

Comments On “Unstable Moments of Reconsideration, Reconsideration”

“I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution: there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism...The newer architecture therefore - like other cultural products I have evoked in the proceeding remarks - stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium”.

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Fredric Jameson.

The question that Jameson poses in the above quotation is the question I would like to take up in reference to the question of curating as an act of cross-generational reiteration. I would like to consider anew the impulse to re-enact the archive in the present moment of our event culture, where performance and labor are quickly becoming indistinguishable. I want to understand this in reference to ontogeny; as a culturally inflected development of the human organism. Finally I want to look at how destructive impulses, as they are utilized in art and curatorial practices, create new languages for those practices and, as a result, the imagination. The power of art will ultimately be understood as neuro-modulatory.

A.

«The diagram is indeed a chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm. It is a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of the painting. As Bacon says, it “unlocks areas of sensation”.»

Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, Gilles Deleuze

«The diagram or abstract machine is the map of relations between forces, a map of destiny, or intensity, which proceeds by primary non-localizable relation and at every moment passes through every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another.»

Foucault, Gilles Deleuze

What has happened since 1964, when *Study for an Exhibition of Violence in Contemporary Art* was first curated by Roland Penrose, and today in 2011 as it is ‘rendered’ again, first at the David Roberts Art Foundation, London and now reassembled again as *Studies For a Catalogue - A Study for an exhibition of Violence in Contemporary Art (Reprise 1964/2011)* at Flat Time House, London? For one thing, the curator and many of the artists in the new publication have been born. Not an insignificant fact. A new generation of subjects has been produced, no longer bound to the logics of modernism, but who have instead formed their habits of perception in the fluid, dynamic, non-linear, networked world of the post-modern, or whatever you want to call it. A new generation has emerged who have substituted the chart and the list, with its hierarchical structure, for the diagram, in which layers of intensity in flux are superimposed; whose perceptual habits, continuing with reference to Jameson’s above quote, have been reconfigured through active engagement and the event rather than passivity and stasis.

Plastic sociological, political, spiritual, economic and historical relations, as they interact with and are embodied by these novel cultural equivalences are spat out as architecture, painting, sculpture, installation and performance. In the end these changes affect the visual, auditory, haptic and kinesthetic topography of the cultural habitus, its distributions and, as a result, its subjectivities, especially the brains and minds, which operate inside them.

In this expanded field of distributed networks, time and space are reconfigured, reappraised and reconnected according to evolving, variable intensities, resulting in hubs and energy sinks that couple to our reflection and attention. These then produce the urgency alluded to by Jameson; changes that create the imperative to grow new organs of perception and provide the pressures, according to present day neuroscience, to sculpt the neurobiological substrate and architecture, giving it new potential to perceive and cognate the formally sublime space of post-modernism. How this might happen neurobiologically is beyond the scope of this essay, but for those interested I refer them to my recent essay «From Noopower to Neuropower: How Mind Becomes Matter» contained in the volume *Cognitive Architecture: From Biopolitics to Noo-Politics*, edited by myself and Deborah Hauptmann, 010 Press, Rotterdam, 2011.

B.

Space, its topographies and topologies, holds inside itself real material conditions but also possibilities. In cultural terms its ability to be described at any time is a product of known and unknown factors that together contribute to its inherent pluri-potentiality. The word pluri-potentiality, as its roots imply, signifies many or several meanings or possibilities that still remain latent, awaiting the proper set of cultural circumstances in which to become real or instantiated. I am using this expression to delineate the conditions of space, both expressed and unexpressed, that are articulated by a particular context and that are coupled to similar but different relations existing inside the subject who operates in that space. The brain, by its virtue to adapt to constantly evolving habitats, is also pluri-potent and its power resides in its ability to change to fit the social, political, economic, historical and cultural conditions it is born into and in which it must operate.

The brain of humans, especially the outer shell called the cerebral cortex, contains an excess of pluri-potentiality at birth referred to as neuroplasticity. The brain has the potential, for instance, to learn any of the 6,700 languages presently existing on this earth, although each of us learns just a few. But the potential is there, especially for the child, to learn any of them. Concepts themselves are pluri-potent, responding to the mutating linguistic and cultural milieu over time, resulting in new surfaces presented to our understanding. Even the white cube, with its anonymity and starkness, holds infinite possibilities to become. Many artistic interventions have attacked its surface and attempted to destroy it in order to reconfigure it and, as a result, provide new surfaces, some of them rough and contorted, in order to make new statements about the condition of art and its container. Liz Larner's, *Corner Basher*, 1988 performed at 303 Gallery in New York comes to mind.

C.

