

**The artist,
the camera,
the window into heaven**

A presentation by Sam Lloyd to Grounding the Sacred through Literature and the Arts 2015

Look at this object: it's a camera, made in Holland in the 1940s, and it's about as simple as a camera can get: if I take out this part – which is just a mechanism for winding on the film – it's just a little box, with a tiny window at one end.

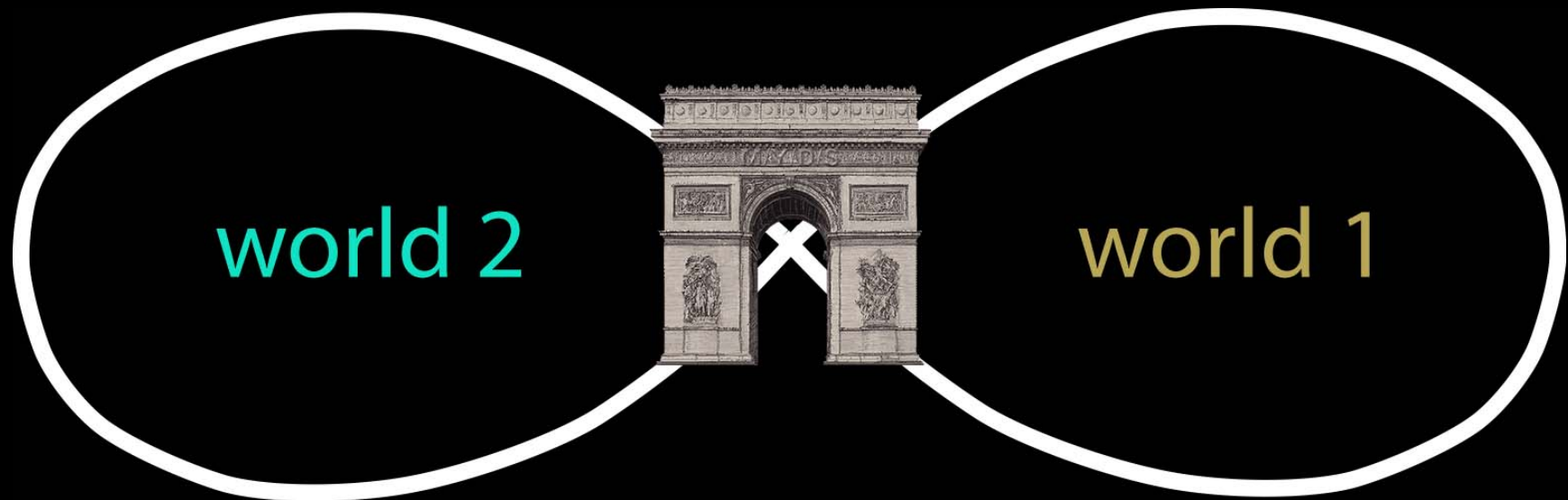
The word 'camera' comes from the Latin *camera obscura*, or 'darkened room'; from ancient times it was known that a tiny hole in a windowless room will project an image of the outside world onto the rear wall. That's what a camera is: a tiny darkened room with a window at one end.

Of course, even this camera has some additional sophistication: a shutter that opens the window for a precise interval, and a mechanism to wind on the film. But even the most advanced modern digital camera is, in essence, a simple little light-capturing box like this.



This symbol looks like the 'infinity' symbol used in mathematics; I am going to use it to express the idea of two worlds, which interconnect at a particular place and time.

In this talk I will explain what I mean by these two worlds and I will suggest that the point where two worlds connect is a gateway through which one may pass from one to the other.



I will then talk about the alchemy that occurs within that little dark space of a camera, when we make a photographic image. Not chemical alchemy: a spiritual one. I'm going to suggest that in the process of making a photographic image, the camera functions as a gateway between two worlds.

Finally, I will suggest that photography is an analogue for the role of the artist in general; that the artist is the keeper of the gateway between worlds, and that by making art, the artist makes comprehensible, that which is beyond everyday reality. I will draw upon my personal experiences of the second world and show how this has affected the art that I make.



