**Spaces of Attunement: Life, Matter, & the Dance of Encounters.**

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**Abstract:**

**Going South: traversal and attunement in painting**

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approaches and Kristeva’s psychoanalytic and post-structural insights, Romantic aesthetics, Romantic and Surrealist painting, I will explore how aesthetic traversals and attunements, inform my currentpainting practice which will be on display in the basement of Somerset House in June 2015 as the closing event for my Leverhulme Artist’s Residency in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London.

In the first instance, I will explore how aesthetic traversals and attunements stage differing dynamics in the necessarily unsettling processes of artistic creation and aesthetic interpretation. Secondly, I am interested in how processes of traversal and attunement motivate this practice: both in relation to mobilising a transformative matrix through the interplay of multiple oppositions, but also towards the disaggregation of the self/other, subject/object anthropocentric distinctions that trouble our ethical commitments to one another in modern life.

**Dr Lola Frost**

**Going South: Traversal and Attunement in painting.**

Throughout my artist’s residency at Kings College London I have been investigating and advocating the value of aesthetic risk in art. Given the location of this residency in the Department of War Studies, I have done so as a critique of risk management and the ubiquity of positivist values and methods in the social sciences. In so doing I have developed something of an aesthetic template, loosely figured around the idea of aesthetic free play, a practice whose operations, I suggest, mobilise the multiple gaps that open up in creative signification and aesthetic experience in art. In this regard, this paper attends to the relation between traversal, as dynamic and risky movement, and attunement, understood as a provisional and risky interruption of, familiarisation with, or reversal of those movements. I explore these possibilities through interpretations of paintings by C.D Friedrich, Max Ernst and me.

But first some clarification on my understanding of aesthetic free play, traversal and attunement in art. Kant associated the aesthetic experience of beauty with the cognitive free play of imagination and understanding, whereas Schiller conceived of aesthetic free play as an educative possibility where the play drive integrated the active and passive forces of emotion and reason. Fast forward to Deleuze and Ranciere and aesthetic engagement no longer services the binary opposition between sense and cognition or emotion and reason, but operates as an affective performative, multiple, traversing or becoming process in the case of Deleuze, and where for Ranciere aesthetic estrangement in art, is political.

Following, but also deviating from these romantic and post-structural perspectives, I suggest that we might understand that aesthetic experience in art is constituted by a reflexive matrix which mobilises our multiple cognitive, emotional, affective, perceptual and sensual capacities, our desires, and our cultural expectations and unconsciously constructed assumptions.

Such multiplicity, I understand is not simply free flowing or perpetually becoming, but might be organised by the oscillation between oppositions. For example as the movement, or traversal between such cognitive and emotional capacities, and the interruptions or attunements we make during that process. There is no limit to which oscillations and ‘lines of flight’ apply. Such playful, risky non-instrumental reflexivity, delivers both political and ethical opportunities to the aesthetic experience of the viewer, as indeed do the traversing and attaching multiplicities of artistic creation. The play of forces that emerge from the intersection of these vectors is both necessarily unsettling and unique to each viewer or artist.

Understood as a performative practice, aesthetic free play in art, constituted by such oscillating multiplicity is not bound by the fixities of representation, even as representation might figure as a component of these processes. Indeed, representation is sometimes point of conflict: for those who resist the risky rollercoaster ride opened up by the traversing multiplicities and attachments of aesthetic free play. Here representation and conceptual clarity might be something of a life raft, which services the production of knowledge, identity and fixity. Whereas for those viewers and artists open to aesthetic risks, representation is merely one component of the practice of aesthetic free play whose aim, at the romantic end of the spectrum, is the disaggregation of fixed identity or self, and the mobilisation of unspeakable experience.

Traversal implies movement across boundaries and attunement registers attention to the adjustments or interruptions to that process. The relation of these dynamic and intertwined processes I suggest, registers an affinity to the dialogical relations that pertain to Kristeva’s understanding of the mutually constitutive interface between the semiotic and the symbolic and to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the ’flesh’, understood as a pregnancy of possibilities or a hinge “on which the outside passes over to the inside and inside passes over to the outside” (Olkowski &Morley, 1999. p31).

