Moving Desire Through a Machinic Assemblage. Rethinking Transmediality with Man Ray

Katarina Andjelkovic*

Abstract

Art in the period immediately after World War I witnessed a general interest in becoming more machine-like, and artists like Man Ray (1890-1976) challenged the functions of the basic optical machines used by artists. Instead of using the camera as a machine for making documents, Ray used it as an instrument for exploring 'desire'. Drawing on Lacan's theory of desire, I propose that, with Ray, desire entered the process and became the purpose of flows, multiplicities, production, and repeated reproduction. This claim is supported by Deleuze and Guattari in Anti-Oedipus, *when they assert that "desire is not primarily connected to a specific object, but is always the desire of an arrangement (assemblage)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). In such constellation, 'desire' becomes part of diverse processes that mark the "transition" of the object to the image and vice versa, as typified in Man Ray's art. Likewise, machine is a tool at the service of Ray's mind, be it automatism characteristic of the surrealism or subverting typical means of reproducibility. The hypothesis is that, when observed from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari's* machinic *approach, the foundations of Man Ray's painting can be contextualized as* machinic, *in a close connection with the concept 'desiring-machines'. The aim of this paper is to renew a concern with the medium by looking at the transmedia nature of Man Ray's painting as being* machinic. *The transmedia nature of Ray's painting will be examined in the case of his painting* DANGER/DANCER. L'impossibilité *(1917-1920), by looking at how 'desiring-machine' undermines ordinary machine functions.*

Keywords: desire, machine, transmediality, Man Ray, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari.

Introduction

For historians and theorists addressing the issue of transmediality, it is crucial to think about different contexts of its application and to dissect its varying significations. During the twentieth and twenty-first century, transmediality denotes the application of two different conditions when discussing the transmedia nature of an artwork: transit and medium. From the perspective of 21st century theoretical reflection, we can perhaps begin from the most general definitions of medium as a form and instrument for the expression of mediation, i.e. a shift and therefore, also a "transit" through different mediums, which is characteristic of the twentieth century representational arts. Sabeth Buchmann's concept "transit–trans" describes the modern period inasmuch as it represents an exemplary state of translation. For example, she takes Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (short film 6', 1960), comprised of black (black film) and transparent (blank film) frames as well as sound (white noise) and non-sound, to remark on the relationship between film and painting. Buchmann claims that "one could describe Kubelka's film as a translation of a painting into flat, graphic pattern, like an abstract score in the sense of a structure based on a set of rules [...]" (Buchman 2016, 146). By referring to the artist's statement, Buchmann further emphasizes that Kubelka spoke against mixing structural film with narrative elements, calling, in an altogether modernist-formalistic vein, for media specificity (ibid, 145)."[1] And all the definitions of medium flow from the old concept 'medium specificity', meaning an intermediate agency, instrument, or channel of communication or expression, or a substance through which

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[1] Sabeth Buchmann paraphrased Peter Kubelka from his lecture, "MONUMENT FILM," held on October 27, 2012, at the Wiener Gartenbaukino on the occasion of the presentation of *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) and *Antiphon* (2012) in the frame of the Viennale. Read more in:

Sabeth Buchmann, "Rehearsing in/with Media: Some Remarks on the Relationship between Dance, Film, and Painting," in *Painting beyond itself,* 145-170.

* independent researcher

impressions are conveyed to the senses, etc.[2] However, it is undeniable that mediums exist only in relation to one another and by definition are not singular, or autonomous, in order to realise their basic function.

In what follows, I will contextualize the medium as an *instrument*—a means of transit—, and machine as a *condition* of this transit. In the second step, I will look at the relationship between painting and machine in order to identify the *machinic* components of Man Ray's art. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical perspective will help me problematise this issue. The aim of this research is not to complicate and pluralise the very idea of the medium in order to challenge its articulations, but to provide a conceptually more specific framework for considering the machinic condition. Regarding Man Ray's art, my contention is that his work is an example of how art seeks to become machinic, even when the mechanism is not working.

