbing of fingers across the black creased

126 Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,” *Selected Writings 1935-38 vol. 3*, Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland, trans. and ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 104-5. Of course, the Boîte’s implicit mobility and manipulability was reversed when inserted into an actual museum where it became, like the rest of a museum’s objects, immobilized, protected, and untouchable: of this effect Duchamp was certainly aware and even seems to have courted it, perhaps as a way to expose all the more the role of the actual museum. From the start, he offered his miniature retrospective to institutions as a gift or at a reduced rate.
128 Ibid.
folders of reproductions, in the sliding and movement of celluloid versions of glass works, in the invitation to touch the palm-sized urinal, glass ampoule and typewriter cover—rejecting the pure ocularcentrism typical of the museum. This was entirely fitting given that elsewhere in his oeuvre Duchamp had repeatedly suggested that there could be no seeing that is not carnal or embodied and therefore unruly, even if he knew too well that, in an institutional context, there was no seeing that is not directed, ruled, and prescribed by the authority of the institution itself.

Duchamp’s aim in his early optical experimentation was, as Krauss argues, “to corporealize the visual, restoring to the eye (against the disembodied opticality of modernist painting) that eye’s condition as bodily organ, available like any other physical zone to the force of eroticization.” One might say, further, that the “disembodied opticality of modernist painting” was, for Duchamp, implicitly tied to the modern gallery and museum. The tactile, mobile looking elicited by the Boîte-en-valise, however different from the darkened, disorienting, or twine-ensnarled installations Duchamp had by that point created for the Surrealist exhibitions, nevertheless also shattered the typical institutional distanciation between body and vision.

This confrontation of corporeality and museological looking, self and object-of-display, is emblematized in two “original” works created in 1946 to accompany two of the deluxe versions of the Boîte-en-valise. The valise of Brazilian artist Maria Martins, Duchamp’s lover at the time, housed the composition Paysage Fautif, consisting of an abstract and amorphous “wayward landscape” formed by a spattering of seminal

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ejaculate on Astrolon backed by black satin. Artist Roberto Matta’s valise, on the other hand, was augmented with an untitled work composed of four small clumps of head, axillary, and pubic hair affixed to the reverse side of a piece of Plexiglas that displayed a lightly sketched bodily form. One might ask what it means to archive and museum-ify the body in such a way, exhibiting such traces of the mundane (not to say, base) fact of corporeality. These works, given to two of Duchamp’s close friends, slyly expose still more of the traditional museum’s tenets, at once demystifying the artist (for artistic “mastery” and museal worthiness seem irreconcilable with this most banal functioning and the secretions of the body) while simultaneously evoking the kind of fetishism evident in the display of objects in such eminent French institutions as, for example, the Louvre, where the object’s presentation and treatment evokes a cult of the relic. To seriously consider the Boîte, then, is to ponder the way in which it not only undermines and redirects the purely visual, but also insists on the libidinal and corporeal as both matière of, and point of access to, the museum.

Figure 2.40 [Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage Fautif*, the original work included in Maria Martin’s *Boîte-en-valise*, 1946]

Yet can it be overlooked that there is something decidedly amiss in the *Boîte-en-valise*’s curatorial/archival system? Duchamp understood well that a number of seemingly innocuous institutional details play a role in how and what we see in an exhibition: from the information on labels and wall text to the title of the exhibition and overall organization in a space. His curated grouping of works follows no perceptible

130 It should hardly come as a surprise that these particular deluxe incarnations of the *Boîte-en-valise* were made during the period in which Duchamp had just secretly begun to work on *Étant donnés: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. le gaz d’éclairage*, an installation that would extend and crystallize so many of the artist’s concerns with the museum, looking, and the body. This would not be the last time, then, that Maria Martins, Duchamp’s lover at the time, acted as a kind of interlocutor in the artist’s museum musings; she also served as the model for the casting of the figure in *Étant donnés* (see chapter three).
logic of chronology, medium, or theme; the selection is arbitrary; the scale of miniaturization is variable. Here, each reproduced item bears a museum-type label with a standardized typeface, and the typical, uniform classificatory information accompany each piece (dimensions, media, collection information). But Duchamp’s labels refer to the “original” works (actually still extant or not), no matter that these are distinctly at odds with the reduced dimensions and posterior re-production of the specimens on offer in the Boîte-en-valise. He thus played the museum’s game—but he played it his way.

Over the years, this artist-as-maker-of-his-own museum repeatedly revised his collection and its museum labels. To map the movement (or loss/destruction) of the featured originals, he made his own administrative guide: he pasted a copy of each of the work labels from the Boîte-en-valise onto a thick mat board backing, revising the information by hand so as to keep his collection information completely up-to-date. When possible, he corrected and remade labels for the boxes that were still to be made. For instance, when, in 1953, a great number of Duchamp’s works went from the private collection of the Arensbergs into the public domain as a gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he noted the change on his mat board and designed a single new label for the Boîte to document the transfer. Along the way he also added selected works to his miniature museum (from sixty-eight in the first valises to eighty-three in the last series), including newly made as well as older pieces. Duchamp even tried to keep track of which of his works were not represented in the Boîte-en-valise and, at one point, thought of including this list in a certain number of the deluxe versions of the box. The idea was abandoned, but nevertheless he did create an administrative list of the “not represented.” Duchamp housed it, along with his mat board of annotated labels, in a cloth-covered box
that holds no less than thirty items—including supply and object inventories, chronologies, methodical accounting statements listing the cost of almost every aspect of the reproductive project, the price and location of each of the deluxe valises, and payment records—each element elaborating the labor (but also the bureaucracy) that accompanied the early preparation for the *Boîte-en-valise*. It was an archive for the portable museum as archive.

*Figure 2.42* [Marcel Duchamp, Notes related to making the *Boîte-en-valise*, from the box labeled *Documents episodiare (chronologique) Jeux de mots*, undated]

*Figure 2.43* [Marcel Duchamp, Notes related to the labels for the *Boîte-en-valise*, from the box labeled *Documents episodiare (chronologique) Jeux de mots*, undated]

It thus becomes clear that Duchamp, a *notaire*’s son, had again transformed himself into a kind of (museum) bureaucrat, one whose careful adherence to the institution’s protocol and whose standardized, completely up-to-date labels form a part of this self-made administrator’s effort to underscore the museum’s regulative function. Yet an ambivalence pervades Duchamp’s operation, for his lists, while strangely and fastidiously complete, are (like his various other notes) also scribbled on the backs of worn receipts and torn piece of cardboard, so that they (like so much else in the entire enterprise) both marshal and contravene the signs of a museum’s authority and administration.

Moreover, just as the inclusion of *Fountain* in the *Boîte* announced Duchamp as author, constructing the conditions for it to be seen as a work of art, so too did Duchamp’s collection of copies of his oeuvre exhibited in a miniature museum act as if it were somehow already museum-worthy, a gesture of incredible hubris, or prescience, depending on how one looks at things. It was, it should not be forgotten, a period when the first large-scale Parisian retrospectives of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse hailed
them as definitive “masters” of the 20th century, and when Christian Zervos’s production of the first lush catalogues raisonnés of the two painters seemed to confirm their status as art-historical icons.\(^\text{131}\) The art world at the time had two declared modernist heroes with no place for Duchamp (no matter the scandal over his *Nude* that ensured him some temporary notoriety in New York art circles); the truth is, he hardly featured in art histories at that time.\(^\text{132}\) The cheekiness of his gesture should thus not be underestimated: by the 1930s, no one was interested in organizing a survey show of Duchamp’s oeuvre (one would not come for another few decades), so curating his own—and in miniature reproduction no less—could likely only have been seen at the time as both precipitous and preposterous.

Even the artist’s most fervent supporters seem to have been uncertain about *Boîte-en-valise*’s function, choosing to see it in terms of the past oeuvre it represented, rather than as a new critical work onto itself. As early as 1936 Julian Levy wondered: “Are [Duchamp’s] present activities indicative of a new advance? Or is he merely ‘writing his own memoirs’?”\(^\text{133}\) Likewise Walter Arensberg—owner of many of the original artworks upon which the reproductions were based—received a *Boîte-en-valise* in the mail and

\(^{131}\) Christian Zervos, founder of France’s premier journal of modern art *Les Cahiers d’Art*, published the Matisse catalogue in 1931, and two Picasso catalogues, the first in 1932 and the second in 1936. Although entirely in black and white, the unrivalled sumptuousness of the affair and the high-quality reproductions used throughout were remarkable, so much so that André Malraux described Picasso as a painter of his own *oeuvre complète*, noting: “His goal was not his paintings, but the albums of reproductions by Zervos in which the breathless succession of works is far more significant than the best single one among them can be by itself.” Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire* (Geneva: Skira, 1947), 53. The Matisse catalogue ended with installation shots of several exhibitions of Matisse’s work, effectively reinforcing the publication’s role as a comprehensive presentation—a virtual museum retrospective—of the artist’s work.

\(^{132}\) Within this contest, Marcel Duchamp did not at all threaten the exalted positions of the two painters, and the situation would not soon change: when, in 1959, Robert Lebel wrote to French museum officials proposing an exhibition of Duchamp’s work, all of his letters went unanswered. Duchamp’s first major retrospective came some years later, in 1963, and at the least likely of places, Pasadena, California (hardly an art world capital), and in no small part due to the vision and perseverance of the Pasadena Art Museum’s then curator, Walter Hopp.

found it “difficult to know exactly what to say of such an epitome of a life work.” And during his seemingly indefatigable discussions with Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne hardly asked about it (one can imagine his reasoning: why devote much energy to probing Duchamp about a valise filled with reproductions when the “originals” were already being discussed?). In short, the three hundred or so Lilliputian retrospectives-in-a-box were often seen as a curious enterprise of self-citation, a “vacationing in past time,” or, alternatively, attention was not paid to them at all.

Yet one “museum” retrospective may have helped beget another. The Boîte’s relationship to the artist’s efforts to conserve the majority of his works in the hands of a small group of devoted patrons and aid them in the donation of these works to a few major museums “should not be underestimated,” as Martha Buskirk insists. Especially, she adds, “given the degree to which it framed—sometimes quite explicitly—the installation of the Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum, which opened in 1954, and subsequent exhibitions of his work, such as those in 1963 in Stockholm and Pasadena, where aspects of the displays paid direct homage to the arrangement in the

\[\text{134} \text{ Walter Arensberg, letter to Marcel Duchamp (21 May 1943), marked “not sent” (Arensberg Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art, henceforth AAPMA).}
\[\text{135} \text{ Cabanne, } \text{Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp.}
\[\text{136} \text{ The assumption that Duchamp’s retrospective project was either little more than an easy repetition of previous work or a repetition that was only important insofar as it lead to something else can be found directly or indirectly in the treatment (or lack of treatment) of the piece in art historic literature until the 1980s, when the first major monographic study of the } \text{Box in a Valise} \text{ argued for its significance, and perhaps just as significantly, when scholarlly interest in “Institutional Critique” was burgeoning. See Bonk, } \text{The Box in a Valise.} \text{ Although both Francis Naumann and Martha Buskirk take the } \text{Boîte-en-valise} \text{ as an important—even central—subject in their respective studies, it is to them that we owe the two citations: Naumann’s recent publication titles the chapter that deals with the } \text{Boîte}, \text{ “Vacationing in past time: seven years to pack a valise, 1935-1941” and Buskirk argues for the } \text{Boîte} \text{ as an “interim step” onto the arrangement of Duchamp’s works in a real museum. Cf. Naumann, } \text{Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Production} \text{ (Ghent: Ludion, 1999), 124; and Buskirk, “Thoroughly Modern Marcel,” in } \text{The Duchamp Effect}, \text{ Mignon Nixon and Buskirk, eds., (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 198.} \]
Ecke Bonk, who so minutely studied and elaborated the details of the monographic project, also sees the relationship between it and the destination of Duchamp’s larger corpus at the Philadelphia Museum of Art as one-to-one. In his account:

It was not until 1954, when the Arensberg collection was installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with Duchamp’s assistance, and opened to the public, that it became possible to accomplish with the originals what had already been achieved in miniature, in the Boîte. The permanent installation in the museum, centering on the Grand Verre (Large Glass), is a 1:1 equivalent of the folding, miniature ensemble. At a stroke, Philadelphia had become the center around which gravitated all the copies of Duchamp’s portable museum, only one-third of which had been issued, in homeopathic doses by 1954.138

The mistake would be to perceive the Boîte as an unequivocal manifestation either of Duchamp’s antipathetic position with regard to the museum or of the artist’s deep longing and strategic efforts to find his way into it, but not of both, failing to sense the critical tension that lies at the heart of the project as a whole.

Understanding this might counter the reading of the Boîte-en-valise as ultimately compromised, like the readymade before it, as a truly radical project:

In the work’s attempt to dissolve reification within the very medium and the site where they are produced, in the necessity to mimaetically anticipate its subjection to ideology by inscribing itself as precisely as possible into those very systems that determine its historical status, it seems to fail to maintain any claim for autonomy and rupture in favor of a complacent, melancholic, and passive contingency upon the conditions of rule it set out to disrupt.139

Buchloh’s damning appraisal suggests that Duchamp’s Boîte-en-valise ultimately failed, further asserting that any questioning that might be presumed from it could only be rectified or righted by the more potent anti-institutional gestures of the generation that

137 Buskirk, “Thoroughly Modern Marcel,” 198, 202 (emphasis mine).
138 Bonk, The Box in a Valise, 21.
came after him, by Marcel Broodthaers, most notably.\textsuperscript{140} No matter the remarkable critical force (and aesthetic or intellectual merit) of the projects of institutional critique that followed in the \textit{Boîte-en-valise’s} wake, and in some cases even thanks to it, few if any of those later projects can be said to have entirely escaped the “conditions of rule” (to use Buchloh’s terms) of the institution, or even necessarily meant to do so.\textsuperscript{141} As if anticipating this, Duchamp evoked the museum already in an interview in 1915, observing that the “so much misunderstood” Futurist manifesto, which demanded the destruction of the museum, was meant “in symbol only.”\textsuperscript{142} Maybe he thought that the Futurists could not have been serious about such a proposal while continuing to make easel paintings. Or perhaps Duchamp knew that they did not truly mean it because they must have known, as he did, that to destroy the institution or even simply to insist on remaining outside of it, would also mean to remain outside of discourse, reception, and perhaps even eventually art historical accounts; moreover, it would mean not bringing actual change to an institution that, however lambasted, was nevertheless of interest to the Futurists as much as to Duchamp (and later, to Broodthaers and others after him).

Perhaps for this reason, Duchamp never made any grand claims regarding the museum’s destruction and that fact was neither a complacent, passive or melancholic admission of his own inevitable defeat. Instead, he worked to expose the walls that held up its

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\textsuperscript{140} This is the gist of not only his essay “The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers,” but also a number of other essays by Buchloh on Broodthaers and the artists that are now known under the moniker “Institutional Critique.” A critique of Buchloh’s closing down of the discussion about the \textit{Boîte’s} potency in favor of claims that later generations confronted the institution more seriously is advanced by T.J. Demos in \textit{The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp}, 32. The subject of Duchamp’s relationship to the gestures of those artists, and more thorough list of references, are discussed in more detail in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{141} For a contemporary response to this line of artistic questioning, see Andrea Fraser’s argumentation that there is no “outside” to the institution in “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” in John C. Welchman, ed., \textit{Institutional Critique and After} (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), 123-35.

narratives, which disciplined its visitors and contents alike, that confirmed its authority, and that displayed its judgments. His was a slow movement toward, around, and within the museum, all the better to reveal its most deeply entrenched premises.

**PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE COMMODITY**

With the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp would push the implications of reproduction, already raised with the *Box of 1914*, to an extreme. Similar to his earlier boxes, the *Boîte-en-valise* uses photography for the seemingly most neutral, most inartistic of means: documentary reproduction (in this case of works of art). Yet Duchamp’s anonymous “documentation” here is often dubious, at once announcing and evacuating its role of witness to a truth. Given that some of the photographs “represent” artworks that, at the time of the *Boîte*’s making, were no longer extant, photography—and the unreliability that Duchamp built into it—became the perfect emblem for the duplicity of the copy.

Duchamp’s involvement in photography in the early 1910s and ‘20s has long conveyed the impression of a playful lack of seriousness, but to look closely is to notice that in almost every instance the artist used photography (either of his own making or that of his conspiratorial accomplice Man Ray) to literalize the potential duplicity at its heart. From the barren landscape suggested by the layer of dust covering the *Large*

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143 In January 1940, at a moment when the reproductions for the *Boîte-en-valise* were nearly complete but the container for the works was still under construction, Duchamp sent several items destined for inclusion in the *Boîte* to represent him at a collective Surrealist exhibition in Mexico City. Making the nature of his contribution explicit, Duchamp asked that the catalogue and exhibition checklist specifically label each work a “reproduction.” One cannot help but think, however, that if the force of Alexander Dorner’s 1929 exhibition lay in positioning the original next to the copy, resulting in a difficulty to tell the two apart, Duchamp didn’t offer an original against which to judge his copies: he did everything he could to underline the fact that in an exhibition he was showing nothing more than reproductions. See Francis Naumann, *The Work of Art*, 140.

144 Duchamp’s relationship with Man Ray is arguably an important element in the former’s complex relationship with photography. Indeed, one might even say that the frequent tasks in which Duchamp
Glass in Man Ray’s and Duchamp’s collaborative photograph Élevage de poussière (Dust Breeding) (1920), published with the subtitle Vu prise en aeroplane (view taken from an airplane), to the numerous portraits of Duchamp in drag as Rrose Sélavy or Belle Hélène in Man Ray’s glossy shots or on labels affixed to perfume bottles—for Duchamp the photograph is the recurrent site of contradiction, deception, visual troubling.

Figure 2.44 [Marcel Duchamp, Dust Breeding, ca. 1920. Photograph by Man Ray]
Figure 2.45 [Marcel Duchamp, Rrose Sélavy, 1921. Photograph by Man Ray]

While preparing the Boîte verte, Duchamp had Man Ray deftly airbrush a soft veil over the reflection of paintings (by Mondrian, Leger, and Malevich) which appeared, a bit too distractioningly, in the only existing photograph of the upright, unbroken glass of La Mariée... as temporarily installed at a Brooklyn Museum exhibition. The corrective airbrushing (which, as Man Ray’s multiple attempts at the task reveal, was no easy matter) is amply justified in the interest of rendering the Glass’s mechanical forms legible; the effect, however, is in keeping with Duchamp’s recurrent use of photography against the grain of its oft-claimed truth. The Boîte-en-valise’s reproductions that are based on photographs, in particular, resist credibility: the image of the Bottlerack shows false shadows; images of a hatrack, bicycle wheel, and coatrack are visibly retouched; the strange plaster and photographic representation of Why Not Sneeze? stands resolutely in a no-man’s land between the second and third dimension; images of Sculpture for Traveling or Unhappy Readymade include blatantly fictive hand-drawn additions; and his

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engaged Man Ray—to document the former’s artworks and photograph his antics—should be considered part of Duchamp’s own lifelong commitment to photography. Still, it might be important to remember that Duchamp’s very first “photography project,” the Box of 1914, was begun several years before Man Ray himself started to take photographs professionally and indeed even a year before the two artists had met. 145 Man Ray was called upon to re-photograph and manipulate an advertisement for the Société Anonyme, Inc. printed in Art News (May 14, 1927) which displayed a frontal installation view of the Large Glass as it had appeared in the 1926 show of modern art at the Brooklyn Museum organized by the Société Anonyme. See Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp, in resonance... (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, 1998), 100-1.
rendition of the *Monte Carlo Bond* includes a special grey varnish to create a false “aged” patina. What you see in the photographic reproductions Duchamp made is seldom what was actually there.

Figure 2.46 [Man Ray (?), Installation view, *Large Glass* on exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, 1927]

Figure 2.47 [Marcel Duchamp, Retouching instructions for Man Ray on a photograph of the *Large Glass*, ca. 1936]

Figure 2.48 [Man Ray, Retouched variants on the photograph of the *Large Glass* made for inclusion in Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise*, ca. 1936]

Figure 2.49 [Marcel Duchamp, Reproduction of Sculpture for Traveling for the *Boîte-en-valise*, ca. 1940]

In 1940, in order to represent *Trebuchet*, one of his readymades in the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp turned to one of the snapshots Roché had taken in his studio around 1917. He enlarged the image and studied every curve of the by-then lost object that was the explicit subject of that particular picture: a coatrack the artist had once nailed to the floor of his atelier. After whiting out the object entirely, Duchamp made a tiny but extraordinarily precise line drawing of the coatrack in which he exactly replicated the photographic detail he had covered over. It was rendered in lines so dry and mechanical that one could hardly detect the expression of an artist’s hand; and yet, the deliberate handwork was exponentially greater than the process of selection that ostensibly had

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146 In order to represent the *Bottlerack*, first conceived and signed in 1916 but subsequently lost, Duchamp had Man Ray photograph a second newly purchased version in 1936; they added a thin, almost colorless lacquer to the image during the intricate printing process so as to suggest a new second shadow. As for the representation of *Why Not Sneeze?*, Bonk notes that “The plinth turned a photographic viewpoint into a pseudo-spatial impression. Even the cuttlefish bone was given a spatial equivalent in or on the plinth...[the work] is undoubtedly one of the most complex ‘items’ in the *Boîte*, and at the end of 1940 it added a new variant, somewhere between the 2nd and 3rd dimension, to the range of facsimile technologies developed by Duchamp.” For a detailed description of the production of these and other reproductions, see Bonk, *The Box in a Valise*, 209 and 238-240.

147 To “trip,” in French, *trebucher* is the verb used to describe stumbling over something one does not properly see or notice. It is also a technical term in chess, where it means a “trap”: the *trebuchet* is a chess piece one sacrifices, it is a piece willingly set out as a trap to win a piece from one’s opponent. Between the two French meanings of the word, *Trebuchet* names the idiosyncratically displayed readymade coatrack as a thing which, nailed to the floor, one might literally stumble over, but whose agency might also go unnoticed.
transformed the store bought item into an artwork in the first place. Then, through a time-consuming and careful process of hand-coloring, collaging, and repeat printing, he turned the newly drawn *Trebuchet* into something like a photographic “document” (he would later employ variants of this process in images of the suspended snow shovel, hatrack, and the bicycle wheel). The result, a new order of image—neither fully photographic, nor fully documentary—introduced a slippage of terms and categories. If photography was so long seen as emulating painting, the father of the readymade effectively reversed this relationship.

The privileged role of the photograph as evidence for the reality of objects or events (a direct transcription of the real) had long endowed it with the status of truthful fact. As Roland Barthes would some time later contend: “Photography never lies; or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing…never as to its existence.” Everything suggests that Duchamp understood well the latter point (his orchestration of the Stieglitz photograph of the *Fountain* in 1917 suggests as much), even if, in his “museum,” he deliberately made photography *lie*. Again and again, as with the carefully simulated notes of the *Boîte verte*, the *Boîte-en-valise*’s reproductions reflexively acknowledge the

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148 One cannot help but see in this miniature industrial drawing an anticipation of the blueprints of the readymades that Duchamp and Arturo Schwarz would have made by professional draughtsman in the 1960s for the industrial originals to be replicated. It was the playful manifestation of all those French drawing lessons where industrial drawings were made to be uninventively and repeatedly *copied*, see Molly Nesbit’s brilliant, “Readymade Originals” *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 53-64, and *Their Common Sense* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

149 As it happens, Walter Benjamin’s “Short History of Photography” is an early and eloquent refutation of this commonplace. The fact that photography does not emulate painting is, he argues, its strength.

incapacity—indeed impossibility—of the photographic to deliver its promise of veracity regarding its subjects.\footnote{Kracauer equates the rise of 19th century historiography and the advent of photography; this assessment is embedded in Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect” for which photography was the most potent exemplar. “Our entire civilization,” Barthes theorized, “has a taste for the reality effect, attested to by the development of specific genres such as the realistic novel, the private diary, documentary literature, the news item, the historical museum, the exhibition of ancient objects, and above all, the massive development of photography, whose sole pertinent feature (in relation to drawings) is precisely to signify that the event represented has really taken place.” See Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” in \textit{The Rustle of Language}, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 139. Siegfried Kracauer, \textit{History: The Last Things Before the Last} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 49 and 57.}

Certainly, the things that appear in the \textit{Boîte’s} reproductions based on photographs actually once \textit{had been} (the \textit{ça a été} that Barthes theorized when speaking of photography), but perhaps never quite as Duchamp makes them appear.\footnote{Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida}.

Disdéri, unremarkable photographer of portraits and genre scenes, shot to fame through his 1854 invention and patenting of a system to print inexpensive, multiple, reduced-sized photographic portraits on a single page for easy distribution as a kind of calling card. The photographic \textit{carte de visite} experienced widespread popularity at the end of the 1850s and into the decades that followed. The 1850s also saw the}

His photographic/drawn hybrids, so calculated to deceive (and to even sometimes reveal that very deception at the same time), show the \textit{Boîte-en-valise’s} testament to a lifework to be a concerted act of artful construction.

It is perhaps little coincidence that photography sits at the center of Duchamp’s questioning of not only how the appearance of the “truth” of the artwork is constructed, but also how its value is construed. The reproducibility of the work of art, more specifically, the \textit{photographability} of the artwork (since, unlike other forms of reproduction, photography retained a perilous proximity to the thing itself), is the subject of Walter Benjamin’s “Letter from Paris,” where he discusses photography through the example of André Adolf Eugène Disdéri’s mid-19\textsuperscript{th}-century reproduction of artworks at the Louvre. For Benjamin, this figure, best known for his invention of the personal photographic \textit{carte de visite}, perhaps more importantly emblematized the practice of photographic replication of artworks.\footnote{Disdéri, unremarkable photographer of portraits and genre scenes, shot to fame through his 1854 invention and patenting of a system to print inexpensive, multiple, reduced-sized photographic portraits on a single page for easy distribution as a kind of calling card. The photographic \textit{carte de visite} experienced widespread popularity at the end of the 1850s and into the decades that followed. The 1850s also saw the}
operation that had “put the notion of the work of art in question, because such reproduction of the work accelerates its transformation into merchandise.”\textsuperscript{154}

The transformation of the work into merchandise and vice versa: this might well have been Duchamp’s mantra, his cunning game, and reproduction was at the center of it.\textsuperscript{155} Reproduction, photographic and other, came to challenge the relationship not only between art, art history, and the museum, but also between art and the market. If Duchamp’s positioning of the readymade in the museum that was the \textit{Boîte-en-valise} had insisted that the commodity could take the place and play the role of an artwork, Duchamp’s production of over three hundred and twenty copies of his own “museum” turned that purportedly non-commercial site into a miniature commodity version of itself.\textsuperscript{156}

beginning of Disdéri’s reproduction of celebrated museum artworks, an enterprise for which he wrote a manual of instructions, \textit{Manuel opérateur de photographie}. On Disdéri, see Anne Elizabeth McCauley, \textit{A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Photographic Portrait} (New Haven: Yale, 1985), and on the phenomenon of art reproduction in Paris, see also her \textit{Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848-1871} (New Haven: Yale, 1994), esp. the chapter “Art Reproduction for the Masses.”


\textsuperscript{155} Marcel Broodthaers, so invested in continuing and expanding the Duchampian paradigm would, in fact, use exactly these terms: to give a “serious definition of art” one must, as he stated “examine the question in terms of a constant, I mean the transformation of art into merchandise. . . If we are concerned with the phenomena of reification, then Art is a particular representation of the phenomena—a form of tautology.” “To be bien pensant. . . or not to be. To be blind.” Initially published in \textit{Le Privilège de l’art} (Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1975), reprinted in translation by Paul Schmidt in \textit{October} 42 (Fall 1987): 35.

\textsuperscript{156} In the early 1950s, Dorner expanded on his \textit{Original and Facsimile} exhibition interest and developed an idea for a chain of museums of facsimiles. As Dorner championed: “Turn the living museum into a museum of facsimiles. . . Mass produce it. Set up two, three, half a dozen, twenty museums of facsimiles in different parts of the country, in sizes to match conditions of attendance and financial support” (Cited in Cauman, \textit{The Living Museum}, 187). The idea to call into being a museum of art reproductions was not, in fact, entirely new. In France, when the photographic reproduction of works of art became viable in the 1850s and into the Third Republic, the idea for a “Musée photographique” of European \textit{chefs-d’oeuvres} was repeatedly put forth but never realized. The debates and resistances to the idea, however, seem to have been less concerned with questions of originality versus reproduction \textit{per se}, since a “Musée de copies,” filled with \textit{painted} reproductions of master works from collections outside of France, was set up in 1834 and was significantly expanded by 1874. Rather, the fact that a museum of photographic reproductions was never formed, despite decades of fervent debate and the evident availability of reproductions from an already burgeoning industrialization of such reproductions for public consumption, is symptomatic of a resistance of the museum \textit{as an institution} to overcome the menace posed by the \textit{photographic} replications.
The museum, however, was the last institution to want to admit such a conflation.

As Yve-Alain Bois notes:

In its desire to substitute itself for the miscellaneousness of the museum as bric-a-brac (which had nothing heterogeneous about it because the interchangeability of extremely varied curiosities directly followed the logic of the commodity and a return to the same), the modern museum did nothing more than engender another type of homogeneity, one founded not on the infinite extensibility or undifferentiatedness of the collection, but on the structure of exclusion furnished by the history of art and based on decontextualization. In aiming to abstract works from the structure of exchange as a real context for which they were sometimes created, the modern museum, and artists with it, has deluded itself about the possibility of escaping the logic of the commodity [la loi de la merchandise].

