

12<sup>th</sup> International Deleuze & Guattari Studies Conference, 8th – 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019, Royal Holloway University, Egham, Surrey

**Deleuze, Painting and the Case for Abstract Art** by Catherine Ferguson

***Introduction***

**Slide 1: Francis Bacon, *Man With Dog* (1953)**

2019 and it is more or less half a century since Bacon discovered his ‘system’. How does Deleuze’s text on Bacon, 50 years later, become useful to contemporary painting? The field of painterly experimentation is no longer conditioned by the alternatives of figuration and abstraction. But the terms have not disappeared – perhaps their meaning has changed and become more complex, folding within themselves the debates that have pulled them this way and that. But then again, for some, to even identify painting as a form of artistic practice is already to assume too much in this pluralist, ‘post-medium’ context – for where does painting begin and end now that it has to operate within, what is commonly known as its “expanded field”?

**Slide 2: Ian Kiaer, *Limp Oak* (2015)**

**Slide 3: Jo McGonigal *Between Painting and Place* (2015)**

But I do continue to make paintings – works on a bounded, flat surface. If a description is needed, you could call my paintings “abstract”.

**Slide 3: Catherine Ferguson, *Spectrum* (2018)**

I don’t much care for Bacon’s paintings but I have a long-standing interest in Deleuze’s philosophy and there is so much in his book on Bacon that resonates for me, for someone who makes paintings.

**Slide 4: Catherine Ferguson, *Heft* (2019)**

Where does an abstract painting begin? Not with the Figure. What replaces a perceptible object and becomes the subject of the work? In this painting it was:

**Slide 5: Caravaggio, *Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist* & Tim Renshaw, *Oblique Turning Wall* (2019)**

**Slide 6: Catherine Ferguson, *Heft* (2019)**

But even that says very little. In order to inhabit that gap between comprehension and admiration (and to revel in the sensation that promises), the challenge was to create a system, in painting, capable of touching those other works. Works that are not objects or images to me but living organisms. Is this what Bacon also had to do; to develop a system in

painting that could overcome the clichés of portraiture that already inhabit the white surface (such as image, such as face)?

### ***The it-narrative***

The it-narrative, object narrative or novel of circulation is a subgenre of 18<sup>th</sup> Century prose fiction in which the narrators or protagonists are non-human characters such as coins, corkscrews or animals. ('Object Narratives' Scott Nowka in *The Encyclopaedia of British Literature*).

### **Slide 7: Francis Bacon, *Lying Figure* (1966)**

Oval/Ellipse: Although I am a stage, from a different point of view I am a circle or a spotlight, even. Light hits the floor and illuminates only the figure who is waiting.

Figure: Perhaps, I began life instantaneously, with the click of the shutter or at some social event, sharing a drink. I didn't look the same then, for you would have recognised me straightaway. But then I began a different life, and you could no longer scrutinise me. This was not because I was hidden away but because you followed me and lost your bearings.

Oval/Ellipse: Perhaps, now I am a hole which will engulf you, and then there would be nothing to distinguish us. (is that what the figure is waiting for?)

Figure: To become engulfed would be death, disappearance but there is a life to be lived. The tensions inside my body overflow. You can no longer recognise me because I no longer have a face. My head and the flesh of my body are moving toward the horizontal ground, where the animals live – scurrying, eating, shitting, screwing.

### **Slide 8: Francis Bacon *Painting* (1978)**

Material Structure: A descent or a transformation? I am here to support you in your contractions and expansions, which (whether you know it or not) are the rhythms of your life.

Figure: I feel it. My pulse races on and runs through 'all the domains [of my body] and traverses them running deeper than what can be seen, what can be heard...'

My body escapes through my open mouth. But you can't see what I'm going through because the surface of my visible body has been turned inside out; it is now the surface of the painted canvas.

Despite what you might expect, this is no spectacle of destruction that might give you cause for pessimism. It is true that you may have seen destruction and horror quite recently or at least be aware of it through newspaper reports – you may have even lost someone close.

But this is no documentation and there is a life to be lived. There are reasons to be optimistic and struggle is inevitable if change is to happen.

**Slide 9: Francis Bacon, *Triptych* (1970)**

Here is struggle, but we are not opponents, as you might expect. We have been seized and brought together. It is as if something in *my* past is also in the other and resonated so strongly that it pulled us together. And now we are One (although we are not the same.) There is no more to tell, this is just how it is, a matter of fact.

My voice falters as words fail me. I am now three or am I four? Rhythmic figures divided, separated and yet unified. Once a moveable screen that could surround you, now you see us, reaching across the horizontality of the picture planes with luminous and coloured vivacity.

Where did we come from, how did we emerge? I don't know. It was a slow process though, as we found ourselves taking over and clearing out the others, and the furniture of their lives, with our bare hands. Photographs (old and new), pictures, images, memories, ideas – they all had to go. But this wasn't an easy process. We had to overcome attachments to many things we didn't even know we relied on so much.