Machine as a condition

The machine has become the hallmark of the modern age; machines of every description flock across the opening pages of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).The machine, over the course of the twentieth century, was progressively integrated into all fields of human activity, including artistic creation; with the first decades of that century having established a surprisingly vital and wide-ranging series of perspectives on the relationship between art and the machine (Bessette 2018). Machine art was primarily seen as visual enjoyment and a knowledge of the action of mechanical functions may be of considerable importance for enhancing the beauty of the objects. (Barr 1934, *s.p.*) Machines are, visually speaking, a practical application of geometry. Forces which act in straight lines are changed in direction and degree by machines, which are themselves formed of straight lines and curves (ibid). Motion is an essential function of many machines and sometimes increases their aesthetic interest, principally through the addition of temporal rhythms, both of movement and of sound. When one contemplates a machine, three most habitual questions come first – Does

it work? What does it do? How does it work? The mechanical and utilitarian functions of machines imply mechanism and scenario for machine operation. If a mechanism cannot execute the movement, and a machine is not primarily connected to a specific object, what happens when their basic functions are challenged, and the machine is perceived as an instrument for activating 'desire'?

What makes the vision complex is the sheer number of things that are drawn into it. For example, the Avant-garde art treated machines primarily methodologically: as an experiment with artistic approaches that challenge current cultural values by using machine as a means towards these goals. Sharing the vanguard tradition, both artists and philosophers undermine the basic role of the machine (to produce) and use it instead as a tool for thinking, questioning and catalysing transformation of the social and cultural values of the Avant-garde. Consequently, in the mind of these thinkers and practitioners, machine becomes not only inspiration, but rather a methodology and a visual thinking tool that pushes the limits of the ontological foundations of the artworks to condition their transmedia nature.

Medium as an instrument

Analysing Man Ray's artwork, we recognise his interest in media as a means of expressing the relationship between man and machine. More precisely, by using a mechanism to depict human being, his aim is to instrumentalise scientific view of the world. After he befriended Marcel Duchamp, Ray changed his approach and techniques towards showing movement in static paintings. This shift gave him the opportunity to depict movement of figures in his works, and his future experiments move towards selecting and modifying ordinary objects. Examples include the depiction of repetitive positions of the dancer's skirts in *The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself with Her Shadows* (1915-1916, Fig. 1, see List of Figures) using collage techniques in traditional oil paint to form an abstract pattern. The painting arrests the dancer's skirts in several discrete moments in a bid to depict the illusion of temporal movement. In his later works, for which he developed unique mechanical and

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[2] These definitions of medium are derived from the third online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED),* updated in 2001.

photographic methods of making images, he combined airbrush technique with pen drawing.

Still using pictorial means and prioritising the flat picture plane (Ray 2015, 31) above all other concerns, Man Ray attempts to depict a mechanism in his *Danger/Dancer. L'Impossibilité* (1917-1920, Fig. 2, see List of Figures). Although Ray describes this artwork as a painting (airbrush painting on glass in a wooden frame), he was one of those painters at the beginning of the twentieth century to self-consciously reengage the problem of the medium, thus reactivating the very question of the medium condition. By examining a machinic sort of relations between different painting elements, it seems that Ray wished to challenge the notion of medium specificity which makes transhistorical essence of any artistic practice. He instrumentalised non-associable relations of a functional assembly for this purpose, by subtitling his work *L'Impossibilité* (impossibility). On one hand, Deleuze and Guattari speak of machines which are absurd: "whether through the indeterminate character of the motor or energy source, through the physical impossibility of the organization of the working parts, or through the logical impossibility of the mechanism of transmission. For example, Man Ray's *Dancer/Danger*, subtitled 'impossibility' offers two degrees of absurdity: neither the clusters of cog-wheels nor the large transmission wheel are able to function." (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 91). On the other hand, in his autobiographical work Self-portrait, Man Ray gives a description of his work: "[...] my latest painting - an airbrush composition of gear wheels, which had been inspired by the gyrations of a Spanish dancer I had seen in a musical play. The title was lettered into the composition: it could be read either DANCER or DANGER" (Ray 2012, 92). One can support Deleuze and Guattari's arguments in view of these associations when one claims that we are to firstly think that the gears' whirling is to express the twirling of a Spanish dancer. But the impossibility of the machine's workings is to convey the idea that a machine by itself could never perform something as non-mechanical as a human dancing. Given that Man Ray explicitly explained that his artwork represents the twirling of a Spanish dancer, I further insist that the human dancer motions are implicit in the entitled workings of the machine.