For Duchamp, the transformation of art into merchandise was a program different from that of Art Nouveau or even the Bauhaus, in which the utilitarian and the aesthetic were to be subsumed. His was a gesture without pretense to heroism: there was no claim to bring art to the masses, no effort to make anything that held the least bit of functionality, no beautification of the everyday. If there was something innately disruptive about the commandeering of a real toilet to claim it as a work of art, there was something—perhaps even more contentious—in reducing its size, in making it toy-like and deliberately playful, and casing it up with other items (typewriter cover, comb, bottlerack…) that in the end serve as nothing so much as placeholders for the “real” once-useful things to which they refer. Thus, insofar as the readymade is seen to expose the tensions between the commodity and the art object, between the serial and the collectable, between the ordinary and the exhibitable, the Boîte grafts this ambiguity even more emphatically onto...
the very specific components that make up the museological, including institutional architecture, presentation technologies, archival methodologies, etc.

Figure 2.54 [Page from the Grands Magasins du Louvre sales catalogue advertising luxury boxed items, ca. 1903]

The multiplications of Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* asserted that the museum itself had something profoundly in common with both industry and the commodity. And here one cannot help but think of Duchamp’s various efforts over the years as not only curator but quasi-dealer, a salesman of art, as part of his “test” to understand how the implications of presentation and display, as well as circulation and exchange, affect the meaning of the thing called “art.”158 If, in his *Boîte*, the “items” (a term itself so resonant of the object’s existence as product) within their case resemble, as many observers have pointed out, a traveling salesman’s case of wares, they insinuate that art institutions might be closer to the market than the art world cared to admit, or even that they could be seen as operating in alliance. The artist’s miniaturized lifework perfectly packaged in a neat box (the most precious examples resembling suitcases with locks and handles) that could conveniently be purchased by way of subscription and whose descriptive inscription (“This box contains 68 items…”) not only made fuzzy the distinction between art object and commodity product, but also claimed for the artist the role of producer, distributor, curator, salesman, and publicist.159

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158 Dalia Judovitz’s astute understanding of Duchamp’s relationship to such exchange is relevant here: “Rather than viewing Duchamp’s commercial activity as a betrayal of both his artistic detachment and putative disinterest in financial value, his fascination for the speculative value of art can be better understood in intellectual terms. It is a fascination with how artistic and monetary value is generated arbitrarily through social exchange. Duchamp’s interest in the speculative character of money does not translate itself into the subservience of his own artistic work to monetary considerations. Instead, it expresses the recognition that value, be it artistic or financial, is embedded in a circuit of symbolic exchange.” Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, 167.

159 Moreover, given that Duchamp had decided to make over three hundred of his *Boîtes*, and the artist didn’t have anything like gallery representation (at least not until the interest of Arturo Schwarz in the
Almost simultaneous with Duchamp’s development of his portable museum of reproductions, another provocative conception of the museum was being forged. Le Musée imaginaire, André Malraux’s book-length study, begun in 1936 and first published in 1947, developed the idea that with the invention of the color photolithographic plate, art reproductions could effectively form a new supermuseum-in-a-book, a *musée imaginaire* as he called it (or a “museum without walls,” as his American translator radically transformed the phrase). The collection of this “imaginary museum” encompassed any photographically reproducible work of art:

In our Museum Without Walls, picture, fresco, miniature, and stained-glass window seem of one and the same family. For all alike—miniatures, frescoes, stained glass, tapestries, Scythian plaques, pictures, Greek vase paintings, “details” and even statuary have become “color-plates.” In the process they have lost their properties as objects; but, by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to style that they can possibly acquire. Thus it is that, thanks to the rather specious unit imposed by photographic reproduction on a multiplicity of objects, ranging from the statue to the bas-relief, from bas-reliefs to seal-impressions, and from these to the plaques of the nomads, a “Babylonian style” seems to emerge as a real entity, not a mere classification—as something resembling, rather, the life-story of a great creator. Nothing conveys more vividly and compellingly the notion of a destiny shaping human ends than do the great styles, whose evolutions and transformations seem like long scars that Fate has left, in passing, on the face of the earth.

1960s), he quite literally created a situation for himself whereby he would have to be involved in selling hundreds of copies of his little museum.

160 The near simultaneity of Malraux and Duchamp’s projects is brought up on the pages of *October*, where the *musée imaginaire* is esteemed the likely museum “context” to which Duchamp could have been responding at the time. This idea is taken up by T.J. Demos, who advances a comparison between the two projects, noting that the primary difference between the two is Duchamp’s use of a monographic form, which “props up the institution of authorship.” Demos’s conclusion is a strategic since, as he posits, authorship “takes on special significance…in the context of exile,” and the construction of an image of Duchamp as anxiously responding to nationalism and exile is the author’s central, if entirely unfounded, thematic. See Buchloh, Krauss, Bois, *et al*., “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp,” reprinted in *The Duchamp Effect*, 216 and Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, 33.


The constellation of museum, photography, reproduction, and reception thus lay at the heart of both Malraux and Duchamp’s projects. They were almost certainly responding to the same historic and museal context, and Benjamin remains a possible conduit between them.\textsuperscript{163} As Benjamin’s letters to Max Horkheimer suggest, in 1936 Malraux had already publicly lectured about the “Work of Art” essay and promised “a more detailed consideration of the essay in his next, evidently theoretical, book.”\textsuperscript{164} Speculative though any real connection between Malraux and Duchamp may be, insofar as Malraux’s thinking about the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction owes something to Benjamin, it might also owe something to Duchamp’s advancement of a “theory of the artwork” formulated by Benjamin while working on his essay.

According to Malraux, and it is the foundation on which his entire project is built, art history is the history of “ce qui est photographiable,” the history of that which can be photographed.\textsuperscript{165} The future French minister of Culture adamantly believed in the direct and ingenuous transmission of information of the photographic medium and of modern photographic reproduction (at least where painting and sculpture are concerned; stained-

\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{163}} Art since 1900 discusses Benjamin, Malraux, and Duchamp together, citing the year 1935 as the moment each of them starts their respective project. See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al., eds., \textit{Art Since 1900} (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 271-275.

\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{164}} Benjamin excitedly reported to Max Horkheimer that Malraux spoke of his “Work of Art” text in his presentation “Sur l’heritage culturel,” delivered in London in 1936 to the Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture and that the Frenchman held out the prospect of even more serious attention to it. See Benjamin, letter to Max Horkheimer (August 10, 1936), \textit{The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940}, Gershon Scholem and Theodor Adorno, eds., Manfred and Evelyn Jacobson, trans., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), letter 280. Malraux’s “theoretical book” would be \textit{La Voix du silence}, and the section most apparently influenced by Benjamin’s reflections on reproduction and photography would be “Le Musée imaginaire”.

glass escapes accurate reproduction, he admits). With his assemblage of paper reproductions of art works, Malraux posits the development of style (i.e. Classical, Romantic, etc.), a veritable aesthetic “truth” obtained from the decontextualization and formal juxtaposition within a grouping of works. Thus the canonical image of the author seen from above and surrounded by photographic reproductions (his book’s image plates) is the perfect image of the project itself: the contents of the musée imaginaire spread across the floor present themselves as anonymous units in an ensemble where their spatial, dimensional, and other distinctions are flattened, homogenized, and decontextualized—each rendered uniformly museum-worthy.

Figure 2.55 [André Malraux posing with the image plates from his Musée imaginaire, 1954]

Malraux’s project places great faith in the photographic—and more importantly—a kind of unquestioned insistence that there can be a neutral and objective presentation and representation of the work of art in the art history book—the paper musée imaginaire. The logic suggested by Malraux’s project can be seen to equally inform the ostensibly neutral, objective presentation in the real museum. Further, the English translation’s transformation of Malraux’s central idea into “museum without walls” covers over yet another important distinction. As scholars have noted, “The original French for this—the musée imaginaire (imaginary museum)—brings out the antimateriality of the operation, its drive to reduce the physicality of the object to the

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Douglas Crimp reads Malraux’s work on the museum as a conception of the museum that has since been overturned. As he suggests: “Malraux makes a fatal error near the end of his Museum; he admits within his pages the very thing that had constituted its homogeneity; that thing is of course photography. So long as photography was merely a vehicle by which art objects entered the museum, a certain coherence obtained. But once photography itself enters, an art object among others, heterogeneity is re-established at the heart of the museum; its pretensions to knowledge are doomed. Even photography itself cannot hypostatize style from a photograph.” Crimp, On the Museum’s Ruins (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1995), 53.
virtuality of the image.” One could say that Malraux’s project—no matter how unthematized—unwittingly advanced a critique of the national museum collection as an ensemble of auratic and original objects housed in a physical edifice: the monolithic position of the museum stood uncontested in Malraux’s telling, only suggesting that in the future it was to be virtual.

If Duchamp’s project shares with Malraux a critical understanding of the potential of reproduction, the artist’s project is both more emphatically trenchant in its effort to uncover the ideologies upholding artwork and museum alike and, paradoxically, wedded to the idea that an actual, physical, full-sized museum should nevertheless one day house the originals on which the Boîte’s reproduction are based. Like Malraux, Duchamp also perceived the relationship between (art) history and “that which can be photographed,” but in Duchamp’s case, the use of modern means of mechanical reproduction was to decisively impact the perception and functioning of the work of art and, in turn and inevitably, the institution’s in preserving and celebrating it, in imbuing it with an aura.

Indeed, one of several vital places where Malraux and Benjamin differ, and where Benjamin and Duchamp share more than they might have been aware of, is a foregrounding not only of the material and conceptual role of photography but of

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168 Even if Malraux did himself deploy photographic tricks and manipulation in his juxtapositions, his work seems all the more to insist on the validity and potential of photography for his creative pursuits. As Henri Zerner points out, in the 1952 printing of *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, the colophon at the beginning of the volume reads “Copyright Text and Illustrations by André Malraux and Librarie Gallimard, 1952” (emphasis mine). When they announced their copyright to the illustrations, what were Malraux and the Librarie Gallimard copyrighting exactly: the sequence of images, the juxtapositions? Needless to say, such a practice, the copyrighting of reproductions as illustrations for such a book was virtually unheard of in France at the time. For a discussion of this, see Zerner, “Malraux and the Power of Photography,” in *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, Geraldine A. Jones, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 116-30.
“exhibition value,” by which Benjamin also means, “exchange value as it penetrates the institution of art, and transforms both the work of art and its contextual frames.”

With the *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp may have been at pains to create his own version of a “museum,” but his was one without authority, transcendent majesty, secure location, or even “authentic” works of art; that is, he creates a museum as a blatantly commercial enterprise and with only the most tenuous hold on museality. In the process, he neither recuperates nor obliterates the museum through his project; rather, he subjects its idea, rules, and operational givens to a series of questions. Herein lies the core of the artist’s project: through a conflations of seeming order and randomness, the original and its reproduction, the museal and the commercial, the auratic and the ordinary, the *Boîte-en-valise* offers an ambiguous model of the artist as producer and an even more conflicted model of the museum as authoritative guarantor of originality, value, quality, and even, some might contend, a kind of art historical “truth.” In doing so, the so-called “portable museum” exposes what the typical art object and its varied forms of institutional support tended to hide—that the history of art and the museum are both involved in constructing and elevating as expediently “natural” what is little more than an artful construction.

**Conclusion**

Why, in 1916, so deliberately insert his readymades into an exhibition that had not even requested them? Why, in 1938 and then again in 1942, curate for the Surrealists when Duchamp was not even a member of the group and rarely felt obliged to do things he

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169 Such is Hal Foster’s characterization of Benjamin in contradistinction to Malraux. I have extrapolated here to suggest that it represents shared ground for Duchamp and Benjamin. See Foster, “Archives of Modern Art,” *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso Books, 2002), 81.
didn’t want to do? Why, indeed, construct his own version of a museum exhibition of reproductions, demanding such painstaking work and long-term commitment? And, lastly, why take part in any of these at all given his declared aversion to exhibitions, based on his own express “principle”: “I myself will exhibit nothing”?

The truth is, Duchamp spent much of his lifetime involved in exhibitions of one sort or another and often presenting his works in them, using what opportunities there were, whether for himself or for other artists, even for artistic groups he didn’t belong to, to curate exhibitions. By the late 1930s, at a moment when the official spaces for the display of art prided themselves as being rational, objective, and scientific, Duchamp’s turn toward the conception of idiosyncratic installation and exhibition spaces and his insertion of *Fountain* into an exhibition space highlights the exhibition as fundamental to the artist’s practice as a form through which he articulated—to use Benjamin’s terms again—a veritable “theory of the artwork.” In the end, Duchamp’s activities as curator might be understood less as disloyalty to his “principle” not to exhibit and more as the radical consequence of exactly this critical position on the institutions of art that had initially prompted his rejection.

In this regard, Duchamp’s practices of note-replication and exhibition-making are not as unrelated to each other as they might at first appear. Both were concerned with how one looked at things, aesthetically, both aimed to support or frame something else (the ostensibly legitimate aesthetic object), and both ambiguously drew and redrew the lines that delineate an artwork, confounding the established borders that dictated what was, and what wasn’t, “art.” Indeed, in Duchamp’s body of work, it is through, and because of, the apparently marginal matter *around* the work of art—whether the notes

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170 See the discussion of Benjamin’s relationship to and understanding of Duchamp’s work in chapter one.
about an artwork, the administration that records it, the display codes that present it, or the institutional forces that affirm it—that the very definition of the art object was put in crisis, which is to say, brought to a turning point.

According to Dorothea von Hantelmann, Duchamp’s selection of everyday things inaugurated what she calls a “curatorial paradigm”: “In the field of art it was Marcel Duchamp who anticipated, paradigmatically performed, and articulated this transition. For in this context the readymade occupies the position of a junction.”¹⁷¹ In her reading, and in accordance with much Duchamp scholarship, it was his *choice* of the ordinary store bought items that was radical, with Duchamp’s vindication of the act of selection allowing the readymade to mark “the transition of a production-oriented society to a selection-oriented society.”¹⁷² Von Hantelmann adds: “Duchamp turned the act of choosing into a new paradigm of creativity. Or, rather, he sharpened a practice that has always existed into something like a paradigm.”¹⁷³ She is, in one major respect, quite right. Duchamp arguably *is* the catalyst of a new “curatorial paradigm.” But if the readymade is, as Duchamp described it, a “work of art without an artist to make it,” it might more properly be thought of as the result of the artist *as curator* who made it.¹⁷⁴ And this redefinition of the artist as curator must consequently be considered as particularly significant to avant-garde practices (and the scholarship) that followed in its wake.

Yet contrary to von Hantelmann’s assertion, this chapter proposes that it is Duchamp’s staging of the documentation, dead-pan presentation, publication of texts

¹⁷² Ibid.
¹⁷³ Ibid.
illustrated by precisely that documentation (even the curious dematerialization of the object itself), and importantly here, the object’s miniaturization, replication, display, and dissemination—rather than an act of selection—that define the “curatorial” paradigm of his practice. And it is this far more labored and complex enterprise that was of fundamental importance to the reception of the readymades as well as their profound impact on artists and art history thereafter. Such a reconsideration of the “effect” of Duchamp acknowledges that, for the artist, the orchestration of the elements around the artwork, was a means of orchestrating the conditions for the work of art to “appear” as such, and this might well constitute his major and still under-discussed contribution to the 20th century.
Chapter 3

THE DEAD END OF THE MUSEUM
Mausoleums

Duchamp had doubts—this is how he put it—about the judgments that determined whether an artwork entered a museum and another not. He claimed, even well into the 1960s, that he thus didn’t see the point of going to visit museums, and he peppered his interviews with asides critical of the “mausoleums of art history.”¹ His understanding was that art history and the museum were linked, inevitably and irrevocably, like twin machines in the dubious but authoritative arbitration of the artwork’s value.

The history of art is something very different from aesthetics. For me, the history of art is what remains of an epoch in a museum...[I] almost never go [to museums], I haven’t been to the Louvre for twenty years. It doesn’t interest me, because I have these doubts about the value of the judgments which decided that these pictures should be presented at the Louvre, instead of others which weren’t even considered, and which might have been there.²

However, everyone knows that Duchamp’s own work ended up in exactly that institutional context, and over his lifetime he spent considerable energy to ensure his work’s placement in precisely that citadel of taste and rule.³ The seeming paradox, however, was neither inconsistent nor a betrayal, but instead wholly in keeping with his critical position, and his final, posthumous installation, *Étant donnés: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. Le gaz d’éclairage* [Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas] (1946-1966) would take it to its obstinate end.

It might, then, be stating the obvious to declare that no project more firmly reveals Duchamp’s vested interest in the museum than *Etant donnés*. After all, it is known not only that the artist constructed the work with the museum in mind, but also that he specifically devised the elaborate instructions for its entry into a museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it now permanently resides. Considering the trajectory, initiated with the *Box of 1914* and the readymades, passing through his exhibition-making and creation of his own miniature museums, and finding its end point in *Etant donnés*, it might seem utterly redundant to state today that Duchamp’s final work was concerned, perhaps above all, with the institution of art. For *Etant donnés* is a decidedly site-specific work—*avant la lettre*—and the museum is its deliberate and permanent site. It is therefore curious that the manifold implications of the work’s museal context and the extraordinary administrative apparatus mobilized by the artist in order to ensure the project’s final destination remain among the least discussed aspects of the profoundly elusive work.⁴

This chapter is about *Etant donnés*, both the complexity of its twenty-year production as seen in the context of Duchamp’s larger oeuvre and its relatively meager reflection in an art history that seems to have been long unable or unwilling to adequately account for it, despite the remarkable impact the artist has had on the generations that followed him. I am not here lamenting the general lack of writing about Duchamp’s final

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⁴ Even when scholarly or curatorial gazes attempt to focus specifically on artists who have been preoccupied with the museum in their practice, Duchamp’s *Etant donnés* goes unmentioned. Symptomatic of this were such exhibitions as *The Desire of the Museum* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989 or *The Museum as Muse* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1999, both of which offered Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* as a kind of avant-garde progenitor to more contemporary questioning of the museum, while failing to acknowledge both his exhibition installations and his final work the *Etant donnés* as part of a sustained and polyvalent preoccupation with the museum and the functions of the display of art. See Catsou Roberts, Timothy Landers, *et al.*, eds., *The Desire of the Museum* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989) and Kynaston McShine, ed., *The Museum as Muse* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
work, even if it is surprising that it has taken so long for more publications devoted exclusively to the work to emerge after Jean-François Lyotard’s nearly lone Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp published in French in the 1970s. My more salient point is that it is both astonishing and telling that Etant donnés has, with few exceptions, not been more widely inscribed in broader art histories of the epoch—which would have reckoned with the work in relation to contemporary practices.

Production and reception are intimately related in the work, for production here will encompass not only the literal labor on the installation in the classical sense, but also the elaborate and equally significant activities that Duchamp conceived in order to direct its reception by situating the piece in its final, institutional resting place. These activities and the resultant display conditions, I will argue, are as much a part of the work’s “making” as anything else, even if the critical reception of Duchamp has been slow to acknowledge these activities, which didn’t necessarily—or literally—produce the artwork so much as situate, contextualize, and frame it.

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5 Jean-François Lyotard. Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp (Paris: Galilée, 1977); translated into English as Duchamp’s TRANS/formers only in 1990. Lyotard’s book was the first, and for more than three decades, the only monographic publication on Etant donnés to emerge since the its unveiling.

6 Of course, the work has, over the years, figured in a number of essays and book chapters in publications devoted to Duchamp (it would be nearly impossible for any such major work to escape those histories) or, simply, collections of diverse scholarly essays even if in much of this literature Etant donnés is largely overshadowed by the readymades and the Large Glass. Michael Taylor’s recent massive and exhaustive exhibition catalogue, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009) goes a long way towards rectifying the lacunae. My discussion of the work’s problematic reception concerns (and the pages and footnotes that follow trace this) the widespread elision of the work from broad art historical surveys that contextualize art practices contemporaneous with Etant donnés. For an exception to this rule, see Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al., eds., Art Since 1900 (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 496-99.

7 This distinction is significant because although Jean-François Lyotard and Rosalind Krauss have written pioneering (and as yet still unsurpassed) studies on Etant donnés, which both take the public space of the museum into account and understand its mechanisms as integral to Duchamp’s final work, neither devotes attention to the involved measures Duchamp took to insert his work there, neither considers the Manual of Instructions that accompanies the work as part of the work, neither considers it in light of Duchamp’s life-long preoccupation with institutions (or such gestures that made possible the readymade, the Boîte-en-valise, and Duchamp’s avid exhibition curation), and neither reads the work as a progenitor to the kinds of critique of the institution that would be prevalent in the 1960s and 70s. See Lyotard, Duchamp’s
MAKING ART HISTORY

Duchamp himself repeatedly commented on the determinant nature of art history: “In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declaration take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art history.”

The reasons for the awkward relationship of *Etant donnés* to “the primers of Art history,” or those narratives that attempt to provide broad overviews of art historical eras and movements, although surprising, are perhaps nevertheless not so hard to understand. Strange, overtly shocking, and rapturously visual, scholars have often read Duchamp’s elaborate *tableau mort* through the lens of what one can see of it, through its iconography—a tangle of visual details suggesting possible connections to the vast and cryptic world of an unattainable bride stripped bare by her thwarted bachelors, complete with a waterfall and gas lighting, evoking frustrated desire and electromagnetic erotics. While those readings attempt to pin down the work through recourse to an explicitly visual narrative, adequate description (and representation) has long eluded the piece.

Numerous authors have struggled, to varying degrees, with “straight accounting” of (visible) facts that reduce largely to the following: a white and empty half-lit room with a massive, aged wooden door at one end, perforated by two eye-holes, through which one can see (if one ventures to look) the scene of a broken aperture of bricks behind which lies a glowingly illuminated recumbent, awkwardly spread-legged nude

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female figure holding a Bec Auer type gas lamp in her left hand. This nude and her bared sex are situated in an eerie but bucolic setting of dead twigs and leaves, and all of this is seen against a photo-collage backdrop with a seemingly moving waterfall. These visual facts, however, hardly manage to adequately account for the actual experience of the piece. Accordingly, almost every discussion of *Etant donné* bears some variant of the mention that “No photograph can ever render justice to the beauty and complexity of this work ... The shock of discovering the piece cannot be captured by a photo or description. Viewing the item is a unique and untranslatable experience.”9 Right, perhaps, this is, but “ultimately,” as Helen Molesworth has recently noted, “this contemporary iconoclasm has meant that the work hovered like air: crucial but unremarked.”10 And this in spite of a veritable cottage industry of writing on Duchamp and the seemingly unshakable place he has as doyen of radical art of the 20th century.

Figure 3.1 [Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donné*: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. Le gaz d’éclairage (exterior door view), 1946-66]
Figure 3.2 [Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donné* (interior view), 1946-66]

Certainly, *Etant donné* divided critics when it was first revealed, many seeing it as the senile lapse of an old man and something better not compared with his earlier “great” work. Art historian Joseph Mashek’s comment, published in 1974, speaks to the negativity of the work’s initial reception: “If earlier works by Duchamp are in the most dubious ways still lovely, this one [*Etant donné*] seems startlingly gross and amateurish. It dissolves into a senile hobby, altogether private in its psychological function, out of

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10 Helen Molesworth, “My Funny Valentine,” *Artforum* v. 48, no. 5 (January 2010), 165.
place and embarrassingly unengaging—it is not a masterwork of any kind.”¹¹ But this kind of dismissal, however prevalent at the time, hardly explains the work’s uneasy place in the art history written in the several decades since. No matter how confrontational, obscene, or morbid its critics may have found the work, there is little to justify why it has long been almost completely invisible in the most basic narratives that describe the development of the art of its time. To best gauge this, peruse just a few representative examples of publications that purport to define and discuss the production of post-war art: *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties, A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, or *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-1969*.¹² In these, *Etant donnés* is not discussed despite it perfectly coinciding with the publications’ stated temporal scope, which spans, in most cases, from the 1940s to the end of the 1970s. Peruse alongside them essays meant to specifically address Duchamp’s influence, such as John Tancock’s

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“The Influence of Marcel Duchamp,” commissioned for and printed in the catalogue accompanying first large-scale retrospective of the artist after his death, in 1973, and taking as its explicit subject Duchamp’s importance to and shared interests with younger artists of the 1960s and ‘70s, or, similarly, Robert Pincus-Witten’s “‘Quality Material…’: Duchamp Disseminated in the Sixties and Seventies,” where one will not find Etant donnés mentioned at all. Even more revealing than the critical condemnations against it, then, was the long-standing art historical silence about it.

The problem perhaps already begins with defining its “time.” Despite having a secure place in the museum, Etant donnés has long been without a firm place in art history: an irony given Duchamp’s understanding of the inseparability of the museum and art history. Made over a twenty year period, from 1946 to 1966, and unveiled to the public in 1969, the assemblage seems to fall out of sync temporally with the strict periodizations that are (still) the cornerstone of art history: neither proper to the heroic years of the avant-garde, like the readymades or Large Glass, nor the result of the “new” art and artists of the postwar period, it sits in a no man’s land. There is a belatedness (or an anticipation, it is difficult to tell which) that has seemingly prevented the work from belonging fully to its present—that “present” being the twenty years of its becoming. It would be tempting to think that this is one more example of the “delay” that was part of Duchamp’s practice, but it is hard to believe that he could have so fully orchestrated, or even have anticipated, the historical afterlife of this work. The work’s absence from postwar art histories is all the more surprising when one remembers that Etant donnés’s

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unveiling was both contemporaneous with, and profoundly relevant to, the diverse expansion of art forms witnessed in the post-war period.\textsuperscript{14}

If one wants to speak to the “decade”—that temporal category wholly artificial when employed as a discursive tool in art and cultural histories—one might well ask in relation to which decade we should speak of Duchamp’s final work? Although its central, nude figure began to take shape materially in the late 1940s, to compare \textit{Etant donnés} with the production of that epoch would lead to little more than vague formal associations. For, however seemingly connected Duchamp’s suggestive assemblage was, for instance, to the sexual provocations of the Surrealists, their fascination with dolls and mannequins and other uncanny female surrogates, Duchamp’s suggestively poised nude is but one small part of a much larger construction, both literally and conceptually. The 1950s are, technically, the decade in which the background and structure of \textit{Etant donnés} were beginning to be built up. Yet it would also make little sense to fully situate the work in this context or to imagine \textit{Etant donnés} as any kind of influence on artistic production of that era since it was unfinished and totally unknown at that point (and, anyway, Duchamp himself was still little known). The final form of the work was concretized in the 1960s, and the bulk of the institutional maneuverings which plotted its permanent museal home was orchestrated by Duchamp in these years, even if the work itself was not made visible until the very end of that tumultuous decade; still, it resonates perhaps more closely with the concerns of that epoch than any other before it.

With his final work, Duchamp not only cashes in on what can be considered as promissory notes left as part of his earlier works, building on and extending his own

\textsuperscript{14} As previously mentioned, \textit{Art Since 1900} is a notable exception to this rule. The statement, “\textit{Etant donnés} constituted a newly wrought paradigm, one that would profoundly affect work from 1968 onward,” heralds a call for new consideration of it in light of what came after its unveiling (p. 497).
previous ideas, but *Etant donnés* also in some way reflects—as do most artworks, consciously or not—the development of the culture that surrounds it. As it happens, in the 1960s, the inheritors of the avant-garde were also beginning to grapple with and translate many of those very ideas that Duchamp had begun to lay out since the first decade of the 20th century. Why, then, has so little attention been to the work’s relationship with the contemporary art historical context from which and into which the work emerged? The attempt to situate Duchamp’s final work in terms of its broader aesthetic milieu is not to argue for its direct influence on any one art-historically defined period per se, nor is it even to suggest the inverse, that any particular stage of the work so defined the whole that one could think of it entirely as a product of notions “in the air” at the time. Instead, it is vital to understand in what ways *Etant donnés* can be historically located, examined—as are all other art historical objects—in relation to the context of its ultimate production and reception.

On the surface, the epochal developments in art of the 1960s might seem the least likely place to “locate” *Etant donnés*: In all its idiosyncrasy and visceral thing-ness, the work’s flimsy awkwardness and blatant constructedness—being obviously something made by hand—could not seem further from some of Minimalism’s embrace of industrial facture, for instance, or alternatively, of Greenbergian formalism, or language- and systems-based Conceptualism, all of which were being championed at the time. Yet, the embodied viewing that Duchamp’s work presupposes, a veritable phenomenological inquiry into the conditions of (museum) perception, and the rhetorical theatricality of his diorama-like installation suggest productive ways of its reading against, for example, Michael Fried’s polemical understanding of Minimalism or the ideas driving Conceptual
Art. For there is some irony to the fact that in those famous “six years,” from 1966 to 1972, when art was apparently “dematerializing,” Duchamp completed his arguably most materialist work. A work that, paradoxically, echoes many of the precise ideas and systems that Conceptual Art was also questioning. Not least among those concerns were the autonomy of the artwork, the value of the copy, the logic of photography, and the insistence on administration as a part of the artwork itself. And whereas the historian might argue that many of those ideas were already suggested in the readymades or duplicated notes from the first decade of the 20th century (no matter the historical delay that effectively kept both the readymades and the notes in a holding pattern until the 1960s), \textit{Etant donnés} not only critically rearticulates some of Duchamp’s most radical ideas, but also introduces a complex site-specific format specifically aimed at the exhibition as a form and the museum as its privileged institutional site. The work’s requirement of bodily presence and questioning of museum conventions leveled new challenges at the conceptions of the artwork and conditions of presentation/reception alike.

