Duchamp's Doors and Windows

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Abstract
When thinking categorically about Marcel Duchamp's art, one is confronted with an apparent paradox: it simultaneously encourages and resists classification. The characteristic is pervasive. It is a quality found in the individual piece as well as in the collected œuvre. For, while Duchamp promoted the unique and inventive, while he abhorred routine, eschewed the habitual as taste making and subscribed to a philosophy of indifference, at the same time he also underscored the cumulative nature of his work. The Large Glass, the Boîte-en-valise[1], the Arensburg Collection itself: all consciously group Duchamp's works together and thereby encourage a context—a fabricated, artificial ground—against which the singular piece must be read. Duchamp packaged his production. He provided an artificial backdrop that insists on its own artificiality. This paradox is, in a sense, the essence of Duchamp's art.

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism
Duchamp's Doors and Windows

*Fresh Widow, Bagarre d’Austerlitz, Door: 11 rue Larrey, Gradiva door, Etant donnés*

“[...] starting with a sentence [...] he made a word game with kinds of parentheses. [...] His word play had a hidden meaning, [...] It was an obscurity of another order.” -Marcel Duchamp of Raymond Roussel

When thinking categorically about Marcel Duchamp’s art, one is confronted with an apparent paradox: it simultaneously encourages and resists classification. The characteristic is pervasive. It is a quality found in the individual piece as well as in the collected *œuvre*. For, while Duchamp promoted the unique and inventive, while he abhorred routine, eschewed the habitual as taste making and subscribed to a philosophy of indifference, at the same time he also underscored the cumulative nature of his work. *The Large Glass*, the *Boite-en-valise*[1], the Arensburg Collection itself: all consciously group Duchamp’s works together and thereby encourage a context—a fabricated, artificial ground—against which the singular piece must be read. Duchamp packaged his production. He provided an artificial backdrop that insists on its own artificiality. This paradox is, in a sense, the essence of Duchamp’s art.

[1] Boite-en-valise
I will examine this essence by bringing together five of Duchamp's works: Fresh Widow (1920), The Brawl at Austerlitz (1921), Door: rue Larrey (1927), the doors to Andre Breton's gallery 'Gràdiva' (1937), and the door of Étant donné (1946-66). The relationship between the five is obvious. Ostensibly each is either a door or a window. As such they rightfully belong in or of a wall.² The wall itself is a boundary. It separates one room from another, the interior from the exterior. In their occupation of the wall, doors and windows simultaneously form and dissolve a boundary. They transgress the boundary-building function of the wall by inhabiting it. This transgression is analogous to Duchamp’s paradoxical position on art. For Duchamp’s art seeks to throw such a priori thinking into question and does so by occupying the boundary itself. Thus these five ‘things’—as Duchamp preferred to call his works—are very conventional, physical manifestations of his artistic machination. They have the added advantage of possessing inherent traditional value. Everyday objects, they are charged with symbolic meaning, yet physically embody conventional thinking. Both the symbolic and the conventional imply a priori classifications of sorts and so provide Duchamp with the fundamental medium for his exploration.

Duchamp’s project, however, is broader in scope than attention to these particulars might imply. His enterprise is an attempt from within to undermine the institutionalization of art. The wall re-presents representation. When Duchamp investigates the occupation, definition and possible dissolution of the wall through windows and doors, analogically he engages in a critique of the ideology that underlies the institutionalization of art, the ideology of representation.

**Fresh Widow**

In his definitive Complete Works Arturo Schwarz refers to Duchamp's Fresh Widow of 1920 as "Semi-Ready-made: a miniature French window, 30 1/2" X 17 11/16", painted light green. The eight panes of glass are covered with black leather. The window is fixed onto a base[...], bearing, on the front, the following inscription applied in black paper-tape letters: FRESH WIDOW COPYRIGHT ROSE SELAVY 1920."² According to Schwarz this "Semi-Ready-made may be considered a three-dimensional pun (Fresh Widow = French Window). But the pun does not stop at the title of the item. It is extended from the verbal sphere to the plastic one. The polished black leather on the panels of the window induces
the spectator to believe that the room on which the window opens is in the dark [...].”

Robert Lebel said of *Fresh Widow* that with it Duchamp “had reached the limit of the unaesthetic, the useless, and the unjustifiable.” In reference to Lebel’s comment, Duchamp responded: “[...] it’s very pleasing as a formula [...] it’s very nice—I congratulate him!”

