
In the Meantime, Examples of the Same Lily
(A temporary androgyne for Lynda Benglis and Richard Tuttle)

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Argo

For a while, Lynda Benglis' *Quartered Meteor* and Richard Tuttle's *8th Paper Octagonal* were displayed next to each other in a room on the fourth floor of Tate Modern. The Tuttle has since been moved to a wall across the room.

Lately I have been preoccupied by the idea of curating an exhibition where none of the works are present. For example, a full-scale photocopy of a reproduction of one of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings would be taped to the wall, accompanied by a live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting in a private collection. A laptop showing a low-res copy of a John Baldessari video playing on loop from Ubuweb might share the space with a press release from a Paris gallery detailing a Pierre Huyghe exhibition, while a performer sits on hand to retell a story someone once told me about seeing a Mike Kelley piece somewhere in the States... that sort of thing. A show where the exhibition space becomes a kind of spirit cabinet or Ouija board, calling on unseen forces and non-present presences to inhabit the otherwise empty space, their thin hauntings considered as a kind of richness akin to that of Morton Feldman's *King of Denmark*,¹ (which might occasionally be played in the exhibition, at a volume turned down to the point of inaudibility).

First Conceit:

Art objects are charged with unknowable potentials.

Second Conceit:

Art objects are conversational and act upon each other.

Third Conceit:

The conjunction of charged objects constitutes a text.

In *The University in Ruins*,² Bill Readings proposes an educational and ideological paradigm shift in university education and management, a move he identifies as shifting from a model of the University of Culture to that of the University of Excellence – from the university as an arena for exchange, debate and exploration to one concerned with the production of evidence of excellence/achievement. This latter is driven ultimately by market forces, and is concerned with the functioning of the university as a bureaucratic entity, not with education, thought or creativity. Potential for (and the potentials of) failure and irrationality are squeezed out of this system, which sees them as threats to the stability of the institutional structure. “Knowledge” becomes reduced to that which is able to pass as such without disturbing myths of objective certainty. Something as dark, irrational and destabilised as the art object was always going to be a problematic presence on this horizon.

Fourth Conceit:

The terms text, constellation, object and body can be productively interchangeable.

Fifth Conceit:

The restless rearticulation of elements found in the Kabbalistic practices of Temurah and Notarikon – magical operations executed through the endless reconfiguration of textual elements, usually from holy scripture – is an analogue for practices of art making (including and not limited to curation, looking, discussion and remembering, alongside other modes of construction such as drawing, writing and so on).

Sixth Conceit:

Acts of making are acts of summoning made from relative ignorance. To place a call is not to know what might answer.

For a while, Lynda Benglis' *Quartered Meteor* and Richard Tuttle's *8th Paper Octagonal* were displayed next to each other in a room on the fourth floor of Tate Modern.

In terms of material and visual contrast, historical conversation, of the (multiple and unstable) genderedness of the art object, of how an artwork can undo both its neighbour and itself, and in this undoing constitute something fresh and vivid, something that exceeds archival presentation in its liveliness, this pairing of works was particularly commanding. The crisp-edged geometry of the Tuttle – coming so much from instinct and idiosyncrasy – seemed diagrammatic and logical next to the Benglis, which lurched out of its corner like a mudslide, its heft and weight underlining the delicacy of Tuttle's octagon. As this airy lightness played against its neighbour's move towards a lumpen formlessness, invocations of the feminine as excessive and monstrous mapped a model of 'male' rationality back onto the Tuttle – a map which clung with an ill fit to its fragile geometry. These fidgeting relations drew attention to the quartering of *Quartered Meteor*, positioned in the corner and formally recalling Robert Smithson's (contemporaneous) mirror and soil works, nodding toward a perfectly rational – if unseen – geometry of its own. This hidden geometry, casting the walls as metaphorical covered mirrors, conjoined with the materiality of Benglis' sculpture (a lead cast of one of her poured polyurethane works) to bring an alchemical dimension to the work, which again linked it to Tuttle's octagon, floating on the wall in near invisibility as if dissolving into/resolving out of Platonic abstraction, while at the same time its impurity and lopsidedness removed it from the sphere of impersonal, given perfection, suggesting it rather as the result of an occulted though plainly human operation. Again, in this light, the slump of molten metal in accordance with complex vectors of force (gravity, heat, kinetics etc.)³ which gives *Quartered Meteor* a form so easily misread as formless, reinjects suppositions about logic and whim in the genesis of *8th Paper Octagonal*. Relations between order and artifice become complicated, revealing a play of forces the repercussions and provenances of which prove, once more, multiple and inconclusive. These chains of association, weaving and unweaving sets of reading through the unstable and oscillating gendering of attributes such as weight, delicacy, rationality and excess, not only in their immediacy but in terms of the histories on which they stand, never settle into fixed relations. What occurred in the coupling of these two works was more akin to an alchemical operation.

