

Dancing Colors

Haptic Materiality of Light in *Chaleur Humaine*

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From the beginning of the performance, the hall is particularly dark, hermetically obscure. The dancers Emmanuel Proulx and Elise Bergeron also accompany this darkness. He has his eyes closed and she has her hair forward, covering her face. In this dark atmosphere, *Chaleur Humaine* begins with her standing, nude but wrapped in a piece of white transparent fabric. He is at her side, nude as well, kneeling, breathing heavily at the height of her legs. One sees a first movement, the breath coming out of his mouth, which is drawn on her body, as a thermal trace. Small colored waves appear, coming out of his mouth. He slowly begins to touch her with his left hand. The hand travels carefully over the legs towards the stomach, leaving a red mark behind, a luminescent trace of heat. The dancers begin to touch each other, receiving at the same time, projected on their own bodies, the light and colors of their own intimacy. The luminescent colors of the traces of touch constantly change, creating a colorful atmosphere. From the darkness, one observes the intensity of this proximity, the temperature, and the affection of this erotic closeness that emerges from the increasing contact with the skin. One observes it through the vibration of a haptic and colorful light, where the invisible traces of the intensity of touching and its temperature acquire a luminescent materiality. This is how colors begin to dance within a haptic constellation, where the different dimensions of the sense of touch – like a sensitive and an affective dimension – are intertwined through a luminescent choreography.

Chaleur Humaine, created by Canadian image and movement artist Stéphane Gladyszewski, was presented at the 2017 international festival for contemporary dance in Munich.¹ With two nude bodies on stage, the performance explores the relationship between the sense of touch and eroticism, desire and pleasure, approaching the sensual intensity of a caress whose traces materialize in luminescent and colorful waves of temperature. With a thermal camera (also known as

1 The work was first created in 2011 and presented in different places. When it was performed at DANCE 2017 in Munich, I had the opportunity to assist. A description of *Chaleur Humaine* will be found at: <https://www.danielleveilledanse.org/en-chaleur-humaine>.

infrared camera), the different levels of temperature of both the movement of the dancers and their interaction through touch were captured and then projected on the bodies themselves. In this sense, the performance transforms or translates the sensitive tactile experiences into a visual body surface through a thermo-video projection system, where the zones of higher temperature, movement, and contact between the dancers begin to shine in a sort of “skin of light,” as the program describes it (DANCE 2017: 13).

This synthesis of color, light, and touching creates in the performance a singular *vibrant* materiality or force of materialization, acquiring its own sort of agency through the intertwining between human and nonhuman forces involved. This sort of vibration is what Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, designates “the capacity of things” (Bennett 2010: viii), considering the notion of agency to describe the different forces involved in various kinds of materialities. Following an interdisciplinary approach – especially by considering a non-dualistic perspective between life and matter, organic and inorganic, among other distinctions – the author aims to develop an ontology of what she calls “vibrant matter” (2010: x). She considers, for example, the notion of “material vitalism” developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1978)², in order to examine how objects have their own vitality as an immanent matter-energy (Bennett 2010). The notion of vibration appears here as a key notion to understand materialities and things as vital or animated entities able to produce different dramatic or subtle effects and affects. In this sense, Bennett underlines the importance of this vitality of matter – this vibration – regarding the capacity of things: how they move or are moved, how they have an effect and an affect on us, around us and in us, opening the question not solely about how things are made by complex collections of vital materials but also how the agencies of human, nonhuman and not-quite-human things, their tendencies, trajectories, constellations and forces of materialization are shaped.

Following this approach, specifically considering the notion of vibration, and approaching colors as a vibrant materiality in *Chaleur Humaine*, one might ask, what is vibrating within these dancing lights and colors in the performance? What is their materializing force about? In order to respond to these questions, I begin by going back to Loie Fuller’s performances to identify the relationship between form, light and color in dance, which happens to have a resonance with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s approach to Cézanne’s paintings, particularly regarding the vi-

2 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, and their chapter “Treatise on Nomadology” – on which Bennett focuses – Deleuze and Guattari develop the idea of a “life proper to matter” (1987: 411) through the analysis of metal and metallurgy. There the authors identify a “vital state of matter” that would exist everywhere within all matters and operations.

brant constitution of the appearance of the object through its “emergence from colors” (Merleau-Ponty 1971: 15).

