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Disappearing Objects in Georges Didi-Huberman's Curatorial Practices

Moving across art history as a discipline, Georges Didi-Huberman questions traditional historiography of art, emphasising the necessity of undermining its distinctiveness. He fuses art history with archaeology, anthropology, and philosophy, draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, and re-examines the key figures of the 20th century, such as Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg. His investigation spans art from prehistory to contemporaneity, overpassing the trajectory of chronological research. He brings out the limits of dominant discourses, proposing in return his own revalorised formulas in art history, concentrating mostly on peripheral narratives. Still, he does not confine himself to theoretical work only, but expands his interests also into the curatorial field, having worked as an active curator since 1997.

In my essay, I undertake an analysis of the first exhibition curated by Didi-Huberman and Didier Semin as the co-curator, *L'Empreinte (Imprint)*, which took place in Centre Pompidou in 1997. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with essays, released in 2008 as a separate publication, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte*. In this project, the French philosopher intentionally bypassed the usual products of artmaking, instead choosing to focus on what is left alongside this process. The project in Centre Pompidou transferred the technique of imprinting into the context of art of the 20th century, investigating the tactile transmission of form from one surface to another. To begin, I will characterise the imprint in Didi-Huberman's methodology and summarise the selection of artworks on a display. Then, I will discuss how this attempt was influenced by the notion of *survivance* of forms and may be referred to Aby Warburg's approach. Finally, I will investigate the contemporary context of the project, and the original/copy issue.

In Didi-Huberman's interpretation, "an imprint is a technological gesture, and this technique is a thing of space and time" (Didi-Huberman, 1997: 11). In *L'Empreinte* catalogue, he writes:

The imprints used by artists aren't particularly "archetypal" or particularly "postmodern." One must understand how, overpassing the usual concept of style and spontaneous chronological divisions, establishing a fundamental anachronism that forces us to recognize the traditional limits of historical models using to discuss artistic issues¹ (Didi-Huberman, 1997: 11).

"These small anachronous objects" are the signs of memory's effort (org. *le travail de la mémoire*), says Didi-Huberman in relation to the works featured in the exhibition. With his treatment of the *imprint* as an *imprint of memory*, a new kind of quality of writing about history emerges, where one can diverge from the chronological approach. This results in the need to redefine the commonly and unreflectively accepted understanding of the concept of time (org. *modèles du temps*) used in art history (Didi-Huberman, 1997: 11). In order to be able to describe an imprint, one must find the *imprint's circumstance* (org. *circonstances d'empreinte*), such that enables it to become unique, or allows it to be viewed as a regular pattern. By accepting the *anachronistic point of view* (org. *un point de vue anachronique*), an imprint becomes the *paradigm*, a *procedure*. *Anachronistic point of view* is based on the rejection of the traditional alternative that contemporary art history often offers us (Didi-Huberman, 1997:16).

The structure of the exhibition served to manifest this specific point of view; it is, indeed, a translation of Didi-Huberman's philosophy into the language of a visual essay. Simultaneously, it is the long history of imprints and their lasting position on the margins of history. *L'Empreinte* was presented in Galerie Sud in Centre Pompidou from February 19th till May 12th, 1997. On a display were 300 works of 110 artists, placed on a 1400 m² area.

In the introduction to the main part of the exhibition, the so-called *emblematic objects* were presented. This selection contained archaeological remains, fossils, primitive ritual masks, i.e. objects usually examined by palaeontology. The exhibition itself was divided into three separate paths leading the visitor, depending on the type of *contact*: *Contacts de la matière* (*Contact with materiality*), *Contacts de la chair* (*Contact with the body*) and *Contacts de la disparition* (*Contact with disappearance*), and they, in turn, were divided into even smaller parts, depending on the characteristics of the specific imprinted item. The first part was dedicated to the technology of the imprinting process, especially in order to accentuate the existence of a printing matrix, which acts as an initial impulse for the whole process that follows. Various techniques and materials used by 20th-century artists

¹ Org. 'Les empreintes produites par les artistes contemporains ne sont ni particulièrement «archétypiques», ni particulièrement «postmodernes». Il nous faut tenter de comprendre de quelle façon, tout en déjouant la notion usuelle de style, et les découpages chronologiques spontanés, elles forment un anachronisme fondamental qui impose de reconnaître la limite des modèles historiques généralement en usage pour parler des choses artistiques.'

were presented to the visitors (like *moulage*, *frottage*, *pliage*, *décalcomanie*, *photogramme* etc.).

