

JACQUELYNN BAAS

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UNFRAMING EXPERIENCE

There is no art per se, only mutual transformations of works of art and observers.

ALEXANDER DORNER, 1947

Manifesting Emptiness, an exhibition curated by Milena Hoegsberg at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, examined formal and philosophical approaches to empty space by artists ranging from Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, John Cage, Yoko Ono, and Nam June Paik to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Kimsooja, and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. On view from August 24 through September 29, 2007, it was part of “fluXspace,” a series of projects, programs, and physical changes to the Betty Rymer Gallery intended to engage the questions: What is a gallery? Why do we make exhibitions? What do exhibitions have to do with the teaching and making of art? The works of art included or evoked were all in one way or another inquiries into the nature of nothing—territory that led me to explore a different question: How can art like this, art about “nothing,” effect change in the world?

The fundamental way art acts in the world, as I am hardly the first to observe, is by changing consciousness.¹ Changing how people “see” is one of the things modernism has been about. According to the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, consciousness is “the unified mental pattern that brings together the object and the self.”² Pattern and analogy are key to how we think, which is why art is such a powerful consciousness-shaping force. Art reminds us of something, something about ourselves. Yet at the same time, art affects consciousness by pulling us out of ourselves. One reason art is an effective tool for changing consciousness is that the eye is like the mind—both function by shifting focus. This quality links the two so closely that “seeing” is a metaphor for “understanding.”

Epigraph from Alexander Dorner, *The Way beyond 'Art': The Work of Herbert Bayer* (New York: Wittenborn, Shultz, 1947), 226.

1. See, for example, Lawrence Rinder, ed., *Searchlight: Consciousness at the Millennium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), and Arthur Danto's essay “The Gap between Art and Life,” this volume.

2. Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 11.

3. Nicholas Humphrey, *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

5. Humphrey, *Seeing Red*, 70.

6. *Ibid.*, 131.

7. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 4–5. Along these same lines, in the last paragraph of the book Dewey states: “The union that is presented in perception persists in the remaking of impulsion and thought” (349).

The psychologist and philosopher Nicholas Humphrey theorizes that sensation (the ongoing, moment-to-moment physical feeling of being alive) and perception (our mental apprehension, thought processes, and knowledge that generate recognition) are two quite separate activities that developed at different evolutionary stages.³ Because sensation and perception occur simultaneously, it is hard for us to separate them. The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid defined perception as “the formation of immediate belief.”⁴ Perception is the framing and analysis of objects and events by the conditioned mind based on experience. We perceive a chair, for example, because we have previous experience with objects in the category “chair.”

Experience, however, is not perception; it is sensation—the immediate, emotional, active response to stimuli from sense organs and the brain. Sensation is feeling. What sensation does, according to Humphrey, “is to track [our] personal interaction with the external world—creating the sense each person has of being present and engaged, lending a hereness, a nowness, a me-ness to the experience of the present moment.”⁵ Sensation generates consciousness.

What is the purpose of consciousness; why does it matter? Humphrey speculates that, from an evolutionary perspective, consciousness matters because it is its function to matter.⁶ At some point in the evolution of sentient beings, consciousness appeared with, as perhaps its most useful feature, the sense of a self whose life is worth pursuing. This obviously would have given our ancestors a competitive edge in terms of their own survival and the survival of their offspring. Consciousness has everything to do with our sense of ourselves as “beings.” This sense of a special self, Humphrey argues, is the source of our intuition that there is something about us that goes beyond the physical, that some people believe survives the death of the body.

The mental pattern that creates consciousness is something we develop, and that we go on developing throughout our lives. Every experience modifies this pattern by creating physical changes in the brain, mutations of the mind—experience strengthens some synaptic connections while weakening others. In this realm, art, as the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey argued, is nothing special.⁷ Except for one thing: art is something humans “do,” on purpose, in order to generate mind-altering experience in themselves and others. The sense of being present and engaged that art practice generates in both artist and viewer is what makes art so satisfying. Art elicits our experiential engagement, which, like a sugar-coated pill, carries its own satisfactions, no matter how strong or bitter the content.

