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‘The Diagrammatic Surface of Painting’, given at *Surface Value: Locating Conditions* Symposium, University of Reading, 10th June 2016

One reason, perhaps, for never having been tempted to explore the ‘expanded field’ of painting is that, for me, the flat and bounded surface has always been a limit/condition that makes its own demands. Rather than operating as a mere support whose passivity might grow tired of the image and displace interest onto the actual space of display (the space of movement and of a mobile visual horizon) it seems to me that the painted surface performs a more active role, or at least it can do. Through the images that present themselves to the viewer, the surface has both the capacity to anchor movement and the visible *and* to simultaneously divert attention away from itself. An act of doubling takes place that prolongs the gaze, which the writer Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier describes as ‘an arrest of time’.

The point of departure for this paper is the experience of painting *Nomads and Wayfarers* and specifically the closing stages. As the painting neared completion the thought of “architecture” came to mind. For a moment I imagined I was building a house and that the surface was a façade and what made it so was not the idea that it was a metaphor (as one might imagine a picture plane to be) but that the façade figured something of the internal life/space of the building – or rather a space that comes into being through the different functions of a becoming structure/system: wall, window, ceiling, floor etc. At that moment it was as if the surface (and its images) became differentiated into functions that, although seen by the eye, were functions/rhythms *felt with the body*, much like the experience of occupying or moving through the architectural space of the building. When the thought of “architecture” came to mind the painting felt as though it had begun to find its own voice; that its emergent rhythms had begun to work together in an act of composition.

In *The Logic of Sensation* Deleuze claims that, unlike other arts which *associate* catastrophe, painting “hysterically” *integrates* catastrophe; as he says:

‘...painters pass through catastrophe themselves, embrace the chaos, and attempt to emerge from it. Where painters differ is in their manner of embracing this nonfigurative chaos and in their evaluation of the pictorial order to come, and the relation of this order with this chaos.’¹

At a point when I had given up believing that I would ever complete another painting again, a point I have experienced many times and which I would describe as the feeling of chaos, ‘architecture’

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, (London, 2003) p103

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returned as an involuntary memory in the act of painting and with that the promise of (in Deleuze's words) a 'pictorial order to come.'

However, when I say "architecture" I can't say that I had a distinct image in mind. It would be more accurate to say that a sense of a building, with its façade, entrance and internal space, came to mind. Like a dream image, this was a momentary sensation of standing in front of a building. It was as if the painting had reached a level of completion or promise that triggered an involuntary memory which connected painting to a very different object.

'By "involuntary memory" Proust understands something like those "unconscious remembrances" which, randomly triggered by some sensation, some spoken word or some encounter, arise from the very depths of our being and from the forgetting to which a wilful intelligence and a wilful memory, both orientated wholly towards practical action, would have condemned them.'²

Although I have begun with a personal narrative the idea of involuntary memory shifts the discussion away from the personal. What returned was not the past which belongs to me and which I can remember. It is as if something from the outside was inserted into a conscious process, distracting me from the clichés of what I could imagine. I do remember the moment when the end began. It started with the first bisected square, at the bottom, in the centre. My aim was to 'settle' the painting or bring it back down to earth (it was just hovering all over the place - all background or underpainting); I wanted to bring it into focus by introducing a hard edged, flat shape that was not drawn or animated through the edge or the way it was painted (like everything else in the painting); something certain, a figure that was not a figure. It was an act of desperation in the face of a painting that was doing nothing.

'It is precisely these (figurative) givens that will be removed by the act of painting, either by being wiped, brushed, or rubbed, or else covered over...This is what Bacon calls a "graph" or a *diagram*...The diagram is... the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and colour-patches. And the operation of the diagram, its function, says Bacon, is to be "suggestive".'³ (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation* pp100-101)

The involuntary memory of "architecture" that came to mind was both a distraction from conscious intention and the suggestion of a different direction, a different system, a 'pictorial order to come.' It was the operation of a diagram through 'asignifying' acts of painting – actions carried out with no purpose other than to make material count differently; a gesture done with no end in sight.

There is a missing part to this narrative, however, for *Nomads and Wayfarers* is a painting that employs a "language" of painting that has emerged through a Western tradition of practice. This non-linguistic language is intertwined with its accompanying art historical and critical discourse.

² Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher*, (Abingdon, 2013), p38

³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, (London, 2003) pp100-101

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Explicitly, *Nomads and Wayfarers* makes reference to a painting by Juan Usle (*La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi*, (The Breath of Albers, the Teeth of Gaudi) 2013, hereafter referred to as G/A) which I have been interested in for a long time and which I have, over the past six years, investigated in the studio and in essay form, most recently in a text to be published in *The Journal of Contemporary Painting* next year called 'The Façade and the Picture Plane'. Rather than knowing irony it is precisely because I am unable to comprehend this painting that my fascination continues. Although I have borrowed its motifs in various paintings this has not been as act of reference to the image per se but has more to do with an appropriation of its rhythmic characters acting out in different environments.

The involuntary memory of an architectural figure in the midst of chaos might seem to reveal something significant about these acts of appropriation and about the relation between a process of conscious decision-making and the desire to elicit something beyond what can be thought.

Throughout the genesis on *Nomads and Wayfarers* Usle's painting was not the only external reference. It began with a motif taken from a Ben Nicholson drawing of a tree in which the trunk became drawn by what surrounded it. As we know he admired Mondrian's paintings and we can see this debt in Nicholson's play with figure and ground relationships in order to elicit different modes of attention beyond mere recognition. Not unconnected was another painting: the final stages of *Monkey Fingers* raised questions about the problem of the surface and how to overcome the "figurative givens" of the either/or of a figure/ground structure. This a very practical problem about how to overcome the problem of where one form ends and the other begins and how to create operations and functions which leap over such divisions. And in so doing, by overcoming the dialectic that might overwhelm the rhythms that run across the surface, space is no longer occupied but becomes unfixed and fluid. After many configurations of the surface the solution I found was to schematise the idea of folding inside and outside, which was expressed through idea of an invagination on each side of the geometric figure. The static central figure was at one time reminiscent of paintings by Frank Stella before it was painted grey as I was thinking through solutions to the problem of the 'left-over' in abstract painting and those discourses on the geometric and the grid. The invaginations allow for a degree of play and a rhythm that is not geometric but is idiosyncratic, gestural, spontaneously executed (but were in fact copied from a preparatory drawing). This figure returned in *Nomads and Wayfarers* as two oval figures and Gaudi's windows became two series of mobile characters that make their way across the surface. The invaginated ovals are drawn out across the surface as they lend the idea of a centre to the bisected squares; such a repetition denying the idea of a centre. These bisected squares map out the surface and organise the plane for the mobile characters. (cf my painting *The Conquerors*).

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The diagram which distracts from conscious attention and suggests a new direction is an assemblage; it establishes relations between heterogeneous terms. Deleuze and Guattari's famous coupling of the wasp and orchid is emblematic of the connectivity and assemblage of two heterogeneous species coming into contact.

'The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialisation: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid's reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction.⁴

The juxtaposition of the two works *Monkey Fingers* and *G/A* could be such a shared deterritorialisation. *Nomads and Wayfarers* operates diagrammatically to break with those external references, to break with them as figurative givens or clichés. So, we might say that *G/A* becomes a surface of inscription rather than a façade; the rhythm across the surface created by its windows or absences become various rhythms created by animated characters that play on the surface drawn out by a different plane; one informed by the idea of overcoming the either/or (overcoming the surface as a plane of x,y co-ordinates). The central figure of *Monkey Fingers* becomes a repeated motif; a figure loses its individuality – the idea lost in rhythms of other thoughts.

Although there remain similarities in appearance the idea is that it is not the image which is repeated but a deterritorialisation that allows the return of something less fixed, something that eludes description and which is operational and generative. The virtual diagram splits these figurative givens so that on the one hand we are reminded of objects of perception but on the other hand, a memory of feelings, a memory of the body returns involuntarily to become schematised in the work. Indeed, Deleuze draws attention to the appearance of pure figures in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* which, he says, were written as a function of involuntary memory as opposed to voluntary memory 'which was content to illustrate or narrate the past' (p67).

As Benjamin has discussed in his essay on Baudelaire 'only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *memoire involontaire*'.⁵ What returns is what could be described as the 'unlived'. In other words, components that were of no interest to perception in the past but remain as a pure past accompanying every present.

This idea of 'unlived' experience, to which Benjamin refers, is crucial because although it refers to the past it is not the past that was once experienced and now forgotten, but the memory of what remains to be lived and what's still to come in any lived experience. This suggests the possibility that

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (London, 1992) p293

⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, 1992) p157

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with every perception or lived experience there is an accompanying unconscious 'unlived' experience; a time that doubles that which we are aware of.

