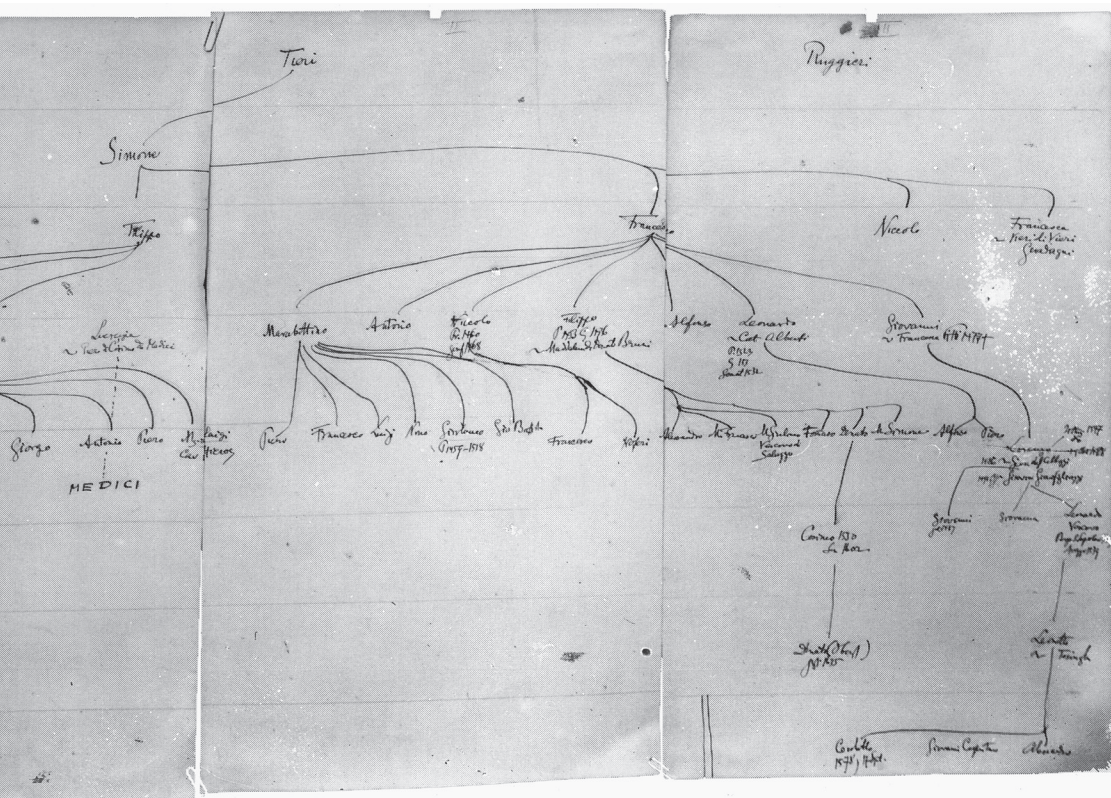


Visual Arrangements in Duchamp's *Étant donnés* and Warburg's *Mnemosyne*

Kieran Lyons



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United Kingdom

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k.lyons@1649.ndo.co.uk

In 1968, details began to emerge of an unknown, final work from Marcel Duchamp, posthumously installed in great secrecy at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Its long title in French, when translated read as: 'Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas ...' although it has come to be known, more simply, through its initial preposition as: 'Given' or in French as *Étant donnés*. Duchamp worked on this project in his studio between 1946 and 1966, finishing it in a room behind his sparsely furnished Eleventh Street, New York premises where he was commonly thought to pass his time engaged in less exacting pursuits. The surreptitious nature of the project provokes its own questions, which Michael R. Taylor's exhibition catalogue *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés* (2009) has gone a long way towards answering. The appearance of the work in 1968 however, has since drawn to it comparisons with a sexually motivated murder that took place in California in 1947 just after Duchamp began to work on the project and was about to start the first explicit body casts of Maria Martins, his model and adored lover; and so *Étant donnés* has acquired an uneasy association with the event, which subsequent scholarship has not entirely dismissed. Taylor convincingly demonstrates its particular absurdity, showing amongst other things that Duchamp was away, in France at the time. Nevertheless some of this awful pathos clings to *Étant donnés* contributing further to its brooding, compromising and rather creepy character. A year after Taylor's catalogue, in 2010, a very different, yet identically titled study, *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés* by Julian Haladyn, appeared in a perverse doubling of nomenclature offering a different approach, deriving from the 'archaeological' model first introduced by the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. In Haladyn's short book the work is examined for its moments of disruption and discontinuity, not only from the possibility of any conceivable precedence in the art world, but also for its relationship to the museum, which Haladyn interprets generically and in terms reminiscent of Foucault, as an institution of confinement – and therefore to be examined with due caution.

