

Étant donnés (mini)

The museum, for which *Étant donnés* was imagined and into which the artist curated it, could be said to determine the piece, even as that work acts like a Trojan horse once inside.

Elena Filipovic, 'The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp'¹

Étant donnés (mini) is a response to Duchamp's final work, *Étant donnés* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas.*) Installed in the project space Disneyland Paris, the work closely references the composition of its namesake, but in miniature form. The iron clad double door of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* is in the miniature replaced with a small, 'medieval-style' garden ornament, akin to the arched holes used in cartoons to suggest the domestic dwelling of a mouse. A peep hole in the door reveals a reclining Minnie Mouse, her gloved hand holding up an LED lit oil lamp. In the distance one sees the waterfall of Splash Mountain, within a misty pine forest. The substitution of elements from Duchamp's diorama with store-bought stand-ins is used to construct an all-over miniature version of *Étant donnés*, embedded in what is the miniature, or at least characteristically small, exhibition space of Disneyland Paris. This text means to draw out connections between Duchamp's *Étant donnés* and my *Étant donnés (mini)*, using the former to ruminate on some of the thinking behind the latter.

In her book 'The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp', Elena Filipovic makes multiple arguments for why Duchamp's enigmatic final work has, in her view, been largely misunderstood, overlooked and dismissed by scholars and artists alike. One of the reasons for this, according to Filipovic, is the work's apparent return to the hand-made. Revealed to the public as a permanent installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1966, the work's "visceral thingness, its flimsy awkwardness and blatant constructedness"² could not be more different from the industrial finishes of minimalist sculpture, or the deadpan administrative aesthetics of Conceptual Art emerging at the time, not to mention Duchamp's earlier work displayed in the gallery adjacent. At the beginning of a six-year period that would soon be theorised as heralding the art object's 'dematerialisation', Duchamp had presented his most materialist work. For Filipovic, the poor reception of *Étant donnés* as an aberrational if not unfashionable return to the hand-made (a perception that lingers over fifty years on) misses the point of the work, which as we will see has more to do with the forest than the trees.

I must confess, this materialist reading of Duchamp's final work was significant to my thinking when conceiving of the miniature. I too had understood the cast female figure, the collaged pastoral backdrop and the hand coloured imagery of the diorama-like *Étant donnés* as something of a betrayal of the more hands-off, cerebral, lazy techniques natural to the readymade. While acknowledging that the reputation of Duchamp's readymades as unlaboured, mass-produced items is itself a little more complicated, (Helen Molesworth has

pointed out that ‘copies’ of Duchamp’s readymades were later produced at the artist’s request through artisanal processes in short-run editions), the constructed idyll that is *Étant donnés* nevertheless features a distinct lack of recognisable products of the modern world. No shovels, no urinals, no bicycle wheels, nothing selected and presented as-is, straight off the shelf. It was my thinking that to re-make *Étant donnés*, using *only* manufactured, purchasable items, would be something of a reversal: If *Étant donnés* signalled a turn away from the readymade, then the miniature would signal a turn back.

But is *Étant donnés* a turn away from the readymade? Perhaps to focus so exclusively on a literal interpretation of what can be seen through the peep holes, and then analysing each of the individual elements as if they were something like crossword puzzle clues, is to miss the greater context of the work’s siting inside of a Museum, and how it came to arrive there. The story is such: In the late 1940s, Duchamp is assigned the task of negotiating the donation of Walter and Louise Arensberg’s art collection to a public museum, a collection that included among other artist’s works, more than forty of his own. Among the institutions Duchamp met with was the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that in its promise to display the collection in its entirety for twenty-five years quickly became the front runner. Through many meetings and visits with the museum Duchamp became closely familiar with its architecture, and it is through access to the museum’s floor plans that Duchamp discovers gallery number 1759, a small, enclosed, dead-end space coming off of one of the main galleries. It’s from here that Duchamp then begins to envisage the permanent installation of *Étant donnés* in this space and works towards securing its inclusion as a condition of the Arensberg collection deal. In 1950 the collection’s donation to the museum is confirmed, followed by a period of preparation, transferal, and installation over multiple years. Soon after completing *Étant donnés* some years later, Duchamp invites the Museum’s Director and other trustees to a ‘private viewing’ of the work in his secret second studio in New York, greasing the wheels for the piece to later find its way in to the PMoA. By this time Duchamp was acutely aware 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.”³ Duchamp was of course successful in his persuasion.

