

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Seven, Number Two

# A Contribution to the Study of the Fantasies of Sexual Perversion in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*

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Contestation makes me think of something that was invented one day, if my memory is right, by my (late) good friend, Marcel Duchamp: "the bachelor prepares his chocolate by himself." Watch out lest the demonstrator prepare his chocolate by himself (Lacan 1987: 118).

## The Fantasy of Viewing

It is only with hesitation that the experience of viewing Marcel Duchamp's final installation *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* or *Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas* (1946-66) is confessed to. Its first appearance is recollected with uncertainty. The analytic treatment of the subject is met by unmistakable resistance. Shame and a sense of guilt are perhaps more strongly excited in this artwork than when accounts are given of Duchamp's various other artistic projects.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is obvious: there is an explicitness about *Given* that exists nowhere else in the Duchampian oeuvre. As Carol James states:

The strangeness of *Étant donnés* might be called the shock of the literal. Upon first looking into it, the regardeur is confronted with a *mise à nu* which, despite

some previous hints, seems so different from the abstract *Bride*, the handwritten texts, and the readymades, which now by comparison seem all the more thingy, mechanical, impersonal. The scene is a jolt to all who are used to the esoteric, indifferent, chess-playing Duchamp. (James 1991: 284-285)

In contrast to Duchamp's previous abstractions – epitomized by *Nude Descending a Staircase* and the *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* or the *Large Glass*, where nothing resembling a bodily form is perceptible – with *Given* we are presented with a naturalistic nude female body, partially visible, laying on a bed of twigs with legs spread. This display is shameless in its exhibitionism, a literal bearing all for those who peep through the holes in Duchamp's door to see. Since this *mise à nu* appears to be without shame, confidently holding up a gas lamp – a conventional allegory of enlightenment and truth – it is we the viewers turned voyeurs that are incited to be embarrassed or ashamed for looking. Yet, in light of the explicit character of the work, much of what is perceived is a result of the fantasies of the viewer and not grounded in any physical element of the assemblage itself.

The concept of fantasy is one that has rarely been discussed in relation to Duchamp's work. If anything, most of his artistic projects actively problematize the process of fantasy formation as it relates to art and artistic display. For example, when Duchamp placed an everyday object, such as a urinal and a snow shovel, within the context of the museum as readymade works of art he made visible the fantastical process through which an object becomes 'art.' The readymade plays with what I term the museum-function, which refers to the process by which the museum as an institution frames object in a manner that encourages spectators to see them as what we call 'art.'<sup>2</sup> In this way, the judgment of viewers within a museum is staged as a specifically passive subjective act that the museum-function makes appear as an active role. This concept relates to Slavoj Žižek's notion of *interpassivity*, which he posits as the "other side" of interactivity: "Is not the necessary obverse of my interacting with the object instead of just passively following the show the situation in which the object itself takes from me, deprives me of, my own passive reaction of satisfaction...so that it is the object itself which 'enjoys the show' instead of me, relieving me of the superego duty to enjoy myself?" (Žižek 1997: 112). It is the interpassive relationship of the viewer to the museum context that is the basis of the paradox of Duchamp's readymades, which plays with this function in order to at once make us believe and question if a specific object *is* a work of art.

The implication of Duchamp's gesture of exhibiting mass-produced objects as artworks upon the role of the artist is profound. As Žižek states:

The underlying notion of Duchamp's elevation of an everyday common object into a work of art is that being a work of art is not an inherent property of the object. It is the artist himself who, by preempting the (or, rather, *any*) object and locating it at a certain place, makes it a work of art—being a work of art is not a question of “why” but “where.” (Žižek 2005: 312-313)