Therefore, the implied necessity for completing the dance illustrates the need for humans to be a part of 'desiring-machines'. In other words, "the aim is to introduce an element of a machine, so that it combines with something else on the full body of the canvas, be it with the painting itself, with the result that it is precisely the ensemble of the painting that functions as a desiring-machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 97). Deleuze and Guattari saw Ray's tendency towards this kind of machines by claiming that

> "the object is no longer to compare humans and the machine in order to evaluate the correspondences, the extensions, the possible or impossible substitutions of the ones for the other, but to bring them into communication in order to show how humans are a component part of the machine, or combine with something else to constitute a machine" (ibid, 91).[3]

In the domain of unassociated relations seen in terms of a machine, we need to imagine how the parts of the mechanism hold together. My contention is that Dadaist art can help us discover the types of relations that hold its parts together, and the ways these unassociated relations are expressed in the machinic operation of the artwork. I act from the belief that introducing an element of a machine to be combined with something else, in this case with a painting, is the means of "uncoupling" of its nature as "the induced machine is always other than the one that appears to be represented" (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 97). Although from a different perspective, Deleuze and Guattari use the concepts of Dada and machines to explain this other sort of relation between parts. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: "Dadaist-machines [...] obtain a functional ensemble, while shattering all the associations" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 125). They claim that these are often completely disconnected parts that work together, functioning as distinct 'desiring-machines'. Francis Picabia is inspired to rethink these connections by establishing the external position of a viewer. This idea is recognised in *Fille née sans mère* (1916-1917, Fig.3, see List of Figures), for which Picabia disconnects content and title of the artwork only to activate the position of a viewer in order to try to reconnect

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[3] Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, "Balance-Sheet for 'Desiring-Machine'," in Guattari, Félix, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet, Jarred Becker, & Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: Félix Guattari and Semiotext(e), 2009), 91.

these elements in his experience. His act is inspired in large part by the development of the machine which starts to proceed separate of our human goals and the human being. Similar to the machine structure proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, this machine, too, continuously feeds its breaks, and as such, constitutes an Anti-Oedipal machine. Furthermore, I posit that much like Anti-Oedipal machines, the artworks executed in early Avant-garde (Paris) adopted and increased these impulses to break with art's representational traditions.

How does desire become productive?

According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire is machinic. In a small footnote in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to Lacan's theory of desire to explain the way in which desire becomes productive. They find that desire has two poles: one is related to the *objet petit* as a 'desiring-machine' where desire is productive and goes beyond both need and fantasy; and another is related to the big Other, the signifier and the Lack in the Other (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). Where Lacan is generally identified with his second pole of desire, Deleuze and Guattari take his word and attempt to develop the first pole in order to elaborate a post-Lacanian notion of desire that is productive rather than delimited by lack and fantasy. Accordingly, Lacan's claims, playing the key role in the development of Deleuze and Guattari's own notion of desire, impact that they do not begin their elaboration of desire from 'lack' (from what we do not have), but from the premise that desire begins from 'connection'. Their work is based on the following thesis: desire is never turned towards the object but is the desire of an arrangement. In other words, a machine can exist only through the network where the mechanism does not represent the functions of the machine as object, but the machine *as part of an* operation in the service of the system as a whole. Likewise, images or media, do not represent an object, but rather are part of 'machine operation' and they become part of things that are connecting with each other. Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari stand for the machinic nature of desire: a 'desiring-machine' operating in a wider range of machines to which

it is connected, and exists exclusively within social machines whose effect demolishes the entire social sectors.

Contrasting Surrealism and Dada, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is situated at the moment when artists started to build real machines, for example Jean Tinguely's *Roto Zaza* from 1975. Yet, Dada representatives, as Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, were gradually introducing parts of mechanical objects into their works. Deleuze and Guattari stress their non-representational character as inherent,[4] non-causal image-apparatuses that nevertheless still partially rely on representational mechanisms. These works function according to the particular relation that their part-objects have not only to each other but to the images in which they are embedded as pictorial parts. The result is the ensemble of a painting that functions on an unstable terrain. It is precisely this kind of relation that Deleuze and Guattari had in mind when differentiating the 'desiring-machines' (as productive mechanism) from technical or psychoanalytical machines (as unproductive mechanism) in their discussions. If Man Ray's dancer has been conducted by the 'desire' of the author, then the rule of continual production, of grafting producing into the product characteristic of 'desiring-machines', results that an ensemble of the painting offers a pictorial equivalent or trajectory of the 'desiring-machines'. This process is evidenced in breaking the glass in *Danger/Dancer* with a desire to detach airbrush painting from the glass background, in order to determine machine connections as productive.