\textit{Etant donnés}’s unveiling also coincided with Happenings, Installation Art, the strategy of “site-specificity,” the perception-oriented and participatory post-Cagean paradigms of the 1960s, and the beginnings of what was later called Institutional Critique, each of which could usefully be read against the backdrop of Duchamp’s final


work. When *Etant donnés* finally opened to the public, it did so at about the same moment as such projects as the Christos’ *Wrapped Art Institute of Chicago* (1968-69), Marcel Broodthaers fictitious *Musée d’art moderne* (1968-72) and Lawrence Weiner’s removal of an exhibition space’s wall lathing for Seth Siegelaub’s *January 5-31, 1969* exhibition (1969), each differently targeting the art institution, with Duchamp’s final work, in retrospect, resonating deeply with these, its contemporaries. *Etant donnés* also became public just before such exhibitions as *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (December 30, 1969–March 1, 1970) and *Using Walls* at the Jewish Museum, New York (May 13–June 21, 1970), both specifically inviting artists to make the very space and walls of the museum part of the work itself. Indeed Duchamp’s final work, one should not forget, was on view not long after Paul Thek’s *The Tomb* (1967), a ziggurat structure to be entered and containing a life-sized cast of the artist in the guise of a “dead hippy,” and was almost simultaneous with projects such as Bruce Nauman’s *Live Taped Video Corner* (1969-70), which literally made the spectator’s viewing in the exhibition space the subject and object of the piece, or, John Baldessari’s proposal for an unrealized project for the *Information* exhibition of 1970, mentioned and sketched in its catalogue, in which a real corpse was to be exposed in a “special room…with a glass peephole.”

*Etant donnés* also preceded Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972), in which the artist’s prone

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17 One could further mention, if one speaks of a specific technical strategy for conveying embodiment, the fact of *Etant donnés*’ completion coinciding with the use of body casting in the work of artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Paul Thek. Although *Etant donnés*, surprisingly, is not seriously addressed in the exhibition and catalogue *Part Object, Part Sculpture*, except as a shadow presence, the impact on the art of the period (by way of the cast and hand made) of Duchamp’s so-called erotic objects that emerged in the 1950s from the then still secret project is brilliantly traced in Helen Molesworth, *Part Object, Part Sculpture* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005).

18 John Baldessari’s “possibly…impossible,” and, in fact, unrealized installation for the *Information* exhibition of 1970 suggests that artists close to Conceptual Art understood *Etant donnés* beyond its apparent return to realism and indeed beyond its appearance as an erotic tableau. Accordingly, the “subject” of Baldessari’s piece, as the artist argued, “is not the cadaver. The subject is rather the issue of breaking and mending aesthetic distance” in a museal context. See Kynaston McShine, ed., *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 16.
masturbating body performed for an audience of aural “voyeurs” in an installation built into the architecture of the gallery (in this case the floor). In their own way, these latter projects performed their own troubling of the terms of institutional display, specifically through the introduction of a corporeality usually not admitted into the dignified space for the showing of art. If the former examples suggest conceptual or ideological links between certain artists’ critical exposure of the institution and Duchamp’s *Etant donnés*, the latter examples formally (and almost directly) featured aspects of the prone nude (in the case of Thek, Baldessari, and Acconci) and the explicit voyeurism of *Etant donnés* (in the case of Thek, Baldessari, Acconci, and Nauman), causing one to wonder why critics at the time almost never evoked comparisons between the works.

Yes, Duchamp is often mentioned in relation to this period and, in fact, to many of these specific practices; John Cage’s interest in Duchamp in the late 1950s and his introduction of the French artist’s work to a whole generation of younger practitioners is frequently cited as the catalyst for Duchamp’s rediscovery in America. But it is the

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19 See critic Robert Pincus-Witten’s review of Acconci’s *Seedbed* in which Duchamp’s erotic objects are even discussed as an influence on the work, one that Acconci himself acknowledged when asked about it, but *Etant donnés*, astonishingly, is not mentioned at all. Pincus-Witten, “Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance,” *Artforum* v. 10, n. 8 (April 1972), 47-49.

20 Here I have specifically avoided comparison with the work with Edward Kienholz and George Segal, some of the rare contemporaries that were mentioned in relation to *Etant donnés* at the time, but those connections, like any others that were made, were seen literally and formally (and seen from the perspective of Duchamp coming, simply, “too late” in relation to those), rather than conceptually or procedurally. One significant drawback to Michael Taylor’s otherwise exhaustive publication on *Etant donnés*, is that while it similarly only sketches out the direct and literal impact of the work on projects by artists like Hannah Wilke or Marcel Dzama, it does not adequately draw connections to so much work in its time with which it actually resonates on levels beyond the explicit or superficially formal level. See the notable essay with references to Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman’s performance-based works of the early 1970s by Michael Lüthy, “*Etant donnés* as a Form of Experience,” in Stefan Banz, ed., *Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010), 132-145, taken up as well in Haladyn, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés*, 21-22 and 50.
Duchamp of the readymades that is mentioned, the Duchamp of chance and language games, it is even the Duchamp of the *Large Glass*, with its deployment of the photographic index. It is not the Duchamp of *Etant donnés*.21

If some sort of temporal or contextual confusion is to blame (historians not knowing whether to consider it a 1940s or ’50s or ’60s work, or even whether to consider it fully European or American), this still does not fully explain why *Etant donnés* remains undetectable in even those rather recent genre- and medium-specific histories of Installation Art, Participatory Art, Institutional Critique, or contemporary photography that are less strictly bound to temporal schemas and to which *Etant donnés* would so interestingly contribute and butt up against. The list of studies to be cited here is long.22

When did this silence (silencing) start and why? Why, for instance, did Brian

21 Here I might point to two seminal articles that focused on the legacy of Duchamp for a younger generation, specifically focusing on two central aspects of Duchampian practice—use of the logic of the index and his critique of institutions—and neither of which, strangely, even mention *Etant donnés*. Rosalind Krauss’s otherwise prescient discussion of Duchamp in “Notes on the Index,” curiously fails to grapple with the tangled ways in which *Etant donnés*—as much as if not even more than any of the Duchampian examples she cites—should be seen in relation to the index and as a precursor to the art of the 1970s about which her article speaks. Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October*, no. 3 (Spring 1977), 68–81; continued in “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2,” *October*, no. 4 (Autumn 1977), 58–67. And, Benjamin Buchloh’s brilliant treatise on Duchamp’s interest in and imbrication in the museum, seen primarily through a discussion of his *Boîte-en-valise*, claims Marcel Broodthaers as the radical inheritor of Duchamp’s critical project but exalts Broodthaers’s position as administrator and “conservateur” of his own museum while completely failing to mention either *Etant donnés* or the ways in which Duchamp enacted quite similar, parallel operations in a real museum at about the same time. I will return to a discussion of both of these texts later in this chapter.

O’Doherty’s brilliant and prescient trilogy of essays about the ideology of exhibition spaces, which appeared in *Artforum* starting in 1976 and which repeatedly mentions Duchamp’s readymades and his exhibition practice as pioneering, not devote a word to the artist’s final artwork?23 After all, *Etant donnés* took even more direct aim at exactly the ideological framework that was O’Doherty’s subject, and the Duchamp work had already been sitting in a museum for several years by that point. O’Doherty is more than just an isolated example. Why did there not appear a single article on *Etant donnés* on the pages of *Artforum* in 1969 when it was first made public (or even, just as strangely, in the several years after)?24 That most engaged and critical hotbed of contemporary criticism at the time not only regularly featured writings by artists (like Robert Morris, Sol Lewitt, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd), who themselves certainly knew of Duchamp’s major last work and who referred to his readymades in their other writings for the magazine, it

23 Brian O’Doherty’s essays have been collected under the title *Inside the White Cube: Ideology of the Exhibition Space* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000). O’Doherty, it should be stated, was in contact with Duchamp just a year prior to the artist’s death, having solicited the artist to include a reading of his notes in O’Doherty’s publication-as-exhibition *Aspen Magazine* 5-6 (1967) and was an avid reader of Duchamp’s works and texts. It is unconceivable that he, like so many artists and critics interested in Duchamp in the period, did not go to Philadelphia to see the artist’s posthumous work when news about it broke.

24 In the period July 1969 to December 1972, covering a span of more than 25 issues and hundreds of articles, more than fifty of which make explicit reference to Duchamp, not a single text was commissioned by *Artforum* to speak about the rather news-worthy revelation of the artist’s last major work. And, aside from a lone letter to the editor, only one article appeared that even mentioned *Etant donnés* by name, and in both cases, only in passing. See Gary Glenn, “Letters,” *Artforum* (November 1972), 6-7 and Jack Burnham, “Unveiling the Consort, Part I” *Artforum* v. 9, n. 7 (March 1971), 56. Burnham, one of the period’s most influential historians among young artists, went on to write a second part of the article as well as a three-part article on Duchamp’s *Large Glass* that appeared in *Arts Magazine*, none of which discussed *Etant donnés*. See Burnham, “Duchamp’s Bride Stripped Bare: The Meaning of the Large Glass,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1972), 28-32; with parts II and III appearing in the April 1972 (p. 41-45) and May 1972 (p. 58-61) issues respectively. Other contemporary art journals, *Arts Magazine* in particular, did discuss Duchamp’s final work on its pages, although hardly as visibly or vigorously as one might easily expect and certainly not comparably with discussions of the readymades. Admittedly, the example of *Artforum* does not provide an entirely accurate measure of the contemporary silence around the work but, given its cultural relevance at the time, it is an important indication of how widespread the recalcitrance was amongst artists and critics who admired the “early” Duchamp to speak much about his last work.
was also precisely the place where contemporaneous developments in art were being vigorously debated.²⁵

And in the rare instances when someone does in more recent times question the larger art historical context in which the work was produced and received, there has often been a blanket refusal to acknowledge the ways in which Duchamp’s final work might relate to the progressive art production of its time. T.J. Demos’s reading is exemplary of this, writing that *Etant donnés* “disconnects from the historical paradigm that his wartime work elaborated. But it also severs ties to its own historical field, in terms of any connection to contemporary avant–garde production (corresponding from 1946-66 to the development of abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, Happenings, and conceptual art, with which it shares next to nothing).”²⁶ Such a view of history ignores *Etant donnés*’s connection and relevance—both to Duchamp’s previous productions, including most specifically his “wartime” exhibition designs and *Boîte-en-valise*, and to the variously mentioned developments of concurrent “contemporary avant-garde production.”

The irony of the work’s occlusion is all the more remarkable when considering that it was around the time of *Etant donnés*’s unveiling that Duchamp came to be internationally acclaimed and the focus of attention for a whole generation of younger artists (in what has been called “the Duchamp effect”). It was roughly the decade and a half—bracketed by the publication of the first monograph on Duchamp, in 1959, the first English publication of his translated *Boîte verte* notes in 1960, the re-edition of thirteen

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of his original readymades in 1964, and his first retrospectives in America and Europe (in 1963 in Pasadena, in 1966 in London, and in 1977 in Paris, the latter being his first major solo show in his native France)—that marks the establishment of the artist’s extraordinary reign of influence, not only as a retroactive “master” of the first half of the 20th century, but also as the virtual lodestar to so many younger artists at the time. Yet, in the 1994 introduction to a special issue of *October*, Benjamin Buchloh asks “whether the reception of Duchamp’s work, manifold and labyrinthine as it is, has not fallen short of the work’s actual historical potential—and the near total silence surrounding the hidden enigma in Philadelphia would attest to that.” Still, and surprisingly, that very journal devoted a meager few lines to the work in an entire issue devoted to Duchamp’s influence on artists after him. And aside from two recent monographic publications on the work, and a single art historical primer, little in the way in which it has been received in the nearly two decades since Buchloh made his observation has rectified this situation.

To question the relative silence around Duchamp’s most recalcitrant work here is to point to the disjuncture between *Etant donnés*’s reception and the imbrication and

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27 Buchloh, “Editorial Introduction,” *October* 70 (Fall 1994), 4. Buchloh’s lament holds another paradox in this context as the “Three Conversations in 1985: Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Robert Morris,” that he conducted and that were included in the issue never once mention *Etant donnés*. Interviewer Martha Buskirk (or her respondents) in “Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson” also included in the volume similarly fail to speak to Duchamp’s final work. Moreover, this discrepancy goes entirely unaddressed in the roundtable discussion on “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp” that closes the issue, where Duchamp’s final work is mentioned in passing and barely discussed. It is remarkable that in an issue devoted to the “Duchamp Effect,” not a single essay is included or commissioned about, and so little mention is made of, the one work which Duchamp left as a deliberately final statement. A similar elision is present in David Hopkins’ essay “Rethinking the ‘Duchamp Effect,’” published years after the *October* special issue, yet does nothing to rectify this state of affairs, in Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, 215-245.

28 Of course, Michael Taylor’s 2009 exhibition and catalogue on the work are milestones, tremendously important and long awaited; still, they cannot be said to have entirely solved the problem of the work’s lack of inscription in wider histories, see Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés*. The same can be said of Julian Jason Haladyn’s slim volume of the same name, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés* (London: Afterall, 2010). For the exception to this rule, see Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, *et al.*, eds., *Art Since 1900*, 496-99.
inner workings of Art History (with a capital A and H) and the Museum (with a capital M) that were the quiet subjects of so much of Duchamp’s oeuvre all along. How strange that precisely this work—Duchamp’s coda of sorts—has ended up insufficiently contextualized and thus uneasily located in the very history that it addresses.

THE GIVENs

To tell Etant donnés’s story, it is necessary to start from the beginning. Who can forget that one of the scraps of paper in Duchamp’s Boîte verte of 1934 bearing the heading “Preface” declares: “Etant donnes: 1. la chute d’eau, 2. Le gaz d’eclairage…”. However, as we know, among the jumble of the Boîte verte’s ninety-three other pages, there is neither an essay per se nor a linear narrative that develops in any traditional sense; in fact, since there is no logical sequence to the notes, there is no recognizable way in which this particular torn scrap could “preface” any of the various other scraps.

Figure 3.6 [Marcel Duchamp, Note “Etant donnés” from the Boîte verte, 1934]

In fact, the note not only recorded the title for Duchamp’s posthumous work, but also suggested that—for decades—it had been lying in wait, delayed in appearance, yet already in the works. Retrospectively, the note takes on the character of a purloined letter, under our noses but unrecognizable as a clue. This trickery was fitting for an artist who had spent the last two decades of his life building Etant donnés in utmost secrecy while nevertheless releasing into the world an array of works that quietly alluded to or referenced the larger installation. Because no one detected what those clues, references, and anatomical quotations were pointing to, their connections to something larger only became known to the public, and even to many of the artist’s closest friends and family, after his death, when Etant donnés entered the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of
Art. Significantly, here the artist’s notes again establish themselves as an odd administrative structure for the work of art that they covertly announce and circumscribe.

Constructed over a twenty-year period, *Etant donnés* was begun in Duchamp’s top floor apartment-atelier at 210 West 14th Street in an aging brownstone walk-up, which he started renting in October 1943. At some point in the summer or autumn of 1949, he rented an additional room that adjoined his apartment. Even after he got married to Alexina (Teeny) Sadler in 1954 and went to live with his new wife in a somewhat more fashionable midtown location, he held on to the two spaces on West 14th Street. The part that had served as both a living and working space for years would thus, from 1954 forward, remain his “official” studio. It was kept as all his previous spaces had been, spartan and dusty. His additional atelier, secured by a locked door, was accessible—aptly—from the official studio’s bathroom (who can forget that so many of the artist’s pieces pivoted on that Duchampian confluence of the bodily intimacy found in the lavatory and the messy stuff of the studio). This second space remained unknown to visitors who would have found that in the “public” studio into which they were invited, Duchamp had eliminated most signs of art-making (as he stated, he had, since about

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30 “The dust lay two inches thick on the floor with a narrow path from the front door and another leading to the bathroom, and always a table at the ready for chess,” observed Jeanne Raynal, cited in Goldfarb Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare*, 245.
31 Back in his 1927 Paris apartment-studio, the artist had made a practical but unusual modification to his apartment-studio space and had a single door swing between two adjacent doorframes, so that the opening of one space (in this case, the work studio) meant the closing off of the other (the bathroom) and vice versa. It is interesting to note that in 1963, at about the moment when Duchamp was likely working on the threshold and the door with regard to *Etant donnés*, he returned to his rigged studio door, and although he no longer lived in the apartment (at that point, a friend, fellow artist Isabelle Walberg did), had it removed from the rue Larrey space and installed a replica of the door made by a carpenter for the apartment. He presented the 1927 “original” door and doubled doorframe as a work of art in its own right, entitled, *Door, 11 rue Larrey* (1963). This domestic modification-cum-artwork is arguably one of the many ways that Duchamp “released” clues to his then-current but secret labor on *Etant donnés*. Tellingly, the artist only claimed *Door, 11 rue Larrey* as an artwork in the context of his working on *Etant donnés*, when the question of (studio) doors that reveal and hide was ever present on his mind.
1923, supposedly “given up” art for other primary occupations, like playing chess and breathing. The secret studio was where his clandestine figure and her flimsy house could, in all freedom, take form. When his lease for both spaces ran out in the winter of 1965-6, the artist was forced to move. Before dismantling and transporting the nearly complete installation to a fourth floor space in a banal office building at 80 East 11th street, Duchamp snapped some pictures and wrote out a few notes to help him remember how to put his construction back together again. Then, in that tiny new room, a mere eighteen by twenty feet, neighbor to the A.F.L. Poultry Worker’s Union, and secreted from all friends and colleagues (he was befittingly not listed in the building’s directory), his gangly installation was finalized.\(^{32}\) In the early months of 1966, the artist signed and dated the piece, and set to work at making an exhaustive manual that would indicate how it could be disassembled and reassembled without his direct involvement. One senses in this action that he knew he might live neither to see the piece taken apart nor to see it enter the final resting place he was so carefully plotting for it.

Without him, in the months after his death, \textit{Etant donnés} was transported to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and, finally, on July 7, 1969, it quietly opened to the public in a gallery adjoining others already displaying the largest collection of the artist’s work. If the work’s arrival at the museum was destined to signal a kind of conclusion for the piece, \textit{Etant donnés}’s date of inception remains the subject of much speculation. The “preface” in the \textit{Boîte verte} suggests that ideas for the piece were already brewing by the early teens when Duchamp had scripted the idiosyncratic title that was eventually


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published in 1934. Another claim sees its beginnings in a remark made to art dealer Julien Levy in the 1920s about wanting to make a “life-sized articulated dummy, a mechanical woman whose vagina, contrived of mesh springs and ball bearings, would be contractile, possibly self-lubricating.” And then, of course, there are those that locate the work’s genesis and most important reference point in the Large Glass of 1915-23, rendering the nude of Etant donnés little more than a physical manifestation of the Glass’s fallen bride. The latter, oft-repeated reference has largely obscured the importance of another probable trajectory of Etant donnés’s development, found in the late 1930s, the moment when the artist was avidly investigating the implications of the museum and exhibition through the work on his Boîte-en-valise and various exhibition and display endeavors—projects to which Etant donnés has, until recently, only rarely been compared.

EXHIBITION-MAKER

The slow but determined labor on Etant donnés followed the production of Duchamp’s museum in a box, the Boîte-en-valise, whose conception and replications had kept the artist busy from 1935 to the early 1940s, when the first of the boxes were released. It is worth remembering as well that, predating his conscientious work on Etant donnés,

33 Michael Taylor mentions this possible genesis. Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 32
35 In Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, Taylor traces the iconographic connections between the exhibitions and Duchamp’s final work, as does Sheldon Nodelman, in a more abbreviated way, in his essay “Disguise and Display,” Art in America 3 (March 2003), 57-62.
Duchamp had already conceived the hyperbolic spectacles that were the 1938 *Exposition International du Surréalisme* and the 1942 *First Papers of Surrealism* show. And, in the two decades that followed those exhibitions, the artist’s interest in display and exhibition-making continued unabated, resulting in elaborate *mises-en-scenes* for Surrealist exhibitions in 1947, 1959, and 1960, which entirely overlapped work on *Etant donnés*. In this activity—where again he essentially took on the role of a curator—he confronted anew questions regarding the rituals of display, organization of vision, and the role of the discursive and other frameworks in the reception of an artwork, in short, the function of the exhibition-as-institution. Together, these investigations could not have been more apt foundations for the major project Duchamp had in mind.

Also significant in this context were the artist’s shop window designs, made at the behest of André Breton, to help promote and sell the latter’s publications. At the Gotham Book Mart in New York in 1945, Duchamp put together a display which he entitled *Lazy Hardware*, featuring a scantily-clad headless mannequin with a faucet attached to her thigh—a lifeless half-nude behind glass purveying (the promise of) running water that already manifested various elements of *Etant donnés* as a three-dimensional tableau. That same year, his design for Brentano’s bookstore, also in New York, included a partial female figure constructed of chicken wire, a waterfall-like cascade of paper strips, and the sculpture of a female torso by Isabelle Walberg, arranged by Duchamp so that “the head and one arm [was] hidden, the other outstretched, legs

36 The Gotham Book Mart window display was meant to announce and celebrate the publication of Breton’s *Arcane 17* and the Bretano’s shop window display was, on the other hand, meant to do so for Breton’s *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*. Both displays are discussed at length in: Thomas Girst, “These Objects of Obscure Desires: Marcel Duchamp and His Shop Windows,” in Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein, eds. *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 143-46.
spread far apart, one straight and the other sharply bent at the knee, the triangle of genitalia exposed.” Iconographically, both of these window designs have been said to anticipate different elements and even the central figure of Duchamp’s final work. However, one cannot help think of how they perhaps more importantly exemplified the artist’s various approaches to presentation, display, and—not negligibly—sales over the years (whether through his Brancusi exhibition, his Concours Lépine stand of Rotoreliefs, or even his Boîte-en-valise) as much as they looked forward to similar issues in Etant donnés. Through these store window designs, the artist seems to have understood that the shop window, like the exhibition, produced value just as much as, if not more than, put it on display.

Figure 3.7 [Maya Deren, Photograph of Duchamp’s Lazy Hardware, window display at the Gotham Bookmart, New York, 1945]

Figure 3.8 [Maya Deren, Photograph of Duchamp working on the installation of Lazy Hardware, window display at the Gotham Bookmart, New York, 1945]

Whenever its actual beginnings, Duchamp dated Etant donnés 1946-66, and the first known studies indeed originate in 1946 when the artist set to work on the concrete plans for, and actual construction of, the piece. The first drawn study of the work is thought to also date from 1946, and it is known that on a visit to Switzerland in the summer of that same year, Duchamp took photographs of the waterfall that would serve as the backdrop of the installation. In the first known letter mentioning the piece, dating from July 1947, the artist writes to his then-lover, the Brazilian artist Maria Martins, whose body served as the model for the nude of Etant donnés, about his worries concerning the “skin” of the figure he was then making.  

reveals that he was awaiting news of a Paris exhibition since at that very moment, in the
elegant spaces owned by the Galerie Maeght in Paris, the 1947 Exposition internationale
du surréalisme had been erected according to Duchamp’s instructions. The invested
nature of Duchamp’s involvement in those postwar Surrealist exhibitions suggests not
only the degree to which the artist continually sought to probe the space of presentation
and display, but also how much these projects became the site for conceptually
articulating ideas important to his simultaneous thinking about Etant donnés. I therefore
examine these exhibitions in some detail here in order to bring focus to the particular
parallels and reverberations with his final work.

Figure 3.9 [Marcel Duchamp, Study for Etant donnés, 1946]

For that first collective Surrealist exhibition to be held in Paris after the war,
André Breton had again asked Duchamp to help design the spatial organization of the
show, which ran from July 7, 1947 to September 30, 1947. Breton hoped for the
exhibition to mark the postwar return of Surrealism to French intellectual life, offering
“initiation” and “superstition” as the exhibition’s implicit themes. Unlike with previous
exhibitions for the movement, for which Duchamp was present on site and directly
involved in the execution of his design ideas, in this case, the artist was unwilling to go
back and forth between Paris and New York to oversee the installation. He thus proposed
to work out the scheme and general plans with Breton in Paris before returning to New
York where he appointed architect Frederick Kiesler, himself a pioneer in avant-garde
exhibition design, to erect the elaborate interior layout and several smaller installations in
his stead. Kiesler, who was based in New York at the time, promptly departed for Paris and spent four months overseeing the construction of the complex exhibition installation. One cannot help but speculate that the reason for Duchamp’s desire to design the exhibition from a distance was due to the fact that he was engrossed in the labor on the nude of *Etant donnés* at his New York studio.

Following Duchamp’s instructions and not only inventing technical solutions for the realization of the artist’s ideas, but also incorporating much of his own vision of architecture into the whole, Kiesler constructed a decidedly nonlinear, labyrinthine structure that spanned the two floors of the Galerie Maeght’s decorous spaces. The “initiation” of visitors to the exhibition began with Breton’s flight of twenty-one stairs (each representing a book spine bearing the names of Surrealism’s most cherished authors), which led to a Duchamp-styled grotto, the main part of the exhibition. For this space, titled the *Salle des superstitions* or “Room of Superstitions,” Kiesler stretched thick dark fabric on a curvilinear metal framework that roughly followed the walls of the various exhibition rooms. Jean Arp compared it to a large egg that enveloped the spectator “like in the bosom of his mother.” Artworks by the show’s eighty-seven artists were similarly engulfed, bathed in a dim greenish light and occasionally hung behind the stretched fabric that had holes cut into it to allow for their viewing. This room gave way to a maze that ended in what was called the exhibition’s “Rain room,” also modeled on ideas by Duchamp. There, water fell from pipes running along the ceiling and dripped

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39 See Kiesler’s elaborate sketches currently housed at the Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation Archive in Vienna and Breton’s sketches and descriptions housed amongst the Breton papers at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

40 See Kiesler’s writings collected in Siegfried Gohr and Gunda Luyken, eds., *Frederick Kiesler: Selected Writing* (Ostfildern: Hatje Canz, 1997).

onto a special latticed wood floor that allowed the “rain” to drain. Adjacent to this simulated waterfall, the artist had asked that artificial grass and a billiard table be installed, the latter serving as an oversized and eccentric pedestal for Maria Martin’s bronze sculpture entitled *Impossible* (1946).  

This area of the exhibition opened onto another maze-like structure made of twelve octagonal compartments, Breton’s “Labyrinth of Initiations,” which served as niches for fantastic pagan votive “altars,” each designed by a different artist, including Duchamp’s altar to the *Soigneur de gravité* or “Juggler of Gravity,” an element from *The Large Glass*. No less spectacular than the 1938 *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, this first post-war manifestation of Surrealism was a peculiar mix of Duchampian elements (the grotto interior of warped fabric exhibition walls, steady stream of water falling near a billiard table-cum-sculpture pedestal, and evocation of nature, all idiosyncratic means of tampering with exhibition conventions), Breton’s mythical-initiatory concerns, and Kiesler’s particular interest in what he called “continuity-architecture-painting-sculpture.”

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Figure 3.10 [Willy Maywald, Installation view, “Salle des superstitions,” *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1947]

Figure 3.11 [Willy Maywald, Installation view, “Rain room,” *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1947]

Figure 3.12 [Denise Bellon, Photograph of Duchamp’s *Soigner de gravité*, *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1947]

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42. The billiard table was what Marcel Jean, Surrealism’s earliest and most indefatigable historian described as “one of those rare notes of deliberate humor in the exhibition.” Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 342.

43. Fellow artist Roberto Matta erected Duchamp’s ephemeral contribution to the “altar” area dedicated to an invisible but apparently crucial figure of the *Large Glass*. The ephemeral installation is known mostly through the photographs by Denise Bellon and Willy Maywald. A description of this ephemeral installation can be found in Herbert Molderings, “The Objects of Modern Skepticism,” in Thierry de Duve, ed., *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994), 259-62.

Duchamp requested that Kiesler specifically make a new work, entitled *Le Rayon vert*, on his behalf. The work was to be visible through a roughly 30 centimeter-wide, perfectly cut hole in a part of the fabric “wall” that made up the “Room of Superstitions.” It referred, as did the eponymous Jules Verne novel that it took as inspiration, to an optical illusion, a green luminescence that can be observed at sea under particular climatic conditions at dusk. Although the exact details of Duchamp’s piece remain appropriately elusive (based as it was on a rare optical phenomenon), Kiesler’s sketches and photographer Denise Bellon’s images suggest that it was composed of a tilted box frame, a neon light, two transparent gelatin filters, one in yellow and the other in blue—resulting in green, when layered—and a photograph of the sea. A slit was cut into the photographic paper so that the light placed behind it seemed to emerge from the image’s horizon. This illuminated photographic seascape reminds us of the strange foothold that water and gas had in all of Duchamp’s work, as well as of the role that photography and voyeurism specifically play in *Etant donnés*. The seascape was likely only illuminated in intervals. This fleeting luminescence and the work’s reclusive placement behind a hole, no doubt, obscured it from most visitors to the exhibition. Few seem to have noticed it at all, and none of the reports of the exhibition even mention it despite the fact that the exhibition catalogue buoyantly announced: “Through a porthole shines the green ray by Marcel Duchamp.” *Le Rayon vert* contended, for those that noticed it, and much like the later *Etant donnés*, that the viewing of what is on the gallery’s walls is an illusion on

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45 As the manual of *Etant donnés* reminds us in its description of the electric assembly of *Etant donnés*: green is the color of the light bulb in the splayed nude’s Bec Auer lamp as it gives “the illusion of gaslight.” *Manual of Instructions*, 20.

46 See *Le Surréalisme en 1947*.
all fronts.\textsuperscript{47} And, in as far as visual tests go, it might have been—like Duchamp’s totally overlooked introduction of readymades into the Bourgeois Gallery exhibition in New York in 1916—an attempt to investigate under what conditions the work of art, placed behind a hole in the “wall” of an exhibition, would become recognizable as such.

