

A THOUSAND DEVICES¹

Simon O'Sullivan

1. Art Practice as Device (Make your Own Device!)

In many ways art practice, post-Duchamp, concerns devices. Certainly, there is a sense that different objects and installations work to do something (that is, they function in a way that is not only—or simply—representation). It might be that the desired effect of the device is known and then it is the relevant—or appropriate—device that is assembled (and here there might be a practice of trying things out or drawing out plans, blueprints and so forth). But it might also be the case that a particular device's functioning is not really known. One builds the device—blindly, as it were—in order to see what it does (much as one might assemble the machine first and then watch for its effects).² Here it is to be hoped that once made, the device will do something, perhaps unexpected. Does this define the art device properly understood: that it is made but then functions in a way that cannot be anticipated? I have written about this elsewhere albeit with a different inflection, in terms of the idea that art is both intended and non-intended, or that it 'speaks back' to you, tells you what it wants (see O'Sullivan 2016). What other reason could there be for making an art device except to circumnavigate any straightforward intention in some senses? Or, put differently, to introduce a different agency into the set-up besides the self.

To lay out a brief schema here: there might then be art that employs different devices on a formal level (this might be anything that breaks with a given 'real-ity effect,' for example). And then there might well be art that is 'about' different devices (as for example is the case with Outsider Art or, more simply, any picture of a device or practice that concerns a given device [as with paintings such as 'Astroarchaeologist' painting from *Infinite Hope 22-C-4* by Michiko Itatani], although I think the argument could be made that some paintings, as well as in-volving pictures of devices [and props], also function as such). But then there is the understanding of art—more generally—as a device (and, following François Laruelle, we might ask here whether there is a 'Non-Art' practice that detaches or repurposes this art (see Laruelle 2012)). Perhaps, ultimately, this is a kind of name for avant-garde strategies that necessarily depart from previous definitions of art (although an avant-garde tradition is also part of 'Art' and so would itself need to be framed as it were

or seen from elsewhere). I work through some of these twists and turns—in relation to a possible understanding of a Non-Art practice—in my essay on 'Non-Philosophy and Fiction as Method' (O'Sullivan 2017).

To return to my earlier comments, there is also something important here about how art practice can itself offer up a different perspective and then—connected to this—how it foregrounds the business of building a device oneself. Indeed, it is this—the way the artistic device is made by a given subjectivity (however that might be understood) and, as such, expresses a point of view—that marks it out from other kinds of device (that is, alongside any other aesthetic function it might have).

2. From Aesthetic Devices to Magical Devices

In his writings, Gilbert Simondon tracks a phase shift away from a prior magical mode of existence to religion and technicity, the latter resulting in the production of technical objects (Simondon 2011). The figure-ground set-up of the earlier phase of humanity has, as it were, been undone. Figure is detached from ground (there is no longer a unity between figure and ground) and becomes a mobile device (the technical object). But it might also be said that Simondon posits another kind of device—an aesthetic one—that reminds of this unity and, possibly, re-enacts it (see the discussion in Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019: 87–94). So, here, there are technical devices (and possibly religious ones too)—but also magical devices (especially those that have survived from the past) and, more speculatively, aesthetic devices also (again, those that remind us of—or conjure up—this other magical mode of existence).

Different devices are also at stake within magical practice per se and especially magick with a 'k' that names practices of self-transformation (as opposed to stage magic). As with art, these practices often involve the magician making their own devices (indeed, this is a key aspect of magical/magickal practice). So, for example, Brion Gysin making his own dream machine or Austin Osman Spare designing his own tarot. In these cases, part of the actual practice—of magic/magick—is making the device that then allows a non-typical state to arise or enables a contact with an outside to the subject as they more typically are. Another way of putting

this is that magic/magick can involve the building of something on the inside that then allows contact with an outside. In fact, there is something similar in play with the cut-up technique here, which is why the latter is not just a literary technique, but also a device that allows the human—as a 'time bound' creature—to escape a given and dominant space-time (see the discussion of William Burroughs and the cut-up in the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit's 'Lemurian Time War' (CCRU 2017)).

