

- 1 Cover of Daniel Spoerri's and François Dufrêne's 1963 book *L'Optique moderne*, *Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d'inutiles notules par François Dufrêne*, 1963, cover design by George Maciunas

# Quirky Optics: *L'Optique moderne*, an artists' book by Daniel Spoerri and François Dufrêne

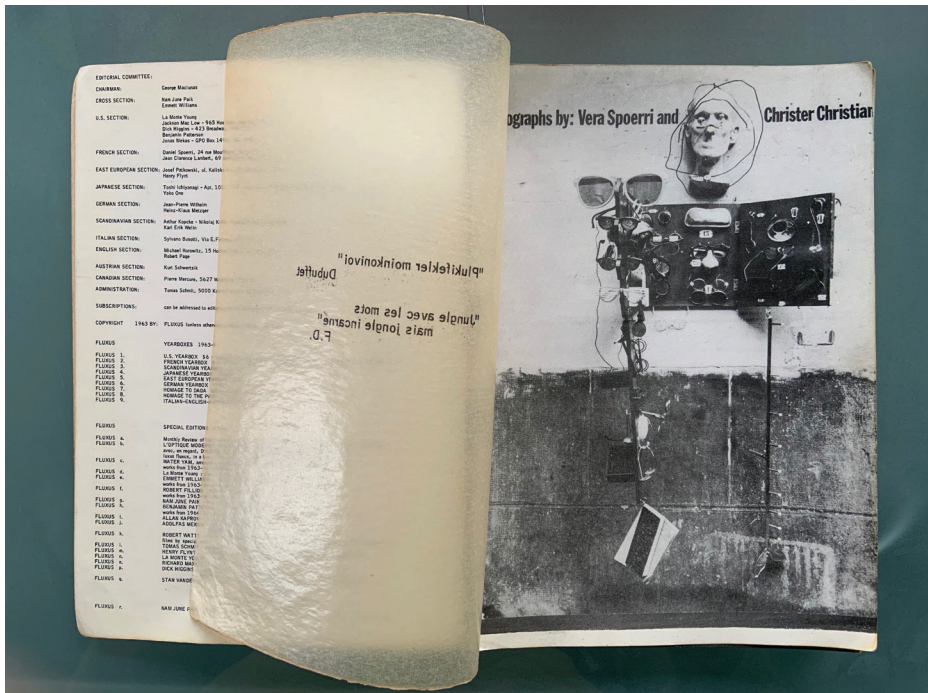
Jill Carrick and Pauline Goutain

*L'Optique moderne*, or “Modern Optics,” is a striking 1960s artists’ book by Daniel Spoerri and Nouveau Réaliste artist and ex-Lettriste poet François Dufrêne (fig. 1). First published by George Maciunas’s innovative Fluxus editions in 1963, it remains a little-known Fluxus masterpiece on the vicissitudes of mid-twentieth-century vision—as glimpsed through the lens of idiosyncratic eyewear. The book juxtaposes tongue-in-cheek portrait photographs of Spoerri posing in glasses with multi-coded texts by Dufrêne. When read out loud, Dufrêne’s seemingly nonsensical writing erupts into playful, fragmented commentary on optometrists, philosophers, and French quotidian life.

*L'Optique moderne*’s kaleidoscopic cultural references and shifting image-text relations are the focus of this investigation. What relationships, we ask, occur between Spoerri’s images and Dufrêne’s texts? How does the book challenge conventions of reading and viewing? And in what ways does Spoerri and Dufrêne’s publication question practices of one-point perspective and the illusions of mastery that accompany it? In addressing these questions, our paper focuses on several image-text pairings drawn from Spoerri and Dufrêne’s pages, namely “Death mask of Voltaire?” (“Masque mortuaire de Voltaire”), “Schubert’s spectacles” (“Lunettes à la Schubert”), and “Pulverizing glasses of Raymond Hains (normal model)” (“Lunettes à verres canelés [*sic*] de Raymond Hains (modèle normal)” as well as the opening pages of the book. Each example, we argue, questions relationships between sight and understanding, while lightheartedly offering fresh perspectives on 1960s art, culture, and everyday life.

## A Book by Several Hands for Many Eyes

*L'Optique moderne* is the fruit of a ludic, improvised collaboration between Spoerri and Dufrêne that showcases their shared interest in not only the visual arts, but also the spiralling polysemous possibilities of language. The book’s full title is *L'Optique moderne: Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri*



2 Detail of Daniel Spoerri’s and François Dufrené’s *L’Optique moderne, Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d’inutiles notules par François Dufrené*, 1963

*avec, en regard, d’inutiles notules par François Dufrené*, which loosely translates as “Modern Optics: Collection of Spectacles Presented by Daniel Spoerri, with Useless Facing Notelets by François Dufrené.”<sup>1</sup>

Spoerri and Dufrené’s artists’ book opens with a photograph of a pre-existing artwork: Spoerri’s *L’Optique moderne* assemblage of 1961–1963 (fig. 2). The latter consists of a collection of optical equipment and eyeglasses positioned beneath a plaster cast of a man’s head. The assemblage was originally conceived as an interactive work—“an auto-theatre,” in Spoerri’s words—that invited the viewer

1 Daniel Spoerri and François Dufrené, *L’Optique moderne: Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d’inutiles notules par François Dufrené*, Fluxus, 1963, unpaginated.



