

Duchamp and the notion of optical tactility

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Initially, Marcel Duchamp's preoccupation with the expanded perceptible experience is articulated mostly in terms of optics, mechanics, and perspective and it is expressed through the idea of extra-retinal perception. He manifested his interest in broadening the limits of visibility by optical and technical experiments accompanying the construction of the *Large Glass* (1915–1923) or later by optical experiments with kinetic machines (*Rotative plaques verre*, 1920, *Rotative demi-sphère*, 1925).

In the forties of the twentieth century, Duchamp paid more attention to tactile and erotic phenomenological experiences, the artworks from this period are mostly sculptural, deliberately engaged with materials and their processing. Duchamp's previous preoccupation with optical and mechanical is apparently replaced by his interests in haptic and organic. His sculptural work is connecting the conceptual with the bodily, sometimes subtly evoking eroticism. Duchamp's last monumental work entitled *Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*, (1946–1966), being created over the last two decades of his life, is basically focused on visual experience and eroticism. While observing the work through the peepholes of the wooden door, the look deprived of a physical touch establishes the oscillatory experience melting visual and tactile sensation. The multidimensional bodily experience of space, time and meaning can be thus the common point allowing us to compare Duchamp's last, formally quite different work *Given* with the *Large Glass*.

Optical tactility

The notion of optical tactility as formulated by Michael Taussig (1993) can be described as a specific perceptual qualitative transformation of visual sensing into

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the haptic mean of contact. To experience this, it is essentially “to insist on breaking away from the tyranny of the visual notion of image [...] To emphasize the non-visual is to emphasize the bodily impact of imaging [...]” (Taussig 1993, pp. 57-58). Taussig states that similar experience of non-visual imaging can be caused by the ritual use of psychedelic drugs. While experiencing altered states of consciousness “you may also see your body as you feel yourself leaving it, and one can even see oneself seeing oneself – but above all this seeing is felt in a non-visual way. You move into the interior of images, just as images move into you” (ibid. p. 58).

We can find similar observations about the expanded character of and altered perceptual experience in some of the writings of Walter Benjamin, which are concerned with the influence of contemporary technology capable of mechanic reproduction onto the way of sensing the physical reality as well as experiencing images. “Optical unconsciousness” and a specific haptic quality of images recorded by a movie camera for example, reveal the hidden physiognomic aspects of visual worlds. Benjamin reflects upon the modifications of human perception caused by new optical technologies: while merging the perceived object with the body of the perceiver, the physiognomic aspects of visual phenomena gain bodily or tactile presence; they start to exist as a tactile reality (phenomena) at the level of bodily perception.

In line with Benjamin’s reflections, Taussig’s anthropological analysis of contemporary visual culture observes that nowadays it is not possible to deal with the multiplication of new forms of visual reality merely by visual contemplation anymore, but only by a new sort of tactility: “This provides a vivid notion of optical tactility, plunging us into the plane, where the object world and the visual copy merge” (ibid., p. 35). The accelerated invention of new optical devices and technologies of reproduction caused the disturbance of tactility up to the point where the eye is taking over the tactile sensation: while looking at the world, observer is simultaneously touching it, simultaneously, the dematerialized form of the world itself is entering into his own body.

The notorious Duchamp’s appeal¹ to abolish the superiority of the retinal (visual) in perceiving the work of art cannot be understood only as promotion of the conceptual aspect of the artwork (an idea). His emphasis on the non-retinal experience of art can be comprehended as an initiative for searching the new forms of perceptual or sensual dimensions in the constitution of an artwork. The idea is manifested in his artwork as a constant aspiration to span the perceptual experience into a domain of discernable crossings between the visual and the non-visual, the sensible and the intelligible.

Apart from a range of artworks based on the exploration of the issues mentioned above, Duchamp was concerned with this topic particularly by his invention of the notion of *infrathin*. The collection of forty six notes, published posthumously in

¹ “The painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual” (Duchamp 1975, p. 183).

the booklet *Notes*², uncovers the artist in a less conceptual but intuitive light. In many cases the examples of infrathin perceptual qualities describe subtle sensorial transitions (between audible and visual, visual and tangible...).

Magnifying glass for touching infrathin.

The warmth of a seat (that had just been vacated) is infrathin.

When the fumes of tobacco also smell of the mouth that exhales it, the two odors commingle by way of infrathin.

