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Art Practice as Fictioning (or, myth-science)

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...theres some thing in us it dont have no name...it aint us but yet its in us... (Russell Hoban, Riddly Walker)

1. Introduction: Art and the World (or, that which is in the world but not of the world)

When art engages directly with the world *as-it-is* it already surrenders some of its power. It needs must use more or less recognizable forms, languages, narratives – even if these are idiosyncratic and/or marginal in nature.

Another way of saying this is that such art is both of and for the world in which it is situated – or, which amounts to the same thing, it already has its audience in place. Jean-Francois Lyotard says as much in his claim that art can simply ‘multiply the fantasies of realism’ rather than, precisely, disrupting them (which, in Lyotard’s view, is art’s true avant-garde function).

In its engaged and oppositional form – institutional critique, for example – such art is still precisely about the world. Indeed, the more engaged it is, the more it must mirror, however critically (or negatively), its object. Such critique, again as Lyotard once remarked, is trapped by its target, which it must, to some extent, adjust itself in order *to* engage. This kind of critical art practice can operate as a kind of melancholic echo chamber in this sense.

The so-called ‘archival turn’ within contemporary art would be a softer example of this logic. Here, art practice becomes an archiving gesture, a framing and presenting of a subset of the world. An archive practice is first and foremost curatorial in this sense; it gathers together hitherto separate elements under a banner (a concept, a theme, a name, and so on), but, crucially, it does not necessarily transform these elements. Indeed, ultimately, it offers nothing more than a product (or a series of products) designed to meet the desire for knowledge – when the latter is understood as knowledge of the world *as-it-is*.

As has oft been pointed out, the ‘Art World’ is insatiable in this respect; it requires evermore banners just as it creates ever more artist-archivist-curators (or, simply, new products and new consumers). Novelty here consists of new groupings of the what-already-is, the trumping of one set of knowledges with another, the identification of counter or dissonant or secret knowledges, and so forth. Indeed, knowledge becomes the currency

of such practices (knowledge is power as the saying goes – at least power of a worldly kind).

On the other hand, can art ever be anything but the presentation of a subset of the world, seeing as it is a practice that takes place in that very world? Here, the definition of a world – what it includes and what it excludes – is crucial insofar as we might make the tentative claim that art can be specifically other-worldly without meaning it is somehow outside the world-as-is (indeed, how could it be?). In fact, an art practice that attempts to operate completely divorced from the world – understood here as our contemporary conditions – runs the risk of irrelevance, escapism or simply being a sophisticated form of withdrawal.

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that art's 'materials' are not simply of the world as constituted. As such, it follows that its audience – an audience adequate and appropriate to it – is not always already in place. Art, in this sense, can be understood as untimely, or as in time, but also out of time. It is, as it were, future-orientated. Gilles Deleuze's writings on art foreground this strange temporality of art – that 'its people are missing'.

But how might this untimeliness manifest itself? What form might it take?

One thing is clear: it will not be easy to understand. If it is a communication, it will be one without meaning (to paraphrase Lyotard once more), when meaning is understood as a register of knowledge – or, to introduce another term, as part of the code of the world as-it-is. Hence the important idea that something might be of the world but not of the (dominant) code of that world. This might mean that such practices – that communicate without meaning – are not taken seriously or simply frustrate, bore, annoy or irritate. At an extreme they will be imperceptible, at least, according to dominant regimes (and codes) of visibility (hence the importance of learning to see, or, which amounts to the same thing, of attending to our own particular production of subjectivity).

The importance of these kinds of practices is then that they offer something different to the what-already-is. This might be simply a diversion – or, at any rate, dismissed as one (not part of the dominant code (or, apparently, a threat to it), hence, ultimately unimportant). But in other cases, and *for different subjects*, they are points of inspiration and radical difference that might then be developed and mobilized into a different way of being in the

world. Here an art practice presents something more germinal than parasitic. It can be the seed of something genuinely new. In an increasingly homogenized and homogenizing neoliberal present that offers only more of the same – a present that *overcodes* all options – these points of difference can themselves become politically charged. Indeed, when the political scene offers no new models, art steps up. Here, in fact, it might be less a case of already worked out models than experimental probes, affective scenes, proto subjectivities, and such like. Art can generate the *feel* of something different in this sense.

But to construct a genuinely new form of coding one needs material, hence, also in this task, the importance of the scrambling of already-existing code or the importing of more alien code from elsewhere (outside of typical art-world culture)...at least as a first step. This is a mixing that is both spatial and temporal in nature (more on this below). Ultimately an art practice can then take off from this hybridity and begin to work on its own terms, producing its own (autonomous) coding. For example, it might throw up images or forms that seem to come from a ‘somewhere else’, but that also have some kind of strange relevance to the world as-it-is. Untimely images. It might also begin to recycle and re-use its own motifs, nesting one set of fictions within another, so as to produce a certain complexity – a density even. The idea that a practice might involve moves in a game for which one does not know the rules echoes this logic of strangeness and autopoietic functioning.

