Ciné-torsion

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As an artist and professor at the Faculty of Environmental Design at the Université de Montréal in Canada, my work has appeared in exhibitions, installations and performances in France, Mexico, Venezuela, Italy, China, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium and Canada. The goal of my art is to deconstruct key concepts of modern motion. My work is designed as a series of dialectical images that question the status of representation in contemporary art. At the 2009 Florence Biennale, I presented an installation called *Ciné-torsion* in which I defy photographic conventions using chronophotographs.

Ciné-torsion draws energy from the history of photography, diverting images into another spatial and social dimension. To fully appreciate the aesthetic experience and social assertion underlying the work, one needs to step back in time to the sources of inspiration.

Close to 40 years after its enshrinement, the photographic device developed long ago by Daguerre now seems to be much more of a prototype containing the indispensable seeds of progress. Numerous technical improvements to the original photographic process considerably changed how photography is used, infusing it with a second life in the hands of scientists. In the 1880s, the advent of bromine silver gel ushered in the world of instant photography. Scientists became adept at extracting the most benefit from this new discovery by exploring new avenues that were just waiting to be revealed. French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) and in his wake, Anglo-American Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) developed the sequential photography of motion or chronophotography. If the methods used by the photographer

(Eadweard Muybridge) and the scientist (Étienne-Jules Marey) differed from a purely technical standpoint, the result nevertheless was essentially the same: through a succession of images taken at regular intervals, they succeeded in deconstructing the movement of photographed subjects. The aura of objectivity surrounding photography was set aside to scrutinize, freeze and analyze human and animal motion. Acts of everyday life, such as walking and running, or the movements of a galloping horse were captured on silver plates. By placing the frames side by side, the slowed actions of the subject now amazingly appeared in a specific context that no human eye could have detected otherwise. By stopping time and motion, these two fathers of chronophotography succeeded in making the invisible visible. Their surprising achievements, revolutionary for the time, became an aid of great precision to artists. In the daguerreotype, Delacroix saw a way to "record reality more objectively and more rapidly than with the human eye and hand[1]". With chronophotography, artists such as Rodin, Eakins and Degas, were finally able to unravel the mystery of motion. It has been said that the artist Meissonier changed some of his historical scenes after studying a still plate on which a series of images showed that at certain times a galloping horse has all its feet off the ground simultaneously. Since the late 15th century, numerous artists have tried more or less successfully to reproduce motion using technical means as diverse as they are varied. Results were rather unsatisfactory. Since the artist's canvas represents a still scene and not a succession of images, movement could only be hinted at (and not produced) by actions, attitudes or the presumed locomotion of the body. Chronophotography, on the other hand, introduced elements that were indispensable to decoding and suggesting motion more accurately than simply as a sensation. The influence of chronophotography on the history of 20th-century art was unprecedented, ushering in the birth of the Seventh Art. The list

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[1] Vigneau André. *Une brève histoire de l'art de Niepce à nos jours*. Robert Laffont, Paris, 1963, p. 59.

of artists who were inspired by Marey's scientific experiments or Muybridge's frames is a long one; however we can cite a few names here: Duchamp, Carrà, Marinetti, Balla, Boccioni, Calder, Agam, Soto, Tomasello, and Tinguely, among others, to help the reader better understand the contribution of chronophotography in the quest to make the speed of motion visible. As a contemporary artist, I am also interested in chronophotography, as witnessed in the *Ciné-torsion* installation that I will present next.

Ciné-torsion

Ciné-torsion draws its inspiration directly from the photographic work of Eadweard Muybridge. I was inspired by two series of photographs of eight frames each, taken from the side and back, of a nude man running. This series of images is from the book *The Human Figure In Motion*, published in 1887. To achieve his results, Muybridge developed a technique that was intrinsically different from the photographic "gun" designed by Marey. This new technique used a series of 12, 20 or 24 cameras arranged in a straight line at approximately 15-cm intervals; the shutters of the cameras were triggered to release successively. The subject began running in front of a black background divided by white lines into a grid pattern to suggest a pseudo-scientific process. In this experiment, motion was not deconstructed in order to synthesize it, but staged to provide some academic poses around a subject or theme of motion. It took more than eight images to understand the mechanics of the runner; in fact, some 30 to 40 images were needed to produce fluid motion, which is one of the reasons Muybridge's photographic frames were not always enthusiastically received. Often times they provoked a certain amazement, laughter and even scepticism. Chronophotography enjoys a singular relationship with reality. There is a disconcerting realism between the image produced and its subject, but it still remains an image.

