2009

George Wittenborn Memorial Book Award
I want to begin by thanking this past year’s Wittenborn Committee – whose amiable outlook, meticulous attention to detail and thoughtful diligence made this enviable task all the more enjoyable. I’d like to recognize the members of the committee: committee members were Annette Haines, Marsha Stephenson, Amy Trendler, Tony White, and Terrie Wilson.

Since our foundation in 1974, ARLIS/NA has made an annual award to recognize excellence of content and production in North American art publications. Initially called the Art Publishing Award, it was renamed in 1980 to honor George Wittenborn (1905-1974), the influential New York art book dealer and publisher. The award is presented annually for outstanding publications in the visual arts and architecture that combine the highest standards of research and presentation. The award this year recognizes books published during 2009.

This year we evaluated over 150 titles and chose our favorites based on scholarship, design and production. Of course you see the titles in front on you in the program so there is little suspense now – I want to spend just a few minutes sharing with you some of the outstanding visual material presented in each book and pointing out to you the depth of scholarship and breadth of scope exemplified by each book. And I’m very excited and honored to have the authors and editors of each book here as well as deserving representatives of the publishers. I’ll introduce them in a few moments.
MARCEL DUCHAMP
Étant donnés

Michael R. Taylor
Mary Cason, ed.
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Mrs. DELANY
& HER CIRCLE

Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts
Yale Center for British Art
Yale University Press
There are two winners this year:

*Marcel Duchamp Étant donnés*
*Mrs. Delany & Her Circle*

No first and second place; no winner and honorable mention; but two winners. The reason for this is that as these two titles rose to the top during the committee’s marathon day of reckoning, we simply could not rank them. The content and focus of each title is quite different (I think these contrasting covers are a perfect analog to these differences; one coarse and rough-hewn, one delicate and refined; one narrowing the view permitting only one viewer at a time, one expanding the view to include ever widening circles of art, and science, and society). Yet the two books are compellingly equal when it comes to excellence and comprehensiveness of scholarship, superb design and use of visual materials, and exacting standards of production.

One provides an exhaustive account of a ground-breaking, bewildering and somewhat difficult, if not disturbing, work of art; a work of art that raises the very question of “is it art?”; the other provides an equally comprehensive account of artwork based on delicacy of craft, exquisite beauty of form, and careful observation of nature; and in its own way, raises the question of “is it art?” While posing this crucial question, each book tells a story – a story from beginning to end and one could even say from before the beginning to beyond the end. I should mention that both document a recent exhibition.
Man Ray
*Marcel Duchamp in a blonde wig*
c. 1955

Thomas Lawrence
*Portrait of Mrs. Delany*
1786-88
These next slides offer a quick introduction to the protagonist of each story, Marcel Duchamp and Mary Delany. The committee and I couldn’t resist this juxtaposition and I do apologize to the creators of each book, I know you never dreamed of this.
Denise Bellon
*Marcel Duchamp in his studio, Paris*
1938

John Opie
*Mary Delany*
1782
On to more sympathetic portrayal of each artist.

Enough with drawing comparisons – because this is not about comparing two books, but about celebrating each one. Let me focus for a few minutes on each book. I’ll begin with Marcel Duchamp Étant donnés.
Authored by Michael Taylor, edited by Mary Cason, and shepherded through the publications process by Sherry Babbitt, *Marcel Duchamp Étant donnés* is a phenomenal tribute to a single work of art.
Étants donnés,
1. La chute d’eau, 2. Le gaz d’éclairage
The title of that piece is Étants donnés. 1ère La chute d’eau, 2ème Le gaz d’éclairage..., (translated: Given: The Waterfall, The Illuminating Gas). The piece, a three-dimensional tableau assemblage, is a difficult work of art to look at, to talk about, and certainly to understand. Elements of voyeurism and erotic tension challenge the viewer. The museum visitor is confronted with an old wooden door with two peepholes at eye level. Before showing the next image, I want to add that photographing the interior of the piece is particularly difficult – the spatial and atmospheric qualities are lost – and in fact there was a moratorium on displaying or publishing any photographs of the interior for at least 15 years after its installation.
Étants donnés, interior
When looking through the holes, the viewer “encounters a startling sight … a realistically constructed simulacrum of a life-size nude woman lying spread-eagled on a bed of dead twigs and fallen leaves” (Michael Taylor). As you can see she holds a gas lamp in her left hand, and the scene is completed with a backdrop of a lush landscape with waterfall. A motor behind the background adds life to the falling water.
Anne d’Harnoncourt, Philadelphia Museum of Art
1973, Opening of Marcel Duchamp Retrospective
The piece was installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969 owing to the vision and diligence of Anne d'Harnoncourt, a Duchamp scholar and young curator at the Museum at the time. Anne died while the exhibit and book were in production and it is to her that they were both dedicated.
Let’s look at the book. The Wittenborn Award Committee was immediately struck by the thoroughness and the clarity of presentation throughout the book, evidenced initially in the Table of Contents. You may think that a straightforward table on contents is an easy task, but you’d be surprised. The layout of this Table of Contents made instantly clear, the organization of thought, the scope of the work, and the breadth of documentary and comparative materials.
The Genesis, Construction, Installation, and Legacy of a Secret Masterwork
Both visually and textually, the book presents Duchamp’s piece with a transparency of intent, counter perhaps to the enigmatic quality of the work itself. The linoleum of Duchamp’s studio floor serves as a visual theme throughout the book, providing the ground for chapter headings; in this instance, the heading for the core of the book telling the story of the work of art from cradle to afterlife.
It almost goes without saying that the book is replete with all the superior bibliographic documentation and addenda that one would expect of a Wittenborn winner: an extensive bibliography and index, a full listing of photographic credits, transcriptions of correspondence, and a list of artist’s copyrights, which I’m highlighting here; an increasingly necessary and useful tool, particularly for contemporary artists’ works.
Various states of assembly