Emerging from Color

With her *Serpentine Dance* and *danses lumineuses*, Loie Fuller created, at the end of the nineteenth century, an innovative type of dance, with extravagant movements combining the use of light and colors. Wearing a long dress as a costume that she used as a projection surface, Fuller was illuminated with different colors while she danced.³ As Johannes Birringer (2017) suggests, following Rhonda Garelick, the result was the development of a specific and innovative sort of movements of the body, merging her own body and her costume as a screen for the lighting technologies involved, which made her one of the pioneers of the modern dance and stage technologies.⁴

One of the particularities of this luminescent design and this dramaturgy of colors was the specific way in which Fuller created different figures or forms in space, and how this process was related to the issue of color. As Sabine Gottgetreu points out, this sort of performance, which involved a serpentine dance and illuminated cloth, marked “the narrow path between recognizability and the dissolution of the form” (2012: 38; my translation). It is not just about the instability of the continuously changing figures that Fuller created (sometimes interpreted as butterflies or insects), but also the body itself – the body as a figure or as a form that was deconstructed. In this regard, Garelick even suggests that “overall, Fuller’s inventions tended to dissolve the shape of her body into a whirl of fabric and light” (2007: 34), while she mutated into different ephemeral forms, reached by the interaction of light and color. The specific work with lights and colors, form and outline, resulted in a singular kind of materiality and corporality, which generated a luminescent and colorful expansion of the dancer’s movements.

As Albright proposes in *Traces of Light* (2007), these innovations concerning form and contour in Fuller’s work coincide with similar art experiments, principally with the Impressionists in painting. With them, colors began to have a sort of

3 Fuller used different technologies to create her performances (sound, lighting effects, film projections). Ann Cooper Albright suggests that her performances “help us recognize the historical lineage of dance and technology and the way that bodies and machines have long been in conversation with one other” (2007: xv).

4 Birringer mentions Fuller’s experiments in the context of his reflections on the synesthetic experience in choreography, especially regarding sound, and the listening perception of choreography. In this sense, he refers to choreographic objects that are created regarding the audible and inaudible experience in choreography, considering the dance practice and creative process of his DAP-Lab (Design and Performance Lab).

autonomy regarding a liberal use of it in relation to the tension between color and line. Because the question of the line was crucial in the nineteenth-century ballet as well, as Albright remarks, Fuller increasingly avoids using lines, similarly to the Impressionists, “favouring instead the play of color and light across the space” (2007: 68). In this attempt, Fuller combines different types of vibrations – those of light, space, music, motion, and colors – to create a harmonized and interconnected vibrating world. The term “vibration” is used by Cooper to signalize Fuller’s aesthetic inclination, awareness, and active engagement with the use of colors and lights, especially with what they are able to move or mobilize. The specific use of lights and color in Fuller’s work was also imbricated with an emotional and affective aspect. Analyzing the different aspects of the use of light and vibration of colors in Fuller’s performances, Albright suggests that the “sophisticated use of theatrical lighting was tied to her awareness of the affective emotional qualities of color and light” (2007: 66). Thus, gathering up these different vibrations and working with them, Fuller “opens up an intertextual space in which she materializes what has often been left invisible” (2007: 82).

I mention Fuller’s performances to underline two principal points: on the one hand the relationship between form and the emerging and shifting of the form and materiality through color and lights, i.e. considering color and light not just as a filling of the form, but rather as the form itself, its own unstable materiality, to approach its vibrations or forces of materialization. On the other hand, I emphasize the relationship between this emerging materiality and an affective and emotional dimension that also emerges from colors.

To clarify this point, I would like to comment on the idea of “*émerger de la couleur*” (“emerging from the color”), actually an expression used by Merleau-Ponty in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1971: 15). It is worth considering Merleau-Ponty’s approach to Cézanne’s paintings here, particularly his idea of a vibrant constitution of the appearance of the object and its relationship with the world of sensations, developed in this essay.

Merleau-Ponty points out that the suppression of precise contours or the prevalence of color over the outline does not serve the same purpose in Cézanne as in the Impressionists. Without following the contour, and with no outline to enclose the color, the object “seems subtly illuminated from within, light emanates from it” (1971: 12). This would be the result of Cézanne’s intention to capture the emergence of the object, the shifting way in which an object appears to perception: “he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization” (1971: 13). In this sense, Cézanne recreated the volume of the object with chromatic modulations and just marked some outlines with blue color. The contour or outline, therefore, should be a result of the colors involved so that finally the gaze would be able to capture an emerging shape, just as it would happen in perception.

