

TRANSDISCIPLINARY AESTHETICS: AN OCCULTATION AND OCCULTISM

1. ON THE INTER...

“Transdisciplinary aesthetics” sounds like a hard term to justify. What does else does it offer (other than novelty) that an “interdisciplinary aesthetics” would not already provide? Indeed, is either adjective needed at all? “Aesthetics” is after all a specific department of the professional discipline of philosophy. It has its specialized skills, and its procedures of academic validation. Aestheticians who try their hand at art are often treated as amateurs, since they lack what is called “a practice”, or professional history of working in art. Correlatively, this means that—regardless of how articulate, inspired or idiotically opinionated their remarks may be—when artists or writers who are untrained or unqualified in philosophy talk about aesthetics they’re doing so with the untutored partiality of an amateur or hobbyist. This is because such remarks, no matter how theoretically self-conscious and critically reflective, will remain in the category of the material that aesthetics investigates (if perhaps as secondary, support documents—such as the notorious “artist’s statement” attached to grant applications). Such remarks cannot qualify to enter the field of scholarly dialogue and disputation that defines the discipline of philosophical aesthetics because they are not testable by that discipline’s standards of procedure. Barnett Newman’s joke about “aesthetics being to artists what ornithology is to birds” defines the disciplinary province of aesthetics with pungent sarcasm: while practising artists might need to learn techniques, methods and skills for making beautiful objects, they don’t need fluency in theories of value. In this formulation, aesthetics can never provide a practical method for making art, even conceptual art, since it offers nothing of practical value to the

artist. But, accordingly, a practical method is little more than the refinement of an instinctual ability. For Newman's joke to sting one must believe that birds learn not *how to fly* but learn simply *that they can fly*; and this is done so without the bird learning a theory of aviation. The discipline of ornithology produces knowledge about birds that is superfluous, thus unnecessary, to the practice of being a bird; so, likewise, aesthetics is redundant in the studio and by implication in an art school. Ironically, the self-sufficiency of the artist's practice, independent and ignorant of aesthetic theory, reciprocally endows aesthetics with its own sovereignty and inaccessibility.

However, it doesn't take a lot to unravel the contradiction in this self-congratulatory joke. To argue, in particular, that artists do not need a theory of art in order to make art—that art is instinctual, that it cannot be taught but only encouraged by example or endorsed and so on—is of course a theory of art and a pedagogical principle. But the disciplinary integrity of aesthetics is precisely what is challenged now in tertiary art schools that pursue so-called “practice-led research” as the criteria for accreditation of their research higher degrees. In these degrees a practising artist is required to submit a dissertation that engages somehow with aesthetic theory or reflects on some pertinent aesthetic topic (rather than be submitted as support documentary material to their practice). But, simultaneously, this dissertation addresses their own practice and thus ought not be evaluated as a work of philosophical aesthetics. This entails that the dissertation both is and is not within a disciplinary field. Research higher degrees in visual art must be defended precisely through this contradiction. They must somehow render their essential incongruity and discrepancy in positive terms. It's not enough to argue that the discipline of visual arts can expand *ad hoc* to incorporate aesthetics and art history when considered relevant for any particular dissertation, case by case; for then, it could just as legitimately

incorporate museology, anthropology, economics, commerce, quantum physics, set theory and so on. Or rather, there would be no discipline for assessing (let alone excluding) such material as unqualified, unscholarly, unacademic. No, if there is a case for an “expanded field” of research higher degrees in visual arts it would need to be argued as a general case of academic work both within and outside a disciplinary definition of visual art: and the term we have been encumbered with to describe this positively regulated inconsistency is the “interdisciplinary”. And yet for all its optimistic unlocking of silo-bound academe, it *is* an encumbrance: exactly due to its buoyant affirmation of collaborative exchange.

Interdisciplinary fields of research are formed on the basis of agreements that regulate the encounter of their constituent disciplinary actors. To a degree, this base of agreeable constituency appears to be the *outcome* of institutional negotiations—analogue to international agreements in trade or diplomatic conduct between entities that are purposeful, territorial and acquisitive. In another sense, interdisciplinary encounters (such as those between the arts and the sciences) occur on a basis of *presumed if eventual* conciliation. Whether through figurative affinity or by discursive alignment, the basis for interdisciplinary encounter is the event of the conference and the activity of conferring, conducted according to a unifying probable correlation of different idioms of knowledge and research practice. This relational coherence and commensurability of disciplines bestows not only opportunity but also necessity on interdisciplinary activity. And much of this activity—whether instrumental or theoretical—amounts not so much to the production of knowledge but to the production of policy. Take just about any situation—symposium, lecture, working group—dedicated to initiating and maintaining interdisciplinary dialogue or exchange: its objective (and

limitless scope) will be the formulation of policy on how to administer an interdisciplinary field.