Briefly, for Kristeva, the poetic text or artwork is one of the paradigmatic sites for the disruption of the (paternal) symbolic by the (maternal) semiotic. In this political and aesthetic project, the material and affective operations of the repressed and unspeakable semiotic dimension of the text or artwork, disrupt cognition and the ego, thereby by producing a crises of subjectivity and subverting the paternal law of the symbolic. Here maternal jouissance is the political and dialectical hinge which ruptures the phallogocentric status quo.

In her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva makes the case that the traversing multiplicity of the energy and laughter of the carnivalesque, or the unspeakable and traversing ambiguities of the poetic, maternity, the unconscious and psychoanalysis, politically disrupt representational fixity and identity, and call for an ethically attuned and provisional subject-in-process.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘the flesh’, a metaphor for the chiasmic enfoldings and reversibilities of being in the phenomenal world, is also conceived of as an ‘open system’ where the pregnant potency of the ‘flesh’ mobilises the movement between oppositions, like inside/outside; subject/object; self/other; unconscious mind/pre-reflective body. Such movement dialectically disrupts the hierarchical arrangement in which these oppositions are usually caught, thereby momentarily releasing the constituent parts from their socially and culturally allotted positions.

For Merleau-Ponty such emancipation also applies to art, and particularly to the traversing and dialogical operations of the poetic. Here poetic ambiguities instantiate a chiasmic performance in which distinctions between inside/outside, world/self, mind/body are folded into one another, a reversible movement, or traversal, that opens up a promiscuous, excessive, invisible framework, or matrix. Such chiasmic reversibility is an opportunity to attune ourselves to our phenomenal being in the world, and in particular to those aesthetic, or sense based, instances of visibility and touch: being touched and touching. Such sense based attunement is of course crucial to aesthetic experience and artistic production, enabling both artist and viewer to playfully traverse those multiple connections between sense, affect, cognition, cultural expectation and corporeal being in the world, not to mention the materiality of painting bodies, performing hands or dancing feet.

Lastly, still on the topic of attunement, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *ecart*, understood as an “open pivot” or the “ ‘hinge around which reversibility swings” (ibid, p.101) might be understood, I suggest, as an attuning interruption to the traversing flows that structure the practice of aesthetic free play. *Ecart* is not onlya pivot or an opening movement, but also the possibility of reversibility, whose double action introduces a radical sense of alterity, estrangement or unknowability into our experience, and in this case, of both artistic creation and aesthetic reception.

So much for philosophical and post structural theory: I expand these ideas through a consideration of CD Friedrich’s Moonrise over the Sea 1821 and Max Ernst’s The Bride of the Wind 1927. Secondly, I consider how such processes of traversal and attunement motivate and activate my current painting practice.

Joseph Koerner’s discussion of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, draws out the themes of landscape and the Ruckenfigure or substitute self, a category which encompasses these three figures gazing out across a moonlit sea. Koerner, drawing on Schelling, observes that the “*Ruckenfigure’s* paradoxical nature is a site of both our identification with, and our isolation from the painted landscape; landscape both is and is not a subjective *Erlibinis*” (Koerner,1990. 217). For Schelling our aesthetic experience of such artworks oscillates between representation, or ‘objective meaninglessness’ and the infusion of such ‘empty’ representation with ‘the spirit of ideas’ by inscribing legible significance, in this case both our identification with those *Ruckenfiguren* and with their asymmetrical substitution, or traversal, into those waiting ships, thereby signifying some sort of open ended journey. Such substitutional and traversing multiplicities open up a dialogical process in which part and whole, particularity and infinity, self and not-self, inaugurate that practice of aesthetic free play.

If we look at Max Ernst’s The Bride of the Wind (Rearing Horses) 1927, this work violently disgorges its unconscious interiority. The composite figure, horse, woman, figuration, abstraction, inside and outside invites the viewer to both identify and dis-indentify, or to attach to and traverse through the wild and ecstatic energy which activates it. The unspeakable gaps that activate this painting however do not only reside in the figure, as compelling as it is, but also in the relation between that figure and its companion ring, both perfect and dynamic. This relation invites, I suggest, *ecart*, or that pivotal moment of unstable attunement, through which this excess is paradoxically both contained and activated. An unspeakable moment we struggle toward but cannot quite conceptually catch.

