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MA Contemporary Art Theory

Thinking the Sensuous

Essay 2: **Rupture, or The Dream of Painting a Wave**

One: Moving Stuff

How could I explain, how could I visualise, how could I communicate, that basic sort of "rupture" that an artwork effects? That there must have been a "before" state of affairs, and an "afterwards"; and that something must have caused the passage between the two? Reaching for whatever was to hand, I tried to demonstrate: a salt mill and a pepper mill, and a pot full of packets of sugar. Maybe there was an ashtray there too, and a candle - I can't quite remember. And we must have been drinking something there too, so probably some cups and saucers. Anyway that's not important: what is important is that for the purposes of my demonstration I'd selected the salt and pepper mills and the sugar pot as my "designated" objects; selected them, that is, from the whole field of objects on the table, in the room, in the café, in fact from all that was available in the world, one could say (if one was being a little hysterical). So I placed the three objects in a particular configuration on the table. That is, a pretty ordinary configuration – there, there, and there – upright, fairly close to each other, not drawing attention to themselves. And then I moved them into another configuration. Again, a pretty ordinary one – there, there, and there – again not drawing any attention, not troubling anyone, not having the slightest effect on anyone (except perhaps the waitress who might have put them back into the "standard" café configuration after we left). There it was then, unveiled: a movement from one state to another, caused by me, and effecting an (admittedly small) rupture in a particular state of affairs (of that particular table top).

My companion remained unconvinced.

Two: Minor Literature

Deleuze and Guattari in 'A Thousand Plateaus' distinguish between two kinds of languages: major and minor. Except that, being Deleuze and Guattari, and not liking binaries, they don't really make the distinction. There aren't two kinds of languages, they say, but two possible treatments of the same language. To distinguish between two kinds of languages – to pitch "high" against "low", or "major" against "minor" - would mean to define the first by the power of constants, and the second by the power of variation. But 'we do not simply wish to

make an opposition between the unity of a major language and the multiplicity of dialects,' they say.[1] Dialects, we are reminded, are often defined in relation to the major languages they veer away from. So for instance Black English, as a minor language, isn't defined by a "sum of mistakes" against standard English; it has its own grammar, which has to be studied in the same way as standard English grammar. It therefore becomes a "locally major language" when it gains such "constancy and homogeneity". But at the same time, 'the opposite argument seems more compelling: the more a language has or acquires the characteristics of a major language, the more it is affected by the continuous variations that transpose it into a "minor" language.'[2] If a language is major on a world scale it is, for Deleuze and Guattari, necessarily "worked upon" by the minorities of the world and undergoes diverse "variation".

The crux of the matter is this:

Either the variables are treated in such a way as to extract from them constants and constant relations or in such a way as to place them in continuous variation [...] For it is obvious that the constants are drawn from the variables themselves [...] Constant is not opposed to variable; it is a treatment of the variable opposed to the other kind of treatment, or continuous variation.[3]

Three: The Pleasure Principle

Freud had a hard time of it in the early 1970s. First he was made to feel quite inadequate by Deleuze and Guattari in 'Anti-Oedipus', then Luce Irigaray challenged his very manhood in 'Speculum of the Other Woman', and when Jean-François Lyotard joined in with his 'Libidinal Economy', Freud suffered in a way he could never have dreamt. Still, at least he could find an escape in the pleasures of art.

Well, actually no, says Lyotard. This whole idea that reality is somehow "put aside" for the pleasurable experience of art simply cannot be sustained. In his essay 'The Psychoanalytical Approach to Expression' Lyotard notes that for Freud hallucination constitutes the "basic datum of art":

For Freud, art must be considered with reference to fantasy [...] he describes the artist 'as a man who evades reality because he cannot reconcile himself to renouncing the satisfaction of impulses, as is demanded by reality from the beginning – a man who in a fantasy life gives free rein to his erotic desires and ambitions.' But the artist does not

hide his fantasies; he lends them form as real objects and, moreover, renders their representation a source of aesthetic pleasure.[4]

The artwork becomes (for the viewer as well as the artist) something to compensate for the lack caused by the substitution of the reality principle for the pleasure principle. The artist (or viewer) can, as Freud claims, 'gratify his own fantasies without reproach or shame'.[5] In this respect art is like play: it requires the putting aside of reality in favour of pleasure. But this is exactly what Lyotard objects to – the assertion that play proceeds from the dissociation of fantasy and reality, that it renders them irreconcilable. For if the artwork 'only belongs to reality by reason of the gap opened up by the lack,' then surely this 'rules out any hope that the wish will ever become the actual world, that reality will ever become a game.'[6]