Although \textit{Etant donnés} would remain a guarded secret throughout the entirety of Duchamp’s arrangements for the exhibition, he wanted to have a cast of Martin’s left breast (made as a result of the preparations for his covert work) replicated as a shallow plaster relief to serve as a cover for the catalogue to accompany the 1947 show. The process would have been onerous, involving casting and then fitting nearly one thousand relatively bulky reliefs to the covers of books, and since the 999 deluxe editions of the catalogue had to be produced in relatively little time, another solution had to be found. But it is telling that Duchamp was so attached to the idea at all. Fellow artist Enrico Donati offered as a suggestion instead to use what was colloquially called a “falsie”—a store-bought three-dimensional foam-rubber breast employed at the time by women to pad their bras—and he apparently also helped to convince the Brooklyn-based company

\textsuperscript{47} Letters and sketches suggest that Duchamp originally wanted the photograph, light, and layers of colored filters to be built into the outer casing of a leather suitcase (like those used for the deluxe edition of his \textit{Boîte-en-valise}) and then placed behind its hole-in-the-wall, thereby connecting Duchamp’s portable museum and this otherwise temporary project embedded into the wall of an ephemeral exhibition. The suitcase idea went unrealized (even as he was proposing it, Duchamp worried that the light bulb might get too hot in a closed suitcase), but all other plans for Duchamp’s obscure little installation seem to have gone ahead. See Herbert Molderings, “\textit{The Green Ray}: Marcel Duchamp’s Lost Work of Art,” in Stefan Banz, ed., \textit{Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall}, 240-257.
manufacturing the objects to make a batch based on Duchamp’s plaster cast model.\textsuperscript{48} The two artists then hand-painted the nipples of each of the resultant spongy breasts and attached them to a backing of black velvet; both elements were then adhered to the front cover of the catalogue slipcase. Hence, the body of Duchamp’s lover became the model for industrially made replicas that were, in turn, individually hand-painted to eventually become a series of artistic originals. In other words, rather than simply leaving a clue to his covert work in the form of an anatomical quotation, as is often suggested (a breast that appears glaringly on a cover even though it secretly references the yet-unknown \textit{Etant donnés}), Duchamp, more importantly, left behind this and countless other conceptual allusions to his deep and persistent concerns regarding embodiment, the copy, and the original.

\textbf{Figure 3.16} [Marcel Duchamp, Plaster relief of breast study for the cover of the \textit{Surréalisme en 1947} exhibition catalogue, 1947]

\textbf{Figure 3.17} [Denise Bellon, Photograph of foam breast and velvet elements for the \textit{Surréalisme en 1947} exhibition catalogue, 1947]

\textbf{Figure 3.18} [Marcel Duchamp, Front and back cover of the \textit{Surréalisme en 1947} exhibition catalogue, 1947]

Slyly extending these queries even further while also continuing an investigation into the photographic medium, the cover of the standard paperback edition of the 1947 Surrealist exhibition catalogue featured a photographic reproduction of an actual breast emerging from a swath of black cloth (the seemingly “real” referent of the foam-rubber falsie) along with the following caption: “This cover is the photographic reproduction of the original cover by Marcel Duchamp.”\textsuperscript{49} Yet the photograph was, in reality, not the breast of Martins—on which the specially made “falsies” were based—nor was it a photograph of the actual cover with its industrial foam breast. The photograph was

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{48} See the account of the making of the cover by Donati in Taylor, \textit{Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés}, 70.

\textsuperscript{49} See \textit{Le Surréalisme en 1947}, cover to the regular edition.
\end{footnotesize}
simply of another breast, a real one, in this case of a model apparently engaged for the task. At Duchamp’s request, French photographer Rémy Duval made this image for the standard edition covers and to include as a loose print in deluxe editions of the catalogue, but it was in no way an actual “photographic reproduction of the original cover by Marcel Duchamp” as announced. Instead, it further complicated the deluxe cover’s positing of an “original” or authentic referent while attesting to photography’s crucial role in this maneuver.\footnote{\textsuperscript{50}}

To the backside of the cover, Duchamp had attached a sober label bearing the instructions: “prière de toucher” (please touch). The association was irreverent, defiantly mixing erotics and tactility in a publication as an atavistic thing to be handled, rendering reading a corporeal venture. More than that, the catalogue arguably served as a kind of manifesto for the rethinking of display conventions surrounding art. For the come-on “please touch” had a specific target: Duchamp explicitly requested of the printer that the lettering mimic the exact typeface used for the famous dictum accompanying works everywhere in French museums—\textit{Prière de ne pas toucher} (Please do not touch).\footnote{\textsuperscript{51}}
catalogue cover thus quietly points to one of the particular operations of the Boîte-en-valise; in a cunning reversal of the museum’s regulatory function, Duchamp encourages the transgression of the institution’s rules by instead offering a suggestive summons to touch.

Some years later, for the next major Surrealist group show, this one held from December 15, 1959 to February 15, 1960 at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris, Duchamp was again invited to generate the exhibition’s design. The exhibition announced “Eros” as its explicit theme, typographically expressed in the title: Exposition interRnatiOnale du Surréalisme. While it is not known if the theme had already been decided before Duchamp was brought in or whether he had suggested it himself, it suited him well in those years in which he was deeply involved in the erotic implications of his secret work.

Again Duchamp designed the space from a distance, and among his ideas for this Surrealist show, Breton’s notes of his conversations with the artist reveal that Duchamp had an initial plan to convert the entire ceiling into a large-scale, spinning apparatus based on his Rotoreliefs. Given the theme of Eros, it is telling that Duchamp proposed that a giant version of one of his optical devices be placed there; the erotic implications of the otherwise innocuous-seeming discs (first presented by the artist next to vegetable slicers and other useful utilities at a Paris inventor’s fair, no less!), with their evocations of carnal viewing and pulsating penetration, were now clear. Likely for technical

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reasons, the idea of a massive ceiling-mounted Rotorelief had to be abandoned, but based on French graphic designer Pierre Faucheux’s drawing for the final interior and a handful of surviving photographs, we can make out the nature of the project that resulted in its place. Even before fully entering the exhibition, one might have spied holes at eye level cut into a curtain covering the front window of the gallery, beckoning visitors to peep at the spectacle within. Given how involved Duchamp was in envisioning the details of the exhibition, his early conversations with Breton likely gave rise to the specific notion of the spectator as “voyeur”, a definition the poet-leader of Surrealism puts forward in a the letter to invited artists; the “voyeur,” after all, was also how Duchamp would refer to the viewer of his then-still-under-construction Etant donnés.  

Figure 3.22 [André Breton, Manuscript of letter to artists “Aux Exposants” concerning the Exposition interratiOnale du Surréalisme, Galerie Daniel Cordier, Paris, 1959]

Figure 3.23 [Pierre Faucheux, Floorplans for the Exposition interratiOnale du Surréalisme, Galerie Daniel Cordier, Paris, 1959]

The suitably dramatic pink satin-covered entrance space of the exhibition featured a ceiling with air pumps hidden behind its fabric so as to create a rhythmic undulating movement, suggesting that the space itself was a living, corporal being. At the end of the entrance portal, visitors passed through a pearl curtain set into an ogival doorway that Surrealist artist and historian Robert Benayoun called, in no uncertain terms,  

Discourse (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 175-199 and finally, “Where’s Poppa?” in Thierry De Duve, ed., Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp, 437. It is perhaps unsurprising that when, in the years following the 1959 Exposition interratiOnale du Surréalisme, the owner of Paris’s famous Crazy Horse cabaret club approached Duchamp to contribute to the stage show, the artist proposed projecting images of his spinning Rotorelief on the bare breasts of the dancers. In exchange, Duchamp and his guests were granted free access to any of the nightly performances. Story recounted to author by Jacqueline Matisse, Duchamp’s step-daughter, who visited the Crazy Horse with Duchamp and her mother as a young adult.  


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“‘vaginal’…with beads of dew.” It replaced Duchamp’s unrealized hope for an entrance portal in the shape of a “vagina in rubber, badly made but evocative.” How can one imagine that the artist who had by that point completed the nude figure of his *Etant donnés*—with her own badly made but evocative orifice—the artist who was in the process of constructing that work’s backdrop and architectural surround, did not have his ultimate work in mind when making suggestions for this 1959 exhibition?

More than seventy-five works of art conveyed the “erotics” of the exhibition’s title through the mostly explicit iconography of (male) desire. Artworks were immersed in dim lighting, almost as if one with the various organic, womb-like spaces and passageways that Duchamp had envisioned. The rooms also included a lugubrious interior lined with moss green velvet walls (the architect’s solution to Duchamp’s specific request for moss in the exhibition) and on the floor featured a thick layer of sand instead of carpeting from which protruded provocative stalactite-like forms. The whole seemed to pulsate to the sound of poet Radovan Ivsic’s recorded acoustics of heavy breathing and erotic sighs, and the smell of cheap perfume, strategically released, permeated the air. Ceilings, walls, and floors, the structural elements so rationally designed and invariably stable in the traditional exhibition, were here rendered volatile and undulant.

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55 This is one of the “Suggestions of Marcel” listed in Breton’s notes for the exhibition, reproduced in Marie Bonnet, “Anti-Reality! Marcel Duchamp, André Breton et la VIIIe Exposition international du Surréalisme, Paris Galerie Daniel Cordier, 1959,” *Cahiers du MNAM*, n. 87 (Spring 2004), 101.
56 Including, for instance, Man Ray’s *Virgin* (1955), an oil on canvas spread-legged nude tacked to the ceiling, Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955), its paint splattered quilt and bed sheets hung upright in a passageway (its first showing in Europe, made possible though Duchamp’s encouragement), Joan Miró’s *Sleeping Object* (1936), part tree-trunk part machine, was placed ominously in a corridor, and Hans Bellmer’s giant *Poupée* (1936), its doubled legs akimbo and strung from the ceiling above mirrors that allowed visitors to see her undersides.
The last room of the exhibition, lined in red velvet, featured Meret Oppenheim’s *Festin*, a deliciously spectacular contribution to the exhibition’s mingling of the carnal and the visual: the artist staged an opening night feast of lobsters, exotic fruit, and other delicacies spread out on the naked painted body of a live model hired for the occasion. Selected visitors to the exhibition’s opening were invited into the installation-performance to sit and eat from the erotic “buffet.” After the opening night, a gold patinated wax mannequin with two tuxedoed male mannequins who joined her as simulated “guests” replaced Oppenheim’s live model.57 Duchamp also had his hand in directing the display terms of this, the exhibition’s last chamber, specifically requesting that the scene include “stagnant water” and that a barrier of iron grating not only interrupt lines of vision but effectively serve to physically separate the spectator from Oppenheim’s sprawled nude in her hedonistic landscape.58 If the whole of the exhibition underscored the connections between the exhibition space and the female body and between looking and carnal pleasure, one cannot help but recognize a direct antecedent to Duchamp’s last project.

*Figure 3.26 [Visitors eating at Meret Oppenheim’s Festin during the Exposition internationale du Surréalisme, Galerie Daniel Cordier, Paris, 1959. Photograph by Roger van Hecke]*

Here again, his conception of the catalogue underscored the central role he had occupied in the show’s organization. The catalogue consisted of an edition of fifty deluxe green mailbox-shaped cases entitled *Boîte Alerte!*—a play on a letter box and the artist’s own previous *boîte* projects. Among what the cover announced as “lascivious missives,” the box contained various erotic letters and paraphernalia, including the facsimile of a suggestive telegram Duchamp had sent Breton before the opening of the exhibition, as

58 These “Suggestions of Marcel” can be found in Breton’s notes for the exhibition, reproduced in Bonnet, “Anti-Reality!”, 101.
well as what Duchamp called his *Couple of Laundress’s Aprons*: two playful pot holders with “male” and “female” genitalia made of fabric and fur that were concealed behind tiny tartan fabric flaps—objects that he had fabricated in Paris and that were based on a readymade set purchased in New York. If the *Boîte Alerte!*, like the 1947 exhibition catalogue, suggestively constructed a relationship between (carnal) desire and (aesthetic) looking as a central concern, it was in the exhibition space itself that one might have found the most telling signs of Duchamp’s attempt to underscore the inherent corporeal implications of exhibitions.

*Figure 3.27* [Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte Alerte!*, deluxe edition of catalogue for the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme*, 1959]

*Figure 3.28* [Marcel Duchamp, *Couple of Laundress Aprons*, contribution to the deluxe editions of the catalogue of the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme*, 1959]

*The Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter’s Domain* was held just a year later, from November 28, 1960 to January 14, 1961 at the D’Arcy Gallery in New York; it would be the last of the Surrealist exhibitions that Duchamp would curate and for which he devised a “hanging” that was rather conventional if not for some small but suitably odd interventions. Being in New York at the time, he conceived and directly oversaw the implementation of the various elements for which he seemed particularly proud, as his letters to Breton suggest. At the entrance, visitors could “punch” their invitation at a time-card machine, and they could have their future predicted by a fortune-teller who was hired for the occasion and kept busy the entire opening night. Inside, the excruciating sound of a child’s blundered piano practice filled the air, clocks bearing different times hung from the ceilings of the gallery’s rooms, a ray of light (suggesting either the setting or rising sun) traversed the gallery, and snaking through each of the different exhibition

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59 Duchamp, letter to André Breton (December 1, 1960), published in Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, eds., *Affectionately Duchamp*, 370-71.
spaces was a garden hose (invoking once again the water of “eau et gaz” that Duchamp so persistently brought into exhibitions he curated).60 There were roughly one hundred and fifty artworks, each with a little flag nearby denoting the nationality of the artists that had created them and, not far, an electric train set circled in a bay window with a string of cars bearing the names of the exhibition’s artists—both gestures serving as Duchamp’s parodic response to the standard exhibition label.

Figure 3.29 [Installation view, The Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter’s Domain at the D’Arcy Gallery, New York, 1960-61]

Figure 3.30 [Installation and detail views, Duchamp’s “Coin sale” in The Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter’s Domain at the D’Arcy Gallery, New York, 1960]

As his own contribution to the show, the artist had created an installation in a corner cupboard comprised of three live hens and their freshly laid eggs held under a green light; the poultry was behind a wire fence against which one had to position oneself for viewing. The corner, it goes without saying, became progressively foul smelling and disturbing as the exhibition wore on. The area bore a handmade sign, composed of a piece of ordinary cardboard onto which nickels were glued, spelling out the words “coin sale,” a play on words that meant literally, “dirty corner,” or, in colloquial French, “vagina.” The elements in the exhibition quietly pointed to ideas developing in *Etant donnés*, each striving to reconfigure the conventional exhibition space and the means by which visitors experience the looking central to an exhibition’s functioning.

A shared iconography undoubtedly connects the Surrealist exhibitions and *Etant donnés*, and Duchamp might have been probing how lugubrious interiors, darkened rooms, and corporeal allusions functioned as exhibition space; Michael Taylor’s

catalogue of some of those iconographic links is persuasive. Yet, arguably, the more vital connection between the Surrealist exhibitions and Duchamp’s overall oeuvre lies in their consideration of what an exhibition is and could be; in other words, they point to the necessity to rethink the typical space of display, to reconfigure conventions of spectatorial looking, and to permit desire to enter into that place where only a disincarnate viewer was otherwise permitted to be present. In retrospect, each of Duchamp’s various curatorial projects—and it would be a mistake not to consider the Boîte-en-valise among them—seems to have served as an important testing ground for the questions he secretly pursued with Etant donnés.

That, however, is only half the story. Although the scholarship on Duchamp has long tended to privilege object-production over the ephemeral (in this case, short-lived exhibition and store-window displays), the output of tangible objects was explicitly not the conclusive endpoint of the artist’s practice. Thus, instead of conceiving of the flow of ideas in only one direction (the exhibitions as preparation for the production of more permanent things), one might see Duchamp’s exhibition-making as an artistic strategy in itself, which catalyzed shifts in his thinking about the potential form and meaning of objects. For it seems just as likely that what Duchamp was working through in Etant donnés figured in the exhibitions and vice versa, both projects actively materializing and simultaneously transforming his notions of how artworks come to be what they are: how they perform in and are constituted by those spaces and objects around them.

THE ART OF A COLLECTION

Duchamp’s development of *Etant donnés* also coincided with a less spectacular but, no doubt, equally influential task: in the late 1940s, Walter and Louise Arensberg enlisted the artist to carry out the negotiations with museum spaces to which the couple could potentially entrust their art collection.\(^{62}\) It was to be no small museum gift: more than forty major Duchamp pieces (nearly every major painting, quite a few readymades, as well as a number of important sketches, in short, by far the most substantial ensemble of his artworks in a single place) and roughly eight hundred ancient artifacts and artworks by other notable artists (many of which had been collected on Duchamp’s advice). For this task, the artist met with a number of officials from different American museums to negotiate the donation and terms of its display.\(^{63}\) Among them, the Philadelphia Museum of Art offered the most long-term perspective for the expansive collection, committing to show it as a unit for a minimum of twenty-five years.\(^{64}\) Letters sent to the Arensbergs in California so as to help them with their decision-making attest to Duchamp’s committed involvement with the entire process.\(^{65}\) Over the course of the deal-making, the artist came to know the galleries and interior architecture of the stately Philadelphia Museum building extremely well. He sketched out plans of the museum’s galleries, carefully noting such details as entryways, room dimensions, light sources, and other architectural


\(^{63}\) On the Arensbergs’s protracted museum discussions with, it is said, no less than thirty institutions over a ten-year period, see Goldfarb Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare*, 261-264.

\(^{64}\) Duchamp mentions the other offers in his interview with Pierre Cabanne: “The Chicago Art Institute offered, I think, to display it on its walls for ten years; after this period, no guarantee: the attic or the basement! Oh yes! Museums are like that. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York offered five years. Arensberg refused again. He also refused ten years. Finally, the Philadelphia Museum of Art offered him twenty-five years. He accepted.” Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 87.

\(^{65}\) See Duchamp’s lengthy and detailed letters to the Arensbergs from: May 8, 1949 (concerning the Philadelphia Museum of Art, hereafter PMA, and including two architectural sketches); October 21, 1949 (concerning the Art Institute of Chicago); July 8, 1949 (concerning PMA); and September 7, 1950 (concerning PMA, and including an annotated tracing made from architectural blue prints). Reprinted in Naumann and Obalk, eds., *Affectionately Marcel*, 269-272, 277-78, 288-90, and 291-92.
particularities, and is known to have assuaged his nervous patrons by emphasizing the “good air of permanency of the building.” In 1949 and then again in 1950, Duchamp sent them various hand-drawn plans that convey the proportions and layout of several galleries in the museum where their collection could potentially be presented. Duchamp’s repeated visits to the museum spanned more than a year, and the study of its architectural particularities quietly entered into his preparatory work for *Etant donnés*.

Figure 3.31 [Marcel Duchamp, Sketches of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s modern galleries, included in letter to Walter Arensberg, 1950]

Those hand-drawn plans, to scale and measured with precision, include the famous galleries where the Duchamp works are displayed to this day. Measured and marked as well is a small room—gallery 1759 in the museum’s original numbering system—where *Etant donnés* would be housed nearly two decades later. Indeed, among the items found in Duchamp’s secret studio after his death was a drawing on a scrap of carton, used as a cutting surface and marked “Phila room,” with the measurements of gallery 1759, relative to which the artist evidently developed the proportions of his installation. In selecting the galleries for the Arensbergs’ collection, Duchamp specifically chose those for his own works with said adjacent room at one end. There was only one entry to that final, small gallery space and no other way out—it was one of those dead ends of the museum.  

Figure 3.32 [Marcel Duchamp, Sketch marked “Phila room,” ca. 1950]

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66 Duchamp, letter to the Arensbergs (May 8, 1949), ibid, 272.
67 Duchamp imagined the space divided into two parts: a portion for his installation, which would be closed off by a massive Spanish door, and a small, empty ante-chamber. Upon entering this ante-chamber just adjacent to the main Duchamp gallery where the artist installed his *Large Glass* in 1954, viewers could not pretend that they were there for any reason, or looking at anything other than Duchamp’s ultimate work: the nature of the spaces’ constellation is such that there is nothing else to be seen. See Michael Lüthy’s discussion of this room in “*Etant donnés* as a Form of Experience,” 132.
With their deaths in 1953, the Arensbergs’ wills came into effect, stipulating the donation to the Philadelphia Museum of Art that Duchamp had helped orchestrate. By 1954, the vast Arensberg collection was installed in those spaces the artist had chosen and whose considerable renovations he had overseen. Duchamp directed the placement as well as the lighting of each of the works, setting up the entirety of his pieces previously owned by the Arensbergs around and in relation to the Large Glass (which the artist, as executor of Katherine Dreier’s will, had also steered towards the Philadelphia museum). It is not a minor detail that the artist was so involved in stewarding the final resting place for his works; his repeated letters to Dreier to dissuade her from permanently committing works by Duchamp to the distant countryside location of her planned “house museum”; and his eventual decision, as trustee of her estate, to donate the Large Glass to the Philadelphia Museum is significant. Equally so is the method the artist used to—literally—secure the piece in the museum for posterity: museum officials agreed to have its metal frame cemented deep into the floor of the museum, an ostensible safety precaution that had as a consequence that the Large Glass’s displacement or removal would entail significant damage to either the work or the museum. In addition, Duchamp requested a quite unusual thing of the institution: he had the museum cut a

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68 The effort was not as simple or evident as it might seem today. That it could have been such considerable effort to convince museums to promise the long-term presentation of what has proven to be two of the most significant collections of Duchamp’s work in America, if not of Modern Art writ large, seems hardly imaginable from our vantage point in the present. But it is important to remember how late the appreciation of Duchamp’s work began, not to mention that of some of the other modern artists, collected on Duchamp’s advice, in the Arensberg and Dreier collections. See, for example, Duchamp’s words to Walter Arensberg: “Of course I understand that [the] Phila[delphia Museum of Art] does not want everything in her [Katherine Dreier’s] collection but I suspect that F.K. [Fisk Kimball, PMA director] and the Trustees hardly like anything she has, including the glass as well. This is strictly confidential: I have a hunch that the broken glass is hard to swallow for a ‘museum’.” Duchamp, letter to Walter Arensberg (April 19, 1951), housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Walter and Louise Arensberg Archives. Perhaps as a result of the Philadelphia Museum being less than enthusiastic about Dreier’s collection, almost all of the rest of her vast modernist holdings, which included many works by Duchamp, were instead donated to the Yale University Museum.

doorway into the gallery wall in front of which his *Large Glass* was installed so that there would be a connection between his *Glass* and Maria Martin’s fountain, *Yara*, which had been in the collection of the museum since 1942 and that was presented on the Eastern terrace of the museum, just outside.\(^{70}\) Beyond merely installing his works, then, Duchamp effectively reconfigured the architecture of the museum to suit his works and vision; and it is astounding that the museum abided by his wishes. The curious hold he had over those spaces extended beyond the initial display of the Arensberg collection; it is known that the artist spent considerable time re-thinking and re-installing the collection even years later, in 1961, when the bulk of it returned from being temporarily shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. In all of these efforts, he acted almost as if a regular museum curator.

Figure 3.33 [Marcel Duchamp installing the *Large Glass* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1954]

Figure 3.34 [Installation view of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s modern galleries with the display of the Arensberg Collection, 1965]

It was Duchamp’s friend Henri-Pierre Roché who commented that the artist “had the same concern to reunite reproductions of all of his works in a suitcase as he had to reunite all of his actual artworks in a single museum.”\(^{71}\) In fact, Duchamp’s administration of the Arensberg collection (and, differently, also the Dreier collection), making it into the single most important reservoir of his work, had been a lifelong process.\(^{72}\) This had been possible not only because the collectors were deeply interested in accumulating pieces by the artist, but because Duchamp himself took an active role in

\(^{70}\) See Michael Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés*, 89.


\(^{72}\) On Duchamp’s negotiations with Dreier regarding the final resting place of her collection, see Lee, “The Puppeteer of Your Own Past,” esp. the chapter “Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme,” as well as Lee’s discussion of the artist’s involvement in Mary Sisler’s collection in the early 1960s, discussed in her second chapter.
funneling his work to them: specifically reserving items for them, gifting them works, facilitating the purchase of his pieces on the secondary market, or even spending his own inheritance money to buy back works only to resell to them.73

To do so, he went to significant lengths to inform himself of the exact whereabouts of each of his works; it was a process that began with the construction of his Boîte-en-valise, for which he visited many collectors in order to take notes about the exact colors of his artworks to facilitate accurate reproduction. But it didn’t end there. Thus when, in 1950, Walter Arensberg needed, for tax purposes, a list of the works that he had purchased from Duchamp, the artist produced an up-to-date, itemized list, including all titles and prices.74 As a result of these efforts, the artist managed to concentrate a remarkable part of his production in only two places, a fact that the collections at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Yale University Art Museum, now make apparent. The significance of this labor seems to have been, in Duchamp’s mind, not merely a benevolent gesture or impartial advising, but instead part of his understanding of an artistic practice per se: in a comment made in an interview, he declared that a collection itself might be considered a work “of art.”75 Consequently, one could regard the artist’s efforts to install the Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art as not only a prolegomenon to *Etant donnés*, but part of the very conception of that work.

73 When the Arensbergs, the original sponsors of the Large Glass, announced they would move to the West Coast, Duchamp convinced Dreier to buy the piece from them so that the delicate glass would not be at risk due to the long travel. He thus shepherded the work between the two most important collections of his oeuvre.
74 Several such lists in Duchamp’s hand are archived at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. See Mark Pohlad, *The Art of History: Marcel Duchamp and Posterity*, 23.
Based on his experience with museum directors and their board members, Duchamp understood that, even as late as 1951, the *Large Glass* was “hard to swallow for a ‘museum’” (as he admitted in a letter to the Arensbergs). He must therefore have been able to imagine all too well what a challenge *Etant donnés* would represent for the museum, even after his death (and, in fact, perhaps he understood that the work would become ultimately admissible only after his death). Despite this and unlike so many artists (Constantin Brancusi, Auguste Rodin, Gustav Moreau, to name just a few) who bequeathed art to the state on the condition that their studios or work spaces be made into quasi-institutions or sites of pilgrimage, Duchamp never seems to have intended to turn his studio into the site for his final work’s viewing, even if that might have been a considerably easier task. The artist wanted *Etant donnés* in a museum, and its display there is pivotal to the work’s very functioning. Significantly, our viewing experience begins outside the work, in the approach through the succession of rooms and objects that precede the small white ante-chamber adjoining the main gallery filled with Duchamp’s works, including the *Large Glass*—itself by now deeply imbricated in the very architecture of the building. Thus it is surprising that few studies see *Etant donnés* and indeed the entire Duchamp presentation spread across several rooms as a result of Duchamp’s willful management of and commentary on the museum itself.\(^7\) Together these are the culmination of Duchamp’s self-curated exhibition, and perhaps his most significant work of art.

Figure 3.35 [Installation view of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s modern galleries with the display of the Arensberg Collection, 1965]

\(^7\) Exceptional here have been Rosalind Krauss’s various discussions of the work specifically in relation to the Cartesian, rationalist impulse of its institutional context. See her contribution to Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al., eds., *Art Since 1900*, 496-99; her response in a round-table discussion in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, 474; and “Where’s Poppa?” in Thierry De Duve, ed., *Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, 437.
Rather than a negligible detail, the location of *Etant donnés* in an art museum entirely circumscribes one’s experience of it. And yet the question of how exactly to read the effort that went into securing the work’s placement there is rarely posed by scholars. One might say that an impressive and extraordinary aspect of the “work” that is called *Etant donnés* is not so much (or at least certainly not only) the elaborate vision before the eyes of the viewer, but instead the invisible legal and administrative tasks Duchamp performed and which mimic the museum’s own rituals and functioning. In the spring of 1966, once he had completed the piece, he arranged to show the work to his trusted friend William Copley and quietly offered it for sale (for $60,000 it is rumored), so that the foundation shared by Copley and his wife would officially “own” it. As an informal addendum to the sale, the artist requested that the very name of their foundation be changed, from the William and Noma Copley Foundation to the Cassandra Foundation. A lawyer was consulted and legal documents drawn up, and the artist stipulated the donation of the work from the Cassandra Foundation to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This charitable transfer was presumably intended to aid the acceptance of the provocative installation into the museum (one cannot help but imagine Duchamp pondering the museum’s particular logic and protocol in order to prepare that scenario). It is now known that once the piece was finished, the artist arranged meetings with several of the museum’s high ranking trustees; lunches were followed by private trips to show them the installation of *Etant donnés* in the artist’s secret studio as part of his mission to ensure that, when a museum board meeting would be called—as he knew one surely would be—

77 A figure from Greek mythology, Cassandra was taught by Apollo to prophesy in exchange for her virginity, but when Cassandra refused his advances after having accepted his part of the bargain, Apollo cursed her by spitting into her mouth, the result of which ensured that no one would believe her prophecies. See James Metcalf, “The Gift of Cassandra,” *Tout fait*, v. 1, n. 2 (May 2000): http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Notes/metcalf.html (accessed January 2, 2012).
there would be supporters who would defend the work’s final resting place in the museum. Acting as his own dealer or agent, he must have understood that this kind of art of “persuasion” among the elite in power at an institution was common procedure, determining so many of the decisions by the museum. Spanning from 1966 through to his death in 1968, Duchamp’s intricate institutional maneuvers revealed that the artist had carefully observed the museum’s operating procedure in order to construct his elaborate response to the institution’s fiction of “objectivity.”

Constituent to this, he devised an incredible object—part bureaucratic binder, part technical instruction manual, part photographic cipher, part discursive accompaniment, part authentication tool (connecting the artist to his construction, even in death)—called by historians the Manual of Instructions, which anticipated and wrote the script for the reassembly of the installation in its final institutional site. Nearly everything had been set up for the work’s final uncovering so that, by 1969, Duchamp “curated” one last show—from the grave. Just over nine months after his death, his postmortem delayed-release installation appeared one day in the back of that small dark room in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Similar to his role as perfect museum bureaucrat when constructing the Boîte-en-valise, Duchamp’s efforts to display his final work—so long taken as merely functional or negligible—must be seen, in fact, as more properly rhetorical: perfectly mimicking the vectors of interest and power of the institution, they rendered the normally nearly invisible rituals and administrative functions of the museum into a critical element of Etant donnés.