Duchamp himself said of the work: “Yes, ‘fresh’ widow, meaning ‘smart.’ [...] The combination amused me, with French window. I had the window made by a carpenter in New York. The little panes are covered with black leather, and would have to be shined every morning like a pair of shoes in order to shine like real panes. All these things had the same spirit.” *Fresh Widow* questions the notion of stasis in art, contrasting it with the temporal: ‘fresh,’ ‘widow,’ and ‘fresh widow’ are temporal conditions, and the window’s leather panes are to be polished daily.

Conventionally, a window is in the wall or part of the wall. But Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow* steps down from, or sits in front of, the wall, just far enough to assert its independence, not far enough for us to view behind it. As a ‘museum piece,’ *Fresh Widow* seems to consciously avoid classification, situating itself somewhere between painting and sculpture. It is clearly a three-dimensional object and sits on a base articulated as such and carrying the black lettering of its title, date and author. Its inert simplicity and confident independence assert undeniable presence. But it is also very much like a painting, and is currently hung amongst paintings. Its proximity to the wall, its flatness, one-sidedness and opaqueness encourage its reading as a painting. This reading is enhanced by a frame that entirely surrounds the would-be movable leaves of the ‘window.’ Conventionally, such a frame is found only on both sides and the top of a window; a sill completes the framing at the bottom, extending past the side frames.

Were *Fresh Widow* a painting, it would represent a ‘real’ window. Here, one might think of Seurat’s painting of a painting. Because the illusion of such an image is made utterly apparent, the subject of the ‘painting’ is illusionism. The work collapses to its material components—paint, frame, leather, display stand, title—underscoring the collusion behind illusion and implicating the viewer himself as prime conspirator.

As a three-dimensional object/sculpture, *Fresh Widow* takes on the characteristics of a miniature—a simulacrum of a window, a ‘sample’ produced at half-scale presumably to facilitate mobility. Despite its obvious sense of presence and its assertion of independence, it is ‘a
representation of.’ Indeed, its essence is representation; and as such it is a display of the idea of display.

*Fresh Widow* re-presents representation itself and does so in several ways. Windows are a boundary between outer and inner. They constitute a kind of projection screen onto which the outside world is cast for our understanding and visual consumption. That they might frame or serve to limit our visual comprehension allows them to metaphorically denote our necessarily always-incomplete knowledge of the world. In a sense, they symbolize a certain freedom—a view out, a new window on the world. But in another sense, they impose limitation. This condition is inherent in the Renaissance idea of ‘reality as viewed through a window,’ an idea which *Fresh Widow* critically re-presents. When we look through a window, do we see the space beyond or do we see only the glass on which a bi-dimensional image, a representation of all that lies behind it, appears? Apparently, we see the space beyond, but paradoxically our recordings of this space are bi-dimensional.

The window, typically a device for framing a subject in traditional two-dimensional art, here becomes not the frame but the subject itself. Duchamp inverts figure and ground. Though three-dimensional, *Fresh Widow* is flat, simple, reduced to base terms. It might have been presented in two-dimensions for it seems to avail itself of none of the opportunities for plastic expression inherent in a dimension of depth. Indeed, it denies depth. Even the black leather panes insist on the object’s presence. The window is not something we look through, but something we look at. Denying the window transmissivity, Duchamp alters its essence.

Finally, there is the copyright, the right to reproduce held by Rose Selavy, a fictitious character known to us only through representation, a re-presentation of Duchamp himself. By definition a copyright is “the exclusive, legally secured right to reproduce (as by writing or printing), publish, and sell the matter and form of a literary, musical, or artistic work (as by dramatizing, novelizing, performing or reciting in public, or filming) for a period in the U.S. of 28 years.” It differs from a patent, which is a right of exclusivity granted to an inventor. We presume *Fresh Widow* to be art—art whose authority lies not in its uniqueness or physical form, but in the careful contrivance of an idea. Are painting and sculpture traditionally considered copyrightable material? What is the domain of the copyright? How is it that we can assign rights to an idea? By signing the piece, Duchamp problematized its categorization. Each question uncovers an aspect of representation typically left cloaked.
Bagarre d'Austerlitz

In Paris, in 1921, as he himself later recalled, Duchamp "had another small window made, quite different from [Fresh Widow], with a brick wall. I called it The Brawl at Austerlitz in French Bagarre d'Austerlitz which is a simple alliteration on Gare d'Austerlitz, an important railroad station in Paris."9 [3]. Schwarz describes this work as, "A miniature window made by a carpenter following Duchamp's instructions."