Interdisciplinary projects are in fact exercises in policy as a mode of collegiality, comparable to the administrative ethos of collaboration that has displaced curatorial and critical enterprise and idiosyncrasy in contemporary art. In the legacy of what Nicolas Bourriaud dubbed “relational aesthetics”, collaboration is a marketing enfranchisement of so-called emerging art, administered with an obligation to “establish” and “engage” audiences, and which is demonstrated through the administrative responsibility to pursue and acquit a project (for instance, international exhibition or residency exchanges).

Indeed, contemporary art defines its contemporaneity with the relational phantasm of “criticality”, as a condition allegedly of “critical engagement” with other art, with audiences and institutions and market situations. Criticality is not to be confused with the activity of modernist critique: it is instead a relational attribute of art, assessable by a measure of inclusive engagement with an agenda of topics consensually acknowledged to have contemporary significance. By virtue of its “criticality”, art becomes subject to the legitimising terms of enlightened citizenship but as a boy-scout responsibility to a community: be that community an audience or a public which one addresses, or a subculture to which one belongs, or a populace with which one identifies, or a cultural legacy which one feels custodian to. This is policy formulation as a secular mode of piety, and a self-congratulatory accomplishment of inclusion, convivial relations and co-operative affirmation.

2. ON THE TRANS...

Does the “transdisciplinary” adjective, then, offer an alternative to interdisciplinary, institutional consensus? I believe it does, but in a way that requires recognizing a difficult and even drastic negation embedded in that prefix, “trans-”, which does not occur with the affirmative accompaniment of the “inter-”. I propose that we theorize the “transdisciplinary” in three ways that require boldness, audacity and a bit of lunacy.

Firstly, think of it as a disruption to interdisciplinary conferring. We should encourage the transdisciplinary as disagreement and, in a more demanding finesse of its alterity, designate it as the “un-relation” of disciplines.

Admittedly, there is some caution to this. Do we not lose the prospect of academic cosmopolitanism and its imperative of universality, when the interdisciplinary meeting place is disrupted? After all, interdisciplinarity seems so much in accord with a commendably modern, secular aspiration to cultural cosmopolitanism that its virtue seems unquestionable and unassailable. Interdisciplinarity surely adopts the cosmopolitan’s honorary citizenship of the world, where one would be no stranger to any part of it and would have a taste for all of it. A world with a multitude of ideas, but in which none of them would be foreign or excluded. And what kind of voice dares disrupt this conversation among equals? OK, but let us think of the transdisciplinary disruption, however, not as simply a pugnacious complaint nor even, more subtly, as a deregulation of academic discipline (as a cultural relativising of the arts and sciences meeting on equal ground), but as an *irregularity* within academic discipline; let us take its difference to be expressed as an insurgency within or “in-discipline” of academe. There is something improper, unintelligible in this term; and rather than domesticate it we should encourage its bad behaviour.

Secondly, I suggest that in contest to the connotations of diversity and amalgamation arising from interdisciplinarity—challenging its collaborative optimism and collegial accent on activity among and between equivalent and consensual disciplines—transdisciplinarity has nothing to do with multiplicity, diversity, relativism or autonomy. Nothing to do with collegiality as an intelligible, institutional paradigm: nothing to do, that is to say, with the address of the academic conference, and the conferring of its dialogue. This insistence on “nothing” isn’t just rhetorical or polemical: we have to accept the transdisciplinary as entailing a certain mode of exclusion and divesting of properties, even if this seems counter-intuitive.

