



Steve Dutton, The Flickering Institution. Graphite, glitter, acrylic on canvas. 120cm H x 160cm W

Text and Work Part 1

There are clear precedents for exploring the territories which are overlapping in the not so simple play-off between "Text" and "Art". It has been well documented and argued elsewhere that U.S. and U.K. 'conceptual art' was wrestling with the philosophical and aesthetic relationships between art and text, art as text, text as art, word and image, word as idea, the literary versus non-literary etc. from the outset. Within the context of the 'contemporary' (by which I mean here the post-conceptual and/or even post-historical) Text in art is as much a ubiquitous a means of production as any other a medium within the realm of what we might commonly understand as, 'contemporary art'.

So why then am I working with 'text' in the context of 'art'? By working with text what I am I really doing? Indeed, why do I concern myself with it as a question at all?

I'm asking these questions because I'm working on a paper for a conference entitled, 'Text Versus a piece of Art' in Łódź next week. As usual I'm still pretty clueless, but as I've written before, this cluelessness may be a valuable commodity (albeit a fragile one) in the over purposive territory of the 'artademy' (© Dutton) . What I'm initially trying to focus on, or better, the place I'd like to work within, is a territory which is implied by the application of the proposition, 'Versus' which is set between the nouns 'Text' and 'Art' in the conference title, 'Text *versus* a piece of Art'.

Versus can be understood to signify a turn toward or against. In other words it can be suggestive of an antagonism, 'against', or as a comparison, 'with'. Either way, the proposition is used to declare a necessarily pre-existing sense of some classificatory difference between two 'concept-things', with the difference which is presupposed (or summoned) by the *versus* being the central distinction between those two 'concept-things' at that given moment of co-habitation. However, although *versus* presupposes and summons difference and distinction, it must also assume some sense of familial similarity within which to identify the distinctions (race horse versus race horse, octopus versus squid, not race horse versus squid).¹

In any case, the antagonism suggested by the conference title doesn't stop at the level of 'between Text and Art' because the actual conference title is of course 'Text versus *a piece of art*' (my italics).

So here, does the 'piece of Art' refer to an 'object', an 'Artefact' or an 'idea', a framed something-or-other (framed in the broadest sense) which exists as 'piece of Art' in the context of all the other 'pieces of Art' which are both being produced, have been produced and are yet to be produced? Is the 'piece of Art' more or less than Art as a totality because it is merely a piece? Or is the 'piece' a fragment of the chaos of the totality made safe². Certainly one might presume that to be a 'piece of art' at all, there must be larger corpus of which to be a piece of. Is art then a 'piece' of this meta-'art'? Does Art call upon this Art-as-totality by invoking it in fragments because the fragment is the only way to understand the whole? Is this a way of slowly immunising ourselves to chaos, to preparing for it, or to fall in love with it?

And yet, and yet.. again the title of the conference is '*Text* versus a piece of Art'.

Not, '**A** Text versus a piece of Art', nor 'Text versus Art', but categorically, as if to underline the fact, a transcendental whole (**TEXT**). So whole it needs no definite article (like **GOD**), *versus* some form of a fragment, a sliver, or a slice (A PIECE OF ART) of that which also commands no **THE**.

What a titanic struggle this is turning out to be.

I suspect that what is at stake then, in the phrase 'Text versus a piece of Art' is going

¹ What would be purpose of random oppositions, of comparing a race horse to a squid? The purposelessness might indeed be the purpose.

² see Elizabeth Grosz, "Chaos, territory, art".

to have some theological undertones. That it is not so much a fight for territory or meaning of each term, as much as an enquiry and even an evocation of a form of oppositional irresolution, a lens through which we might try to understand the terms as existing within a singular and dynamic whole, and if this is the case, a question of what this whole might be.

Here, the proposition 'versus' is already first placing 'text' and 'a piece of art' into a familial field in order then to subdivide once more them into more precise categories from which to retrieve them in new formations, producing a new 'sense' of Text versus a piece of Art. Both Text and Art are checking each other out, are about to be transformed by their mutual re-assessment and love-in during the discursive course of the conference paper.

It is precisely this contradictory territory, between the whole and the fragment, the general and the particular, the image and the text conjured up by the conference title which I want to try to explore as a means towards understanding what might be possible in and through the work of art which approaches itself through text, or the text which approaches itself through art, with a longer view on what thinking and seeing within these oppositions might mean for 'experience' or 'world' and in particular what this might mean in respect of 'time'.

