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From Canvas to Flatness: A Ready-made Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the possibility of flatness in painting through the lens of readymade. Precisely, the concept of flatness is questioned through its physical reduction to a white canvas. Because all untouched canvases are achromatic industrial sculpture composed by a high number of tiny asperities and a complex variation of shadows, they can actually not be considered as the phenomenalization of flatness. This claim is supported by several images illustrating the fractality of flatless canvas. In this context, this article analyzes the perceptive dimension of canvas as readymade by switching the focus of observers from painted elements (what is painted) to the painting ones (what composed the painted elements). The paper discusses the perception of untouched canvases as an experience of the flatness referring to the beginning and the end of painting in line with the Duchampian reflection on contemporary arts.

Keywords: Flatness, Canvas, Readymade, Duchamp.

JEL classification: Z; Z1.

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1. Introduction

The rectangular two-dimensional canvas is probably the most common surface used in painting. This trend has been observed for several centuries and caught the attention of historians and theoreticians of arts (De Duve, 1991; Riout, 1996). In the 1950s, Greenberg associated the conceptualization of this two-dimensional surface with what he called “flatness”. In other words, it characterizes the smoothness and the absence of curvature of a canvas. Greenberg (1960) wrote that flatness and its delimitation is the essence of painting because “flatness is the only condition painting shared with no other art”. This perspective is quite selective/restrictive because the concept of flatness could be discussed through other practices (photo², sculpture³ etc.). In this context, Greenberg also discussed the conceptual impossibility for painting to show its own flatness since,

“The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness [...] The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks

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² Zhang (2018)

³ See Stangos (1974)

made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension” (Greenberg, 1960 p.21).

In a modernist way of defining painting, the concept of flatness refers to the physicality of the untouched canvas but, through a Duchampian lens, this concept transcends its own materiality to become a readymade i.e. a physical tool and a necessary condition for arts – that will be the meaning we will associate to flatness in this essay. One might say that this perception echoes to the Duchamp’s impossibility of doing (“l’impossibilité du fer”) in which flatness stands at the edge of creation and absence of creation: all paintings start with flatness but the flatness itself embodies the absence of painting. On this point, Greenberg wrote that “flatness became quite an issue, an obsession, one might say. The question of what an artist could or could not do without violating the principle of flatness and the integrity of the picture plane” (Greenberg, 1962, p.12. The space offered by the canvas is not only the place containing the painted elements but it also suggests a form that contributes to the work. This is where the canvas stops to be merely perceived passively as an artistic medium.

The material shape of the painting’s surface physically delimitates the world of painting possibilities. Some artists were aware of this point and they explicitly worked on the issue of the delimitation of flatness: Malevitch (with his suprematist composition) and Mondrian (with composition red, blue and yellow I and II), for example, made resonate their abstract geometrical works⁴ with the painting’s support while post-painterly abstraction painters rather emphasized the planar dimension of the canvas by representing geometric forms that never overlap. In the 1960s, Frank Stella broke the rectilinearity of the canvas by adapting it to his works (opening the doors of the “shaped canvases era”, Wolfe, 1975, p.89). All these debates on the use of canvas in painting actually defines the background of this article which does not directly deal with the shape of the canvas (this aspect has been analyzed by Schinckus, 2018) but rather with the flatness itself. In a sense, this article can be looked on as a complementary research to Schinckus (2018) who discussed the role played by the delimitation of flatness⁵ in the observers’ perception. Alternatively, the idea of this essay is to investigate the concept of flatness by studying its readymade aspects and how this readymade nature influences the viewers’ perception. As explained in De Duve (1991); Carbon et al. (2015a; 2015b) and Schinckus (2018), the role played by the canvas texture in contemporary arts is still under-investigated. The contribution of this article is to explore further this aspect. The rest of this article is structured as follows. The next section deals with the literature review overviewing the few works debating the possibility to consider flatness as a readymade while the third part clarifies the methodology used in this study. Finally, the last section proposes visual elements illustrating the quasi-impossibility of absolute flatness (that I call “flatless”).