And so while some theorists have linked the imagery of *Étant donnés* to *The Large Glass*, suggesting that the nude figure is in the fact the fallen Bride, Filipovic instead suggests that focusing on the work’s holistic form as a site-specific installation, or better yet an institutional intrusion, literally and administratively *embedded* in the Museum through the artist’s ‘wilful management’ of its own ‘rituals and procedures’, is more revealing of the work’s slippery and largely overlooked criticality. Filipovic explains that to best understand what Duchamp was getting at, we must first remind ourselves of what was at stake for the work of art and its relationship to the museum in the 1960s. In short, Greenberg’s treatise for the artwork as a totally autonomous material object, (for him best exemplified by painting), depended on the supposed neutral conditions of the white-walled museum for its power and status. The opposite is also true, in that the museum needed the autonomous artwork to be perceived as such, as something in and of itself, self-contained, uninfluenced and transhistorical, in order to preserve and uphold this air of unbiased neutrality. The readymade was of course preoccupied with this fallacy, and sought to expose the museum for what it is, an institution that sanctified objects into artworks according to a very particular, subjective

system of values and power relations. For Filipovic, this is precisely what *Étant donnés* achieves in spades. Not only does the work declare in a literal sense that it is not autonomous, reliant as it is on the museum's walls for its architectural framework, but the work also uniquely reveals through its very existence inside the museum, (having been cunningly negotiated in to being there by the artist himself) the fickle conditions under which artworks acquire institutional validation. With this in mind Filipovic returns to what is actually seen when looking at *Étant donnés*; a door that should lead us outside, but that actually leads into a strange threshold space, purportedly outside but quite obviously inside, a frame within a frame. The subject of *Étant donnés* is the museum itself.

This too is the endeavour of my work *Étant donnés (mini)*, 'the miniature', which it aims to address through some less obvious similarities to Duchamp's final work. In the case of the miniature, the 'museum' that houses the work, Disneyland Paris, is a small, former serviceperson's facility, a toilet for visiting tradespeople, located directly underneath my apartment. In May of 2020 I converted this space in to a white cube and began using it to host exhibitions. The space is largely unvisited with the exception of a photographer that documents the shows, and the exhibiting artists who sometimes assist me to hang the work. The space has no advertised opening hours, no public address, no openings, no sponsors, no stakeholders, no staff. And so without any conventional *official-ness*, no real authoritative, institutional power, the way that the objects placed within this renovated toilet cubicle come to be read and understood as artworks by an audience is largely through their imaging. Images of the exhibitions are distributed online through the 'museum's' webpage and Instagram account, and it is here that the artwork is digitally distributed. In this way 'Disneyland Paris' operates much like a brand, or watermark, and it is this brand that ultimately gives credence to the materials on display as art.

And so if we are to understand *Étant donnés* to be both in and about the museum, a position achieved through a certain self-referentiality to its material and immaterial particularities, the miniature similarly means to illuminate (and call in to question) the processes that enable its consecration as art, more specifically the roles of the image and of the brand. In replacing Duchamp's hand-made nude figure with a readymade alternative, an official Disney Minnie Mouse plush toy was chosen because of its obvious reference to the 'museum's' title – Disneyland Paris. With the exception of Mickey, Minnie is the purest embodiment of the Disneyland brand, like Ronald to McDonalds, and so my thinking was that her inclusion in the assemblage as something like a mascot would fold the work and the brand (the mechanism that enables the work to be *a work*) in on itself. This would to my mind take the self-referentiality of *Étant donnés* one step further, something like if Duchamp had branded the inner thigh of his reclining nude with the logo of the PMoA!

Another of Filipovic's theories for *Étant donnés*' apparently poor reception and under representation in Duchampian literature, is what she describes as photography's inadequacy to represent the experience of the work. It is thought that the multifaceted nature of experiencing *Étant donnés* first hand, as firstly a large wooden door, and secondly an elaborate scene accessed by peering through the door's peep holes, is difficult to sufficiently capture in image form. Ironically the supposed deficiency of the image runs counter to various aspects of the work; Duchamp after all went to grave efforts to control the viewing

conditions such that the scene can only be seen from one position, through the peep holes, disabling the viewer from getting further from or closer to it, nor view it from multiple vantages. Surely here Duchamp was pre-empting the work's dissemination as an image! Further to this, the artist left detailed instructions for precisely how to reconfigure the work for ideal documentation: "To take good coloured photos: 1st remove the black velvet that covers the rear of the door / 2nd / 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."⁴ Oddly enough, and testament to the claimed complicated relationship of *Étant donnés* to its photographic representation, the work did not exist as an image for nearly fifteen years after it opened to the public, due to strict rules put in place by the museum, which might explain its absence from commentary in the years that followed its unveiling.

For *Étant donnés (mini)*, the documentation of the work is tantamount to its completion, rather than simply a method for its recording. Its image is both *the* work, and a means to disseminate the work. Like Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, the way that the peep hole enables a controlled viewing from a single, fixed vantage point, from which one can see 'the scene' – which itself is in essence a static, three-dimensional picture– means to double-down on the institution's reliance on the image to consecrate this hodgepodge of items as art. While this is a condition common to all of the exhibitions at Disneyland Paris that preceded the installation of *Étant donnés (mini)*, the miniature captures this condition more explicitly. Different from the previous exhibitions held at Disneyland Paris, where the artworks are experienced as images, but are clearly not themselves images, *Étant donnés (mini)* is experienced exclusively, whether through reproduction or first hand –in image form.