Accordingly, the claim is that *Nomads and Wayfarers* extracts a Figure from those external sources through the memory of what was never lived; what was left when a perception was cut from a plenitude of sensations but which remain awaiting action; *a memory of feelings*. In the temporal paradox of aesthetic sensation, the unlived returns, not through a conscious act of remembering but through the irruption of involuntary memory. This is not to fictionalise the event of involuntary memory as that which was experienced by artist or viewer but to locate it in the diagram of "sensation".

What Figure does *Nomads and Wayfarers* extract from the figurative givens *Monkey Fingers* and G/A and which revealed itself in the involuntary memory of "architecture"?

Although I have suggested that the diagram defeats the clichéd reading of G/A as a façade or as a source of characterful motifs through an assemblage with *Monkey Fingers* it is also the case that this 'figuration' does not completely disappear. The diagram introduces 'possibilities of fact' but as Deleuze says 'In order to be converted into a fact, in order to evolve into a Figure, they must be reinjected into the visual whole...' p101. This reinjection happens through the operation of the assemblage/diagram which decomposes then recomposes.

Let us return to the idea that *Nomads and Wayfarers* is a painting that employs a "language" of painting but also that this non-linguistic language is intertwined with art historical and critical discourse. The involuntary memory of "architecture" seems to suggest that what is in assemblage with *Monkey Fingers* is not the image of G/A but, in fact, G/A as discourse, as a piece of writing which understood that work in relation to architecture (specifically the façade). Indeed, it must be said that for this to be an assemblage of heterogeneous species this must be an assemblage of a painting with something other than other painting; not G/A but a piece of writing about G/A.

We can imagine that painting emerges from an intertwining of the verbal and the visual (to use Foucault's terminology) from an intertwining of the discursive and the non-discursive. I have said quite a lot about *Monkey Fingers* and the thoughts that were entwined with the painting process – ideas about painting and the material process of painting. But what can be said and what can be seen remain heterogeneous and yet operate as invisible forces to generate the sense of the painting; writing becomes the invisible fold of painting. On the other hand, the generative differentials of the seen and said are implicit in my writing about G/A, but here painting becomes the invisible fold of writing.

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The thought of architecture began with the central bisected square, on its own at first, a door or at least an entrance into the painting. In my imagination the surface became a wall inscribed with the rhythms of nomads and wayfarers. These animated characters are not pictures of nomads and wayfarers in any literal sense, of course, and the title refers to certain Deleuzian motifs. However, it seemed to me that these figures were only their image – and that is was a picture not of visual, tactile objects but of mental schema written on the wall. A picture of a picture; a schematisation of figures on a schematic or diagrammatic surface.

It seems that the involuntary memory of “architecture” turns out to be schematic. It is really the return of what was constructed in writing; an essay that tried to invent an equivalent to the sense of G/A as a trope of the facade. As such, it is the return of the idea of the Façade as a Figure constructed painting which was then constructed in writing. In this return *the Figure of the Façade of G/A becomes the Figure of the Surface of Inscription/Depiction of Nomads and Wayfarers*, extracted from the figurative givens of my own painting *Monkey Fingers* and my own writing about G/A.

But this is not a surface that could be experienced. What returns involuntarily is not subjective experience but only what was of no interest to perception in the past but which remains as a pure past accompanying every present. At the moment of return the past and the present are synthesised to cancel out temporal distance.

The time that separates them is annulled and they are carried onto another level, another temporality. They converge in a sort of instantaneousness that runs parallel to the flow of time, a sort of “time outside time” that is at the same time the very essence of time, what Proust calls “time in its pure state”.⁶

It could be that *Nomads and Wayfarers* schematises the surface as the condition of possibility for painting and writing. It is as if the “unlived”, virtual differential relations of *my own* painting (the ideas and discursive discourses that are inseparable from my practice but which are never explicit always elusive, problematic and implicit) and those of *my own* writing on G/A (informed by my practice as a painter) return through the surface as it becomes a Figure.

The Figure of the Surface is encountered in its essence i.e. as pure and empty. It is the schematisation of a moment of incomprehensibility in which there is no content and no knowledge. But this is not a denial of writing, theory, philosophy, the discursive. It is a flattened space in which the seen and the said occupy the same space. It is the paradox that is incomprehensible but which doesn't deny comprehension. It marks a radical moment of discontinuity in the subject – the arrest of time and the invitation to write, to paint with no end in sight.

⁶ Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher*, (Abingdon, 2013) p 56)

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