2. Literature review: Flatness as readymade

Flatness is now a classical concept in contemporary arts – it mainly refers to the quality of having smooth surface without raised areas or indentations. This aspect has been emphasized by Greenberg (1960) who presented flatness as what makes painting different from other arts. In this article, flatness is magnified and studied for itself as a Duchampian readymade.

The related literature therefore deals with this key concept of readymade and how this notion disrupts arts theories and artistic practices. Because this essay focuses on canvas as readymade, the existing literature can significantly be reduced since this approach is quite unique. This section overviews the few works questioning the canvas as readymade.

A canvas as a mere object, is a blank toile that can be found in any art shop and that has been designed to be painted. However, although this intimacy with painting, a white canvas is not (yet) a piece of art. The canvas has the necessary condition for having a piece of painting: flatness usually contributes to the elaboration of a piece of art through the artistic process in which it is used as medium. In this essay, I suggest to quit this usual framework and to study a white canvas as a piece of art through a colorless and lineless way of painting the achromatic beauty of the flatness itself. It is an Duchampian suspension of aesthetic judgement. The canvas as unassisted readymade results from a

⁴ See Saint-Martin (1989) for further details on this point

⁵ See Schinckus (2018) for further information on the topic.

decision to achieve an inexpressive inachievement illustrating the spectrum in which painting is simultaneously possible and impossible (referring to the Duchampian “impossibilite du fer”).

Deriving from Rodin’s perspective that every subject is worth being represented, the notion of readymade illustrates that common objects can be elevated to the status of art by the artist. In this perspective, Duchamp’s approach to aesthetic is mainly relational and readymades are presented as a rendez-vous (De Duve, 1989; 1991). Duchamp explicitly recognized this aspect by inscribing the minute, hour, the date and the title of his readymades as information. In this temporal perspective, readymades results from an unaesthetic judgment taking the form of a curatorial decision. The concept of readymade still generates a lot of debates as the following words witness,

“The Readymades are not anti-art... but rather “an-artistic”. Neither art nor anti-art, but something in between, indifferent, existing in a void... Their interest is not plastic but critical or philosophical. It would be senseless to argue about their beauty or ugliness, firstly because they are beyond beauty and ugliness, and secondly because they are not creations but signs, questioning or negating the act of creation” (Paz, 1993 cited from De Duve, 1993, p.164).

The artist’s way of choosing is not an aesthetic choice, as it is based on visual indifference and/or on the absence of taste – it is rather a conceptual process. In this way, Duchamp dismissed the category of taste when the choice of the readymade was done (de Duve, 1991). It is necessary and sufficient for the artist and the object to exist and to be able to meet. By elevating the common and the everyday aspect to art, Duchamp challenged the definition of art and what is institutionally accepted as art in the galleries. Readymades have no style, they rather embody the absence of style as a specific style. Their aesthetic is totally ignored – they exist in their symbolic and enunciative function. The perception of these works does not refer to an aesthetic judgment but rather to their acceptance as socio-cultural object. This article explores this function with the presentation of canvas for itself and a study of flatness through itself. The idea has been mentioned by De Duve (1989, p.240) who mentioned that flatness can, to some extent, be seen as a specific readymade:

‘it [a blank canvas] is a manufactured product, new and not used, it is the case with all Duchamp’s unassisted readymade but it is one that you can find in all artistic shops and not in somewhere else [...] Before being touched by painter’s hand, it belongs already to painting tradition or, more specifically, to a tradition of Western painting since the Renaissance’

In this context, considering flatness through itself deals with the impossibility to touch the flatness without violating its definition. In the same vein, studying flatness through itself also emphasizes its quasi-impossibility as it will be discussed (and illustrated) in the following section.

Because a white blank canvas is a specific object designed to be painted, it already exists as a picture leading Greenberg (1962) to claim that a stretched or tacked-up canvas cannot be a readymade. However, such statement is not in line with the Duchampian perspective in which “the artist does not start from scratch, but from a ready-made tradition: Man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from ready-made things like even his own mother and father” (quoted from De Duve, 1991, p.130). The French artist even explained in detail what he meant “Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the worlds are readymade aided” (Duchamp, 1961, p.141). For Duchamp, a white canvas is a readymade and it is probably the only work that actually keeps the essential Greenbergian convention on painting. Precisely, a canvas is a blind spot embodying the conventional Greenbergian conditions of modern painting: flatness and its delimitation.