1. The window into heaven

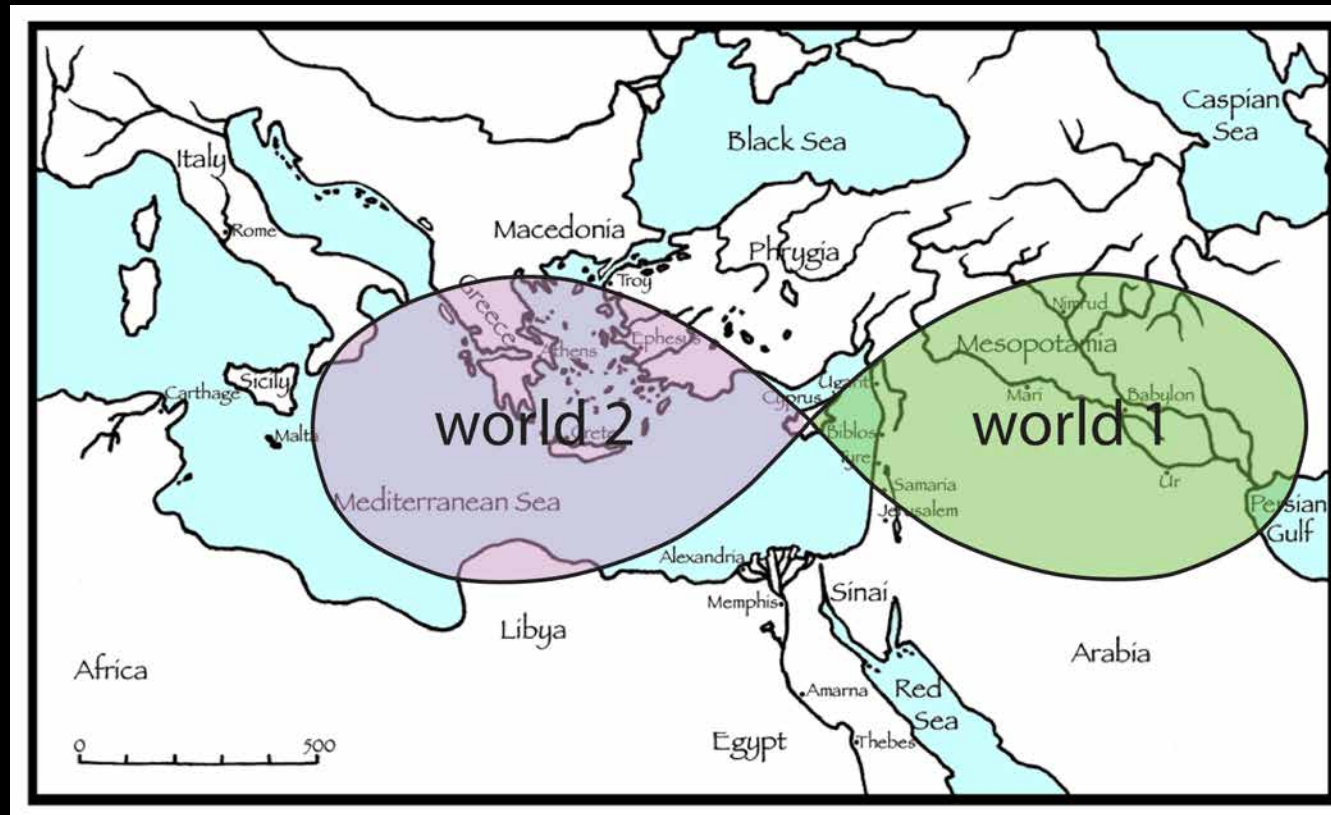
In a museum in the little village of Kouklia in Cyprus, sits a shiny black stone.

Unloved now, for thousands of years it was an object of adoration at the cult centre of Aphrodite, one of the most important religious sites in the ancient Greek world. Her temple was located near the spot where, according to legend, the Goddess was born and emerged from the sea; however that story suggests a remote origin, and Aphrodite is considered to be a Greek version of the Mesopotamian goddess of war and fertility, Astarte. She did indeed arrive across the sea - in the boats of Phoenician traders.



'Aphrodite's stone',
Kouklia, Cyprus

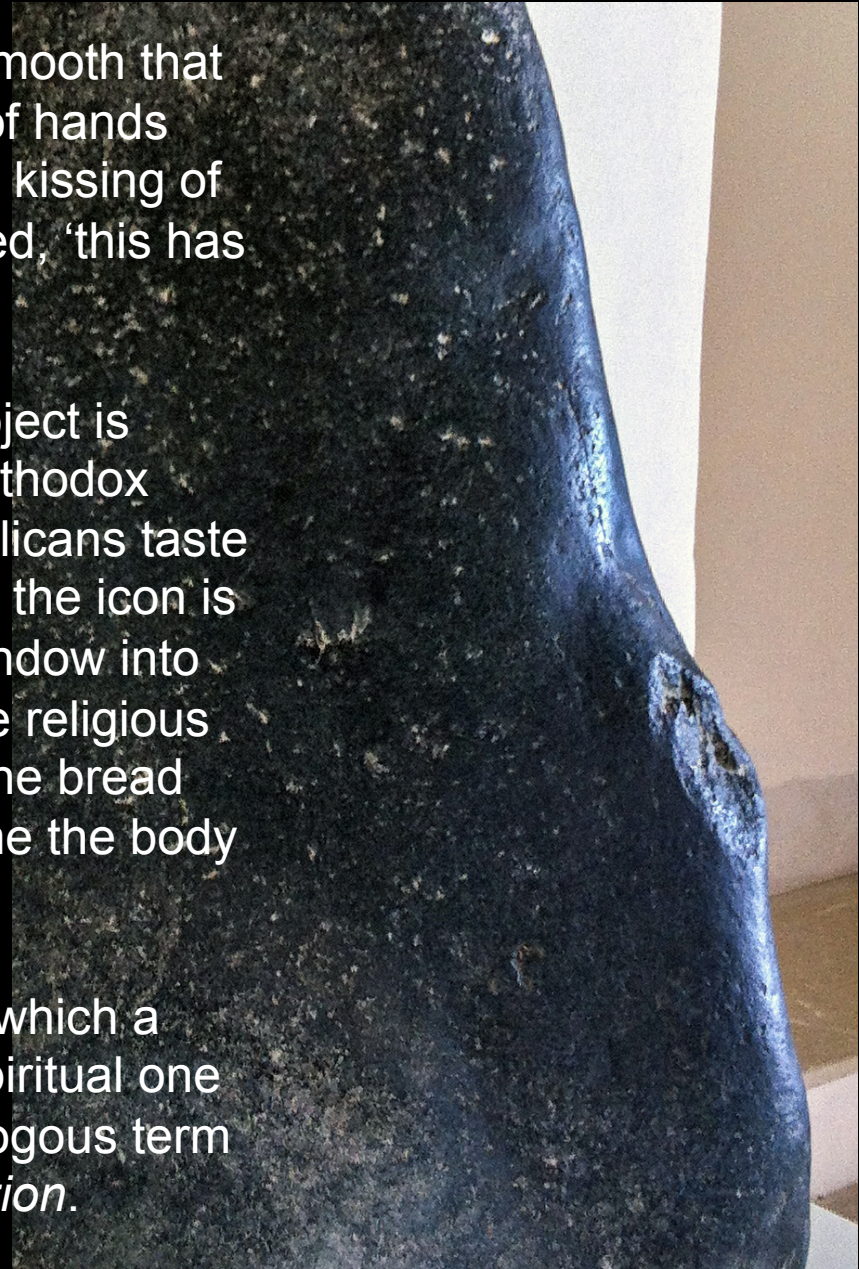
Cyprus, therefore, is a gateway; a place of contact between two cultures: the Greeks and the Persians. The city-states of Cyprus were a conduit for trade and ideas between the cultures to the 'east', including the Phoenicians and the Mesopotamian civilizations, and the Greek states. Religious practices are one example of the many ideas, people, and products that passed through the gateway of Cyprus.