Approaching the installation now, as in 1968, the visitor is confronted with an ancient wooden door that seals off further progress and into which two peepholes have been drilled, through which a scene of uncompromising sexual display can be observed. Both Taylor and Haladyn devote considerable space to the circumstances imposed by Duchamp for viewing this display through the fixed viewpoint of the peepholes. These limit the work to an undeviating scrutiny, imposed on the viewer, eliminating the freedoms and possibilities that a shift of position or even a change of posture might bring.

Thirty years before the installation of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* in Philadelphia, Aby Warburg in Hamburg adopted an altogether different way of addressing his subject, involving an essentially mobile form of visual attention. The subject, his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1925 – 1929), became a four-

year deliberation on the genealogy of pictorial representations that connected the visual concerns of classical antiquity with subsequent art that continued through the middle ages and into the high renaissance. Warburg's medical condition, he was schizophrenically prone to inexplicable anxieties, lead this seemingly conventional research into alignments with behavioural psychology through the "*mnemic engram*", an encoding of consciousness first promoted by Richard Semon in 1921. The "*mnemic engram*" is understood to be a form of mimetic tracing that once encoded into the human nervous system encourages a 'moment of reflection' allowing a rational rather than instinctive response to the potentiality of danger – rather than a capitulation to the impulse of fleeing from it (Gombrich, 1984, p. 134). This theme of flight and stasis became an essential subtext of Warburg's project and so the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was also inflected with its own sense of alarm and disquiet. Had he not died at 63, the duration of this study might easily have extended to rival the eight years that Duchamp took over his most celebrated work 'The Bride stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even' (1915-1923), or perhaps even the twenty years that marked the production of *Étant donnés*. Warburg's approach however, unlike Duchamp's, was inclusive rather than inhibiting and was determined by his intention of giving coherence and pedigree to a range of associative connections where the theories he posited were based on relational rather than purely visual affinities – from which we might derive some social benefit and an understanding that goes beyond the remit of conventional art history.



Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp. *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...) 1946-1968. Section of exterior door with viewing peepholes. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of the Cassandra Foundation.

Aby Warburg, the eldest scion of a banking dynasty was as interested in the interconnections forged by business and commerce as he was by the congruencies in form and gesture that were the normal stock in trade of art history. And so, Warburg studied the banking details and financial involvements of businessmen in the fifteenth century, including the minutiae of mundane choices made on a daily basis, down to the selection and nature of garments and undergarments they wore on any given day. In short all aspects of quotidian activity would become a contributing factor of equal interest in Warburg's understanding of the renaissance masterpieces that this extensive network of links and associations generated. For Warburg, the fiscal interest extorted in the market place was as significant as the individual themes, narratives, and materials in the images the artists they commissioned depicted.

Warburg's relational approach, with his family money behind him, allowed him to amass a huge collection of images that supported his endeavour. These were stored as photographs, postcards and other mechanically printed paraphernalia in his research institute where they were assembled onto display panels to elucidate a continuity that would explain: "the very particular relationship of Italian Renaissance art to the art of classical antiquity" (Crimp, 1983, p. 43). His system and methods were admittedly idiosyncratic and frequently opaque to other observers but his intentions were unwaveringly devoted to a more complete understanding. By the time of his death Warburg was envisaging greater public engagement with his library and archive that had at its centre the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Duchamp's intentions for *Étant donnés* by contrast, seem to have been entirely hermetic, self-referential, alienating and visually pre-determined (Taylor, 2009, *passim*). Between them they help to typify a divergence of aim between extremes of academic and practical research methodologies that may be of interest – their similarities might also recommend further attention.