This issue of the “where” of art, according to Žižek, emerges out of Kazimir Malevich's isolation of the act of framing – or, as Kojin Karatani terms it, the *bracketing* – in *Black Square* (1915).<sup>3</sup> In modern culture, this frame of bracket is experienced most powerfully in and through the institution of the museum. Duchamp's entire practice as an artist, I would argue, is an engagement with the readymade qualities of art and the museum, exposing the underlying fantasies that viewers willingly engage with when taking on the role of artistic spectators. As Peter Bürger states, the readymade “lives by the context of the institution of art which it questions. It makes the functioning of the institution visible by its ironical attitude towards the viewer. He/She finds what he/she was looking for and feels at the same time duped” (Bürger 1989: 16). Duchamp's entire artistic practice in varying ways appears aimed at revealing the fantasies of viewing, rather than participating in the construction of artistic fantasies. However, an examination of Duchamp's staging of *Given* demonstrates his ability to construct, as well as disrupt, fantasy.

### **What is Fantasy?**

Before discussing *Given*, it is important to first establish a basic understanding of fantasy as a concept since, as Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis tell us, it is difficult “to avoid defining this word in term of what it is not, the world of reality” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1986: 6). Fantasy, according to Laplanche and Pontalis, can therefore only be defined by ironically referencing the reality that, often times, it opposes or stands in for; similar to Freud's discussion of female sexuality, fantasy exists only comparatively through what is previously defined as “reality.” Victor Burgin's definition in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* is equally convoluted; as he states, fantasy “is not to be defined simply as the mental image of a desired object; it involves the total context and activity in and through which the object may be attained.... Fantasy, then, is not simply a matter of summoning imaginary objects, it is a matter of staging, of *mise-en-scène*. That the subject may play more than one part in the staging of desire is shown in Freud's essay, “a child is being beaten”: a contribution to the study of the origin of sexual perversions” (Wright 1992: 85). There are two major elements of fantasy expressed in this definition that are of particular interest to my examination of *Given*. First, the matter of

staging or *mise-en-scène*, which give the desired object *total context and activity*. Second, the fact that subjects *may play more than one part in the staging of desire*.

Žižek extends the logic of this second element in *The Plague of Fantasies*, specifically in terms of the manner in which fantasy subverts standard oppositions of the subjective and objective; as he states:

fantasy is by definition not 'objective' (in the naïve sense of 'existing independently of the subject's perceptions'); however, it is not 'subjective' either (in the sense of being reduced to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions)... When, for example, the subject actually experiences a series of phantasmic formulations which interrelate as so many permutations of each other, this series is never complete: it is always as if the actually experienced series presents so many variations on some underlying 'fundamental' fantasy which is *never* actually experienced by the subject. (Žižek 1997: 119)<sup>4</sup>

In this formulation, Žižek defines fantasy as a series of experiences that are never fully complete or known to the subject, existing within the liminal space between subjective and objective realities – possibly pointing to *some underlying 'fundamental' fantasy* that the subject *never* experiences. Without an originary fantasy, subjects engage in this incomplete series from more than one subjective position, being forced to play, as it were, a number of parts in the staging of the desire or fantasy – again, without the possibility of an underlying objective or fundamental experience. This is precisely the subject position(s) that we as viewers are placed when experiencing *Given*, specifically in terms of the incomplete and interrelated *series of phantasmic formulations* that are variations on the underlying artistic fantasy that Duchamp conceived when constructing the assemblage, a fantasy that we can *never* actually experience because he specifically left this element out of the objective reality of the work. In addition, viewers can never physically engage with the objective construction or assemblage of *Given*, which is literally locked behind a door that cannot be opened, but instead can only subjectively experience the work as a series of incomplete visual perceptions and intuitions, or fantasies.

### **Gender, Sexuality and Absence**

In his construction of *Given*, Duchamp did not simply present viewers with a representational image of blatant sexuality involving the female body – a sight not uncommon within an institution of art – but instead staged the work as a series of fantasy constructions that viewers must negotiate through the act and process of viewing. Unlike a nude painting or sculpture that can be seen from any number of positions within the space of a gallery, the nude in *Given* is only

visible from a specific point of view in a specific location, the process of getting to that point being carefully arranged by Duchamp. Before you are able to look upon the illuminating interior of the assemblage, you must first enter a small-unlit room discreetly positioned at the back of the Duchamp gallery. This liminal room, a space that exists between the collection of Duchampian artifacts in the main gallery and *Given*, is completely empty and without light, the only illumination coming from the spaces to which it is connected. Accessing the assemblage, therefore, necessarily involves engaging in the total context and activity of entering this liminal room, in and through which the act of viewing is made possible.