The underlying idea was that each form has an implicit anti-form and each print – its archetype. Perhaps the most representative in terms of illustrating Didi-Huberman's curatorial intention was *Female Fig Leaf (Feuille de vigne femelle)* (1950–1951) by Marcel Duchamp. This work was exhibited beside its own mould, which served as its archetype. What is symptomatic, the mould of *Female Fig Leaf* (1950) forms a part of Centre Pompidou's permanent collection, as its legitimate part. These two pieces were accompanied by Duchamp's small-scale *erotic-objects*, like *Dart Object (Objet Dart)* (1950) and *Not a Shoe* (1950) with its antagonist form *Wedge of Chastity (Coin de chasteté)* (1954), as well as *Please Touch (Prière de Toucher)* (1947), a collage made out of rubber foam in the shape of woman's breast, known from the cover of the catalogue of the *Le Surréalisme en 1947* exhibition in Galerie Maeght in Paris. A bit further, the display presented the famous moulding of the sink-stopper, *Le Bouche-évier* (1964). Duchamp's works might serve as a visual link helping us to understand the ideas that stood behind the project. As the founder of modernity, contesting the traditional notion of work of art as well as the originality of the object, he initiated the way of thinking about art that Didi-Huberman draws on. The following part showcased works such as *The Hunter* by Tony Cragg (1991), a composition of 23 structures made out of gypsum and rubber foam, Jasper John's *Bread* (1969) or Bruce Nauman's *Device for a Left Armpit* (1967), a realised version of three sketches from Nauman's *Shoulder Sketches* (1967). Further on, the display contained imprinted shape-like structures, such as Arman's *Hommage à la Gorgone* (1964), with combs dipped into the paint and pressed on the canvas, Jasper John's *The Critic Smiles* (1959), where the lead and gold made toothbrush hair was replaced with four teeth, or *Achrome* (1957) by Piero Manzoni. Another interesting example is the *Moulanges en plâtre de deux savons usés (destinés à l'agrandissement)* by Joan Miró, two moulds of used soap that later served as the inspiration for his full-scale sculptures, such as *Personage* (1978) or *Monument* (1970). Pablo Picasso's *Profil d'homme* (1932), one of his Erwinographies was also on the display, next to the photogrammes by Man Ray. They were followed by works in the form of seals and tools used for their production, such as Arman's *Cachets* (1959), *Tampons* by Louis Cane (1967), *Poem* by Maurizio Nannucci (1967), or *Conspiracy* (1992) by Abigail Lane. In-between was a reprint of Kurt Schwitters' famous poem *Anna Blume* (1922) from the collection of the Dada nonsense poems.

The next section contained artworks characterised by *sensible structures (surfaces sensibles)*, such as Pierre Alechinsky's *Bouclier Urbain* (1984), decalcomanies by Oscar Dominguez (*Lyon's Bicyclette*, 1937) and Jean Dubuffet (*Le Chien du Hasard* and *Empreints* from 1957). Simon Hantai's *Folding method (Le Pliage)* was represented with three paintings from 1968, 1971 and 1973, next to one of Piero Manzoni's *Anachromes* (1959). The second path referred to the depiction of the body, and the relation between the physical aspects of the individual and