What is an artwork what is a body why is curating like writing where are the edges are the edges what are they and where are they in writing in curation in bodies in the making of bodies and do they sit still. How long do they last how long do they take and what does are mean, are, are they. What are they where are they are they and when are they. You will not mind if I sometimes pretend to be Gertrude Stein.

An artwork is three things it is lots of things but it is also three things these are the three things that an artwork is is is under question of course these are the three things that an artwork is this is what I am telling you to think firstly of the artwork as component secondly of the artwork as aggregate thirdly of the artwork as a continuum of avatars yes.

Component what is a component a component is an element that is open to conversation at all points. Every part of the component is like a mirror or a socket or a thing simultaneously lock and key it can attach and reflect and communicate and take brutal possession or be gentle or anything else when you put them together two components or more they link they do not need to touch of course but they link like face-to-face mirrors like the jewels in Indra's net which I will tell you about and they are a conversing machine the wasp and the orchid.

An aggregate now. An aggregate is made of components which is simple to understand. So artworks can be components and artworks can be aggregates and they can be them at the same time because things are both whole and particulate the God Indra for example had a net of jewels it had a jewel at every knot or intersection and these jewels each reflected every other jewel in the net to infinity both aggregate and component and writing and curation help thinking about this and about what is an object what is a body because a Mary Heilmann painting is an object and an exhibition where it is shown by live video feed is an object even if only imagined and a written account of this exhibition is an object and they are all objects and all parts of an object and this is like the body of the artwork as component as aggregate.

Of course the Gertrude Stein that I am pretending to be is not only Gertrude Stein and I am happy enough to say this out loud you would hear me if you were here to do so.

Thirdly there is a continuum of avatars or possibly a discontinuum but a continuum of avatars. Think of it like this. There is a Mary Heilmann painting and an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting and a written description of an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting and an image conjured by the reader of the written description of an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting and the memory of the image conjured by the reader of the written description of an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting and the story told about an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting by the reader of the written description of the imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting trying to reconstitute their memory of the image conjured by the reading of the written description of an imagined live video feed of a Mary Heilmann painting to another person. Anyone can see components and aggregates and also avatars avatars where a thing speaks through an image of it that stands in for it in a chain that goes and goes a continuum the contiguous parts of which are very much similar and the extremities of which are very much different and this is like Dan Flavin about whom I will talk as I will talk about Indra's net, and a reason why what is a body and where are edges are edges is difficult and worth thinking about. Because then what is an artwork as I have said.

Seventh Conceit:

Even in a post-medium, expanded field context, the artwork is hounded by notions of formal integrity.

Eighth Conceit:

It is necessary to rethink the body of the artwork in time as well as in space.

Ninth Conceit:

Emancipated from received ideas of what constitutes a body, the artwork is itself revealed as a complicated and unruly body that can be neither located nor contained.

Rosalind Krauss' particular attack on a certain idea of coherence takes a structural approach. She draws here from Barthes: "...Barthes liked to use the story of the Argonauts, ordered by the Gods to complete their long journey in one and the same ship – the *Argo* – against the certainty of the boat's gradual deterioration. Over the course of the voyage the Argonauts slowly replaced each piece of the ship, "so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This ship *Argo* is highly useful," Barthes continues. "It affords the allegory of a highly structural object, created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution, but by two modest actions (which cannot be caught up in any mystique of creation): *substitution* (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and *nomination* (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts): by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the origin: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form." ... The structuralist model of substitutions and nominations does not call to mind the image of depth – substitution being able, after all, to take place by moving pieces about on a plane surface. Thus if Barthes cherishes the *Argo*-model, it is for its *shallowness*."⁴

The main goal of the alchemist was something referred to as the Great Work or Crowned Androgyne. Opposing principles – most often referred to as masculine and feminine – are in this figure synthesised into a more complex third term. Barthes uses this figure of the hermetic Androgyne as perfect whole to discuss his idea of the Neutral,⁵ not as a relationship wherein binaries cancel each other out and fall into a state of nullification, but rather as the site where an unbridled complexity can play itself out free from the restrictions of binary structuration.