I want to suggest that there is an inverse relationship between the degree of framing or categorization with which perception “makes sense of” sensation and the effectiveness of art experience. The less “framed” the sensation, the more open the situation; the more unfamiliar the pattern of sense stimuli, the greater will be the impact on consciousness. Buddhists call this mental state “beginner’s mind” or “mind of don’t know.”⁸ It is an open, alert, nonjudgmental attitude toward experience that is cultivated in both meditation practice and art practice. This open, creative state of mind comes naturally to artists, which is why so many artists have been attracted to the teachings of the Buddha—they already “know” what he was talking about.⁹ Central to my thinking in what follows is the underrated relationship between the Taoist/Buddhist concept of emptiness and the preeminent cultural issue of the modern era—removing the barrier between art and life.

Many philosophies and religions emphasize wisdom and compassion. The teaching unique to Taoism and Buddhism is the teaching on emptiness: all things are “empty” of inherent self-existence. In Buddhist Tibet, wisdom is the female attribute; compassion, male. The visualized union of their manifestations generates, in the mind of the practitioner, a blissful experience of the so-called “empty” nature of reality. Taoist/Buddhist emptiness is the opposite of “empty” in the usual sense of this English word. It is full of a fundamental sense of connection and potential: there is nothing, including ourselves, that exists either separately or permanently. Everything is connected and in process. To perceive this counterintuitive reality is to experience emptiness.

Now let me return to the question: How can art that encourages seeing “nothing” effect positive change in the world? One answer can be found in the work of two artists born more than fifty years apart: Marcel Duchamp and his godson Gordon Matta-Clark. For Duchamp, unlike Matta-Clark, there is no documentary evidence that he was influenced by Taoist/Buddhist perspectives on reality. There is, though, plenty of indirect evidence. I want to begin by expanding upon the concept of art as medicine—that “sugar-coated pill” I mentioned earlier. In “The Inventor of Free Time”—a story by Duchamp’s friend Robert Lebel published together with the novel *Double View* in 1964¹⁰—a character based on Duchamp says,

“Everything announces a passage to go through, a rupture to realize. Between this world and the other, there’s no legendary transition, no discursive communication. No one offers us the key to some different nirvana because it seems as if, where we’re going, ecstasy has no reason to exist. . . . No ceremonial, no incantations, no rites, but reaching the point of lucidity where the notion of time becomes a fruit one can peel,” and with his fingers he made these little, nimble movements.

8. See, for example, Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

9. Buddhist texts became available to the educated public in Europe and America beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the last quarter that various translations of Buddhist texts began to yield anything like a coherent understanding of Buddhist theories of mind. See Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

10. Robert Lebel first published his story in André Breton’s journal *Le Surréalisme, même* in 1957. He republished it along with the novel in 1964, in *La Double vue suivi de L’Inventeur du temps gratuit* (Paris: Soleil Noir). “L’Inventeur du temps gratuit” has been translated into English by Sarah Skinner Kilborne with Julia Koteliansky and published as “The Inventor of Gratuitous Time by Robert Lebel” in *Toutfait*, the online Duchamp journal (issue 2, 2000); http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Art_&_Literature/lebel.html. I have modified their translation somewhat.

11. Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (1969, 1970; rev. ed. New York: Delano Greenidge, 2000), 597.

12. Michel Sanouillet, with Elmer Peterson, *Duchamp du signe: Écrits*, rev. ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 261–62.

13. This point was first made by Tosi Lee in “Watering, That’s My Life: The Symbolism and Self-Imaging of Marcel Duchamp,” Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993, 218.

A fruit presumably peeled in a spiral, like the corkscrew shadow in Duchamp’s so-called “last” painting, *Tu m’*, or the spirals of his “Precision Optics.”

