

## Ten Concepts Following Cathy Wilkes' Practice

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What is the role of writing in relation to art, and specifically Cathy Wilkes's art? What can writing add? What function might it play? Certainly writing about art can operate as an apparatus of capture that can halt the very *work* of art. This is often the arrogance of 'theory' that positions itself as master discourse and reads the work through its own particular optics and logics. Here the work becomes an illustration of certain theoretical models – a prop for certain arguments and suppositions. And yet Wilkes's work, in particular, stymies any such interpretive moves, rendering them clumsy if not obsolete. In fact we might say that this is a key modality of Wilkes's work in general: it does not pander to our desire for reassurance; it does not multiply the 'fantasies of realism' as perhaps Jean-Francois Lyotard would say.<sup>1</sup> It 'stops making sense'. Indeed, although there are certainly art historical references, fragments of other signifying regimes and distinct expressive elements that a critic/art historian may be able to seize upon, there is also, as other commentators have pointed out, a resolute toughness that prevents, or at least renders partial, any such 'reading'.

This does not mean that Wilkes's art is without intentionality. There is certainly something going on in and with the work, but rather that this 'going on' is irreducible to writing, operating as the work does, for this writer at least, predominantly on a register of affect – or as what Raymond Williams once called, in relation to emergent cultures, a 'structure of feeling'.<sup>2</sup> It is this internal affective complexity, this consistency and cohesiveness, this obvious carefulness but also impenetrability, which constitutes the force of Wilkes's assemblages. Put simply, they pose a challenge; they force us to thought. We might say then that there is no substitute for seeing the work in its specific context, for allowing it to operate in its own space-time. It is in this sense that aesthetics is still a useful term naming as it does the possibility of a 'disinterested', or simply open, attitude to the work. It is only if we can approach the work free from habit, free from our clichés of perception and thought (and in particular our expectations about art) that we allow the work to begin its work. This is not an easy business for habit is nothing if not resilient, naming as it does our own cohesiveness, our own particular subject-construction.

With such a practice as Wilkes's, writing's only role – in addition to carefully documenting and describing the work (in all its 'matter-of-factness'), and providing an account of an encounter with

such work (that will necessarily be personal) – must be to somehow accompany the work, to seize upon certain aspects and to amplify or develop them. This might involve writing as itself a kind of fiction; writing that produces the same ‘structure of feeling’, the same constellation of affect. It might also involve the deployment of an archive, referencing works – art historical or from elsewhere – that have a similar affective charge.<sup>3</sup> However, it also might involve the extraction of certain themes from a body of work, a following of the trajectories suggested by the work itself. This might itself involve the mobilisation of concepts from elsewhere, the bringing together of different forms of thought that although logically distinct might be said to parallel one another. What follows then are ten concepts – some loosely borrowed from Gilles Deleuze – which might help us think Wilkes’s work understood itself as a form of thought. This is not an attempt at a reductive reading, even less an attempt to speak for the work, but rather the adding of something to an existing assemblage that is already in connection with other assemblages (i.e. the world). It goes without saying that the work itself does not need these amplifications and digressions, but only that they might operate to open up further fields of enquiry, or indeed to provoke further forms of thought.

1. *The Encounter*. In Deleuze’s terms, an object of encounter’s primary characteristic ‘is that it can only be sensed’.<sup>4</sup> An object of recognition, on the other hand, is not only that which can be sensed, but that which may be attained by the other faculties (recalled, imagined, conceived): ‘It therefore presupposes the exercise of the senses and of the other faculties in a common sense’.<sup>5</sup> Common sense operates here to predetermine, and we might say limit, typical experience. With an object of recognition we are reconfirmed and reaffirmed as that which we always already understood ourselves – and our world – to be. In such a place no real thought takes place. An object of an encounter ruptures this self-confirming mechanism. It operates as a cut that itself functions as a ‘mutant centre of subjectivation’, a singular point around which a different kind of subjectivity might constellate.<sup>6</sup> An encounter is then an event that as well as rupturing one world opens up another. This rupture need not necessarily be huge. Indeed it might be a micro-deviation, a *clinamen*, which begins a landslide. In any case the event-encounter must be responded to as such, it must be taken on its own terms and in its own specificity.

2. *Representation*. Recognition operates as the cornerstone of representation, understood as the representation of that which is already in place. But is this the end of the story? Certainly objects might ‘take on’ connotations beyond themselves as objects. They may be displayed in such an arrangement, placed within a certain frame, or subject to modification; that means they take on a

supplementary dimension to their brute existence (or even that this brute existence is foregrounded). Here objects are made strange, or are made to tell a story, to provide a scenario. Representation is here a name for the object's work, for what the object is made to do. We might say then that representation is the name for the secret life of objects, or simply the name for our relation to the object-world. If anxiety is a productive state it might name this seeing beyond the everyday existence of objects into their other life – and especially the different temporalities they can suggest. We might say then that art involves seeing the object as actual object, but also seeing the object as the tip of a virtual realm, the latter understood as simply memory.<sup>7</sup> Indeed art might be said to operate on this very edge between the actual and the virtual.