The direction of Warburg's project could be traced through a series of 79 large pin-boards upon which he fixed images in thematic arrangements that charted the passage of visual themes in western culture (Dillon, 2004). These images were prominently displayed in his library so that there might be an easy migration between textual sources from the books on the shelves and the dissemination of images between the photographs and other ephemera on the display panels. The gradually shifting character and essentially conditional nature of this mode of classification – seemingly confident yet methodologically tentative – anticipated further modifications as a result of the developing programme of his scholarship. These changes, involving the progressive addition and replacement of images, or perhaps more subtly in the reposition of pictures into different arrangements, perhaps only involving the movement of one closer towards the influence of the next, would be the natural result of insights gained through the gradual overlap and build-up of interconnections in the fixed ensembles. These ensembles were then re-fixed in photographic form anticipating an extended process where, subsequent fixings and re-fixings would occur over and over again. Warburg's death in 1929, long before the appearance of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, would seem to militate against any form of influence although the incubation period of Duchamp's work on the 'Large Glass' did begin in the early teens of the new century and so there may be some element of coincidence. Their shared propensity for

writing obscure memos relating to their internal thought processes on scraps of paper and then storing them for posterity, in Duchamp's case, photographically (Duchamp/ Sanouillet, 1973) suggests a further congruence of sorts.



Fig. 2. 'Action' and 'Sacrificial Dance' panels from the 'Ovid' exhibition. Reading room, Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg. 1927. © Warburg Institute.

Further attempts to link the two men become more tentative although Warburg's professional disinterest in modernism, would have received measured approval from Duchamp whose pronouncements on the debilitating effects of 'retinal', formalist art had appeared fairly regularly in print from 1915 onwards. Duchamp would, no doubt, have been interested in Warburg's desire to link recurring classical and mythic themes with their reinterpretation into later artistic periods – a process that he too had been engaged with in, for instance, the antecedents for the alchemical process of 'stripping of the bride', the subject of a drawing he made in 1912 leading to the development of the 'Large Glass', properly known through its arcane title 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even' (1915-1923). However, Duchamp tended to distance himself from these abstruse suggestions although a body of evidence seems to reveal a concordance with mid-sixteenth century alchemic literature (Golding, 1973). We cannot say at this remove, but perhaps in some vanished mnemosyne arrangement in his own dusty studio, Duchamp may well have charted the influence of these alchemical formulae into the genesis of his own practice.

For his part, Warburg's fascination with the consequences of communication, connectivity and of course travel would have found a counterpart in the physical exhilaration of Duchamp's journey, by automobile, across France in 1912 and he would have shared an intellectual correspondence with the extraordinary, visionary note that Duchamp wrote, marking the event

(Lyons, 2008). There is no record of them meeting, however. Warburg's anthropological studies in the pueblos of the American South West occurred almost twenty years before Duchamp got to New York in 1915, although Duchamp travelled through Germany in 1912, his route did not take him to Hamburg where Warburg was in the process of compiling his library and where his research institute would be established. He might well have encountered Warburg's work in the subsequent period of semi-cloistered research at the *Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève* in Paris in 1912 and 1913. However, as we have seen, the two men, by the end of their lives seem to have promulgated radically different modes of addressing the work they promoted; in Duchamp's case, the private, sexualised scoping of the object in *Étant donnés*; with Warburg, the diagrammatic *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a subtle, patient process of pinning and re-pinning of images that chart the lineages of classical themes in the hereditary of pre-modernist western art; mapped, positioned, repositioned and tentatively affirmed. With this affirmation he established the images that track the mythology of man away from the encodings of fear in the "*mnemic engram*" of his animal ancestry (Gombrich, 1984, p. 134).