The history of exhibitions is a history of the traces of that mind in a state of becoming. Is this, in fact, the story of *A Study for an Exhibition of Violence in Contemporary Art*, an exhibition that has been reconstituted at different times and in different spaces, continually shifting its presentation to fit its specific context? That history is reflected as cultural memory in relation to the facts of this roving nomadic exhibition: the ICA, David Roberts Art Foundation and Flat Time House present different discursive contexts and problematics through which the exhibition can be redefined.

First, at the ICA, the exhibition was categorized into different frames of reference using panels, like one might do for a card catalogue in a library. Linearly distributed, they followed

the course of the ICA's interior architecture and they were each labeled, from one to thirty. One might have experienced this exhibition as one might read a book, page by page. As each page is turned, new content unveils itself to the eyes, body and mind, arranged as a narrative displaying different categories of violence and destruction.

For instance, Panel 1 concerns itself with introductory remarks and is illustrated by reproductions of Van Gogh's *Willows at Sunset*, 1888, and Pablo Picasso's *Woman and Dead Child*, 1937. (Few actual works of art were included in the original installation at the ICA, most were represented in photographic reproduction. These works of art illustrated the categories used. I will not recite the full list of works, as I am more interested in the arrangement of topics.) Panel 2 sets the stage for 'Violence Observed: Nature' which is divided into Panel 2, 'Landscape', and Panel 3, 'Animals'. Panel 4 is the beginning of 'Violence Observed: Human Behavior' and is subcategorized into 'Sex' and 'Sport'. The next panels continue this category: Panel 5, 'War', Panel 6, 'Fighting', 'Murder' and 'Torture', Panel 7, 'Suicide', 'Hysteria' and 'Madness', Panel 8, 'Anguish' and 'Anger' and Panel 9, 'Birth' and 'Death'. At Panel 10 the exhibition takes another turn with 'Violence Imagined: Symbolic Violence'. It is made up of 'Religion' and 'Myth' and continued in Panel 11 with more about myth. Panels 12, 13 and 14 follow with the categories of 'Dreams', 'Sex', 'Obsessions' and 'Signs'. At Panel 15 another abrupt switch is made under the grand category 'Creative Violence: New Styles- New Conceptions'. These panels read as a history of art in the twentieth century. Panel 15, 'Colour: Fauves', Panel 16, 'Significant Distortion', 'Expressionism', Panel 17, 'Movement: Futurism' and, 'Optical', and finally Panel 18 and 19, 'Irrational: Surrealism' and Panel 20, 'Exuberance'. Panel 21 introduces another category 'Violence as a Weapon' with the subcategory 'Anti-society' followed by Panel 22, 'Anti-Religion', Panel 23, 'Anti-Art Dada', Panel 24, 'Anti-War', Panel 25, 'Anarchy', Panel 26, 'Polemical', and finally Panel 27 'Irony and Humour'. 'Direct Expression' is the final major heading and includes Panel 28, 29 and 30 under the subcategory, 'Action'.

The works of art that are subsumed by these categories act as forms of proof for the suppositions provided by their respective panel headings. They are rigorously incarcerated by the discursive logistics of the overall plan that controls their spatial coordinates and restricts their pluri-potentiality. They are physically contained by their designated panel assignments, unable to jump beyond their physical and metaphysical confines into another category or to fill in at another location. Of course, each painting could be used to reference many different topics, but in this arrangement they are allowed just one. One is reminded here of the conditions of Michel Foucault's term 'disciplinary society' in which architecture itself becomes biopolitical. The installation affects the minds that regard it, instituting hierarchies with which to form basic understandings.

D.

My purpose here is not to recount the content of the catalogue of the exhibition, you can go online for that, but rather to make two important points that relate to my original conjecture. That, in fact, the mind formed inside modernism finds the post-modern space sublime. The corollary being that the mind formed in Post-Modernism is characterized by habits of perception and cognition that refer to alternate forms of neurobiological distributions which provide it with the ability to understand these sublime spaces. These alternative, materialized dispositions also have the potential to create new forms of cultural materialization. I am arguing that the brain/mind of Mathieu Copeland is, beyond its individual character, sculpted according to the logics of his generation. He is a stand-in for his generation, who share common neurobiological materializations in the form of

memories, coded and summated as the activity of millions of synaptic switchings. As such, he is an agent for the production of cultural forms that instantiate those generational proclivities, for example, the post-modern. I argue that his brain/mind is sculpted very differently than that of his predecessor, Roland Penrose, whose brain was sculpted in the space and time conditions of modernism; indeed, that the different epochal, culturally derived habits of perception and cognition lead to very different installation formats, produced for very different generational audiences accustomed to varying readings of space and time.

