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The Nature of Constraint, Art, Habit and Rule.

Note:

This paper was presented as part of the conference Generative Constraints 16th November 2013 at the Center for Creative Collaboration Royal Holloway University of London. What follows are notes from this presentation. The video work Sanity Assassin was screened in parallel to these statements as a proposition that explores these problems and defends and acts as a conclusion to them.

The idea that a constraint might be positive, productive; that it might present opportunities, actions, decisions and events that might hitherto have been impossible, is something that most artists are familiar with.

I take this observation from the start as something that effects the day-to-day life of studio practice, from the paint that simply won't get that desired effect, the porcelain that reveals all those cracks rather than producing that ideal flawless complexion, and the funding of work that simply won't materialize whatever the reason. These constraints are encountered when we rub up against the empirical limitations of the contexts within which we work.

These constraints traditionally express not only a limit point but also a failure, where those things that we want, can't, don't, or won't happen and there is very little we can do about it.

Arts practices live with these empirical constraints and as we shall see they often make use of this to graft a specific political dimension to their practice. But to make constraint become important, they are forced to link this empirical experience to a larger conceptual program. Here, often the failures of particular materials are correlated to a universal diagnosis of the human condition. Practices that have been involved in this politics of constraint are interested in limits, in borders, in ends and in finitude.

We might say that the largest constraint of all and one that we are all familiar with is the principle of a critical art, inherited from a Duchampian paradigm. This is the one that tells us that anything can be art, but we must nevertheless strive for a *different art*. This search for difference is central to a postmodern practice that would value hybridity and remix as methods by which to reform and expand the notion of art. But let's not rush this, because we must be careful to make sure that we understand the distinction between the legacy of the Duchampian paradigm that makes reform and expansion an endemic character of art, and what we can see to be the very different Duchampian challenge that asks us to define new artistic paradigms altogether.

The reformist occupation of contemporary practices values constraint in a particular way. Here, constraint is understood as something that is not only a part of life but a necessary part of life. In a culture of remixing and postproduction, there is an implicit knowing of constraint towards particular paradigms, styles, forms and historical language materials, where work operates upon an already agreed set of historical circumstances to conjure new forms. An abstract and totalising ground is assumed – for instance we are all constrained to language - and this concept acts as the ground of our constraint.

If we follow this logic then we must agree that without constraints, without limits, work would be meaningless. Constraint now becomes something that must be exploited in the artwork as a means to determine art's meaningfulness.

Naturalizations

The practices that engage in a culture of post-production commemorate the failure of the challenge that we identify in a Duchampian call for a different art, which must be seen to be set against the art of difference that has sprung from this. This art of difference is where difference is understood as relative to existing forms of art. As such in contemporary culture we seem to be held within the specific method of reforming and expanding the definition of an already existing paradigm. Art, therefore, is constrained to its name, and this name has meant the dominance of certain methods and processes in art that as I will show, hinge upon the privileging of generative constraints and the designation of unachievable and abstract freedoms.

Artworks, particularly from the genre of institutional critique, have spent time telling us that constraint is productive, but moreover it is necessary and natural; reminding us that there is no escape from the nomenclature 'art', and that the defining condition of art is to differentiate itself from itself: This is the constraint of art. This totalizing all-tolerant democratic space for art is witnessed as our final constraint, the constraint to a concept of freedom. Understood in these terms, if constraint is generative then doubt becomes the primary access of a live and critical culture; an aesthetic lifestyle of doubt produces this dialectic of freedom and constraint.

I would like to propose a challenge to art and its dominant method. This means that I must challenge the method that has privileged constraint as a mode of success. Ironically, it is this theory of productive limits that has characterized the limits of art's critique for generations. In this way perhaps we can meet that Duchampian challenge for a genuine non-standard and non-relational art.

Idealizations

Being trapped in and by art has become the aesthetic legacy of an emancipatory modernism. Some artworks have assumed that knowing constraint and expressing the limits, definitions and rules of art can somehow enable us to transcend them and to reconstruct decision on making better and more productive distinctions between what is true and what is false. This is not the naturalization of constraint but a more thorough idealization of its power to enable a new politics and culture that can be set anew beyond its borders.

Other works have told us that knowing these limits reinforces the fact that we are stuck in this field of constraint and the best we can do is to talk about it, express our limits and admit our failure to head outside of the confines of specific modes of thought, and that we simply do not have the imagination to think beyond the given.¹

Art that speaks to the conditions of our constraint foregrounds 'the tragic'. Here, we are told that the world is constraint; that there is nothing we can do but keep on going, to

¹ Philistinism, yBA punk nihilism, the limits of expression in Dada, the slacker attitude in west coast art, the return to the private, language games and systems...horror...

persevere with an unsatisfactory world. This narrative is as present in Samuel Beckett as it is in Structuralist inspired conceptual art.

Artworks like Bruce Nauman's "Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)", from 1968, stress the condition of crisis that we experience when faced with the oppressive infinitude of language. The open field of possibility that language potentializes is in fact a space that binds us to language itself as a form of ultimate constraint. Maurice Blanchot's description of the process of writing also reinforces this tragic nature of production, where our constraint to the present alienates us from deriving meaning from our representations that would emancipate us from this process. This incapacity serves to trap us in a constant reiteration of and as the text, where our desires are never realized and yet we persevere with them all the same. Writing for Blanchot is not up to the task, but it is all that we have: A distinctly tragic scenario of the present.

If we are to recognize our constraints then surely we must understand what dominance looks like and what forms of oppression we can challenge. But, here the problem is that constraint is not conditioned upon any particular recognition of a thing. Constraint is everywhere, because constraint is understood as the very conditions of communication that we use everyday.

However, in either case, can knowing the condition of our constraint provide any generative moment for practice?

I'm more than a little suspicious of how we might value constraint, and how it is idealized in arts practice. I'm concerned about how constraint is made equivalent to a politics of failure and reflexes on tragedy as a redemptive moment in practice. This is how art might recognize and produce constraint as a reality and then use this as a yardstick for its own sense of victimization or agency. This is not to suggest that we do not experience constraints, or that they do not exist, but, moreover, I would like to think about how constraint might be conceptualized without opposing it to freedom and without associating it with some form of negatively defined redemptive space for art. This is the misunderstanding that knowing we are constrained or 'unfree' enables some strange equivalence to freedom.

I want to say a little more about why I think that an art that finds meaning in constraint is a problem; and then I will talk a little more about how constraint might not necessarily be opposed to freedom. If this is correct then we need to ask how art operates as *a field of constraints*, which might be very different from the field of constraints that I described earlier. These were the constraints that are naturalized to contemporary practices that determine the insistence of the status quo in a reformist paradigm of difference. Indeed, this is where we must consider if it is possible or correct to link constraint with 'the generative' in any causal sense. This is a question of art's politics.

Lack of freedom

So far I have discussed two approaches to constraint: that of the tragic, and that of what we might call the post-tragic. The former is a type of critical idealism, and the latter naturalizes constraint.

In a practice that naturalizes constraint we are reminded of the difficulty of talking about, representing or mediating constraint in any way at all because constraint as a concept has been naturalized to the status of the image. Any world beyond this one cannot be thought, and we are destined to a fundamentalism of the image. Freedom is engaged at when the infinite and open is totalizing to the essence of all human experience. For art, we see this expressed in a carving out of specific contexts, identity, history and sites that are shifted and re-rooted in semantic games. This defines the choice and invention that is associated with freedom which conditions politics to a limited set of already agreed upon structures and therefore struggles to think beyond its self comprehension of an ontology of language.

Specifically in the realm of a critical idealism, we can see that despite the claim that we are bound to language and contexts from which we cannot move one inch away, we see artworks take on a transcendental role that assumes that they can see this relation. Here, artworks capture the transcendental position of knowing constraint and revealing our constraint to us. Here, the artwork is transformed into a pedagogical exercise which is purchased through a negative relation to freedom.

Crucially, a critical approach that idealizes constraint as a form of negative freedom holds no guarantees for freedom, since freedom is retained only as an abstract concept. Remember that the artwork is only interested in expressing a knowledge of constraint, whether this be manifest as particular or generic power, or both co-mingled.

Both the postmodern and the modern work keep the conditions of their constraint in focus as the cornerstone of the work's political claim. Both approaches to constraint demand that the artwork materialize a form of dominant power to determine what this constraint is. This might be the irony of targeting itself or its own language as already existent forms of power that are there to be destabilized and unsettled, or this frustration might be directed at other forms of power. As such, we identify a mode of critique that values knowledge of constraint, but this knowledge cannot transcend the circumstances of it. Constraint as an ideal concept, or as something that is normatively understood to be generative is in fact the opposite. It locks us down to particular stories and paradigms of dominance that we invent and yet claim are natural.

It is here where we encounter more problems: these approaches to critique cannot tell us that if things were to change (for the better or for the worse) we would know this in any real sense. And, since all power is the target of this critique, we are told that any system in which we would find ourselves would find itself under the same scrutiny.² This might seem all very good for some kind of critical labour, as it certainly keeps us busy, but in the end, it stands as our political inertia and a final distraction. A theory that knows this to be the case, and which nevertheless continues to identify failure as some redemptive space, can only be tragic.

The central tragedy is this: This theory knows that it is responsible for defining the now of the *status quo* and that it cannot move beyond that in real terms. Its parameters are set in the mirror.

Another way of understanding the politics of constraint, as it is written here, is to acknowledge that constraint is identified with context. As such, the aim of this theory is to prepare a space that is context free, and call it freedom. This space of freedom has to

² Fish comments on this in the essay *Change in Doing What Comes Naturally, Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*.

be beyond the political, contextual, historical and relational conditions of experience to hold onto the hope for a future that is *unconstrained*. But the problem here is another contradiction: the space that is defined by those that revel in failure and the tragic is named as constraining because it is open, infinite and deregulated; anything might happen. The irony here is that these artworks seek to free culture from this space of freedom. In fact, this means that this tragic critique that seeks to identify constraints is actually ordering language, for it has recognized the anarchic field of language to be inequivalent to the type of freedom that it has in mind. In this sense, freedom is not freedom in a radical sense, but establishes itself as other forms of constraint.

In this way, a practice that assumes that it can know constraint, that constraint is generative and that this generative moment guarantees some form of change, is incorrect.

If anything can be art, then the constraint that art defines is the arbitrary nature of its own existence: its 'all-inclusive nature'. But we know that art has habits, methods, plans, systems, rules, traditions, histories, genres, paradigms, etc., despite its promise of 'the open': In fact it is organized, systematized and ordered in both general and particular ways. The fantasy that art is free has produced the largest and most resistant myth of all, the myth that has blackmailed us, for who could disagree with freedom? Who would opt for constraint? This is the deeper fantasy that we can even make the choice between the two. We are not free to choose freedom.

How might we disagree with the formulation of generative constraint that has been the hallmark of contemporary arts practices? What would it mean to do this without settling back into the same tragic scenario that returns us to the circle of critique where constraint is understood as generative or the condition that determines a status quo? This is a question of how we live with constraint.