There is something ambiguous in raising an untouched canvas to the level of piece of art. The white canvas reifies the possibilities of painting through two aspects: 1) its physical materiality (rectangular canvas usually used as physical support for painting) and, 2) its flatness that, according to Greenberg, is the only condition painting shared with no other art.

In line with this Duchampian perspective, the flatness that is usually perceived as a medium (or a support to visual art) can be seen as a readymade. The medium becomes its own results without experiencing the potential artistic preparation/process - so doing, the medium keeps all its possibilities. The untouched flatness appears as a transparent plan that cannot be broken emphasizing therefore its material geometry.

The immaculate virgin canvas has always attracted painters. Kandinsky (1913) emphasized the beauty of such pure background paving the way to all painting possibilities. “The virgin canvas, the

point of departure for the painter and the initial site in which his desire and his anguish are invested” (De Duve, 1991, p.35). Although a blank canvas is a creative door for all potential paintings, it also embodies its contrast. Precisely, a blank canvas can also illustrate the obsessive fear of no creation and even the apocalyptic end of painting. In this perspective, the untouched toile is a tabou embodying the beginning and the end of the Western tradition of painting. An unpainted painting designates nothing else than the exhaustion of its own naming. This is the reason for why a blank canvas as readymade is probably the simplest illustration of the Duchampian abandon of painting.

From Manet to Franck Stella or Robert Ryman modernist painters gradually emphasized the importance of flatness with the increasing importance of monochrome or quasi-monochrome paintings. The white monochrome is nowadays a painting style initiated by Kazemir Malevitch (and his *White on White* in 1918) in Russia and Wladyslaw Strzeminski in Poland. The list of painters working with the white monochrome is quite long, one can, for instance, mention Rauschenberg and his *White Paintings* (1951) or Josef Albers and his *Homage to the square* (1963). As quasi monochrome, let us mention, the work of Reinhardt who painted, in 1950, his *Number 107* that combined white painting with the natural color of the underlying canvas. Interestingly, the origin of monochrome is quite old and comes from cynical cartoons and the oldest one is probably a white page entitled “*Canard blanc*” suggested by Jean-Baptiste Oudry that was exhibited at the Salon de Paris in 1753 (Riout,1996). In the same vein, one can mention Alphone Allais and his “*Premiere communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige*”, in 1897, that showed a white page with the title.

Regarding the importance of the canvas itself, it is also worth mentioning the works of Jo Baer who proposed paintings in which only the frame of empty canvas is painted (*Untitled*, 1963, 1965). In the same vein, Piero Manzoni, starting from 1957, worked on his *Achrome* in which the canvas is covered with different white objects and products. In a sense, Manzoni’s works appear as an abandon of painting to move achromatically toward sculpture. In doing so, Manzoni played with the concept of flatness by emphasizing its potential texture. In relation to the flatness, it is also worth mentioning Lucio Fontana who, starting from 1949, offered unpainted canvas with holes or slashes on the surface to emphasize the fracture of flatness.

No artists, even minimal and conceptual ones proposed a mere a blank canvas as a piece of art. There exist some assemblages of untouched canvas (Robert Barry; Jan Dibets) while John Baldessari offered an empty painting with only the words *Everything is purged from this painting* but these works were not a simple canvas. More ambiguous, some of the Remy Zaugg’s white monochromes imitating a blank canvas (but these works entitled ‘*Toile Vierge*’, were painted so they violated the flatness). The physical structure (layers of paintings, importance of canvas etc.) of monochrome paintings usually contrasts with their (broken) flatness. To my knowledge, the only artist, who presented an (almost)⁶ untouched canvas as a piece of art is Isidore Isou, who, in 1956, proposed an imaginary painting. In this work, Isou did not paint the white canvas that he presented as a painting by simply writing the title: *Oeuvre infinitesimale ou esthapeiriste*, his name and the date on the canvas. The objective of Isou was to keep the painting opened for the changing mood of the observers (Satie, 2000, p.56). Such perspective echoes to a hermeneutic way of thinking painting allowing observers to see what they want on a mute canvas that has been designed to say nothing except this ability to evoke an infinite imagination.

