

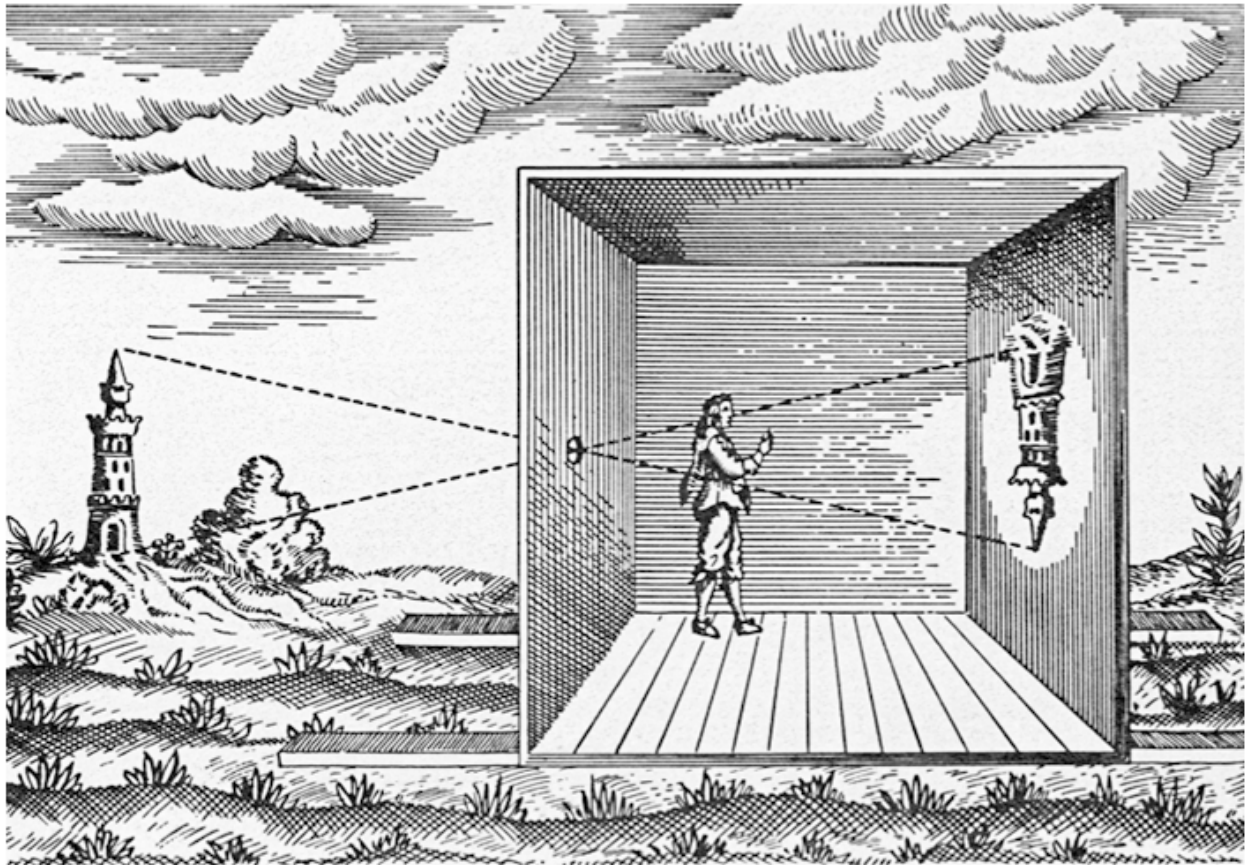
## *Dark Chamber*

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An illustration in Albrecht Dürer's *The Painter's Manual* (1525) shows a man attempting to master perspective using a grid through which a reclining model is seen. In the background, two adjacent windows, one functioning as a landscape and the other as a still life, act as grids themselves. For unclear reasons, the model's hand hovers above her mons pubis, presenting a huge foreshortening problem for the artist. From his perspective—implicitly, the only one being recorded—she is pointing *at* him.