3. *The Commodity*. In fact, certain objects are already forms of representation before their involvement in art. They already encapsulate a history, the history of their production and also, as such, the history of their use. Following Marx, we might note that the objects produced within capitalism go beyond this simple and obvious use-value.<sup>8</sup> Objects that are produced specifically for exchange already contain a mysterious secret life – a certain value – above and beyond their status as made things in the world. This is the fetish character of commodities in which their social being, as products of labour, is masked by their abstract exchange-value. Hence the 'magic and necromancy' that surrounds them, the 'grotesque ideas' they form about themselves.<sup>9</sup> Art is a commodity form *par excellence*, the intentional production of a supplementary 'meaning' beyond an object's use-value. However, art, in its manipulation of already existing commodities, its taking them out of their 'original' context, might operate to disrupt this alienation. Art foregrounds an object's specificity as object, whilst also drawing attention to the very notion of art *work* in this process. This might involve a further fetishisation in which the value of objects as commodities is ruptured and is made to take on further supplementary – expressive – values. A secret life of the secret life of the commodity.

4. *Repetition*. For any work to work it must contain either figurative elements, at least as a point of departure, or certain repetitions and rhythms that produce a consistency or auto-cohesiveness to the work. Figurative elements might simply be recognisable elements – everyday objects – from the world. They might also involve certain interventions, fragments of signifying elements (text), other intentional and expressive acts (painting) that alter the typical. They might also involve apparently abstract constructions, which through repetition become figures. Through a repetition of elements, of forms, a composition is established; 'meaning' is produced. This might be a repetition of elements within a work, or the repetition of elements between works. It might also

be the repetition of elements from outside the work – repetitions of other art works for example, or simply repetitions from everyday life. In each case it will be a repetition with difference. Indeed, it is this difference that marks the specificity of a particular artwork.

5. *Subjectivity*. It follows that art is involved in the production of subjectivity. First, a particular subjectivity for the artist is produced, the work recording a moment in her own processual self-creation. Here the selection and arrangement of objects, as well as the fragments of expressive materials, produce a specifically singular artist-subjectivity. Art is a technology of self-knowledge in this sense, a way of producing one's world, of marking out territory. Indeed, it is not the artist that produces the territory in this sense but the territory that produces the artist. The spectator confronts this subject-diagram, and in so doing encounters another world and the difference – the distinct viewpoint – encapsulated in this world. Art offers up a kind of different landscape in this sense. Again, it is this difference that constitutes the work. This is also why, as Proust once suggested, we move from our apprenticeship in love towards art, for 'only art gives us what we vainly sort from a friend, what we would have vainly expected from a beloved', that is, a different 'possible world'.<sup>10</sup> It is also in this sense that Proust elevates love over friendship involving as the former does the renouncing of all communication, which only ever produces false understanding.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, art, like love, is not about communication, but about provocation; the provocation to thought, to decipher 'signs'. This provocation might involve only the smallest gesture. It is in this sense that we meet characters within this landscape, for what else are characters but these fragments of gesture, these part-objects, minor events and repetitions?

6. *The World*. Art has a relation to the world that it is in a sense a part of, and yet in its very arrangement as art it is apart from the world as typically experienced. Here art counteracts the realm of opinion, the habitual linking of an internal state with an external state, and the agreement amongst a group of that very connection.<sup>12</sup> We might also call this the realm of cliché. Art offers, and affirms, a different combination, a different dice throw as perhaps Deleuze would say. This might involve the mobilisation of previous assemblages, of previous art for example, afterall, art is made from the stuff of the world, but it organises this matter in a different way. Once more, it is this difference that gives art its specificity. We might make a point about the complex context of the work of art here. The latter might appear relatively simple, but placed as it is within a complex situation – the gallery, art history, the art world, the world – it will produce effects that are as much to do with the milieu it is inserted into as the practice itself (the ripples caused by the

thrown stone are as much to do with the water as the pebble). When considering the art's work then its 'appearance' can only ever be one moment in this expanding circuit of effects.

7. *Thought*. Art is a form of thought that operates through affect. Affect is a name for that which art produces: becomings – the risings and fallings – in and on the body.<sup>13</sup> Affect also names that which makes up the work of art: affects frozen in time and space (waiting to be reactivated by a viewer).<sup>14</sup> There are other forms of thought, for example philosophy that operates through concepts. Following Spinoza, it might be that a particular bundle of affects works as the precursor, the platform for concept creation – for a certain understanding of the world. It might also be that a particular combination of affects subsists alongside our conceptual system, and operates to disrupt such pre-established systems – a kind of 'dark precursor' to conceptual thought (and signifying forms in general).<sup>15</sup> It is as well to remind ourselves that we too, as well as being conceptual/signifying creatures, are also bundles of affect, hence our inherent similarity to, and resonances with, the work of art.