For Duchamp, *Étant donnés* was essentially a personalisation and reinvigoration of the themes and subject matter of the 'Large Glass' a work that the art critic Leo Steinberg, in his 1968 lecture 'Other Criteria', described in terms of a shifting palimpsest of ideas: "no longer the analogue of a world perceived from an upright position, but a matrix of information conveniently placed in a vertical situation" (Steinberg, 1972, p. 85). Indeed, the 'Large Glass' was constructed, having been laid flat over wooden trestles, an arrangement that saw a thick layering of dust, accumulating to obscure the details of one pane of glass from the details of the other and combining their irreconcilable difference in this temporary homogenisation (Henderson, 1998, p. 118). The difference was evidenced in a shift in dimension between them; the lower pane in the installed version – dust having been removed – depicts the familiar world of three dimensional representation that is nevertheless discontinuous and incompatible with the upper pane that imagines a slice, as if from a microscope slide, of a world in four dimensions divorced from the terrestrial, three dimensional world beneath it.

The horizontal alignment of the work, flat on its trestles, during its process of mapping-out and laborious execution would allow Duchamp an overhead view and a sliding, shuffling form of selection that allowed him to position and reposition, adjust and readjust his images of unlikely objects and unorthodox operating systems before finalising and fixing them down into their final arrangement. In his succinct description of Duchamp's process for the 'Large Glass', Steinberg opens-up, for this reader at least, an insight into the physical articulation of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* through his discussion of what he would describe as the 'flat-bed' approach.

Leo Steinberg introduced the concept of the 'flat-bed' as way of comprehending the radical nature of Robert Rauschenberg's interventions into the visual art of the 20th century (Steinberg, 1975). Rauschenberg's method provides a different model of pictorial representation altogether, which while paradigmatically invoking Marcel Duchamp also gives us more to say in appraising Aby Warburg. Steinberg's claim is that before Rauschenberg, picture-making had always referred, no matter how obliquely, to a top and bottom of the picture thus the: "top of the picture cor-

