Dissecting the Imperceptible

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REFERENCES

Davila, Thierry. *De l'inframince : brève histoire de l'imperceptible, de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours*, Paris : Ed. du Regard, 2010

- 1 Encouraged by his museum experience as curator at the Mamco in Geneva, Thierry Davila offers us the recent history of the flipside of art, the one played out on the borderlines of the perceptible, where extreme tenuousness is presented as the actual motif of creation. His book, which is an offshoot of his doctoral thesis, supervised by Eric Michaud and submitted in 2008 at the EHESS, and is devoted to the creation of the *barely-visible*, draws up a subtle report showing great flair within a historiography that is missing, and it does so in a novel and impressive manner. Because flair—and subtlety—are what are needed to take a look at art history the other way round to what is usually taken as the object, i.e. the presence of forms and their effectiveness. The author actually contrasts the concept of “effectiveness” associated with the world of the visible, not to say the spectacular, with “efficiency” a notion borrowed from François Jullien’s analyses of Chinese thought: a discreet way of making slow and noiseless transformations, which are nevertheless quite strong enough to alter perception. By dooming viewers to a slowness and a re-learning process with regard to how they look at things, almost invisible works challenge the logic of meanings in order to “open the perceptible up to an unstable and subtle development through the determination of a threshold of perceptibility which is also a possible threshold of the disappearance of the datum” (p. 20). While there have been attempts to write a work-less history of art (as attested to by the republication of the very literary *Artistes sans œuvres* by Jean-Yves Jouannais, Paris : Gallimard, 2009), nobody has currently tackled the systematic examination of any existing, albeit tiny, production. By forever teetering on the tight wire between presence and absence, these works derive their strength far from emphatic and

stentorian flashings, in their capacity to relaunch aesthetic discernment, the art of nuance.

- 2 In his introduction, the author first lays out the framework of his set of issues, even bringing in the antique narratives of Pliny the Elder about the rivalry between Protogenes and Appelles, who had become involved in a competition to know who would be capable of drawing the finest line, an almost imperceptible line which would precisely demonstrate the *greatness* of artistic genius. After reviewing shrewdly selected examples of the discourse on art—from Giorgio Vasari and Leon Battista Alberti to Viktor Chklovski—, Thierry Davila proceeds towards the core of his idea: “... how to produce intensities by subtraction?” (p. 28). And with what *œuvre* might he better connect if not Marcel Duchamp’s? By way of the “inframince”—the “infra-thin”—the father of the readymade managed to include his visual ideas, from about 1935 on, within a phenomenology of the imperceptible, where singularity and differential action are expressed not only in scaled-down dimensions—the fact of removed thickness and thus formal evidence—but also through operations playing on duration, slowness and delay. Because this is the central core of his thesis, Thierry Davila devotes two entire chapters to Duchamp. First, he painstakingly re- and de-constructs the notion of the “infra-thin”; then he questions it, using the artist’s works and actions as his yardstick. By recreating Duchamp’s elective affinities for the mathematical writings of Esprit Pascal Jouffret and Henri Poincaré, he delves extremely deeply into Duchamp’s clearly experimental logic, and forges links with common theoretical corpuses from Henri Bergson and, more unexpectedly, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Rare are those writings that have successfully conducted such a subtle and stimulating investigation about the man who has inspired so many pens, rightly or wrongly.
- 3 While Marcel Duchamp enjoyed ever-growing acclaim, going hand in hand with nothing less than institutional recognition since the late 1950s, the generations of the two subsequent decades illustrate, in their own way, a liking for “de-materialization”, not to say “the immaterial”. Still rooted in a phenomenological reading, Thierry Davila develops the role of experiment conveyed by the aim of changing perception through case studies of European and American artists. Based on configurations of individual issues involving Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Andy Warhol, Ian Wilson, and Robert Barry, to name but a handful, the author retraces the different adjustments and transformations made to the “infra-thin”, which are henceforth played out more in relation to disappearance and invisibility than to the *barely*-visible. To bolster his argument, he devotes an essential chapter to the acoustic experiments of Max Neuhaus. But within this extremely interesting fabric of aesthetic correlations, crossings and differences, one particular thing can be read between the lines, without being named by the author. In those Cold War years, when the settling of the Holocaust trauma and the nuclear arena was overtaken by international political and military crises, the efficiency of the imperceptible was also and above all nurtured by a *Zeitgeist* marked by ambient uncertainty and an ambient climate of threat. Might the consideration of art’s political function—aimed at, rejected or repressed—perhaps have been able to enrich an analysis that already, *per se*, benefits from a complete relevance? One thinks in particular of the visual dialogue between the works of Jíří Kovanda and Chris Burden, between Prague and Los Angeles, and of the echo of history within the recent works of the Slovakian artist Roman Ondák (dealt with in the book’s final chapter).

- 4 If, in a consequential way, the author proposes a case study with the purpose of writing a history of works, he brings to the fore an unusual but coherent selection showing that art has not stopped inventing itself, and this also and because of what barely exists. We have got the point: the history of the imperceptible is anything but a trifling matter, and for it Thierry Davila's beneficial work has once and for all set down a significant marker.