Thinking of "machines as ciphers for human drives" (Mundy 2008, 22), Marcel Duchamp developed an original language that implicates antiquated mechanical imagery in a narrative of 'desiring-mechanism'. In his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23, Fig. 4, see List of Figures), human-based forms are introduced to replace a composition of abstracted mechanised systems that are characteristic of Man Ray's *Danger/Dancer*. Likewise, instead of abstracting forms, now ideas are abstracted and meaning remains always in flux. In times of rational thinking when everything tends to be explained, Duchamp has found a way to introduce irrational thought using concepts

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[4] Deleuze & Guattari: "Léger demonstrated convincingly that the machine did not represent anything, because it was in itself the production of organised intensive states: neither form nor extension,

neither representation nor projection, but pure and recurrent intensities." Read in: Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1977, 122.

and themes through visual systems. Breton's full iconographical description provides details as to how Duchamp's mechanism operates:

> "The Bride passes her commands to the bachelor machine through the three upper nets (draught pistons), these commands being supported and guided by the milky way. In reply, the nine malic moulds (provisionally painted with red lead while waiting) which have by definition 'received' the illuminating gas and have assumed it castings, while hearing the litanies sung by the chariot (the refrain of the whole celibate machine), allow this illuminating gas to escape through a certain number of capillary tubes that are at the head of all the malic moulds (each of these capillary tubes, in which the gas stretches, has the shape of a standard-stoppage, that is to say the shape assumed by a thread one meter long on contact with the ground after being held taught horizontally one meter above the ground and suddenly released) [...] The top inscription is supported by a kind of flesh-coloured milky way and is obtained by three draught pistons, the images of which were produced by registering three successive chance distortions of a square of white cloth flapping in the wind. It is through this triple form that the commands, orders, authorisations, etc. are transmitted to join the shots and the splash – and it is with the splash that the series of bachelor operations proper come to an end" (Breton 1935).[5]

To understand how *The Bride Stripped Bare* accomplishes machinic functions, we must imagine its components in motion. The first aspect to be considered is: do we recognise parts that cohere together in an integrated way? If it makes a system whose parts are not all compatible, such a machine would not be able to fix itself into an arrangement (assemblage). Due to potential failure, we need to understand these constituent parts in the sense of being-apart and then investigated if they can reconnect into a whole to exert the function of a machine.

We can start by recognising the way relations are expressed in the functioning of the machine.

Duchamp's artwork is a multiplied shapeless form projected on a thin film – transparent glass, which alludes to vanity and absence of any visible relations of one part to the other parts of the same work. Despite the fact that each element in the work has no function, rather they operate in relation to one another through a series of disconnections. Namely, these relations were firmly established through the concept and a function of the bachelor machine, drawing inspiration from the 'desire' mechanism. Kiesler's pseudo-technological reflections, borrowing images from research into glass technologies, clearly portray visual themes that offer a passage to a different world: framing and drawing on glass, shooting and breakage of glass panes, and a "Bride" figure above in order to draw attention of the lonely "Bachelors" below. In his interpretations, any possible loss, that the glass may allude to, is replaced by an insight that expands the theme of 'desire'. In other words, Duchamp's painting reveals a space of tension by establishing a clear link between his approach to the 'mechanism of desire' and the way complex constructs are arranged from the constituent parts of optical machines. The play of these parts is mechanical not just because they are in interactive motion caused by the use of electricity, performing operations on one another. Rather, the erotic-dynamic operation of electrical stripping of female figures (in Lynda Dalrymple Henderson's terms[6]) was launched to expand the themes of 'desire,' *operating like any other 'desiring-machine'* in a wider range of machines to which it is connected.

This mechanistic interpretation of the phenomena of 'desire' operates as a machine whose parts were connected mechanically but are non-sequiturs in terms of individual identity (Rubin 1978). Moreover, many of the important mechanisms never saw completion, even though Duchamp stopped developing it when it was 'perfectly incomplete.' And even if all the missing parts were there, the system would never arrive at a state of balance. Therefore, these mechanisms seem to be striving for something but all they really accomplish is the continual renewal of their motion, which allows the continuous operation of the mechanism. The

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[5] André Breton, "Lighthouse of the Bride," *View*, Marcel Duchamp issue, series 5, no. 1 (March 1945): 94-97. Originally published as "Phare de la Mariée," *Minotaur* 6, no. 6 (Winter 1935).