For the details of these visits, see Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 132-33. One cannot help but speculate that if Duchamp believed (as he had once said of the museum) that it was “controlled by dealers,” his orchestration of Etant donnés’s entry into the museum was a defiantly critical act, showing that he could, acting as if his own dealer, affect the permanent collection of a venerable institution.
**THE FRAME**

It has long been an accepted truth that the nude female figure—legs spread to reveal her scandalously bared sex and arm aloft—is the central subject of *Etant donnés*. And if not her, then the two eponymous “givens”—the falling water and illuminating gas—are looked to as the work’s crucible, so literally are they named as the work’s center. But what if one understood, instead, the work’s context as more than merely auxiliary?

It would not be incorrect to call the piece a “site-specific” work, even if it was first conceived before that term was in usage, and even though when the term did come into widespread use, in the late 1960s (just as *Etant donnés* was completed), it largely denoted industrial wastelands or deserted nature to which artists were turning in order, precisely, to escape from the ideologically-compromised white cube of the gallery and museum. But *Etant donnés* is tailor-built not only for the specific proportions of an actual museum space but also, more significantly, in response to the institutional and conceptual underpinnings of what that space stands for. It is, in that way, a decidedly site-specific work—similar to other works of this genre made in the 1960s and ’70s often described in the following terms: each of these works “took the ‘site’ as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of constitutive physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms…existing conditions of lighting, ventilation…[and] gave itself up to its environmental context, being formally determined or directed by it.”

With *Etant donnés*, there is, in short (and

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79 On site-specificity, see Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997), 85-110.
80 Ibid., 85.
conforming to the very definition of a practice that once would have been called site-specific): “an inextricable and indivisible relationship between the work and its site.”  

Duchamp chose the museum—that institutional apparatus intimately connected to the validation of the work of art—not only as *Etant donnés*’s “site” but as its frame (of reference) and arguably also its very subject. The museum thus functions as figure and ground, target and weapon, all at once. As this chapter argues, through means both covert and explicit, behind the scenes and glaringly on view (perhaps so much so that it blinded), Duchamp used *Etant donnés* to frame the institutional frame; and in framing the museum, to reveal how it functions, what it upholds, and what it requires to continue to exist.

To begin with, one must speak of the supposed autonomy of the artwork and the museum’s relationship to it. Painting, sculpture, and the very idea of an artwork as a totally autonomous material object (à la Greenberg)—whose contained surface and delimiting edge delineated its content—depended for their privileged status on the apparently neutral conditions of the museum or gallery space (Brian O’Doherty’s famous “white cube”). The opposite is also true: the museum and gallery’s white cube seem to need the “autonomous” art object in order to prevail; it is their *raison d’être*. This space is fundamental to the Modernist precept, its foundational myth: the conviction in the artwork’s self-grounding, in other words, its existence as something “in and of itself...[with] a fixed and transhistorical meaning.” The readymade pointed to the

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81 Ibid., 86.
fallacy of this characterization as its steadfast preoccupation. With the readymade, the artist arguably spent a lifetime probing these conditions in various art and non-art spaces. *Etant donnés* is the last of his “tests,” and the museum is its keystone. Yet not only does *Etant donnés* declare, already in its external presentation (brick-lined, inset into the museum’s architecture) that it is literally not autonomous—requiring the museum’s walls, its institutional authority and specialized viewing conditions—it also concentrates what were the hallmarks of the museum at that time into its very substance.

As we know, the artist’s elaborate institutional maneuvers guaranteed that his final work could occupy the museum as if a tenant with a long-term lease. Still, it is peculiar that discussions of the work fail to mention how exceedingly strange it is—even if we were to accept as commonplace that an artist might manage to insert any work of his own in a museum—that the thing Duchamp insinuated into the museum’s collection is not a painting to be displayed on a wall or a sculpture to be shown in the round, but an artwork that makes the very walls of the museum its own. His critics, more than his champions, were the first to detect the threat this posed. *The New York Times*’ John Canaday’s caustic article, written upon the opening of the piece to the public, condemned it as “a parasitic appendage.”84 However dismissive Canaday’s reading, there was something to his critique: from the moment *Etant donnés* opened, it had, in a way, appropriated the museum and would use it, akin to a parasite, for its own critical ends.

Insofar as the work makes the very walls of the museum its own, it implicates the succession of rooms before it as part of the experience of the *Etant donnés*: the museum is revealed as a spatialized articulation of a system of values (reflecting not only bourgeois conventions, but also its masculine heterosexual fantasies), that end in an oddly

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lit ersatz crotch, a hole that is the endpoint of a whole series of other holes that, one could say, Duchamp burrowed into the museum. It is not by chance that the work makes so much of the museum’s thresholds. In perception as in architecture, a threshold marks the point of transition, the passage toward or away from the perceptible, into or out of a place. Considered in these terms, *Etant donnés* follows a decidedly confounding architectural logic, offering an elaborate behind-the-scenes structure whose visible “front” is a weathered, exterior door found inside the museum that should logically lead vision outside the door, which is to say, outside the museum, but instead brings vision past a broken brick aperture, giving way to an illusionistic idyll, purportedly outside (in nature, in the world) but rendered so unconvincingly, that it is, in fact, very clearly inside.\(^8^5\) But inside what exactly? A structure of thresholds, *Etant donnés* explores this limit of architecture, uncovering the place in which it stands and, in the process, lifting the whole of the (usually normalized and therefore inconspicuous) museum into view as the site at which the work’s perceptual unfolding begins.

**A Viewing Apparatus**

If demonstration is the very purpose of museal display, Duchamp’s installation is a kind of monstrous viewing machine: fixing viewers in place, turning them into peeping voyeurs, disrupting demarcations between inside and outside where the artist-curato-impresario posthumously escorts us visually to an indeterminate place, veritably inside, and yet projecting an outside, of the museum. There, the viewer is an actor in Duchamp’s final work, not a mere observer. As Octavio Paz once put it: “The person peeping through

\(^{8^5}\) Craig Adcock once said of *Etant donnés* that it “has no exterior. It has only an interior, from which you look at another interior.” Adcock in Thierry de Duve, ed., *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, 342.
the holes in the Spanish door is not outside the Assemblage: he is part of the spectacle. *Given* is realized by means of his look: it is a spectacle in which someone sees himself seeing something.”

Someone sees himself seeing something: In a note written in the teens, Duchamp anticipated this idea by articulating his interest in an ocular reversal, *On peut regarder voir* (One can look at seeing). While this “seeing” has been the subject of considerable Duchamp scholarship, it is the seeing in this specific place that I want to question here. For it had to be in the museum, the very place built on the primacy of visuality, that Duchamp inserted his strange vision-machine-as-crypt. *Etant donnés* might thus be the perfect example of the artwork that, as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited in 1961, one doesn’t actually see, but rather *according to which one sees*; in other words, it is a work that simultaneously actuates and reveals parameters of seeing.

In *Etant donnés*, Duchamp carefully determined the perspectival focus of the viewer’s gaze; he organized, even plotted it. And though it might not look like the product of anything wholly scientific, the artist undoubtedly found his models in science. The perspectival and other semi-scientific research of the artist, manifest in works from the *Large Glass* through to *Etant donnés*, is legendary.

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86 Paz, *Appearance Stripped Bare*, 117.
87 Note included in the *Box of 1914*.
88 For a further discussion of the visual premises of the museum, see chapter two of this dissertation, especially the section “This is a Curator, Exhibition, Museum.”
89 *L’Oeil et l’esprit* (1961) translated as “Eye and Mind” raises the compelling issue of how the artwork (painting, in this case) functions as a form of visibility. We do not, Merleau-Ponty argues, so much look *at* the work of art as we see *with it* or “according to it.” See Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” trans. Carlton Dallery in James Edie, ed., *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
to his research. While none of his vast collections of notes seem to directly speak to the
details or construction of *Etant donnés*, it is clear that Duchamp’s interest in, and
application of, the laws of perspective and stereoscopy in that work were decisive.91 It is
a kind of stereoscopic space that we seem to experience, which can be generally
described as:

…perspectival space raised to a higher power. Organized as a kind of
tunnel vision, the experience of deep recession is insistent and
inescapable…[As the spectator] views the image in an ideal isolation,
his surrounds, with their walls and floors, are banished from sight. The
apparatus of the stereoscope mechanically focuses all attention on the
matter at hand and precludes the visual meandering experienced in the
gallery as one’s eyes wander from picture to picture and to
surrounding space.92

To create such an experience, the artist abided by the customary structuring of
stereoscopic views “around a vertical marker in fore- or middle-ground that works to
center space, forming a representation within the visual field of the eyes’ convergence at
a vanishing point.”93 Duchamp, following these parameters to the letter, constructed
*Etant donnés* so that the vanishing point (in the “perspectivist sense,” as Jean-François
Lyotard would say), viewed through the eye-holes and past the gaping hole in the brick
wall, would coincide with yet another hole: the supine figure’s exposed vulva.94 Just so

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91 See Jean Clair, “Duchamp and the Classical Perspectivists,” 40-49. On perspective and stereoscopy more
generally, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth
92 Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other
93 Ibid., 291.
94 “The vanishing point of the ‘cube’ (in the perspectivist sense) of *Given* would be given by the vulva…”
Lyotard then adds an important addendum: “But the position of the vanishing point would be verifiable
only by photo (which the *Approximation* freely invites us to do).” Lyotard, *Duchamp’s TRANSformers*,
172.
one would not miss it, the *Manual of Instructions* specified that a spotlight of 150 watts “has to fall vertically, exactly, on the cunt.”

Not only did Duchamp determine where the viewer should look, but also how. The artist went to considerable lengths, using large swathes of black velvet to line the back of the Spanish door and to cover the sides of the structure from the backside of the front door to the broken brick wall, to ensure that the viewer would not be able to see in by any other way than the two eye-holes provided. When looking through these, the point of view and the vanishing point coincide, and, as Lyotard points out, a cunning reversal ensues:

The device would be specular...The plane of the breach would be that of a picture that would cut the visive pyramids that have as their summits the voyeur’s holes. In an organization of this type, the viewing point and the vanishing point are symmetrical: If it is true that the latter is the vulva, then the vulva is the specular image of the voyeur-eyes; or: When these eyes think they see the vulva, they are seeing themselves.

In the process, roles switch, relationships are inverted, the gaze turns back on itself: we are seen looking. “Con celui qui voit” is how Lyotard put it, simply and directly, like a finger pointing at a fault line: *He who sees is a cunt.*

This cunt you see (this cunt that you are, in Lyotard’s scenario) is awkward, gaping, failed, and unnatural. Even more than the rest of the body, it is a mix of aborted realism and ambiguity, familiarity and strangeness, seemingly threatening to deliquesce

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95 Among the instructions that are part of the 7th operation: “la spot doit tomber vertical’, exact’, sur le con” (italics mine). *Manual of Instructions*, 20.

96 Lyotard, *Duchamp’s TRANSformers*, 175.

97 Ibid., 175. Here I have opted for the original French of the now legendary aphorism and the English translation of it that has more widely circulated than the slightly different, “A cunt is he who sees,” that is provided by the first English edition of the publication. But there is a play of words in Lyotard’s original (a double sense to “con” in colloquial French), such that the viewer as “cunt” could also be the viewer as “idiot.”
at any moment into undifferentiated matter, and suggesting that Duchamp did not want to present a nude either as an ideal or even as a truly libidinal object (could there be any arousal gleaned from this lumpen thing?). Rather, it is a simulacrum, a placeholder for the thing that the artist really wants to compel you to see: the museum. Following Lyotard’s logic, then, the museum is the cunt.

The work’s private, one-to-one mode of address and its imperative of bodily contact violates so many museum protocols and fundamental precepts—it is almost impossible not to lean too closely, touching the door, your nose pressed against it while your eyes peer into this display that has the formal structure of the peep show and the diorama at once. The very combination and their respective bodily implications were anathema to the art museum. As we know, in place of embodied viewing, the museum championed a pure, universal, and disinterested gaze (the 1937 “museology” exhibition in Paris, with all its Cartesian fanfare, had made this explicit). Indeed, the story of the museum is the story of control over the carnal body of a visitor that does not eat or drink or run or speak too loudly or touch anything in its pristine space; in the museum, surveillance of the body and, as scholars such as Tony Bennett argue, the formation of civic subjecthood, go hand in hand. Yet, with Etant donnés, as Mason Klein has pointed out, Duchamp “dramatically questions the greatest conceit of the modernist epoch: the unexamined idea that vision emerges autonomously from within the opaque, psychophysiological source of the observer’s body.”

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98 See discussion in chapter two in the section entitled “This is a Curator, Exhibition, Museum.”
100 Mason Klein, The Phenomenology of the Self: Marcel Duchamp’s Etant donnés (Ph.D dissertation, CUNY, 1994), 22-4. Klein’s dissertation points to the importance of Duchamp’s final work in an understanding of the artist’s notion of the self, arguing for the work’s meaning as embedded in a complex critique of vision, subjectivity and corporeality in modernism. I would, however, insist on the centrality of the museum to this sustained enterprise—especially as it is spelled out in Etant donnés, but also in other
though, as this might well have been the lesson of so many of Duchamp’s curated exhibitions. Each of them, in their own way, assaulted the Cartesian premises of a disembodied museum-like viewing, thus thwarting and complicating one of the central and expected givens of the exhibition as such.

It was Rosalind Krauss who, following Lyotard’s lead, best theorized the way vision operates in so many Duchampian works, having understood that the throb of his pulsating optical games and devices were erotic to the core. Her reading was unequivocal: “The optic chiasma that Duchamp suggests is unthinkable apart from vision that is carnal through and through.”\textsuperscript{101}\textit{Etant donnés} is arguably the culmination of Duchamp’s understanding of vision as carnal, cutting through, as Krauss brilliantly concedes, “the idea that a museum is a public space within which one is disincarnated, one where carnal conditions don’t count, an ideal space—the one of Kant’s conditions of the shareable, communicable ‘universal voice’—which is not one where you have to go to the bathroom or where you leave your galoshes.”\textsuperscript{102} Instead, the particular contemplation that \textit{Etant donnés} devises is one in which you are always potentially “caught in the act” as was Jean-Paul Sartre’s protagonist at the keyhole in \textit{Being and Nothingness} (1943), which Krauss persuasively evokes relative to Duchamp’s final project:

\begin{quote}
To be discovered at the keyhole is, thus, to be discovered as a body. It is to thicken the situation given to consciousness to include the hither space of the door, and to make the viewing body an object for consciousness. As to what kind of object, Sartre defines this only in relation to the Other—the consciousness of the one who discovers
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{102} Krauss, round-table discussion in \textit{The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp}, 474.
\end{flushright}
him, and in whose look he ceases totally to master his world. As for himself, this thickened, carnal object produces as the content of his consciousness the carnation of shame.\footnote{Krauss, \textit{The Optical Unconscious}, 112.}

\textit{Etant donnés} similarly unsettles by way of constructing a potential site of shame: with its ante-chamber, it places its viewers in the position of being seen by other museum visitors who might catch them hunched, peering, in rapt attention at the lewd scene. If, as Krauss further observes, “The scenario of the voyeur caught by another in the very midst of taking his pleasure is never far from consciousness as one plies the peepholes of Duchamp’s construction, doubly become a body aware that its rear-guard is down,” it is so because Duchamp has deliberately sited this process in the unavoidably public space of the museum.\footnote{Ibid., 113.}

No longer a contemplative museum spectator, you are, according to Duchamp’s explicit wording in the \textit{Manual of Instructions}, a “voyeur.”\footnote{Duchamp, note for the 5\textsuperscript{th} operation (“The Door”) in \textit{Manual of Instructions}, vi.} And, as a voyeur, the undeniably embodied position you must take thus becomes not only a commentary on the museum’s conscientious construction of “proper” viewing and behavior relative to the auratic artwork (as a step toward forming model subject-citizens, museum historians would tell you).\footnote{See Tony Bennett, “Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics,” \textit{Configurations} no. 6, vol. 3 (1998), 345-371 and “Speaking to eyes...” in \textit{The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture}. McDonald, Sharon, ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).} It becomes a public answer to it. You cannot \textit{but} be a body in front of Duchamp’s piece.

Yet vision deceives us in \textit{Etant donnés}. It manipulates. We might press our noses to the door, position our eyes over the holes, focus our perception, attempt to distinguish figure from ground, illusion from “reality,” inside from outside, but, in the process, what
we cannot see exceeds what we are given to know by way of vision (so much has clearly
been constructed behind the scene), and even what we can see leaves us riddled with
doubt. The whole piece staunchly upsets the presumed equivalence between seeing and
knowing: one looks right into the nude figure’s sex, that vanishing point of the image
where every perspectival line converges, and it is there—as a result of the invisible relay
of Duchamp’s nearly thirty electrical cords and precariously attached wires to illuminate
exactly that point—that the light shines at its brightest. Yet it is also exactly there—
despite light being a symbol of truth, reason, and knowledge, despite the fact that it
shines most emphatically sur le con—that we know very little and we can be sure of
nothing: is she dead or alive? Is she whole behind the dead angles of what we see, or
decapitated, footless? What is that oddly shaped gash placed where a vagina should be?
Sitting at the threshold of life and death, interiority and exteriority, singularity and
repetition, and even among photography, painting, and sculpture, the work irreverently
unhinges knowability.

It isn’t a secret that Duchamp had the camera obscura—that product of 17th
century epistemology and Cartesian reason, forerunner to the modern camera—in mind
as he worked. In the Manual of Instructions, Duchamp himself compared the effect of
the black velvet curtain to “a kind of completely dark camera obscura when looking
through the voyeur’s peepholes.” As its name implies, that “dark room,” illuminated
by only a single beam of light, let in through a peephole projects whatever is outside onto

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107 About the trickery of the illusion of Etant donnés, see Molly Nesbit, “Last Words (Rilke, Wittgenstein)
(Duchamp),” Art History vol. 24, n. 4 (December 1998), 546-564.
Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art and Duchamp in Context; Lyotard, Duchamp’s TRANS/formers;
Krauss, The Optical Unconscious, 95-146.
the interior wall opposite that aperture. The camera obscura was, as Jonathan Crary’s important treatise on vision in modernity suggests, “a complex technique of power...a means of legislating for an observer what constitutes perceptual ‘truth’.”\textsuperscript{110} And, as Mason Klein points out, it is precisely the logic of this apparatus—“historically thought to clarify and stabilize the visual”—that is thoroughly reversed and made “decidedly confounding” in \textit{Etant donnés}.\textsuperscript{111}

Lytotard accurately characterized \textit{Etant donnés} as based on a system of classical perspective; and the classical perspective (like the camera obscura) that Duchamp was at pains to both use and undermine could be said to also be representative of Cartesian thinking, rationalist ideology, and authoritative organization—those things that the museum at the time also still very much stood for.\textsuperscript{112} Thus it is no coincidence that \textit{Etant donnés} takes on the appearance of a strip-tease: the museum’s codes are exposed—from the conventional representation of the nude in a pastoral landscape as seen in a perspectival space, and the autonomy of the object, to the means through which artworks are validated and “enter” the institution, and the ways that that institution disciplines the bodies that “look” within its walls. The tender sensibilities of critics and onlookers were shaken because they thought they were looking at pornography, when, in fact, all along, they were being forced to confront an institutional site that Duchamp had revealed as obscene.

\textit{Etant donnés} thus might have begun with a question: how to open up a hole in the museum, a hole that is also a frame for viewing, that is also architectural, also corporeal, that also becomes part of the work itself? The hole that the work burrows into the

\textsuperscript{111} Klein, \textit{The Phenomenology of the Self}, 20.
\textsuperscript{112} Lyotard, \textit{Duchamp’s TRANSformers}.
museum serves to demystify and upset everything around it. As Krauss has noted, “by lodging itself at the heart of the museum—public protector of the values of disincarnated disinterest—the Etant donnés was able to pour its logic along the very fault lines of the aesthetic system, making its framing conditions appear in startling clarity only to make them ‘strange’.”

Etant donnés, so informed by Duchamp’s previous exhibitions and the Boîte en valise, defined, together with these other works, his lifelong project in manifest opposition to, and entanglement with, the museum.

**THE MANUAL**

The Boxes refer to a work in progress, unfinished, perhaps unfinishable, delayed; the Instructions [of the Manual] are those of a last will and testament: it is finished, I have made it, you can only remake it, here’s how.

–Lyotard

In order to accompany and constitute Etant donnés in its intended resting place, Duchamp devised what scholars have called, for lack of a better name, his *Manual of Instructions*, comprised of page after page of handwritten texts, penciled diagrams, and photographs held together in plastic sleeves in a black ring binder. Bearing the heading “approximation démontable” (an approximation that can be taken apart, or disassembled), its mode of address flies in the face of the artist’s various loose and self-consciously replicated notes, written from the first decade of the 20th century onward, that were speculative, abstract, imagistic, and full of word games. The unique original that is the *Manual of Instructions* is by contrast excessively concrete, detailing in a direct and

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114 Lyotard, *Duchamp’s TRANSformers*, 157.
bare-bones way the precise steps necessary to dismantle and re-install the elements that make up the installation. Everything about it seems to say that it offers instructions, information. And yet it would be a mistake not to see it in relation to the discursive operation instituted previously with his notes. Although the *Manual* is singular, as opposed to replicated, and its visibility initially limited, as opposed to widely disseminated, and it is in other ways different from the notes, like them it also crucially directs our reading.

The contents of the binder are, according to nearly all Duchamp scholarship, extraordinary but, ultimately, merely practical; and, to be fair, for the first fifteen years of the public life of the work it accompanied, the manual itself was a largely invisible postscript, consultable only by request. Yet anyone writing seriously on the work, avid scholars, amateurs of Duchamp, not to mention friends and a curious band of artists inspired by Duchamp, did, in fact, consult the manual. Still, and surprisingly, even in serious studies devoted to *Etant donnés*, little is said of the *Manual of Instructions* as an object in and of itself.\(^{115}\) Although many have “used” it, gleaning from it a valuable understanding of the behind-the-scenes machinery of the piece (Lyotard, its most astute reader, deduces innumerable of his brilliant conclusions from it), few took it—much like Duchamp’s notes—as more than mere purveyor of technical facts. Few, in other words, noticed the particular ways in which the manual actually functions (as opposed to what it instructs), the role of photography at the heart of it, or the behavior (of the museum and its staff) it so skillfully imposes. As opposed to the installation’s construction of a singular, highly regulated view (the voyeur can only see one way and one thing through

\(^{115}\) It is noteworthy that even Michael Taylor’s extensive study of the piece devotes little time to questioning the nature of the manual and instead takes it to be an almost transparently useful guide-book. Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés*. 

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the peepholes), the manual deliberately opens up a multiplicity of vantage points, effectively an excess of views. The curious nature of the artifact seems to announce—to want us to see—that it is more than a workman’s tool, more than procedural residue, that it is instead something more profoundly meaningful, and deliberately ambiguous.

Figure 3.37 [Marcel Duchamp, Manual of Instructions, view of cover and the collaged interior of the front cover, 1966]

Duchamp actually made two manuals. A first version, dating from late 1965, which the artist seems to have made for himself, is full of quickly jotted notes and shorthand reminders for his own de-installation and re-installation of the piece when he moved to his 80 East 11th Street location; it resembles, but is much expanded upon in, the later version, which probably would only have been possible because Duchamp first practiced at how to fully “instruct” the de-installing and re-installing of the work. The later album, more publically known through the facsimile version the Philadelphia Museum of Art published in 1987, is composed of thirty-five pages of lengthy, handwritten, numbered instructions (called “operations” by Duchamp) and one hundred and sixteen pasted, cut, and collaged photographs, as well as a tiny, to-scale, fold-out architectural model, the whole providing considerable evidence for not only reading _Etant donnés_ but also Duchamp’s relationship to such things as administration, photography, and the museum in the larger sense.¹¹⁶

Figure 3.38 [Marcel Duchamp, Architectural model for _Etant donnés_ from the Manual of Instructions, 1966]

Looking at the final manual, we see what is behind-the-scenes: the artist had cobbled together a bizarrely functioning object from materials at hand, an incredible structure held together with Scotch tape, with clouds made of cotton, dangling electrical

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wires attached with twist-it ties, a homemade waterfall-light machine encased in a Peek Freans Biscuit tin—in short, nothing like the gleam of commodity objects with their perfected, assembly-line efficiency. The inner elements and crudely composed mechanisms of Duchamp’s final work so seemingly far from the impeccable surfaces of the industrial object—the urinal and shovel—were here deviated in favor of the handiwork of a promiscuous amateur, using whatever seems to have been at hand, not abiding by any rules of electricians or carpenters, or any other professionalism. He must have taken some pleasure in its functional chaos, a ricketiness that could not be less like the pristine environment and stability of the museum and would also go against every one of its impulses for order, security, and standardization within its walls (not to mention the demands of its insurance handlers and other associated bureaucrats). In short, the manual reveals both what the museum in its caretaking would be required to maintain and what the museum visitor would not be able to see or even perhaps divine behind the apertures of the tightly regulated image they are allowed to see.

Figure 3.39 [Marcel Duchamp, Spread from the Manual of Instructions, 1966]
Figure 3.40 [Marcel Duchamp, Spread from the Manual of Instructions, 1966]
Figure 3.41 [Marcel Duchamp, Details of photographs from the Manual of Instructions, 1966]

Duchamp drew the whole installation piecemeal for the museum. Nearly every operation was accompanied by small hand-drawn illustrations, visually pointing out where the checkerboard linoleum floor should be placed, how each of the sixty-nine numbered bricks should be arranged, not to mention the measurements and degree of angle for positioning various elements. He used a combination of photography and drawing, together with the accompanying written instructions, to meticulously control the ensemble, from the best way to place the blond wig’s curl of hair (so that it lay between
the breasts of the figure, as photographic demonstration illustrated), the brand of light bulb to use ("very white [General Electric] or pinkish"), the degree the landscape should tilt ("at an obtuse angle of 91° or 92°"), to how the nude figure should be moved ("better to have two people to delicately lift the nude and place it exactly on the 3 points of impact").

Nothing, or almost nothing, was left to chance. The "ad libidum" announced in the manual's opening lines concerns the cotton fluffs that make up the scene's "clouds" whose unregulated placement is the only liberty the artist explicitly permitted the museum. What perversity to make the museum attend to this strange ensemble, to make it tiptoe around the hanging wires and crumbling bricks, to fret that a piece of Duchamp's tape or twist tie might come unstuck. Where, after all, does this artwork begin and end? Duchamp left that for the museum to mull over.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC

The manual reveals the astonishing array of materials and methods that make up *Etant donné*, but it also speaks volumes for the particular and vital role that the photographic had for the project as a whole. For if Duchamp used a panoply of different media for the making of his final work, he turned in particular to photography, not only literally, as a medium to construct the backdrop for the work and the documentation in the manual, but also procedurally, internalizing the photographic principle of the copy and the trace as the very matrix for the work. Photography's impact on Duchamp's *Etant donné* is, in fact,

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inseparable from the foundational, even “structural” role photography arguably had for the artist’s entire practice.\textsuperscript{118}

Duchamp’s use of and interest in photography was, as we already know, curious. Unlike his friend Brancusi, who was so fastidious about the photographs of his sculptures that at a certain point he refused all documentation except that which he took himself, or even Rodin’s use of commissioned photographs of his studio and sculptures as part of the dissemination of his oeuvre, Duchamp’s relationship to photography was both more detached and more complex. There was, of course, his peculiar recourse to the medium inaugurated with the \textit{Box of 1914} and his use of photography over the years in so many of his previously discussed projects;\textsuperscript{119} in each of these cases he employed photography primarily in what appeared to be an almost backhanded, indirect way (even as the medium’s logic of inscription, repetition, and reproduction was, again and again, fundamental to his larger thinking about the work of art).\textsuperscript{120} Crucially, and although he is rarely thought of as an artist much involved with photography, Duchamp revealed the medium to be an abiding concern.

Figure 3.42 [Marcel Duchamp, \textit{Tonsure}, 1921. Photograph by Man Ray]

\textsuperscript{118} “Structural” is how Rosalind Krauss so astutely described it. It thus seems remarkable that Duchamp’s complex relationship to photography rarely registers in the histories of photography proper, and this despite Krauss’s prescient theory that Duchamp’s indexical paradigm profoundly affected the work of artists working in the 1970s. See Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” 68–81; and “Notes on the Index. Part 2,” 58–67.

\textsuperscript{119} See my chapters one and two.

\textsuperscript{120} Often, Duchamp deliberately stretched the conventional uses of the medium: his idiosyncratic approach to photography is evident in the 1932 cover of his chess treatise, \textit{Opposition et les cases conjugées sont réconciliées} (Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled), made from zinc stencil letters that were, according to Pierre de Massot, “placed between two plates of glass which were tilted at an angle and exposed to the sun. The uncontrolled deformation produced on the ground by the sun’s rays was photographed by Duchamp, who afterwards made a negative from this photograph….,” It is also revealed in Duchamp’s notes to himself suggesting he make “photographic records which no longer look like photographs of something” to cite just two of the more eccentric examples. Robert Lebel’s monograph on Duchamp cites Pierre de Massot’s description of the making of \textit{Opposition et les cases conjugées sont réconciliées}, see Lebel, \textit{Marcel Duchamp}, 177. The note on photography is discussed in David Antin, “duchamp and language,” in Anne D’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., \textit{Marcel Duchamp} (New York/Philadelphia: Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), 106-7.
Not unlike the photographs of the *Box of 1914*, those within the *Manual of Instructions* have all the hallmarks of amateur photography, eschewing deliberate artfulness and aesthetic pretense. Both partake in that particular look and form of address that Benjamin Buchloh characterized, in relation to certain strands of Conceptualism, as the “aesthetics of administration.”