His elaboration on the piece is short. It is, he writes, "A variation on the theme of Fresh Widow [...] again with a pun in the title." The piece is approximately two feet high by one foot wide and two and one-half inches thick. It is signed on one side: 'Marcel Duchamp;' on the other: ‘Rrose Sélavy/Paris 1921.’ Schwarz also notes: "back painted in imitation brickwork, the front painted gray."10 White glazier’s marks appear on the glass like the figure ‘8.’

With Brawl at Austerlitz—the title refers to the famous Battle of Austerlitz fought by Napoleon against the allied forces of Austria and Russia in Moravia on December 2, 1805—Duchamp presents us with a condition of permanent argument. Like Fresh Widow the piece is three dimensional, but unlike the earlier piece, it's to be viewed from two sides. We assume an inside and an outside. Unlike Fresh Widow, its literal subject is, one suspects, not the window but the wall. The window is transparent, but serves as a kind of billboard presenting us with a sign, the glazier's '8,' a symbol that adds a temporal dimension to this work. This mark designates a particular moment in time—the moment of completion, a fresh window. A coded message, the '8'-mark makes painting into a kind of writing encouraging us to read the imitation brickwork as also coded, and ultimately even to read in a similar way the paint on the wood window frame. Our attention is drawn to the spectral surface, to the ‘infrathin,’ the superficial. Only through this surface, this outermost layering, are we informed. All else is mere structural prop for this guise. Duchamp presents reality itself as coded and in so doing confronts us with our biases. "I was endeavoring to establish myself as far as possible from 'pleasing' and 'attractive' physical paintings," says Duchamp, "That extreme was seen as literary."11
Door: 11 rue Larry

Of all Duchamp’s ‘things,’ nothing seems as witty as the door he designed for his Paris apartment at 11 rue Larry in 1927 [4]. The door itself is a conventional wood door about two feet wide and a little over seven feet high. Hinged on a jamb shared by two openings at right angles to one another, the door serves two thresholds (and three rooms) at once. It is not simply useful; it exudes functionality. Duchamp explained: “In Paris I was living in a very tiny apartment. To take full advantage of the meagre space, I thought to make use of a single door which would close alternatively on two jamb-linings placed at right angles. I showed it to some friends and commented that the proverb ‘A door must be either opened or closed’ was thus caught in flagrante delicto for inexactitude. But people have forgotten the practical reason that dictated the necessity of this measure and they only think of it as a Dada provocation.”12 There is concision and economy of gesture in Duchamp’s effort. He creates with an act of elimination. Where once there were two doors, now there is one. Like Bagarre d’Austerlitz it is a gesture that presents absence, but it does so by subtraction as opposed to the additive superimposition of that earlier work.

With his door at 11 rue Larrey, Duchamp did not do away with the traditional door and frame. What he countered, he countered with the conventional. He re-presented traditional artifacts. In them resides traditional thinking. Like the body cast, the fingerprint, the photographic negative, the door is an index of reality. It is a part of our everyday world. Reframing converts it to a coded message.

Duchamp’s door at 11 rue Larrey provided an escape from the tyranny of stale ideas and overbearing classifications. In this it closely parallels the ‘circular binding’ Duchamp designed for a book in which the end is introduction to the beginning, and where the reader never
quantitatively progresses through the book. A paradox, it resembles Duchamp's verbal puns and might be thought of as a physical manifestation of his stated position: "I don't believe in positions, therefore when I commit to one, I attenuate it by irony or sarcasm."

The door as first conceived in Duchamp's apartment had use value. It economically fulfilled real requirements. Its wit had functional purpose. It was an operation. It literally 'worked' and did so in space and time. It was visceral and empathic, and when operated, the operator moved with it. But it was removed from 11 rue Larry to become a museum piece—Door: 11, rue Larrey. Museumizing stripped the door of its essential feature, function. In its re-presented form, it relies on narrative to complete its meaning.

