

Title. 'Clueless. Contradictions, Malapropisms and Tensions within a contemporary art practice '

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At a recent gallery opening of the work of *Terry Atkinson* as part of Lanchester Gallery Projects in Coventry in the UK, I got talking to an artist friend, lets call him, 'M', and both of us were singing the praises of a certain mutual acquaintance, lets call him 'D', who happened to be 'cropping up' all over the place, in shows, in magazines and his writings and even his teaching was also being talked about. Whether it was a genuine pleasure to see our friend doing so well is a another question, but when my friend 'M' made the point that 'D', "was really focussed and knew what he was doing", then adding slightly mournfully, "I wish I did, I feel utterly clueless most of the time", I pricked up my ears. What struck me firstly was the fact that I thought the work of 'M' was far better (by that I mean, more interesting, more compelling, more complex and more difficult to grasp) than the work of 'D', and secondly, that I felt an immediate sense of empathy with this sense of 'cluelessness'. It seemed entirely appropriate that we would have this conversation within the context of work by Atkinson who has recently described the art world as a kind of 'swamp' and his own practice as a 'practice of unease'¹, both terms which signal somewhat turgid, foggy, cloying or sticky processes and environments.

At first I thought that perhaps when we said that 'D' really "knew what he was doing", we had momentarily lost track of exactly 'what' D was *really* doing (in terms of practice and in terms of what I thought 'M' did better), and had been seduced by *how well* 'D' was doing it (in terms of career trajectory and what 'M' was probably doing quite badly). In other words the line between 'the work or the practice' and 'the career' had somehow become muddled.

With the benefit of hindsight I started to realise that the reaction wasn't simply just a 'practice' v 'career' stand-off (as very nicely outlined by Atkinson in the accompanying publication to his exhibition), though undoubtedly this will have been part of the issue, but that there was also a deeper tussle going on which felt like it could be termed either an *affliction* or a *condition* or indeed a *symptom* of cluelessness when it comes to a some contemporary art practice because I confess too to often feeling utterly clueless in my practice.

This cluelessness is often made evident by the strategic employment of a range of approaches and tactics within the practice and a palpable sense of dynamic tensions in the studio and in the installations themselves. It often seems as if there is no focus at all, only a series of collaged 'events', be they photographs, texts, sound works, drawings, animations etc which seem to float from one to another in what at first glance would seem and arbitrary and pointless manner. Yet, the idea of my work being 'lost', or 'uneasy', or 'unfocused' doesn't worry me. Quite the opposite, it quite

¹ where

excites me. As does the work of others which seems to me to be existing in a dynamic of what Julian Stallabrass termed flickering perceptual states between when describing the impossibility of really pinning down the work of Liam Gillick, for example. I could even say I feel liberated by my condition. Think of Gillick for example, or Fischli and Weiss, or Arakawa and Gins, all of whom seem to operate on what could be called 'borders' of classification, moving in and out of positions of focus as if they were weaving a bike through traffic.

Of course, within the context of the academy this unruly methodology may be a problem, this apparent lack of direction and blundering around may indicate an absence of something necessary, and this could be altogether more serious, a lack of a sustainable intellectual argument perhaps, leading to the academic threat of the loss of esteem as a pre-conditioned reaction to a practice which does not appear to contribute to knowledge despite the fact that it is hard not to recognise that knowledge itself could be said to be in crisis.

But currently, even more withering than the threat of academic peer dismissal, might be the accusation of a shortfall of 'artistic ambition'. It seems that neither the careerist artist nor the academic know quite what to do with notions of waywardness, complexity, tension, confusion, and contradiction as legitimate areas of exploration presumably because both 'camps' are built around an *attitude* of measurement and competition, be it the research council or the Turner prize and of course, measurement and competition are both games which Cluelessness doesn't need to play.

It reminds me somewhat of Don DeLillo's "the names", set here in Athens in fact, in which the lead character confesses to enjoying being a tourist because it is a licence for him to be an idiot and thus get to where he needs to go.

Perhaps this condition of apparent stunned perplexity for want of a better phrase is inevitable. As I am an artist, one half of the collaborative duo Dutton and Swindells, *and* a Professor in *practice*, I say what I say because I have a practice out of which emerges a recognition that it is important that the research driven academic community is also opened up to practice in much the same way as the practice community has been opened, and closed, by research agendas. Is it then not surprising then that the artist/academic is reduced to state of continual bewilderment as he or she stand at the cross roads of two very different approaches to 'knowledge', neither of which actually reflects what Gunther Kress recently described as a 'life –world'. That is, the suggestion that 'society' has been replaced by 'life-world', which is then defined by 'life-style'. I.e. knowledge is that which I need now, which solves a problem for me.²

Cluelessness might well be an understandable, if slightly stupified, response to contemporary crises, political, economic and epistemological, a little like the rabbit caught in the glare of the headlights, stunned, transfixed, hypnotised by the oncoming truck. But unlike the rabbit that doesn't know what's coming, the artist is made clueless in realising quite how much he or she doesn't know, and can only stare back in state of mute anticipation of oncoming forces. This is Cluelessness as a kind of

² Gunther Kress, Professor of Semiotics and Education at a recent ESRC funded conference on the Multi-modal Doctorate

dawning awareness of just how bad things are and thus a natural reaction to it. A kind of impasse.

