

Penelope Haralambidou

Given: The Corridor, the Tower and the Fall...

Between 1946 and 1966, after convincingly persuading everyone he had abandoned art for chess, Marcel Duchamp worked on a major final piece in complete secrecy. Just before his death in 1968, Duchamp arranged for the piece to be permanently installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art under strict regulations: it was not to be photographed for fifteen years, and no one, not even the museum curator, was allowed to look at it from a position other than the one carefully designed by Duchamp. Standing in front of an old weathered door in a darkened, empty room, the viewer engages through two peepholes with a concealed pornographic scene: a recumbent, faceless, female nude, holding a gas lamp and submerged in twigs in the open landscape bathed in light, where a waterfall silently glitters. Defying traditional definitions of painting or sculpture Duchamp's enigmatic final work is an assemblage of elements, a carefully constructed diorama, with an equally enigmatic title: *Etant Donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* (*Given: 1st the waterfall, 2nd the illuminating gas...*).¹ The title derives from an earlier note by Duchamp:

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Given* throughout this book for consistency.

Preface

Given 1 the waterfall
 2 the illuminating gas

Determine the setting for an instant Pause (or allegorical appearance), of a succession of a set of phenomena seeming to necessitate each other according to laws, in order to isolate, the sign of accordance between this Pause (open to all countless eccentricities), on one hand, and a choice of possibilities legitimised by these laws (and also causing them), on the other.²

² Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe: Ecrits*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, Paris: Flammarion, 1994, pp. 43–4. My translation of the French.

³ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1965, p. 2.

So, *Given* is perhaps Duchamp's attempt to determine the setting for such 'an instant Pause' or 'allegorical appearance'. Angus Fletcher in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, asserts that in the simplest terms allegory says one thing and means another.³ Deriving from the Greek *allos*, other, and *agoria*, speaking, it signifies a doubleness of intention that requires interpretation. Accordingly, *Given's* 'allegorical appearance' is a pornographic image that says one thing and means another. The title reads as a mathematical problem or a riddle inviting interpretation by the viewer. Furthermore, the uncanny atmosphere and stillness of the nude body resemble a crime scene under forensic examination. Whether an

allegory, mathematical problem or detective mystery, Duchamp's piece confronts the viewer with an enigma. What is the hidden meaning behind the allegorical setting of *Given*?

This exhibition of drawings, part of my wider research on architectural representation, is also a response to Duchamp's call for the interpretation of *Given*.⁴ The research is primarily conducted through drawing and *The Fall*, the design of an imaginary building aimed to critically analyse Duchamp's allegorical work, is also an allegory.⁵

My study takes as its starting point a reconsideration of architectural representation, which I see as closely connected with the Renaissance invention of linear perspective and founded on a simplistic geometric model of vision: a flat plane intersecting the monocular visual pyramid. Due to the overpowering simplicity of linear perspective, the 'other' eye has been overlooked. However, binocular disparity proposes an alternative understanding of vision: a visual schema expanding beyond the flat intersecting planes of Cartesian space and best conceptualised as a gas or a fluid in motion.⁶ A grasping of visual space beyond linear perspective able to describe this alternative schema became the main objective of the research and Duchamp's term 'blossoming' came to suggest the passing from the flat plane into a dispersal of particles.⁷

The allegorical narrative of *The Fall* sets the parameters for a research method and defines the central hypothesis of the study. It describes an imaginary building linking Duchamp's *Given* to Leonardo da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1507. One of the riddles connected with Leonardo's portrait is the identity of the sitter. A similar secrecy veils the identity of the female nude in *Given*. In *The Fall*, the two enigmatic figures merge, condemned to share the same lost identity. *Lady on a Balcony*, a less known title for *The Mona Lisa*, suggests that the female figure sits on the balcony of what might be a tower overlooking a mysterious landscape. In *Given*, the female nude observed through the door of a backyard lies submerged in a similar landscape. In my design, the two locations converge at the waterfall on the right side of both images. What we see is the same landscape from two different viewpoints; the change of position, which also causes the undressing of the woman, results from her fall from the balcony to the backyard.