Parchment “skin” for upper torso
1948-49
This richness is further enhanced with plentiful photographs of Duchamp's studio, as well as of numerous objects representing the trials and errors and experiments of the process of creation.
In many cases we see photos that Duchamp combined in collage form, replicating the synthesis of realism and artifice of the piece itself.
Photocollage of interior in studio, 1966
Here is a photocollage of the piece in the studio: the NY Times reviewer described the piece as “a ramshackle exercise in bad carpentry and precarious wiring, with pieces of drapery held in place by clothespins.” (NY Times Review, “Landscape of Eros, Through the Peephole”, Aug. 27, 2009) That comment is exemplified in this photocollage.
Manual of Instructions for assembly
Particularly informative is Duchamp’s binder with instructions for assembly of the piece, for which he used documentary polaroids and extensive commentary/instructions. The binder is reproduced in its entirety in the book. I show you two entries from the binder.
pages from the Manual of Instructions for assembly
In the interest of time, I’ve barely touched on the richness and completeness of this book, but I hope I’ve piqued your interest and that you will stop by the Exhibit Hall tomorrow to see the book.
I turn now to our second winner, *Mrs. Delany & Her Circle*. Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts co-edited the volume. It was co-published by the Yale Center for British Art and Sir John Soane’s Museum in association with Yale University Press.

*Mrs. Delany & her Circle* is a book encompassing the many circles of Mary Delany’s life, her curiosity and interests, and her creations: the broadest circle of her life characterized by the influential social and court circles of mid-18th century Great Britain was filled with smaller circles defined by her amateur, yet sophisticated and informed interests in botany, gardens, and natural history, as well as music and literature.
Chess Game Silhouette, c. 1750
Before launching into the book, I wanted to give you a quick synopsis of Mary Delany, though she’s not easy to encapsulate in just a few words. She lived from 1700-1788, was born to aristocracy, was married and widowed twice, and lived in England and Ireland. She developed a career around her interests in gardens and plants creating thousands of works of art of various media (she was called a “model of accomplishment”). She is most particularly known for her paper collages or paper “mosaiks” several of which I’ll illustrate in a few moments. As an example of her fine eye and careful hand, we see a paper silhouette depicting the Viscount of Weymouth’s family at chess.
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The committee was impressed with the thoroughness and clarity of presentation of this book, evidenced, again, at the start in the Table of Contents. It was interesting to us how Tables of Contents are markers both of the complexity and of the simplicity of a book. In addition to the lucidity offered in this Table of Contents, the breadth of scope and the promise of interesting twists and turns that Mary Delany’s story will take are made explicit.
Marianna

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s Mrs. Delany was an avid reader of contemporary novels, particularly those of Samuel Richardson, with whom she corresponded. Her most extended (and last) fiction, Marianna, exists in a manuscript eighteenth-century manuscript and a long-forgotten acquaintance to other forms. It contains elements of the court romance and remained asleep of the eighteenth-century publishing industry. Mrs. Delany's novel is not only a love story; it is also a novel of manners, and a novel of education. The story was probably originally written by Mrs. Delany's sister, Anne, and was later sold to the Lady Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.