Four: Lawn Sprinkler

Recently while I was visiting a Mike Marshall exhibition, there was a moment when I began to want it to be raining outside.[7] I was watching a video piece, 'The Thunder and Lightning' – in which, to quote the press release, 'the naturalistic sound of thunder drives a search to catch the glimmers of illumination from within a shifting darkness.' The piece shows us a scene shot amongst some trees in a woodland at night; there isn't much to look at, but the soundtrack is rich with the pattering sound of rain falling on vegetation, punctuated of course by the occasional roar of thunder. The video provides a sensual experience for the viewer, "poetic" even; but it is essentially the same sensual and "poetic" experience produced by thunder and lightning itself, in reality. Wouldn't it be ironic, I thought, if – when I stepped outside the gallery – it was into that same experience of rain and thunder.

That wasn't a particularly original thought or observation I admit (of the at times mimetic relationship between art and nature), but it did at least lead me to think about a certain characteristic of Marshall's work in general. Might it be possible, I wondered, to characterise his work as effecting a "non-break", or a "non-rupture"? For one of the appeals of his work is that it seems to present "almost nothing"; that it seems to operate at that very point where its ability to compel threatens to give way to mere banality. I am thinking specifically of his 'Days Like These' here, a video work in which a garden lawn sprinkler is seen, well, sprinkling a garden lawn.

Without wishing to pass judgement in general terms on the success or failure of the work (I happen to like it) I would say that – considered purely as potential rupture – it's a bit of a non-event.

Five: To the Café, Again

To ensure his philosophical meditations were thoroughly grounded in the materiality of the lived world, Sartre often used evocative scenarios, and one of his most famous explications of existential nothingness utilises the motif of the café. The example he uses in 'Being and Nothingness' is of a protagonist sitting in a café waiting for a companion to arrive, breathing the smoke-filled air, listening to the murmur of conversation, hearing the clinking of glasses. I can't quite remember exactly how the rest of the story unfolds without looking it up again, but that's not important here. What is important is what follows.

The concept for Kant, writes Clive Cazeaux in a recent essay on Sartre, is the part of the subject's cognitive apparatus that reaches out into the world and moulds it into shape; it does this in order to stabilise and make recognisable the world for the subject. The concept 'sculpts, gives shape, offers purchase, illuminates, differentiates, ruptures, ripples, or contours.'[8] Our faculties have a transformative relationship with the world; in a sense we create, or rather "re-create" the world for ourselves. Furthermore, our actions – at least as seen in the schema of Sartre's "topology of action" – make a difference to what would otherwise be a continuous, undifferentiated flow of experience. An action thus becomes an event which rises above or drops below the "flat line of inactivity". And since for Sartre experience is "successive", or as Cazeaux describes it, 'a continuum in which aspects appear and disappear, in which appearances are revealed and then withdrawn', when we conceptualise or form an object of this world we are performing on it a necessarily momentary particularisation.[9]

What emerges here is a gap between the particularity of our momentary experience of an object of the world and the attempt to describe that particularity (which is an opening up to a different generality: that of communicable language). The movement seems to be one of an initial contraction of experience into an object, followed by a dilation of that object into the generality of words. But for Cazeaux the generality of language is of a different order to the generality of

the world. The description of experience, he argues, introduces a specificity which wasn't there to begin with:

> The sentence is a specific arrangement of two basic elements, a subject and a predicate, e.g. the sky is blue, in the face of a world that is otherwise indifferent and multifarious. From all that could be said at that moment, one selection, one slice across phenomena is made: the sky is blue.[10]

The concept doesn't "contain" experience therefore; it cuts up or ruptures experience.

Six: Whatever

I rather hastily used the phrase "reaching for whatever" at the beginning, while I was trying to describe the choice of objects for my table-top rupturing demonstration; it seemed at the time to work in the context of the story, but now I'm not so sure. For the question surely arises: what "whatever" has ever really meant "whatever"? If in reaching for whatever was to hand I had been able to strip away all conscious choice, all preconceptions, all preferences, all anticipations of what I was about to do, all knowledge of how I was about to do it, all memory of what I had done before; if I was able to ignore all my sense-data and disengage all my cognitive capacities – that is, if this "whatever" really had implied the making of an absolutely free random choice from amongst an infinity of possibilities – then it would probably have resulted in an incomprehensible and meaninglessly obscure scenario anyway. (Or at least one that could not have been related anecdotally.)