“I’m one of the rare ones to explicitly define [free time],” Lebel’s Duchamp character brags, “to the point where I can, without too much posturing, presume to be its inventor. . . . My ambition is to turn it into a real commodity, a simple object to buy and sell, just like those pharmaceuticals whose properties are known only to chemists, but which are nevertheless sold at every counter.” The statement is reminiscent of the two little “lights,” one red, the other yellow, that Duchamp said he dabbed onto an art-store print, which he then inscribed “Pharmacie.” “I saw that landscape in the dark from the train,” Duchamp later recalled, “and in the dark, at the horizon, there were some lights, because the houses were lit, and that gave me the idea of making those two lights of different colors . . . to become a pharmacy; or at least they gave me the idea of a pharmacy, there on the train.”¹¹



Pharmacy wasn’t the only time Duchamp conceived of art as a cure. My own idea of art as a sugar-coated pill came from a letter he wrote to Tristan Tzara in 1922 proposing they produce a multiple consisting of four cast letters “D, A, D, A,” strung together on a chain together with what Duchamp described as

A fairly short prospectus . . . [where] we would enumerate the virtues of Dada. So that ordinary people from every land will buy it, we’d price it at a dollar, or the equivalent in other currencies. The act of buying this insignia will consecrate the buyer as Dada. . . . [It] would protect against certain maladies, against life’s multiple anxieties, something like those Little Pink Pills for everything. . . .

*You get my idea: nothing “artistic” literary about it; just straight medicine, universal panacea, fetish—in the sense that if you have a toothache you can go to your dentist and ask him if he is Dada.*¹²

From his dentist example, Duchamp’s “Dada” would seem to be someone who can give you relief. The Sanskrit word *dadati* means “giver,” and one of the Sanskrit names for Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, is Abhayam-dada. *Dada*—“giver”—is appended to *abhayam*, which means “fearless.”¹³ So the bodhisattva of

Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) from *Boîte—Series F*, 1966

compassion is “the giver of fearlessness,” a trait that would be very helpful in a dentist as well as an artist.

Another thing about Avalokiteshvara is his ability to manifest as either male or female, depending on the requirements of the situation. The gender of the bodhisattva of compassion is thus open to artistic interpretation. Duchamp gave Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* a mustache and goatee, bestowing on her a male alter ego that paralleled his own female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. His caption, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, read as a single English word, instructs us to “LOOK”!¹⁴ On the other hand, said individually as French letters, their sounds make a sentence that translates as something like “she has a hot bottom.”

Both meanings are conflated in Duchamp’s last major work, a startling diorama visible only to those willing to cross a small, dark room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and “look” through two holes in an old wooden door. The two holes make binocular vision possible: Duchamp wanted his viewers, one at a time, to fully experience his three-dimensional diorama of a

naked female within a mountainous landscape in a dancelike pose that reveals her “bottom.” Duchamp entitled the work *Étant donnés*, or *Given*. (There’s that Sanskrit *da* again—*da*, “give,” is the root of the French word *donner*.¹⁵) Where might the concept for this amazing scene have come from?

Its background resembles that of the *Mona Lisa*. But the strange pose is typical of Tibetan images of *yoginis* and *dakinis*: naked female figures who represent the transformative power of consciousness (p. 222). As a meditative object, the task of such an image is to help the practitioner integrate energies liberated in the process of visualization, or inner “looking.” *Dakini* is a Sanskrit word; in Tibetan, her name is *khadroma*. *Kha* means “celestial space,” or emptiness; *dro* means “moving”; *ma* signals her feminine gender. Thus, *khadroma* is a female moving, or dancing, within emptiness. Her nakedness symbolizes the nature of reality unveiled.

Like Duchamp’s figure in *Étant donnés*, *khadroma*’s arm is raised and her leg bent, although her genitals are not as open as those of Duchamp’s figure. From this point of view, the image who offers herself to us in Philadelphia would seem to be a West-



14. This reading of the title was, I believe, first pointed out by Theodore Reff in 1977 (“Duchamp & Leonardo: L.H.O.O.Q.-Alikes.” *Art in America* 65 [January–February 1977], 90). Its significance was elaborated by Tosi Lee in his dissertation, “Watering, That’s My Life,” and his essay “Fire Down Below and Watering, That’s Life: A Buddhist Reader’s Response to Marcel Duchamp,” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 135.