his surroundings. First, moulds of hands, such as Wassily Kandinsky's *Imprint of the Artist's Hands* (1926), Claude Viallat's *Untitled (Imprint of the Hands)* (1972), Giuseppe Penone's *Maldoror's Hands* (1987), as well as fingers, e.g. Gina Pane's (*Identity Painting*, 1968) or Jean-Jacques Lebel's fingerprints of the audience taken during the happening *120 Minutes Dedicated to Devine Marquis*, a tribute to Marquis de Sade (1966) or Piero Manzoni's egg with an imprint, *Uovo con Impronta* (1960). They were followed by hand imprints, for instance Pablo Picasso's *Main de Picasso* (1937), Pascal Convert's *Unattributed Sculpture (Hand's imprint)* (1994), and Giuseppe Penone's *Hand is a tree (Mano e Albero)* (1973), and finally by face imprints, e.g. César's *Mask* (1968) and *Head in Pain (La Tête en Pain)* (1973), Marcel Duchamp's *With My Tongue in My Cheek* (1959), and an ear mould in Camille Bryen's *Morphologie du désir, objet a fonctionnement* (1934–1937). The aspect of an inside and outside of the body was also brought up, as in Louise Bourgeois' *Rabbit* (1970). The last part of the exhibition referred to the process of vanishing, debris of dematerialisation, ephemeral actions, and capturing the invisible. On a display were artworks such as Yves Klein's *Pink Cosmogony with Traces of Wind (Cosmogonie Rose-Vent)* (1961), Marcel Broodthaers' *5 Magic Slates (5 Ardoises Magiques)* (1972), and Lucio Fontana's *Spacial Concept* (1957). Also, objects somehow wounded (org. *blessés*), like Camille Bryen's *Automatisme (Fumée)* (1935), and imprints of objects seemingly impossible to duplicate, including Picasso's pieces on Brassai's photographs, a piece of corrugated plaster [*Sculpture de Picasso (Morceau de plâtre cannelé)*, 1944], or crumpled paper [*Sculpture de Picasso (Empreinte de Papier Froisse)*, 1944]. Finally, there was the famous *Soffio (Breath)* by Giuseppe Penone (1978). Some items depicted the destruction as a result of the passage of time, such as Charles Rosses' *Solar Burn, 5/10/1970* (1970), Luciano Fabro's, *Sisifo* (1994), Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* (1920) or Robert Morris' *14 minutes* (1962). Lastly, the loss of space was depicted in such works as Rachel Whiteread's *Untitled (Airbed)* (1993) and *Untitled, Wax Floor* (1992). These three paths of the exhibition formed a coherent structure, a narrative that included the genealogy of the imprint and its evolution throughout contemporaneity. They also revealed two leading problems. On the one hand, the matter of time and *survivance*, the duration (org. *la durée*) of images, that leads to the distortion of the conventional trajectory of art history and the linear vision of time, a necessity to fully understand what an imprint is for Didi-Huberman. On the other, there is the original/copy issue that emerges from the status of artworks on display – admitted as rightful artworks, but also objects with a copy: a printing matrix that preceded them.

In order to fully understand this project, we must go back to Didi-Huberman's theoretical background and its key figures. His anachronous methodology implies this kind of understanding of time that was formulated by Walter Benjamin in his concept of *constellations*, i.e. *the dialectic configuration of heterogenic times* (Didi-Huberman, 1997: 17). Following Didi-Huberman's writings, we can also be certain that the key to his methodology lies in Aby Warburg's *nameless science*. In

L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg, published in 2002, he delivers a unique reinterpretation of concepts conceived by the German historian, especially his idea of *survivance*. Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, his survival figure, describes the life and after-life of certain forms, and their ability to endure (Bałus, 2010: 37). Examination of Warburg's study, his ideas about the *impurities of time* and the life of images, worked as a starting point for Didi-Huberman's concept of anachronous history of art. The *survivance* of forms discredits the existence of the linear concept of time by replacing it with endless duration, which includes disappearance and resurrection of forms. Warburg was also investigating the necessity of direct contact with historical means of artistic expression in order to revive them, which might serve as a crucial point of reference for Didi-Huberman's attempt. As a result of his deliberations, Warburg created the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

It is Didi-Huberman's leading premise that a historian does not work with History itself, since there cannot be any direct access to it. All we are left with are testimonies, traces, and remains (Leśniak, 2010: 124). Therefore, to study history is to research merely the evidence or its traces. Anachronous art history also deals with facts of memory, items whose being cannot be precisely located on the timeline. In *Devant le temps*, the French philosopher writes about the *archaeology of anachronous* and the *epistemology of anachronous*, and that they are strictly related to the functioning of memory, examination of traces and imprints (Vojvodik, 2009: 12).

For Didi-Huberman, an imprint, understood as an imprint of memory, is a certain kind of utility that allows us to adopt an *anachronistic point of view*. In this point, we can interpret the *L'Empreinte* exhibition as the manifestation of Warburgian *survivance* figure, in a way it is seen by Didi-Huberman.

It is difficult to evaluate the collection gathered by Didi-Huberman in this exhibition. It contains the classics of 20th-century's art but also works created shortly before the exhibition, in 1997. Some of the artifacts, except for the key names such as Duchamp, could have easily been replaced. This aspect was brought up by Richard Shiff, who, in his exhibition review in *Artforum*, asked a relevant question: "From room to room, I thought repeatedly, why include this object?" (Shiff, 1997: 132). He also emphasised one more aspect that emerged when Didi-Huberman's philosophy was translated into the visual language of the exhibition, namely he asked about the fate of imperfect imprints: "Didi-Huberman's theory of the imprint deals only with the most normative instances; he is imprinting without deviation, distortion, or failure, without degradation or entropy." (Shiff, 1977: 133) He mentions an example – Marie Pierre Thiebaut's *Medius Digitus – Taxonomie 1 et 2* from 1994. He writes:

On a smooth sheet of cardboard Marie Pierre Thiebaut laid out a grid of his fingerprints using wet clay instead of ink or paint to make the impressions. Such marks thoroughly blur or fail to register the finger's pattern of papillary ridges, which identify the

mark as a functional fingerprint. Here the imprint is entirely indexical, yet isn't at all what our culture tells us a fingerprint should look like (Shiff, 1997: 133).