It’s reasonable to assume, after all, that the prefix “trans-” suggests an encompassing span across borders that echoes the inclusive relations and coherence of that other programmatically all-embracing prefix, “pan-”. The Transatlantic accent in a voice, to provide an aesthetic example, suggests a hybridity caused by crossing between continents: it could be treated as a bridge in the way the term “Pan-African” signals an assembly and alliance. But the Transatlantic accent can also be unsettling, precisely because it is unsettled. When it is unsettling this is not simply because it suggests a sort of privileged mobility, like an international diplomatic passport, nor because it is reciprocally distributive across states. It is because the accent unequally disperses its origins—it has no fixed domicile, suggesting a false ethnicity because it belongs (in the sense of its *ethnos*, or affinity by birthplace) nowhere. Opportunistically callous as this may sound, the *transit* of disciplines must be comparable with (although not identifiably projected onto) that heterotopic postcolonial, increasingly borderless or stateless or homeless and extralegal Fourth World of the “precariat” or transient labour force, of refugees, asylum seekers, slaves of the sex trade, of boat people

and street people, of post-genome biocapital entities, of webcam avatars and nomad terrorists, of the *sans papiers*. This transit of disciplinarity is itself unsettled by an etymological alternation between being a passage “across” states (a transfer that doesn’t lose its sovereignty or citizenship) and an extensive vector “beyond” states, but into nothing. This transit implied in the transdisciplinary is, then, a freedom of movement only in the most negative sense: of dispersal and dispossession of properties, of annulment—a crossing over but without merger, without decision, without profit, without any positive value. It is an eclipse.

There is another theoretical issue at this point. Interdisciplinarity may be fraught with competitive ambitions and in practice may barely conceal imperialist take-overs, but its paradigm is that of ultimately good relations between disciplines. Let us recall that to discipline is to train and that a disciple is one who adheres and submits to the discipline by *learning*. Obviously the obedience demanded of a disciple involves the decisive, deferential observance of and conformation to rules, and is not the same as the subjugation of a conscript or a slave for whom the rule of their work only is reducible to the deferral of their death. (Strictly speaking a slave learns nothing: the wily slave is one who eludes the rule even though bound in captivity.) As its Latin source *discipulus* pronounces, the disciple is an apprentice; and the duty of apprenticeship is to follow the example of the master because that is the right way. In a visual arts academic context, the Master alludes to the atelier tradition that art schools strive to hold to, in modified and depleted forms, politically corrected but exposing the withered state of that tradition. And nothing can be done to restore this institutional custom: its condition is incurable. The Masters degree, to be specific, is the atelier’s Chernobyl: a prosthetic sarcophagus encasing interminable decay; for what else is encrypted within the common but banal usage of the term

“Master’s degree” in visual art but the revenant, undead “Master” who haunts the art school as its demon?

Here is the third and perhaps most mystifying value of *transit* that we must put to the transdisciplinary. That its unsettling negation of properties, its eclipsing of the disciplinary, evokes a demonic darkness. Let me again provide an aesthetic instance by speculating on the master’s voice as a voice accented from the “other side”, announced through the voice of the undead. I propose a neologism for this unsettled accent: it is an “unnunciation”. It is not the voice of God’s angel that inseminates or intercedes as Annunciation, but a particular type of negative prophecy; the mediumistic echoing of a life sign. It is, indeed, what I am doing with this paper, since if you hear these words it will be only because I am not here to say them: these words are not just spoken on my behalf but because precisely because I am no longer able to speak them. You must take them as ill-omened. Ominous.

This is most markedly the dramatic tone of a last will and testament. “I, who am no longer here, speak through my executor to do...”...whatever. The “will” is where the dead control the living, still command their obedience and the conduct or directions of their lives by bequeathing an paradoxical obligation: do with this legacy what I now tell you to do—read it out and make it *come to pass*. The discipline in this will is that of a curse passed on in the form of a debt, and it can only be uttered once the one who speaks it is dead; it is announced “after life”. This is the mode of those dire pronouncements recorded by people who have died from some often self-inflicted, addictive condition, warning us to take care not to do likewise. We hear them these days about the dangers melanoma or lung cancer.

I remember one of these from a long time ago. It was delivered by the screen and stage actor Yul Brynner, who was best known for his Oscar-winning role as King Mongkut of Siam in the 1956 movie (and also almost five thousand stage productions!) of the musical *The King and I*. I had a liking for Brynner: he was Russian from Vladivostock and in legend assumed to be Mongolian or Tartar, due to his partly north Asian looks and fierce warlord facial expression which—like his heavily accented, gruffly baritone voice and shaved head—gave him an exoticism that steered him in, Hollywood and on Broadway, toward roles such as that of Pharaoh Ramses II in Cecil B. DeMille's kitsch extravaganza *The Ten Commandments*. In most of his publicity and paparazzi shots he is puffing on one of his much-loved cigars; and it was this that prompted the famous TV spot that I mentioned a moment ago. In October 1985, Brynner died of smoking related lung cancer. Knowing for almost a year that he was dying, he recorded an anti-smoking advertisement for the American Cancer Council, which was released after his death and which began, "When you hear this I am dead." Even his memorial plaque in the Hollywood cemetery shows him holding a cigarette. "Now I am gone, I tell you," he intones, "don't smoke."

