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**Roundtable Discussion: '*Performing Transdisciplinary Failure: The International, the Visual, and the Dramatic*'.**

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**Abstract:**

**Cognitive failures in art.**

In this paper I make the case that works of art open up a creative spectrum, which for both the artist and the viewer, is predicated on moments of cognitive failure. Such failure is folded into a risky and transformative performance in which the creative viewer and the creative artist traverse across their diverse imaginative, cognitive, perceptual, emotional, affective and unconscious capacities and cultural assumptions even as they attune to the particularities and interplay of those events.

Creative production and aesthetic reception are thus an opportunity to reverse the usual hierarchy in which cognitive mastery designates success. Instead, those artworks which mobilise such aesthetic processes lay claim to a particular form of negative success. This paper considers how such a failure/success spectrum plays out in my painting practice. And following from this, I consider how this supplementary account itself fails to represent the multiple aspects of artistic creation and aesthetic experience of these artworks.

I briefly conclude with some thoughts on the tensions between cognitive failure in art and its success in supplements, both of which contribute to the production of trans-disciplinary aesthetic subjects in an international context.

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**Cognitive failures in art.**

Beckett’s claim that we should not only fail well and often, but also learn ‘how to fail better’ (Halberstam : Kindle, Chapter 2) could also be an injunction to open up to those processes and methods in the arts, where cognitive failure registers a form of creative success. Such methods, I suggest, involve traversal across the multiplicity of our various cognitive, emotional, imaginative, affective and unconscious capacities and cultural expectations, even as we attune to the interconnections and interruptions that take place in this process. Each artwork stages such a performative process in terms of its own rules, and each viewer/reader/listener approaches this excessive melee from his or her unique perspective.

These relations disrupt and unsettle our capacity for cognitive or conceptual mastery, even as cognition is also a part of this process. For some, cognitive failure is a political achievement, insofar as such failure puts pressure on those positivist values which would position cognitive mastery, conceptual clarity or knowledge, as the hallmark of success.

So much so that cognitive failures in creative and aesthetic processes are often conceived of as touchstones for artistic success. These processes are not reducible to the topic of failure that often circulates in western art, but are implicated in the foundational rules of what Ranciere identifies as ‘the aesthetic regime’ (Ranciere: 2008), understood as a locus in which “ thought ... has become foreign to itself”... and where knowledge is ... “transformed into non-knowledge” (Ranciere 2008: 23). Such events for Ranciere, are the “moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity” (ibid: 24).

With reference to two of my paintings l briefly consider the precarious space between the unknowing work of the artwork, which appears in the practices of making and our experience of it, and the various knowing supplements we bring to such processes. In so doing, I draw distinctions between our aesthetic engagements with art and our aesthetic attunements in international relations texts.

In as much as I have developed my painting practice, as a practice, I have also laboured to produce a variety of verbal supplements through which I might know my work. Yet in this paper I will argue that my attempt here to re-present features of my creative processes is unable adequately to register the totality of what is at stake in the creation and reception of these paintings.

So bear with me when I make the claim that my current painting practice deconstructs the tradition of sublime landscape painting through the production of an unspeakable and dilating gaze. The aesthetic success of this painting practice is however not confined to such cognitive description or verbal representation, but is performed across a set of viscerally shocking and unspeakable sensibilities, and through a process which requires me to be formally inventive, open to risks and emotionally, perceptually and imaginatively attuned, all of which I am unable to adequately address in any supplement.

The emotional shocks and energy releases produced by these visceral fractals in this painting titled *Coming Alive*, are difficult to comprehend. I could perhaps frame such incomprehension as the performance of *jouissance,* a term that has been theorised in psychoanalytic theory, but in so doing I enter into a practice of supplementarity which requires cognitively attuned philosophical knowledge and verbal acuity.

In the same vein, I might designate such unknowability as sublime, insofar as this word marks a painful/pleasurable aesthetic condition in which the relation between a sense of self and not self is unsettled. In particular, this image seems to constitute a sense of self as a monstrously embodied ‘thing’, a not-self. Furthermore, I understand that this style of painting, where the eye cannot settle, intervenes in those hierarchical arrangements in which scopic or cognitive mastery operate as privileged foundations for phallogocentric interests. Yet all these attempts to identify, conceptually frame or give discursively appropriate reasons for my creative processes and painting practice, fail adequately to identify or explain the totality of my creative efforts, or indeed the multiplicity of our aesthetic experiences of this artwork.