As a maker, I recognise a 'value' (a quality perhaps) of evolving criteria from *within* the 'work' of art (in the spirit of immanence) so, in the spirit of this work, I can only begin here by recognising the proposition of two differing and seemingly mutually exclusive totalities which are also entirely intertwined as they are being presented to me in the conference title alone. My criteria for this paper must originate then from within here and here alone, from this stand off of two totalities; on the one hand the totality of Text, the über Text which enmeshes all texts which come before, after and within, and on the other the totality of the thing (Art) of which we can only make sense by making reference to a fragment (a piece), a totality which is so unknowable and chaotic we must access it via an agent (a piece of art), the cipher or the fragment, all of which elements are subsumed under the generic classification of *what ever this new work thing is yet to be called*.

So, I'm approaching this division (the *versus* of art and text) as a spatial, conceptual and temporal territory which I might inhabit, or in the spirit of my recent work, temporarily occupy. This territory, which orientates around that which may or may not be considered a piece of art, that which may or may not be considered Text (and as a consequence what may or may not be considered an image?), is key not because I'm too concerned with defining what is or isn't anything else, (I'm happy with Reinhardt on this one) but because that territory of inconclusiveness might *also* be as of itself, a means, a *movement of occupation towards* an affective realm within a practice/life/world in which the ontological flickering between states of being emerges as a form of aesthetic affect (by which I mean here what Peter Osborne

describes as being '*felt* by the mind'³). In short, the production of an interior reflexive zone within which what is proposed to happen is also *felt* in the process of it happening. Or to be more precise, to suggest that the proposition itself is '*felt by the mind*' AS a proposition as it becomes, not merely understood as one after the fact, not a spatial zone but territory of time experienced and felt by the mind.

Part 2

The work is a score performed in the mind

The world is a work performed in the words

The mind is a work performed in the world

The above is a studio text, made towards the construction of a work. This Text then is a play on the nature of the task which lies ahead, which is to say it is a declaration of what it *is*, which is precisely that which it has yet to become. The task which lies ahead and the becoming of the text are one and the same. But the text is complete isn't it? In itself as an image perhaps, yes, (isn't an image always complete?) but as 'a piece of art', no, at least, not yet.

By working through these three propositions (there would be an infinite number of them) the text suggests that the work, the mind, the score, the world, and the word are all interchangeable in the performance of something which might be called 'art' or 'what ever this new thing is to be called' (back to 'the work' of art I would suggest)⁴ at some point unspecified in the near future.

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Following the sometimes perverse ‘performative logic’ of this studio practice, I’m trying to develop a conceptual and affective model of art and text relations which prioritises the *work* of art via thinking around “Text versus a piece of Art”.

³ see Peter Osbourne, *Anywhere if not at all*, London, Verso (2013) p. 45.

⁴ This interchangeability of forms and words also lies at the heart of the end of ends project in which possible endings dissolve into a constant blur. See endofends.co.uk

As Rancière has written,

Aesthetics is the ability to think contradiction.⁵

What is of interest to me as is that the works I'm working on/with could be described as uncertain and contradictory. Yet it is this uncertainty and instability which might tell us something about how image, text and art relations may be seen as generative and productive, not classificatory problems to be solved but generators of aesthetic contradiction and complexity. Contradiction 'felt by the mind'; generators of life.

Consider this text then, as a 'work', as a 'piece' of art. By which I mean, consider that this work, is, in itself, the task upon which this text is focussed, its flickering ontological status as Text *versus* a piece of Art. Through the development of this new work, through this translucent lens which this paper presents, I might orchestrate (I might summon) a sense of potentiality which may be created in dynamic and fluid and mutable relationship between Text and a piece of Art.

But also, I want to suggest the above Text presents something else; it presents itself (or can be understood) as another medium, the medium of a Text-in-Time.

What might this mean? An attempt to produce and encounter both the text as a developmental process (as might can see in a simple time lapse video of the 'growth' of a painting, the writing and re-writing) but also, importantly, the text as a finality which, while not actually changing form (i.e. the words remain the same and in the same order), is still constantly mutating as a performance of itself (in the way the Text refuses to 'settle').

Lets take the flickering painting here as a case in point.