Despite the works mentioned in this section have an intimacy with the idea of blank canvas, they actually do not focus on the untouched canvas for itself – they either consider canvases as a component of painting or study canvases for their geometric properties. The existing literature does not focus on the notion of flatness and still sees canvases as an artistic medium. In this context, none of the existing studies study flatness for itself – that is the path explored by this article.

3. Methodology: Analysis of the flatness through its exemplification

This essay directly uses a creative practice as research methodology. Precisely, after having defined (in the next section) the concept of flatness and flatless, these two notions will be exemplified and illustrated through a juxtaposition of artistic artefacts. The method of juxtaposition of aesthetic

⁶ The title of the work is on the painting so that it is not an untouched canvas.

artefacts consists in analysing visual material by placing them two side by side - Such methodology has been used in social sciences to create new knowledge (Schinckus and Gasparin, 2019).

This juxtaposition takes the form of an exemplification of the flatness. Generally speaking, the notion of exemplification refers to specific properties that can be associated with the image. The painting of a sunny landscape, for instance, can simply denote a landscape (case of denotation) but this pictorial entity can also exemplify happiness. Exemplification is a way of referencing to abstract properties or mental associations we can make with a visual element (ex: a bird can exemplify “freedom” or “independence” depending the system of symbol this image is exhibited). As explained by Goodman (1976),

“Exemplification is possession plus reference. To have without symbolising is merely to possess, while to symbolise without having is to refer in some other way than by exemplifying [...] If possession is intrinsic, reference is not; and just which properties of a symbol are exemplified depends upon what particular system of symbolization is in effect” (Goodman, 1976, p.53).

Exemplification allows Goodman to consider abstract paintings or other works of art as symbols referring to something else – as he wrote, “by exemplifying some properties, an abstract painting refers (at least) to these properties or to a clan of things that instantiates these properties” Goodman (1976, p.65). This concept of exemplification studied by Goodman (1976) can directly be used as epistemological framework to analyze contemporary arts and more specifically the concept of flatness.

4. From flatness to flatless

This section illustrates the idea of flatness as readymade by discussing further the quasi-impossibility of flatness that I call “flatless”. All virgin canvas have a different skin that keep their possibilities infinite in their untouched appearance. The immaculate toile is released from its usual iconic function to be reduced to its major component: the canvas. The untouched canvas is the negative revelation of what could have been painted; a phenomenalisation of what is not painted. The visibility of the white toile emphasizes the objective concreteness of the canvas and it paves the way for a new perceptive analysis. The untouched flatness dissuades fixed idea but its concreteness catches the sight offering therefore a diversity of details that are usually not mentioned/noticed in painting. The emptiness of the canvas fills the expectations of observers who cannot avoid to focus on the asperities (and their fractality) of the toile that become the real visual outcomes. Indeed, depending on the thickness (gsm or grams per square meter) of the canvas and its components (cotton or linen), the flatless (quasi-flatness) might vary significantly. The following pictures illustrate this minimal layer that actually makes the flatness impossible.

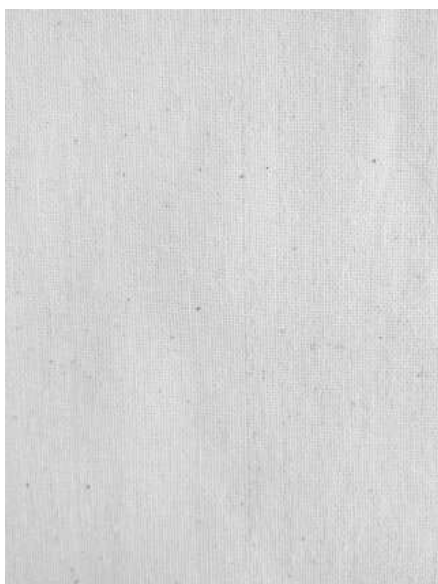


Figure 1a. Flatless 1 – white canvas, cotton, (120 gsm)