15. Duchamp famously loved words—their derivations and multiple meanings. In 1967 he disingenuously told Pierre Cabanne: “The word ‘art’ interests me very much. If it comes from Sanskrit, as I’ve heard, it sig-

Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*: 1° *La chute d’eau*, 2° *Le gaz d’éclairage* (*Given*: 1st *The Waterfall*, 2nd *The Illuminating Gas*), 1946–66



nifies ‘making’” (Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Rod Padgett [1971; New York: Da Capo Press, 1987], 16).

16. From a 1953 interview with Dorothy Norman published in *Art in America* 57 (July–August 1969), 38. I have reversed the two phrases for readability.

17. From a January 19, 1959, interview broadcast November 13, 1959, by the BBC as part of the series *Art, Anti-Art*; excerpts available at <http://www.ubu.com/sound/duchamp.html>.

ern version of the female Buddha, Vajrayogini, in her manifestation of emptiness. Both works quite remarkably conflate the bliss of seeing things as they really are—namely, empty of inherent self-existence—with the bliss experienced within the “emptiness” of the female vagina. And both are intended as objects of meditation: they are artistic tools for the transformation of consciousness.

Marcel Duchamp worked to liberate art from the realm of what he called the “retinal” in order to make it more effective medicine for liberating the mind. “Whereas the modern approach to art is based on competition, on making art exoteric,” Marcel Duchamp told Dorothy Norman in 1953, “The true artist, true art, is always esoteric.”¹⁶ His work, like the work of the dada and neo-dada artists who followed him down this path, got dubbed “anti-art” by mainstream critics. In a 1959 interview with Richard Hamilton, Duchamp expressed his opinion of this term:

I’m against the word “anti,” because [anti-artist] is very like “atheist” as compared to “believer.” An atheist is just as . . . religious . . . as the believer is, and an “anti-artist” is just as much of an artist as the other artist. “Anartist” would be much better . . . “an”-artist, meaning, “no artist at all.” That would be my conception.¹⁷

Hamilton restated Duchamp’s word as “a-artist,” which would seem to mean the same thing, and be more linguistically correct. But “a-artist” is not what Duchamp

Sarvabuddhadakini (khadroma), Tibet, 1800s, and *Vajrayogini in Her Manifestation of Emptiness*, Tibet, Shangpa Kagyu lineage

said, and Duchamp was nothing if not verbally precise. Duchamp's "an" is a Sanskrit prefix. His choice suggests that what lay behind "anartist" was the fundamental Buddhist concept of *anatman*, or "no-self"—in contrast with Brahmanism's *atman* or eternal soul. At the same time, *anatman* countered the opposite belief—in the annihilation of the self, which, the Buddha pointed out, presupposes the existence of a separate self to be annihilated. *Anatman* is no self at all, just as "anartist" is "no artist at all."¹⁸

This was Duchamp's conception of the role of the artist—at least his own role as an "anartist," whose most important work was "breathing."¹⁹ This is why his work is impossible to "understand": there's nothing to understand. You are the one who makes sense of it, depending on who you are and how aware you are of the workings of the mind. Marcel Duchamp unframed the art experience, dubbing this process "extra-sensory esthetics."²⁰ The "empty" creative consciousness Duchamp distilled in his work offers liberation from habits of perception—of space and time, of ourselves and others. His goal was freedom, for himself and for each of us to realize that we are artists of our own lives, to become "anartists."

Of course, his influence was huge. You could say that Marcel Duchamp is still changing consciousness by how he changed art making. Duchamp's godson, Gordon Matta-Clark, was very much his own artist, with his own issues and concerns. But he spent a good deal of time with Duchamp in his youth, and traces of the older artist's influence are woven throughout his work. The parallels are many: their numerous notes to themselves; their shared love of word-play; their mutual interest in "passages"—as in Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, which first went on public view in 1969, one year after his death, and Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* of 1975, which he also called *Étant d'art pour locataire*—roughly, "being about art for occupants."

Then there is Matta-Clark's term for his artistic practice. Trained as an architect, he called the free-form art he and his friends engaged in "anarchitecture," by which he seems to have meant a subversive process of creating spaces of mental freedom. Just as Duchamp's "anartist" was "no artist at all," so Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" was no architecture at all. It was "art for occupants"—people, the public, the society of his time—that responded to the human need to breathe, to be free of the confining walls of social stricture.