2. Fictioning: Synchronic and Diachronic Operations (or, speaking back and speaking in tongues)

One way of articulating this particular logic of art practice is as a ‘fictioning’: the production of untimely images – that speak back to their producer (1); and the layering of motifs to produce an accretion of sorts, resulting in an opacity (2).

(1) As far as the first of these goes, it might be that a practice just presents the result: the final image (or images). Here the relative strangeness of the image (its difference to the what-already-is) is foregrounded. On the other hand, it might lay out the procedure and protocols that allow this image to step forth from its dark background. Indeed, it might be that a practice stages this event, or even that practice is a name for it. Performance can involve what we might call this magical function: the summoning forth of

something hitherto unknown and unseen. Collaboration, or more specifically, collectivity – a scene of some kind – is also crucial for this operation. How else can one make something that is of one but not of one at the same time? That is intended but produces the unintended? For I is indeed a stranger, but it is only through a specific practice that this stranger can foreground itself from the habitual and familiar. It should be pointed out here that collectivity (again, a scene) need not involve more than a single individual. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remark at the beginning of *A Thousand Plateaus*, we are always already more than one.

Art speaks back in this sense. It is both cleverer *and* dumber than its progenitors. This is not to evacuate the subject from the picture. Indeed, such art – like all art – is made for subjects (images and objects made ‘for’ other images and objects may be many things, but art is not one of them – although see my comments below). Nevertheless there is something about this fictioning – this production of something non-subject – that is specifically object-orientated, to use the current valence. It is as if the goal here is to extract a certain objectness (something non-human) from an all-too-human subject.

This is the synchronic aspect of fictioning.

(2) In terms of the second aspect, time itself becomes a material insofar as the accretion happens through time...across a work, or across multiple works. It might be that this passage is imperceptible, only able to be tracked by the recurrence of the motifs – or avatars – that appear, disappear then reappear (perhaps in a different form), each with their own operating logics, their own speeds (and slownesses). An art practice has a certain duration in this sense – or even multiple durations. A kind of aesthetic ecology is produced which means the practice has more in common with a series, or again, a scene, than with an object *per se*.

The elements of an art practice *travel* in this sense. Fragments of previous codes make a re-entry, spliced with other more recent experiments. Such work is a palimpsest even when it looks relatively simple. Another way of articulating this logic is that a practice *nestjs* its own fictions within itself. This kind of temporal density comes from the fact that any given moment – any given image of the practice that we see – is an extraction from a process, even a narrative (at least of a kind), that goes from the depths of the past of the work, towards a future that the work itself helps to bring about.

This is the diachronic aspect of fictioning.

Art is simple *but* complex in this sense. It inserts itself into a variety of registers (signifying and asignifying), but it also refers to itself (it is, as it were, inward looking). Or, more accurately, it works on itself...follows lines of enquiry, repeats certain moments, accelerates some motifs...slows others down... In so doing, art itself constitutes a world – its own world (as well as the terms in which it may be ‘understood’). And this, ultimately, is its power.

3. From Collapsing Worlds to Points of Collapse (or, a holding pattern of minimum consistency)

In a way, both of the above modes of fictioning involve a layering. Again, the first is spatial, the second temporal. It is this spatio-temporal density – which results in the production of a *different* space-time – that constitutes art when it is a practice rather than simply the production of a commodity.

The increasing availability and relative affordability of digital imaging and editing technology means that there is now the possibility of a more accelerated mixing of temporal and spatial worlds and, as such, of increasing this density – and, with it, producing ever stranger spatialities and temporalities. Such technology also allows its user to alter the speeds of the different images and sequences being deployed. This might mean the introduction of a different character (or a different speed) into a different scene that has its own duration, or, indeed, the insertion of one scene into another. In this strange dream-time a virtual ‘third thing’ is introduced between the two. A no-place and a no-time. An ‘erewhon’ when and where other things become possible. This is an indirect answer to the ever present now of commodity culture insofar as it often involves recourse to a recent past, to that which has been too easily and eagerly forgotten in the ever increasing and insatiable desire for the new.

This collapsing of hitherto separate worlds – and the concomitant production of a ‘new’ landscape, a new platform for dreaming – is another definition of fictioning, especially when it is no longer clear where the fiction itself ends and so-called reality begins (or where reality ends and the fiction begins). Fictioning inserts itself into the real in this sense – into the world as-it-is (indeed, it collapses the so-called real and the fictional), but, in so doing, it necessarily changes our reality. This is fictioning as

mythopoeisis: the imaginative transformation of the world *through* fiction.

This particular sense of fictioning dovetails with the idea of post-internet art, or art that is made *from* and *for* the web of images that now doubles our own world of things. As such it might be said that the collapsing worlds we produce have their own life outside of our control, or, indeed, that of anyone else's. Ultimately, they do not rely on being seen to operate as agents (after all, who, nowadays, can see all the images that are generated?). They are already in contact and 'communication' with image-worlds that are increasingly not of human generation. Once again the question here is whether such worlds that operate divorced from any kind of subject can be called art (who, after all, is there to call them anything?). It is perhaps more accurate to say that they become art when confronted by an interlocutor (although this will not necessarily be a 'human' in the sense of a particular historical diagram, with an inside and outside, a centered 'self', and so on. More on this other subject below).