So, within magical/magickal practice there is the use of these devices and often, as a kind of accompaniment, instructions on how to make them (and/or where to place or enact them). There might also be accounts—more narrative descriptions perhaps—of the workings of these devices (so here the more literary aspects of magical practice are foregrounded). And when magic operates through writing—as with spells—then this becomes more complex, a traversing across these different modes of operation. After all, a spell is partly a set of instructions, but also, crucially, a performative utterance (it is not only about meaning, but also about getting something done).

And then, finally, it might be that magic/magick in general can be understood as a kind of device. This might be the case when it is seen from outside and/or from a different perspective (hence those problematic theoretical [or sociological/anthropological] accounts that position magic as regressive).³ But from another point of view, seeing magic/magick in this way—as a device—allows us to reclaim it in some senses—to work out its relevance today perhaps?—to see it as both a technology of the self and of the non self. Indeed, seeing magical/magickal practice in its context is important for all sorts of reasons (chief amongst these is being sensitive to its origins and local specificities), but it is also important to be able to detach it and, as it were, repurpose it (so that it has traction in and on different presents).

Magical/magickal devices offer up a different per-spective and then, importantly, allow for practices of transformation that arise from this other perspective. Put slightly differently, these devices (as, for example, with the cut-up) allow a framing of the self or a seeing of the self as a fiction.

3. Technical Objects and Scientific Devices

The idea of the device really comes to the fore within our own scientific paradigm. Indeed, from one perspective, science involves the production of a series of devices that allow us to see and interact with the world differently (they are devices that are less concerned with subjective experience in this sense). More abstractly, science involves coming up with theories and then also testing out these theories. Here the device equates to the scientific instrument, but it might be that the theories themselves can be understood as devices too. However abstract or diagrammatic, the principle of the scientific device remains the same: it allows a different take on reality (a different understanding which then allows different tasks to be performed).⁴

On a more general level—and following Simondon once more—there is also a sense that the scientific paradigm proceeds through proliferating devices (including the more abstract—or mathematic—ones I mentioned above). This Promethean impulse—to invent, create—characterizes the human endeavour, although, following Simondon, it is a pursuit that is cut off from the unity it attempts to move towards (it is blind in this sense). Might there, however, be other devices that work more as optics on this prior unity? Devices that are, perhaps, placed in certain privileged locations that allow a shift in perspective (so, perhaps, return us to subjective experience)?⁵ Here, at the sharp edge of technical development—with some of the most advanced devices—we have something like the appearance—or calling forth—of a magical device (as for example in various experiments involving a quantum paradigm). Might this also work the other way around? The uncovering of older, perhaps redundant devices that can then be reconfigured—or repurposed—as aesthetic devices?

To return briefly to my schema. There is then science as a proliferation of devices, from mathematical formulas to technical objects. Then there might also be writing about these devices (as, for example, in the history of science). And then there is science as itself a particular kind of device or operation. Foregrounded in this way we can also see how the scientific device involves certain values and logics that are intimately connected with its development in Modernity and within colonialism too.

Western science—as device—has brought about crucial developments but it has also brought about—or been entangled with—an extractive and colonizing mentality (a certain kind of instrumentality).⁶ Perhaps a similar perspective to Laruelle's Non-philosophy is required so as to refigure science as a series of practices untethered from this dominating overview. In fact, something like this seems to be the case in Isabelle Stengers's call for an end to Science (with a big 'S') (with its dominating logics) and an accompanying call for the proliferation of 'sciences' (small 's', plural) which, when seen in this manner—and on this plane of immanence (to use a Deleuzian term)—necessarily interact with other experimental practices and pursuits—and other devices—not least magic.⁷ A thousand different devices then, all inter-acting in different ways.⁸

1. The following is an extract from a longer essay—with the same title—from the forthcoming book *From Magic and Myth—Work to Care and Repair*, London: Goldsmiths Press, 2023.