Perhaps the most striking parallel is an undated manuscript text in which Matta-Clark played with Duchamp's motto, "There is no solution because there is no problem,"²¹ in terms that suggest the four fundamental truths of the Buddha:

18. The Sanskrit prefix "an" becomes "un" in English, meaning "not" or "non-." Another way to say the same thing would be "un-artist"—a term Allan Kaprow, the originator of happenings, would adopt in the early 1960s for his own practice. See Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 157ff.

19. At the end of his life, Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne: "If you wish, my art would be that of living: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It's a sort of constant euphoria" (Cabanne, *Dialogues*, 72). Duchamp's stepson Paul Matisse wrote of him: "When asked, he used to say that he did nothing, that he was just a breather . . . and it was the truth, despite the fact that many of us thought that he was joking. . . . And what did he know? He knew nothing, as he was perfectly content to tell us" (Paul Matisse, "Some More Nonsense about Duchamp," *Art in America* 68, no. 4 [April 1980], 82).

20. Paul Matisse, *Marcel Duchamp: Notes* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), n. 220. Somewhat unusually, this note is in English.

21. Henri-Pierre Roché, "Souvenirs sur Marcel Duchamp," *La Nouvelle N.R.F.*, 1, no. 6 (June 1953), 1136.



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect* (also called by the artist *État d'art pour locataire* and *Quel Con*), Paris, 1975

(1) We experience life as unsatisfactory (2) because we resist change. (3) It is possible to dismantle our resistance to change (4) by cultivating attitudes and behaviors consistent with the perception of the interrelatedness of all things—the so-called “middle way.” To see everything as interrelated is to remove the framing devices that limit our perception. “There are no solutions because there are no—problems,” Matta-Clark reminds himself in his note. “There are no solutions because there is nothing but change. There are only problems because of human resistance. Passing through resistance—surprise—is passing through and seeing what you have always expected. . . . Surprise is a state of consciousness.”²²

He relates these observations to his work in another note: “Cutting through for surprise, the building is given complex spaces and parts punctuating the relations between views and the invisible.”²³ Matta-Clark seems to be observing that surprise can be an engineered state of mind, a mind-of-don’t-know that dismantles the conditioned framing devices, both social and psychological, that dictate how we “see” by extracting the visible from the “invisible” reality beyond our habitual perceptual frames.

Like Duchamp, Matta-Clark sought mental “perspective” via unexpected penetrations of ordinary surface existence that open to higher dimensions of consciousness. “What we understand as building or see as the urban landscape,” Matta-Clark said, “is just this sort of middle zone . . . that given ingredient which is . . . really just the beginning of speculations about what could be beyond it, and what number of directions there could be.”²⁴

There are, of course, other influences to consider—too many to discuss at length here. Most frequently noted is alchemy, the art of change and transformation.²⁵ We also know from Matta-Clark’s first partner, the dancer Carol Goodden, that Matta-Clark was “enamored” with the teachings of the Buddhist- and Sufi-influenced Russian G. I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949), who developed the concept of “The Work,” connoting work on oneself, and emphasized the spiritual benefits of energetic movement and dance.²⁶ And, after the suicide of his twin brother in 1976, Matta-Clark became a student of Tibetan Buddhism.²⁷ Two years later he too was dead, from cancer, at the age of thirty-five.

Gordon Matta-Clark’s overarching project was archaeology of the self. He said of his building cuts: “Aspects of stratification probably interest me more than the unexpected views . . . generated by the removals—not the surface, but the thin edge, the severed surface that reveals the autobiographical process of its making.”²⁸ For Matta-Clark, architectural space was a middle zone waiting for an anarchist to come along and open it up, revealing its “empty” qualities of passage to unframed

22. Gloria Moure, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2006), 122.

23. *Ibid.*

24. From an interview with Judith Russi Kirshner in *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Valencia: IVAM Centro Julio Gonzalez, 1992), 391.