The mind of Roland Penrose that decided the order of the original content of the ICA exhibition and administered its design, was attempting to make sense of a bevy of existing original materials, randomly distributed over time and topics, that dealt in a haphazard fashion with the idea of destruction and violence in art. I quote from his preface from the show, "Violence is an elemental force which can not be neglected and the arts have traditionally claimed their share of the emotional excitement it provides. Martyrs, battles, catastrophes, murders and rapes have been the motif for colouring many masterpieces with blood. It flows as freely in the ritualism of Italian Primitives as in the realism of Goya, Gericault and Delacroix.» By using an outline or chapter heading form of classification he was hoping to produce a taxonomy, or natural history, of violence in art, to use an expression found in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, in hopes of removing the hitherto obfuscation that surrounded the topic. The cataloguing of forms of violent expression as they appear in the arts was the first impulse to arrange this information. It was followed by a second-order rearrangement, within the catalogue, with its different rules of formatting. (Don't forget there were no InDesign programs at this time.) The second-order rearrangement, or meta-arrangement, I would suggest is a second order cataloguing or re-cataloguing. This manifestation, as it existed formally as text choreographed and styled on printed page, was entombed in the ICA archive at the Tate in London until the curator plucked it from its shelf and gave it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The act of exhuming this content, buried deep and for so long, allows us to understand the power of this original, classical model for creativity; one that lit the way for the Enlightenment, but which now seems antiquated and anachronistic. Even within its hierarchical constraints, the possibility emerges for 'Creative Violence' to produce 'New Styles - New Conceptions'. It is here that violence acts as a generative force, breaking up that which is known and understood into a thousand pieces, in order to be reassembled in a new construction of the known in order to create a new territory of the unknown. This is a continuous cyclical phenomenon. Violence, and its cohort destruction, punch holes in institutional logics in order to create new territories for the imagination to operate within. Are these methodologies of destruction a key to understanding the formal adaptations necessary to make the contents of the catalogue real again? Will violent curatorial methodologies be necessary to exhume the catalogue and re-enact it in a revitalized three-dimensional space, inhabited not by dust particles and the faintest of light, but by living, breathing human beings rummaging through scopic regimes and haptic kinesthetic logistics of the 21st century? A public used to watching fast editing on Music Television Videos, reverse action replays on sports television, and distressed photographs that portray partial body parts with their need for assumptive pattern recognition. A new public and viewership privy to new forms of viewing, who witness the simulacra of the work deposited anew, almost sixty years later, in the pluri-potential white cube structure of the David Roberts Art Foundation.

E.

But the story does not end here. For, as a witness of the exhibition installation downstairs at the David Roberts Art Foundation and a futuristic voyeur of the installation at Flat Time House, what becomes quite apparent is that the modulated context has pressured the installation to emerge as something quite different.

When one reviews the documentation from the David Roberts Art Foundation, what is evident is that the curator has thrown off his cloak as a disinterested observer attempting to clear away the detritus of unmeaning in order to rehabilitate a common understanding. Instead, following in the footsteps of the great Harald Szeemann, he has become an artist himself. Or, should I say, he has gone native. He has contaminated the original presentation at the ICA by reneging on its original cataloguing and refutes the linear, extensive, arboreal logic of his predecessor(s), instead reinstating the logic of the salon as diagram or rhizome. Images are assembled as they might be on an i-photo library source page or, even better yet, a Final Cut Pro browser window displaying its clips.

At the David Roberts Art Foundation there was a nod to the original catalogue, but it was almost invisible, especially for those not privy to the original installation format. The topic headings were still there but were less obvious, not inscribing an entire panel but inserted into a stream of similarly processed information. Photocopies hung on the wall, one subdivision followed immediately by the next, blurring the boundaries between each. What was more apparent and attention grabbing were the incongruities created by the original works, borrowed from the David Roberts Collection and hung on the wall, which stuck out like gorgeous sore thumbs. Instead of flat photocopies these works were uncharacteristically large and either framed or resting on pedestals, causing the eye to change its course rather spastically. They made the whole installation unbalanced and odd. They broke up the original, ordered rhythms and created jumping-off points for the eye, which was averted from its normal path, as well as creating junctions for the dissemination of information between now coalescing information streams.

