

Marc-Olivier Wahler

FREE-FALL

(Art in a State of Weightlessness)

We've all imagined it at least once in our lives: if we could have one wish, only one, what would it be? When I was little, I wished that I could get locked inside a big sports goods store after closing. I dreamed of having the entire night to try on all the different sports shoes, throw the rugby balls, tennis balls, and basketballs, kick footballs, zigzag on the newest roller skates as fast as I can through all the aisles, fall asleep on a mountain of fifty cold-weather sleeping bags, and wake up by splashing in an inflatable swimming pool. The dreams may become more sophisticated and increase in number, but they don't fundamentally change. For example, I have, of course like every art historian, imagined spending a night at the Metropolitan Museum. The location is grander, but less hilarious.

And, as time goes by and I meet artists, I realize that one wish is particularly near and dear to my heart: being able to levitate. Or the correlating experience of weightlessness, which is less magical, but with similar effects. I will probably never walk on the moon, but I know that in order to elude gravitational forces, it is enough to let myself fall (all falling bodies are in a state of weightlessness). I could, for example, practice ski jumping or jump off a diving board at the swimming pool... or even from a rooftop like several artists: the longer the fall, the stronger the experience of weightlessness. The ideal state is, of course, free-fall. He who throws himself into empty space, into the void, accelerates faster than a Ferrari, and although he experiences g-forces as powerful as 3 g, he never feels the pressure of acceleration that his body undergoes. "You don't feel it because it is your own mass that produces acceleration through falling. Paradoxically, it is your own mass that also creates the feeling of floating," specifies Marco Leval, a Hollywood stuntman.

I love to imagine that spectators confronted for the first time by the presence of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades must have felt this sensation of weightlessness as it is described by Marco Leval. A dizzying fall, a tremendous acceleration, which is caused here not by a physical drop, but instead by an intellectual tailspin. Moreover, Duchamp accelerates faster than a Formula 1 car or Han Solo's spaceship: Marco

Leval has only just begun his fall into the void when the ready-made has already arrived. Just imagine! A topnotch Formula 1 can go from zero to 300 km/h in just a few seconds. But, Duchamp moves from ordinary object to artwork at the speed of light!

But, let me go back to the beginning. For centuries, artwork has accelerated at the same speed as the material process used for its fabrication. Tube paint was a major advancement. Teamwork allowed every painter, perhaps an expert in landscapes and or in drapery, to place himself in the service of a master who directed his studio in a way not entirely different from Taylorism. Photography reduced the manufacturing time to a matter of seconds. In turn, cinema's 24 images per second allowed for a snapshot of real time. Is it possible to go faster than a few centimeters a second? This wild race morphs into a struggle, one in which Duchamp lands a KO punch and nobody comes to: by selecting a manufactured ordinary object and by raising it to the level of art, through the process of transfiguration, he opts for a strategy that simply short-circuits the fabrication phase. In order to hatch an artwork, it is then sufficient to "decide" or "choose" an object, no matter what it is, and to designate it as an artwork. Otherwise said, a ready-made isn't made; it suddenly appears, transfigured from one state to another, as Boris Groys pointed out in his passionate essay.¹ Its production relies only on its stance, the thoughts it evokes, and the connection it causes between two neurons, a connection that happens at the speed of light. We cannot go faster. This is the record pace of absolute speed and now no other acceleration can be imagined and no self-respecting artist can ignore such a revolution.

Art was shaken to its core. Its ontology underwent a complete overhaul. There was no going back, but at the same time, we were confronted with the impossibility of moving ahead. Some have suggested attempts to decelerate, like Fischli & Weiss, who brilliantly forged paint cans, bricks, chocolate, stools, paintbrushes, metal drums, Coca-Cola cans, etc. The artwork that they constructed is indistinguishable from everyday objects. We expect to find manufactured goods, clues from our mechanical age. We uncover instead "hand-made" objects, painstakingly produced at the slow speed of artisanal work. On another level, Douglas Gordon took Hitchcock's film *Psycho*, slowed it down so that it lasts for 24 hours, and in doing so, created a bona fide temporal dilatation. The master of suspense (and suspense is a sort of psychological weightlessness, similar to the experience felt in physical freefall) sees his film downgraded to the length of a day, to a daily cycle, to something banal.

These attempts at deceleration act as more than simple counter-points or proofs that any acceleration after the advent of the ready-made is impossible. They shine a spotlight on what is dear to Duchamp's heart: the moment of transfiguration when an ordinary object becomes an artwork – in this crucial instant, Duchamp breaks through the limits of an artwork at lightning speed – in the end, it is only the moment of interpretation. And this moment is also a moment of paradox because, as history has shown us, it is inversely proportional to the duration of the artwork's production: never has a work spawned so many interpretations nor have we required so much time to wrap our heads around it. What matters isn't the acceleration itself, but this moment of weightlessness, when the very notion of time has become a genuine paradox and when it can no longer be thought of in terms of specific moments, timelines, or an acceleration from one point to another.

In Joao Onofre's video *Untitled (Leveling a spirit level in free fall feat. Dorit Chrysler's BBGV dub)*, a person is in free-fall. A camera, attached to a harness on his chest, provides a subject point of view of the skydiver's forearms and of a level that he is holding. We assume that he just jumped from a small airplane that briefly flies past in the background. The effort to keep the level horizontal provides the tension of the artwork. We understand that in the sport of free-fall that, more so than in others, we must keep our eyes locked on landmarks and our sense of direction. But, we also realize how futile such efforts are. In the state of weightlessness, there is neither up nor down, and the basic rules dictated by gravity are null and void. In a sense, everything again becomes possible, as it is on a blank page. Similar to the artist who every morning goes to his studio and faces a new blank page: every morning, he jumps from a plane and, in the state of weightlessness, tries to create a new system of orientation. He no longer tries to tame time by attempting to speed it up or slow it down; instead he functions in the heart of this air bubble, which is impossible to hold down.

Such an artwork – considered in this moment of weightlessness – glides through time and renders visible the countless multiplication of layers that make up its construction. This perspective complicates art, rendering it denser. It develops what Umberto Eco so succinctly and so pertinently defines as the "Function etc." The artwork has left behind selective logic (which relies on distinctions of this or that) for additional logic (this and that). It can then test the "elastic" capacity of time, graphing additional layers onto it, stretching it beyond the brink, and thus revealing an

unrippable material, limitlessly ex- tensible and malleable. The artist strives to constantly transfer, to transmute elements from one zone to another, to test this tremen- dous elasticity, and to therefore develop a veritable schizophrenia of the real by using its multiple temporalities. Here the artist joins the skydiver in the moment of free-fall when he floats in a state of weightlessness: in this instant, the constraints have no effect on him and he can slide freely from one current to another.

1 Boris Groys, *The Speed of Art*, in Peter Fischli David Weiss. *XLVI Biennale di Venezia*, OFC, Berne, 1995.