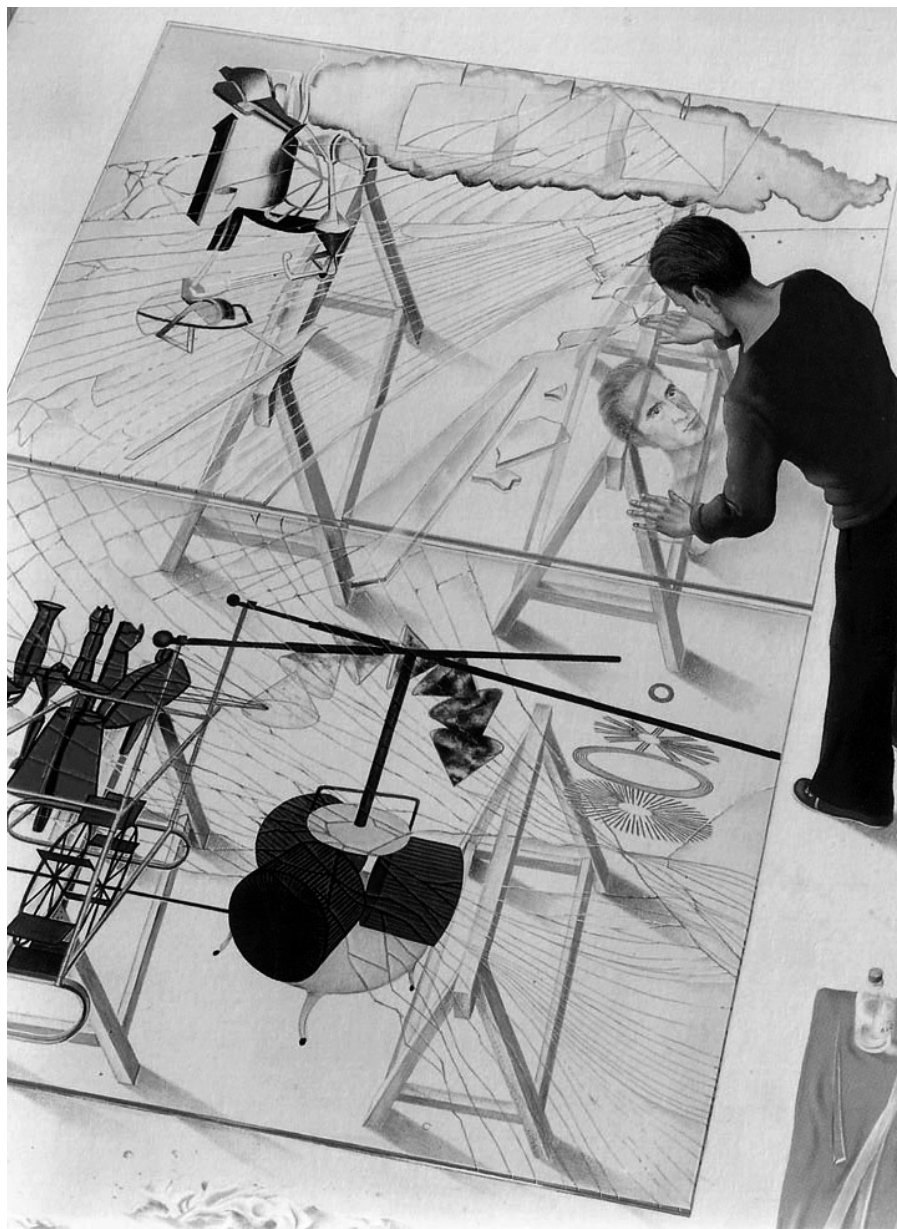


Fig. 3. André Raffray. *Marcel Duchamp repairing the 'Large Glass' in 1936*. Image no.10 from a series of 12 gouaches on the life of Marcel Duchamp. Centre Georges Pompidou. Paris. 1976-77.

responds to where we hold our heads aloft; while its lower edge gravitates to where we place our feet” (Steinberg, 1972, p. 82). With Rauschenberg’s work of the fifties and early sixties we can no longer be so sure, because he dismisses the up/down orientation of the picture plane in favour of the exploratory surface of the ‘flat-bed’ where images and objects from discontinuous states and time-zones jostle, collide, spread across and eventually coalesce as if they were objects floating on a flat surface, only to be dispersed and redistributed at the next impulse with a different overlapping of the same dislocated imagery: typically a selection of front-door keys, football players, army trucks, Rubens or Diego Velasquez, nudes, the American president and all caught in different orientations in an extended permutation of related works.



Fig. 4. Robert Rauschenberg. *Transom*. 1963.

The logic of this confluence of images, Steinberg claims, cannot be determined by approaching them as if they inhabited the narrative, upright picture plane. This insight no longer works in the comparison of subsequent paintings by Rauschenberg but when Steinberg made his case in 1968 the idea applied. The celebrated combine ‘Monogram’ of 1955-58 with its taxidermist’s angora goat seems to bear this out, as do others made at this time, but gradually Rauschenberg’s paintings and prints begin to look more stable and more at home on the wall than anywhere else. The exciting lack of orientation, the sense of being compelled across divergent currents begins to subside. Nevertheless, in viewing Warburg’s *Mnemosyne*, we feel the eddy from this form of turbulence as we give way to its different forces competing for our attention when (perhaps in the mantle of an early twentieth century German art historian, wearing thick woollen suits, shiny leather shoes) we visit the Institute, standing before the extensive ‘Atlas’ on Heilwigstrasse in 1929.