Around the time Duchamp was producing the bulk of the photographic images for his manual, he solicited some remedial photographic advice from his friend, photographer Denise Browne Hare, who later admitted that she only learned why he had been asking at all when the piece was revealed, after the artist’s death.

In the no less than one hundred and sixteen Polaroid photographs of the *Manual*, photography explicitly functions to aid the museum to dismantle and reassemble *Etant donnés*. They look, for all practical intents and purposes, like little more than crude but deadpan documentation or even, as one scholar has pointed out, like crime scene photos, that deadest of deadpan documentation.

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121 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 53 (Winter 1991), 105-43. It is curious that for all their apparent interest in Duchamp, historians of Conceptual art never looked to these two specific projects by Duchamp to seriously question their connections to later works. With their combination of text and a deskilled use of photography, both offer important, pioneering examples to Conceptual Art’s production of photography, archives, and administration. Their photographic amateurism is the direct progenitor of Conceptual art’s willfully artless photography described as having a “DIY” aesthetic and the requirement that “the work looked as if it could be made by anyone.” See John Roberts, “Photography, Iconophobia, and the Ruins of Conceptual Art,” in *The Impossible Document: Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976* (London: Cameraworks, 1997), 30. Observe how the following description holds true for the *Manual of Instructions* as it had already for the *Box of 1914*: “the preoccupation with the notion of photography as a medium that communicated ideas rather than producing objects often assumed a reduction in the status of the image from the primarily visual to the merely visible or informational.” David Campany, “Conceptual Art History or a Home for *Homes for America*,” in Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 132-3. Michael Newman also speaks of an “ambivalent role of photographic representation and documentation, which becomes explicit in Conceptual Art,” which could usefully be connected to these Duchampian projects. See, Newman, “After Conceptual Art,” 214.


123 Olivier Asselin provocatively points to the way in which the manual’s photographic images of a repeatedly covered body, like a corpse, as well as white body outlines on the floor when the figure is missing, red ink dots on the photo indicating a “point of impact,” etc., share formal similarities with the
“The Polaroids are documents, not of a fabled retirement, not of cerebral dandyism, but of effort, effort, effort, and the strain and anxiety Duchamp was under as he began to form, through photographs, the rudiments of an instruction manual for dismantling and reassembling the flimsy product of nearly twenty years’ work.”\footnote{Cotter, New York Times (August 27, 2009), C21.} But more than evidence of the fanatical management by someone anxious for a museum to technically reconstruct his piece as he intended, there are many signs to indicate that the manual offers still other information about its role in contributing to the work’s reception and posterity.

Cropped, blown up, doctored, marked up, collaged together, drawn on, sometimes annotated: The sheer materiality of the agglomerated fragments of photographic images mirrors the installation’s. Like the work they depict, the photographs in the manual are resolutely homemade, seemingly rudimentary, but astonishingly efficient. To look at them is to confront not only photography’s capacity to capture the intractable muteness of things—any one of those photographs that include the figure’s lumpish simulation of flesh underscores this—but its capacity as well to speak of what we might not see in the picture. The nude is the unquestionable protagonist of many of these photographs (so are, in different images, a biscuit box or precarious grouping of wires), but the invisible process that took place for the shutter is inscribed here, too. And here I don’t mean the construction of the ensemble, those twenty years of “effort, effort, effort,” I mean rather the construction of the images as compositions of long-secreted information.

The photographs consigned to the plastic sleeves of the ring-bound manual are culled from a far bigger mass of photographs that the artist took. And in
preferring one exposure over another, Duchamp—like any photographer, amateur or professional alike—imposed an idea, a standard on his subject. Unusually, Duchamp did not in any way involve Man Ray, his close friend and regular accomplice in most matters of photography. In accordance to Duchamp’s vow of secrecy, the photographs in the *Manual of Instructions* needed to be taken by the artist himself. There is one exception to this in the whole manual: A single photograph was clearly taken by one of the very few people who accompanied him in the development of the project, his wife Teeny. The image was taken most probably according to the artist’s specific instructions; it pictures Duchamp, seen from the back, leaning forward and holding the figure of the nude to position it. It is included in the manual right next to the image of Teeny performing the same task. They are the only two images in the whole binder that picture humans in this collection of documentation that is, in the end, a panoply of stuff. Neither image imparts much information, except a vague sense of how to best handle the figure, with both hands, one behind the figure’s shoulder and the other bracing the torso and leg. But if assuring correct handling were the purpose of such an image, one alone would surely suffice. Instead Duchamp included them both, and next to each other, not only uniting him and his wife in the strange portrait that the manual offers of the artist, but confirming (to us, future readers of this discursive and pictorial apparatus for the work) that she helped, and that his was a labor that was secreted from nearly everyone but her.

Figure 3.44 [Marcel Duchamp, Photographs picturing Teeny and Marcel Duchamp from the *Manual of Instructions*, 1966]

In the housekeeping of death, much was found in that small secret studio that saw the making of *Etant donnés*. In addition to the more than one hundred photographs

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included in the *Manual of Instructions*, Duchamp evidently took more than seventy additional Polaroids that didn’t make it into the binder, including a handful of color images. There was also a Dom Perignon Champagne box filled with various attempts at constructing stereoscopic color images of the scene. Thus no less than two hundred photographs in all exist of the single work, from all angles. Two of the loose photographs of the nude figure found in the studio are known to precede those that fill the manuals; the images are identical except for a red crayon marking added to one (as if contemplating, in red, the possibility of a smaller opening and tighter view on the nude). Both were seemingly taken in 1959, not long after the artist had completed the painstaking labor on the final nude figure, but before he had constructed the broken brick aperture or any of the architecture around it. By the time the pictures were taken, Duchamp had made some much-needed repairs to the nude and, as a consequence, had to change the viewing position slightly. He used a piece of dark fabric with a large hole gauged in it to simulate what would later become the broken brick wall. With photography as a tool, he seems to have been testing the position of the nude, the architectural aperture and the position of the viewer.

*Figure 3.45 [Marcel Duchamp, Photograph of a plaster study for the figure in *Etant donné*, 1959]*

The 1959 photographs were evidently enacted for the camera’s eye (a stand in for the viewer’s own). They, like some of the manual photographs, and still other loose images that were not finally included in the manual, confirm that Duchamp used photography avidly and repeatedly, yet none of the resulting images could be called documents of process per se. They don’t show Duchamp building up the work in any technical or literal sense throughout the various stages of development over twenty years.

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126 See discussion of Duchamp’s repair to the figure’s arms, below.
nor do they record anything about the elaborate process of manufacturing the nude figure. For instance, there is not a single photographic trace of Maria Martins submitting to the repeated and involved casting sessions. Instead, one important use of the medium seems to have been to actively help simulate the view of the spectator and thus define the work for the artist himself. One can imagine this being the case even if the artist understood well that the monocular, static view of a camera and its resulting photograph could not actually compare to the roving, binocular, and carnal gaze of the viewer’s body looking through the two holes in the door. Still, the doggedness with which the artist took photographs from the “voyeur’s” position is nevertheless telling. What Duchamp’s photographs reveal is that the whole of Etant donnés, a work that so many historical accounts have described as unphotographable (or impossible to adequately capture in a picture, which amounts to much the same), was constructed (at least in its final stages) with the artist frequently looking through the lens of a camera. Duchamp seems to have been using photography to try to anticipate Etant donnés’s reception—both attempting, however inadequately, to simulate how future viewers might see the work and staging the utter discrepancy between the experience of the work and its photographic representation.127

Importantly, Etant donnés did not exist as an image for nearly fifteen years after it opened to the public. One couldn’t simply “see” it without experiencing it in person and in its specific museal context—conditions of viewing that are lost in a photograph. An official museum decree prevented any photographs from being published or being

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127 The photographic analogy did not escape Lyotard, who wrote of the (male) voyeur: “he sees suddenly, in the snapshot of the opening of the diaphragm. Because of this he sees no more than is seen by a sensitive film, he is impressed, like the film.” Its image imprinted upon us in the instant of our gaze, we become as if a photograph of the scene. Lyotard, Duchamp’s TRANSformers, 174.
taken by the public, and, for over a decade, the Philadelphia Museum of Art did not itself release any photographs of the behind-the-scene view offered by the manual (only an image of the door was reproduced).\textsuperscript{128} Regardless of whether or not Duchamp would have stipulated an interdiction of any sort (let alone this one), he was well aware that the work would sooner or later be photographed;\textsuperscript{129} consequently, he left very specific instructions in his manual and even built a system into the structure to allow for the ideal photographic position in the event of the work’s photographic reproduction:

To take good color photos: 1\textsuperscript{st} remove the black velvet that covers the rear of the door/ 2\textsuperscript{nd}/ unscrew the 4 battens 4, 5, 6, 7, which fix the 4 panels of the door together and slide the 2 upper panels to the left and right along the big round steel rail.\textsuperscript{130}

We thus know that Duchamp wanted the work, were it to be reproduced, to be represented in such a way as to replicate as accurately as possible what the museum spectator sees. Any image that might circulate of the work should not show any other angle, nor any possible additional view, and definitely not the rickety interior construction, but instead the scene exactly as the artist had composed it for the “voyeur.”

\textsuperscript{128} The agreement with the Cassandra Foundation and the Museum stipulates that “within or adjoining [the] Museum’s collections of works by Marcel Duchamp, in a setting especially designed for the purpose of housing the same…. For a period of fifteen years from this date, [the] Museum will not permit any copy of or reproduction of Etant donnés to be made, by photography or otherwise, excepting only pictures of the door behind which said object of art is being installed.” See “Agreement between the Cassandra Foundation and the Philadelphia Museum of Art,” housed at the Philadelphia Museum and reproduced in Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 427-29.

\textsuperscript{129} It is hard to know for certain if Duchamp would have been happy about the ban. He was famously not a man of interdictions but, according to at least one source, it was important to him that work not be reproduced, if it were possible to keep it from being so. William Copley’s adamant statements to Anne d’Harmoncourt (and copied to then Philadelphia Museum director Evan Turner and Teeny Duchamp) about his conversations with Duchamp detailing that the work should not ever be moved or reproduced suggest that Duchamp wanted Etant donnés to be viewed in person and in its specific (museal) context. The museum’s fifteen-year ban on photographic reproduction of the work was inscribed in the agreement for the acceptance of the work from the Cassandra Foundation but then was later revisited, allowing for the exceptional release of images. See the Copley letter housed with the Anne d’Harmoncourt Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art and the “Agreement between the Cassandra Foundation and the Philadelphia Museum of Art,” Michael Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 427-29.

\textsuperscript{130} Duchamp, additional note for the 5\textsuperscript{th} operation, “The Door (continued),” Manual of Instructions, 15.
The place of the (potential future) photographer and the visitor/voyeur is necessarily—and painstakingly—aligned in the artist’s conception of the piece. Duchamp had already, then, taken into account the dissemination of the artwork, leaving careful instructions for how its image should circulate, not only popularly, but also what perspective onto the work its scholarship would be afforded.

In a few of the photographs included in the manual, Duchamp experimented with brick placement, angle of vision, and other elements that affect what a view would ultimately reveal. On the very last page of images in the album, Duchamp included two photographs that were taken earlier than the others, and for the production of which the camera literally stands in the place of the imagined spectator.131 The artist framed and reframed the scene, with the splay-legged female body ever so slightly more or less visible behind the dead angle of the bricks. Minutely changing angle and viewing distance, he made about twenty photographs in all of almost exactly the same view, although he didn’t include all these images in the manual. In some that he did include, however, he added bricks here and there, first penning them in, then emphasizing them on the photograph with red marker, and finally, adding them to the actual construction. The question, however, is this: if the manual was to aid the museum in its job of reconstruction, why include these shots—the incorrectly aligned along with the final views—in short, why include details not necessarily useful for the reassembly of the installation at all? What seems at stake in these final images is not so much to convey information about the scene itself, but to convey to the museum (and eventual readers of the Manual) Duchamp’s imperative to minutely control what the viewer would see.

Figure 3.46 [Marcel Duchamp, Final image spread of Manual of Instructions, 1966]

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131 Ibid., 48.
There is more: among those particular photographs, the two that predate the others were taken before Duchamp had changed the wig of his figure—from the earlier brunette version to the figure’s final, blonde tresses. This hair color change, known to those that have studied the manual, has long and probably correctly been read as Duchamp’s desire to change an important reference in the work: from the raven-haired Martins to the blonde Teeny, who had become his wife just about mid-way through the construction of the piece. Over time, the form and materiality of the nude figure itself has been understood by scholars as a composite of allusions to his most important lovers: the “skin” of Mary Reynolds, his on-again-off-again companion from the 1920s to the ’40s who, as a bookbinder, was trained in using leather and probably inspired Duchamp’s use of it and might also have concretely helped him procure the parchment skin for his project; the body of Martins, his voluptuous lover for most of the 1940s, who sexually transfixed him but finally left him; and the hair, raised arm, and clenched fist of Teeny, the last of the women in Duchamp’s life. To each of them, differently, this strange crypt refers. If this supposition has animated scholarly discussions for years, it was partly fueled—at least regarding the detail of the change of hair—by the artist himself. For, excepting those two last images in the manual, all other photographs picture the central figure with blond tresses, and thus there would have been no question about the figure’s hair color in the final installation; and indeed, given the secrecy surrounding the work, no one would have known that it started out with brown hair at all. Except those two images—utterly unnecessary to the technical task of reassembly of the work—annotated

132 Ibid.
133 See Paul Franklin’s scholarship illuminating the connection between Reynolds and the use of leather in the work. Franklin, “In the Beginning, There Was Mary: Marcel Duchamp, Mary Reynolds, and the Landscape Backdrop of Etant donnés,” in Banz, ed., Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall, 70-85 and the discussion of Martins’s and Teeny’s roles in Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés.
in Duchamp’s hand to tell us that the wig had been “changed” to blond, make the
revelation that the change has significance. Here again, photography and note-writing
were the means through which Duchamp conveyed details that he wanted posterity to
know.

Figure 3.47 [Marcel Duchamp, Photograph from the final image spread of Manual of Instructions, 1966]

Photography figures prominently not only in the manual but also in the pictorial
elements visible in the larger work. In 1946, Duchamp took seven photographs of the
picturesque Le Forestay waterfall in Bellevue, Switzerland during his week-long visit
there with Reynolds. These images were evidently the starting point for the construction
of Etant donnés’ backdrop and, in the years after taking the images, Duchamp
substantially manipulated the photographs. After enlarging one of the photographs
several times, he cut out parts and duplicated others, reassembling the different elements
as a photographic collage on a piece of plywood. He then used a combination of paint,
graphtite, crayon, and ballpoint pen ink to hand-color the whole. The result was
reproduced as a black and white collotype, which he hand-colored in turn, enhancing
details in black and colored pencil as well as adding elements, as he had with the collage
on plywood, according to the careful notes he had taken in 1946 about the color of the
foliage and waterfall.134 This extenuated process of replicating color was much the same
as the one Duchamp had employed while working on his Boîte-en-valise some decades
earlier.135

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134 He made the collotype while visiting Salvador Dai’s home in Port Lligat, engaging his old friend’s help
in the process but apparently without revealing what it was for. For a description of the trajectory of steps,
see Stephan Banz, “Paysage Fautif: Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall,” in Banz, ed., Marcel
Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall, 29, ill. 7.
135 This is discussed in chapter two.
For his *Boîte-en-valise*, he had visited collections holding his original artworks in order to take detailed color notations so that he could create accurate reproductions. But whereas arguably in that case an exactness with regard to representing a particular extant painting or sculpture makes sense, here the act is both odd and extremely telling. Duchamp did not have to exactly reproduce the particular waterfall that he had seen and didn’t name; he could have rendered it more or less as he remembered it, more or less akin to a general conception of a waterfall and foliage, and likely no one would have ever known that his approximation was not faithful to some actual waterfall he once visited. Yet he took great pains to accurately record *that* waterfall, cutting out imagination or idealization in favor of something far more mundane: through this complicated and elaborate procedure involving multiple steps, it becomes clear that, in the whole of *Etant donnés*, he was at pains to replicate, as faithfully as possible, an *original*.

It should hardly be surprising that “the photographic” provides the guiding logic for *Etant donnés*. It was a continuation of Duchamp’s lifelong critical project, exemplified in the *Box of 1914, Boîte verte*, and *Boîte-en-valise* and discussed in previous chapters, in which photography is the medium through which the artist sounds the depths of the fraught relationship between originality and reproduction. Photography and its logic form the crucible from which *Etant donnés* is built, not just literally, as visual instructions, but conceptually, too. Inevitably, for the artist, photography also stands for the manipulation of perception, and the manual operates hand-in-hand with the
installation in order to argue for the demise of certainty, be it photographic or other. This is one of stories that the manual tells.

**THE AURATIC**

It is in the manual that Duchamp calls *Etant donnés* an “approximation démontable,” avoiding such descriptors as “painting” or “sculpture” or even a neologism that would anticipate the new category, something like “installation.” This latter classification, so often used today to refer to the artist’s final work and describing the “discipline” in which Modernism’s quest for medium-specificity collapsed, did not yet then exist. His own gloss on the “approximation démontable” (“By approximation I mean the margin of *ad libidum* in the dismantling and remounting”)\(^\text{136}\) suggests that he intended to refer not to some category to which it fit, but instead to the agency he offers the people installing the work: the result of their approximating his ideal of the piece. But the choice of words is revealing and perhaps more meaningful than hitherto recognized. From Latin *ad-* and *proximare* “to come near,” the dictionary tells us that an approximation is something that approaches something else by way of similarity, for instance, “a mathematical quantity that is close in value to but not the same as a desired quantity.”\(^\text{137}\) To have used it for his project suggests that this dismountable thing, *Etant donnés*, is defined by the fact that it can approximate something else: a replica of the real that is “close” but “not the same as” the real thing, in other words: it is a kind of *copy*.

One might here recall the artist’s 1937 formulation of the concept of the *inframince* (infrathin), the Duchampian neologism which refers to the minutely thin

\(^{136}\text{Duchamp, opening words of the Manual of Instructions, iii.}\)

\(^{137}\text{Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary.}\)
interval between two nearly identical things and which bears considerable relevance to
the artist’s thinking about the aesthetic original and its reproduction, in particular
reference to the cast and mold. No two things, in the artist’s estimation, could ever be
the same: repetition inevitably generates difference, even if only infinitesimal. It was this
infinitely “thin” distinction that interested him. The inframince is the “practical
approximation of similarity,” as he declared in a note that was published
posthumously. Duchamp used the term to describe the difference between the
otherwise undifferentiated objects in a series of mechanical production: “the
difference/(dimensional) between/2 mass-produced objects/ from the same mold/ is an
infrathin/when the maximum precision is obtained”.

(recto) 2 forms cast in/the same mold (?)/differ/from each other/by
infrathin separative/amount—All ‘identicals’ as/identical as they made
be, (and/the more identical they are)/move toward this/infrathin
separative/difference. Two men are not/an example of identicality/ and
to the contrary move away/from a determinable/infrathin difference—
but
(verso) there exists the crude conception/of the déjà vu which leads
from/generic grouping/(2 trees, 2 boats)/to the most identical
‘castings’/It would be better/to try/to go/into the/infrathin/interval
which separates/2 ‘identicals’ than/to conveniently accept/the verbal
generalization/which makes/2 twins look like 2/drops of water.

With these speculations, Duchamp reveals that any so-called “precision technique” of
copying, whether casting and molding or another replication method to make serial

138 Infra-mince, appears for the first time in a note dated 1937, later included in his final box of replicated
notes, A l’infini, published in 1966, just as he was completing Etant donnés.
139 Duchamp, Notes, translated and arranged by Paul Matisse (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), n. 33,
unpaginated.
140 Ibid.
141 Duchamp, Notes, n. 35, unpaginated.
things, only produces approximations that are similar but decidedly not the same.\textsuperscript{142} The infinitely small but nevertheless non-negligible distinction between them is, in a word, \textit{inframince}.\textsuperscript{143}

The deep and willfully complicated relationship that \textit{Etant donnés} has to the idea of the copy—a copy still somehow inextricably tied to aura, but also, as we have seen, to the workings of photography—sits at the very heart of the work’s functioning. Thus if photography might, even more directly or literally than any bachelor machine in the \textit{Large Glass}, be \textit{Etant donnés}’ motor of operation and signification, aura would be its consistent yet elusive fuel, its love gas. Duchamp’s entire final work persistently strives to maintain a connection to, and simultaneous distance from, its auratic original (the lover’s body), and the whole of the artist’s reproductive quest in \textit{Etant donnés} serves to construct a situation by which “she” is both infinitesimally present, even if in actuality lost, which is, as it happens, the perfect analogy for any work of art once it enters the museum—at once preserved (on offer) and inevitably constrained (set at a distance from viewers, regulated, controlled).

\textbf{Another Original}

If ever the photographic was structural, indeed procedural for Duchamp, it was in \textit{Etant donnés}. Photography’s logic takes hold perhaps most saliently in the work’s central figure. “She” is a series of art-historical quotations, her body a mere “pattern book of

\textsuperscript{142} See Georges Didi-Huberman’s discussion of the \textit{inframince} in his \textit{La Resssemblance par contact: archéologie, anachronism et modernité de l’empreinte} (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2008), 279-282.

\textsuperscript{143} Georges Didi-Huberman takes the term to be another name for “aura” for Duchamp: an approximation manifesting (physical) contact that nevertheless bears visual distantiation (from its model/original). Ibid., 286.
nudes”: That is what some scholars say. To read their lists is to revisit the whole history of art to which Duchamp apparently refers: “The Origin of the World, Woman with a Parrot and The Studio of the Painter by Courbet, The Virgin of the Rocks and the Mona Lisa by Da Vinci, Luncheon on the Grass and Olympia by Manet, the Statue of Liberty by Bartholdi, the Saint Theresa of Bernini, The Woman bit by a Serpent by Clésinger, the Ideal City and many others by Dürer, Titian, Ingres, Chassériau, Cabanel, etc. ad infinitum.” But is it so? Much like the viewer who sees the “original”—say, a particular Douglas Sirk film, a certain B-movie starlet—in Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills from the 1970s, so, too, historians that claim they see the art-historical references in Duchamp’s Etant donnés miss the forest for the trees. They overlook the fact that there is no exact or singular art-historical reference, no clear citation, in other words, no actual “original” in Duchamp’s monstrously complex copy, at least not one to be found in any history books. That the work is a tangible material remnant—an attempted copy—of its corporeal origins is another story. Yet in its assemblage of these traced origins and in a way similar to Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, modeled on various mass-cultural archetypes, figures which stand as “woman” in patriarchal culture, so, too, is Etant donnés a “concatenation of stereotypes,” laying in the splendor of an equally

144 As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has put it: “So it is a pattern book of nudes, an excess of intertextual alliances is part of the shock of the work: one looks at its exscent self and knows the whole museum is falling on one’s head.” Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Sub Rrosa: Marcel Duchamp and the Female Spectator” The Pink Guitar (London: Routledge, 1990), 75.


concatenated ensemble of staid pictorial conventions (the nude, the pastoral landscape, perspectival space, etc.).

This nude, however, is not only an ambiguous pastiche of archetypes (presented in that very pantheon of the art history that Duchamp is meant to have referenced), but she is also—emphatically—based on a real woman (or even, strictly speaking, three women, if counting the details that “belong” to the other loves in Duchamp’s life). It is obvious that he could have used a readymade figure—a mannequin, a life-sized doll—or, alternately, he could have simply sculpted one. But the point, it seems, was not simply to offer a nude for viewing and definitely not to find one readymade, but to enact something far more convoluted and unsettling. To make his figure, Duchamp turned to live body casting—a denigrated artistic method of imprinting in which the body itself is the primary generator of the sculptural form. The resultant nude was, then, from its very beginnings meant to be an “approximation” of a real body, a one-to-one rendering of the object of the artist’s forlorn love at the time—not just a lump of parchment, and not either an arty idealization or an abstraction, but a form of direct copy.

As letters by Duchamp reveal, Martins’s body was not only the starting point for the piece, its replication also might well have been a way to capture that body’s very real and dogged evasiveness. He and Martins had met in 1943 and began an impassioned affair that carried them through the beginning of the following decade. The tenor of Duchamp’s desire, grasped mostly through his letters to her (hers are presumed lost),

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147 Krauss, speaking of Sherman calls her a “concatenation of stereotypes,” see “Notes on Photography and the Simulacral,” October 31 (Winter 1984), 59.

148 Duchamp speaks of the importance of the figure being a “unique and direct sculpture,” (italic mine) suggesting that he was thinking of the one-to-one indexical quality of a life impression. Duchamp, letter to Martins (March 19 [1950]) in Taylor, Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 417.

defies much of what we thought we knew about the man repeatedly described in terms similar to Ettie Stettheimer’s 1923 assessment: “a cold-blooded fish, who can lose his head over no one, and doesn’t pretend to.”\textsuperscript{150} Indeed, as Helen Molesworth notes, “One of the most persistent pieces of received wisdom about Duchamp is that he was a paragon of indifference in matters both personal and aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Etant donn\'es} belies both counts. He was anything but indifferent to Martins, and in the suite of letters that were written contemporaneously to his first frustrating years of constructing the figure he told her much about the early process of making the work that would only later be titled \textit{Etant donn\'es}.\textsuperscript{152} Martins was not only its muse, model (the original “original”), and the woman to whom he sent so many missives between 1946 and 1951 mixing the technical and the amorous, but, in matters of sculpture, she was also his consultant.

In early 1950, she permanently moved to Brazil with her newly retired husband, effectively putting an end to her affair with Duchamp. One senses though that it was as much Martins’s presence in the artist’s life, as perhaps her consistent unattainability—refusing to leave her husband and child to sequester herself in Duchamp’s studio as he so repeatedly implored of her—that left its permanent trace in his final work. The mix of love, frustrated desire, and loss that is apparent in Duchamp’s letters seems to drive the peculiar obsession that is \textit{Etant donn\'es}, a work that he somehow couldn’t finish, or part

\textsuperscript{150} Ettie Stettheimer [Henrie Waste, pseudonym], \textit{Love Days} (New York: Knopf, 1923), 106. Cited in Goldfarb Marquis, \textit{Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare}, 120.

\textsuperscript{151} Molesworth, “My Funny Valentine,” \textit{Artforum}, 165.

\textsuperscript{152} Martins was the rumored former mistress of Nelson Rockefeller and sexy socialite artist-wife of a Brazilian ambassador who conveniently kept a duplex on Park Avenue for part of the week in the city while her Washington-based husband tended to diplomacy. She sculpted there, building up the surreal-inspired figurative forms for which she had begun to have some renown in the 1940s. She also often met up with Duchamp there, before her husband was transferred to a diplomatic post in Paris. The move posed little obstacle to the affair given how much Duchamp travelled between the two cities anyway and, while apart, they wrote to each other.
with, for two decades—two decades that, as it happened, made up just about the rest of his life.

The process of making the nude figure began in the mid-1940s with lessons in body casting Duchamp took, together with Martins, under the instruction of Italian sculptor Ettore Salvatore, a specialist in the technique. These were followed by sessions with Martins, duplicating individual body parts such as legs, arms, breasts, and her torso through several stages of mold-making and casting. The first full-scale plasticine figure, based on the life cast was, in turn, cast in plaster (for that he commissioned Salvatore), and was completed in May 1949: “My plaster cast is back home,” Duchamp wrote to Martins later that summer, “and I am working on the sterile surface of the intractable plaster, with the inevitable mishaps. What is ugly about plaster is the impression it gives of having been molded, that very top layer has to be removed by reworking the contours and then you have another original.”