Rosalind Krauss compares the subject position that Duchamp designates in *Given* with that of Jean-Paul Sartre's subject looking through a keyhole in a door in *Being and Nothingness*. In Sartre's text, he invites us to imagine a subject – identified as himself – that looks through a keyhole in a door; as he states:

This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way *known*; I *am my acts* and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification.... This means that behind the door a spectacle is presented as "to be seen," a conversation as "to be heard." The door, the keyhole are at once both instruments and obstacles; they are presented as "to be handled with care"; the keyhole is given as "to be looked at through close by and a little to the side," *etc.* Hence from this moment "I do what I have to do." No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a *given* on which a judgment can be brought to bear. (Sartre 1992: 347-348)

In this description, Sartre constructs a voyeuristic fantasy environment that is *given* specifically "to be seen" without consequences – similar to the collective alibi of viewing within the museum context. The fantasy for Sartre, however, is in the erotic staging or *mise-en-scène* of the act of peeping and does not involve what is actually seen through the keyhole, since inevitably he sees nothing. Except, with Sartre the production of the scene *is* the content. As a voyeur whose viewing position is carefully constructed through Duchamp's arrangement of *Given*, your experience of peeping through this particular *keyhole* differs from that of Sartre's in one crucial manner: *you see*. The content of this fantasy, which depends greatly upon *the way in which it is produced*, is primarily based within what is displayed, but the content displayed – a nude female with her legs spread – reciprocally affects the manner in which the staging is experienced. Unlike Sartre's voyeur who is unable to see beyond the keyhole, with *Given* we see the content of what is behind the door: we witness the hidden fantasy.

The first and most lasting visual impression that we are *given* is that of the nude. Our ability to view the assemblage is limited to the area visible through the two eyeholes and the aperture formed by a space broken in the brick wall that stands a short distance from the door. There is an obvious eroticism and sexuality to this image of a woman with her legs flung apart that relates to the peepshow-like environment that Duchamp has reconstructed or restaged with the context of the public space of an art museum. But, although we see the nude, along with the landscape in which she is resting and the gas lantern that she holds, our eyes are in fact drawn to a very specific point on the figure in the foreground. Beyond the realism of the figure in *Given* – as well as the strangeness of the fantasy environment in which we find her – the immediate image that awaits us on the other side of the door is the *female genital apparatus*. It is the experience of seeing this vision that viewers do not want to confess to. This display of sexuality, or more precisely sexual difference, is the root of viewers' discomfort and shock when experiencing *Given*.

Yet within this explicit *shock of the literal* – to return to James' term – staged within *Given*, there is a notable absence of a realistically depicted vagina. Within the relative realism of the assemblage, in which Duchamp produced a landscape diorama "filled with an atmospheric stagey light" like "the best Museums of Natural History provide for the animals and tribal folk, so 'naturally' posed," the woman's sex is shockingly unreal (Bronfen 2002: 69). But what is even more shocking in this scenario is the misrecognition or mistaking of this *female genital apparatus* as a realistic depiction of a vagina. In *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, Jean-François Lyotard describes the "vulva that you can't fail to notice – it's all you can see – is denuded of all hair...the erect large labia are open. They let us see not only the tumescent small labia but also the gaping orifice of the vagina and even the swollen vestibular bulbs around the lower commissure. The vulva looks up? Or, the vulva-full looks up?" (Lyotard 1990: 183). This almost anatomical articulation of the various components of the vagina is surprising for anyone who has physically seen the nude in *Given*, the vaginal area of which is visually suggestive and not much more. The interesting point here is not Duchamp's explicitness – which is misleading – but the manner in which the suggestive and vague folds representing the nudes vaginal area are seen by Lyotard as *realistic models of female sexual organs*. The absence of a realistically depicted vagina in *Given* is literally overlooked and in its place a fantastically envisioned provocative sexual organ *looks up*. Directly responding to Lyotard's imaginative description, Amelia Jones notes that the "not quite womanly body of the figure lying in the bed of twigs is uncanny precisely because she has *not* a vagina leading into her interior, her womb, but a shallow crevice with no exterior lips at all" (Jones 1994: 201).

