DUCHAMP’S LAST WORK
Nicolas Calas


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Etant Donnés: 1er la Chute d'Eau, 2e le Gas d'Eclairage (1946-66) is an erotic sculptural environment consisting of two parts: an external wooden door and an interior window-size version of a stage-set with a brick wall serving as the counterpart of a drawn stage curtain. Through the eye-level peepholes of the door and the gap of the brick wall the viewer sees a landscape of low hills against the horizon, trees, and a crude imitation of a water fountain. In the foreground lies the life-sized manikin of a naked woman, her thighs open wide and a lighted gas lamp in her raised left hand. Focus is on the female trunk and the exposed sex, as the extremities of the manikin’s legs and right arm are hidden by the brick wall while the head is covered by the hair of a wig from the neck up.

As Duchamp borrowed the title of the work straight from his notes for The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, he obviously intended to establish a correlation between his celebrated Large Glass and his last work. But what is the specific character of the affinity? The first link between the two is found in Duchamp’s drawing of the Large Glass (1939), which includes in both halves the outline of hills (collines in French). The baffling title of the drawing Cola Altëts in verbatim translation means “necks confined to bed.” Phonetically, the two words could be mistaken for causality (causalité), which raises the question: What is the cause-and-effect relationship between the Large Glass and Etant Donnés?

Duchamp in his notes in the Green Box calls the complicated machinery of the lower half of the Large Glass a “machine agricole,” implying that it is a machine made by Duchamp and not a machine du champ (of the field). From this it might be assumed that by including a landscape in a drawing of the Large Glass he was considering using mechanical devices in the work in progress. Such are the mechanical gas lamp held by the reclining manikin and the waterfall consisting of optical effects produced by a tin can rotated by a motor.

The missing link between cause and effects—consideration and facts—is covertly provided by the bizarre title of the drawing Cola Altëts. As the word col denotes a mountain cleft as well as a neck, I assume that in the title col could be a reference to the cleft of the mount of Venus, the female sex—a sex that is brazenly exposed by the naked woman with her head hidden from the col (neck) up while allée (lying) on a bed of faggots.

What still remains to be explained is why allëts is used as an attribute of col. The key is to be found in the ever-handly Petit Larousse Illustré. Under the word col this dictionary mentions the expression la hant au col and under hant says that this term denotes both the raffia cord for binding faggots and the rope for hanging criminals. In his notes for the Large Glass Duchamp suggested using une charnière (hinge) for the section of le femelle pendu (the hanging female, i.e., a faggot). But charnière recalls the charnier, “a place where cadavers are piled up” (Larousse).

The manikin with the covered head lying on a bed of unbound faggots holds in her hand a bec Auer, a gas lamp with a jet inside a funnel. In a 1966 etching entitled Bec Auer Duchamp represents a woman in a pose similar to that of the manikin. Phonetically, the French pronunciation of the German name Auer with eau (water) and air (air), while bec (beak) in the vernacular denotes the human mouth. The mouth that emits gassy air and water is the female sex. This interpretation is further reinforced by another Duchamp etching of the same time after Courbet in which femme courbée (bent-over woman) is exposing her sex to a falcon (faucon, Duchamp).

The female manikin, whose antecedents traceable back to le femelle pendu, lies in a field of Du-Champ back of a rustic house with a bolted dilapidated front door. Could Marcel Duchamp have had La Maison du Pendu (The House of the Hanged Man) of Cézanne in mind? The expression être condamné à la hant could be phonetically read to mean être condamné à l’art—in other words, to be condemned to art rather than to hanging. Under both the words hant and col the Larousse quotes the expression faire amende honorable (to make a honorable amends). Is this what Duchamp did when he borrowed the subject matter of a painter of champs (Cézanne) who is primarily known as the father of modern art? Is he, with Etant Donnés, making honorable amends to art, which he was supposed to have abandoned after he had stopped working on the Large Glass?

Etant Donnés is a riddle with the thematic structure of the Large Glass. As René Alleman, an authority on the occult, explains, a work of
modern art cannot be interpreted on the basis of traditional works, whether mythical or literary. In this view, to compare the Large Glass to The Penal Colony of the traditionalist Kafka, as did Michel Corrouges, is erroneous. Albine himself compares the vanguard writings of Raymond Roussel and the Large Glass to the structure of games.

In my opinion, the players of sophisticated games, like chess or bridge, view the limiting rules of the game as a challenge to their ingenuity, while the modern artist and poet challenges us by presenting us with language games without pre-established rules. As the knowledge of having played skilfully compensates for abiding by the rules, so the structuring of a new enigma is a challenge to the artist and the cracking of its code is for the viewer a liberation from the fetters of aesthetic abstraction.

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1. The interior of the Ensevin Dames cannot be photograph.

2. "The Lacrouze dit and copy all the so-called abstract objects, i.e. those which have no concrete referents."