Figure 1b. Flatless 2 – white canvas, cotton, (123 gsm)



Figure 1c. Flatless 3 – white canvas, cotton, (238 gsm)



Figure 1d. Flatless 4 – white canvas, cotton, (350 gsm)

The repetition of four canvases exhibiting different granularity invites the viewers to suspend his/her usual esthetic expectations to pay attention to the tiny dissimilarities between the exhibited flatness. By inviting viewers to stop and fix the canvases, these works offer a “off-time” moment for observing what appears as the beginning and the end of painting. In a sense, these white canvases can be perceived as an antidote to our hyper-mediated artistic sphere. Through a Taoist creative gesture without leaving a mark, the artist invites viewers to become aware about the absence of flatness in painting. These white canvases can be seen as the physical expression of the action through in-action and the in-action through action. Precisely, the exhibited paintings (action) show untouched works (in-action), however, such in-action aims at inviting (action) viewers to think about the beginning and the end of painting. In other words, viewers can perceive something where they cannot directly see something. Interestingly, the viewer position directly influences the perception of these works since any change in the observation’s angle generates various lights and shadow effects when looking the untouched canvases. These shadows and light effects also testify the absence of perfect flatness in painting. Indeed, even though these toiles are unpainted, the observer’s gaze is drawn to the tiny asperities of the canvas and his/her eyes float around potential shadows and light effect. In this context, the canvases from 1-a to 1-d also illustrate how the absence of flatness is actually the minimal condition of perception in painting. Precisely, the granulation of these white canvases can be exhibited and perceived for itself in contrast with the case of painted (white) canvases where granulation becomes part of the artistic medium influencing directly the adhesion of paint and indirectly the perception of viewers. The physicality of the canvas also appears as a key element of the work perception. In absence of material on the toile, the delimitation of the flatness defines the area where the perception actually occurs. In other words, the shape of the canvas might influence the perception (Schinckus, 2018). The figures 1-a to 1-d provide a classical rectangular shaped canvas that appear then as opened window with no line following predefined style. Being emotionally touched by a white canvas might appear strange and the mental health of a person claiming that a vierge toile (i.e. “virgin canvas”) is beautiful would probably be questioned. As readymade, an untouched canvas refers to the absence of aesthetics and what has to be perceived is actually not merely what is seen.

In terms of perception, adding 3D pigments of color changes the perspective simply because observers usually focus their attention on the painted elements (‘what is painted’) instead of the painting elements (‘what composes what is painted’). In the case of a white canvas, viewers are invited to look the work where the painting actually does not exist to reconsider the absence of painted elements as a painting. In doing so, the observers’ attention switches from a passive view to a reflexive vision on painting.

Even the adding of real 3D qualities, firstly done by Leonardo (Carbon and Hesslinger, 2013; 2015a; 2015b) does not change the nature of flatness – only perceptually it gains the third dimension. Viewers usually have a holistic perception of paintings forgetting therefore the microscopic painting elements whose physical existence calls into question the possibility of flatness in painting.

For several decades now, painting has been faced with a dematerialization in which painting practices has become eroded and even erased. In this process, painting actually extended its horizons for free zones of exploration while the pain itself became a mass product commodity leading Duchamp to consider tubes of paint as readymades. In the same vein, white canvases are nowadays mass products that can be associated with readymades whose asperities can be seen as industrial sculpture witnessing the impossibility of real flatness. Although all unpainted canvases are the best reification of the concept of flatness, they exist only in a flatless way.