However interested in the "measurement of lines, areas, and solids by means of a compass and ruler," the chief image finds the male gaze intact from the start: the woman as a passively supine untraversed landscape awaiting discovery. Dürer's ostensibly objective grid betrays a kind of feminine trigonometry—the sine wave of a hip, the tangent of a shin dropping below the plane, the arc of an erotic hand—in which a subconscious x- and y-axis are to evolve as some temporary placeholder for control. Today, it bears a descending line marking points of a failing market; or city blocks, as seen from above, tenuously locked in socioeconomic disarray; or Microsoft Excel, whose infinite rows and columns ripple outward into some theoretical quantification of the world. To look through it was to begin to misunderstand it.

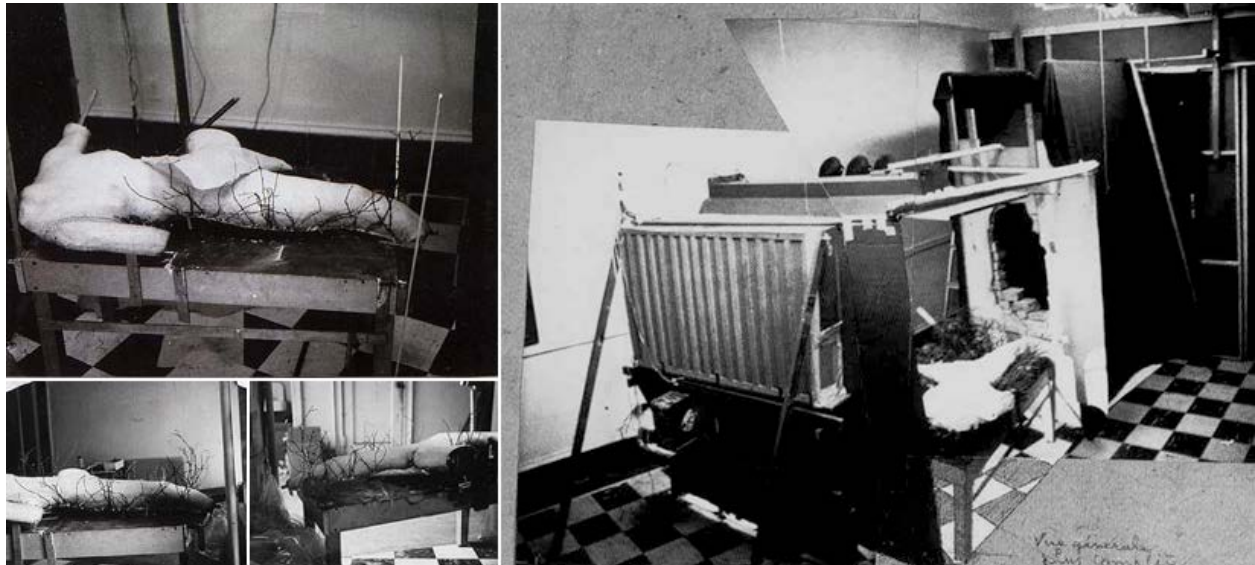


Some seventy years later, in *Paralipomena* (1604), Johannes Kepler coins the term *camera obscura*, meaning "darkened chamber" in Latin, a phenomenon in which light outside a room will, if passed through a small hole, project itself upside-down on to a surface. Thus begins our first distinction between nature and its representation (*pictura* and *imago*, respectively). We see the image flattened for the first time from three-dimensional space onto a plane, a troublesome issue laboriously played out in Western painting from then on, until ultimately expressed, and perhaps destroyed, by Cézanne.

Nobody is sure why the image is reversed, so they draw dashed lines to explain. The projected image is not real, but can be taken as an abbreviated or surrogate reality. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (Book VII, *The Republic*, 380 BC) was indeed an eerie premonition, but its projected shadows were essentially metaphorical: our subjective encounter with an objective antecedent, a quick placeholder for our distorted perception. Now we had mimesis to deal with.