The surface of Aphrodite's stone is so smooth that when I first saw it I thought 'thousands of hands have touched it'; then I remembered the kissing of icons in Orthodox churches and I realized, 'this has been kissed by thousands of mouths.'

This need to touch or kiss the sacred object is common to many religious traditions: Orthodox Christians kiss icons; Catholics and Anglicans taste bread and wine. The former believe that the icon is no 'picture' of Jesus or a saint, but a 'window into heaven', through which they can see the religious reality. Catholic Christians believe that the bread and wine served at the Eucharist become the body and blood of Christ.

In Orthodox Christianity the process by which a mundane object is transformed into a spiritual one is known as *metastoeicheiosis*. The analogous term in the Catholic Church is *transubstantiation*.

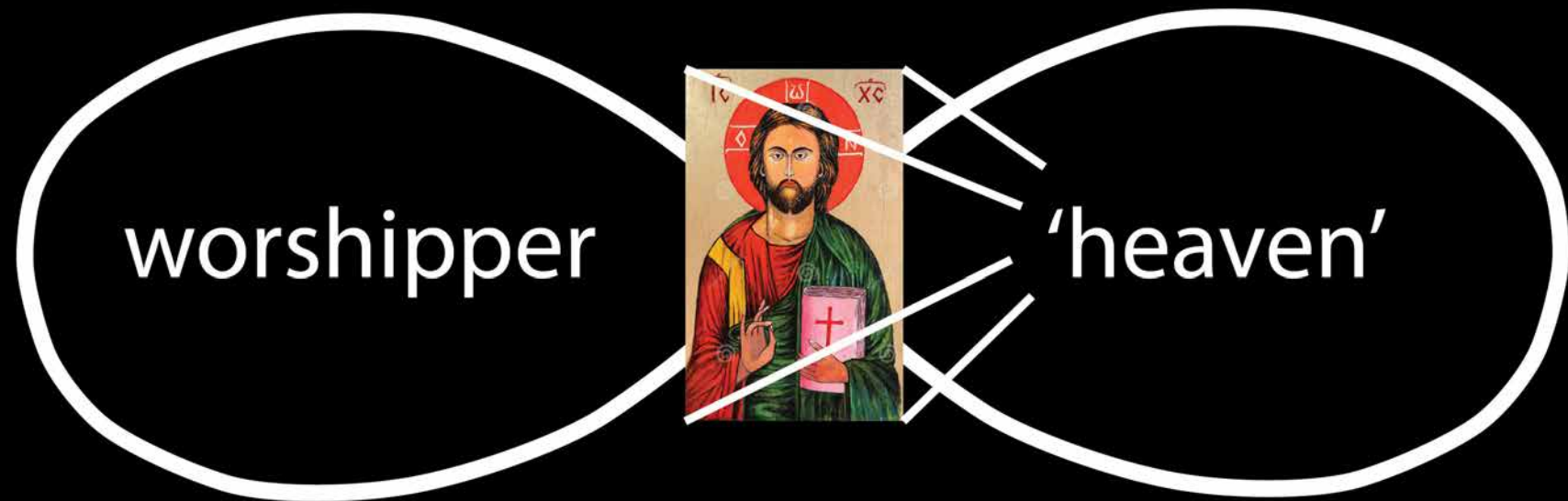


I don't think it's not too much of a stretch to see these 3 acts of adoration involving a physical object as aspects of the same thing: the use of the object to encounter, that which is inherently beyond normal experience, 'a mystery'.