Slide 1. (Flickering)

Video 1. (Scan the surface of the painting)

The field that the text is organised around is not only the field of the surface of the page/canvas but also the field of the before, the present, and the yet to be, a field of time.

Some areas of text are more 'worked' than others. By declaring itself as completely 'incomplete' (as opposed to 'in ruins', once complete and now depleted) the work proposes its own potential to become as its very medium and material; in short it proposes itself as something which announces its 'once-ness' each time it is encounters the force of the *present*⁶. The work then exists as that which is beyond exchange because it has no value outside of the here and now (which is, of course, forever). Once we look away, its gone again. Perhaps. Its material is it's before and after.

⁵ Rancière. Find source

⁶ Sarat details here

What 'Text and a Piece of Art' do here is to *counter compliment* each other, to the extent that the significance of the art/text divide here is that the 'work' must exist both, as both art and text, and as neither art nor text, simultaneously, in and around this sense of the affectivity of the ontological flickering between 'totalities' and fragments of art and text, as object, image and performance.

It must be:

BOTH BOTH AND NEITHER

Scare quote alert.

By 'working' a 'text' as a 'painting' certain key 'issues' come to the fore.

If this Text versus the Piece of Art can be seen in the light of a 'temporal' or 'performative' turn, in a practice of becoming (infinite becoming, not a new idea at all of course but perhaps significant in the light of the 'contemporary' which might be infinitely present but lacking all sense of potentiality, a sort of depleted present, as in a ruin), might this suggest the *work* of art as a form of labour or practice where image and text polarities *vibrate* with an erotic charge, in which the emphasis is always on the doing rather than the done, where the vibrations themselves amount to the doing.

A key factor in the ontological separation of art and text is this sense of the 'doing'. That a 'piece of art' might be variously described as being in a state of infinite becoming, by which we might understand it as a form of potentiality which invents its protocols along the way, during its own process of unruly becoming. Unlike TEXT it's not so much a thing to be read as a thing which is always announcing itself as yet to be a thing and as such is always uncertain and unpredictable.

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If the 'image' is 'dialectics at a stand still'⁷ then the image which sits (or is created) at/by the counter-complimentary work of 'Text versus a piece of Art' is the play off of irreconcilable realms, one of the many conditions of the contemporary.⁸

It would be tempting now to use current 'paintings' to *illustrate* the point but this would be at best disingenuous, and at worst completely missing the point. The current 'paintings' (if that is what they are) apply multiple strategies in which different 'voices' are written, speed of application of material is consciously disrupted, fonts themselves are positioned up, down, and/or mirrored in an approach to get *inside* and *behind* the 'text' in a spatial/conceptual play. Despite their flatness these paintings are models of multi-dimensionality and agency, which recognise within their materiality, the summoning of the significance of a 'temporal turn'⁹ in an attempt perhaps to "loosen the power words have on the mind"¹⁰, to let the words loose in time.

The temporal then is critical to the making of the paintings because the paintings serve as invitations to reflect on the texts as they are, but also as invocations of the 'text-paintings' they are yet to become.

What does this invocation suggest other than the summoning of that which is not 'here', not 'with us', spatially, and/or perhaps more pertinently as I have already suggested, temporally. Thus, the invocation is a summoning of that which is not here *yet*. This reference to here-ness, present-ness, of the über text and the not yet-ness of art are in stark contrast with each other, existing not only in differing ontological domains but also different temporal dimensions and realms. Art is a shadow (or a silhouette) cast by the text.

What is at stake then in the staging of 'Text versus a piece of art' is the performing of a thought or an experience by colonising the text as a medium of present-ness, a declaration of itself in the here and now, cast against the yet to be or what was-ness of 'art', at its core a play off of the contemporary and the modern. It is this clash which creates the once-ness (albeit a once-ness which may be replayed ad infinitum) of art by summoning the libidinal vibrations between the ontological status of both Art and Text.

The impervious super-cool detachments of art, the ability to colonise and be colonised without turning a hair rests on this this project of calling upon what is yet to be, incessantly re-inscribing that very chaotic potentiality and movement which

⁷ Benjamin, quoted in Peter Osborne, *Anywhere if not at all*, London, Verso (2013) p. 55.

⁸ "the incapacity of resolution is a part of the making of the contemporary" (Sarat..more details)

⁹ show the PARSE stuff here

¹⁰ John Gray. The Silence of the animals. P144

marks a difference in the world.¹¹ This is art's contradiction, it's consumption of itself is what make it safe (from its own consumption).