Leo Steinberg's theme was subsequently developed in 1980 by the critic Douglas Crimp in an essay for *October* magazine and in Hal Foster's 'Postmodern Culture', finally appearing in his own collection as the eponymously titled 'On the Museum's Ruins' in 1993. Crimp's point is that through the radical shift in approach to the process of arranging ideas across the visual field and in the demonstrable unconcern for logical continuity seen in Rauschenberg's work, we see a moment of disjuncture between modernism and postmodernism (1983). Steinberg introduces the term without necessarily anticipating the full extent of its subsequent impact on critical thought. Warburg would have had little time for this further development from nineteenth century practice although as has been shown, through a common interest in the potential and importance of an art of pioneering connectivity he might have had some common agreement with Marcel Duchamp. And so further links between them might be made.

The visitor's access to *Étant donné*s contradicts any expectation of being able to examine the work, anonymously, in the way that museums normally allow; (Haladyn, 2010) it leaves the viewer no alternative but to survey the work with the probability of becoming, unintentionally, a prey to the scrutiny of others at the same time. This uncomfortable scenario becomes exacerbated once the sexually explicit nature of the work, behind the door, is determined and with it the realisation of the disadvantage of being the viewer in this compromised position. Behind the viewer, the shadowy space is a sort of darkened vestibule where others will be waiting their turn to look – or more disturbingly – others who may have entered that space will be waiting, more simply, to scrutinise whoever is looking through the door, catching them while transfixed by the illuminated scene beyond it. The anonymity that the museum visitor enjoys is, in this way, replaced with a form of static complicity informed in surprise, shock and embarrassment leading to paranoia that invokes something of the stasis, so crucial to Warburg's understanding and dissemination, in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* of the distinction between the man and the wild things around him. In the wild state we spring away from potential threat and take flight. As he recorded in his cumulative panels in the Atlas we learn, gradually, to control this forceful imperative, we hold our nerve and take stock. We learn to look and assess and at this point it is worth turning to Ernst Gombrich who during his 1966 celebratory address at Warburg's hundredth anniversary put it succinctly this way:

The doctrine which sees the evolution of culture in terms of the conquest of fear not only offered insights into the psychological roots of science, but also appeared to be applicable to art. As a motto for 'fragments towards a psychological theory of art' Warburg wrote the sentence: 'You are alive but you do not harm me'; the image is alive yet banished into its own sphere; the artist creates distance. Warburg increasingly liked to describe this distance as the 'space for reflective thought' (*Denkraum der Besonnenheit*), because reflective thought alone can save us from unconsidered fears and restrain our instinctual reactions. Not only anxiety threatens this space for reflective thought; every passion, every instinctual impulse leads to immediate discharge in movement. Greed leads to grasping, fear to flight. Only reflection creates that interval between stimulus and action which distinguishes civilised man from creatures of instinct (Gombrich, 1984, p. 120).

Duchamp described “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, even”, a work of actual voyeurism, as a “delay in glass” (Duchamp/Sanouillet, 1973, p. 26) and we will conclude this paper by considering the situation of the naked mannequin on display just inside the door of *Étant donnés* who, aware of the presence of an intruder by a change in the light level coming through the peephole caused by something on the other side of the door, holds her ground – resists flight, engages the delay until the threat and the need for a response can be assessed. The conclusion this time is that: ‘You are alive but you do not harm me.’ And the sense of threat subsides; a moment of stasis allowing the memetic trace, Semon’s “*mnemic engrams*” to record their findings and re-encrypt the code that will organise and influence the next set of responses to sudden alarm. The visualisation of this impossibly complex internal process compelled Warburg towards his grand charting of the Mnemosyne project, now vanished.



Fig. 5. Viewer at the door of *Étant donnés*. Photo: Daniel Nester. <http://thememoiroffice.wordpress.com/>

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Tesi

Andrea
Giacomini / Giovanni
di Francesco / Giovanni
di Pietro 1874

Giuseppe
Michele
Pietro / Giovanni
1878

Felipe
S. 1875-1876
1875

Giacomini

San Francesco (1874) San Giovanni
1874 / 1875
1874-1875

Fig. 12. Kandelor

Fig. 13. Tronconi & Kandelor

Fig. 14