So there are some ambiguities we are left with. The narration of the exhibition is consistent, although, the choice is subjective and apparently there is no definite key. We are confronted more with representations of some symptoms, rather than with the objects as such.

As to the original/copy issue, *L'Empreinte* investigated the dilemma of whether the process of imprinting is rather a case of copying the original item, or, on the contrary, losing the essence of the original. Does the process of reproduction make authenticity and uniqueness widely available or rather is this uniqueness being dispersed among many objects? This way, we are obliged to rethink the notion of the origin (*org. repenser la notion d'orgine*).

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin, mentioned on numerous occasions in *La ressemblance par contact*, linked the seriality of photography and possibility to easily multiply the images with the loss of aura. Years later, Rosalind Krauss, in her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, discussed originality in the context of Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* that she saw in the National Gallery in Washington in 1978. She undermined the work's authenticity – this is not a lifetime cast, moreover, we do not know whether the final set of the composition's elements coincided with Rodin's vision. However, the answer to the question of whether we are dealing with a copy or an original is not clear-cut. This binary opposition, a contradistinction between original and copy, real and fake, common for the modernist narrative, was overpassed with the emergence of postmodernism.

In his essay, *Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop and Sigmar Polke*, Benjamin Buchloh wrote:

When Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol introduced mechanically produced, "found" imaginary into the high art discourse of painting (by technological procedures of reproduction, such as the dye transfer process and silkscreen printing), gestural identity and originality of expression were repudiated. The very procedures that had concretized notions of creative invention and individual productivity in the preceding decade were now negated in the mechanical construction of the painting (Buchloh, 2000: 350).

The emergence of the neo-avant-garde was a subsequent step to break down the isolation of high art. The increasing impact of mass culture on artistic production and its mechanisation entirely rejected the modernist *aura*. In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* was published, and four years later his *Postproduction*, where he argues that the change that took place in the 1990s, when artists were using already existing works for reproduction or recreation, placing artworks in a new context, was much like the process of sampling, when already existing music

is being mixed and blended. For Bourriaud, *postproduction* is the consecutive stage of *appropriation* (Bourriaud, 2002: 25).

So, why in 1997 still discuss the issue of originality of an artwork? The original/copy dilemma had already been fairly obsolete a short time after Rosalind Krauss speculated about *The Gates of Hell*. So why go so far back in 1997? Wasn't the starting point for the exhibition anachronous itself? Displaying copies or non-artistic objects that emerged with Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades has a long history in modern art narrative since the birth of the avant-garde; one may even mention André Malraux's *Museum without Walls* from 1947. However, *L'Empreinte*, aside from the initial part with "emblematic objects", gathered original, fully-fledged artworks, "original copies." The works presented by the philosopher have always existed only in the *negative* form, so they were items of the exhibition with full rights. Alongside presenting his reflection on Warburgian methodology, Didi-Huberman aimed to overpass both the avant-garde dualistic strategy and the postmodern unification. With their binary status, the artworks shown on display were suspended between those two models. These copies, which are at once originals, create a paradox, a lapse in the dominant art history narrative and the concepts of time it is using. Their characterisation leads us to the *anachronistic point of view*. The artworks on display are not originals in the modernist understanding of the term, because they have been multiplied; neither are they postmodern copies in spite of being multiplied.

When it comes to exhibition making, Didi-Huberman's curatorial approach definitely remains postmodern. The acceleration of life and the emergence of the new model of society conjured a new type of ahistorical exhibition that overcame the approach that was in force since the 1960s. In *Museum in the Post-Industrial Mass Society* from 1996, Peter Weibel analyses the changes that have occurred in the exhibition models during the 1980s and 90s. Weibel writes that: "In some way, the lack of criteria of present-day curators guarantees their omnipotence because without criteria their individual dictatorship disguised as «intuition», becomes legitimate. An apparent pluralism shrouds the tyranny of subjective choice" (Weibel, 2017: 381). He describes a new type of exhibition, defined as "show-like" display: "correspondences, constellations, affinities, interference and resonance are produced purely subjectively, intuitively. They replace the historical categories of genealogy, of development, of chronology" (Weibel, 2017: 385).