Figure 2. Marianna, Marianna (1778).
The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Like Étant donnés, this book is characterized by a richness of bibliographic documentation: a complete bibliography, a concordance of plant names to establish clear and consistent connections between the plants Mary Delany portrayed and the plants that we know today; a full transcription of a novella (Marianna) written by Mrs. Delany (reproduced in this slide with one of the four illustrations); as well as an extensive index; and a detailed list of photographic credits.
which the authors of this book address specifically: the exchange of handwork to cement bonds of friendship, the emphasis on the preservation of such gifts, and the important role of correspondence in framing and perpetuating these exchanges. Subsequently, Mary was raised for the most part in London, living with her aunt and uncle, Lady Anne and Sir John Stanly, at Whitehall, and educated in the expectation that she would receive a court appointment. It was in this milieu, at the age of ten, that Mary first encountered Handel:

“We had no better instrument in the house than a little spinet of mine, on which that great musician performed wonders. I was much struck with his playing, but struck as a child, not a judge. For the moment he was gone, I seized myself to my instrument, and played the best lesson I had then learnt; my uncle and lady asked me whether I thought I should ever play as well as Mr. Handel. ‘If I did not think I should,’ cried I, ‘I would burn my instrument!’”

This “innocent presumption of childish ignorance” was transformed into a profound devotion to the composer, shared by Mary’s brother, Bernard Granville, that would stretch beyond Handel’s lifetime. Mrs. Delany’s correspondence remains an important source on the reception and performance of Handel’s music in the eighteenth century. This period of privilege and expectation gave way to uncertainty with the death of Queen Anne in 1714. Under pressure from Lord Lansdowne, Mary was married off, disastrously, at the age of seventeen to a Cornish MP, Alexander Pendarves, forty years her senior. As she wrote the autobiographical fragments she composed in the 1740s,

“I was married with great pomp. Never was one dressed out in gayer colours, and when I was led to the altar, I thought I had not been led, as Hypolita was, to be sacrificed. I was sacrificed. This is real life indeed, but I look all that makes life desirable—joy and peace of mind…”

Figure 7: Firescreen, design and embroidery attributed to Mary Pendarves, c. 1740. Silk thread on cotton, 19 x 14 in. (48 x 35.5 x 38 cm); stand and frame, unknown maker, c. 1800, 10 x 14 in. (25 x 35.5 cm); Private collection

Firescreen, designed and embroidered by Mary Pendarves (Delany), c. 1740
The visual documentation of Mary Delany’s work is heightened by the exquisite and straightforward layout of each page.
Embroidery Tools
given to Mary Delany by Queen Charlotte
1781
In addition, there is copious documentary illustration – here an example of tools that Delany owned or would have used. These illustrations are supplemented by numerous maps, contemporaneous drawings and paintings, charts, etc.
Sarah Stone
Leverian Museum,
as it appeared in the 1780s

*Florilegium*
by Everhard Kick
 c. 1705

Mantua (gown), embroidered silk, c. 1744
As I noted the book is comprehensive in its scope, bringing in geographical, cultural and historical themes that inform us about Mary Delany’s life and work. The most significant theme of the book, though, is the relationship of science and art. They are not opposing forces, but are interwoven, interdependent and provide a synergy for her work. Science and all that it represented inspired art, and the creation of art symbiotically supported the observation and understanding of the natural world. It was a time of intense interest in nature, all that was familiar and all that was unfamiliar. We see a contemporaneous depiction of the Leverian Museum filled with exotic specimens, an example of a type of botanical book that served as a model for her work and an embroidered gown representing the taste of day – silk embroidered as though flowers are randomly scattered over the fabric filling it with rich color and sinuated form.
Mark Laird, Reconstruction of an auricula theatre
Delany’s desire to collect and document the natural world adds weight to what is often considered ‘women’s craft.’ Mark Laird provides a reconstruction of a theatre or stage of plants that Mrs. Delany created in 1746. He points out that there were both scientific and religious connotations in that this staging of plants was intended not only to provide an encyclopedic view of horticulture but was to evoke (and perhaps even replicate) the plants of the Garden of Eden.
Pancratium Maritinum
Sea Daffodil, detail
And then there’s the pure beauty of Mary Delany’s talent and craft. I’ll finish up by cycling through a few slides depicting some of her handiwork. As noted earlier, Mrs. Delany is best known for her paper mosaiks – paper collages. Over a period of ten years she created ten albums of detailed and botanically correct collages of plants – created with cut and colored papers. The virtuosity, accuracy and sheer beauty of these works set them apart.
Geranium fulgidum
Scarlet Geranium

Geranium Inquinans
1778

Rubus fruticosus
Common bramble
1775
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Presented to

MARCEL DUCHAMP Étants donnés
Michael R. Taylor, author
Mary Cason, editor
Sherry Babbitt, Philadelphia Museum of Art

MRS DELANY & HER CIRCLE
Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, co-authors
Yale Center for British Art and
Yale University Press
Needless to say, I have barely skimmed the surface of the richness of each book. Once again, I invite you to come see each of these books at the Exhibit Hall and I encourage you to add a copy of each to your collections.

I am truly honored to celebrate these two books and to present the Wittenborn award certificates to the authors and editors and publishers of *Marcel Duchamp Étants donnés* and *Mrs. Delany & her Circle*.

Thank you!

April 23, 2010
Rebecca Price
Chair, 2009 George Wittenborn Memorial Book Award Committee