Kepler's camera obscura is to become an actual contraption used by scientists and artists to study the projection of an image from natural light, most notably used by Johannes Vermeer, whose perfection of light streaming into a room seems almost fraudulent when considering its aid. Then there is the camera itself, whose etymological "chamber" is that very dark room from which the first recorded image came.

Dürer's problem may have been form, the shape of a body who auspiciously happened to be there, but now we must wonder why. Why she was there in the first place, and if there were not some gentle violence in her discovery.

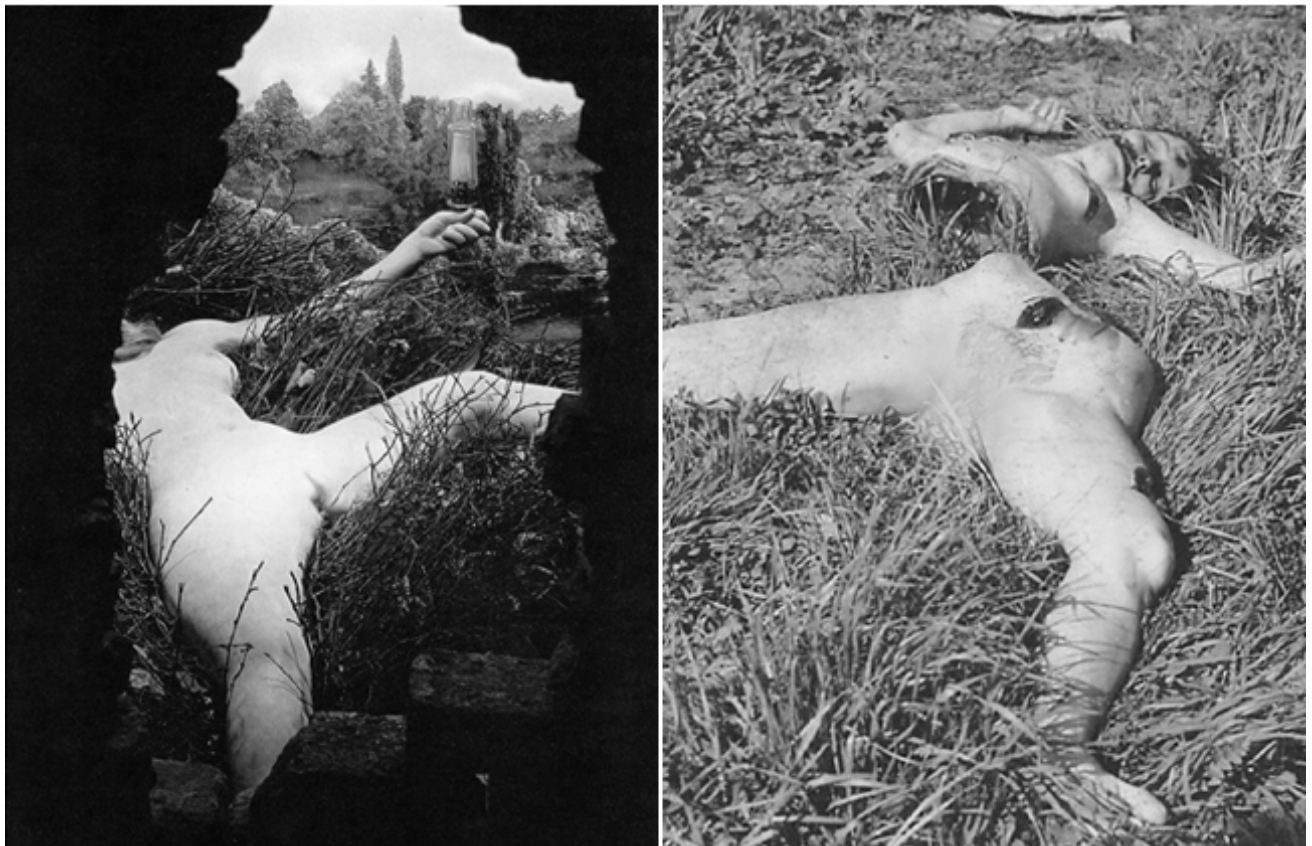


In 1946, Marcel Duchamp creates his own chamber of sorts, secretly working on *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage* in his apartment for the next two decades while almost everyone thought he had abandoned art for chess, stating his preference that it could not be commercialized. "The chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem," he contemplatively issues. Did he, staring down at the chessboard with its black and white grid, suddenly envision Dürer's model yet to be fully understood or, simply, misunderstood? Were its chess pieces imbued with their respective roles, strategic movements marching towards a fate of bloodshed? Was his violence readymade, or his readymade violent? Pawns inch forward in hopes of metamorphosizing into a Queen.