We have, in turn: an object that embodies the mystery in its dark and pregnant form; an object that is a window into the mystery, and an object which is believed to be part of the mystery itself. In each case, the encounter is intimate, and sensual: involving sight, taste and touch.



These objects have great power because they sit at the intersection of two worlds. We inhabit 'world 1', the world of everyday reality, while the object of veneration is of another world, 'world 2', the world of mystery; it contains the power from that world, it is a window into that world, or it is a fragment of that other reality made real in ours. The object of religious adoration has come through the gateway.



What do I mean by a 'world'? I mean an experience of a reality that is consistent, meaningful, and we accept as 'true'. In everyday life we inhabit a world more or less like this: we know our way around it, it is familiar and does what we expect of it; therefore we find it more or less satisfying or meaningful and accept that the experiences we undergo are 'true'. What of the other world: the world of religious experience?

These days many people question whether it exists; others may accept such a world in the form of an after-life. However, I think that even non-religious people have a sense of a world larger than that defined by our rational conscious mind, and many have experienced that world.



Religious traditions are full of descriptions of spiritual realms. In Christian mysticism, the *Theologia Germanica* of 1516 states: “if the soul shall see with the right eye into eternity, then the left eye must close itself and refrain from working, and be as though it were dead. For if the left eye be fulfilling its office toward outward things, that is holding converse with time and the creatures; then must the right eye be hindered in its working; that is, in its contemplation.”

The Sufi mystic poet Rumi talks about that
‘other kind of intelligence’, a ‘second
knowing’ that is “a spring overflowing its
spring box; a freshness in the centre of the
chest . . . a fountainhead from within you,
moving out.”





Some indigenous traditions also suggest the co-existence of mundane and spiritual worlds: for example, contrary to common Western understanding, the 'dreamtime' of Australian indigenous people is not in the past, but is ever present; it has been described as a psychic state in which contact is made with the ancestral spirits; it includes the 'seeing' of eternal things during sleep.

Each of these examples involves a special kind of seeing: a second eye, a sensation in the chest, or a state of heightened awareness.

ON THE SPIRITUAL IN ART BY WASSILY KANDINSKY



It was a truism of discussion about art in the first half of the twentieth century, that art and religious experience shared a common history and purpose. For many artists this raised a dilemma. With the 'death of God' what was the purpose of art? At one extreme, Wassily Kandinsky despaired of the 'nightmare of materialism' and argued for a return to a language of art "which speaks to the soul". Others delighted in the new freedom of art, the Marxist Walter Benjamin declaring: "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."

Others took a nuanced position. Marcel Duchamp, to some the *enfant terrible* of a cynical and materialist art, understood art's ritual aspect, remained deeply attached to it, and used Catholic religious terminology to explain what art does, stating: "through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual *transubstantiation* has taken place". More recently, the English-Cypriot art critic Michael Paraskos has used the Greek Orthodox equivalent of *transubstantiation*, *metastochiosis*, to argue that an artwork is a window on to another reality fabricated by the artist. (as in this work by British contemporary artist Clive Head)



Clive Head
Memories of an English café
(detail) 2014

Paraskos – an atheist - adopts a religious term to argue that when an artist makes a work of art, a transformation takes place: the artwork is no longer a material object in actuality but a material object that creates its own world. This world is communicated to the viewer through the aesthetic devices employed by the artist.

Returning the word to its Greek origins, Paraskos defines aesthetics as 'to feel or experience through the senses'. One of the key purposes of aesthetics in art, he argues, is to communicate that which is otherwise not communicable, or would be too difficult to bear if presented explicitly.



2. The camera



Victorian 'spirit photograph';
Photographer unknown

It might seem that photography is the very essence of objective recording of our world, world 1, the world of the physical senses. In everyday life, we assume that when we take a 'selfie' with our smartphone, we are making an accurate record of ourselves at a particular time and place.

However, a brief look at the history of photography will show that the medium is not simply a mechanical reproducer of physical reality. From its earliest days, photographers played tricks on the viewer through manipulations of the image such as multiple exposures.

As control over exposure and contrast increased, they discovered the expressive possibilities of light and shadow.



Edward Steichen, Portrait
photograph of August Rodin



Gary Winogrand
c1980s

They learnt to crop, compose, select viewpoints and focal lengths to manipulate and interpret.



With the advent of motion photography, visual effects, and computer-generated imagery, the pretence that the photographic image presents a facsimile of reality is swept away.

Star Wars

Canadian photographer Jeff Wall creates photographic tableaux which appear to record real events, but are complete fabrications, combining hundreds of separate images to achieve what the artist calls “a sense of the real, how things really are *or would be*.”



Jeff Wall, 'A sudden gust of wind' 1993 (after Hokusai)

In the hands of an artist like Wall, manipulation of the photographic image transcends mere visual trickery and becomes the kind of alchemy in which a work of art is born.