2. As is also the case in the initial discussion of machines in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*: 'Given a certain effect, what machine is capable of producing it? And given a certain machine, what can it be used for?' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 3). For Deleuze and Guattari a key figure here is then the *bricoleur* (involved as they are in 'tinkering about' and 'the art of making do with what's at hand' (translator's note in Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 7)).

3. See for example Marcel Mauss' *General Theory of Magic* (2001), itself a critique of J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1983) (both authors position magic as a regressive form of thought).

4. David Burrows has written on this more abstract functioning of diagrammatic devices that allow a 'picturing' of different aspects of reality that are typically invisible (such as Black Holes) (see Burrows 2020).

5. To quote Simondon at length here:

A privileged place, a place that has a power, is one which draws into itself all the force and efficacy of the domain it delimits; it summarises and contains the force of a compact mass of reality; it summarises and governs it, as a highland governs and dominates a lowland; the elevated peak is the lord of the mountain, just as the most impenetrable part of the wood is where all its reality resides. The magical world is in this way made of a network of places and things that have a power and are bound to other things and other places that also have a power. Such a path, such an enclosure, such a temenos contains all the force of the land, and is the key-point of the reality and of the spontaneity of things, as well as of their accessibility. (Simondon 2011: 412)

6. Technological development's reliance on colonial logics is explored in Louis Chude-Sokei's *The Sound of Culture* (Chude-Sokei 2016).

7. To quote Stengers:

Science, when taken in the singular and with a big S, may indeed be described as a general conquest bent on translating everything that exists into objective, rational knowledge. In the name of Science, a judgment has been passed on the heads of other peoples, and this judgment has also devastated our relations to ourselves—whether we are philosophers, theologians, or old ladies with cats. Scientific achievements, on the other hand, require thinking in terms of an adventure of sciences (in the plural and with a small s). (Stengers 2012: 2)

8. For some further thoughts on this plane of devices—especially as found in different science fiction novels—see Burrows and O'Sullivan 2022.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burrows, David (2020), 'Science Fictioning Singularities: The Diagrammatic Imaginaries of Physics', *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft. The Future of Knowledge Systems*, eds. J. Golding, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 38–64.
- Burrows, David and S. O'Sullivan (2019), *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- (2022), 'Science Fiction Devices', *New Perspectives on Academic Writing*, London: Bloomsbury. (pp.39-52)
- Chude-Sokei, Louis Onuorah (2016), *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) (2017), 'Lemurian Time War', CCRU Writings 1997–2003, Falmouth/Shanghai: Urbanomic/Time Spiral Press, pp. 33–52.
- Deleuze, Gilles and F. Guattari (1984), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Sem and H. R. Lane, London: Athlone Press.
- Frazer, J. G. (1983 [1922]), *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Laruelle, François (2012), 'Photo-Fiction, A Theoretical Installation', *Photo-Fiction: A Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. D. S. Burk, Minneapolis: Univocal, pp. 11–24.
- Mauss, Marcel (2001 [1950]), 'A Definition of Magic', *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. R. Brain, London: Routledge, pp. 22–30.
- O'Sullivan, Simon (2016), 'Mythopoesis and the Fictioning of Reality', *Paragrana*, 25.1: 80–93.
- (2017), 'Non-Philosophy and Fiction as Method', *Fiction as Method*, eds. Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evisson, Berlin: Sternberg, pp. 273–318.
- (2023), *From Magic and Myth-Work to Care and Repair*, London: Goldsmiths Press. (forthcoming)
- Simondon, Gilbert (2011 [1958]), 'On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects' (extract), trans. N. Mellamphy, D. Mellamphy and N. B. Mellamphy, *Deleuze Studies*, 5.3: 407–24.
- Stengers, Isabelle (2012), 'Reclaiming Animism', *e-flux*, available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism> (accessed 24/8/2022).