At the centre of Duchamp's staging of *Given* is an absence, a non-vagina within an otherwise realistic fantasy construction of voyeuristic titillation, which brings into question the relationship between sexual difference and fantasy, specifically the staging of sexuality upon, as Freud consistently argues, the possibility of castration "evidenced by the sight of the female genital" (Freud 1997b: 188). Duchamp exaggerates the Freudian vision of the woman's vagina as an – in this case literalized – absence where sexual difference is defined. According to Freud, what a young girl sees when she encounters a male genital organ is her own lack, a perception based upon a visual comparison between the penis (as presence) and vagina (as absence). Freud thus predicates female sexuality on male sexuality, which is itself predicated on female sexuality: sexual differentiation perpetually located not in-itself but in the fantasy of itself.

### **Staging the Fantasy**

The fantasy constructions that are staged within *Given* conflate or exaggerate the conception of sexual differentiation, the result of which is a disruption and objectification of museum viewers' conventional subject positions. There are a number of fantasies being staged within the *mise-en-scène* of *Given*, the fantasy changing depending upon the specific subject position that the viewer adopts in order to be able to view the assemblage. "The sexuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer," Jacqueline Rose tells us in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, the "relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust" (Rose 2005: 227). Duchamp accentuates this fractured relationship between the viewer and the scene in *Given* by constructing a viewing apparatus – the peepshow-like room containing a door with holes to view the erotic scene – that makes spectators aware of their subjective position within this staged fantasy. This staging also forces viewers to occupy a number of subject positions in relation to the assemblage in order to physically and conceptually negotiate the specific viewing arrangements of *Given*. As a means of examining this multiple fractured subject position, I will loosely compare the three subject positions that Freud posits in "A Child is Being Beaten" with three generalized stages in the process of viewing *Given*.

1. The first phase occurs when you, the viewer, are standing at the back of the darkened liminal room watching another viewer peeping through the door, catching her/him in process of an erotic and/or confessional-like exchange: a private moment within a public context. In this

manner, you are positioned within the scene and staging of *Given*, but you can only look on as another viewer – whom you are envious of – engages with the work. This phase loosely coincides with the first phase of Freud's beating-fantasy, which he sums up with the phrase: "My father is beating the child *whom I hate*" (Freud 1997a: 103). If I were to reword this phrase, it would read: "My father (Duchamp) is visually assaulting the viewer *whom I hate* (because she/he is obstructing my ability to view)."

2. The second phase, which is the most important and traumatic, is when you get to peep through the door and view the artwork; here you are positioned at the focal point of the entire optical process, but by engaging in this voyeurism you become the viewer that is watched. This phase loosely coincides with Freud's second phase of the beating-fantasy: "*I am being beaten by my father*" (Freud 1997a: 104). If I reworked this phase it would read: "*I am being visually assaulted by my father* (Duchamp)."

Whereas this phase typically remains unconscious in Freud's theory – which is brought to light by the two conscious phases, even though this second phase can never actually be recounted – in this viewing process of *Given* this is the position of hyper-consciousness, when you become aware of the fact that you are peeping at a nude woman through a hole in the door within a darkened room. As Sartre states: "I see *myself* become *somebody* sees me" (Sartre 1992: 349). However, this phase is also the one that is typically repressed, replaced by the fantasy of what viewers project onto the absence of the *female genital apparatus*.