This alchemical relationship is therefore not one that places its terms in didactic opposition, but which allows them rather to collapse into each other, and into a state of nuanced complexity. In the coupling of *Quartered Meteor* and *8th Paper Octagonal* what begins to unfold is not a pure presentation of the Androgyne itself, but an intimation of its approach, or of its presence underneath the mantle of paradigms and divisions. Like votive items arranged on an altar, they call the Androgyne, making of themselves a conduit through which it might manifest or make its presence felt.

A few months later, when I returned to the Tate to look at these works a second time, I found that the Tuttle had been taken down and reinstalled on the other side of the room.

Tenth Conceit:

The invocatory acts of arrangement that make up artistic practice give voice to forces inimical to fixed institutional structures such as that of the University of Excellence.

Eleventh Conceit:

Argumentation is symptomatic of a faith erroneously placed in rationality.

Twelfth Conceit:

The word of a Magus is always a falsehood.

“At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”⁶

“The water in which Narcissus sees what he shouldn’t is not a mirror, capable of producing a distinct and definite image. What he sees is the invisible in the visible – in the picture the undepicted, the unstable unknown of a representation without presence, which reflects no model: he sees the nameless one whom only the name he does not have could hold at a distance. It is madness he sees, and death... Lacoue-Labarthe, in very precious reflections, reminds us of what Schlegel is supposed to have said: “Every poet is Narcissus.” We should not be content simply to rediscover in this statement the superficial mark of a certain romanticism... One ought, no doubt, to understand Schlegel’s statement in another way too: in the poem, where the poet writes himself, he does not recognize himself, for he does not become conscious of himself. He is excluded from the facile, humanistic hope that by writing, or ‘creating,’ he would transform his dark experience into greater consciousness. On the contrary...”⁷

“...God Almighty, merciful God, why can't one focus one's attention on anything, the world is a hundred million times too abundant, what will I do with my inattention...”⁸

Depth and shallowness are models or orientations that allow and prioritise certain ways of moving. Depth goes inward, where shallowness spreads across. You can go as far in either case, but you are answering the call of a different rhetoric. To plumb a depth is figured as a movement that draws closer to an essence or truth (which for some reason is assumed to reside in the centre of things), while traversing a surface enacts a movement that remains as distant from the centre as when it started. To move oneself, one's attention, about on a plane is to flit about like a gadfly. Yet the gadfly pricks things into motion. Lighting on bodies, the gadfly awakens them and goads them into activity. One could claim this as a movement less concerned with authorship than the possessive journey to the heart of the matter, from whence the core will be excavated and brought into the light; but this would miss the larger picture of the object, the body of active relations, brought about by the restless movement from point to point that returns to each mobile body as to a spinning plate: to keep the circuit running, the motion live, the surface taut and springing with potency and surprise. And do we discard depth here? Not at all: though we may be inclined to reconsider our understanding of the movement into depth in the light of the experience of shallowness. If, as in narcissistic contemplation, the move deeper brings not clarity but increased obscurity, this is very like the baffling multiplicity of proliferating encounter generated by the endless movement from one surface to the next.

I am magnetised. I move. Denying the differentiation of depth and shallowness, I choose to believe I can go in all directions at the same time.

The camera (I always think of it as a camera) orbits the architecture of a plantation house in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*; a cool, gently unstable movement through indefinite time, repeatedly returning to a wall in the dining room marked with the stain of a squashed centipede, as inevitably as the protagonist of Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos* returns in thought to the lynched sparrow hanging in the woods, to the maid Katarina's deformed mouth, to the small stick hanging from a thread in the corner of the garden, round and round in an circuit of acquisitive and increasingly unhinged rationalisation.

Both novels involve a circling, and take this as a structuring principle. In *Jealousy* the narrator is a disembodied eye or camera passing through and around the architecture of a single house, looping (in ways both continuous and discontinuous) through space and time. This looping movement subjects the building to a close scrutiny which also encompasses events taking place within it, memory traces which present themselves in somewhat occluded fashion – narrative is implied, but its alluded-to core remains inaccessible, an opacity around which the book slowly rotates. *Cosmos*, on the other hand, is a first person narrative where the protagonist, Witold (after the author), is directly involved in the events played out in the story: his inner monologue provides the narration, and his actions influence those around him. In each novel the structuring of the position of maker/reader – that is, the position of the protagonist as a reader whose reading produces the text within which he or she is embedded⁹ – is differently expressed: in *Jealousy* the primary narrative act could be proposed as the reading of an architecture, which reading as a result produces the object of the novel. In *Cosmos* the acts of reading (the protagonist's obsessive and illogical interpretation of phenomena) and making (i.e. on the one hand, the performance of acts which drive the story, and on the other, the production of webs of association) are more densely woven together. Where *Jealousy* operates via a gesture of presentation, *Cosmos* is more interested in rationalisation: or rather, rationalisation is what it is concerned to present. The opaque centre of *Jealousy* is an event from which we are held back; in *Cosmos*, the opacity that Witold's speculations circle is more radically uncertain and unknown – at no point does he himself have any clear idea of what it is that he suspects. Argumentation as presented here is an extreme or purified analogue of modes of engagement encouraged by the University of Excellence: a

sort of paranoid, counter-entropic psychosis, which I maintain rests in the heart of all argument (in what you now read as much as anywhere else). However, the idea of entropy and the counter-entropic impulse seems potentially important with regard to the Neutral as a position to be taken in relation to binary structuration. If binarism cannot be refuted or opposed, then a pure Neutrality (i.e. a state wherein binary structures are wholly absent) seems a practical nonsense. A truly Neutral Neutrality must be *nonbinary*, in the sense that it must encompass and move beyond the binary without negating or denying it. Just as the drive to argumentation seeks to counter the collapse of paradigmatic structures of meaning, so the drive to evade argumentation seeks to preserve the nuanced complexity of Neutrality from collapsing into the rigid abstraction of binary distinction. The entropy these drives seek to counter, however, seems destined to eventually trump them both: argumentation will break down and reveal its aporias; the free play of non-linear discourse forms, among its many transient expressions, nodes of argument, and erupts with binarisms which, try as it might, it cannot purge. It may then be that only in a truly androgynous and entropophilic nonbinary matrix can the University of Excellence be productively dissolved.

Wittgenstein's extension of the Positivist inquiry to its logical conclusion leads him to reject the possibility of certain knowledge. If the possibility of certainty is removed from the epistemological system, what do we mean when we talk about the production of knowledge?

Blanchot positions (and questions) research as a seeking after a centre that "allows finding and turning, but... is not to be found."¹⁰ He charges the researcher with being unwittingly under the fascination of the centre, like a dog who falsely believes he has his prey surrounded.

What is this centre? If looking is an act of making (and I claim this as the case), then the object of research is constructed by the activity of research, giving the lie to the fundamental misconception that research looks outside of itself to deftly surround an ultimate and external object. Might the case not rather be that the activity of research establishes its object as a centre internal to itself, of its own construction yet essentially unavailable to knowledge, whilst establishing the model of an *a priori* external centre as an avatar of the research, a mouthpiece through which the research's unavailable core can speak back to the researcher in tongues?

Somehow, through what seems a deeply embedded hubris, the University of Excellence has allowed the art object into its fortress, mistaking it for a small domestic animal easily spayed by academic convention¹¹ rather than the Trojan horse it can actually, and, one may hope, quite catastrophically, be. So far, so good.

If this writing can in some way invoke and give voice to the conjunction of *Quartered Meteor* and *8th Paper Octagonal*, it can do more. Think of it as a version of the exhibition of absent works mentioned earlier – that collection of objects acting as a magic circle – itself absent from physical space and installed instead in the space of writing: an uncertain territory calling out to the non-present objects with which it builds and fills itself, asking them to speak through it, and asking whatever it is that speaks through them to speak here also. A conduit for conduits. A garland of unstable relays. A palimpsest of figures that, through a set of formal operations, overlap both in time and in the layering of paragraphs via the stratification of pages to form a complex sigil charged with the potential to disrupt and, with vigilance, topple the edifice of the University of Excellence.¹² Such is the goal of the magical operation undertaken in this writing. Figures are shuffled and reconfigured across the desktop and the page as on the surface of an altar, a magic square, or the studio floor. Charged objects brought into conversation, acting on each other in constellation and radiating like calamitous stars.