[6] Read more on Lynda Dalrymple Henderson's interpretation in: Lynda Dalrymple Henderson, "Illuminating Energy and Art in The Early Twentieth Century and Beyond: from Marcel Duchamp to Keith Sonnier," in Energies in the Arts, Douglas Kahn (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019, 140-143.

essence of machine operation is that it runs in a continuous flow, which allows, according to Deleuze and Guattari, that everything changes qua connecting. By illuminating the flow of operation via the network in *Bride Stripped Bare,* Duchamp's machine embraced the system of continuous transformation. In giving such prominence to the idea of a vast network of interconnectivity when they did, in the early 1970s,[7] "Deleuze and Guattari were ahead of the explosion of interest that there would be as the internet grew in cultural significance, particularly–at a popular level–from the late 1980s" (Ballantyne 2007, 32). Now, that the connections between things become paramount, we routinely make connections through networks. Accordingly, social relations are no longer primarily mediated by the goods that we produce. Rather, they are immediately taken over by these networks.

Modern novelists, the English writers E.M. Forster and H.G. Wells, arguably predicted this scenario by fiercely stepping into the world of inhabitable machines in the early 1900 (long before Le Corbusier). Namely, E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) envisions the danger to reduce human mobility in communication technologies like social media, long before they actually appeared. As Gabrielle Bellot noted, by predicting computer interfaces and programs like Skype that would allow us to communicate with people across the globe without leaving our rooms, H.G. Wells's stories (1895) capture the wonder of technologies that did not as yet exist, associating scientific innovations with societal progress as a whole (Bellot 2020). Embracing the disbelief in the machine in his "The Machine Stops", Forster describes an individual in relation to the network. He compares a woman's life in a

mechanized room - not too comfortable machine - to the global underground network of rooms and tunnels in which all humans supposedly live. The woman is meant to represent a vision of humanity that has absolute faith in the machine and the power of its interconnections, but it is she who chooses whether to connect with the outside world or stay in her room forever. Instead of initiating the processes, the machine causes her fear that it may progress eternally and stop the human processes initiated by the machine. It is understood as a warning, or in Wells' terms "with the development of the machine it starts to proceed separate of our human goals and the human being exists only as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries" (H.G. Wells 1895, 15). Perhaps this is comparable with Man Ray's mechanism, which doesn't operate but outlives through the networks, independently, as a metaphor for the realisation of a modern world driven by desire whose flow is constantly renewed, and whose desire begins from connection.

Conclusion

The renewed concern with the medium challenged the question of conceptual validity and the historical relevance of the notion of painting, not just according to traditional usage as a two-dimensional rendering in coloured pigment on a canvas suspended in a binder, but looking at its transmedia nature as being *machinic,* where elements of the painting in its fluid state bind together incompatible parts of our experience. This brings us back to the question of painting's early twentieth century history and how it has changed what we think a medium is.

Note:

[7] Arguably the concept is already in play in *Anti-Oedipus,* but it was identified in the rhizome by 1976, when Deleuze and Guattari published a book of that name, which would be reworked as the introductory chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus:* 3-25.

List of Figures

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Biographical note

Katarina Andjelkovic, with a Ph.D., M.Arch.Eng., is a theorist, practicing architect, researcher and a painter. She served as a Visiting Professor, Chair of Creative Architecture, at the University of Oklahoma U.S.A., Institute of Form Theory and History (Oslo), Institute of Urbanism and Landscape (Oslo), University of Belgrade, and guest-lectured at Master Studies of TU Delft - Faculty of architecture and the built environment, Doctoral studies of AHO - Oslo School of architecture and design, FAUP – Faculty of Architecture University of Porto and Bachelor studies of ITU - Istanbul Technical University. Katarina has published her research widely in international journals (Web of Science) and won numerous awards for her architecture design and urban design competitions. Katarina has published two monographs; an upcoming book chapter and several journal articles with Intellect UK. Andjelkovic exhibited her artwork at many international architectural, fine arts and photography exhibitions, including three solo and numerous group exhibitions: at Pall Mall Gallery in London, Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, MAAT Museum in Lisbon, International Biennial of Illustration in Belgrade, TU Delft in the Netherlands, the Museum of Applied Arts in Belgrade, the National Museum in Belgrade, Gallery Singidunum in Belgrade, the Gallery of the Central Military Club, SULUJ Gallery. More info: https://independent.academia.edu/KatarinaAndjelkovic