Is art the only place where we find this logic of collapsing worlds? Or, indeed, the spatial and temporal layering laid out in the above section? Certainly other aspects of culture utilize the latter, albeit only partially and somewhat reductively. Fashion, for example (as spatial layering), or the mini-series (as a form that involves longer durations than the typical film or, indeed, the novel). In terms of collapsing worlds we need only look at the post-continuity cuts of recent pop videos (but also note that a strange continuity is maintained 'behind' the videos themselves in the 'lives' of the celebrities as narrated on-line and on TV). This amounts to saying that the world (or let us now give it its other name: capitalism) generates its own experiments outside of art – experiments that in some senses doubles art's own probe-heads.

But in art, the processes outlined above are accentuated beyond the reasonable. Art is like a joke pushed to an extreme in this sense. From a certain perspective it is like an ongoing absurd repetition, a gesture beyond the logics of the market. Indeed, art does not have to maintain even a modicum of good/common sense in this respect – or, to say it again, is not necessarily involved in the production of typical knowledge.

Crucially, with art, this often means that something unrecognizable – often accidental – is introduced into the mix. Chances can be taken (after all, there is no audience to please, except for the very specific audience that is

looking for something that does not please them). This is the introduction of something random, something that is, as it were, unwelcome and spoils any ready made and too neat schema or logic. It is the introduction – or excavation – of rupture, a point of collapse.

It is in this sense the art practice, ultimately, is not the production of subjectivity. It is not therapeutic, however that might be defined. A practice certainly needs a sense of cohesion, but it also needs these points of collapse – or else it risks just presenting more-of-the-same. I have written about this – with David Burrows – at more length, and in relation to Guattari (and Jacques Lacan), elsewhere.¹ Suffice to say here that an art practice might be a kind of holding pattern – maintaining a minimum consistency – for these points of collapse. Indeed, this might, again, be a definition of fictioning: the production of a myth that binds the holes and presents and pitches them to an audience.

4. Conclusion: Reclaiming the Unconscious (or, a message not to you but to something within you)

It is not news to say that Capital has colonized time as well as space, but this needs also to be thought in terms of more imaginary registers, that is to say, not just within reality *per se* with its typical spaces, places, times and durations, but also in terms of our unconscious worlds. As has also been remarked often enough, the failure of politics is also the failure of the imagination. Capital, we might say, has increasingly co-opted even our dream worlds – that repository of images that give us a life beyond the plane of matter.

Indeed, this unconscious – understood in a Bergsonian sense (as a virtual reservoir that subsists, but that is habitually masked by more utilitarian and pragmatic interests) – is being colonized by commodity culture, and not least by Web 2.0 and its logics. Facebook and Twitter and all the other filtering super-nodes of a once wild – and un-enclosed – web offer up a restricted repository of images – ever available, seemingly varied, but, in fact, just more-of-the-same. The result of this is not only a poverty in the sense of the homogenization performed by these image-banks, but also an alienation: we become the spectators of our own subjection insofar as these images are not of us, or, at least, are only of a part of us (that part which can be represented by such images and their attendant algorithms).

Another way of thinking about the fictioning function of art practice is then as the reclaiming and unleashing of this unconscious. Art practice – in the sense mapped out above – can produce new images and sequences – new myths, new dream worlds. An important aspect of fictioning, in this sense, is *participation* in the fiction. This does not necessarily mean that an audience/spectator is invited into the work – often an artwork is precisely inhospitable (it refuses to give ground), but it does mean that the produced fiction offers something. It is from and for a collectivity – albeit one that is masked by more typical (atomized and hyper-individualized) subjectivity.

It is also in this sense that this fictioning performs its own alienation: alienation from and for an already alienated subject. Here fictioning's difference from the world as-it-is means it will alienate the subject-as-is, but, at the same time, speak to the subject-yet-to-be. It is a message not to you but to something within you.

It is also for this reason that difficulty, complexity, the refusal of meaning, and so on are not always the signs of elitism or a deliberate mystification/obscurification, but the sign of something that will not give ground to the world-as-is, will not pander to the demand to make sense (at least, following the dominant codes of meaning, and top-down decisions about what should have meaning). It is also, in this sense, that art must invent the criteria by which it is 'understood', when this does necessarily involve the register of interpretation (to follow Lyotard one last time, meaning might mean simply that we are 'set in motion' by the work). Every practice, if it is a practice, is its own genre in this sense – and, as such, to say it again, constitutes its own world. But that other place from where art is pitched is also a world, one whose edges are now revealed by this doubling. Indeed, an art practice maintains a critical function in this respect insofar as it turns away from that other myth-system which it has revealed as such. Myth-science is a good name for this world-building – and world-breaking – technology.

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See David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, 'Art Practice as Non-Schizoanalysis', in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Visual Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Biographies

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