If the goal of the technical process is to document reality, it does not automatically confer objectivity on photography. Precisely because of its technical parameters, chronophotography interprets reality by altering our perception. The viewing angles, physical limitations of the framing, distortions caused by various lenses and paper on which the images are reproduced are all criteria that imply a subjective disassembling of reality. The runner is not represented as we see him but rather as Muybridge shows him to us. In the words of photography expert Jean-Dominique Lajoux: "The Muybridge genre and style are exclusive, of great aesthetic quality. Each image has its own charm and together they form a magnificent abstract image made up of 12, 24 or more small rectangles of each photograph. Muybridge was a photographer, a great photographer. Marey was a physiologist, a great researcher. Therein lies the essential difference[2]".

I appropriated Muybridge's chronophotographs as a starting point for the installation's design and reinterpreted them in a modern context. My technique involved transferring the nude man's body onto white tulle, a fabric normally used for bridal veils. Muybridge's runner was moved from the support of a rigid still frame to a soft and airy one. I also inverted the chronophotography codes, changing the black background on all the sequences to a pure white background. Using a photographic transfer technique, I inlaid six carefully chosen images of the runner, in a different pose each time, on three huge pieces of tulle. Once the fabric was printed, the images were covered (above and below) by an additional layer of pristine tulle. The entire assembly was then attached to rigid curved supports and suspended from the ceiling like a mobile. The grain of the photographs, which had been altered by the transfer technique, was

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[2] Lajoux, Jean-Dominique. "Marey, Muydridge et les femmes" in *Marey/Muybridge pionniers du cinéma*, Beaune/ Stanford Meetings. May 19, 1995, Symposium held at Palais des Congrès, Beaune. Conseil Régional de Bourgogne, Ville de Beaune, Stanford University, 1996, p. 101.

magnified once again by the effect of the tulle as it captured the rays of natural light. Once completed, the installation occupied a space of 45 cubic metres (2 m x 9 m x 2.5 m) and could be viewed both from the inside and outside.

As previously mentioned, photography as an illusion of reality is merely a semblance of what is visible. Yet photography always bears witness to the existence of something real; without this, there would be no image. The theoretical term for this is the *referent in photography*. Theorist Roland Barthes explained this clearly: "By 'photographic referent' I do not mean what is *arbitrarily* real as referenced by an image or sign but what is *necessarily* real as placed in front of the camera lens; without the latter, there would be no photography[3]". In *Ciné-Torsion*, I create the illusion of the photographic image having lost its referent, allowing the body to be seen only at certain times partially restored to its whole. Here and there, through the use of photographic transfer, a leg or a hand almost disappears, frayed, damaged and torn. This fragmented body, which owes much to the legacy of Greco-Roman statuary, ends by becoming an autonomous work in itself, an expression of ideal beauty in its classical form. This fragmentation—on the one hand inherent in the technique and on the other hand voluntary—allows the body to be reframed on sheer fabric, displaying it to the viewer in an unaccustomed way. The nude man now becomes his own object of artistic questioning.

In creating *Ciné-torsion*, I also played with the index value of the photographic transfers that had inspired me. These images can signify either a trace of reality or an aspect of reality that differs from its original context. In the latter case, the image has a symbolic value, signifying the upheaval of the human condition. The frame in which the subject evolves has changed from celluloid to tulle. The runner is provided with a new spatial reality by means of the soft-focus

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[3] Barthes, Roland. *La chambre claire Note sur la photographie*, Éditions de l'Étoile, Gallimard, Le Seuil, Paris, 1980, p. 119–20.

effect, light and the contrast between the shades of grey of his body and the white background that supports him. Tulle is essentially a light, airy fabric. Its sheer quality enabled me to highlight the runner in black and grey contrast, seemingly tearing the white veil. Through the gentle play of overlapping fabric, bit-by-bit the image of the runner emerges and appears from out of the maze of folds. The transparent tulle opens and reveals the figure on each side, multiplying the views of the nude runner. As a metaphor for the bridal veil, the tulle is stained with multiple printed images of the human form distorted in the moving folds of the tulle. The runner ceases to be a scientific subject and becomes an anonymous man without any pretension.