Another way altogether to read *Étant donnés (mini)* is in relation to *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp's miniature, transportable museum. The items that are housed by the 'box in the suitcase' –that is the mini *Fountain*, the postcard sized *Nude Descending A Staircase*, the fold-out *Large Glass* and so on – function very much like merchandise for their well-known 'originals.' Produced in an edition of twenty between 1935 and 1940, and then as a later edition of six during the 50s and 60s, Duchamp's final work *Étant donnés* does not feature in the *Boîte-en-valise* project. And how could it? the work is as we've said concretely bound to a physical location, and made up of unique, hand-fabricated elements held together precariously by a complicated apparatus. And yet *Étant donnés (mini)* imagines this impossibility. Its parts –the figure, the waterfall, the lamp and so on– themselves already mass produced items of merchandise, are all purchasable, and would collectively fit comfortably into a suitcase to be transported and re-assembled elsewhere. Like a kit that you might buy from the museum gift shop, *Étant donnés (mini)* functions as a kind of merchandise for its namesake, as well as for the museum that houses it. Where the *Boîte-en-valise* project might be interpreted as a bold attempt by Duchamp to circumvent the political mechanisms of the museum by producing his own, *Étant donnés (mini)* instead reinforces the museum's relationship to the work it houses, even promotes it. We increasingly see this 'strategy' of artwork and institution amalgamation being used by many major museums globally, perhaps best exemplified by Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *America*, a fully functional 18 carat gold toilet. Commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum in 2016, Cattelan replaced one of the museum toilets with a gold replica, that visitors could then line-up to use. *America* was unsurprisingly a social media sensation and was visited by almost 3000 people a day in

2016/17. It also prompted (more) mainstream media attention when in 2017 museum director Nancy Spector offered to loan the work to the White House as a wry sledge of the Trump administration. In 2019 the work was moved from the Guggenheim to Blenheim Palace to be shown as part of a survey exhibition of Cattelan's works for the Blenheim Art Foundation, where the work was again made functional and 'interactive.' We might think of *America* as semi site-specific; plumbed to the host institution's infrastructure the work is embedded but at the same time impermanent, situated under a 'limited time only' type arrangement surely designed to maximise visitation. Where the physical permanence of *Étant donnés* was in its time a cunning technique used by Duchamp to secure the posterity of his final work in the museum, Cattelan instead employs impermanence and semi site-specificity to these same ends; the work is a temporary display, better yet a travelling *attraction* that can be re-sited for *any* museum. I would further suggest that given the institutional iconoclasm of Cattelan's practice more broadly, that this marketing strategy is not incidental to the work *America*, but part of it. In the same spirit of both *Boîte-en-valise* and *America*'s deployment of mobility and reproducibility, the miniature suggests taking *Étant donnés* 'on the road', accommodating and pre-empting a demand for its re-siting that may never arrive.

As in Filipovic's re-reading of *Étant donnés* which I have drawn on throughout this text, the various aspects of the work *Étant donnés (mini)* that I have outlined here –the brand, the image, merchandisability and so on– are not incidental or subordinate to some other hidden subject, but rather are the subject, best summarised as a probing of the work of art's relationship to the Institution. I'll end by finally re-assuring the reader that despite the work's apparently gleeful adoption of consumerist techniques, *Étant donnés (mini)* ultimately aims to present these techniques critically in a masochistic way –something like a miniature Trojan horse.

Postscript

In October of 2020, the Melbourne based art criticism publication 'Memo Review' reviewed an exhibition at Disneyland Paris by artist Isabella Darcy, titled *Luxury & Labour*.⁵ In it, critic Amelia Winata makes mention of the way the project space recalls Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, drawing a connection between the space's 'decrepit' door and Duchamp's installation, as well as the way that both *Étant donnés* and Disneyland Paris can only accommodate a single viewer at a time. Whether or not Winata's likening of Disneyland Paris to Duchamp's final work was a moment of serendipity, where unbeknown to the critic my artwork addressing these very similarities was secretly underway, *or* whether in fact her comparisons were the impetus for the artwork that would come, is left undisclosed. If we take the latter to be true, then this is but another example of the way that *Étant donnés (mini)* folds another of the institution's mechanisations in on itself; instead of valorising the work of the artist retrospectively, it having found its way inside the museum, the critic has instead preceded (if not superseded!) the artist in the formation of the work.

David Attwood

¹ Elena Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*, MIT Press, 2016, 259.

² Ibid, 165.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, 234.

⁵ Amelia Winata, 'Isabella Darcy: Luxury & Labour', *Memo Review*, 2020, <https://memoreview.net/blog/isabella-darcy-luxury-labour>.