For Cézanne, as Merleau-Ponty underlines, the world and the perception respond to an organism made of colors (or to a chaos of colors) where lines and forms vibrate as the object or matter is formed, and where color and outline are not different from each other anymore. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty states that “Nor did Cézanne neglect the physiognomy of objects and faces: he simply wanted to capture it *emerging from the color*” (1971: 15, my italics). This point is crucial because it would allow one to consider color, if not as a materiality in itself, then at least as a *vibrant matter* or force of materialization, as a force that brings something into the intensity and vibration of its emerging presence, forming its process of appearing.

For Cézanne, as Günter Figal points out, painting was to compose colors, to work with them in a way that colors would not solely shape the thing of the world, but they would also become those things: “The colors, their tones and nuances, form lines; they become things, rocks, trees [...]” (2010: 38). I mention this idea of emerging from color and colors becoming things to underline the possibility of approaching colors as things, as vibrating things, emphasizing the intertwining between colors and materiality.

On the other hand, this vibrating constitution through the emergence from color responds as well to other vibrations. Parallel to the chaos of colors, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, a chaos of sensations arises. Figal suggests that, when abandoning the outline, Cézanne was approaching a chaos of sensations (2010: 13). Following Merleau-Ponty, Figal emphasizes that Cézanne’s painting has to do with a process of translation, of “translating the sensations to the canvas” (2010: 35), and this process is related to colors. Accordingly, what concretely emerges in Cézanne’s canvas is this translation (2010: 38).

Emerging from Touching

Returning now to *Chaleur Humaine*, I earlier suggested that the performance translates the sensitive tactile experiences into a visual and luminescent body surface. It is not only about the vibrant constitution of the appearance of an object that comes about in color, like in Cézanne’s paintings. It is the vibrant and colored emergence of a sense – the sense of touch – that arises in a way that it could not be constituted by itself without the interaction of the dancers with the technologies involved in real time. On the other hand, both in Fuller’s performances, Cézanne’s paintings, and in *Chaleur Humaine*, one can find a path from an emotional or affective dimension – or from a chaos of sensations – to colors or to a chaos of colors. This path could be identified as a translation of different processes of materialization. In the performance, this translation would form the process of appearing of touching: its emergence from colors.

Nevertheless, at the same time another translation takes place in *Chaleur Humaine*: colors *emerge from touching*. This is not a play on words, it is exactly through this emergence from touching that colors become things, things that dance, vibrant matters, vital or animated things. They acquire their own agency through a haptic materiality of light. In this intertwining, both – colors and touching – dance as they emerge from each other through different bodily movements. This mutual emergence creates a colored haptic constellation, where the dancing-tactile experiences, and the affective intensity of the caress, shine in the skin of the dancers – creating multiple ongoing chromatic and pictorial relations, mediated through a camera.

As well as in the performances of Fuller, we would find in Gladyszewski's *Chaleur Humaine* an abstract configuration of light and color, where the shifting forms of tactile traces emerge through the agency of vibrating lighting colors. But what vibrates is the intensity of the contact as well, where the human warmth becomes more than just information about temperature. The traces of light and color would correspond, therefore, to a deep dimension of the caress that travels next to the warmth of dancing contacts.

It is worth mentioning that Emmanuel Levinas, in *Time and the Other*, points out that what is caressed is not properly touched. This does not mean that there is no tactile experience in the caress, but rather that the caress does not end or begin in that experience of touch. I want to underline this point, considering the relationship between the caress and the human warmth, specifically when Levinas suggests that “it is not the softness or the warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks” (1987: 89). What the caress looks for is something indeterminate, in the sense that the caress does not know what it seeks. And this constant seeking of the caress would constitute its essence. In this sense, the sensory experience of touching regarding the caress implies an excess, something that exceeds the sensory experience, or rather, the sensory experience in the caress already implies that excess which deepens the sensitive experience.

Regarding this excess of the tactile experience of the caress, then, the *emergence from touching* in *Chaleur Humaine* is always related to its untouchable dimension. That is to say, the tactile experience linked to temperature emerges connected to that which goes beyond it, and which refers to an affective, intimate and erotic dimension of the caress. This would create a singular process of materialization where the colors begin to dance. The colors dance this vibration of the intertwining of the touchable and the untouchable over the bodies, the vibration of the excess and the sensitivity, giving place to different types of haptic movements of the dancers.⁵

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