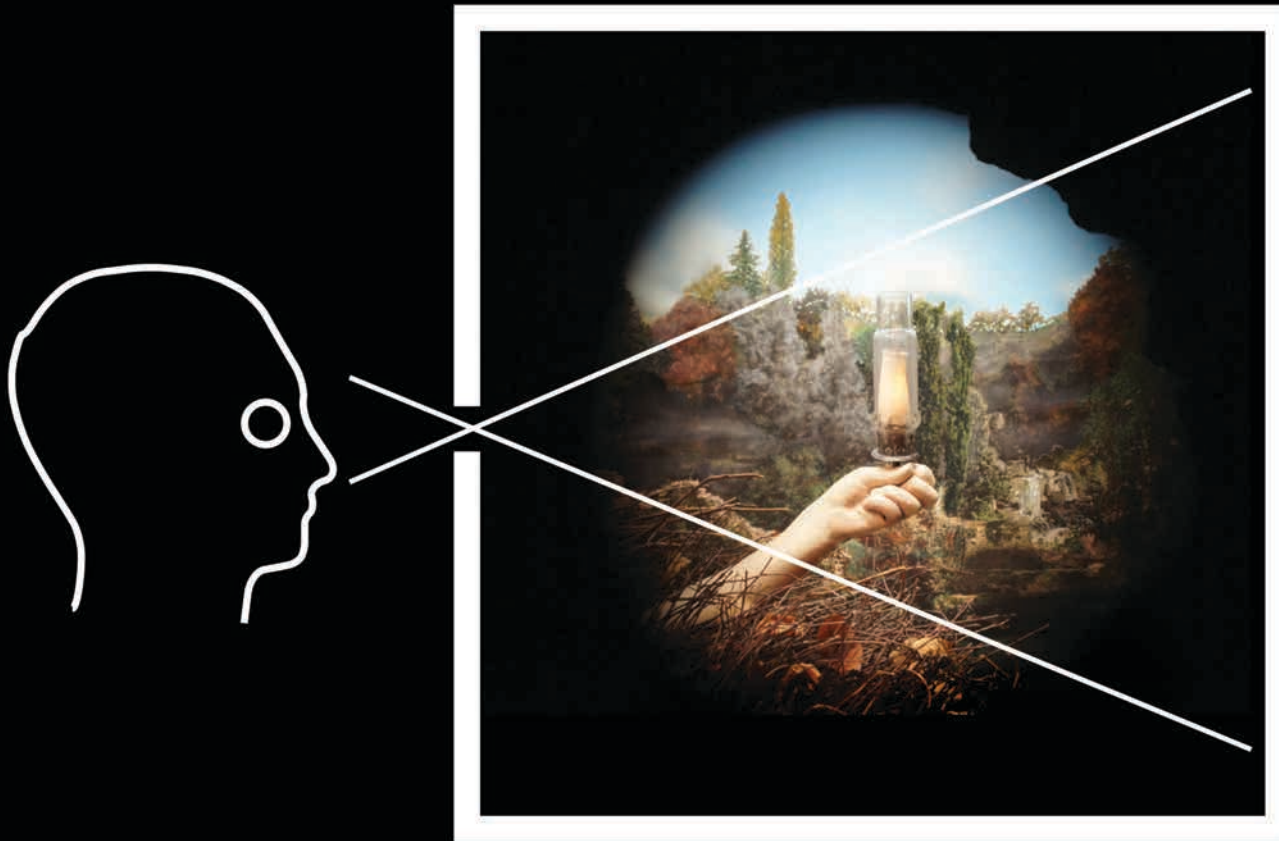


An artwork by Marcel Duchamp may help to explain the nature of photographic alchemy.

Étant donnés (Given: 1. The Waterfall; 2. The Illuminating Gas) was Duchamp's final work. It is not a photograph, but an installation. It comprises an ancient door, in which there is a peephole; the spectator peers inside and sees a curious tableau: a room in which a naked woman reclines on a bed of grass, holding a lamp, in a surreal landscape that includes a glittering iridescent waterfall.



Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*:
1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz
d'éclairage. 1946-66



This artwork is rather like a camera in reverse; if we think of the room behind the wooden door as the *camera obscura*, then we are looking into the camera from outside, observing the alchemical process of image making as it occurs.

Étant donnés inverts our usual role as photographer, the person holding the box, into that of a passive observer of the making of the image, which paradoxically is also in a sense 'made by us', since it appears only to us, as we observe the contrived scene from a particular viewpoint.