Ultimately, one must remember that *L'Empreinte* was on display in Centre Pompidou, an emblematic space for postmodernism, where twelve years earlier Jean-François Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux* was exhibited. One might also mention here two projects that somehow corresponded to *L'Empreinte*. In the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, Didi-Huberman writes about *Impronte del corpo e della mente* (*Imprints of the body and mind*), a show organised by Adalgise Lugli in 1995, for the Venice Biennale, where the imprint was also analysed from the historical perspective underlining its anachronous aspect. However, Didi-Huberman noticed many differences, including the lack of interest in the process of imprinting

itself in Lugli's proposition (Didi-Huberman, 1997: 11). On the other hand, Richard Shiff recalls the exhibition *L'informe: mode d'emploi* (*Formlessness: User's Guide*), organised in Centre Pompidou one year earlier, in 1996, by Rosalind Krauss and Ive-Alain Bois, whose narrative was based on *formlessness*, as conceptualised by Georges Bataille. Didi-Huberman was also critical here, accusing Krauss and Blois of misunderstanding the formless as an absolute opposition to that which is formed (Shiff, 1997: 133). *L'Empreinte* was followed by many other exhibitions curated by Georges Didi-Huberman, including a project referring directly to Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The latter, titled *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, was presented in 2010 in Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. It was a specific three-dimensional atlas, which also resigned from the traditional distinction between artistic and non-artistic, and consisted of Warburg's *Mnemosyne* panels, as well as works of art, including Goya's sketches, works by avant-garde artists (Kurt Schwitters, László Moholy-Nagy) and surrealists (Man Ray), various representations of the atlas (Marcel Broodthaers), and pieces not commonly associated with their authors, such as Paul Klee's herbarium, photos of pre-Columbian architecture by Josef Albers, photos of random objects by Robert Rauschenberg, photos of New York graffiti by Sol LeWitt, atlas sheets cut by Rimbaud, and Benjamin's notes to *Arcades Project*. In 2010, the exhibition travelled in an unchanged shape to the ZKM in Karlsruhe and later, in 2011, to Stiftung Falkenberg in Hamburg. Didi-Huberman engaged French photographer, Arno Gisinger, and entrusted him to create the documentation of the whole project, beginning from the process of installation to the dismantling of the exhibition, as well as the exhibition itself. The project was subsequently shown in other venues, such as le Fresnoy (*Histoires de fantômes pour grandes personnes*), and Palais de Tokyo (*Nouvelles histoires de fantômes*), in a new form, as a video projection on the walls of the interior. In Beirut Art Centre (*Afteratlas*), printed photographs were hung on the wall. For a change, in Rio Art Museum (*Atlas, suite*), photographs were placed on the floor and leaned against the wall. If *L'Empreinte* was dealing with the objects of memory through the sense of touch, it is important to mention also the digital version of the exhibition, since this marked the moment when the artworks were replaced by their dematerialised virtual copies, or by *poor images*, as Hito Steyerl calls them. Is it still *survivance*? With what kind of memory are we dealing when the physical medium is removed?

To summarise, it is difficult to overlook the question of topicality of those translated ideas. Didi-Huberman asks about originality, and, using Benjamin's category of aura, he moves on to reflections about the process of reproduction, filtering them through the postmodernist screen. However, this anachronism remains intentional and it serves to manifest the *anachronistic point of view* adopted from the examination of Aby Warburg's methodology and *survivance* figure. It is convincing, but in 1997, the golden era of net-art, it could strike one as a bit obsolete. The complete isolation of the artefacts from their original context and their use as building blocks for a new composition, in an effort to make them work as evidence

supporting a specific theoretical model, is an area where one should always remain careful. From the present perspective *L'Empreinte* certainly remains very distant. Nowadays, we live in the age of digital reproduction, when the image has never been so distant from its prototype, or even never had a physical prototype. However, the rapidity of changes and persisting circulation of forms made the problem of their survival come back with a vengeance, but from a different angle, responding to the postmedia condition.

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Abstract

In this essay, I undertake an analysis of the first exhibition curated by Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte (Imprint)*, which took place in Centre Pompidou in 1997. In this project, the French philosopher and art historian intentionally bypassed the usual products of artmaking, instead choosing to focus on what is left alongside this process. The project in Centre Pompidou transferred the technique of imprinting into the context of art of the 20th-century, investigating the tactile transmission of form from one surface to another. I will examine how Didi-Huberman's attempt was influenced by the notion of *survivance* of forms, formulated by Aby Warburg, and how it offers an alternative to traditional approaches to original/copy issue.

Keywords: Georges Didi-Huberman, imprint, originality, curating, Centre Georges Pompidou, anachronism, Aby Warburg

Słowa kluczowe: Georges Didi-Huberman, odcisk, oryginalność, kuratorstwo, Centre Georges Pompidou, anachronizm, Aby Warburg

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