Seven: Ereignis, or, The "It Happens"

There is a gap between the content and the effect of an image, Brian Massumi is telling me; the content of the image, he says, is often pinned down to its 'indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification.'[11] What these approaches lose moreover, in favour of structure, is the event:

'The stakes are the new,' he continues.

Sounds interesting already.

'For structure is the place where nothing ever happens -'

I see.

'That explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules.'

Great.

'Nothing is prefigured in the event.'

Excellent.

'It is the suspension of the invariance that makes happy happy, sad sad, function function, and meaning mean.'[12]

Suspension of invariance: that's exactly what I'm looking for. Thanks Brian!

Or rather, I should perhaps say: thank you Deleuze. But not just now: because on this particular "plateau" I'm going to turn instead to Lyotard.

For Lyotard the event, which as we've just seen can be placed in contrast to systematic thought, retains the sense of 'wonder that (something) is happening'.[13] Systematic thought, on the other hand, can only understand events according to what is already understood about the world. The centrality of art for Lyotardian thought is due precisely to its ability to present events without necessarily giving exhaustive analyses or explanations for them; art, as Simon Malpas puts it, 'allows the world to be surprising.'[14] The avant-garde artist for Lyotard can, by veering away from existing cognitive and representational structures, produce new ways of seeing and feeling. Avant-garde art can in this way present the "unpresentable".

What is to be challenged is the "realism" of an everyday perception and representation that aims to, as Malpas in his article 'Lyotard, Art and the Event' phrases it, 'stabilise the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognisable meaning,' and 'to preserve consciousness from doubt.'[15] Within this realism there is a mechanism of censorship: certain possibilities for thought and action are silenced. It is the task of the artist for Lyotard to bear witness to this exclusion, to disrupt it – to "make seen what makes one see". This disruption is manifest in the form of the sublime.

'What can one say that is not given?' says Lyotard of a Barnett Newman painting in his essay 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'; 'it is not difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as a paraphrase.'[16] Although Newman's work, typically made up of just a single flat field of

colour, divided by a narrow vertical line or "zip", 'denies the solace of good forms,' its sublimity lies in the fact that it presents nothing other than the fact of its own presentation:

> When he seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens.[17]

Something happens. But it's not to do with anything that the painting refers to, or "means". It's not a question of asking "what" it is that happens – just acknowledging that "it happens". It's the occurrence itself: the moment that is immanent in the "what happens". It is a flash that, borrowing Heidegger's term, Lyotard refers to as "ein Ereignis" – an (unpresentable) event that can only be approached through a state of privation in which 'that which we call thought must be disarmed'.[18] The 'hegemony of habitual or classical ways of looking'[19] – the "realism" of ordinary perception – hides the Ereignis; but for Lyotard the artist is in a unique position (potentially at least) to access it.

Eight: A Lesson from Nietzsche

"Behave!" pleads a mother to her young son, rapidly coming close to losing her cool. We're in a supermarket, in the cleaning-products aisle; the mother is earnestly trying to make a considered and balanced choice as to which brand of air freshener to buy, based on a combination of economic, functional, and ecological considerations. The boy, close by, is clutching a roll of cooking foil; with it, and with increasing excitement and intensity, he is hitting every one of the packets of toilet roll on the shelves that he can reach. Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack!

Behave: it's not simply a plea to "behave" (for how could one cease to behave?) – but to behave in a certain way. That is, to behave in a way that is acceptable in a particular situation, in preference to a way that is not acceptable in the situation. To keep within the rules (of society). While as children we have to be taught these kinds of lessons, as artists, it seems, we are engaged in a process of constant forgetting.

Nine: Curiouser and Curiouser

When Alice becomes larger, writes Deleuze in 'The Logic of Sense', she becomes simultaneously larger and smaller. She is larger now; she was smaller before. This, he says:

> is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation of the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once.[20]

Alice, in other words, doesn't grow without shrinking, and doesn't shrink without at the same time becoming bigger. This, we're told, is an example of pure becoming. Beneath "things", Deleuze wants us to see, is a "mad" element, like a 'wild discourse incessantly sliding over its referent without ever stopping.'[21] Language tries to fix the limits, he says, 'but when substantives and adjectives begin to dissolve, when the names of pause and rest are carried away by the verbs of pure becoming and slide into the language of events,' – well, then things start to get interesting.[22]