The readymades presented in this essay do not refer to visual aspects. Seeing in this article does not refer to a sensation but rather to an awareness related to noticing what is seen. This act of awareness includes the noticing of what is not directly visible such as the granularity of the canvas or the shadows and light that might appear on the untouched toile. In other words, the exhibition of an untouched canvas invites viewers to notice the situation in which they are. Exhibiting readymade put viewers in a situation of comprehensive awareness, an imaginative exercise internalizing a public experience. This is an act of awareness of a social situation in which what is exhibited make senses through an institutional agreement about where art starts and stops. In other words, observers experience the simplicity of readymades and their institutional nature in arts. Taking time to discuss\exhibit untouched canvases as readymade is an invitation to experience the institutional importance of flatness as the beginning and the end of painting. In a sense, there is a dialectical act of awareness: acknowledging that an untouched canvas is actually the beginning of painting; confessing that the same white canvas dangerously echoes to the absence\impossibility (end) of painting and; finally, exhibiting this duality as a work of art.

5. Words on flatless and flatless of words

The flatness in painting has been studied “from the inside” by merging the painting with its medium (Graw and al., 2014, p.48). The figures 1,2,3,4 suggest considering flatness from outside, for itself, not for its usual medium function. In doing so, these works show that flatness are not only an in-between medium for artists but it can also become a specific production of signs (i.e. an industrial sculpture and a readymade). The following illustration, taking the form of a canvas on which flatless is exhibited, summarizes very well the objective of this essay: discussing the quasi-impossibility of flatness through its phenomenalisation in flatless.

The collection of immaculate toiles does not aim at becoming a piece of art, it rather emphasizes the absence of art in accordance with the concept of readymade. The work entitled Flatless Canvas reifies the quasi-impossibility of flatness by combining several toiles offering different ‘flatnesses’. The concept of flatness takes forms through a flatless canvas echoing to the geometric fractality of flatness. An untouched canvas acts is a mass produced commodity, however, by being explicitly presented as a readymade, this object becomes other to itself although it still retains its material form.

Since, Duchamp suggested that all objects and creations are actually a readymade, this article can also, to some extent, be perceived as an aided readymade. All words written in this essay violate the white page and its infinite possibilities.

All sections of this article fix the ideas and close the imaginary projections that a reader could have had about an unwritten essay on flatness and readymade. In such perspective, I conclude this essay with a re-opening of the imaginary nature of this writing by placing this article in a situation of readymade. The figure 3 visually embodies the objective of this article: discussing the impossibility of



Figure 2. Flatless Canvas: Canvas with 5 different cotton fabrics.

flatness as readymade⁷. By pasting this essay on a white canvas, words and sentences echo to these asperities of the toile I mentioned earlier emphasizing here the importance of enunciation in the Duchampian readymade. Words and enunciation of readymade play a significant role in their social acceptance. A smart formulation of a situation associated with a unassisted readymade (for example, in advance a broken arm) emphasizes this Duchampian evolution from the impossibility of doing (*impossibilit  du fer*) to the possibility of saying. In the same vein, the impossibility of flatness has been emphasized here through words. Like asperities of an untouched canvas that make pure flatness impossible in painting, words are unassisted readymade characterizing the enunciative nature of readymade. Pure flatness cannot be shown – it can only be formulated through words and its opposite manifestation shown on a canvas.



Figure 3. Wordy asperities – paper on canvas

6. Conclusion

This essay investigates the possibility of flatness in painting through the lens of readymade and its physical reduction to a white canvas. Through a creative gesture without leaving a mark, the artist invites viewers to think about the beginning and the end of painting. In other words, viewers can perceive something where they cannot directly see something. Because all untouched canvases are achromatic industrial sculpture composed by a high number of tiny asperities and a complex variation of shadows, they can actually not be considered as the phenomenalization of flatness. The untouched canvases presented here invited viewers to look the work where the painting actually does not exist to reconsider the absence of painted elements as a painting. In doing so, the observers' perception focusses on the painted elements ('what is painted') instead of the painting elements ('what composes what is painted') implying a reflexive vision on painting. By focusing on flatness and its role in painting, this article provides an epistemology of canvas use in visual arts. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this paper also extends the concept of readymade to academic writing (see end of section IV) by considering that all well/conventionalized structuration of knowledge can also be perceived as a readymade. Such perspective paves the way for further research on the status of science as social practices.

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⁷ It is important to emphasize that the figure 3 is presented here as a painting – through a picture – not as a picture. In other words, the concept of flatness is still discuss for painting and not in a context of photography.

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