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ÉTANT DONNÉS: AN AFTERWORD

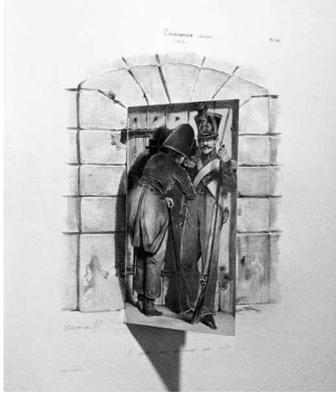
Jeff Wall describes in his lecture how he grew up in love with works of art and why the thought of participating—at the beginning of the 1970s—in Conceptual Art, the artistic movement of his own generation, was painful to him. He could not identify himself with a strategy aimed at invalidating the notion of the “work of art.” Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* is a model for Wall’s own well-considered escape from his dungeon of mimetic and artwork-related negation, an escape he initiated with *The Destroyed Room*, which also bore a strong relationship, in both concept and content, to Duchamp’s diorama.¹ *The Destroyed Room* symbolizes his own volte-face and venture into a new kind of classical, metaphorical imagery, although his “photographic panel paintings” have since then been concerned not just with the tradition of art and with its visually rhetorical questions. They also have an inward radiance that “illuminates” us, the viewers.

In his lecture, Jeff Wall stresses the fact that, with *Étant donnés*, Duchamp had returned to the canonical tradition of art history, seeking not only to reconnect the retina to the gray cells but also, through the exploration of certain traditions in visual art, to arrive at altogether

new formulations. Here we can also recognize Wall’s own artistic concept, which, for example, makes Édouard Castres’s monumental circular painting of the Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne—a work that depicts the internment and humiliation of the retreating French army under General Bourbaki in Switzerland—Wall’s starting point for a new work entitled *Restoration* (1993).

Édouard Castres’s cultural monument is also comparable, conceptually, with Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, although it is not the combination of two-dimensional representations (painting, photography) and solid objects (freight wagons, railroad tracks, twigs, female figure, gas lamp) to form a three-dimensional tableau that primarily links the two works together but rather the underlying themes of viewing and participating. In the case of Castres’s panorama, which in its entirety is arranged like a human eye, the viewer enters the center of the work by way of a staircase and functions, so to speak, as the nucleus, as the seeing pupil of the panorama. In the case of Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, the viewer first enters an empty room, where he is obliged to peep through two small holes in an old, solid oak door. In other words, the viewer plays in both cases a central, active part in the process of seeing.

Moreover, Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* was inspired in much the same way as many of Jeff Wall’s cinemato-



5 & 6 Michel Delaporte [sic], “Le cachot sera désormais une vérité!” (Jail will henceforth be a truth!), in *La Caricature* (Paris), no. 70, March 1, 1832, foldout lithograph, art collection of the University of Göttingen, both views photographed by Stefan Banz in the exhibition *Georg Büchner. Revolutionär mit Feder und Skalpell*, Mathildenhöhe Institute, Darmstadt, October 12, 2013.

graphic photographs. Gustave Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* (1866), for example, was unmistakably an important point of departure for Duchamp’s diorama.² And only recently did I come across two interesting works that to my knowledge have not yet been discussed with any reference to the genesis of Duchamp’s last great work.

The first work is a foldout lithograph entitled *Le cachot sera désormais une vérité!* (Jail will henceforth be a truth!, figs. 5 and 6), which was published in the French magazine *La Caricature* on March 1, 1832. Viewed historically, *La Caricature* was the first longstanding caricature magazine in France. It was published in Paris between the years of 1830 and 1835 by Charles Philippon. Each issue was supplemented with two lithographs. *La Caricature* came to be a polemical republican medium in the early July Monarchy and was finally banned in 1835. Its contributors included such famous artists as Grandville and Honoré Daumier. We may readily assume that Duchamp was familiar with this publication, not only because he worked for a time at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris and thus had access to the issues of the magazine, but also because he himself, as an impoverished artist, also published caricatures in the Parisian weekly *Le Courrier français*.

Consequently, *Le cachot sera désormais une vérité!* might indeed have directly inspired the spatial concept of Duchamp's *Étant donné*: a doorway and lintel of rough-hewn stone, an old, solid wooden door with a peephole, and behind it a chained and gagged woman.

The second significant work in the context of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donné* is *Landscape with Figures* (fig. 7), a small-format painting done by Louis Eilshemius (1864-1941) in 1919. Marcel Duchamp was an ardent admirer of his paintings, which he had discovered in 1917 in the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Grand Central Palace in New York, an exhibition for which he himself had submitted his readymade *Fountain* (fig. 1, p. 64) under the pseudonym of R. Mutt but had been refused by the hanging committee. Duchamp subsequently invited Eilshemius to exhibit together with him in the Salon des Indépendants in Paris. Duchamp even organized—three and seven years later, respectively—two solo exhibitions for this sensitive, dreamy, and extraordinary artist with the progressive Société Anonyme, an art society co-founded by Duchamp in New York. However, both exhibitions were torn to pieces by the critics. This discouraged the artist so much that he decided to give up painting for good. Duchamp, for



7 Louis Eilshemius, *Landscape with Figures*, oil on cardboard, 20 x 44.5 cm, 1919, private collection.

his part, thought highly of Eilshemius: “He was a true individualist as artists of our time should be, who never joined any group. This attitude is only one reason for his late recognition. He was a poet and painted like one, but his lyricism was not related to his time and expressed no definite period. He painted like a ‘Primitive’—but was not a primitive—and this is the origin of his tragedy.”⁴

Landscape with Figures is only one of Eilshemius’ countless paintings depicting naked nymphs in the midst of idyllic nature against the background of, in most cases, a babbling waterfall. In this painting there are even two waterfalls. While the nymph on the left stands in the water and dresses her hair, the one on the right reclines stiffly and unnaturally on a boulder in the brook. Like Duchamp’s reclining figure in *Étant donné*s, her left leg is bent and her left arm is raised demonstratively above her head. Here, however, the figure unmistakably seeks contact with the viewer.

NOTES:

¹ See Michael R. Taylor “Jeff Wall’s The Destroyed Room and Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donné*s,” in *Jeff Wall: The Crooked Path*, ed. Hans de Wolf (Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts, 2011), 46–47, and in his introduction of this volume, pp. 5–17.

² See Stefan Banz “Introduction” and “Paysage fautif: Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall,” in *Marcel Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall*, ed. Stefan Banz (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 9–13 and 26–57.

³ *La Caricature* was also well-known on account of Charles Philipon’s having been tried in court for lèse-majesté in 1832 and sentenced to imprisonment for several months. The magazine had published a drawing that showed Louis-Philippe, dressed as a mason, plastering over slogans in the rue du 29 juillet, the very slogans that had inspired the revolution that had put him on the throne. Philipon then drew a series of sketches in which the head of the monarch gradually metamorphosed into a pear. As the French word for pear—*poire*—can also mean “dunce” or “numbskull,” insult had now been added to injury. These so-called pear caricatures then became very popular in France, for a caricaturist could not be prosecuted for merely having depicted a pear, but every reader knew at once that the king was the butt of the joke. The French government ultimately sharpened the laws governing the press, and then, in 1835, banned the publication of caricatures altogether.

⁴ Marcel Duchamp, *Louis Eilshemius, 1864–1941. Painter, Writer, Poet, Musician*, 1943, quoted in Michel Sanouillet, *Marchand du sel. Écrits de Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1959), 127.

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