One might speculate about why Duchamp opted to cast Martin’s body in the first place. In terms of the artistic fashions of the day, casting would hardly have been an evident choice. Reproduction by casting not only ostensibly evaded the necessity for the inventiveness or skill required to make a form from scratch, but a single matrix or mold also often allowed multiple identical casts to be made: both factors had discredited the method as a legitimate artistic tool. Few could forget the scandal at the 1877 Salon de Paris over Rodin’s Age of Bronze, where the allegation that the artist had cast the figure from life (proven untrue) was tantamount to an accusation of fraud. And even though

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more than a half-century had passed between the Rodin-incident and Duchamp’s forays into casting, the art world had not yet rehabilitated the technique. As Molesworth explains, “Under the aesthetic regime of modernism, casting came to be denigrated because it was presumed to offer the repetition of an existing form, or to enable the production of identical forms—both of which were seen to be antithetical to the privileging of the sculptural object as unique.”¹⁵⁵ In defiance of precisely that hierarchy (that Duchamp had defied, differently but no less adamantly, with his use of pochoir printing and his general fascination with reproduction), the artist made the technique, and with it the whole procedural logic that it shares with photography, central to the development of *Etant donnés*.¹⁵⁶

The result of the casting procedure Duchamp employed is, in fact, less naturalistic (and, in places, strictly speaking less anatomically correct) than it might have been had he sculpted the figure to scale based on the body of Martins. But naturalism seems not to have been the point. What is more, we now know from his letters to her that the process was anything but straightforward and easy; he struggled and failed on repeated occasions to arrive at the desired result.¹⁵⁷ The methods he used were complex, time-consuming (by his own accounts he often worked eight hours a day on his project), and frustratingly characterized by trial and error. He was forced to construct and then abandon several versions, searching throughout for better methods and materials to render the form. To see any number of partially broken plaster cast body elements, discarded parchment

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¹⁵⁵ Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture*, 211.
¹⁵⁶ As Sue Malvern has argued: “Modernist art’s rejection of the plaster cast could be termed a symptom of a crisis in representation, or a flight from photography or any form of reproduction that, like the photograph, has an indexical relationship to the referent.” Malvern, “Outside In: The Afterlife of the Plaster Cast in Contemporary Culture,” in Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand, eds., *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 351-358.
studies, or even the large Plexiglas element drilled with countless holes filling in the contours of an outline of the figure (the precise use of which, to this day, no one seems to have fully understood), all found in the secret studio after Duchamp’s death, is to palpably recognize the extent of his struggle. Yet he continued undauntedly. A clue to the reasons that he might have devised such complex methods seems contained in the letter where Duchamp admits that he is producing, as he claims, “another original.” For no method other than casting could have garnered the same results: not only did it reproduce the (desired, elusive) body, but also in being an imprint, the figure also forever retained a physical trace of that body. In other words, it was representation’s opposite: not a mere mimetic likeness, it was a bit of the thing itself. And perhaps it is precisely this hold that the result has on a real referent that is responsible for the work’s unsettlingly existential corporeality.\textsuperscript{158} For Duchamp, the point, it seems, was to turn the figure in his installation \emph{into an index}.\textsuperscript{159}

\textit{Figure 3.51 [Marcel Duchamp, Plexiglas element used in the making of \textit{Etant donn\'es}, ca. 1951]}

The defining quality of the cast, like the particular and irreducible condition of the photograph, is its indexical quality. It was the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce who, in the late 19th century, first gave that quality its name, distinguishing it from the iconic or the symbolic sign whose relationship to things is either a question of resemblance or merely custom. The “index” was an altogether different order of sign, \textsuperscript{158}There is something to be said of the incredible physicality of the work—not only in relation to Martins’s physicality as sitter, whose skin is literally remade; and correspondingly our physicality as viewers, crouching slightly, held in place, controlled as bodies, engaged in the act of looking; but also Duchamp’s as its maker, who so tirelessly labors to hand-shape countless elements of the installation.\textsuperscript{159} This body—literalized, indexed—would be meaningless as a specific trace for anyone but him and the model (the matrix) herself. For anyone else, for the public Duchamp was anticipating (in the museum), this body could be any body. But it wasn’t. Her head, that most concentrated bodily zone of identity, was thus not to be included. Such specificities were not needed. This was a public work but also an intensely private one.
bearing a causal, factual, and physical connection to its referent, like the relation between a fingerprint and the digit that made it or a weathervane and the wind that pushed it. The photograph, as scholars have told us, is the index’s modern embodiment, rendered by the passage of light from a subject to a light-sensitive surface and thus endowed with an intimate, material, physical, not just conceptual, relation to its referent. The cast, similarly made by physical imprint, in this case, of mold meeting matter, is a direct registration of the real, and, as such, is evidence of it. Duchamp himself saw parallels between the mold and photography: A mold is “the (photographic) negative…from the perspective of form and color,” he announced in his notes collected in 1966 in his last box, *À l’infinitif*. Both are certifications of a sort, testifying undeniably to a quality of the thing depicted—what Barthes, years later and referring to the photograph, called the

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161 Typologically speaking, the photograph—like the cast—would be a hybrid sign, part index but also part icon, because of its resemblance to its referent.

162 Georges Didi-Huberman has written extensively and brilliantly about what he calls “resemblance by contact,” the direct physical transference of a form from one surface or material to another in such diverse objects as archeological remains, death masks, and a number of Duchamp’s works, see, in particular, *L’Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997). Although he never directly treats the casting, molding, and reproductive implications of *Etant donnés*, he has given the erotic objects that stemmed from it, and particularly *Feuille de vigne femelle*, a central place in *L’Empreinte* and indeed in his whole reading of Duchamp. Although his arguments share more with Rosalind Krauss’s than he will admit (explicitly her two essays, “Notes on the Index”), in *L’Empreint*, Didi-Huberman articulates a position in opposition to her assertion of the photographic index as vital to Duchampian practice. He attests to finding the photographic too limiting as a conceptual or technical paradigm, preferring instead to insist on a notion of “resemblance by contact” that claims itself to be more broad and more precise at the same time. Both Krauss’s and Didi-Huberman’s theorizations have been vital to my own thinking here and I therefore refer extensively to them, while focusing on an object (*Etant donnés*) the implications of which each thinker almost wholly overlooks in relation to their respective readings of Duchamp in relation to the index/imprint. Although the full technical details of Duchamp’s casting process only became public in 2009, with the publication of Taylor’s extensive catalogue, it has nevertheless long been speculated that the figure was the result of casting and at least primarily from Martins’s body. See also Didi-Huberman’s earlier study on the relationship between photography, indexicality and figuration in “The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain),” trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 29 (Summer 1984), 63–81.

163 *White Box (In the Infinitive)* reprinted in *Salt Seller*, 85.
“having-been-there.” Here the lover’s ersatz is a product of fastidious casting and molding, with those casts cast and molded again, always maintaining a chain of indexicality connecting Martins’ physical topography to *Etant donné* as a material witness that the lover undeniably once had been there. In other words, like the elements in the *Box of 1914*, Duchamp’s nude figure is, no matter whatever else it is, a document, a record.

The cast of Martin’s body cast repeats, as Barthes wrote of the photograph, “that which can no longer be existentially repeated.” What a strange mnemotechny, then, repeating and as such reminding Duchamp of his lover, holding her vestigial copy in place (locked up) at the very moment that her real body was threatening to evade him. “It is your leg and of such beauty!” the artist wrote to his model of her cast. Just as the photograph serves as indexical evidence, so too does the cast. Both are equally relevant to what André Bazin (coincidentally, at the very moment Duchamp was finishing his figure) theorized about the specificity of photography, which can be effectively extended to casting: “it is the model it reproduces.”

Yet another cast, which Duchamp had mentioned in a July 1949 letter to Martins, appears in the only photograph of the figure from the early period of preparatory work.

164 Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 87. See also, Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) as well as André Bazin, who wrote: “The objective nature of photography confers on it a credibility absent from all other picture making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.” Bazin, “Ontologie de la photographique,” (1958) published in English in 1960 as “The Ontology of the Photograph” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960), 7–8.


167 The full citation is as follows, previously discussed in chapter one: “No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.” Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photograph,” 7–8.
Speculated to have been taken by Duchamp himself, the stark but elegant photographic composition and clean black backdrop suggests that he used the single image as a kind of “portrait” of his cast to share with Martins. Using this and other partial plaster casts produced by this same method (one must imagine him slathering plaster, building molds in individual bodily sections, putting that body together and taking it apart again), Duchamp assembled the final model. The artist stretched a thin layer of taut wet parchment over the plaster (after trying and discarding various other vellums) to make the figure’s “skin.” It was, from the start, clearly the skin—that vast surface of contact of the body—rather that the body’s actual form, that Duchamp was concerned with (“the surface produced by the plastilene gives me more or less what I am looking for, namely the epidermis and not the sculpture of the bones or the volumes,” he wrote to Martins, adding, “in any case this plaster cast was only made with a view to the skin that will go on it...”). He painted the surfaces and the undersides of various studies, testing them to find what he considered the most natural skin-like result (not “too candy-pink,” he hoped). In the end, the final eerie, hand-colored, parchment-lined nude took in itself more than a decade for Duchamp to complete, the labor spanning the period between the mid-1940s until the late 1950s and introducing, indeed, “another original” to the complex meditation on the copy that is this final work.

Figure 3.52 [Marcel Duchamp, Photograph of plaster study for the figure in Etant donnés, 1949]
Figure 3.53 [Marcel Duchamp, Untitled (Skin for lower torso of the Etant donnés figure), ca. 1949]
Figure 3.54 [Marcel Duchamp, Untitled (Torso Fragment), ca. 1949]

168 In this period, Duchamp refers in a letter to a photograph of the plaster cast as if Martins was in possession of it, perhaps included with the letter itself. Duchamp, letter to Martins (March 19, [1950]), in Taylor, ed., Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés, 417. Indeed the 1949 photograph in question was found in the collection of Martins after her death.

The result of his efforts is, no matter how you look at it, resolutely artificial. What Lyotard aptly called the “last nude” is a life-sized yet foreshortened figure with a thin skin of painted parchment. Screwed to a support of crisscrossed wire, tin sheeting, Peg board, and grey putty propped on angled joists, she features a raised arm and clenched fist that is out of proportion with the rest of the body and a “vulva” that is, by all accounts, a strangely shaped, attenuated crevice.\(^{170}\) Endless is the scholarly speculation about that orifice, about why Duchamp bestowed the “woman with the open pussy,” as he called it in letters to Martins, with a vulva that is so anatomically incorrect, so insolently awkward.\(^ {171}\) One possible answer would be not to speculate (violation? castration? mere mutilation?), but to acknowledge, again, that however much the impression of an actual, specific body remained fundamental to the entire project, exactitude of translation was evidently not the ambition. In fact, the oddness of her sex could, at least partly, have been the result of the casting process itself, which required different body parts to be cast individually and then put together, sometimes with awkward joins.\(^ {172}\) Still, whatever may have been the initial technical or other causes, the fact that Duchamp didn’t correct or modify the form to make the obviously strange crevice appear more correct is revealing.

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\(^{170}\) To read the list of the “numerous irregular brace elements and connective devices that criss-cross the underside of the supporting substructure” of the nude is to get a sense of the complexity of the project, see Meighan, “A Technical Discussion of the Figure in Marcel Duchamp’s _Etant donnés_,” in Taylor, ed., _Marcel Duchamp: Etant donnés_, 247.


\(^{172}\) One indication of this is suggested by the fact that none of the smaller drawings, studies, or early fragments used to design the piece has the figure’s vulva figured as it does in the final version. Its appearance of being mutilated, then, was seemingly not part of the artist’s initial conception for the piece.
After all, this was not a man afraid of the labor or time it would take to get his figure exactly as he wanted it.

And, as with the vulva, the same might be said of the nude’s out-of-scale left arm and hand. One hot summer the original plasticine arms melted and cracked. It was 1959 and there had been a heat wave in New York while Duchamp was away that caused both parchment arms of the then-recently finished figure to so severely fracture that Duchamp was forced to revise the viewing angle of the nude slightly (to conceal the part of her truncated right limb that had simply fallen off). He also decided to cast Teeny’s raised arm and hand to take the place of the extent upright left arm, Martins’s, which had been damaged beyond repair. While practical, this new partial casting session with another model seems unlikely to have been the only possible solution, not to mention that, since Teeny’s arm was somewhat larger than Martins’s, the literal incorporation of this new body part caused an odd disruption of scale to the whole. Duchamp didn’t seem to have minded. By that point, with his relationship with Martins long over, it appears that she didn’t need to be the only indexical reference of the piece, even if it should—without question—still be an index. In other words, the expanse of the figure’s cast form—so hard-won by Duchamp—seemingly had to be the indelible imprint of real bodies (actual lovers), but in the very process of production, the artist also determined the figure’s uncanny regress from the real. He effectively created a result that evinces its own willfully uneasy reciprocity between the actual body and the cast body, between original and replication.

One cannot help thinking here of George Baker’s compelling claim in relation to one of Duchamp’s close friends that “reproduction, for Picabia, never remained simply a


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mechanical process; it was conceived, instead, as both machinic and bodily, both technical and corporeal, with reproduction understood in its full sexual sense, marching indeed to the drum beat of desire and the bodily drives.”

It is so obvious, and yet one wonders if it had ever been stated so directly. How could we have forgotten that double sense of “reproduction” which, all along, for Duchamp as much as for Picabia, was understood as a question of the body? After all, it seems no coincidence that Duchamp’s perhaps most famous commentary on reproduction in the very period to which Baker is referring declares “L.H.O.O.Q.,” which, as so many scholars have dutifully told us, translates to “she has a hot ass,” failing to note the flagrant colloquial meaning of that phrase, which is, in fact: “she’s so horny” (they turn the title into a mere comment on its subject’s physiognomy, rather than on her own base, corporeal desire). A work like *Etant donnés* makes this libidinous understanding of reproduction explicit and magnified, one last and final time.

Whether one recognizes reproduction as libidinal or not, one cannot deny that the ontological promise of photography is precisely its capacity to beget, again and again, and virtually without end, duplicates of itself. The cast, like the photograph or even the signature, is not merely the product of a repeatable, iterable form, but also inevitably bears within it the potential for further reproduction. Baker’s description of the photograph is applicable to the cast as well, since it “also bears its own relation to the condition of the multiple spun through a logic of serialization in which each individual instance of a photograph presents itself as only one of a potentially infinite number of

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175 On the signature’s necessary iterability, see the discussion in chapter one.
copies.” What perversity, then, for Duchamp to have used the logic of both throughout his oeuvre in just that way and to then alter his strategy, right at the end, by suddenly using those methods to make something paradoxically original, undeniably singular, inevitably unreplicable. After a lifetime of playing fast and loose with originality and reproduction, Duchamp’s final work is a willfully unique, auratic object—singular to an extreme and, as it is unmovable, demanding the experiential presence of the viewer—even as it is (and this is its incredible paradox) also a kind of copy.

**Copies of a Copy**

If the copy emerges as a central transgressive force of the deliberately auratic work that is *Etant donnés*, one can retroactively detect the concern in several works that Duchamp released well before his secret work went public—from straight-forward-looking etchings to curious bodily metonymies. Think of the series of works on paper that the artist produced in 1968 under the title *Morceaux choisis*. Those “selected details” were essentially nine etchings of line drawings made in the “style of” Ingres, Rodin, and Courbet; they were modified imitations of iconic, erotic works by each artist. The poses of the figures or themes of the images cannot help but recall *Etant donnés*, but of course this is only apparent in hindsight. These multiple engraved works, signed MARCELLUS D, didn’t hide their debt to copying. On the contrary, these literal imitations of the well-known images of “famed” artists made a show of it.

Figure 3.55 [Marcel Duchamp, *Morceaux choisis (d’après Rodin)*, 1968]

Figure 3.56 [Marcel Duchamp, *Morceaux choisis (d’après Courbet)*, 1968]

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176 Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, 149.
These were not the only meditations on the copy released in those years before *Etant donnés* was unveiled. Duchamp employed casting for the production of a series of objects that were made public in the 1950s, long before people could connect them to *Etant donnés* and without divulging from what they were themselves cast. A trilogy of what have been called his “erotic objects,” *Feuille de vigne femelle* (Female Fig Leaf) from 1950, *Objet-dard* (Dart-Object) from 1951, and *Coin de chasteté* (Wedge of Chastity) from 1954, emerged into the world, one by one, as art objects in their own right. *The New York Times*, at the time of their first showing, deemed them “bizarre artifacts,” an attribute that they likely provoked not only because of their eerie corporeality but also, and even if the reporter couldn’t know it at the time, because of their double role as both things in themselves and preambles to something yet impenetrable beyond them.177

Figure 3.57 [Marcel Duchamp, *Feuille de vigne femelle*, 1950]

Figure 3.58 [Marcel Duchamp, *Objet Dard*, 1951]

Figure 3.59 [Marcel Duchamp, *Coin de chasteté*, 1954]

Almost defiantly unlike the first readymades, the erotic objects were carefully molded and cast elements, the product of something that, at its origins, is handmade, as Molesworth reminds us.178 And although we know now of their curious provenance, few at the time of their first public exhibition in the 1950s and ’60s, could imagine the larger project’s production from which they were the residue: *Feuille de vigne femelle* seems to have been used originally as a countermold, helping to press and hold moistened parchment in the crevices and contours of the vaginal opening of a positive plaster mold

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as it dried. The palm-sized object is thus a positive of the figure’s lower regions, a vulva turned inside out, literally making the secret nude’s sex visible in those years before *Etant donnés* exposed it to the public. The *Objet-dard*, at once phallic and scatological with a title that plays on “art object” and French slang for “penis,” had been fabricated from a reinforced plaster armature used as a brace to help press down the parchment slightly below the breast of the nude figure. The two-part *Coin de chasteté*’s original function seems less clear although it is now known that one of the two elements that make up the piece, its galvanized plaster wedge, fits snugly into the sex of one of Duchamp’s abandoned parchment elements related to the production of the nude. Replicating this same sense of bodily union, Duchamp made the second part of the work from flesh-colored dental plastic and inserted the galvanized plaster part into it. To separate the two parts is to be confronted with an uncannily evocative vaginal crevice formed as the perfect imprint of the wedge that so delicately sits in it. As multiple countermolds to the secret installation, the little erotic objects were eagerly made public by Duchamp: exhibited whenever there was an opportunity, gifted to friends, and even quite immediately included in reproduction in updated versions of the *Boîte-en-valise*.  

Duchamp had given one of his two casts of *Female Fig Leaf* to Man Ray as a gift, offering as well that his friend could make another ten copies of that “original” cast to sell off to make himself some money, which Man Ray did. In time, each of the erotic

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179 For precise descriptions of the technical aspects of all of the so-called erotic objects, see Meighan, “A Technical Discussion of the Figure in Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant donnés*,” 254-55.
180 Duchamp, moreover, seems to have thought that they made ideal gifts for those closest to him. The original version of *Coin de chasteté* became the artist’s wedding gift to Teeny in 1954, for instance. Another way of releasing them into the world was to include them in his ongoing project, the *Boîte-en-valise*. Duchamp frequently updated and added to the contents of his *Boîte*, and in 1955 he added twelve more items to the portable museum, including a selection of his erotic objects.
181 In 1961 and from Man Ray’s gifted cast, Duchamp had the Paris gallery Rive Droit make a bronze edition of the *Feuille de vigne femelle*, which he insisted on signing personally and individually since he
objects would be replicated, in small bronze editions, molded and cast from those “first generation” already replicated objects. If the first-generation objects were themselves at a remove from the original—Martins’s body—being themselves molds of a cast (the figure in *Etant donnés*), their further replication continued Duchamp’s convoluted replication project, all while maintaining an inexorable grip on the index.

Figure 3.60 [Anonymous, Mold for making copies of Duchamp’s *Feuille de vigne femelle*, ca. 1951]

Photography’s implication in this, not only structural but also literal, should not be forgotten. One example perhaps suffices: a hand-retouched photograph of *Feuille de vigne femelle*, most probably made in 1956, to be used for the cover of the first issue of *Le surréalisme, même*, published in October of that same year. Having been asked by Breton to make the inaugural cover of the new magazine, Duchamp engaged a photographer in New York to reproduce his *Feuille de vigne femelle*, specifically requesting that it be made to look convex rather than concave, in other words, like a negative image of itself, which would be, in fact, a positive reproduction of its source. Duchamp then hand-colored the photo, adding details to emphasize its contours and to enhance the illusion. Through the photographic process, *Female Fig Leaf* becomes an inversion of itself; its representation shows it as if it were an image of the “original” model/body, not something at several removes. Like the playful inversions of original and copy for the cover of the 1947 Surrealist exhibition catalogue, Duchamp here deploys photography as if to remind us of its central place in the work to which it covertly announced.

Figure 3.61 [Marcel Duchamp, Hand retouched photograph of *Feuille de vigne femelle* for *Le Surréalisme même*, ca. 1955]

There were still other indexical works that emerged in the same period, this time not of the lover’s body but of the artist’s own, no longer feminine but masculine. In 1959, when Duchamp had to make new casts of the arm and hand for *Etant donnés*’ nude figure (this second time around from Teeny’s body), he conceived two new works, *With My Tongue in my Cheek* and *Torture morte* (both 1959) that were cast from his cheek and the sole of his foot respectively. Originally made in relation to Robert Lebel’s book, whose publisher had requested new works from the artist, the horrified publisher refused to use them in the end. They were, in a word, not at all what admirers of Duchamp had come to expect from him. The artist doesn’t seem to have been daunted; he showed them instead at the Surrealist show that he was curating that same year. Even before *Etant donnés* itself was visible, and for anyone who paid close enough attention, Duchamp’s avid curatorial practice throughout this period revealed his persistent interrogation of the presentation and dissemination sites for the work of art; just as the various blatant copies and bodily metonymies that he circulated suggested that reproduction, eroticism, and the body (as a model but also as a means of production: these were, after all, not only bodily casts but also decidedly handmade) were all at stake for the artist right up until the end of his life.

And if all these essentially handmade objects employing the technique of casting may have seemed odd at the time, thoroughly unDuchampian, it is telling that they gave way to the actual reproduction of his readymades on the massive scale that we now know
These cast and carefully hand-copied works, like the nude of *Etant donnés* herself, however different seeming from the readymades, are inexorably in dialogue with them. As Helen Molesworth has noted: “Although the original readymades had been mass-produced objects, purchased by the artist and transformed into art through the artists choice, the readymades of the 1960s were anything but mass produced. Italian artisans laboriously crafted these replicas whose work was subject to Duchamp’s approval. The temporal proximity of the intimate, handmade erotic sculptures and the replicas of the readymades suggests that the erotics of the body and the allure of the commodity are connected in Duchamp’s practice.”

So it goes to figure that in 1964, during *Etant donnés*’ construction, and after his Italian gallerist Arturo Schwarz made a set of replicas of his erotic objects, that the artist had those industrially made, store-bought things carefully replicated into a multiple edition. Some might wonder if their reproduction was more the result of the historical (and with it, financial) interest reaching the artist at precisely that time, and less Duchamp’s own prompting, but Molesworth is right to suggest that it is relevant that he performed such a major project to reproduce it.

It is noteworthy that Arturo Schwarz, the Italian gallerist perhaps most famous for having made the series of multiples of the readymades with Duchamp, issued an official bronze edition of two of the trilogy of erotic objects in 1962 and ‘63, just two years before beginning to remake the readymades. Thus, before the artist entered into his seminal reproduction project with Schwarz, making the replicas that would bring thirteen of his most important industrial and other objects from the 1910s and ‘20s (back) into view, he first proposed to copy these strangely lumpen, handmade, and cast forms with him. Of course, a few reduxes of his readymades had circulated in the 1950s, but they were sporadic and haphazard one-off responses to exhibitions, like Sidney Janis’s 1950 and the 1953 gallery shows, *Challenge and Defy* and *Dada 1916–1923*, for which the gallerist picked up a store bought urinal on Duchamp’s behalf. Nothing of the scale nor with the implications of the Schwarz limited edition, signed and numbered readymade multiples, had been produced before 1964. For these, a professional draftsman prepared precise drawings of the “original” readymade objects based on the only traces that were left—photographs—and had a factory construct shiny new urinals, bottleracks, snow shovels, etc. from these plans. With the erotic objects, the process had been different, no drawings were necessary since the objects themselves were undeniably extant. In a curious twist, one might say that it was those little cast objects, byproducts of a larger cast figure of a then-still clandestine project, which helped set in motion a massive replication process, the repercussions of which art history is still digesting.

them on a large-scale (eight editions of thirteen of his readymades) at exactly this moment. He was, through the process of finalizing Etant donnés, thinking anew through the complex implications of originals and reproductions, exhibition value, and exchange value that had preoccupied him throughout his life.

Figure 3.65 [Marcel Duchamp, Technical drawing for the 1964 re-edition of Bottlerack, 1964]

Figure 3.66 [Marcel Duchamp, Bottlerack, 1914/1964]

CONCLUSION

At once a copy and an original, an approximation and an auratic, psychic, phenomenological thing, in a museum and also part of that museum, specular and cuntish, Duchamp’s Etant donnés is the untenable combination of all of these things at once. If the Boîte-en-valise with its three-hundred plus copies of artworks and its abstraction of display space (it is an any space) seems to celebrate art’s power to undermine the original even as it holds on to it, Etant donnés does the opposite: it insists on the resurgence of an original object—rare, undeniably unique, authentic in every way—that traffics in, and was made through, outmoded sculptural techniques based on copying. As the culmination of a lifetime of reproduction and thwarting the aesthetic original, Etant donnés might seem surprising for being, ostensibly, a unique work. And yet Duchamp positions us in front of an auratic object that is distinctly bound up with the question of the copy, and in a museum no less.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{184} In all of this, Etant donnés is both about a specific desire (and in the end three specific women), and about something that was more general, but also, and at the same time, the horizon of his entire oeuvre: a critical concern with reception, reproduction, and institutions of art. Helen Molesworth is correct when she speaks of the “mangy paucity of Duchamp studies,” in which, as she says, “all the talk of desire is always generic (be it capitalist or Lacanian) and never approaches the problem of desire’s specificity.” To that end, Etant donnés might be said to be the result of one man’s specific carnal and emotional desire (with its accompanying risks of longing, love, loss, and obsession), as well as his very persistently expressed intellectual desire to enact a wider critique of the institutions of art—exhibition, museum, art history. Molesworth, “My Funny Valentine,” 169.
Photography is the operative model in much of this. For Duchamp, the photographic logic (to which casting subscribes) was not only a motor for the destruction of the idea of the unique original and the ontological promise of the multiple (of more of the same); it was also the bearer of material traces and thus, ambiguously, a perpetuator of originality, producing reliquaries of sorts, containing within it a grain of the thing itself. It was all of these contradictory things at once. This is another story that the *Manual of Instructions* tells, for there Duchamp speaks not only about the task at hand—the reassembly of *Etant donnés*—but importantly also of the centrality of the photographic to the entire work. It informs the viewer that all along Duchamp had used a photographic logic structurally, as a destabilizing agent, a tool that, in its mobilization, oxymoronically renders ambivalent the conditions of its own constitution as an original that is, simultaneously, a copy.

The artist took ordinary stuff (tape, cotton, plaster, and vellum) and transmogrified it into one of the most radical and transgressive artworks of the 20th century, and, as Jasper Johns famously observed: “the strangest work of art any museum has ever had in it.”185 But, as this chapter has set out, the work’s radicalism and transgressivity is less based on the apparently shocking scene it displays, less based on what it dares to represent (the subject of so much of the existing writing about it), than on how it does so, which is to say, how it managed to insert itself into the museum, how it continues to insists on exposing that context from within, and how, in the process, Duchamp lays bare the properties of that very institutional site, so it could never be seen in quite the same way again. For the museum—with its subjective role in the production

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of value and taste, its unchecked ability to constitute the work of art as much as frame it, its supposed neutrality, its implication in power and self-interest, and importantly also, its investment in originality—was the veritable subject in *Etant donnés*. And in positioning its future viewers in place, making their voyeurism part of his work, Duchamp hardly hid that he was exposing the museum to them, one by one, as nothing less than obscene.

Figure 3.67 [Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donnés*, interior view, 1946-66]

Figure 3.68 [Marcel Duchamp, View of the signed figure in *Etant donnés*, in Duchamp’s studio, ca. 1968. Photograph by Denise Browne Hare]

Duchamp’s steadfast interest in thinking about the meaning of the artwork through, with, and even against its institutional context, and in particular through his investigations of the curatorial and administrative aspects of this context in the physical space of exhibitions throughout all of the postwar period, is deeply pertinent here; the museum, for which *Etant donnés* was imagined and into which the artist curated the work, could be said to determine the work, even as that work acts like a Trojan horse to effectively undermine the museum in turn. Duchamp’s final work thus extends so much of what the artist was grappling with from the first decade of the 20th century onward, but if that earlier project has long been seen as a more epistemologically focused investigation of the object, *Etant donnés* exposed the institution as both figure and ground of the artist’s oeuvre all along. It was his final artist-curated exhibition.

It is a gauntlet thrown at the feet of the museum, effective precisely because it doesn’t let go of its grip on the institution: it sits within it; its walls are the museum’s walls, its floor is the museum’s floor.186 Those visible and invisible (or at least oft-

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ignored because supposedly neutral) support structures are physically integrated into *Etant donnés*. It was Krauss who has perhaps said it best when she noted that *Etant donnés* “would settle into its permanent institutional context to form the most total and devastating critique of how the aesthetic itself operates and is legitimized.”

The force of Duchamp’s particular practice of criticality lies in precisely this. After more than half a century of shaking up the terms of aesthetic legitimation with his readymades, *Etant donnés* importantly extends but also differently articulates an attack on the institution that amounts to this “most total and devastating critique.”

Yet, for all of its distinctly transgressive implications, pushing in entirely new ways at issues first introduced in the 1910s with the readymades, it is remarkable that the reception of Duchamp’s final work was characterized by a critical silence that, in fact, performed what the artist worked his whole life to reveal: the ultimate power of the forces outside the work itself, including the discourses that historicize it. In one of his rare public lectures, “The Creative Act,” given when Duchamp was nearly exactly half way through his construction of *Etant donnés*, he stated: “Let us consider two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes posterity.”

Elsewhere he continued the thought: “After all, the public represents half of the matter; art is also made through the admiration one has for it; the masterpiece is declared in the final analysis by the spectator.”

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less than “makes the work.” And if this is the case, did the viewers of *Etant donnés*, once it was unveiled and in the several decades that followed, simply decide it didn’t deserve to be thus *made*?

Why, one might rightly ask, did it take so long for *Etant donnés* to be inscribed in those very histories and in relation to the very ideas that it so audaciously set out to question? And why, to return to the set of questions evoked early in this chapter, is *Etant donnés* largely still absent from so many studies on simultaneous developments in “advanced art” that are themselves declared to be paradigmatic? To be clear: these questions do not mean to suggest that Duchamp’s final work need be claimed as responsible for, or directly influential to, those artists and practices; this is neither an effort to establish cause and effect, nor heroic origin and disingenuous repetition (and, in some cases, the very simultaneity of some projects I have mentioned suggest that the authors simply couldn’t have known about *Etant donnés* at the point at which they started their own projects). Instead, my questions mean to provoke debate about how it is possible that such a highly spectacular final work by an artist who himself is claimed to be so important for the generation of artists and their practices that came after him (a work that exactly those artists and critics could *not* pretend not to have heard about at the time) would so systematically be excised from critical discussion contextualizing exactly these practices. The inverse is also the case: given the understanding that those practices incited, why did more historians not return to *Etant donnés* to parse it more carefully and read its situated critique in light of the subversive operations attributed to a younger generation?

