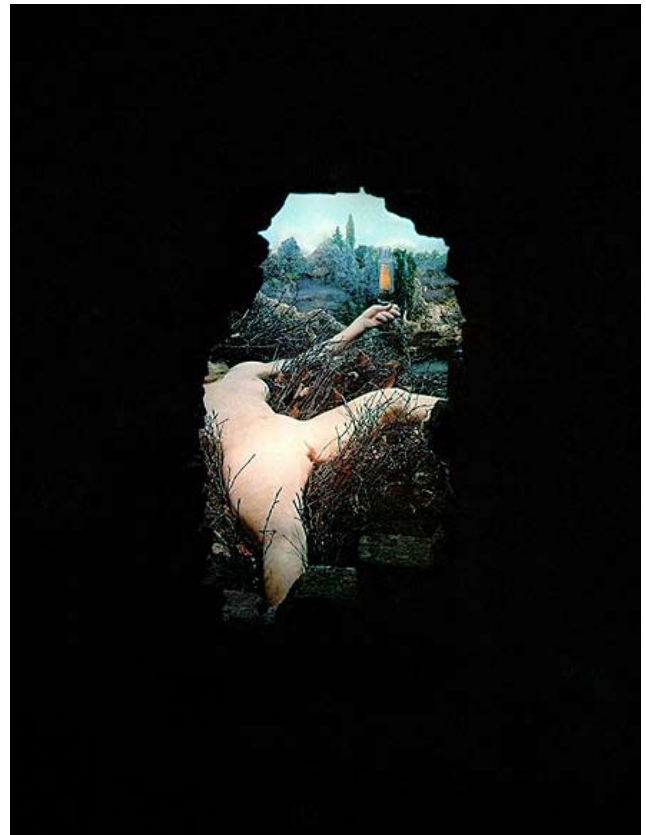


Stefan Banz

Le Forestay

The Waterfall in Marcel Duchamp's "Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage..."

In 1946 Marcel Duchamp spent five weeks in Switzerland, five days of them, from 5 to 9 August, at Lake Geneva, with his then lover Mary Reynolds. He took up residence at the Bellevue Hotel (today, Le Baron Tavernier) in Bellevue near Chexbres. The hotel is located in the very heart of the Lavaux vineyards, which have just recently been designated a world heritage site by UNESCO. The hotel on the Route Corniche offers one of the most striking panoramas in the region with a magnificent view of the lake flanked in the background by the mountains of Vaud, Valais and Savoy and the entire chain of the Jura Hills. On clear days, one can see practically the entire lake from Villeneuve to Geneva, as if it were a vast bay. The Corniche runs through the extraordinary vineyards of the region, linking Chexbres with the villages of Epesses, Riex and Cully. The hotel is also about 100 metres away from a spot known locally as the "balcon du monde", which also affords a spectacular view of the lake as well as a feeling for the steepness of the vineyards along the Dézaley slope. Their steepness also explains the waterfall between Bellevue and Chexbres. The topography is rocky and steep, with the water gushing out from under the buildings in Chexbres, as if it were coming out of the buildings themselves, and then cascading down to the community of Puidoux, to which Bellevue belongs. Le Forestay, as the waterfall is called, consists of three steps. It falls over the cliffs in the hamlet of Chexbres, then slows down for a moment before crashing on to the back of the Dézaley hills below. There it is contained in a brook for a few hundred meters until finally gushing out over another cliff and plunging into the Lake of Geneva, where the shoreline is at its steepest and therefore most perilous and exciting.



Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...*, mixed media, 242.5 x 177.8 x 124.5 cm, 1946-1966, Philadelphia Museum of Art

The Hotel Bellevue is situated not far from the first step of Le Forestay. Night after night Marcel Duchamp must have heard the thundering waterfall sundering the idyllic silence, its incessant fall resembling the unexpected din of ocean breakers. This waterfall is inconspicuous, almost hidden away, in reverse pro-

portion to the imposing panorama of the lake. It cuts through the landscape of the vineyards, carving a vulva-like path down the hillside that is partially concealed by pine trees and woods. Duchamp took a picture of this topography and incorporated it into his last great masterpiece, the installation *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (1946-1966). It is down the *chute d'eau*, the vagina of nature, where the outflow rushes between two spread-eagled flanks. One can still identify the waterfall today despite substantial changes in the environs over the past 60 years. At the bottom of the first fall, there are still two large boulders, one of which can clearly be discerned in Duchamp's photograph, while the other is hidden behind bushes.