"because art is what it has yet to become, its concepts refer to what it does not contain..art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. Art acquires its specificity itself from what developed out of it- its law of movement is its law of form"¹²

This re-inscription of art's capacity to disrupt singularity through movement is of course critically deeply problematic. Without critical attention a capacity to disrupt becomes quickly fetishised and co-opted by capital needing emotive emblems of change, providing opportunities for 'thin' quick fixes as creative innovation and solutions, but little else. Yet, at another level, this disruption as erotic vibration also reminds us of the sensual nature of temporal 'world', an aesthesis, of the critical element of dynamism and movement, not as progressive tiers towards a solution but as a tremor which is impervious to innovation as understood within the cult of progress. The aesthetic 'affect', epitomised in the nature of a 'vibrant contradiction', may be the awakening of a potentiality before it becomes singularly harnessed to the will of institutional (or any other) power.

As Claire Bishop points out,

"Artistic Practice has an element of Critical Negation and an ability to sustain contradiction that cannot be reconciled with the quantifiable imperatives of positivist economics- artists and works of art can operate in a space of antagonism or negation vis-à-vis society, a tension that the ideological discourse of creativity reduces to a unified concept and instrumentalises for more efficacious profiteering."¹³

Massumi goes further about the potential of art,

"sometimes tensions draw to the breaking point and a crisis ensues. Recuperative mechanisms usually ensure that the breakout is a breakdown leading back to the grid. The categories re-activate. The leash tightens. In rare instances breakdown leads to breakaway, a line of escape back to the non-limitive body without organs and the increased potential residing there. This is called 'art' whether or not a poem of a painting is ever produced"¹⁴

¹¹ This imperviousness to critique is a real problem, and this may be true, in which case all the above is moot. But, if Art and artists is tough enough, something yet to be named might emerge.

¹² Adorno, quoted by Peter Osborne, *Anywhere if not at all*, London, Verso (2013) p. 58.

¹³ Artificial Hells , Claire Bishop p16

¹⁴ Massumi. A User's guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia. MIT 1997 p77

The words 'Text versus a piece of Art' force us to live with complex and contradictory forces which are impossible to sustain inside of Massimi's 'grid'. The versus in 'Text versus A piece of Art' re-inscribes a form of classification which lives within the 'grid'. If we want to escape the grid we must learn to live with contradiction that leads to breakaway.

Conclusion

*"art is art of affect more than representation, a system of dynamised and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images which function under the regime of signs"*¹⁵

I have been thinking about how we define the 'work' of art through the lens of a conference title 'Text versus a piece of Art'. This has led to speculations between the doing-labour-making *work* of art (the artists' work and art's work) and the more conventional recognition of the 'work of art' as an autonomous object or event which frames itself by defining itself by what is isn't.

This process has led me to ask, is it possible to consider an element of 'time' as art, to understand time as autonomous, framed by defining itself by what it isn't (not productive, not progressive, not linear, not consumable), and if so, is this what we access when we access 'a piece of art'?

I'm a maker. My area of concern is the doing, it's about being in there, making work, but it's also about re-making 'world'. Through this process I have come to think that the work of art is also the 'work' of art, the doing of the *work* of art, the task of art. Indeed it this very conflation between the doing, the done and the yet to be done, that I've tried to focus on in this paper and in my work, and in that sense to position this paper *as* a work and all that that might mean in terms of classificatory problems between art, text, research and knowledge.

As I have tried to suggest, the text is not only a different 'noun' to 'art', it is a different ontological species. But for all that, the fact that we are here at all suggests there remains a tacit fascination and compulsion with the relationship between 'Text and a piece of Art' which while acknowledging the fundamental otherness of each might also suggest some form of ontological flickering which may take place as Text and Art intertwine and overlap. And, to take that a step further, one might suggest that the very flickering which takes place is precisely the point at which the text is no longer *versus* art, but *is* art as art *is* text, that far from being a generic 'Text', Text itself becomes approachable for its 'once-ness' as Art.¹⁶

¹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz. Chaos Territory Art. P 3.

¹⁶ Sarat Maharaj.

What 'Text versus a piece of Art' can summon is the negotiation of aesthesis which in turn aids us in our ability to think and *feel by the mind* the contradictory qualities of 'world' and to further produce them.

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