The project's architectural structure occupies the space hidden behind the figure in the portrait, a void created by the visual shadow of *Mona Lisa*. It comprises the tower supporting the balcony, which joins to a long corridor traversing the void and leading to the view from the backyard. After the fall, the female figure walks through the corridor and climbs the staircase in the tower to assume the original position, only to fall into the landscape again in a repeated cycle of uninhibited falling. *The Fall* is the design of a composite building, a house for the female protagonist, comprising the linear architecture framing her pedestrian journey, the pictorial garden of the cut-out landscape, and the sinuous trajectory of her fall. Therefore, the allegorical hypothesis of the research suggests that the appearance of the nude in *Given* is the result of *Mona Lisa*'s fall from her balcony into the landscape. During the fall she undergoes a

4 See Penelope Haralambidou, 'The Blossoming of Perspective: An Investigation of Spatial Representation', PhD thesis, University of London, 2003. Professors Philip Tabor and Jonathan Hill supervised the thesis at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL.

5 For an in depth analysis of *The Fall* as allegory see '*The Fall*: The Allegorical Architectural Project as a Critical Method', in Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian, eds., *Critical Architecture*, London: Routledge, 2007.

6 Hubert Damisch presents a similar understanding of the cloud as sign: an oppositional factor to linear perspective with which it interacts dialectically. See Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Stanford: Stanford University, 2002.

7 Paul Matisse offers an insightful description of Duchamp's term 'blossoming'. See his introduction in Marcel Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp: Notes*, ed. and trans. Paul Matisse, Paris: Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 1980.

transformation: she loses her clothes and blossoms into three dimensions. The flat portrait, representing linear perspective, blossoms into the three-dimensional pornographic, but enigmatic diorama of *Given*.

After establishing the hypothesis on an allegorical level the study pursues Jean-François Lyotard's reading of *Given* as an inversion of the rules of linear perspective to expose its hidden assumptions.⁸ However, the two peepholes in *Given's* door hint on Duchamp's staging of an alternative expanded spatiality. Duchamp uses 'blossoming' to describe the Bride's desire-driven fall and her passing into the fourth dimension, but I saw it as also linked to his interest in stereoscopy: a spatial representation technique, isolating and revealing binocular depth and allowing an image to 'blossom' in space. Blossoming is a vivid phenomenological effect, combining intellectual and affective attributes, which cannot be directly apprehended through monocular vision nor represented by linear perspective. Stereo-photogrammetry a measuring technique based on stereoscopy, can accurately describe spatial forms through three-dimensional fields of points, similar to floating gas particles, suggesting an unveiled, undressed, geometry of vision. Consequently I see stereoscopy as *Given's* central and intentional theme, and stereo-photogrammetry as a creative tool, influencing its intellectual content, guiding its manufacturing process and pointing to an expanded representation technique in architecture. As in the 'art of memory', *Given* is a *tableau vivant* or 'allegorical appearance' whose components act like mnemotectonic loci: their spatial arrangement bears a coded account of the geometry of desire, a blossoming of perspective.⁹

This use of the allegorical architectural project of *The Fall* is an example of an alternative critical practice which employs architectural drawing, the language of describing buildings, to articulate something 'other', allos: a critical idiom combining design with text to contemplate on architecture, art, science and politics.¹⁰ The allegorical architectural project, although at times visually and physically inhabited, is often disconnected from the material construction of a building. The imaginative, sometimes poetic bringing together of ideas positions it closer to visual literature and, because of its high dependency on narrative, it can be a bridge between a work of art, painting or sculpture, and a literary text, poem or novel.

Furthermore, the allegorical architectural narrative of *The Fall* is employed to unravel another piece of work, Duchamp's *Given*, by questioning its underlying syntax; the allegorical project reveals an analytical inclination and becomes a vehicle for criticism. Architectural design, therefore, is used not as instructions to build, but as a critical method, analysing spatial phenomena better grasped and investigated through drawing and text. Blurring the distinction between two traditionally divided fields of architectural practice – the building, in terms of the architect as designer and the theoretical/historical text, in terms of the architect as writer – *The Fall* explores the potential of architectural design as critical theory.

8 Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, trans. Ian McLeod, Venice, CA: Lapis, 1990.

9 The 'art of memory' is an ancient technique of memorising texts by constructing imaginary spatial environments. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: Pimlico, 1992.

10 For a critical analysis of other allegorical architectural projects, see Penelope Haralambidou, 'The Allegorical Project: Architecture as Figurative Theory', in Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes, eds., *Architecture and Authorship: Studies in Disciplinary Remediation*, London: Black Dog, 2007.