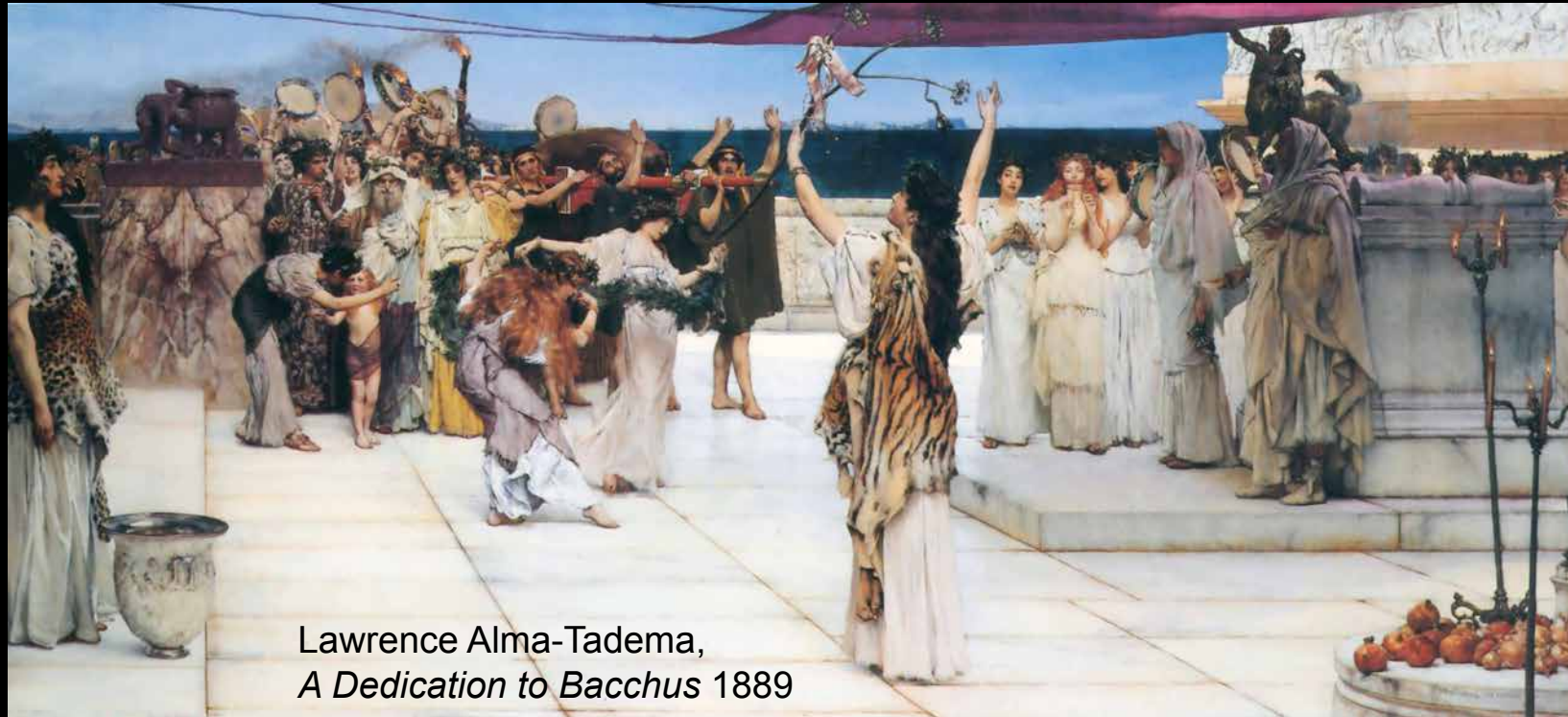
The work is typical Duchamp in the way it plays with the contradiction of the work of art being an object made by the artist, but whose reality is created by the observer.

Étant donnés also demonstrates that the alchemy by which art transcends normal reality – its *transubstantiation* – is an aesthetic one. This suggestion may appear heretical; Duchamp hated what he called 'retinal art', that just strived for sensual effects without any religious or philosophical content. Some have taken his stance to mean that aesthetics are irrelevant in art making. But this is to misunderstand Duchamp. After all, what does he do in *Étant donnés*? He sets up an erotically charged scene, using evocative materials and intricate mechanisms; he hand-paints a sublime landscape background; he composes and lights the scene and, finally, establishes a specific viewpoint for us to observe it.

If we return to the definition of aesthetics given by Michael Paraskos - 'to feel or experience through the senses' – then *Étant donnés* is a highly aesthetic work. In this exquisite, heightened moment, art occurs - the *transubstantiation* takes place.

This is precisely what the camera does: a little container, an alchemist's crucible, by which we set up, compose, light and frame, so as to transform reality into something else.

We have come full circle to the experience of the devotee of the black stone in Cyprus; containing an awesome power, no less than the overwhelming human passions of violence and love, embodied in the Goddess herself, present in that very stone, yet made 'safe to touch' by aesthetics: the shape of the stone, its smoothness, its color.



Lawrence Alma-Tadema,
A Dedication to Bacchus 1889

The ceremonies that accompanied Aphrodite's worship are unknown to us; probably they were nothing like this 19th century fantasy. Yet I have no doubt that the experience would have been highly aestheticised: we can imagine that the object was placed at the end of a processional walkway, with 'mood lighting' to dramatize its importance; there would have been priestesses in special clothes, and rituals involving song and dance. In that temple, as in the camera, *transubstantiation* would occur.