Visitors to my recent exhibition titled *Going South*, whose namesake painting is on view here, would ask whether these visceral ‘things’ were brains or coral, to which I would reply that such descriptions did not fit my intentions nor my understanding of what I was doing. I imagined that the title would give them some idea of what I thought was at stake, insofar as *Going South,* not only geographically marks a set of journeys I have and will make to the southern reaches the Antipodes, Africa and South America, but also registers the meanings of the term ‘going south’, which colloquially implies sexual transgression and liberation, or financial and social failure.

This title and these ideas position this exhibition as a deconstruction of the tradition of sublime landscape painting and as site in which psycho-sexual repression and the hierarchies of failure might be interrogated. Yet all these conceptualisations are insufficient to the aesthetic work of the artwork, even if they may discursively and politically contextualise this practice, enrich the aesthetic experience of the viewer and ground his or her anxieties about the risk of the failure of cognition. For the creative production and aesthetic experience of these paintings registers a disruptive, creative and performative process in which both I, as the artist, and each individual viewer, must traverse across, and attune to, his or her multiple responses to the political, emotional, affective, imaginative and cultural impact of these challenges, to the point where we might radically differ in our accounts of what is going on in these experiences.

The conundrum I am teasing out here is that there seems to be role for cognition, and indeed even for the cognitively successful supplement, but such cognitive components are inadequate to the totality of what creative and experiential processes involve. I would add that like Ranciere, I understand that such failure of cognition in art involves the education of a particular kind of humanity, one in which we perform ourselves as aesthetically attuned subjects.

What then is the significance of cognitive failure in art in the context of this roundtable discussion about performing international trans-disciplinary failure?

Michael Shapiro’s book *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* 2013 as an account of ‘writing-as-method’ (Shapiro: 2013), could be understood as the performance of a particular kind of trans-disciplinary creative supplement. In employing this method Shapiro traverses across a variety of culturally and psychically marked social texts and in so doing, thoughtfully attunes to the political and ethical implications of this interface. For example, insofar as he traverses across a variety of television serials, films, musical genres and novels he also attunes to the topic of the automobile and the idea of ‘hard times’ and produces a form of political theory, that becomes something of a creative and anti-positivist performance that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

There are of course tensions between ‘writing as method’, which remains a creative and performative, but cognitively attuned, supplementary reading of other texts ..... and the creative work of the artist and the viewer, where aesthetic experience includes cognitive elements, but where cognitive mastery must ultimately fail. These differences not-with-standing, I do understand that both methods are involved in the production of what Ranciere calls aesthetic subjects, or what I would call aesthetically attuned subjects.

I briefly conclude with some thoughts on the tensions between cognitive failure in art and cognitive success in trans-disciplinary supplements, both of which contribute to the production aesthetic subjects in an international context.

In this short paper I have dwelt on the problem of how the cognitively attuned supplement is both folded into, and at odds with, artistic creation and aesthetic experience. By contrast, cognitive mastery is valued in academic texts. Even those texts which are critical of positivist values, are also under the whip of that power/knowledge couplet, committed to the production of knowledge rather that its displacement or deferral.

By contrast, the disruptive artwork instantiates a performative process that is not only valuable in itself, but also one which educates us in a particular kind of way, namely as a creative opportunity to open up to our multiple phenomenal, cognitive, affective and imaginative capacities. Shapiro’s ‘writing as method’, understood as a trans-disciplinary creative and performative supplement is also an opportunity for us traverse across and attune to the intersections and disruptions that occur in our creative and aesthetically marked experiences of reading supplementary texts. Such learning might stand us in good stead in the conduct of our lives and in our relations with others. By extension, as aesthetic subjects, attuned to both art works and creatively thoughtful supplements, we could constitute new forms of civil society and societies of states, in which we engage with one another not only as tolerant rights holders, but as creative and political participants in a globalising world.

My point here however, is that we should recognise that that there are differences between artworks, whose artistic success and identity is largely predicated on the failure of cognition, and those thoughtfully attuned supplements and trans-disciplinary methods of writing, where cognition does not fail.

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