

Science and its Fictions

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November 22nd 2013

The correlational impulse

The idea that art is something that either ameliorates or indeed aids and abets the conditions of dominant and existing forces in 'the political' has been understood as a manifest problem for those who talk and write about art as well as those who make it. The central paradox of a theory of art's social agency is central to this problem. Here we see that an art that is called political is often causally connected to the production of social emancipation in whatever form this is considered. At the same time this same artwork calls itself art, not politics, as a mark of its freedom to define itself outside of any local or political context and in order to re-think politics from this distance.

Within this contradictory formulation of participation and transcendence, the principles of subjective freedom and relative difference are employed as standard. And we would be remiss to forget that these are the same principles that support the doctrines of contemporary neo-liberal market forces. In this way practices set out with the misguided belief and the incorrect claim that they are making change happen, when in fact they are conducting a restitution of the norm that they claim to be the alternative to. Just this description of this naïve relation to art's habits, laws and structures as a start, tells us that art is in trouble. This approach to the norm of a critical art is a form of neo-liberal social realism and the crisis for us it seems, is that we can't do anything about this.

But, Art asked itself how it might take science as its cue to overcoming these problems and namely how it could then go to work as a science might; that is: Without establishing any correlation between its practice and 'the real'; to understand itself as non-idealized form; and, to set itself within the material substrate of matter in the world.

Here we can see that the deployment of science in culture is a form of response and solution to art's 'politics in crisis' question. Scientific methods would attack, decenter, de-stabilise and undo what have been historically determined as the normative, conservative and ideological conditions of art practice and in doing so transform the operations of culture away from the right wing pervasive ideological illusions of dominant power as well as from weak expressions of the displaced dream of futures to come that is concomitant with the work of the left. But how would this science relate to the political charge of a critical arts practice? Our broad question here is if and how any claim to science might enable any thinking of the political as we know it, or at all.

A critical modernism reminds us that humanities discourse, as well as artistic and creative languages stand as the bulwark to a real science and a radical politics. The Platonic inspired argument argues that these languages are confusing, too messy, open, and without direction. They are unregulated and have no hope of being useful, and at the same time they serve to underscore their prevailing idealist fantasy of having innate and special access to freedom and the real. We might say given this, that art is neither use nor ornament. Understood in this way, this art without science thus perpetuates its own spontaneous philosophy of myths of the author-genius and mysticism. Spontaneity being the mark of our habituation to received and unquestioned behaviors and rituals.

An art that would seek to be scientific and to take its place in the world must seek to overcome ideology. It has been widely believed that in order to achieve this art must divest itself of its mediating faculties and become 'object material'. Here we witness an art that seeks to suppress itself against its nature as image. As such we can see the problem that this move to the realm of world material through and by art assumes that such an escape from mediation is possible and achievable. This process of self-transformation and self-annihilation calls upon a form of remarkable magic that would be difficult to associate with any scientific method. This is because

the transcendence that is required for this project contradicts the scientific claim that there is no correlation between art and the real. Therefore this choice to move towards the organizational, scientific and administrative realm of the political and away from the faculties of mediation, semblance and representation can only be understood at the level of semantics. In attempting to delete or evacuate its facility of mediation art simply takes on the mediation of another rhetoric, that of an image of science. Despite this core problem, this characterization has determined very often how we have understood art as becoming science.¹ So I would like to look at this a little further....

Conceptual Art is a clear marker of this shift away from representation, figuration, and expression. And despite some references to design and construction these works are not centered on function in a casual sense, but rather on the context of their operations that privilege analytical, structural and empirical materialisms. The employment of language games that analyze and explore the epistemological, ontological and teleological conditions of communication toyed with the infinitude of language and its standardized systems as a baseline for these worlds. Here the viewer bears witness to the contradictions of meaning that are held up and demonstrated by a theatre of concepts at work within the structural limits of language form.

The operations of Minimalism and Land Art, drew out the values of sense perception and the temporality of experience of art as the lens through which a meaningful art could be cast and here we see a more emphatic attention to empirical matter and experience, where artworks are specific objects co-existing with other objects in a complex field of receptive experience. Dematerialized practices and the informe extend from this, and present artworks that further establish the condition of

¹ This traversal of an artistic paradigm from the culture of the emotive towards the culture of the machine is central here. Furthermore, this turn to science by art can be understood to align itself with the acknowledged failure of the avant-gardist project of emancipation.

entropy as the formless matter of life. This is another form of empirical fascination with the stuff that makes up our world and a focus on modes of sensory encounter in time and space. These latter practices privilege the life of objects in the world that exists, where the objects of art ask us to consider our own mortality and finitude cast in the new light of a global ecology of the object.

Whilst claiming a share in a materialist science, the problem is that these practices actually end up producing empiricist idealisms across these different schemas. This is where we can make detect an explicit distinction between materialism and materiality through the claim that they must be brought together as if to resolve the problem of their distance. The idealism that is immanent to these practices is that they figure materiality to materialism and empiricism to science. And in doing so, the art objects that are employed to valorize this often in-aesthetic moment only further mystify the art object to the level of the cultic fetish in another genre of alterity. This 'materialism as materiality' is thus a genre of a folk science fiction that cannot free itself from the correlational impulse to graft local instances to a universal referent.

Bearing this in mind, I'd like to draw out two problems to review for this discussion— one that is most easily formulated in the distinction between scientific and cultural languages. Between reason and the imagination. The second point and one that I will deal with first, is to focus on the problem of how the same ideological tendencies persist in these artistic practices despite their attempts to escape certain standards and to do so by approaching a materialist philosophy that privileges science.

What I hope to demonstrate with these examples, is that whilst these practices highlight the tools of analysis, material and systems as a central part of their work, and often focus on their operational and machinic character, they persist with the old principle of arts freedom from these systems, which so it goes, must be protected at all costs. This observation recaptures my point from the start, which

describes the problem that a contemporary understanding of a critical art falls towards what are essentially naïve and contradictory claims. The claim for arts freedom is manifest in a rejection of the idea that art has or works with method. And this is central to why art fails to project a real science fiction. Here we can see that Art's principle of freedom is imperative to this denial of method because art is; a) always already too free for method and b) method is the regulative and administrative, and can only lead to the binding of art to specific aims in the kinds of terrible instrumentalism that Benjamin called the politicization of the aesthetic.

But here we can list just a few ironies of this approach to a free practice or practice without method:

1) The valorization of the figure of art as 'open', or being available to a multiplicity of interpretations is actually served in the production of particular modes of behavior to exercise and access its claim to freedom. Art is declared as always already free and then this freedom must be achieved. If art were free already then what is the point of this pursuit?

2) Despite arts interest in the observations that are derived from scientific exploration, which refer to the temporal, the processional and the contingent, art's project assumes that by using the aesthetics of these durations it is somehow exempt from the ontological picturing that results from this. Art is thus transformed into the very form of science that it had hoped to overcome, the kind that seeks to evidence what is already there, a place where discourses on entropy manifest as a form of pragmatic apathy.

My argument running through this paper is that art has a misunderstood its relation to method, and art therefore misses out on the prospect of what could be defined as a scientific method. This would be an art that could operate without conditioning its

relation to the real. This would be an art that would no longer cultivate a naïve or superficial relation to the methods that it takes up and uses. ²

If we are to ask about a real science fiction then, we can say that this is not the production of dreams of other worlds, or attempts to produce wistful ambiguities where decision is deferred in favor of an aesthetic experience that presents a theatre of our world as chaotic flux. Nor is a science fiction a place where we imagine modifications to our existing world. These are simply other forms of social realism where we plug into either the banalities or melodramas of a conceptualized contingency. This is a refusal of a culture of difference, a refusal of the open, and with that a refusal of arts political claim as correlated to the processional or any other figure of the real for that matter. This is a refusal of these types of folk-consciousness that have standardized art and politics as that thing we can call the ethical regimes of life as we know it. They must now awaken to their retirement and it is here where we can begin to articulate a science fiction with a politics without cause and method without ground. This means that we have to re-think both.

² Now, this is where we ask about the relation between science and language and we can ask what a scientific culture, a materialist culture might be? Central to this is the question of how we live with representations; and how representational work – the mediating faculty of the image – is not something that we can or should seek to move away from, delete or censor, as if this holds back the work of science. Here we can say that method is not anathema to art and representation is not anathema to science. Rather, this is a question of how we interact with the thought that there are some things that are beyond representation and how we bring these thoughts to languages and forms in our world without contradicting ourselves by idealizing this representation as the real object of our study, or by denigrating language further to the field of superficial illusions. How we understand images to have structure without ground, and also how we understand that language has force, direction and conviction is central to this question.