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Even Krauss, who had in the 1970s so presciently seen the indexical functioning of Duchamp’s other works, left *Etant donnés* curiously out of her consideration. There, and once again, Duchamp was claimed the progenitor of a generation, but it was not the Duchamp of *Etant donnés* that was mentioned, and this regardless of the fact that the work offered, even more directly and programmatically, a key instance of the very “indexicality” that Krauss was discussing.¹⁹¹ Several decades later, Krauss would come to see that *Etant donnés* had, in fact, grappled with the photographic in fundamental ways, saying: “And if his art had used photography as a structural, procedural element through which to reveal the operations of the index, here [in *Etant donnés*] ‘the photographic’ seemed to manifest itself in its crassest incarnation, merely as a drive toward the brutally simulacral: the substitution of the mimetic copy for reality itself.”¹⁹² I would inflect her arguments differently, suggesting that there is not only no “reality itself” to see in *Etant donnés* (except if one speaks of the museum itself, although I am not convinced that is what Krauss meant) but instead only a bizarrely auratic but nevertheless mimetic copy; and that “crassest incarnation” of the photographic is the cast itself, responsible for *Etant donnés*’ hyper realism and its eerie artifice but also, and importantly, for the work’s equally paradoxical and simultaneous evocation and refusal of the cult of auratic, authentic originality so cherished by the museum. It is Duchamp’s siting of precisely this tension in the museum, I have sought to argue, that lies at the heart of how the work operates but also perhaps explains how it managed to fall so decisively into disfavor among critics who failed to recognize the full implications of that gesture.

Comfortably sited within a structure of power, it looked, quite simply, like complicity, a sell-out, something better ignored as an artistic dead end.

For twenty years Duchamp had labored on the construction of something seemingly anathema to the uncompromisingly critical oeuvre that had come before it. “Retardataire” was how The New York Times, in a word, dismissed it when it opened to the public, suggesting that it had “arrived a bit late to make a sensation,” and comparing its “spent and sterile slickness” to Bouguereau, that most ridiculed of 19th century Salon painters. The highly figurative and stridently material (rather than conceptual) aspects of Etant donnés were seen as deeply disappointing to many of Duchamp’s close friends and nearly every journalist reporting on the installation when it was first made public. For them, it simply made no sense that the dry and cerebral chess-playing father of both the readymade and the allusive Large Glass had for so long and with such effort clandestinely crafted something so apparently naturalistic and crassly literal, so tied up with the labor of the hand, and so ridiculously like a poor man’s Technicolor peep show. Either an incongruity in his oeuvre or a retour à l’ordre were the explicit terms by which they saw it, failing to understand it as the most elaborate and consistent declaration of the most central of Duchamp’s concerns: the questioning of the apparatuses for the legitimation, valuation, and circulation of the artwork.

193 New York Times critic John Canaday minced no words: “very interesting, but nothing new,” just “an entertaining invention that has arrived a bit late to make a sensation[…] For the first time, this cleverest of 20th-century masters looks a bit retardataire. Edward Kienholz, as the major specific example, has gone so far beyond the spent and sterile slickness of this final Duchamp work that he makes Duchamp look like Bouguereau.” Canaday, “Philadelphia Museum Shows Final Duchamp Work,” 30.

194 It is worth noting that this reception was not exclusive either to those critical of Duchamp or to the period just after the work was unveiled, it clung to the work even among studies that purported to celebrate Duchamp, generally, and even until rather recently; note the comment by T.J. Demos: “Unlike the fragmented disorder, homeless mobility, and labyrinthine spaces that Duchamp’s earlier installations produced, Etant donnés presents itself, then, as a retour à l’ordre of sorts.” Demos qualifies this statement but the conclusion of his reading amounts to a positioning of Etant donnés as the nevertheless regressive
What if Duchamp’s final work, so long repressed from histories of the practices and movements of art developed in the epoch in which it was unveiled, might have all along revealed that era’s most tenacious and perhaps still repressed concerns? Although the beginning of this chapter sketches a diverse body of resonant works with which of *Etant donnés* could have been, but wasn’t, compared—from the practices of John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman to those of Paul Thek and Vito Acconci—it might be productive to focus on one pregnant example to better understand the stakes and consequences of its reception.

It was around the moment of *Etant donnés*’ unveiling in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the questioning of the role and power of institutions of art thrived amongst the most progressive of artists. In his 1970 essay, “Critical limits,” Daniel Buren laments the attention “fixed only on the object shown, its meaning, without looking at or discussing even once the place where it is shown.” In 1972, Robert Smithson declared in an interview that “the great issue” of contemporary practice, which he predicted would continue to be the “growing issue” throughout the rest of the 1970s, would be “the investigation of the apparatus the artist is threaded through.” Critics, for their part, agreed, finding just such an investigation manifested “in the practices of Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, and Louis Lawler…”

Numerous were those who, speaking of the filiation of the artists dealing with a critique

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597 Owens, “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After ‘Death of the Author’?” 122-23.
of the institution, began to connect so many practices that actually resonated deeply with

_Etant donné_ s somewhere else. Craig Owens, for example, admitted:

It is customary to attribute the recognition of the importance of the frame in constituting the work of art to Duchamp (the readymade requires its institutional setting in order to be perceived as a work of art), and to regard the investigation of the apparatus that the artist is threaded through which took place in the 1970s as a revival of the productivist line elaborated in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically, of the demand (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin) that artists refuse to supply the existing productive apparatus without attempting to change it. I am arguing, however, that the “death of the author” constitutes a historical watershed between the avant-gardes of the ’10s and ’20s and the institutional critiques of the ’70s, and that to regard the latter as a revival or renewal of the former can only lead to misapprehensions about contemporary practice.

It is striking how much _Etant donné_ s shares with so many neo avant-garde projects of the late 1960s and 1970s in their observations about, and complex understanding of, the functioning of art institutions; each could be described as artworks that are, in fact, about the frame of art, including display systems, labels, scenography, administration, etc., which organize meaning, interest, and power in the museum.

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199 Owens, “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After ‘Death of the Author’?” 127.

200 Mignon Nixon, in “Posing the Phallus,” touches on a similar question _vis-à-vis_ how to historicize Duchamp’s erotic objects in relation to the neo-avant-garde. There, her rhetorical use of the term “survival”
No artist seems to better exemplify the postwar era’s paradigmatic concern with the institution than Marcel Broodthaers, whose *Musée d’art moderne* (1968-72), with its different institutional “departments” and “sections,” provides an interesting parallel case to *Etant donnés*. It is all the more revealing that the Belgian artist’s fictional museum project is repeatedly described as having absorbed the lesson of Duchamp’s readymade in order to use it to herald a related but presumably more expanded and emphatic form of critical inquiry, an inquiry that will be hailed as “Institutional Critique.”

Speaking of Broodthaers, Krauss defines what emerged from his questioning as follows: “The whole practice of what came to be called ‘institutional critique’ derived from such a practice—calling attention to the supposedly neutral containers of culture and questioning this putative neutrality.”

Although I hardly wish to displace Broodthaers from his place as reigning father of Institutional Critique, nor do I wish to claim one more feather in the cap of Duchamp, who already is credited amply with what followed him, I cannot help but be surprised that for the generation of scholars that celebrated Broodthaers’s packing crates, postcard reproductions of paintings, opening and closing “ceremonies,” staged art

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201 One of Broodthaers’s most important advocates and most sensitive readers, Benjamin Buchloh, in particular makes the claim that Broodthaers succeeded where Duchamp’s readymades and *Boîte-en-valise* failed (*Etant donnés* is simply never mentioned), and a vast amount of scholarship has followed his lead; but sometimes the successes Buchloh credits Broodthaers with (or other artists involved in Institutional Critique, such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, or Louise Lawler) are difficult to distinguish from the failures he ascribes to Duchamp. See Buchloh, “Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde,” *Artforum* 18, n. 9 (May 1980): 52-59 and “The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers” in A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 45-56.

transport vans parked outside his events, and ironic adaptation of the role of museum “conservateur,” Duchamp’s own enactment of institutional rituals for *Etant donnés*, including behind-the-scene museum trustees meetings, lawyer’s contracts, *Manual of Instructions*, reorganization of the museum’s contents and display, and even insertion of the work in the museum itself, etc., get elided as the radical critique of the systems of value and meaning constructed by the museum that they are.

While the readymades had, by the mid-1960s, unquestionably begun to leave their mark on the collective unconscious of contemporary artists and art history—claimed as nothing less than the primal scene of so much advanced artistic practice—Duchamp’s final work provoked an almost opposite response. In the writings of artists and critics speaking about Institutional Critique, it was treated as if it simply did not exist, although it perfectly coincided with that project’s declared inception. Yet didn’t Duchamp’s installation involve, precisely, a “critically reflexive site specificity” that has been

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204 Buchloh, for example, laments in his seminal reading of Conceptual Art that its artists focused almost to exclusion on the readymade and even only on one narrow aspect of the readymade—its status as “speech-act,” leaving out “its structural logic, its features as an industrially produced object of use and consumption, its seriality, and the dependence of meaning on context”—in addition to their avoiding, among other “eminently crucial” works, *Etant donnés* and the *Boîte-en-valise*. But if Buchloh and perhaps even other critics at the time might have noticed this, why, one might rightly ask, did they not in their readings insist on teasing out the implications of this broader context for the work of the time? Why, in other words, limit readings to the intention or self-proclaimed references of artists? Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” 126.
understood as the founding methodology of Institutional Critique? In no way did he “affirm, expand, or reinforce” the historically and ideologically loaded site that is the museum, but instead “problematized” it. And did he not exact a “reflection on the discursive and systematic mechanisms of reification and instrumentalization” within the institution, revealing how it defines, validates, frames, isolates, excludes, and naturalizes? Did he not, indeed, depart from his own more epistemologically focused investigation of the work of art to treat its frame as, quite explicitly, both “target and weapon.”

I cite here the terms used to define Institutional Critique and its methods because applying them to Duchamp’s final work makes apparent how selective history has been about who it discusses and how; and this, in the end, is one of the very critiques Etant donnés aimed to wage against art history and the museum.

The questions that remain are these: Could the most passionately committed critics of the 1970s and beyond simply not have seen what Etant donnés so fiercely aims to show us—holes burrowed in a seat of power that reveal that there is much “behind the scenes” of the museum that demands interrogation, including how works enter an institution (the wheeling and dealing that is typically not seen), how the discourse that surrounds a work determines reception, how museums dictate perception and behavior, and how value is constructed, culture naturalized, the author affirmed, aura produced? Or, conversely, were artists and scholars at the time embarrassed for Duchamp (as some accounts suggest), thus avoiding mention of his final work because they wanted to preserve a pristine image of the “truly” radical gestures for which they held him...

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205 The quoted terms in this sentence and those that follow are all Andrea Fraser’s defining the specific means and methodologies of Institutional Critique in her article “What is Institutional Critique?” in Welchman, ed., Institutional Critique and After, 306-7.

In only seeing the inexplicably crass and incongruous hyper-realism of the work, had they so thoroughly missed the critical force of *Etant donnés* in relation to the “apparatus through which the artist is threaded,” and the ways—distinct from the readymades’ gestures—in which it enacted the period’s very questioning of the various institutional forces and relations impacting artistic production?

In the 1980s and ’90s, a number of scholars actively hailed the generation of artists that had come of age after the embers of the avant-garde’s fire had apparently cooled. They acclaimed the paradigmatic value of this generation’s work, and defended them against reactionary accusations that they were merely compromised and impotent “neo” repetitions of the past. To do so, the fatalist teleology of Peter Bürger’s thesis was reversed and a more complex “temporal exchange” between the historical and neo-avant-gardes was suggested: “Rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde have comprehended it for the first time?” Hal Foster asked in an essay whose far-reaching consequences have helped to redefine how we write the

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207 Artist, critic, and Duchamp admirer, Anthony Hill’s comment insinuates as much: “A critical issue is that of *Etant donnés*: I do not take this work seriously […] For me, and perhaps many others, the Second World War is the ‘break’ after which I sense a complete change and a great deterioration…a genuine tiredness. *Etant donnés* is the kind of thing Duchamp can be excused for choosing as a means of passing time. I admire a number of contingent features of the work, the ‘legislative’ aspects (the restriction against reproduction), the idea of keeping it a secret, and best of all—if it is fair to mention it—the judicious timing of his retirement from life in connection with its premiere. But it remains in conception a banal affair, a peep-hole tableau.” Hill, “The Spectacle of Duchamp,” in Hill, ed. *Duchamp: Passim, A Marcel Duchamp Anthology* (London: G+B Arts International, 1994), 158.

history of contemporary art. The argument, however, might turn on a necessary disavowal, one that was echoed in numerous readings of the operations and strategies of the neo-avant-garde that followed. To argue for the innovation of the new generation, critics might have wittingly or unwittingly constructed a horizon for an avant-garde that did not always, in fact, so neatly fit into the categories to which it was being assigned, at least not as far as Duchamp’s final work was concerned: Duchamp, who was understood as uniquely belonging to the first generation avant-garde, was almost wholly associated with the readymade (which itself was seen by the 1970s as compromised as a radical project). In that scenario, Duchamp, by the 1960s and ’70s, could only serve through “legacy.” The conclusion drawn was that the generation that followed Duchamp, the neo-avant-garde, “grasps” (in Foster’s terms) what Duchamp and the avant-garde could not, and while not cancelling the importance of their historic predecessors à la Peter Bürger, the neo avant-garde, it is claimed, “enacts its [the avant-garde’s] project for the first time.”

But what if history were more complex and convoluted than either Bürger or his critics could admit? What if—instead of either a utopian notion of linear progress (and

209 Ibid., 16.
210 One way Foster did so was to claim that “Duchamp, in the guise of R. Mutt, ‘chooses.’ [The] work [does not] purport to be an analysis, let alone a deconstruction … the museum-gallery is left intact by the readymade,” while, on the other hand, “Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke were concerned to elaborate these same paradigms in order to investigate this exhibition status and that institutional nexus more systematically.” Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-garde?” 19, 20. The sustained influence of this reading remains in place even today. An incisive recent article by Buchloh argues (with no indication to suggest that he considers Duchamp among the artists of the 1960s to which he refers): “And what the artists of the 1960s and 70s finally formulated more clearly than anybody before was the fact that the museum had to be recognized as the site where, and the social institution wherein, these forms of acceptance through affirmation, of control though cultural canonization, of tolerance through quarantine, of inversion of meaning through the process of acculturation, had been most successfully implemented.” Buchloh, “Farewell to an Identity,” Artforum 51, n. 4 (December 2012): 254.
211 Bürger, who declared, “Once a signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in the museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns to its opposite,” was by far not alone.
212 Ibid., 20.
ultimate failure), followed by meaningless repetition, or, contrarily, an avant-gardism
only fully realized in an interpretation and enactment by its successors—there might have
been yet other paths for history? For what to do with a figure that grasps the implications
of his own radical previous projects and enacts them himself, critically taking on the
museum and acting as a curator at the same time that a new generation was doing so as
well? What to do, in other words, with a figure who defies the temporal categories of
“avant” and “neo” by creating a coda at the very end of his life that returns to ideas he
had put forth in the 1910s but intuits their consequences a half century later (and perhaps
even absorbs the reception of his ideas by others) and, further, opens them up for future
new directions?\(^\text{213}\)

The suggestion here is not to re-establish the original celebration of the historic
avant-garde, as Bürger was at pains to do, nor to declare, as Clement Greenberg did
(speaking of Duchamp generally), that the artist “locked advanced-advanced art into what
has amounted to hardly more than elaborations, variations on, and recapitulations of his
original ideas.”\(^\text{214}\) The suggestion instead is to recognize how much Duchamp’s final
work was not the “retardataire” lapse of an old man who “arrived a bit too late,” but
instead the neo-avant-garde gesture of an artist who never stopped articulating the terms

\(^{213}\) Frazer Ward, in a footnote to an essay focused on the generation of artists after Duchamp involved in
Institutional Critique, provocatively wonders: “Here the question might be raised whether, in staging the
‘scandal’ of the urinal, Duchamp didn’t in fact stage the limits of what the institution would sustain, which
is to suggest that perhaps he did begin to explore the discursive parameters of the institution […]
I would suggest that Benjamin Buchloh’s account of the Boîte-en-valise (1936-41) as Duchamp’s own attempt
to deal with problems of acculturation and institutionalization might give 1936 as the moment in which the
readymade touched on, and might also give Duchamp as his own neo avant-garde.” Ward, “The Haunted
Museum,” 82, fn. 31.

of a criticality that operates in, through, as well as against the institution of art, and who had found one last and final way to do so.
Conclusion
PUBLICITY

Figure 4.1 [Percy Rainford, Portrait of Marcel Duchamp (with annotation), 1945]

Marcel Duchamp sits, his back to a photographer, almost in three-quarter profile with a pipe in the form of a miniature toilet delicately poised between his fingers. He is surrounded by the unkemptness of his studio, a belt holding a folded pillow to the old chair on which he rests, a chessboard tacked to the wall alongside scraps of paper and a photograph (of Maria Martins, as it happens) hanging askew near a dangling electrical wire. But the way he holds the curious pipe seems almost too demonstrative not to have been posed. He will begin his preliminary studies for *Etant donnés* about a year later, although nothing in his studio gives that information away. Duchamp does, however, want you to see that little pipe. The picture, one of several taken in the artist’s 210 West 14th Street, New York studio in January 1945, is part of a photo shoot by photographer Percy Rainford taken at the behest of Frederick Kiesler who wanted images of Duchamp and his workspace to accompany the architect’s article on him in *View*.¹ A hand-drawn square surrounds the pipe in the resulting photograph, as if to suggest that it should be emphasized in the final printed layout. Whether the marking is in Duchamp’s hand or Kiesler’s (in whose archive the image ended up), the suggestion of emphasis, if it was that, was moot.² The photograph didn’t appear in the article and, instead, Kiesler chose a similar image *sans* pipe for his centerfold on the artist. The architect was more interested in the artist’s fascination with perspective, enigmatic mechanics, and his *Large Glass*

¹ Kiesler composed an elaborate centerfold triptych about Duchamp as his contribution to Charles Henri Ford’s avant-garde magazine, which had a special issue devoted to Duchamp: *View* vol. 5 no. 1, (March 1945). Duchamp himself designed the cover, several articles on the artist appeared on its pages, and Kiesler, for his part, used a combination of photomontage and the superimposition of Rainford’s commissioned images in order to create a layered combination of the *Large Glass* and its various elements projected onto the walls of Duchamp’s New York studio.

² Currently housed in the Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Foundation Archives in Vienna with notes, photographs, and other material connected to the architect’s *View* magazine article preparations.
anyway; thus Duchamp’s sly reference to a lavatory appliance never got the publicity he seems ready to have given it.

By the time the picture was taken, the first batch of the artist’s Boîte-en-valise had begun to circulate amongst friends, patrons, and interested institutions. The announcement it contained about Duchamp’s authorship of Fountain had thus also begun to make its rounds. The news didn’t hit like a bombshell; it was slow and trickling. Fountain’s appointment to the place in art history that it holds today was the result of innumerable small maneuvers that connected Duchamp to the industrial piece of plumbing that made him the “father” of the readymade forever after, including testing to see if anyone would notice something like it at all (in 1916) or would have it in their exhibition space (in 1917). Having it photographed and publishing the urinal’s image (both also in 1917), he finally signed for it (as R. Mutt had once signed for Duchamp) at the same moment that he miniaturized and reproduced it so that it appeared in his portable retrospective in 1938. After admitting (or publicizing) that he was Fountain’s “author,” another round of acts followed: helping the young Harriet and Sidney Janis to theorize the readymade in the first article to discuss it seriously (published in that 1945 issue of View where Duchamp with his little toilet pipe should have appeared as well), and signing and exhibiting an altogether new replacement urinal (bought for him at a Parisian flea market by Sidney Janis) in Janis’s New York gallery in 1950 and then showing the replacement urinal again in 1953. In 1963, he accepted that Swedish artist Ulf Linde make a replica for an exhibition on Duchamp in Stockholm, and finally, in

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3 In this same issue, Harriet and Sidney Janis’s article, “Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist,” the first published discussion of Duchamp’s readymades appears, see View 5, no. 1 [21 March 1945], 23.
4 I borrow this idea of “signing for” the work from Howard Singerman in his “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” October 101 (Summer 2002): 106.
1964, the original Stieglitz photograph served as the basis for the replication of the urinal in an official edition of eight. Its entrance into history was indeed hardly swift or readymade.

**MARGINAL ACTIVITIES**

With *Fountain* now firmly associated with its author, it became the most emblematic ambassador of the ideas for which the other members of the same category also stood. But if no readymade is more iconic than *Fountain* today, it is in no small part due to Duchamp’s elaborate efforts to assert its place in posterity. For no readymade was more *curated* than this one. And the 1945 studio photograph, in which Duchamp presents himself with a toilet pipe in hand, would have been, if it had appeared in print, one element of that larger endeavor.

Figure 4.2 [Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917/1964]

The demystification of artisthood is generally claimed to have been promulgated by the readymade—in its refusal to claim the artist as vessel of technical skill, craft, romantic vision, and authentic experience channeled into the making of a unique and auratic object. Yet this was not the result of the fact that Duchamp simply “chose” something and used the rest of his time, as he enjoyed asserting, merely being a “breather.” He replaced the creative and generative processes traditionally associated with the artist with a multitude of seemingly practical activities—administrating, archiving, curating, dealing, historicizing, publicizing, reproducing, etc.—that became themselves veritable artistic procedures; largely unnoticed or perhaps even taken to be excessively mundane in their day, these would gain phenomenal importance to the artistic
generation to follow him, a generation that, for its part, is said to have similarly “assumed the function of the dealer, curator, the critic—everything but the creative artist.”

This counter-conception of the artist formed the matrix for Duchamp’s unorthodox approach to art, focused on revealing the aesthetic and ideological fault lines of the institutions that governed it and leaving behind a legacy of radical questioning. Yet accounts of Duchamp, and indeed art history in general, have proven slow to know what exactly to do with activities that eschewed acting as things. Without the material sturdiness of an object, or even, alternatively, the spectularity or bodily-ness of something claimed as a performance, indeed without attempting to be recognized as art at all, Duchamp’s fugitive operations disavowed anything like medium-specificity. These activities—some of them resulting in what could be considered “works” under arrived conventions—were, as a consequence, either long ignored or inadequately analyzed, perhaps because of their ontologically liminal status: the creation of various discursive “manuals” for works, curated exhibitions, administration, organization of publicity, reproduction of miniature versions of his work and assembly of them into a traveling case, constitution of several art collections of his work, involvement in the display and renovation of a whole section of a museum, and, finally, the painstaking semi-posthumous insertion of his work in a museum.

Throughout my study, photography and the exhibition represent two axes along which Duchamp orders his thinking. He used photography and its logic of copying to displace the singular material existence of an artwork as the primary repository of

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5 This is a quote from Craig Owens about Sherrie Levine but could easily be the description of any number of other artists of the period, and certainly including those associated with Owens, “Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks,” Art in America 70, no. 6 (June 1982): 148. Cited in Howard Singerman, “Sherrie Levine’s Art History,” October 101 (July 2002): 98.
meaning and worth. But his was not exactly a pitting of the original *against* reproduction, but an inquiry into the economy of their relationship and the ways the elevation or denigration of each might shift meaning, reception, exhibition value, etc. His *Box of 1914* is, in many ways, the matrix. In 1913-14, after he had brought objects into his studio but before he had endeavored to have them “switch function” (by decision, speech act, or even curation), which is to say, before he began to unravel and disclose the institutional conditions for the work of art with the readymade, he replicated and disseminated his notes, setting foundations for his work in which questions of repetition, indexicality, and the testing of the apparatus around the work itself would be crucial. Consideration of reproduction in Duchamp’s work is thus here set against lengthy discussions of his involvement in exhibitions, which aim to take seriously what the artist used exhibitions for, which is to say, how he saw them participating in the construction of the items they presented, or indeed how he deployed them to articulate his own understanding of what an artwork, oeuvre, artist, or artistic autonomy could be. Consequently, it has been the attempt of this study to demonstrate the deep connections that bind the *Box of 1914* (and the related boxes that it spawned), the readymades, curated exhibitions, *Boîte-en-valise*, and finally, *Etant donnés* to an imbricated logic, one which values what surrounds the artwork as much as the artwork itself. And whereas *Etant donnés* has long been understood as the readymade’s *other*, the former’s highly worked manufacture, hyperrealism, and museum aspirations seeming utterly anathema to the authorless conceptual elegance of Duchamp’s selected industrial objects, the two projects are here interwoven in a reading that makes them pendants of the other, each bookending his career as an
artist deeply aware of the discursive, historic, administrative, institutional, and presentational mechanisms that condition art.

**His Dead End**

The temporal distance that separates us from *Etant donnés* today both allows and obliges us to take it seriously, as Duchamp clearly did. An anatomy of the work’s critical operations has been attempted here, but also, and precisely because, it is a work so much about how artworks are constructed in, and through, the mechanisms that are outside of them, this study has queried the ways in which it has been received. If I have wondered here why Duchamp’s last work was not contextualized among similarly critical interventions in the late 1960s or even the decades after, the question aims neither to establish influence nor to propose a revised genealogy. Instead one must ask what was at stake with regard to the neutralization of the critical agency of *Etant donnés*, and how might its particular methods and discomfiting result modify the way in which we understand what a critique of the institution in the postwar period was—and what it can perhaps still be. Following a lure, so many saw (or wanted to see) a bared sex at the center of Duchamp’s last work, and not the obscene spectacle of the museum infiltrated, its conventions of power and rule, ideological and economic investment exposed. *Etant donnés* was, quite simply, the reflexive culmination of a lifetime of institutional questioning, deliberately set within and working against the very structure of power that it sought to question. And yet, its critics will counter, the institution *still stands*—after its acceptance of the readymade and after one of the most singular and stubbornly unsettling works of all time quietly burrowed itself into its walls. But we, the viewers, are arguably
not quite the same after seeing it. The work’s allusive but insistent effect continues to inhere in its experience even to this day. And if there is one lesson to be learned from both the scathing dismissals and the awkward historical elisions, it is that Duchamp’s final work, for decades after its unveiling, managed to resist being fully acculturated, either by art history or the museum.

**Postscript**

*Etant donnés* was an end, in many senses of the word. Duchamp constructed his elaborate, final work over twenty years. The question one might rightly ask: How did he do it *in secret*? How did he manage to conceal the installation and his labor from the world? After all, dissimulating such a massive project for twenty years from friends and family, avoiding mention of it in interviews, and avoiding even any suspicion into what the artist was *actually* doing is no small undertaking. As we know, he managed this feat by keeping a second, secreted studio. It was a decoy—another exhibition of sorts. Let us return to them both for a moment: In one studio he was building his gangly nude and her brick house, while in the other he sat around, receiving friends, guests, groupies, chess mates. He gave interviews there. He told anyone who came around that he was doing nothing, simply breathing, that he had given up making art. Of course, this was evidently not true: even if one didn’t know about the secret project, Duchamp “released” all sorts of objects during those years; there were all those books, store windows, and exhibition designs, and many of those, in fact, point to ideas developed in *Etant donnés*. There were also the series of erotic objects derived directly from the parts or casts of the secret
installation, each enigmatic form serving as a key sent out into the world for an as-yet invisible door.

Figure 4.3 [Denise Browne Hare, Photographs of front door and neighboring door to Duchamp’s secret studio, ca. 1968]

Figure 4.4 [Denise Browne Hare, Photographs of Duchamp’s secret studio after his death, ca. 1968]

Still, anyone who came to the “public” studio saw few signs of production or artistic activity (as John Cage said, there was “nothing going on” there). Duchamp could simply have gotten rid of one of the two studios altogether and received visitors at home. But he wanted to have a public studio, just next door to the secret studio, in which he could show—literally exhibit—that he was doing nothing. Brian O’Doherty says it best when he notes: “The empty studio, site of production, is displayed as evidence of non-production, a mask for an activity in process elsewhere. A creative gesture—the invention of an empty studio—is presented as evidence of sterility, the paralysis of the creative act.”

Duchamp fooled them all. When he died, nearly no one knew that the sterility and “non-activity” of the official studio had long hidden the libidinous fecundity of a secret one—not his closest friends, not the interviewers, not even Arturo Schwarz, who was just then going to press with The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp.

*I myself will exhibit nothing*, Duchamp had once said, resolutely, defiantly, with a lifetime of curatorial involvement and participation in exhibitions seemingly betraying that declaration. And yet there, in the “invention of an empty studio” as a quasi-public

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6 John Cage noted: “[Duchamp] had two studios in New York, the one people knew about and the one next door to it, where he did his work, which no one knew about. That’s why people were able to visit his studio and see nothing going on. As he expressed later, it was a way of going underground,” in Moira Roth and William Roth, “John Cage on Marcel Duchamp: An Interview,” Art in America 61, n. 6 (November-December, 1973), 72-79. Reprinted in Masheck, Marcel Duchamp in Perspective, 151-61.


8 The story goes that when Schwarz learned of the posthumous piece, just as his monograph was going to print, he held the publication and asked the printer to add four pages to the end of the book so he could include a descriptive mention and photograph of the outer door of *Étant donnés.*
space, was his pendant statement to that of the spectacularly visual *Etant donnés* in the museum: The exhibition of nothing, like those apparently marginal activities that in their own way also looked like nothing at all, might, in fact, be the key to everything.
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