**Gradiva door**

In 1937 Duchamp designed a door for André Breton's gallery *Gradiva* at 31 Rue de Seine, Paris [5]. Breton named the gallery after the title of a novel by W. Jensen. According to Schwarz, the novel "included fictitious dreams [and] Freud found in these dreams a confirmation of the correctness of his method of dream analysis."13 Schwarz goes on to say that "Duchamp designed the entrance to the gallery, cutting in the glass door the silhouette of a couple entering the gallery hand in hand (a reminiscence of Magritte). The item was very fragile. When Gradiva closed down, the door was stored by Charles Ratton, a friend and a dealer in primitive art. About eighteen months later Duchamp called on Ratton with Breton and asked that the door be destroyed."14

Like *Fresh Widow*, the Gradiva door is an appropriation of an 'art idea.' Whereas *Fresh Widow* might be seen as re-presenting, or at least referencing, the Renaissance 'view,' the Gradiva door appropriated the already appropriated. It re-presented and in doing so transformed again the ideas of Magritte, which arguably are a two-dimensionalization of Duchamp's three-dimensional take on Renaissance windows. In a sense then Duchamp framed the double frame. As with *Fresh Widow*, the Gradiva door was a three-dimensional manifestation of a two-dimensional illustration of the third dimension. It was later transformed back to a bi-dimensional image—converted to the cover of the 'Doors' catalogue. In the sixties, the door was reconstructed in plastic. As simulacrum, this plastic door is a representation of the framing of the double frame.
Schwarz’s description, “the silhouette of a couple entering the gallery hand in hand,” is curious for, in fact, no hands appear in the photographs of the door. Rather the ‘couple’—others have described the shape as “a pair of lovers”15—appear melded together but perhaps not amorphous. As a transparent cut-out of a translucent (?) door, and as a figure-ground reversal that frames both the gallery’s patrons and the street beyond, the ‘illustration’ is surely “a reminiscence of Magritte.”[6] But as pure shape, the ‘couple’ resembles the subjects of two Seurat crayon drawings [7]. In both of these drawings, one figure is considerably darker, more clearly delineated than the other. The woman would seem to be dancing with a man, but the male figure fades away at the bottom suggesting its fabrication from an orchestrated accretion of the scratched lines that envelope it. In the other drawing, the lighter figure appears as a shadow of the darker one—so dark it seems almost a void. This might account for the unusual height and bulk of the larger ‘figure’ in the Gradiva door. The smaller figure appears to be life-size.

[6] La réponse imprévue

[7] At Twilight
Duchamp’s final door is only a part of his masterwork *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau, 2° le gaz d’éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) begun in 1946 and completed in 1966. The door of *Etant donnés* is a fragment of a larger door-gate found by Duchamp in Spain [8]. In Duchamp’s installation, the wood door is mounted on concealed hinges fastened to a track, permitting the door to slide open. This opening allows only for special access—including photographic—to the ‘interior’ of *Etant donnés*. Normally the door functions more as a wall with peep holes. It permits a restricted view while preventing access to the interior space. *Etant donnés* is located in the remote wall of a small, private room adjacent to and entered through the large Duchamp gallery in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As one enters the room, the door appears as a ‘boarding up’ of a dimly lit arched opening in the far wall. Two holes exist in the door at about eye level.

*Two* holes: the duality is important. It is a door that mimics our own structure. The holes in the door are like the holes in our skull. The gesture recalls Brassai’s *Troglodyte* (1936), a photograph of a cave entrance taken from the inside looking out [?]. In this image the dual openings are eerily reminiscent of the openings in the skull, the lens-less apertures through which we view the world. Through mimicry Duchamp calls attention to our own physical construct, our own bodily frame, a frame we carry with us always. We cannot get outside ourselves. We are made to realize our own biases, our personal ‘point of view,’ a position we can never escape.

When we look through these holes, we see another frame. The frame is a masonry wall from which a few bricks have been removed to provide a view. The view beyond the brick wall is of a nude in a provocative position. The double frame prevents us from seeing the face. We want to
shift our position, to physically jockey for a better angle. Repositioning, however, is impossible. The dual openings, our only access to this private viewing, are fixed and immovable. The frame seems intolerable.

Looking through the holes, we see ‘real’ three-dimensional space. Unable to alter our view, however, we cannot verify that what we see is really real. Indeed, intuitively one senses something construed and artificial about the view. In fact, it is a highly contrived false perspective, but our perceptive faculties deny us knowledge of that. What we do understand, if only ‘sensationally,’ is that an ‘infrathin’ image of a three-dimensional construct is seemingly being projected onto our two-dimensional mental ‘screens.’ The sensation is uncanny, and inescapable. Seemingly reversing his Gradiva door position, with Etant donnés Duchamp underscores the mental recording of three-dimensional space in two-dimensional format. The visceral and the retinal act in tandem.