But back to becoming, and to Henri Bergson. Ready? Here we go (I'll keep it short): The centrality of Bergsonism in Deleuze is due more or less to its understanding of the world through an ontology of becoming. What attracted Deleuze to Bergson was his attempt to replace a static philosophical conception of things with a more creative and dynamic conception of processes in continual transformation; that is, his undermining of the stability of fixed objects and states. Through an engagement with this alternative philosophy of movement and change, Deleuze was able to formulate his own ontology of fluidity and becoming. Things can change, things do change, things "are" change. That's the basic point here. The more one immerses oneself in Bergson, the more one comes to a realisation (a revelation?) that each thing can become otherwise, even if its present being can be calculated and measured quite precisely. Or as Elizabeth Grosz put it in a recent paper: 'by virtue of its inherence in the whole of matter, each object is more than itself, contains within itself the material potential to be otherwise and to link and create a continuity with the durational whole that marks each living being.'[23] Did you follow that, Alice?

Ten: The Artist at Work

It's a well known story, but it's worth repeating nonetheless. Bruce Nauman finishes art college in the mid 1960s, having just given up painting. He then gets himself a studio (because, as he reasons, an artist must have a studio, just like a doctor must have a surgery or a gardener must have a garden). So pretty soon the fact of having a studio, and not having anything to "do" in it – like paint, for instance – becomes the focus of his work. 'If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio,' he says, 'you sit in a chair and pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio.'[24] He then comes up with a series of simple, pared-down, grainy black and white performance works for video, which include (complete with elegantly self-explanatory titles): 'Stamping in the Studio', 'Bouncing in the Corner', 'Wall/Floor Positions', 'Revolving Upside Down', and 'Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square'. He also produces a photographic work of a spilt cup of coffee entitled 'Coffee Thrown Away Because It Was Too Cold', about which he remarks:

I didn't know what to do with all that time. There was nothing in the studio because I didn't have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself and what I was doing there. I was drinking a lot of coffee, that's what I was doing.[25]

He then becomes one of the most widely known and internationally respected artists of the last forty years.

Eleven: A Poem of the World

One of Jacques Rancière's main interests is in subverting the norms of representation that permit stable distinctions between one type of person or experience and another (for instance workers and intellectuals, masters and followers, the articulate and the non-articulate, the artistic and the non-artistic). By offering a radical rethinking of the relationship – and a blurring of the boundaries – between the spheres of the political and the aesthetic, Rancière is able to place art at

the centre of his philosophy. For it is in the very moment, he argues, when the real world "wavers" into "mere appearance" that it becomes possible to form a judgement about the world.

Rancière's "aesthetic revolution" effects 'the ruin of any art defined as a set of systematisable practices with clear rules.'[26] His claim is that everything is material for art; that art is governed solely by 'what it speaks of', and that consequently, 'art can show and speak of everything in the same manner.'[27] He points to Balzac's epic modes of description applied in his novels to the banalities of life as an instance of such a "confusion" of art and life. In the absence of representational norms (such as the standard categorisations of painting as tragedy, history, genre, etc.) to serve as a limit for its affective capacity, art can become genuinely political. Balzac, as Rancière sees it, has a similar position – that 'there is something like a vast poem everywhere, which is the poem that society itself writes by both uttering and hiding itself in a multitude of signs.'[28]

Politics, in Rancière's understanding, is a 'reconfiguration of the way we share out or divide places and times, speech and silence, the visible and the invisible;' it is, moreover, 'a putting into practice of a certain poetics.' [29]

Twelve: Heisenberg Principle (A Bit of Art Theory)

As an artist you are faced with a simple choice: either you enter the reproductive economy, or you steer clear of it. To choose performance art as your medium would seem to imply – at least on an ontological level – a siding with the latter. Performance is about the "now", the "live", the "happening", the unravelling in real-time of an event. As such, it is, in a strictly ontological sense, non-reproducible. All that remains in any attempt to reproduce the performance art work is a mere signpost to something that has already happened. As Peggy Phelan writes in her 'Unmarked: The Politics of Performance':

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance.[30]

In practice, however, performance very rarely disappears into invisibility. There are of course instances of artists attempting to prohibit the reproduction of their work – by for instance refusing photographic documentation – but even then their work doesn't necessarily disappear; for if that work is ever to be written or spoken about, it equally enters into another, alternative reproductive mechanism. But at an ontological level Phelan is correct in her assertion that to write about the event of performance art is in fact to alter it. For as she points out, writing is an activity that relies on the reproduction of the same for the production of meaning (as words consistently have to refer to the same things to "mean"):

> The mimicry of speech and writing, the strange process by which we put words in each other's mouths and other's words in our own, relies on a substitutional economy in which equivalences are assumed and re-established. Performance refuses this system of exchange and resists the circulatory economy fundamental to it.[31]