2 forms cast in the same mold (?) differ from each other by infra thin separable amount.

The condensation or moisture on polished surfaces (glass, copper) is infrathin.

(Duchamp 1980 (n. 32r, 4, 11v, 35, 36) pp. 21-36)

Referring to infrathin dimension, Duchamp is describing subtle sensorial experiences, which escape any form of conceptualization and strictly rational (logic) comprehension. Thierry de Duve (1984, p. 235) argues that the invention of infrathin is another form of Duchamp's aspiration to stimulate the observer's imagination. Duchamp was attentively observing a specific aspect of ephemeral, mostly banal incidents, employing the notion of infrathin as a conceptual instrument for describing the infinitesimal aspects of physical phenomena as a mean to define barely- or non-sensual but still imaginable phenomenological events. Duchamp's neologism infrathin can be understood as the "elucidation of the intelligible embodied in the sensible", establishing thus a particular connection of cerebral/mental and visceral/sensual qualities. Didier Semin observes that "Duchamp's notes on infrathin attempt to identify those unheard of moments where a pure abstraction of the fourth dimension would deliver itself up in an indisputably concrete, yet extraordinarily fleeting manner" (Semin 2004, p. 245).

Large Glass and the Haptic Experience of Optical

In his notes³ accompanying the creation of the *Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, 1915–1923)*, Duchamp writes that the work on glass was originally conceived to capture the projected shadow of a higher dimension reality: the upper part of the *Glass* contains the Bride, imagined as being a three dimensional shadow of a four dimensional entity.

² The notes of Marcel Duchamp have been published in two parts: *Notes*, Champs-Flammarion. Paris 1980 and *Duchamp du signe*, Champs-Flammarion. Paris 1975. *Notes* are divided into four thematic parts: Inframince, Le Grand Verre, Projets and Jeux de mots.

³ Dating period of Duchamp's notes concurs with the construction of the *Large Glass*, mostly in its preparatory and beginning stage (1912–1915); they are collected in the *Box of 1914* and the *Green Box* (1934). Moreover, some notes from the same or later period and collected later in the *White Box* (1966) deal with the problem of fourth dimension in connection with the *Large Glass*.

In spite of the complex narrative configuration of elements constituting the imaginary of the *Glass* – the Bride, a group of Bachelors and a set of mechanic devices, which transform and translate erotic energies on the *Glass*, the primary concern of Duchamp was a visualization of the imperceptible relation of the visible and invisible.

The conceptualization of *Large Glass* relied on Duchamp's deliberating use of transparency and its relevant optical effects. He drew his inspiration on the use of perspective, but only up to the point of its anamorphic negation: by applying dimensional analogy to conceptualize the transition from 3rd dimension to the 4th dimension he opposed to the classical rule of linear perspective, which is reducing 3rd dimension to 2nd dimension. By this mean, he introduced the idea of specific perspective, which can only be reached by engaging the particular optical tactility of sensation or so to speak, by employing the mysterious "sixth sense" of perception.

It is not surprising, as George Didi-Huberman (2008) observes, that the *Glass*, being conceived as a projection of imaginary four dimensional entity into our three dimensional world, was considered in optical as well as in tactile (haptic) terms. In his writings, Duchamp himself accentuated a tactile aspect of vision:

Use transparent glass and mirror for perspective ⁴.

Analogy: perspective ⁴: the tree dimensional perspective representation of an object ⁴ will be perceptible to the eye ³ just as the perspective of a cathedral is perceptible to the flat eye² (and not to the eye ³). This perception for the eye ² is a wandering-perception (relating to the sense of distance).

An eye ² will only have a tactile perception of a perspective ³. It must wander from one point to another and measure the distances. It will not have a view of the whole like the eye ³. By analogy: wandering perception by the eye ³ of perspective ⁴.

(Duchamp 1975, p. 125; translation: Sanouillet M. and Peterson E. 1989, p. 88)

Or, we can say, the eye will not see the whole as an "eye", unless it wanders in a "tactile" way ("tactile exploration") over the surface of the glass. Wandering means moving, implying the dimension of time. Ordinary visual perception, while focusing at the point a, point b, point c etc. cannot reach the space "in between". One can only attain the whole by the complex perception, conducting a sort of optical tactility and a non-retinal "sixth sense", capable to perceive the fullness of the "empty" space between the point a and point b (as a space-time continuum).

The Large Glass is conceived on deliberate use of optical effects of glass, which allow the constitution of spatial multiplying or dissections, imaginary separations and refractions. The surface of glass is transparent as well as mirroring, thus incorporating duality that works like a visual trap by destabilizing the ordinary perceptual experience of space and time. As Lyotard states, the *Glass* is

embodying two kinds of mirrors: the first one is formed by a virtual intersection perpendicular to both parts of *the Glass* (upper and lower) – at the point of the middle transversal. The second mirror is engaged by modification of our sight: the transparent surface is not only the medium of “seeing through” but is also reflective; it is up to the observer to choose what to be engaged with, what to see; object reality around *the Glass*, the complex iconography on its surface, the ephemeral reflection of light in the space, his own reflection or his own mental projections. The simultaneous intersection of transparency and reflection induces a specific perception of transitional virtual space in motion, where cast shadows are melting the vision of the real objects, represented reality and imaginary mental worlds, thus creating an intangible impression of fleeting allusions and apparitions.

Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas

Duchamp’s last monumental artwork entitled *Given 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas* strongly differs from *the Large Glass* formally speaking, but notwithstanding reformulates the problem of expanded perceptual experience in a very new way. While *the Large Glass* is inducing the extra-retinal, unstable, and mobile perceptual experience by using the optical effects of glass and methodologically, dimensional analogy, the installation *Given* establishes the conditions of experiencing erotic tactile vision by constructing a physical distance between the viewer and the viewed. The erotic story between the bride and her bachelor(s) is connecting both artworks, as well as practically all elements from *the Large Glass* are transposed into the scene of *Given*: the bride, illuminating gas, waterfall etc. In both works, the fourth dimension is treated as a conceptual fact which cannot accomplish in physical reality; it remains to be unseen and untouched, though it can be experienced and conceived.

The key element of the installation *Given*, constructing the distance between the viewer and the scene, is a wooden door, being perforated by two peepholes to peer through it. The door is setting up the obstacle for the observer’s body but not for his curious gaze. Thus, the barrier is dividing a corporeal experience from the visual: the erotic and seductive scene invites us to approach, to touch, to explore it from near; however, the wooden door (in front of which we cannot be nothing else but still) sets up the situation to become aware of the body in a new and particular way. By visual scope we become part of the scene, out of which we stay, in the same time, excluded. The position of the body is opposed to the gaze and the visual energy directed to the stage is returned back and transformed into strong sensation of excited but immobile state of the body. The installation *Given* is trying to define the imaginary “inter-space” by breaking down with any illusionism or symbolic connotations of the artwork. The spectator is seeing him/herself seeing, sensing him/herself sensing; the self-awareness increases while sensing his/her own body immanence.

Duchamp’s work can induce the perceptual experience which is not purely optical neither strictly conceptual, but essentially corporeal, melting the cerebral and the visceral. The optical tactility is plunging us into a bodily experience of

images, merging the object world and its visual reflection into the same corporeal plane. The haptic power of vision, the mediation of visual into tactile physical experience engages the perception of space “in-between” as described by Didi-Huberman:

The point is not to choose between what we see [...] and what sees us; the important is the space between. It is needed to be dialectical, therefore, to try to think the contradictory oscillation in its rhythmic extension and contraction (the heart beat that pulses, the tide of the sea that waves). A moment that imposes neither a surfeit of sense nor the cynical absence of sense. This is the moment that opens the gap between what observes us in what we see.⁴

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⁴ Didi-Huberman 1992, pp. 51-52: “Il n’y a pas à choisir entre ce que nous voyons (...) et ce qui nous regarde (...). Il y a, il n’y a qu’à s’inquiéter de l’entre. Il n’y a qu’à tenter de dialectiser, c’est-à-dire tenter de penser l’oscillation contradictoire dans son mouvement de diastole et de systole (la dilatation et la contraction du Coeur qui bat, le flux et le reflux de la mer qui bat) ... C’est le moment où ce que nous voyons commence juste d’être atteint par ce qui nous regarde – un moment qui n’impose ni le trop-plein de sens, ni l’absence cynique de sens. C’est le moment où s’ouvre l’antre creusé par ce qui nous regarde dans ce que nous voyons.

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