But lets take it a step further. What if the *condition* is less an automatic response of 'shut-down' when faced with the complexity of everyday life, and something more a reactive means of survival? Less of a symptom and more of a mutation or evolution?

For example, should an artist admit to their wayward processes resembling some form of modus operandi then he or she is entirely 'knowing' about what he or she is (not) doing? In which case the artist is finely performing a lack of 'performance', focusing, via the invocation of diverse and contradictory strategies, on precisely this lack.

This brings us back to the notions of the 'practice' and the 'career'. If the confusion in my original conversation with 'M' is anything to go by, what may be suggested is a turn toward the foregrounding of the career as being central and I would suggest this to be vast oversimplification of practice.

A career has a trajectory, a practice expands. By virtue of the career dissecting the expanding sphere of the practice, the career is one-dimensional, the practice, multi-dimensional. And it here I am reminded of Paul Virillio's model of knowledge; that of the expanding sphere. As the sphere of knowledge gets larger and larger, the surface area, which stands between what is known and what, is not yet known also increases.

In other words, the more we know, the more we know how little we know.

Cluelessness then, far from something to be ashamed of, may well be the first step towards developing a methodology of engaging in an extraordinary complex world in a new way, a way of opening up possibility, malleable to new forms and instructions. It is the beginning of a potential proposition in the world which does not strive to reduce the world to over-simplified terms and effects, sound bites of modules of knowledge (and in this sense if profoundly non-representational).

So what might this really mean in practice? How do we think of this confusion and contradiction as a methodology of creativity? There would have to be a tactical approach introducing malapropisms, mistakes, confessions, slippages, assemblages, reversals, blunders and blockages into the hyper smooth formations of contemporary knowledge production and production of the self.

If we take Ranciere's notion of "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity"³ it may be possible to consider cluelessness as *attitude, or stance*, rather than condition or symptom. As the fertile ground upon which, or space within which, these new modes of sense perception may start to flourish.

Cluelessness as a knowing refusal then, as opposed to a condition of helplessness, pre-supposes an end to what Ranciere calls the "unsatisfying mise-en-scene of 'the

³ From the forward of the politics of aesthetics, Jaques ranciere, first page. Continuum books.

end and the return that persistently occupies the terrain of art, politics and any other object of thought”⁴ in that it is neither progressive or regressive. It is simply concerned with developing a language of movement in the here and now.

As Judith Butler suggest,

“There will be no meta-language- it will be the labour of transaction and translation which belongs to no single site-but is the movement between languages and has its final destination in this movement itself. Indeed the tasks will not be to assimilate the unspeakable into the domain of speakability in order to house it there, (*as we must within the ‘research culture’*) within the existing norms of dominance, but to shatter the confidence of dominance, to show how equivocal its claims to universality are and from that equivocation, track the break up of its regime- an alternative version of universality wrought from the work of translation itself.”⁵

To wind up.

David Bohm, in *On Creativity* suggests that we must ‘give patient and sustained attention to the idea of confusion’.

Ultimately my argument is for a small scale re-aligning of what we mean by the term ‘practice’, particularly within the contexts of research driven agendas of the Art and Design Institutions and career orientated ‘business studies-fine art degrees’. That Practice would become the process within which conceptual models and propositions proliferate meanings and non-meanings, confusions and complexities to exist as and be understood as *aesthetic* tensions, which are in turn attempting to exist outside of, or at least form some resistance to, and/or meaningful dialogue with, the ever encroaching realm of the neo-liberal simplification and commodification of cultural forms and processes, whilst simultaneously also being *implicitly* sceptical (by being in practice) and resistant to the fetish of progress which drives the idea of ‘knowledge’ as defined within the contemporary Research Culture. In other words, a practice, which is defined by the line, it draws in its constant dynamic motion and tensions between the dominant spaces of culture and knowledge production.

Thinking once more about the words of *Jacques Ranciere*, ‘Aesthetics is the ability to think contradiction’⁶. Is there an argument that refuses to isolate waywardness or incomprehensibility or cluelessness as a lazy or uncritical approach, and indeed, on the contrary to suggest that such an approach is engaged, possibly politicised and recognises such attitudes as contradiction or confusion of as an aesthetic, libidinal and political forces.

If so, is it possible to argue that this impossibility (or difficulty) of classification, (which applies first and foremost to what we think we are doing, hence, if we don’t now what we are doing we are ‘clueless’), this refusal (or inability) to ‘focus’ is in itself a highly charged force which, at their centre promote a deeply profound and

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⁵ Judith Butler ‘Open’ p69

⁶ the politics of the aesthetic, first seen in Claire bishop article the social turn? Art forum..

necessary critical distance and attempt at detachment in order to *play* within what could be seen as the atomising effects of the twin neo-liberal obsessions of enterprise and innovation, to the extent that an art practice can present another model of confusion, in which tensions and stresses, contractions and disturbances, mistakes and malapropisms have aesthetic and dynamic dimensions and effects which may be experienced as a form of deep critical ‘pleasure’ and effect?

In the words of the Raqs Media Collective⁷

“The tree of life, and therefore of art, would be barren were it not for the fruit of occasional misunderstandings”.

⁷ in E-Flux Journal no 14..