3 Daniel Spoerri, *Self-portraits with Glasses*, 1963, grouping of photographs exhibited at Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, in 2007

to try on the glasses and experience their optical effects.<sup>2</sup> Instead of hanging optical art on the wall, Spoerri explained, the idea was to hang it directly in front

2 "I also began my series of 'collections' of kitchen utensils, of shoe lasts, which are presented in all their variations. It's about showing the evolution and transformation of an object.

In the 'collections' the objects are neither fixed nor glued, but just hung, ready to serve. Another reason leading me to not fix the objects in the collection: mobility would permit the public to try on the glasses and thus create an 'auto-theatre'. The idea of directing and theatre still had not left me.

With the publication of *L'Optique moderne*, which consists of a series of photos of myself wearing different glasses (accompanied by *Inutiles Notules*, by François Dufrière), my relations with Fluxus began."

(Je débute aussi ma série de 'collections' d'ustensiles de cuisine, de formes de chaussures, qui sont présentés dans toutes leurs variations. Il s'agit de montrer l'évolution et la transformation d'un objet.

Dans les 'collections', les objets ne sont ni fixés ni collés, mais seulement accrochés, prêts à servir. Une autre raison qui m'a conduit à ne pas fixer les objets de la collection : la mobilité devait permettre au public d'essayer les lunettes et de réaliser ainsi un 'auto-théâtre'. L'idée de mise en scène et de théâtre ne m'avait toujours pas quitté.

Avec la publication de *L'Optique moderne* qui se compose d'une suite de photos de moi-même portant différentes lunettes (accompagné d'*Inutiles Notules*, de François Dufrière) commencent mes relations avec Fluxus.), Daniel Spoerri, in Otto Hahn, *Daniel Spoerri*, Paris, 1990, p. 50.

of one's eyes so that everyone could change their point of view.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, to accentuate the performative dimensions of the work, Spoerri had his picture taken wearing the glasses from his collection (fig. 3). Playing to the camera and its tight frontal framing of his face, he staged his expressions while sporting an oddball array of eyewear and other optical devices: "Schubert's spectacles," fur-covered glasses in honor of surrealist Meret Oppenheim, slatted "Venetian-blind" sunglasses, and "Dark glasses" with spikes positioned to puncture the eyes. The majority of the photographs, taken by Vera Spoerri and Christer Christian, adopt a frontal documentary style suggestive of black-and-white identification photographs or photo-booth shots. These images became the raw material for Dufrêne and Spoerri's collaborative book project.

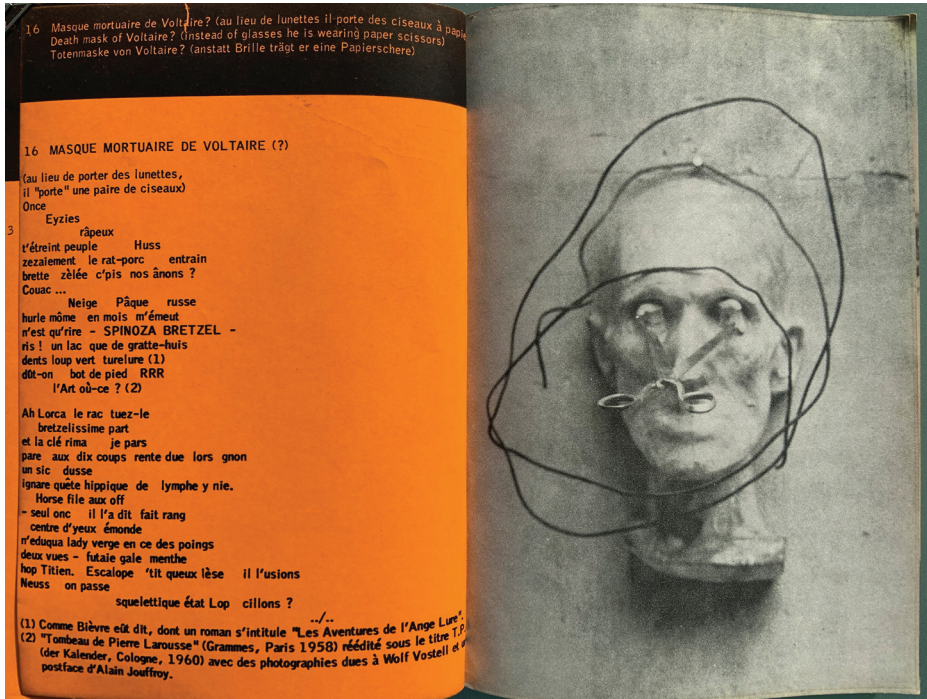
When asked about the creation of the book, Spoerri explained that he first compiled the photos and scripted brief titles in French, English, and German, then passed these materials to Dufrêne.<sup>4</sup> Dufrêne used them to freely compose the texts without Spoerri's intervention. The resultant notelets mingle direct references to the images with a vertiginous range of other topics.

*L'Optique moderne* revels in contradictions and incongruity. The book's legibility, for example, is frequently hindered by its design. In keeping with the mischievous spirit of Fluxus, the layout and typography of the 1963 edition deliberately challenge the viewer's gaze. Spoerri, Dufrêne, and publisher and designer Maciunas opted for glossy orange paper that reflects light and dazzles the eye. Switches between orange and black backgrounds under areas of printed text force the gaze to reacclimatize while reading. Maciunas's book cover also tests the eye; its bold typography, composed of mismatching fonts, pulls the reader's gaze across the page in unaccustomed directions (fig. 1). While the words "L'Optique moderne: Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri" read, if somewhat bumpily, left to right, the continuation of the title has our eyes leaping backwards and upwards, significantly slowing the reading process.

3 "[A]nstatt es an die Wand zu hängen, kann man es dirkt vors Auge hängen und dann verändert an auch die Sicht das war eigentlich die Idee und die konsequenteste Lösung [d]avon war ja die Brille, die die Augen aussticht, also les lunettes noires". (Instead of hanging it on the wall, you can hang it directly in front of your eyes and it will also change your vision. This was the actual idea and the most consequent result from it was the glasses that gouge out your eyes, [and] so *les lunettes noires*.), Daniel Spoerri, interview by Markus Baldegger (misspelt as 'Baldecker' on the archived transcript), tape III, side II, page 1, typed transcript, Swiss Federal Archives, 1982.

For further discussion of Spoerri's installation *L'Optique moderne*, see Jill Carrick, "L'Optique Moderne: Daniel Spoerri's 'Optical Readymades'", in *Art History* 39/4, September 2016, pp. 744-771, republished in Natalie Adamson and Steven Harris (eds.), *Material Imagination: Art in Europe, 1946-72*, Chichester, 2017, pp. 112-139.

4 Daniel Spoerri, interview by Jill Carrick, unpubl. transcript/recording, Vienna, 9 December 2011.



4 Detail of Daniel Spoerri and François Dufrêne's *L'Optique moderne, Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d'inutiles notules par François Dufrêne*, 1963

In 1965, Dufrêne reworked *L'Optique moderne*, selecting twenty-eight of the approximately fifty original image-text pairings.<sup>5</sup> The order of the images and poems was rearranged, and the content of the texts increased through the addition of new verse.<sup>6</sup> These modifications expanded the book's already vast fields of reference, introducing new comments on current events. In 1972, the revised ensemble was issued in a publication accompanying Spoerri's retrospective at France's Centre national d'art contemporain.<sup>7</sup> Under the direction of graphic designer Roman Cieśliewicz, the shiny orange paper disappeared in favor of a white mat ground, and a new format was introduced that presented two image-text pairings per double page. Unlike the 1972 publication, however, the 1963 edition stands out for the ways it materially inflicts on viewers a series of optical hurdles—the latter ranging from visual glare to disassembling pages.<sup>8</sup>

5 In addition to the fifty-odd pairings, the 1963 edition contains photos and title pages without added commentary by Dufrêne.

6 François Dufrêne's annotated and reworked *L'Optique moderne* manuscript is in the collection of the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

7 *Cnacarchives Daniel Spoerri*, exh. cat. Paris, Centre national d'art contemporain, Paris, 1972, pp. 29–61.

8 The 1963 edition was bound with a glue that has not well withstood the passage of time.

## "Death mask of Voltaire?"

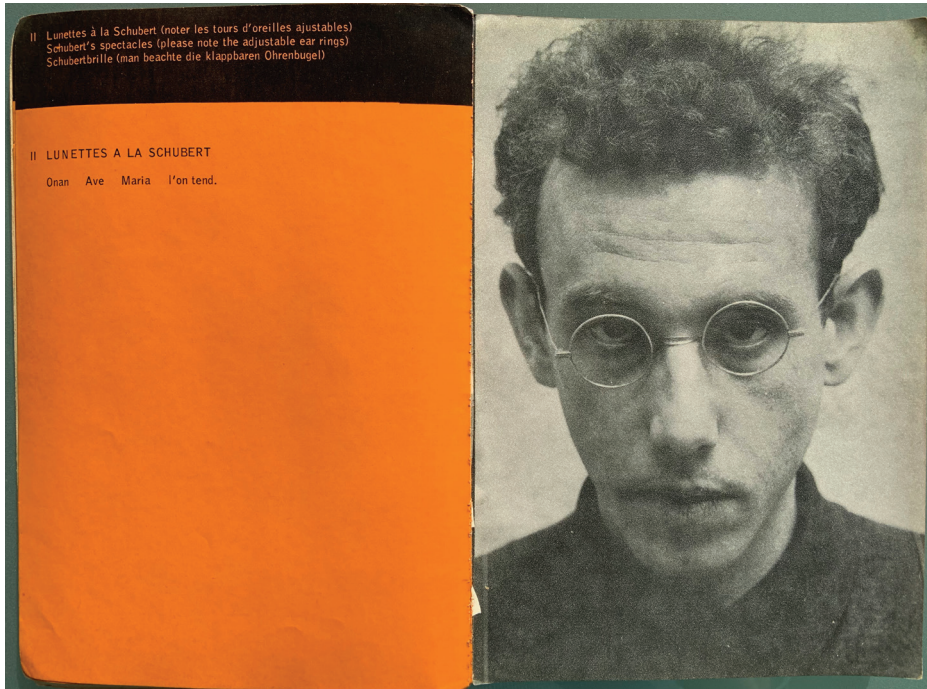
Sight, blindness, and the shifting nature of vision are key themes in *L'Optique moderne*, and "Death mask of Voltaire?" provides a provocative case in point (fig. 4). Like other image-text entries in the book, it not only features themes of distortion, but playfully dislodges certain modes of seeing and knowing associated with perspectivalism. In 1965, while reediting *L'Optique moderne*, Dufrière noted that the "voltuaire" image (as he named it) is the only photo in the series not to figure Spoerri 'in person' and as such is an exception in the book.<sup>9</sup> Its inclusion, we suggest, evokes the symbolic weight of Baroque allegory.<sup>10</sup> The opening title—"Masque mortuaire de Voltaire? Death mask of Voltaire? Totenmaske von Voltaire?"—is followed by the subtitle, "instead of glasses he is wearing paper scissors." The facing photograph shows the plaster cast of a face encircled by bent wire, scissors plunged into the eye sockets. Despite Spoerri's use of a question mark to signal his uncertainty regarding the mask's origin, its seeming resemblance to the French eighteenth-century philosopher Voltaire raises key questions. How might this implied attack on Voltaire—a key figure of the Enlightenment and admirer of Isaac Newton's 1704 *Opticks*—relate to the book's theme of modern optics? In what ways might one read the image as an allegorical attack on French intellectual traditions and Enlightenment philosophical ideals associated with clarity, transparency, and rational thought?

Voltaire functioned, and still does in France, as a powerful symbol of the Enlightenment, French cultural identity, and freedom of thought. Not only was he seen to embody French civilization, but also the French language itself: the latter was often referred to as "the language of Voltaire."<sup>11</sup> Spoerri's iconoclastic image of Voltaire can be read in many ways, and dark

9 "C'est, sur les photos, Spoerri en personne qui figure, exception faite du masque voltuaire.", François Dufrière, "Notice", in *Cnacarchives Daniel Spoerri*, Paris, 1972 (note 7), p. 30.

10 Walter Benjamin's characterization of Baroque allegory as a face or death's-head—"the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape"—sheds light on this tradition. "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity—nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline", in: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London/New York, 1977, p. 166.

11 Olivier Bivort, "Le romantisme et la 'langue de Voltaire'", in *Revue italienne d'études françaises* 3, 2013, URL: <http://rief.revues.org/211> [accessed: 13.11.2017].



5 Detail of Daniel Spoerri and François Dufrêne’s *L’Optique moderne*, *Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d’inutiles notules par François Dufrêne*, 1963

associations of enucleation, blindness, castration, and death come easily to mind. For Dufrêne, however, Spoerri’s “Voltaire?” image served as the detonator for a ludic eruption of references to European philosophers and vision. Absurdity and erudition intermingle in Dufrêne’s wildly inventive texts, which not only exploit, but gleefully twist and reshape Voltaire’s much-revered tongue.

### ‘Ear-Ringing’ puns

Dufrêne’s *Inutiles Notules* make use of a wide variety of word games and literary devices, including alexandrines and alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. Perhaps the most recurrent wordplay featured in *L’Optique moderne*, however, is the verbal pun. The punning principle is clearly on view in the 1963 edition’s image-text pairing “Schubert’s spectacles (please note the adjustable ear rings [*sic*])” (fig. 5). Facing a photograph of Spoerri solemnly posing in Schubert-style wire-rimmed spectacles, Dufrêne’s text riffs on the title’s musical associations. The result is a joke on composer Franz Schubert’s evergreen: his 1825 song “Ave Maria.” At first glance, the printed words “Onan Ave Maria l’on tend” may suggest Onan, the biblical figure associated with masturbation; *Ave Maria*, the



Latin name of the prayer Hail Mary; and *l'on tend*, French for “one tends” (though the sound is also similar to the third person singular of the French verb *entendre*, meaning “to hear,” or “to understand”). Spoken quickly, either aloud or internally, a francophone reader might hear: “on en avait marre il y a longtemps” (we got fed up with it ages ago).

Dufrêne described the word-games in his *Inutiles Notules* as a “game of phonetic substitution of the terms of the text,” where “open combinations” of sound bring out the ‘underside’ or “natural imprints of words” in each other—“small ones in big ones.”<sup>12</sup> The result—a wild and tangled proliferation of sense and sound—undercuts any single ‘definitive’ translation of the notelets’ wordplay, whether into ‘standard’ French or other tongues. Dufrêne’s conception of the pun as a generative strategy in contemporary art also signals his interest in Marcel Duchamp. Like Spoerri, Dufrêne was keenly aware of Duchamp’s experiments with both optics and word play.

### Sound, Optics, and Anamorphosis

In the 1963 version of “Death mask of Voltaire?” punning occurs on a grand scale. At first glance, most of the lines of the poem smack of absurdity and seeming randomness, as exemplified in the text’s opening words “Once / Eyzies / râpeux.”<sup>13</sup> Certain clusters of words in the poem, such as “Neige Pâque russe” (snow Russian Passover), however, evoke narrative associations, while other words, such as “Horse” and “off,” are even recognizable to Anglophone readers. Onomatopoeic words, such as “Couac,” the French word for the sound of an instrument out of tune, also appear in the text. In addition, names of historical figures abound in Dufrêne’s curious word salad: “Lorca,” referring to the twentieth-century Spanish poet Federico García Lorca; “Titien,” the French spelling of the name of the sixteenth-century Venetian painter Tiziano Vecellio, known in English as Titian; and “SPINOZA,” the surname of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who also worked as an optical lens grinder. Each of Dufrêne’s poems, in fact, bursts with references to artists, writers, and thinkers past and present. His texts, furthermore, include brand names of food and other merchandize: “Spinoza Bretzel,” for example, was a commercial brand of pretzels in France.<sup>14</sup> And so, by running the opening words of “Death

12 As Dufrêne puts it: “Du moins, sont-ce là les Dessous du langage qui m’occupent, empreintes naturelles des mots plats—les petits dans les grands.”, Dufrêne, 1972 (note 9), p. 30.

13 Read literally, they suggest *once*, a pre-metric unit of measurement of weight; Eyzies, the name of a place in southwestern France formerly known as Les Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil; and *râpeux*, the adjective “raspy.”

14 Ginette Dufrêne, interview by Jill Carrick, unpubl. transcript/recording, Paris, 28 September 2013.

mask of Voltaire?” together, overlooking their written syntax, inserting new spacing, and pronouncing the French and foreign words with a French accent, one can end up with a phrase like the following: “On saisira peut-être un peu plus aisément le rapport entre un pretzel et Spinoza, non ?” (Perhaps we’ll understand the relationship between a pretzel and Spinoza a little more easily, right?).

Further lines of text contain rather gothic references to the tomb of Pierre Larousse (the nineteenth-century publisher of the French dictionary) and associated howls or screams.<sup>15</sup> Following these, the next section appears to proceed: “Yet, at this very moment, Pretzel here seems to me / the clear contemporary parodic image of the eyeglass / as well as the archetypal sign of the infinite.” The text continues:

So this philosopher—according to whom the difference between God and world is only due to the divergence of points of view—was equally an optician. Is the relation of optics to illusions not what ethics are to options?

What Dufrêne offers here is, first of all, playful absurdity, exemplified in the linking of Spinoza, the lens grinder and philosopher, with a pretzel, and the pretzel with the two conjoined circular forms of the lemniscate, the eyeglasses-like symbol of infinity. Second, he has heightened our awareness of duration and of the presence of the body during the process of deciphering the text on the printed page. We can only speak personally of our consciousness of time as registered through other senses—hearing, or imagined hearing, and the movement of our lips and tongues—as we struggled to reformulate and articulate meanings against the ‘evidence’ seen with our eyes. While striving to overlook the spaces on the page, the form of the printed text becomes a barrier to be playfully resisted. This temporal process of reformulation that produces new visualized ‘shapes’ of meaning in *L’Optique moderne* can be compared to certain processes of anamorphic distortion.

Distortion is both the subject and the formal principle at work in Dufrêne’s poems. The question of what is in or out of focus can be developed through theories of anamorphosis. One of the standard case studies for anamorphosis in art history is Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* of 1533, with its blurred floating figure in the foreground that comes into view as a death’s-head only when viewed by spectators positioned at an extreme angle to the work. Jacques Lacan employs the same painting to discuss anamorphosis as a glimpse of death seen out of the corner of the eye.<sup>16</sup> It brings into view that about which

<sup>15</sup> Here, Dufrêne indirectly references his 1958 poem “Le Tombeau de Pierre Larousse.” François Dufrêne, *Le Tombeau de Pierre Larousse*, Dijon, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), trans. Alan Sheridan, London, 1994, pp. 79–90.

we would rather not think. As Christine Conley elaborates, it offers perspectives that disrupt our sense of entitlement and omnipotence.<sup>17</sup> Donald Preziosi describes anamorphosis as a type of “oscillating determinacy: an either/or opticality.”<sup>18</sup> We would like to draw on a third definition of anamorphosis, however, to emphasize the processes at work in Dufrêne’s text. Feminist scholar Amelia Jones, in her book *Seeing Differently*, explicitly features time in her discussion of anamorphosis.<sup>19</sup> For Jones, “Anamorphosis both disorients the punctual viewer of classic perspective and shifts the field of vision into an experience that takes place over time.”<sup>20</sup> It introduces, she emphasizes, “*duration* into the experience of seeing and knowing.”<sup>21</sup> It is this emphasis on processes of seeing and knowing stretched across time that comes to the fore in Dufrêne’s texts.

Many comparisons can be drawn between Spoerri’s emblematic *vanitas* image and Dufrêne’s text. Both attempt to “cast vision into doubt,” both undo ideals of representational transparency, and both attack the so-called Cartesian concept of the subject as centered, seeing, and knowing.<sup>22</sup> Spoerri and Dufrêne were conscious of concepts of an idealized mind-body split as popularized in mid-century France, and their *L’Optique moderne* collaboration gleefully challenges notions of disembodied perspectivalism.<sup>23</sup> This is visible in the scissors in Spoerri’s “Death mask of Voltaire?” image, which, on the one hand, evoke certain classical diagrams of sight and the functioning of the eyes, and on the other, confront us with a reminder of the vulnerability and limits of human vision.<sup>24</sup>

The subjective, variable nature of vision is further emphasized in *L’Optique moderne* through Spoerri’s repeated presentation of optical prostheses for faulty sight. Both Spoerri and Dufrêne, as we have seen, emphasize the material presence of the body: Spoerri, though the inclusion of photos of his own body,

17 Christine Conley, in conversation with Jill Carrick, Ottawa, 2019.

18 Donald Preziosi, “Brain of the Earth’s Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity”, in Bettina M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Chichester, 2004, pp. 71–84, here p. 82.

19 Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, London, 2012.

20 Ibid., p. 86.

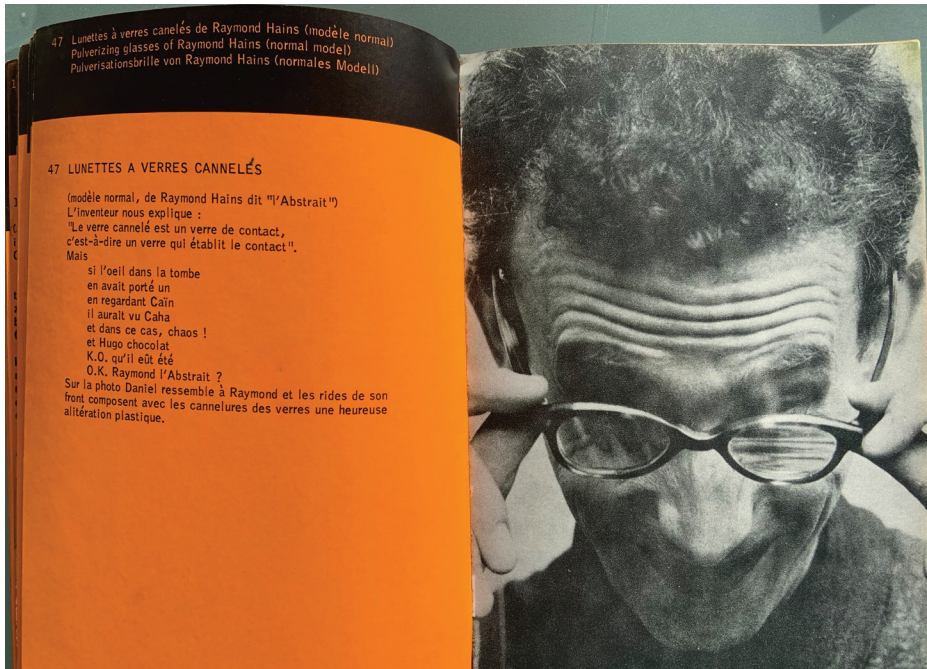
21 Ibid.

22 Relationships between perspective and Cartesian rationalism are also discussed in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, 1993; Lyle Massey, “Anamorphosis through Descartes or Perspective Gone Awry”, in *Renaissance Quarterly* 50/4, Winter 1997, pp. 1148–1189; Hal Foster, “Torn Screens”, in *Prosthetic Gods*, Cambridge, MA, 2004, pp. 256–301; and Jones, 2012 (note 19).

23 Hannah Higgins points out *L’Optique moderne*’s anti-perspectivalism in her *Fluxus Experience*, California, 2002, pp. 22–29.

24 One such diagram is a 17th-century illustration in René Descartes’s *De Homine* describing relationships between rays of light and the pineal gland in the brain.

and in the Voltaire image, through the photo of an indexical cast of an actual body; Dufrière, through the fracturing forms of his poetry that force a temporalized awareness of the visual spacing that shapes written texts. Both the texts and images play with the principle of anamorphosis: Spoerri blatantly, if we reference Lacan, with his literal rendition of the death's-head usually screened from sight; Dufrière, obliquely, through his open-ended, performative, shifting textual mechanisms.



6 Detail of Daniel Spoerri's and François Dufrière's *L'Optique moderne*, *Collection de lunettes présentée par Daniel Spoerri avec, en regard, d'inutiles notules par François Dufrière*, 1963

### "Pulverizing glasses of Raymond Hains"<sup>25</sup>

Themes of distortion and optical confusion appear throughout *L'Optique moderne*, as exemplified in the 1963 edition's "Pulverizing glasses of Raymond Hains (normal model)" (Fig. 6). The latter queries relationships between

25 For a more detailed discussion of the "Pulverizing glasses of Raymond Hains", see Jill Carrick and Pauline Goutain (with Exposer Publier), "*L'Optique Moderne: Une publication kaléidoscopique*", in *Journal de l'Université d'été de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky*, no. 5. *Artist's Publications: From the Studio to the Library and Back Again*, MNAM, Paris, 2019, pp. 123-142. We wish to thank the Bibliothèque Kandinsky for granting us permission to publish extracts from our study in their journal in the following section of this chapter.

sight and understanding, while embarking the reader on a funhouse ride past misshapen mirrors, multiplied reflections, and a seemingly scrambled array of distorted cultural references. Yet for all the seeming confusion, “Pulverizing glasses” offers its readers imaginative tools for navigating its rippling layered imagery. On the right, Spoerri’s photo presents a close-up of the glasses’ undulating lenses positioned beneath his eyes. On the left, Dufrêne’s ludic text elaborates on themes of optical confusion inspired by Hains’s eyewear. Together, image and text celebrate the potential of Hains’s furrowed lenses to unleash a vertiginous array of visual forms and literary associations.

Raymond Hains—a friend of Dufrêne’s and Spoerri’s and fellow member of the 1960s Nouveau Réalisme group—donated two pairs of his idiosyncratic glasses to Spoerri’s collection. Hains was already well known for his visual experiments, love of wordplay, and verbal flights of fancy based on associative jumps between words of similar sound. From the late 1940s onwards, he employed grooved glass to produce quasi-abstract images. Hains’s inventions include the *hypnagoscope*, a device that combines a camera with ridged glass. The name is derived from the Greek word *hypnagogia*, which designates a state of dreamy consciousness that occurs just before sleep. This condition, which can include visual and aural hallucinations of colorful images, geometric patterns, nonsensical sound fragments, and wordplay, was associated in the nineteenth century with pathological delirium.

The concept of delirium (*délire* in French) was significant to Hains for its resonant homonymic associations. For passionate enthusiasts of the French language such as Hains and Dufrêne, the distance between *délire* (delirium) and *dé-lire* (“to un-read” or “anti-read”) was minimal. Dufrêne’s verse, in our opinion, may well be a riff on the etymology of *délire* itself: *délire*—from the Latin *delirare* (*de-*, meaning “away,” and *lira*, “ridge between furrows”)—signifies “to deviate from the furrow.”<sup>26</sup> Dufrêne’s text “Pulverizing glasses” encourages the reader to ‘veer off-course’ in several directions at once, its language semantically proliferating in a manner reminiscent of many of Hains’s verbal and optical experiments.

Spoerri, in discussing the staging of the image for “Pulverizing glasses,” recounted how he deliberately manipulated his facial features by wrinkling his brow and pursing his lips to more closely resemble Hains.<sup>27</sup> The photograph shows Spoerri’s face tilted downward at an angle that visually accentuates the lines of his brow. Dufrêne’s poem employs other strategies to indirectly reference Hains and his glasses. His accompanying notelet alludes to a nineteenth-century Romantic poem titled “La Conscience” by Victor Hugo from the

26 Oxford University Press, s.v. “Delirium”, URL: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/delirium> [accessed: 21.09.2018].

27 Daniel Spoerri, interview by Jill Carrick, unpubl. transcript/recording, Vienna, 16 August 2018.

latter's 1859 volume *La Légende des siècles* (*The Legend of the Centuries*).<sup>28</sup> Hugo's text features a large disembodied eye of conscience that pursues the protagonist throughout the poem. In Dufrêne's irreverent notelet, the giant eye is equipped with cannulated glasses, and chaos ensues.

The final words of Dufrêne's text offer a useful formula for analyzing formal relationships between image and text in "Pulverizing glasses of Raymond Hains": "In the photo," we read, "Daniel resembles Raymond, and the furrows of his brow and ridges of the glasses compose a felicitous plastic alliteration."<sup>29</sup> Here, Dufrêne employs literary terminology to elucidate the visual. In so doing, he presents us with a succinct interpretive key to his text.

Alliteration is a poetic device involving the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of consecutive or closely positioned words. Examples abound in Dufrêne's verse, which leaps scatologically from one instance of the French sound *ca* to another: from *ca* and *ca* to *cas*, *cha*, and *k*. In linking alliteration to the French term *plastique* (which denotes three-dimensional plasticity or the shaping of matter into form), Dufrêne stresses alliteration's structuring capabilities. He also highlights the repetition of plastic forms visible in Spoerri's photograph: the wrinkles of Spoerri's forehead 'rhyme' with the ridges of the glasses. If alliterative repetition emphasizes the ordering effects of Hains's "Pulverizing glasses," its linkage with the word *plastique* evokes more disorderly effects. The verb *plastiquer* suggests detonation or a bomb attack, and potentially brings to mind the chaos and confusion of polysemy. The alliterative repetition created with the French homonyms "chaos" and "K.O." through the notelet accentuates these connotations.

The deforming glasses donned by Spoerri thus found their aural parallel in the alliterative repetitions of Dufrêne's prose (fig. 7). Sound and image segments in "Pulverizing glasses" were creatively repeated and twisted in and out of shape. Through the use of "vers" (verse) and "verres" (lens)—homophones in French—Dufrêne and Spoerri humorously proposed distortion as both the subject and formal principle at work in their collaborative text.

<sup>28</sup> Victor Hugo, "La Conscience", in *La Légende des siècles*, Paris, 1875, pp. 22-24.

<sup>29</sup> "Sur la photo Daniel ressemble à Raymond et les rides de son front composent avec les cannelures des verres une heureuse allitération plastique."



7 View of François Dufrêne's copy of *L'Optique Moderne* with his pair of Raymond Hains's *Lunettes à Verres Cannelés* in the collection of Ginette Dufrêne

### Through the Looking Glass

Inside Maciunas's cover, a mix of small and very large letters on *L'Optique moderne*'s psychedelically hued opening page announce the publication edition as "fLuXuS NO. B." The double-paged spread that follows provides information (some of it accurate, some wishful thinking) on Fluxus's editorial committee, present and future "Yearboxes," and "Special Editions" (fig. 2).<sup>30</sup> On the right side, one encounters the photograph of Spoerri's *L'Optique moderne* assemblage described earlier, but its details are blurred by an intervening page of transparent paper. Printed on the semi-opaque sheet are two brief, somewhat cryptic citations: the first, "Plukifekler moinkonivoi," is attributed to the French artist Jean Dubuffet; the second,

"Jungle avec les mots  
mais jongle incarné,"

to "F.D."

<sup>30</sup> Spoerri, 2011 (note 4). Spoerri noted that the projected "Fluxus 2. FRENCH YEARBOX (1963)" cited on this page was, at one stage, under his direction but was never completed.

Dubuffet's seemingly nonsensical printed words reconfigure in French as the phonetical equivalent of "Plus qu'il fait clair [,] moins qu'on y voit" (The lighter it is, the less one sees). François Dufrêne's text, for its part, approximately translates as "jungle with words, but juggle incarnate." If the homophonic resemblance of the words "jungle" and "jongle" are brought to the fore, their juxtaposition with the word "incarné" also results in the indecorous insinuation of an "ongle incarné" (ingrown toenail). Disembodied perspectivalism is once again undermined by a reminder of the body. Dufrêne's evocation of a "jungle with words" also sets the scene for the reader's potential experience as they navigate the pages of *L'Optique moderne*: loosing oneself, choosing from multiple pathways, forging one's way along paths both winding and off-track, chancing upon countless dangers and lures.

Dufrêne's choice to preface the book with a citation from Dubuffet is also telling. The latter's anti-Enlightenment pronouncement comes from a book of texts by Dubuffet published in 1950 titled *Plu kifekler mouinkon nivoua*.<sup>31</sup> Dubuffet was well-known in France for his rejection of 'high-brow' culture, his championing of art brut (the art of untrained 'outsider' artists), and his love of popular speech, language sonorities, and the scatological. Dufrêne's *Inutiles Notules* partake in a comparable overturning of established aesthetic hierarchies. Like Dufrêne's Nouveau Réaliste *décollagiste* art—made from the peeled undersides of street posters (*dessous d'affiches*) stripped from city walls—the lowly is made prominent and an underlying 'disorderly' language comes into view.

*L'Optique moderne*'s transparent leaf draws attention to the page as a distorting lens. In some of the copies we have examined, a slight puckering of the sheet creates a rippling effect. Once the page is turned, however, the printed words have already passed through the looking glass, and we see Dufrêne's beloved *dessous* from behind—an imprint reminiscent of his *dessous d'affiches*. Spoerri and Dufrêne's quirky optics, in sum, revel in unexpected, oblique, off-center points of view. 'Modern optics' is perversely revealed to us as the flip-side of a science or aesthetics of precision and clarity.

Spoerri and Dufrêne's artists' book offers a kaleidoscope of dark, absurd, and tongue-in-cheek commentary on sight, the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment, and everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s. Its pages take aim at both Cartesian clarity and one-point perspective, the latter understood—to

31 Jean Dubuffet, *Plu kifekler mouinkon nivoua*, France, 1950. The publisher of this work, Ler dutan, is a homonym of the French expression *l'air du temps*, meaning "the current trend." For more on Dubuffet's phonetic poem publications, see Pauline Goutain, *Les Mythologies matérielles de l'Art Brut (1945-1976): dimensions, processus créateurs et matériaux à l'œuvre*, cotutelle Ph.D. thesis for the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture, Carleton University, and Université Paris Ouest Nanterre, 2017, pp. 360 and 375.



use Hal Foster's words—as “monocular and fixed.”<sup>32</sup> In situating multivalence and play at the heart of its investigation of modern ‘ways of seeing,’ it joyously scrambles vision and comprehension.

*L'Optique moderne*, we have seen, employs visual and textual processes of distortion to playfully dislodge certain modes of knowing and seeing associated with perspectivalism. The shattering of one-point perspective, and the ideological illusions of mastery that accompany it, are a key feature of the book. Questions, including political ones, of whose voices, and which histories, emerge or fade amidst this palimpsest of cultural memory, remain to be discussed as we investigate ways in which *L'Optique moderne* proffers a shifting range of subject positions to its prospective readers/viewers, while mirroring, interrupting, and undercutting the identifications of self through sight on offer in mid-century France.

#### Notes

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, *Prosthetic Goods*, 2004 (note 22), p. 273.