In chronophotography, one becomes aware of the ephemeral character of time, a measurable unit at the origin of motion. Through the mechanics of the photographic process, the camera is able to stop time and freeze the subject captured by the lens, permanently etched in silver salts. This perspective is tempered throughout *Ciné-torsion*. The mechanical action of ambient air or the passing of a visitor, subtle as it may be, produces a gentle movement within the installation, imbuing life into the runners who are caught in a defined no man's land from which escape is impossible. All the pieces of fabric assembled together form a structure that sequentially represents the human body in motion. The effect is reminiscent of the zoopraxiscope, invented by Muybridge in 1879, which projected images from glass discs as they rotated at a certain speed to create the impression of motion. This projection device is considered to be the first modern cinematographic viewer. *Ciné-torsion* can be viewed as a singular operative point, midway between photography and cinema, with the goal of creating a new reality.

Playing on dimensions and spatial perceptions

The strategy behind *Ciné-torsion* was to place 2D images in a 3D space. By inserting photographic transfers into a specific location during the Florence Biennale, those viewing the installation were summoned to an overall re-reading of the images. More importantly, they found themselves integrated into the installation, moving from a passive role to an active one. Viewers had the option of choosing to look at each image individually or taking a more global view and, unbeknown to them, becoming an integral part of the work. To quote Marcel Duchamp, "spectators are canvases."

Duchamp has been a major source of inspiration to me, especially Eliot Elisofon's image of *Marcel Duchamp Descending a Staircase*, which appeared in the January 1, 1952, issue of Life Magazine. The photograph echoes Duchamp's famous painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). The work of art is a direct continuation of the chronophotographic experiments of Marey, deconstructing the phenomenon of motion on canvas and imbuing the easily identifiable human silhouette with a sense of movement. In the painting, the body is reduced to several poses that describe its trajectory, while at the same time creating the impression of suspended time and of automatic movements. The scientific images of Marey instilled a new awareness in Duchamp, paving the way to the use of abstract vocabulary to represent the human form. . Since the 1970s, Marey's chronophotographs have not only become a source of inspiration but also an integral part of Yugoslav artist Vladimir Velickovic's work, who's artistic concerns I share. The artist delves into Eadweard Muybridge's *Human Figure In Motion* to find the images necessary to complete his work. In an article on Velickovic, Marc Aufraise explains the artist's purpose in pursuing his pictorial research: "By inserting Muybridge's photographs into his work, Velickovic discovers new accents, i.e. new words to express his doubts about the

validity of a process of charting the progression of humankind and representing human nature[4]".

Ciné-torsion falls within this same continuum.

[insert here **Figure 7.9]**

[insert here **Figure 7.10]**

The *Ciné-torsion* installation seeks to prove that the body is an artistic impression of the social order and that diverting photographic images causes the re-routing of our society's values. The nude man becomes the reflection of post-modern man, a subject of reflection, and one that merits that we stop to think about him. This new man exposed in his nakedness possesses all the ascribed qualities of an Adam symbolizing the first man in the history of humanity. Trapped in the folds of this sheer labyrinth, he runs incessantly, enclosed in a box, in a space. But to where is he running? Through the process of repetition on overlapping tulle, the silhouette appears to become lost in infinity. To the extent that man's destiny is interwoven intimately with that of woman, one might wonder about his intentions: Is he running away or is he running to find Eve? What roles and place does man occupy in 21st-century society? How can he give of himself differently than his great grandfather? What are his new reference points? All these questions form the starting point for more in-depth reflection about the deconstruction of the male identity, its complexity and its new reality.

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[4] Aufraise, Marc. *L'homme en mouvement ou l'utilisation de quelques photographies chez Vladimir Velickovic,* http://aripphoto.org/Home/images/stories/File/Marc%20Aufraise/ Marc%20Aufraise%20-%20Colloque%20Inspiration.pdf, consulted on January 30, 2011.

Discussion questions:

1. How does Vallee explore the mystery of motion in space, the use of chronophotography and spaces itself to explore the issue of body in space?

   a. How do photography and science intersect with the past to evoke new concepts for the present and future?

   b. How do the representation of the images and the figures in movement create spatiality?

2. What is the "photographic referent" in the theory of Roland Barthes?

   a. How does Vallee use this theory to create an illusion in an artistic expression?

   b. What is this process used and what new spatial realities emerge?

3. What is the resultant proof that the "…body is an artistic expression of the social order and that diverting photographic images causes the re-routing of our society's values" ?

   a. How is this cause for reflection?

   b. How do we understand the theoretical premise and the application into the installation?

4. Why is this work more than just an art installation?

   a. What is it saying about theorizing and reflecting upon the social human condition?

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