Like the "last will and testament", Brynner's voice is paradoxically incarnate (irrevocably involved, entangled within the life it possessed, to which it was immanent) but also disembodied (disentangled from that life, a disentanglement that could be serene or tortured). But unlike the last will and testament its injunction, "don't smoke", is actually inoperative: not an admonition to obey a practical rule about compliant conduct in restaurants, for instance, it is instead a plea in the form of a negative prophecy. We do not hear it as a command but as a prayer. And our audience with it is in the manner of the dog on the old HMV disc logo (designed by Francis Barraud from an 1898 painting suffused with Victorian sentimentality), with its ear

against the antique horn of the gramophone listening to “his masters voice” as an unearthly thing, like the morbidly erotic voice obscenely thrown into the mouth of a ventriloquist’s dummy.

3. ON THE UN...

If I call this undead voice of “unnunciation” obscene it’s to refer to it as “outside the normative limits”; but abominable not because it is a transgression but because it is ill-omened. This meaning comes from the Latin word, *obscaenus*; where the *scaena* in this word refers to a stage setting, and also to public or civic life. The *ob* in front turns the public stage—or at least some part of it—into something secretive, dark and hidden as in *obscure*, *obscuratio*. The verb *obscurare* is “to suppress” as well as to conceal; and, pointedly, in Latin *obscuratis* can refer to something or someone of low social rank, who perhaps ought not to be seen, and so ought or be excluded from view! The obscene has something of this reprimand in it. That’s to say, the obscene is something that ought not be seen but is shown or shows itself in maculae or spots, stains, blots. It is something that ought, by social or aesthetic convention, be excluded but which intrudes. We hear this sense of intrusion possibly more easily in the French background to our English use of the word: in *obscène* where the “scene” is blotted, eclipsed, by an ominous dark spot.

The sinister aspect to Yul Brynner’s voice from beyond the event of his death is similar to the Cheshire cat’s smile in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*: a smile which persists even after its owner – who has a tendency to disappear – has gone. Is this staying power? Only of a vague sort, since there is little sense of stamina in the cat’s grin, just facetious obstinacy. The Cheshire cat’s smile lingers past its appropriate duration, indeed lingers

importunately beyond the disappearance of its subject; in this way it invokes the residual existence of the living dead who don't stay within their graves or memorials, or the ghostly persistence of a nagging property outside its body, indecently lingering like a smell or a scent or an afterimage with the aesthetic effrontery of a hallucination that haunts, terrifies, irritates, offends, entices, stalks. The Cheshire cat's smile is obscenely other-worldly. Partly because it is sinister. Tenniel's iconic illustration of the cat in the first publication of *Alice in Wonderland* endows this smile with an expression that is elusively, disdainfully, deceptively enigmatic. And partly because it is also ominous. The Cheshire cat in *Wonderland* is an oracle: it tells the adventurer Alice, with mischievous unintelligibility, what will happen and which way to go. In a world where one's size telescopes like a concertina, where one must run as fast as possible to stay in the same place, where at the Mad Hatter's table it is tea-time all the time—advice about which way to go is not so much less than useful but more than useless. All of which presumes an ill-omen.

In summary and in conclusion then let me suggest that we use the prefix “trans-” to suggest drift and errancy, as disciplines cross each other with the eventful possibility of collision or collusion but without the eventuality of their consensus. I would provocatively call this crossing an *occultation*, in that it induces an esoteric knowledge not manifestly conferrable, discernable or communicable. In this respect, the “transdisciplinary” induces an occulting of disciplinary research by an abnormality or unnaturalism, which is to say it offers a new manner of *occult* knowledge. Can we speculate, within our specialities of visual media for instance, on “transdisciplinary aesthetics” as such an occult vision? The drift of the “transdisciplinary” is fugue-like, amnesiac and lapsing: signalled in the treacherous negation entailed in the prefix “un-” as the sinister persistence of a remainder beyond the deprivation of that thing's essential qualities or properties. A remnant and

revenant of a discipline that involves its disappearance like the cat into a grinning unnaturalism, and the dispossession of its own corpus or body of knowledge. In this fugue-like drift could not aesthetics become an occult science, or (in no way symmetrically or commensurately) could science become an occult aesthetics?

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