Relationships came and went. His girlfriend initially modeled for the body but, by its penultimate years, it was his second-wife (incidentally, Henri Matisse's daughter-in-law) who would model for the gas lamp brandishing hand. This aggregate mannequin, whose erratic composition seems merely subject to the meandering love life of the artist, is somewhat metaphorically hacked into pieces, her corporeal body for genius becoming an empty object for material. As conceptual as *Fountain* (1917) was, true "form without content" seemed expressed by this body laid bare. Before chopping up his daughter-in-law, Duchamp had already jabbed Matisse, derisively invoking his work as an example of the kind of conceptually vapid "retinal art" he was abandoning.

Is our headless heroine the subject of the artwork, or the tableau which comprises her environment, or simply the room at large in which she is contained? (Paintings don't include the frame, but the artworks do. Just ask Sotheby's.) Duchamp's edifice is a semi-realized room flanked by doors with two peep holes, mirroring our eyes, through which viewers intuitively peek. If painting memorializes

the incident of looking at it, and if sculpture presents the incident of standing before it, then is not Duchamp inviting some pervert, perhaps you, to his bedroom? He plays with our boredom, our listless patronage in museums, only to give us a morbid revelation.



By conceptual omission, Duchamp "gives" us (via the English translation of the title *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) only the obvious: the waterfall and gas lamp, both secondary subjects, an invitation to not see the primary one, the body. To call it one thing is to call attention to something else. We are semantically blinded by the thing right in front of us, that singular orifice through which we came, into which some come, one muffled by a thicket of pubic hair in Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866), whose eroticized commemoration of our very birth spins us into a nasty existential loop of our own conception vs. our progeny's; that is, immortality. Like Dürer's model, she, or rather it, is pointed right at us.

In 1947, in what has since become the "Black Dahlia" murder, a waitress Elizabeth Short is cut in half at the waist, her face gruesomely mutilated. Short's remains are discovered by a local walking her dog, who first thought they were parts of a mannequin. The corpse is completely drained of blood and evocatively posed, the two parts linearly aligned and only a foot away from each other, as if she simply needed to be completed by a more focused creator. Her elbows are symmetrically bent at right angles, drawn open like a hug, or sentimentally crucified, her intestines carefully tucked inside her. That she moved to Hollywood to be an actress, only to be played by actresses in various

accounts of her murder, is telling. Duchamp had already started *Étant donnés* a year prior, though one may be subdued by how influenced, if at all, he was by her murder and ultimate authorial rendering.

Lacan wondered if alienation was not a child first discovering herself being seen, conceptually, from a place outside of herself; to be first "taken in by signs," as an ideal demoted to the actual, in order to survive the world. Gender asymmetry aside, while such signs are historically patriarchal, is not the male just as lonely in his gaze? He will never be content with what he sees, and therein lies another kind of violation. We are collectively violated by our inability to correctly see what lies directly in front of us. "Men act and women appear," said John Berger, though he still combed his hair every morning. Form without content, as shepherded by Duchamp, is a prophecy hence realized and still endured. Images point backwards as a cone of vanishing light, into a tiny peep hole in the wall, a kind of shadow. May all these men continue marching their pawns to upgrade into a Queen, their fingers draped around her imaginary curves. We are only cameras letting light in. As for Dürer, he never quite masters the female, her mathematically unyielding waves a torrent behind a matrix of lines, his gaze condemned to look. She points at him and he knows not what to do.