25. See Thomas Crow’s essay “Gordon Matta-Clark” in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 27–31.

26. Corinne Diserens, “Gordon Matta-Clark: The Reel World,” in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Diserens, 213, n. 7. Michel Waldberg, author of a 1973 book on Gurdjieff (Paris: Editions Seghers), is the son of Patrick and Isabelle Waldberg—mistress of Robert Lebel and an intimate friend of Marcel Duchamp who lived in Duchamp’s Paris studio apartment after Duchamp relocated to New York in 1947.

27. Verbal communication from Jane Crawford to Mary Jane Jacob, 2007. Gerry Hovagimyan related to Joan Simon how “in 1976 . . . Les Levine took him to Rimpoche [probably Dujom Rimpoche] and the meeting between Gordon and the guru, and his subsequent involvement with Buddhism calmed him down; he was able to function again” (Mary Jane Jacob and Gordon Matta-Clark, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* [Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985], 89).

28. From an interview by Donald Wall, “Gordon Matta-Clark’s Building Dissections,” *Arts Magazine* 50, no. 9 (May 1976), 79.

29. Levine in Jacob and Matta-Clark, *Gordon Matta-Clark*, 95.

30. From a conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, *Artforum* 45 (March 2007), 259, 261, 264.

31. See “Appendix I: Glossary of Technical Terms” in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 85.

32. Dorner, *The Way beyond ‘Art,’* 112–13.

33. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (1998; Dijon: Presses du réel, 2002), 13. Artists associated with Fluxus, such as Ben Vautier, Daniel Spoerri, and George Brecht, were engaged in this type of activity as early as the 1950s. Although Bourriaud seems unfamiliar with the nature and extent of their activities, he does portray relational aesthetics as part of a cultural continuum, giving plenty of credit to Duchamp.

34. Cf. Duchamp’s *Clock in Profile*, a “pliage,” or folding artwork, created in 1964 for the special edition of Lebel’s book, *La Double vue suivie de L’Inventeur du temps gratuit*. While flat, this piece is in the shape of a pair of glasses. When folded into three dimensions, it forms a clock with holes where numbers normally would be.

dimensions of vision, awareness, and response. His friend and fellow artist Les Levine asserted:

*What’s left of [Gordon’s] abandoned buildings, now torn down, is the same as what’s left of any action taken to make the world better. The world is better. The world knows and feels more. Their individual actions may not be remembered, but their actions did change things, and the world is better for it.*²⁹

So here is yet another way of answering my question: How does art like this, art about removal, art about “nothing,” bring about change in the world? The contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière could have had Gordon Matta-Clark’s “anarchitecture” in mind when he described his concept of “dissensus.” “Dissensus is a modification of the coordinates of the sensible . . .,” Rancière says. “The problem, first of all, is to create some breathing room, to loosen the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility, bodies within an estimation of their capacity, and possibility within the machine that makes the ‘state of things’ seem evident, unquestionable. . . . And the practice of dissensus is always a practice that both crosses the boundaries and stops traffic.”³⁰

“A modification of the coordinates of the sensible” strikes me as a pretty good description of what Matta-Clark and Duchamp, too, were trying to achieve. Their extra-sensory aesthetics were calibrated to modify the coordinates of the sensible and shift viewers’ consciousness into higher gear and wider dimensions of reality. They were key instigators of what Rancière describes as a loosening of the bonds that include and exclude what we see “within a form of visibility”; a dismantling of the restricting walls, both social and aesthetic, that shape “the partition of the sensible.”³¹

I call this process “unframing experience.” It is a process that liberates perception, making it possible to see objects and events as entities, while simultaneously experiencing them together with ourselves as both unbounded and interrelated. The revolutionary German museum director Alexander Dorner described an early stage of this process in his 1947 book, *The Way beyond ‘Art.’* “The old three-dimensional reality has become obsolete . . .,” Dorner wrote. “Abstract art has opened the gate to a new reality beyond all form. . . . It leaves behind, literally, the rigid confinement of the frame.”³²

Unframing experience might be characterized as a heightened version of the so-called “relational aesthetics” of the 1990s, proposed by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud as a shift in which “the role of artworks [became] no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real.”³³ From artworks as “social interstices” (to use a Bourriaud term) to artworks as “spectacles” (from the Latin *specere*: “to look”)³⁴ is not a

small leap, but it is a necessary one: you can't live or act within what you can't see. Seeing clearly is what Duchamp and Matta-Clark helped us to do. Art that generates this expanded field of perception links maker, viewer, and environment within a continuous, multidimensional reality: infra-relational aesthetics.