Thirteen: An Insane Pursuit

What semioticians hypothesise, according to Lyotard in 'Libidinal Economy', is that the "thing" they speak of can always be treated as a sign – that it can be placed in the networks of concepts of their theories of communication. 'The thing,' he wrote, 'is posited as a message, that is a physical medium equipped with a sequence of coded elements which its addressee [...] is capable of decoding, in order to retrieve the information which the sender aims at him.'[32] The "thing" therefore, one could say, replaces the information; or (to speak the semioticians' own language), the sign replaces what it signifies. Or again put slightly differently, the sign 'at once screens and calls up what it both announces and conceals.'[33] Either way, says Lyotard, if we accept the Saussurian view that signification itself is made up of signs, then all we can ever hope to reach is a further cross-referencing – which goes on forever: 'signification is always deferred, and meaning is never present in flesh and blood.'[34]

Semiotics therefore produces an infinite postponement of meaning; a postponement which, consequently, initiates a search. While in older, more metaphysical times we might have searched for God, or meaning, these grand metaphors are now absent from our thinking. Instead, 'when the object of our admiration is to be found in the structural metonymical substitution, the search is no longer for God or truth;' it is, as Lyotard dismally concludes, 'the search plain and

simple.'[35]

      "Can you really believe," Lyotard imagines the white anthropologist-thinker demanding, "that when the Noh actor sidles forward on the stage as though he were not moving at all, that it means nothing?" It must be a sign! There must be a code! The addressees must be familiar with it!

Fourteen: The Commuter

      Finally, an image: a man stands on a platform in an underground station, waiting for a train. He's dressed in a suit. Perhaps he's waiting to go home after a hard day at the office – we don't know for sure. There are some other people in the background of the photograph,[36] on the opposite platform. One woman is looking over at the man with an expression of mild intrigue, but everyone else seems to be more preoccupied with the imminent arrival of their own train. The man, you see, is wearing his briefcase on his head. It's one of those black leather types – not the rigid sort, but the more casual expandable kind with a zip. The man has put his head right inside it, and, despite the fact he can't see, is apparently able to quite comfortably adopt the standard slightly impatient stance of the ordinary commuter. His arms are folded. He is being quiet. He's not causing any trouble.

N o t e s

1   Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, in Boundas, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 147.
2   *Ibid.*
3   *Ibid.*, p. 148.
4   Lyotard, *The Psychoanalytical Approach to Expression*, p. 4.
5   Freud, quoted in Lyotard, *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6   Lyotard, *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7   *Mike Marshall*, solo show at Union Gallery, London, Jan-Mar 2007.
8   Cazeaux, *Categories in Action: Sartre and the Theory-Practice Debate*, p. 47.
9   *Ibid.*, p. 52.
10   *Ibid.*, p. 53.
11   Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*, in Patton, *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, p. 220. The essay is essentially an elucidation of Deleuze's use of the concepts of "intensity" and "affect", discussing in particular the "unknowable" and "unrecognisable" qualities of affect, and hence its resistance to critique.
12   *Ibid.*, pp. 220/21.
13   Lyotard, quoted in Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard*, p. 99.
14   Malpas, *Ibid.*
15   Malpas, *Lyotard, Art and the Event*, p. 200.
16   Lyotard, quoted in Malpas, *Lyotard, Art and the Event*, p. 202.
17   *Ibid.*, p. 204.
18   *Ibid.*, p. 206.
19   *Ibid.*, p. 207.
20   Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, in Boundas, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 39.
21   *Ibid.*, p. 40.
22   *Ibid.*, p. 41. The sentence in full reads: 'But when substantives and adjectives begin to dissolve, when the names of pause and rest are carried away by the verbs of pure becoming and slide into the language of events, all identity disappears from the self, the world, and God.'
23   Grosz, *Bergson, Deleuze, and Becoming*, accessed online at http://uq.edu.au/~uqmlacaz/ElizabethGrosz'stalk16.3.05 .
24   Nauman, quoted in Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 127.
25   *Ibid.*, pp. 127/28.
26   Rancière, *Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview*, p. 205.
27   *Ibid.*
28   *Ibid.*
29   *Ibid.*, p. 203.
30   Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, p. 146. The book's chapter 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction' is of particular relevance here.
31   *Ibid.*, p. 149.
32   Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, in Benjamin, *The Lyotard Reader*, p. 1.
33   *Ibid.*, p. 2.
34   *Ibid.*
35   *Ibid.*, p. 3.
36   The photograph is from a series entitled 'One Minute Sculptures' by the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm.

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