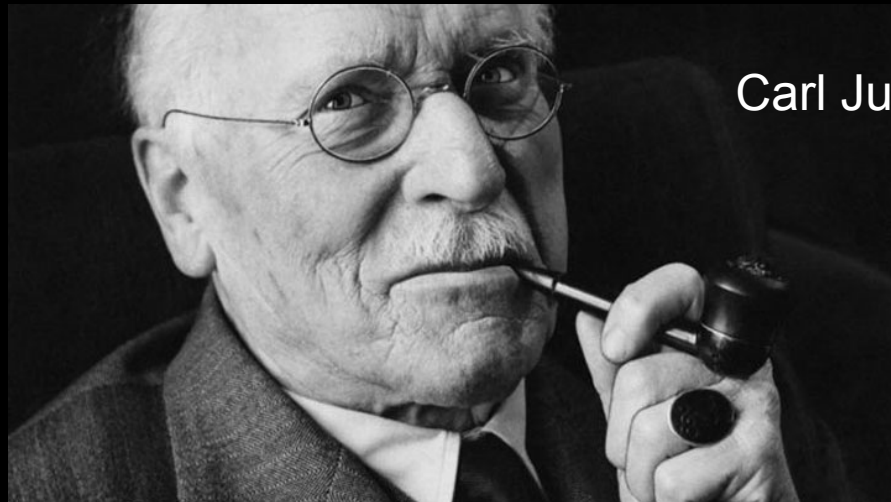
Pablo
Picasso,
La Pientre
1967



3. The artist

My personal experience of the 'second world' - the 'second knowing' - comes within the context of Jungian psychology.

Between 1913 and 1918, Carl Jung underwent a deliberate and prolonged exploration of his soul - an experience that he describes as a journey: "My soul leads me into the desert, into the desert of my own self. I did not think that my soul is a desert, a barren, hot desert, dusty and without drink."



Carl Jung



C G Jung, from *Liber Novus* (The 'Red Book')

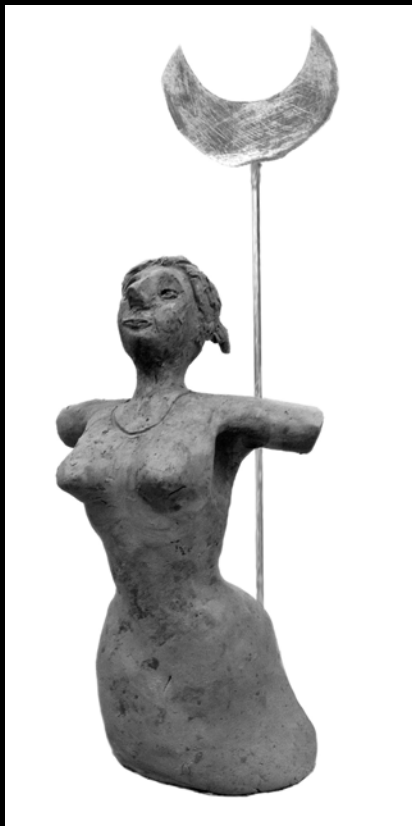
Jung was aware from a young age that he lived in two realities: one that was actual and present, and another that was deep and timeless. In his mysterious and wonderful 'Seven Sermons to the Dead', Jung elegantly describes the condition of human beings at the intersection of two worlds:

"Man is a gateway, through which from the outer world of gods, daemons, and souls ye pass into the inner world; out of the greater into the smaller world. Small and transitory is man. Already is he behind you, and once again ye find yourselves in endless space, in the smaller of innermost infinity."

In other writings, Jung elaborates on the role of the artist as “a vehicle and molder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind.” What Jung means is that the artist takes images that arise in the unconscious - the second world - and elaborates and shapes these images into works of art. Jung called these images from the other world ‘archetypes’; they carry all the power that this word suggests: a primal energy, a power akin to that of Gods themselves.

Before I left Australia for a 9 months arts residency in Cyprus in 2013, I was engaged in Jungian therapy called ‘active imagination’. This attempts to replicate Jung’s experience of journeying into the inner world of the soul. The resulting experiences - surprising, disturbing, wonderful - showed me that there is within us a second world that we can get to know at a conscious level. Like Jung I discovered a world of autonomous beings, meaningful stories, and revelatory visions.

I incorporated imagery drawn from these experiences in artworks I produced in Cyprus. These works are explicit and raw; I have tried to describe the archetypes as they appeared to me, in all their beauty and terror, at the same time using classical imagery to establish a distance so that these powerful feelings can be contained.



Sam Lloyd, 2013



Sam Lloyd, 2013



I also made works that relied upon more abstract symbolism: light and dark, Mandala-like circular patterns.

On my return to Australia, I began a new series of works by accident, as art projects often do. I collected small, discarded objects in the streets near my studio, and put images of them on my Facebook page.

Viewers responded strongly to these images, so I decided to photograph the objects more professionally, using the sort of lighting setup used in commercial photography. A kind of 'light tent', this setup achieves a very even and diffuse light, and an environment in which contrast, shadow and background can be precisely controlled.



At first my images were rather literal, just well lit and composed 'portraits' of recognizable objects. Gradually, however I found myself drawn into the strange world of these objects, which became increasingly unrecognizable; they lost their original scale and purpose; they became visitors from another place, possessed of a strange autonomy and independence, with an inner life and power.