8. *Style*. It is an artist's style that coheres these different affects together, that gives consistency to a certain assemblage.<sup>16</sup> Here fragments from the world – of the domestic, of the everyday, etc. – take on a self-sustaining existence beyond their life outside art (even if the work itself does not physically last). Style is composition in this sense; each detail must be considered in itself but also in relation to the whole of which it is part. Style also necessarily involves a certain intuition, a kind of thinking *through* materials and matter (and not a projection onto them). Style will also involve its own logic and 'language', a certain authenticity – a being true to oneself and the development of one's own 'take' on the world. Style cannot be faked in this sense. Through style we make life into art, or even treat our lives as a work of art.

9. *Woman's Work*. This concept procedurally comes first. It is difficult to make claims for woman's work when I myself am necessarily outside this work. What can be said, however, is that if woman is a particular way of being in the world, then women too is a bundle of affects, a history of certain becomings, certain phases and cycles. Woman is also a certain regime of signification. We might call this latter regime the domestic, which includes as a key component the maternal. Here women's work might involve the production of an alternative diagram, an alternative 'representation' for, and of, woman. This might involve the ordering of already existing elements from the world – commodities – in a new organisation. It might also draw attention to those forms of work – usually invisible – that have not been commodified, that

subsist alongside the commodity form. Here woman's work operates as an animating force, converting objects into desiring-machines, putting them to work in strange and unpredictable ways. It is in this sense that woman's work is also art work.

10. *Faciality*. Faciality, or the white wall/black hole system, is the human organisation of our present times. It lies at the intersection of two regimes: the signifying regime (premised on signifiante; on the desire for interpretation) and the post-signifying regime (subjectification; consciousness, or the turn inwards).<sup>17</sup> The faciality machine produces us as signifying subjects just as it produces a 'meaningful' world. However, 'beyond the face lies an altogether different inhumanity', 'probe-heads', or simply different modes of organisation, that form 'strange new becomings, new polyvocalities'.<sup>18</sup> Part-objects will play their part in this diagrammatic functioning that has a specifically future orientation. This might involve alluding to anthropomorphic form so as the assemblage 'works'; impacts on our own form as it were. It might also involve the utilisation of aspects of faciality albeit in a different way. At its extreme edge such probe-heads work themselves as abstract machines that call an audience forth – understood as a new subjectivity masked by the dominant.<sup>19</sup> It is in this sense that art, and especially Wilkes's practice, is difficult. It is not made for a subjectivity in place but to draw forth a subjectivity yet to come.

1 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1984, p.74. Lyotard specifies these fantasies as operating: 'whenever the objective is to stabilise the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognisable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others - since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them.' (*Ibid.*) Hence, for Lyotard, artists who counteract this 'realism', who are precisely 'working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*' are of great importance. (*Ibid.*, p.81).

2 See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p.128–35. 'Structures of feeling' are a form of 'practical consciousness' that itself is: 'almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relation with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.' (*Ibid.*, p.131.)

<sup>1</sup> In this context I want to mention Will Bradley's remarkable essay on Wilkes' work, 'Quiet Radical', *Untitled Magazine*, 25, Summer 2001, pp. 4-6, that successfully combines many of the above approaches.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 139.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139.

<sup>1</sup> Felix Guattari, 'Subjectivities: for Better and for Worse', trans. S. Thomas, *The Guattari Reader*, ed. G. Genosko (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996), p. 200.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the virtual in this sense see Henri Bergson, 'On the Recognition of Images: Memory and Brain', *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 77-131. See also Gilles Deleuze, 'Memory as Virtual Co-existence', *Bergsonism*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), pp. 51-72.

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Marx, 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', Part One, Chapter One, Section Four, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 163-77.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 169/163.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 42

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of opinion in this sense see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), p. 144.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of this specifically Spinozist definition of affect see Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), especially pp. 48-51. See also Deleuze's essay 'Spinoza and the Three "Ethics"', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 138-51.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of affect in this second sense see the Chapter on art, 'Percept, Affect, Concept', in *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 163-99.

<sup>1</sup> 'Spinoza and the Three "Ethics"', p. 144.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of style in this sense see *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 170-1.

<sup>1</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Year Zero: Faciality', *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp. 167-91.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 190-1. See also Gilles Deleuze *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 20-1.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the abstract machine and its diagrammatic functioning see *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 141-3, and pp. 510-14.