Take for instance the framed Lichtenstein work entitled *Brushstroke*, 1965, which butted against both Bridget Riley's *Fragment 1*, 1965, on its left and a photocopy of Ben Shawn's *Sacco and Venzetti*, 1931-1932, on its right. The Lichtenstein stretches from panel 20, 'Exuberance' where the work resides, all the way to Panel 17, 'Optical', where the Riley sustains itself, and finally connects the whole 'inter-panel complex' to Panel 21 where the Shawn lays waiting, ready to proclaim 'Violence'. Of note is that the Bridget Riley was a substitution for '*Disfigured Circle*', 1965, which was not in the collection, whilst *Fragment 1*, 1965, was. This kind of substitution occurred, according to Copeland, 10-15 times. Inter-panel complexes dot the surface of the wall. They are the essential entity that makes inter-panel readings and communications possible. They are the dispositifs of the exhibition and demand a post-modern reading, with its call for distributed information and networking rather than that which was originally allowed for under the strict rationality of high modernism. The display set up here was somewhat analogous to words and images displayed on computer screens with hypertext that allow the viewer to jump fields of attention from one webpage to another. Hubs of interest, where intense flows of information congregate and upon which the observers' eyes rest in order to resample continuities based on personal biases rather than institutional prerogatives. This micro-distribution of the sensible, the arrangement of the images in the gallery and the political conditions that this aesthetic presentation implies, has been mutated according to the logics of the information society with its web designs, computer games, internet and online

discussions. (I am not implying by this reference to technology that technology is the most important force for near-modulation. I am actually saying that the changing conditions of the neurobiological architecture give the mind new forms of mechanic intelligence with which to think and that, in fact, new technologies are the result of that imaginative thinking. New technologies are produced in order to give the mind a new means to reflect upon itself in order for it to understand the new evolving self-condition.) The installation of the works mimicked these conditions, giving them a renewed freshness, at the same time alluding to the revived productive labor of the cultural worker whose mind has been selected by these new contingencies. The apparatus of the exhibition is the mimic of the conditions of the epistemological reframings caused by modulated neurobiological apparatus and architectures of the brain molded in the information age.

F.

Space is defined not only by its material basis, its walls, windows and ceilings, but as well by the discussions that ensue about it. Buildings and the spaces they hold, as Patrick Schumacher has intoned, have become discursive events. As such, buildings become part of linguistic performances. In tertiary economies, according to Paolo Virno in *The Grammar of the Multitude*, in which performance and labor become indistinguishable, immaterial linguistic events that leave no traces are the new contingencies for the formation of capital. 'Gossip networking sites' like Facebook attest to this. I am arguing however that these new linguistic forms do have a material presence; that they inscribe messages of sorts upon the wet, mutable pluri-potentiality of the brains and minds of the audience, gathered to view the performance. (<http://www.artbrain.org/>) As we move towards Neo Global Cognitive Capitalism with new technologies at hand, like software agents and social network sites, like never before it is the mind and brain which constitute the new territory for dominating strategies of international capitalism. This power to inscribe upon the masses perceptual and cognitive habits is not new. Benjamin was hip to these possibilities and in his *Work of Art* essay he describes how works of art in the hands of the Third Reich were used to produce an 'organic community' (the German People or nation) as a work of art itself.

The exhibition, like the architecture, visual art and film mentioned above, is also a mirror to self-reflect upon the conditions of the changing relations of the epochal generationally-sculpted neurobiological mindedness. This in itself provides for the potential for political expression. Most importantly, in the context of this text, the act of exhibition production is always in one way or another a political act.

G.

"This is why this return of what is never simply itself. What returns is the movement through which something other is inscribed within the same, which, now no longer then the same, names what is always other than itself." Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser

The history of curating is a history of the reading of the mutating conditions of the culturally constructed zeitgeist as it is manifest in trends of artistic production. Artists are the self-described agents of that. Curators reading artistic works in the way that critics read texts find emerging patterns in the plethora of artistic bricolage that clutters the zones of cultural production. They, as cultural workers, come to the cultural field with different forms of procedures, apparatus and discourses to read the ensuing mutations of that landscape. They use artists' works as their palette, constructing a meta-language through which to

understand the new emerging patterns. (Patterns that, like ready-mades, can emerge from the noise of the uncommon, disordered and ensuing destruction of information itself.) They decode and disseminate those changes to the culture at large.

The recent resurgence of re-enactment as a conceptual tool, most readily illustrated by Marina Abramovic in her exhibition *The Artist is Present*, is now spilling over into the field of curating. Interest in historical ready-mades as a means to understand our own contemporary culture has sent artist and curator alike scurrying into the archive to mine the rich fertility of the past. Sometimes, as is the case here, to find original books and catalogues from which to build contemporary productions from memories of exhibitions as they are documented in words and pictures. The reasons for this interest are multitudinous. From the condition of the eternal return itself, to the need to reread works of the past with a contemporary perspective post 9/11 and internet, to the unveiling of the pluri-potential nature of these early works, which contain inside themselves multiple readings not yet interpreted and that require contemporary subjects who have, like Jameson intimated, grown new organs of perception to untangle them.

Warren Neidich