Le Forestay waterfall and boulders in the waterfall, near Chexbres, 2007. Photographs: Stefan Banz

Significantly, Duchamp may well be the first and only great artist ever to visit the impressive region of Lavaux, without turning to the lake and the mountains as a source of inspiration for his art, as did his famous colleagues Gustave Courbet, Ferdinand Hodler and Félix Vallotton. Duchamp chose to devote himself to the other side, to look into the vineyards, to capture the effluence coming from the inner depths of the earth – an orgasm that becomes an additional spring for this imposing lake – and to turn it into an overwhelming visual experience. Duchamp's subject matter is deliberately concealed, so to speak, deliberately unspecific and yet still spectacular; it could occur anywhere in the world for it is not inescapably linked to this site. The artist has transformed a specifically local situation into one that is unspecific and general, while nonetheless retaining a sense of the individual and the personal.



Ferdinand Hodler, **Bleu Léman**

Oil on Canvas, 70 x 108 cm, 1904, Musée Cantonale des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne

Duchamp's photograph also renders the sound that we hear long before we catch sight of the waterfall through the trees. He captures what is hidden and, in his installation, turns it into moving time, into the relentless, driving force of life. The wonderful is the centre and, at the same time, the inconspicuous duplication of the naked woman with no pubic hair, a gas lamp in her hand. The gaze is instantly arrested by the hairless vagina, an open cut that intrudes upon vision. But as soon as we pass beyond its visual

blatancy, we discover the gash in nature, illuminated and set in motion by a special mechanism. It looks as if water were squirting out between the boulders and the pine trees and we do not perceive civilization although it is inescapably present.

We actually seem to hear the waterfall, smell the gushing waters and feel the vibrant, photographed bushes; we look through the two peepholes in the wooden door at the heaped up dead branches and we can almost hear the woman breathing, lying there spread-eagled, one leg bent revealing her sex while holding the gaslight aloft in one hand to illuminate the waterfall.

And what can we do? In Chexbres, we can turn away and look at the other side, at the mountains across the lake, at the entire expanse of tumescence and fluidity, of good and bad taste. (Duchamp always stressed the fact that the selection of his readymades was beyond good and bad taste.) We have the choice and we stand between inside and outside, between intimacy and spectacle, between deed and execution. But when we look through the two small holes in the wooden door, we cannot turn away. We are arrested by the immediacy of the facts. If we do turn away, we see the large, empty gallery. And so we gaze intently at the woman's outstretched arm; we envision it breaking — *In Advance of the Broken Arm* — and the light going out, extinguishing the view of the waterfall. We envision finding redemption in the stringency of the facts. And Duchamp knew that.



Hotel Bellevue (today: Le Baron Tavernier) in Bellevue near Chexbres and **view from Hotel** with Dézaley, Lake Geneva and Savoy Alps, Fotografien: Bachmann/Banz 2008

Strangely, we are always trying to find the sweeping movements, the waterfalls of art, of life and of history. But in the end we find ourselves caught up in single and singular destinies. Through them we penetrate the mysteries of meaning and enigma, hoping to surface again purified and reconciled with the rest of the world. Individuality is beyond taste and acquires a specific value only when it is integrated into the world and given a home. In this sense, Duchamp's works are indeed beyond taste and beyond any artistic canon; they belong nowhere because they not only have no home but assiduously, indeed provocatively, avoid acquiring one. They remain suspended in space, in the mind, in the imagination, just like the *Unhappy Readymade* — the geometry book — that Suzanne Duchamp and Jean Crotti, following Duchamp's instructions, had to hang up on the balcony of their apartment in Paris as a wedding gift. Abandoned to wind and rain, the content of its pages repeatedly ruffled and soaked, the book finally fell apart and all the knowledge it contained evaporated until only the memory remained of what one might or should have learned. But the secret is more powerful than knowledge. And so, Duchamp laconically leaves us with 1. the waterfall and 2. the gas lamp. We, too, are abandoned as we gaze through the holes in the door.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert