

# Duchamp, Materiality, and Intersubjectivity: from Phenomenology to Aesthetics

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This paper, as much as the presentation I delivered on the occasion of the conference Human Freedom at the test of AI and Neurosciences, starts with the same reflection on contemporary artistic production and practices that lies beyond a consistent part of the doctoral project I am currently undertaking. It feels harder, if not, sometimes, impossible, to distinguish a work of art from any other object in today's art scene. What I mean is not a criticism of the lack of technical mastery in contemporary works but rather a question about the value and, ultimately, the existence of an actual ontology of art in the first place. I started by focusing on the phenomenology of aesthetics instead.

In his 2004 book *Spaces, Domains and Meanings*, semiotician Per Aage Brandt suggests that it is *technè*, the ability to practise artful, skilled behaviours, that makes artistic objects “interesting” and worth of “attention”<sup>1</sup>. These techniques are bodily activities by which certain doings and body parts are studied, trained, and practised with elaborate skill. Artists thus need to employ some sort of attention, a specifically artistic one, in their process of making, and, in return, attention is awakened in observing audiences. Moreover, Brandt argues that the implementation of specific techniques is not, *per se*, sufficient to arouse attention, and the experience of cultural practices (including artworks) has been part of collective, ritualised habits since the origins of civilisation, coded and framed in terms of specific environments and conditions. From sexual practices and religious rituals to the cleansed

<sup>1</sup> P. A. Brandt, *Spaces, Domains and Meaning: Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*, Peter Lang, Series European Semiotics, Bern 2004, p. 203.

and neutralised milieu of theatres and contemporary art museums, the role of contexts in such experiences is fundamental.

However, Brandt also addresses the progressive aestheticisation of concepts in contemporary art, bringing the example of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, while this claim could be extended to many artistic expressions over the last two centuries. Defined by Brandt as the expression of an escalating «modern collective “hysterization” of attention» (emphasis by the author)<sup>2</sup>, technical practice is simply reduced to the intentional act of deciding for an object and its right to be displayed in a chosen context. Strongly inspired by, and later involved in, the Dada movement, Duchamp and his ready-mades aimed to question the very notion of art (and Art), the socio-politics around its exhibition, observation, and ultimately adoration.

One of his most famous works, *Fountain*, described by William Camfield as «one of the most famous/infamous objects in the history of modern art»<sup>3</sup>, presents a very interesting case for its formal and intellectual properties, authorship, and disappearance. *Fountain* was first exhibited in April 1917 on the occasion of the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists. The porcelain urinal signed “R. Mutt 1917” was displayed at The Grand Central Palace in New York City: the act of choosing an everyday factory-fresh piece of plumbing, according to Duchamp, was enough to make an artwork. Despite the press actively commented the selection of the piece for the exhibition, whether enthusiastically or with indignation, the work did not likewise resonate with the audience since the sculpture was eventually not exhibited for the public, did not figure in the catalogue, and was innocuously described as a “bathroom fixture”. It was only later, thanks to a picture taken by Alfred Stieglitz, that *Fountain* gained notoriety, even though the original work got lost and only replicas have survived to the present day.

In the specific case of ready-mades, the chosen artistic practice is not involved in manufacturing the object, which is found complete in its production conditions, but in the selection made by the artist that becomes a whole technique in itself through creative individual authority. Changing the context and the purpose behind the situatedness of an object is enough to redirect the attention of audiences in artistic terms. In Duchamp's case, this mechanism is implemented through the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917*, in R. Kuenzli-F. M. Naumann (edited by), *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1987, p. 64.

translation of a urinal from a practical object to its artistic conceptualisation as both a fountain and *Fountain*. Since then, most diverse questions have been raised on the nature of *Fountain* and, by extension, artistic practices. The aesthetic conceptualisation of an object of ordinary use became a fully entitled creative act, and even a whole artistic movement, and the choice of display the expression of artistic intentions. A question arises spontaneously: If there is no exhibition, is there ready-made art? Is its status of art only contingent or also substantial?

If the technical aspect that Brandt valued in his work and was earlier introduced in this paper seems to be progressively losing value – and it is, increasingly, in the century that has passed since ready-mades were first exhibited – it could be claimed that it is the practice of ‘witnessing’ (intended as an expansion of the most traditional spectating, to include watching, listening, smelling, . . . , and even participating) and its designated environment that predominantly characterises contemporary artistic practices. This habit and its framing define today’s art as much (if not more than) art itself: it appears to be more a question of contextual narrative rather than ontology. This spatial determination, as much as the architectural framing, allows us to go beyond and even against purely intellectual interpretation: some historically and monetarily valued paintings might go unnoticed if exhibited in an unusual place, while any object that happens to find itself in a renowned institution can arouse interest and trigger sensorial reactions. Ultimately, any object, and thus any artwork, is always only about itself until it is put in dialogue with other objects, subjects, and anything constituting its surroundings, or until we challenge the way we position ourselves in respect to it: «[a]nything meaningful is meaningful in a “context”»<sup>4</sup>.

As digital reproduction and new media have shaped a time of abundant artistic production, many museums and, in general, exhibition spaces have shifted their focus from parameters strictly based on the historical monetary value of exhibited works to broader narrative approaches, and in particular towards architecture, exhibition designs, and audiences: the experience of the exhibition has become as relevant as what is exhibited. Many institutions today are moving from a collection-centered approach to recognising, as Suzanne MacLeod writes, exhibitions as possibilities to enhance practices and knowledge<sup>5</sup>. This

<sup>4</sup> P. A. Brandt, *Spaces, Domains and Meaning: Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> S. MacLeod, *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 1.

perspective follows many other concerns, such as understanding exhibitions according to contemporary values and practices, including educational services and didactic approaches, user-led meaning-making, and wider multidimensional and multisensorial takes on the traditional exhibiting structure. For this reason, exhibitions' architecture and display design have become veritable social and cultural products that can only be activated through occupation, fruition, and even opposition. I would argue that once new technologies and media – including, for instance, video making and extensive digital and material reproduction – have slowly undermined unicity as an object-oriented value, it is, in turn, the exhibition and its experience that have gained such dimension.

This immaterial take on value has today pervaded countless spheres of our contemporary lifestyle. Experience economy, one of the latest trends of capitalism, has deeply influenced the attention that has been recently given to the production of exhibitions and even the construction of new buildings dedicated to art exhibitions. To rephrase German architect Anna Klingmann, this approach has led practitioners to wonder not necessarily what architecture is, has or does, but how its users feel and, ultimately, who they are<sup>6</sup>. Starting from these premises, I want to look at the concept, practice, and phenomenon of exhibiting as the interrelation of three fundamental elements: the visitor's body, the architecture as a phenomenal, diachronic, and semio-narrative tool, and artworks as objects. The audience is thus (re)framed as the complexity of subjects which feature «corporeal capacities in co-creation»<sup>7</sup>.

As we discuss space and our physical engagement with it, in both functional and aesthetic terms, the first element that comes into place is the human body, particularly the role of bodily and embodied perception. I want to start borrowing from Merleau-Ponty a definition of the body that suits my proposed analysis while acknowledging its limitations: the body is the first of all cultural objects<sup>8</sup>. In the frame of this paper, the research interest around the body is a central tool in producing meaning while recognising the geographical, cultural, and political possibilities and variations on the theme, especially approaches that

<sup>6</sup> A. Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> C. Stalpaert-K. Pewny-J. Coppens-P. Vermeulen, *Unfolding Spectatorship: Shifting Political, Ethical and Intermedial Positions*, Academia Press, Gent 2018, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, D. A. Landes (translated by), Routledge, London and New York (1945) 2012.

challenge the male-centred, Western, and purely scientific definition of the body that we often take for granted. These include feminist conceptualisations, the limits of the white body and intersectional theory, and non-cultural and more-than-human approaches to corporeality.

Looking at the human experience as bodily grounded and following Gibson's ecological approach<sup>9</sup>, contexts, as much as situatedness and diachronicity, profoundly affect how we individually and socially make sense of what surrounds us. In the specific context of exhibitions, the physical experience occurs in association with the nature of the creative expression that art entails, which is not understood as pure embellishment or technique but in its performativity and narrativity, as the relational result of bodily acts of creation and subsequently perception. In this phenomenal frame, the relationship between meaning and consciousness can exist only when the body is involved. Coming from a tradition that includes Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, semiotician and linguist Göran Sonesson writes that «embodiment emerges as a problem within the philosophy of consciousness, which aims to reconstruct the world as given to a (generic) subject»<sup>10</sup>. This perspective highlights an essential aspect of how consciousness acts: the body, which determines the way we are present in the world we perceive, cannot be merely another mentally perceivable object or simply an epiphenomenon playing an incidental role in meaning-making processes. Realistically, the body is the contact point between consciousness and the physical world or, as Sonesson phrases it, «our *condition of access* to all possible experience of the world» (emphasis in original)<sup>11</sup>. Whatever is given to the realm of our consciousness is first and foremost presented bodily: as we are physically grounded in the world, perception depends on our positionality. Primal element of every encounter, the body cannot but present itself as part of the meaning.

The idea that the role of the body should not be overlooked in aesthetics was often addressed as a contemporary revolution in philosophy. However, we can find in the work of early modern and pre-Cartesian theorists references to bodily perception, frequently considering the body as an open organism in constant exchange with its surround-

<sup>9</sup> J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1979.

<sup>10</sup> G. Sonesson, *From the meaning of embodiment to the embodiment of meaning: A study on phenomenological semiotics*, in T. Ziemke-J. Zlatev-R. M. Frank (edited by), *Body, Language and Mind. Vol 1. Embodiment*, Mouton, Berlin 2007, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

dings rather than a self-contained and self-identical expression of the mind. This approach oriented to physical and multisensorial perception and feelings affirms a pre-reflective, non-discursive mode of knowing and symbolising. Given these premises, we can look at artworks as particular to the human phenomenal sphere both as forms of practice (in their creative dimension) and experience (in their perceptive dimension). Tied to a bodily, perceptual response, artworks play within the traditional semiotic relationship between symbol and symbolised, not only depending on the associations that exist between name and object but also on how a person projects certain bodily sensations onto the object in question. This relationship is structured around symbols (gestures, words, shapes, and many more) referring to imagery (emotional, visual, lexical, etc.), which are translated into new ways of meaning.

Adopting a phenomenological and semiotic approach to spectatorship means addressing the corporeal ways in which audiences engage. This implies developing a specific interest in what is happening to the spectator while “spectating”, but also in what audiences simply do. Although it is central to acknowledge that audiences are not singular and homogenous entities and many factors impact perception per se (from gender and social class to geography and location), the artist’s physical presence (whether direct, for example, in performance and video art, or indirect, namely resulting in the creation of visual art and physical objects) has a role in affecting aesthetic experiential phenomena in ways that trace back to intersubjectivity. As Siri Hustvedt writes, «[i]n art the meeting between viewer and thing implies intersubjectivity. [...] It is the silent encounter between the viewer, “I”, and the object, “it”. That “it”, however, is the material trace of another human consciousness [...] the residue of an “I” or a “you”»<sup>12</sup>.

Today, the complex and manifold experience of artistic objects concerns the entire body: artworks can surround us and even be in motion, they can be smelled or touched, or be embedded in the artist’s performing body itself. For this reason, both positioning towards and interaction with artworks affect perception and interpretation, which is further influenced and oriented through architectural and display narratives. Between aesthetics, intersubjective encounters, and possible meaning, contemporary exhibitions must be thought of as relational milieus where value is experiential and personal but also social and

<sup>12</sup> S. Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2005, p. xix.

collaborative, in the interplay between individuality and community, art and presence, gaze and physicality, image and material, mediation and simulacrum, occupation and estrangement, and many, many, more. This reflection shows how artworks constantly experience new forms and framings collectively and institutionally (from historical settings and interpretation to exhibition narratives and design) and subjectively. They cultivate new meanings and experiences but are also practised upon in different ways through time and in diverse spaces. Bodily and symbolic practices and interpretations make artworks entities in constant development since the properties and values that we find in them belong to the broader structure and deconstruction of the world where human practices are renegotiated.