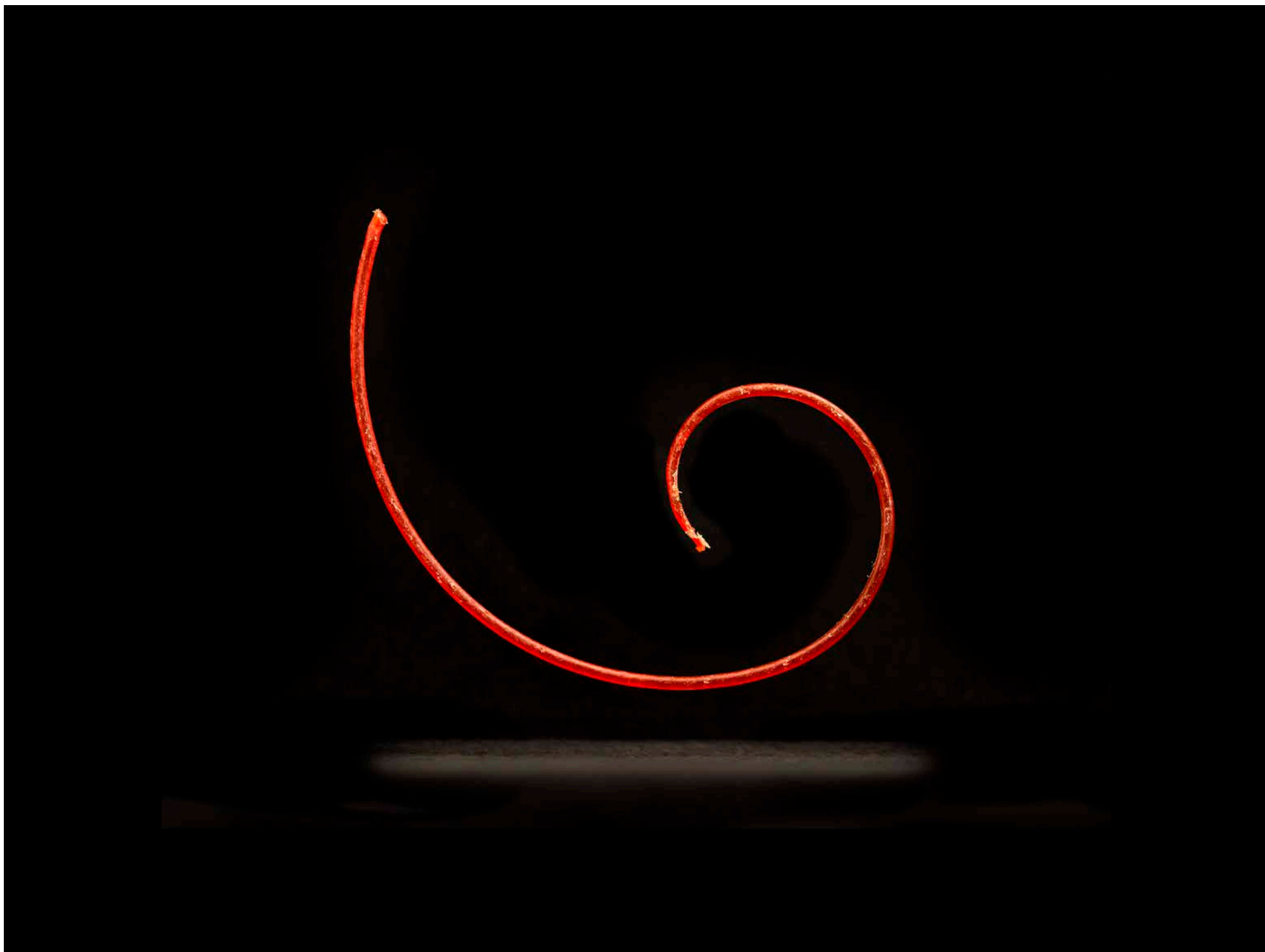












Of course, this is aesthetic skill, artistic trickery. It results from things like: choice of subject; arrangement of lighting and background; selection of lens and focal point; composition and framing of the image, and so on. It is a simple and powerful demonstration of the role of aesthetics - sensory experience - in the creation of art. It shows how, through aesthetics, the ordinary can become extraordinary. It is the alchemy of the *camera obscura*, turning base metal into gold. It is *transubstantiation*, *metastoecheiosis*.

As much as these objects are transformed into visitors from another world, these images are a window into that world. I believe that this second world is always there, enormously active, operating independently within us, yet largely unknown to us. Certain people - mystics, indigenous peoples, artists - retain the ability to keep '2 eyes' open to two worlds - that of present reality, that of the infinity of the soul.

I do not think it is too much to claim, as Jung did, that the artist stands at a gateway, bringing into actuality the visions, fantasies, and awesome powers that dwell beyond the threshold.

You could say that art learnt its tricks in the service of religion, and now it uses those tricks for other purposes, serving other masters. The aesthetic skills of art have become the tools of advertising and entertainment. Some would argue that the ritual and spiritual role of art is dead, and good riddance!

But just because God is 'dead', does not mean the gods are not still alive within us. All of us still stand at the gateway between two worlds. Art's purpose remains to show us our deeper selves, to bestow upon us the riches of that other world, the world of the soul. The artist continues to be a gatekeeper to that world, and the photographer, through his lens, provides a window into heaven.

Thank you very much.



THE END