3. The third phase once more resembles the first, in that you, the viewer, are recounting your experience with *Given*, which you describe in terms of watching another viewer peeping through the door; as a retrospective position, the experience is generalized and you see yourself *probably looking on*.<sup>5</sup> This phase loosely coincides with the third phase of Freud's beating-fantasy, which is reflected in the more general and detached phrase: "A child is being beaten" (Freud, 1997a: 104). If I were to reword this phrase, it would read: "A viewer is being visually assaulted" – an art historical gaze that separates the experience of the work from the fantasy of that experience.

### **Learning 'how to desire'**

Although this comparison to Freud's multiple subject positions in relation to fantasy is, as I stated previously, loose and metaphorical, I believe it sheds significant light on *Given*



specifically in terms of the traumatic character of the fantasy that it stages – one based upon practices of viewing and/or voyeurism as they relate to the staging of sexuality and/or sexual difference. Through the exaggerated use of the female body that is the focus of *Given*, most prominently the abstracted absence or non-vagina of the nude, Duchamp constructs a fantasy that formulates viewers not only as voyeurs, but, more specifically, as objectified subjects within the fantasy of viewing. This voyeuristic fantasy of erotic and sexualized peeping is strictly implied, yet acutely experienced at the second phase of the viewing process when another viewer – who is in the first phase – catches you in the darkened liminal room as you peep through the door.

In fantasy, Laplanche and Pontalis state, the subject “appears caught up in the sequence of images.... As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1986: 26). Through the *sequence of images*, or more precisely the sequence of viewing positions, *Given* establishes the subjective presence of viewers within the staging of the work – specifically when they are caught peeping, or even imagine being caught – that at once makes them the subject of the fantasy and a *desubjectivized* object within the syntax of the assemblage. By peeping into the hidden spaces of *Given*, we are forced to construct a fantasy in which the privileged position of the *female genital apparatus*, rather than defining sexual difference, functions as a liminal site of absence that problematizes the possibility of making a clear distinction between the sexes. As a fantasy assemblage, *Given* represents an absolute splitting between the fantasy of sexual differentiation and the complex reality that is overlooked or obscured by the intangible and subjective qualities of fantasy. There is a never-ending structural and historical play between constructions of fantasy, which is in turn defined in terms of the real, and reality, which is experienced through the subjective fantasies that shape our definition of the real. In the fantasy-scene, Žižek informs us, “desire is not fulfilled, ‘satisfied’, but constituted (given its objects, and so on) – *through fantasy, we learn ‘how to desire’*” (Žižek 1999: 118). Ultimately, what *Given* postulates is a question of the origins of what we are being *given* – and possibly do not see.

## Notes

1. These four sentences are meant to mimic Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay “A Child is Being Beaten,” in which he writes: “It is only with hesitation that phantasy is confessed to. Its first appearance is recollected with uncertainty. The analytic treatment of the subject is met by

unmistakable resistance. Shame and a sense of guilt are perhaps more strongly excited in this connection than when similar accounts are given of memories of the beginning of sexual life various other artistic projects” (Freud 1997a: 97).

2. I first propose the concept of a museum-function in *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*, which, responding to Michel Foucault’s author-function, I describe as the functioning (ready-made) qualities of the museum as the structure that intrinsically creates art (Haladyn 2010: 22).

3. In fact, Žižek goes so far as to say that “there is no Duchamp without Malevich: only after art practice isolates the frame/place as such, emptied of all of its content, can one indulge in the ready-made procedure. Before Malevich, a urinal would have remained just a urinal, even if it was displayed in the most distinguished gallery” (Žižek 2005: 313).

4. Following this statement, Žižek draws a parenthetical connection between this conception of fantasy and Freud’s ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, specifically highlighting the manner in which “the two consciously experienced fantasies presuppose and thus relate to a third one,” which Freud states typically remains unconscious and is therefore never fully known by the subject, even though it is the basis of the other two (Žižek 1997: 119).

5. As Freud describes: “The figure of the child who is producing the beating-fantasy no longer appears in it. In reply to pressing inquiries the patients only declare: ‘I am probably looking on” (Freud 1997a: 104).

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