**Slide 10: Piet Mondrian *Composition C (No.III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1935)**

Of course, we could have moved somewhere else – there was an ideal place: already cleared out (or so they say), clean lines, pure, untouched, a spiritual haven – but that was no life for us.

**Slide 11: Jackson Pollock, *Convergence* (1952)**

Or we could have moved underground where it's dark and action is non-stop. But we wanted a different, more varied, kind of life than that.

**Slide 12: Francis Bacon, *Triptych* (1973)**

Can you identify with that? We may appear strange, inscrutable, you may not know us but we feel the same things as you. I can tell you that before we arrived we lost our way. All was chaos. We began to wonder if we would ever emerge from such catastrophe. And then, all of a sudden, there was a new dawn and we found ourselves again. Or was it us? Because we were never to be the same again after that process. It began by accident and we didn't have a choice about where we are now. I think of it as a re-birth. What happened? How did it happen? I can't tell you but I know that the past came back, uncontrollably, fluid, malleable and not at all what we thought it was.

We were made anew because of that place that happened upon us. A place we cannot clearly distinguish, where it seems that capacities, hidden from view, about which we knew nothing, became apparent with no other purpose than to let us play across the surface. Our

movements are no longer limited by the contour of our flesh. And here on the surface we remain with no deeper meaning or higher purpose. Your eye will move across the surface, and your head will imagine a future sense of satisfaction to be had when you finally possess the whole picture. But before long your eye will rub on the surface, no longer separated from the memory of touching, with its fragmented, discontinuous and momentary knowledge of things. Then, the contour that might limit your vision begins to break down and you will be free to revel in the colour which that contour tries to separate.

We don't live in the shadows from where we might emerge from time to time. Instead our space is dynamic. It is warm *and* cool, it expands *and* contracts. We pass across the surface but never disappear into it. An intense, coloured world, tangible, palpable.

### **Lydia Dona**

#### **Slide 13: Lydia Dona, *Solar Voids and the Cyborgs of Trajectory* (1993)**

Oval/Void: The figure has left the stage or, perhaps it has become the stage for those figures at its margins.

These figures have come from other places both utilitarian and artistic. Visible entities with conceptual significance. But the work of de-figuration does not happen outside of the canvas, in the realm of writing or talking. These ready-mades must be overcome through the work of painting. To become 'matters of fact' pictorial elements must isolate themselves from the words that would consume them within the narratives of art historical discourse. Some paintings don't manage to do this :

#### **Slide 14: David Salle, *Mingus in Mexico*, 1990**

#### **Slide 15: Fiona Rae, *Untitled (triptych 1)***

Mixtures of painted marks and images signify the artist's knowledge of diverse pictorial and graphic sources with ironic reference to a knowing audience. These are linguistic paintings.

#### **Slide 16: Lydia Dona, *Solar Voids and the Cyborgs of Trajectory* (1993)**

But here, linguistic reference becomes pictorial. The drip isolates itself by becoming an operative function that empties out the void. The faint pencil line grid remains and has become an asignifying trait. The graphic symbols import an alien space. We could say that these are figures that have entered into the discourse of postmodernism and now have become de-figured by a painting. The vertical plane of abstraction's optical space has been laid out horizontally. It is as if the pictorial surface now operates as a page, a surface of inscription. It is a surface that brings with it the act of inscribing and the hand as it turns the page. However, this surface is not an inert passive receptacle. It expands and contracts rhythmically, playing with the grid that, sometimes hidden or effaced, sets the metre.

#### **Slide 17: Lydia Dona, *A Thousand Plateaus of Triangulation and the Sites of Excess* (1993)**

Zones, markings, drips and a geometry organise the surface. Abstract painting in name but with a geometry that is 'no longer in the service of the essential and the eternal' (p46). It is a geometry that is arbitrary, provisional, wobbly, just off-centre. It is a geometry that is in the service of accidents and intersections.

Geometric figures and diagonal lines, that could be perspectival, are traversed and broken by those familiar figures of inscription which are fragmented and in pieces. It is at the edges where the tension lies, where suggestive marks and possibilities of fact inject a challenge to the 'reading metaphor' (as Hubert Damisch would call it) that would overdetermine and prevent the fluidity of forms across the surface. A figural space is, in Lyotard's terms, blocked together with the textual space of visual description. There is a figural 'thickening', a motivated desire to look – a friction on the retina. Through that motivated space that needs the body of the reader, the body of the viewer this 'matter of fact' is seen but the eye is no longer a fixed organ (p52). Unreadability operates forcefully within all that it is possible to recognise. (BR, p19)

**Slide 18: Lydia Dona, *States of Infiltration into the Real, the Lack, the Symbolic and the Semiotic* 1993)**

How is it that we are not allowed to forget the line as our eye passes over the surface of the painting? This matter of fact is not a property of the paint as such (its materiality), but it is a resistance to conceptual representation. It can't be intended as such. Its evocation demands a process which is uncontrolled, wild, hysterical. But what does that look like? The gesture of frenzy is too simplistic. Rather, it depends on context, the system in play as to what constitutes letting go. It is a matter of asignifying traits opening up a space which resists representation. It is to act in such a way as there is nothing to lose - despair, hopelessness with no guarantee of success. Painting doesn't let you have your cake and eat it. You can't keep what you like and add what you imagine will resolve it. It's a flat surface that you have to cover over and lose what is underneath.