I too work within the ambit of romantic landscape painting and surrealism, but my painting practice, has a distinctly feminist edge to it, even as it too is motivated by the unrepresentable, process-driven traversing and attuning possibilities of the practice of aesthetic free play.

For example, in this painting titled *Between Here and There 2007*, one’s gaze struggles to settle on any single part of this mobile threshold, or is it an orifice? This opening, framed by fluttering lips, or fractals, marks a boundary, between a seemingly infinite and incandescent space beyond, and a hot, mobile and visceral foreground.

This multiplicity: both part and whole, both inside and outside, both sexualised fleshiness and radiant light, poses questions for the viewer. Is he or she prepared to take the risk of entering into that metaphorical fleshy radiance, or to defend him or herself from such psycho-sexual traversals?

Like Max Ernst’s painting this painting titled *Coming Alive 2010* articulates a risky, performative and traversing energy. Such traversal calls for some sort of conceptual frame which of course can only be incomplete and provisional. However I suggest that this arching pregnant torso takes its cue from that repressed maternal matrix, or that psychic and signifying space Kristeva has called the ‘semiotic’. Figured as headless and hybrid creature, a body with no skin, both an inside and an outside, a body traversed by a libidinal desire and a transformative energy which distorts and subverts all meaning. The relation between traversal and attunement in this painting, I suggest operates between a set of oscillating oppositions, for example between figuration and abstraction, interiority and exteriority, visceral force and precise form, to name a few.

*Taking Risks* 2014 is also activated by the relation between oppositions; for example between the sexual indeterminacy and the psychic potency of a substitute self, or Ruckenfigure, which like Friedrich’s, also peers out into an empty space. But unlike Friedrich’s Moonrise painting, our identification with this substitute self signifies some sort of open ended internal or psychic journey.

I suggest that it is the oscillation between oppositions, in this case between potency and emptiness, sexuality and psychic interiority, that sets the signifying ball rolling, a movement that we might attune to through a multiplicity of sensual, emotional and perceptual vectors: the rich colour, the trembling folds, the embodied poise of this dark and searching presence.

This painting, titled *Opening,* like *Taking Risks* is part of a series of paintings that bear the traces of a set of journeys I have made, and will make, around the tips of the southern continents: New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Such travels and traversals mark a metaphorical ‘skirt of the world’, an open signifier for that generative and mercurial matrix that structures the operations of aesthetic free play, and an enormous southern geographical circuit. This painting project encompasses but transforms northerly stereotypes insofar as ‘going south’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is to go ‘down under, down on, or cash out a bad debt’.

In the case of this painting such transformation was inaugurated by walking along the edges of a gulley, pointing due south, on the Tzitzikama coast in the Western Cape, I momentarily and aesthetically attuned to the call of the landscape. Such attunement is part of the ‘grammar’ my painting practice, one which involves the reversal or unsettling of oppositions, and mobilises these in the service of that non-representational, performative practice of aesthetic free play.

Such dialectical, or traversing and attuning ‘play’ engages all our cognitive, cultural, affective, emotional and psychic capacities, which although experienced individually, also has social implications insofar as this practice can operate as an antidote to the alienations of modern life. For like Schelling and Ranciere, I understand that aesthetic free play ‘educates’ us into taking risks. The risks of traversal, the risk of attunement, the risk of not having a fixed or final meaning: above all such play involves the risk of abrogating control and fixed identities, those positivist bulwarks which make us such fearful, potent and competitive beasts, available to and in the grip of, instrumental regulation and reason.

The oscillating and risky grammar of aesthetic free play, it seems to me, opens up the possibility of agency, critique and transformation, however provisionally this might be articulated. In so doing, I suggest, this productive risk practice offers us ways of opening up to our phenomenal being in the world, to the estrangement of art, and to one another.

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