Evidence of the expanding realm of aesthetic experience is readily apparent in recent exhibitions, such as Olafur Eliasson's *weather project* (2003, p. 228) at the Tate Modern in London, where a semicircular form lit by hundreds of mono-frequency lamps was completed in the mirrored ceiling of the Turbine Hall to create the illusion of a dazzling sunlike sphere. A fine mist drifted through the gigantic space, which the yellow color of the lamps transformed into a vast duotone landscape. It was the first exhibition I'd seen that *made* people react physically in a particular way—flinging their bodies onto the concrete floor to experience the sight of themselves in the mirror overhead along with everybody else within Eliasson's otherworldly environment.

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* (p. 251) at *documenta 12* in the summer of 2007 incorporated 1,001 Qing dynasty chairs and 1,001 Chinese citizens scattered throughout the exhibition venue, which was itself scattered throughout the city of Kassel. The “content” of *Fairytale* became the actions and interactions of Ai's “guests” within the context of this huge, sprawling show—guests that (the Chinese chairs made clear) included us Westerners. Ai's unbounded installation somehow erased the boundaries of space while foregrounding, in a low-key but omnipresent way, the relationships and interrelationships of ourselves and others within it.

Finally, as one of many other examples, I want to mention Ann Hamilton's 2007 performance tower at the Oliver Ranch near Geyserville, California (pp. 69–73). Forbidding on the outside, magically multidimensional on the inside, the structure, which was three years in the making, is neither art nor architecture. Inspired by a sixteenth-century Italian well that let farm animals down to water via one staircase and—because there wasn't room for them to turn around—back to the top via another, the tower functions as a threshold to higher dimensions of reality. At the bottom, a reflecting pool serves as the start-point for two spiral staircases. Shaped like a double helix, the winding stairs never connect or cross each other on their way up to a circular viewing platform at the very top. The 128 steps in each of the staircases get progressively narrower as they ascend. The climb is punctuated by openings that allow for unexpected glimpses of sun-drenched landscape, and also allow sound to escape the reverberating space.

“A vocal chord for the Alexander Valley” is how Hamilton describes her tower. “What interested me about the form of the double helix in this situation,” she says,



“is that it means that one stairway can be a moving performance, and one can be a static or moving audience. But you’re wound within each other, in the same space.”³⁵ The result is unframed experience—an expanded field encompassing sight and sound, movement and stillness, oneself and others as unbounded, inter-related entities.

35. From the KQED arts and culture program *Spark*, broadcast July 2007; <http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=18240>.

All of this brings me back to the exhibition *Manifesting Emptiness* and its encompassing project, “fluXspace,” which included, among other things, a student-curated series of relational works, presentations, and temporary installations both inside and outside the gallery. Students had the opportunity to choose, as did Matta-Clark and the artists represented in *Manifesting Emptiness*, to dismantle frames of perception and see beyond what they thought they knew to what they didn’t know they knew. As it happened, outside and inside were unexpectedly brought together by one of the works in *Manifesting Emptiness*—Yoko Ono’s *Painting to See the Skies* (1961/2007). One day, the gallery’s director, Trevor Martin, noticed that when the lights were turned off, this canvas with two holes placed in front of a window transformed the gallery space into a camera obscura, as an otherwise invisible moving streetscape appeared in full color, upside down, on the opposite wall.

Surprise is a state of consciousness, as Matta-Clark observed. But there are different kinds of surprise: there is the sudden surprise of the unexpected, and then there is the satisfying, slow surprise of experiencing what we see “out there” as no more real than our perception of it, perception that can be transformed by something as simple as turning off the lights.