Series allow the process to find the edge of that unknown. Repetition incorporates new discoveries.

The car manual diagram is 'figurative' and it is not part of the language of abstract painting. It is a system of notation that is both legible and visual. Here it invades the language of abstraction. It's blurred and illegible. It brings with it a specific way of looking – up close on the page, detailed, diagrammatic, utilitarian, dirty hands, dirty pages and definitely not precious – the manual is about manual work but it demands a conceptual mastery of what it schematises. Equally, the diagram might be located in the school room – the chalk board – temporary, soon to be rubbed off, supplementing verbal descriptions. Or is that surface a void? We have seen the drip before, but here it does not extend over the whole surface of the painting. It becomes operative, speculative. The act of inscribing, the act of dripping,

sign paint – the eye no longer separated from the memory of touching, with its fragmented, discontinuous and momentary knowledge of things.

### **Conclusion: The Diagram**

#### **Slide 19: Lydia Dona, *Infra-Circuit and the Abstract Voyages of the Polyvocal*, (1994)**

Rubric 12: 'The Diagram'. It's an elusive concept, for it's not a map laid out before us by which we find our co-ordinates and by which we find our way home. It is not a means of representing or schematising space. It is more like an agent of transformation by which one system of working is able to access the invisible forces of another, not in order to know it or define it, but in order to create something that creates a new perception of the other. It repeats the vitality of that which it 'investigates', explores, lives with – a wasp/orchid scenario.

The diagram does not do so as a general theory but it must be able to go to the heart of the matter. It must discover the specificity of the other but it can only do so by creating something new, because it is a specificity that did not exist before it was discovered.

The diagram has to overcome *cliché* by clearing away the givens that would occupy the surface. Acts, marks – stuff on the surface, asignifying traits. For Bacon, the 'scrub, sweep or wipe [of] the canvas...throw [of] the paint (p99). These are acts that remove the identity of the sitter – the face, the contour, a volume that would occupy an empty space and through which it might move. A Figure emerges that is caught in a state of internal movement and tension. This breaks up the figurative system of organic representation that organises pictorial space optically. It is a means to overcome the cliché of the photograph, the cliché of depicted horror and to discover *in painting*, not only the chaos and confusion that comes from destruction but importantly the germ of order or rhythm (p102) that would constitute the Figure and the vibration of Sensation.

For Lydia Dona, the drip, the graphic, the line, the cell, the plastic and sickly surface of sign paint remove the identity of the grid that would insist on a flat, continuous, 'digital' plane. Arbitrary approximations, paint applied crudely, vulgar colour introduce 'possibilities of fact'. Such marks and materials overcome the clichés of an optical aesthetic that would totalise the surface – the reverie of an aesthetic sublime. The fragmentation of the surface into zones or 'foldings' connect rhizomatically. Localised at the edges, rhythms emerge which extend across the surface.

Perhaps, Bacon's work gives visibility to a consciousness of the fragility of the body following the death and destruction of WWII and, perhaps, the pessimism that follows as a rational thought becomes transformed through the act of painting into a 'nervous optimism'.

Perhaps, Lydia Dona's work gives visibility to a consciousness of living in the beginnings of a networked, information saturated, technologically sophisticated, urban world. But you might ask what has happened to the human body? We share and experience Dona's world with its emphasis on eye and finger but we still have a body that eats, farts, fucks, screams, lives and dies.

In 1991 Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* was published and abstract art was partially rehabilitated from Deleuze's earlier antipathy. Here it is defined as that which '...create[s] sensations and not concepts...no longer a sensation of sea or tree, but a sensation of the concept of sea or concept of tree'. (p198). Although, Lydia Dona's paintings don't create the sensation of concepts of perceivable objects they can be understood to create sensations of a world in which perception itself is conditioned by an increasing consciousness of our own subjectivity. Of course this idea belongs to theoretical discourse, but it is also experienced and expressed corporeally as a creation of that matrix of political, economic and social forces that we construct as we live.

I will give Lydia Dona the final word:

Colour codes are both cosmetic and cosmic. Cultural codifications of the 'cosmetic bodies' of femininity and masculinity are both quoted and displaced to build a systematized degendered 'code', a third zone of schisms and multiplicities: the zone of techno-urban bodies. The ghostly painting of the ghosts of the body'. (Quoted in Moos, 'Lydia Dona: The Architecture of Anxiety', in *JPVA* No. 5, p43)