Etant donnés is democratic. Everyone is offered the same view. Yet only one person can see the ‘Etant donnés’ view at any given time: a private viewing of private parts. The act is ritualistic, and as such the antithesis of the democratic. Like much of Duchamp's work, the piece simultaneously exudes contradictory values: exhibition and cult at one and the same time.

With Etant donnés, as with many of his works, Duchamp created a double frame. We peep through its two holes assuming the posture of a voyeur and become acutely self-conscious. Our private viewing is itself on display. We are a part of the exhibit—watched by all who wait to see what we are seeing. As they observe the observer, those waiting observe themselves observing. In role reversals typical of Duchamp, figure becomes ground and ground becomes figure. The museum itself is framed. Its institutionalization of the view is underscored. "It is the onlooker who makes the museum, who provides the elements of the museum," Duchamp once mused, and then asked rhetorically, "Is the museum the final form of comprehension, of judgement?"

Re-Presenting Representation
Duchamp re-presents representation. He arrests the act of delimitation, altering boundaries and underscoring the artificiality of imposed limitations by artificially imposing new limitations. His trajectory is all encompassing and telescopes, for its logic suggests that at any moment another frame might reframe the framed.
Duchamp devised many strategies for the presentation of representation: figure-ground reversal, the conjoining of different ‘worlds’ of thought, transformation from one medium to another, surface emphasis as a means of ‘retinal’ dissolution, balancing about zero. Doors and windows provided ‘real life’ parallels of a condition of simultaneous separation and conjunction that such strategies underscored. To recognize these strategies is perhaps to take issue with one of Duchamp’s most celebrated disciples, Jasper Johns. Johns viewed Duchamp’s art as a “persistent attempt to destroy frames of reference.”

A frame of reference is a set of presuppositions that constrain or refrain one in some way. It is a context or viewpoint or system of thinking. Duchamp does not destroy, but rather employs the frame of reference. Our biases, our viewpoints make his ‘things’ work. Each strategy deployed by Duchamp depends intrinsically on such frames of reference and their collision with other frames.

It was Duchamp’s unique strength to economically invoke systems of reference that combat one another and yet never manifest themselves physically. We understand them to be our own mental constructs, our cultural baggage, our biases, and so begin to understand our values as being fabricated from the outside, as constructs which might easily be dismantled. The non-presence of these constructs prevents us from assaulting them directly.

So it might be said that Duchamp assists us in our systematic thinking while at the same time reminding us that such was not his way of thinking. A system is promoted, but always conjoined with its anti-system. Because this occurs habitually, we might reasonably consider it to be Duchamp’s style—a style of thinking that exposes the fallacy of stylistic thought, an “obscurity of another order.”

Duchamp created many door-like and window-like works not discussed here. For instance, he designed a book-binding for Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* that is like a hinge or a door. His *Large Glass* could be thought of as a double-hung, stained-glass window. There are, in addition, shop windows, display stands for a Surrealist exhibition in the form of revolving doors, and the 1941 *Boîte-en-valise*—representations of his better known works of art in miniatures, framed and folded into a mobile display that neatly fits into a briefcase.


Pierre Cabanne, op. cit: 66.

Ibid.

Ibid.

*Fresh Widow* is in the New York Museum of Modern Art's collection and is displayed—or at least it was displayed the last time I looked—in a location appropriate to the time of its creation and to its 'type'. It is (was) hung on a wall not unlike the rather traditionally crafted paintings that surround(ed) it.

'Modern' architects constantly combated such limitations, insisting on the freedom expressed in panoramic views and paying the resultant high price of over-exposure. The same might be said of doors as of windows. With modern architecture doors lost their frames and became wall openings—pivoting, sliding, tracking.


Quoted in Arturo Schwarz, op. cit: *


Quoted in Arturo Schwarz, op. cit: 497.


Ibid: 505.

d'Hamoncourt and McShine, op. cit: 304.

This posture is portrayed in Duchamp's etching *Morceaux choisis d'après Courbet* from March 1968 showing a falcon observing a representation of Courbet's *Woman with White Stockings* depicting a girl dis-robing.

Pierre Cabanne, op. cit: 70.

Pierre Cabanne, op. cit: 110.
2. *Fresh Widow*, ibid. p 127
4. *Door: 11 rue Larry*, ibid., p301
5. *Gradiva Door*, ibid., p305, fig. 157