

This conversation

Terri Bird and Tom Nicholson, 2010

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Terri Bird: This conversation started some time ago, prompted in part by the pejorative use of the term 'formalist' to describe artworks that seem concerned with little more than the detailing of material, colour, surface, form, etc.¹

Ton Nicholson: Whenever we're in a public forum we seem to end up talking about it. I try to resist using the word 'formalist' in a simple, pejorative sense. There are clearly different kinds of formalism, not just the sort that Clement Greenberg advanced. But a cranky anti-formalist lurks within...

TB: My objection to the pejorative characterizations of formalism stems from observations by feminist philosophers, who draw attention to the unconsciously repressed procedures inherent in assumptions that matter is inert, simply a vehicle for form, content or ideas. Luce Irigaray for example emphasizes the way philosophy forgets the mediums through which its representations take place. She argues there can be no change to the social order that fortifies discriminatory social practices without socializing differently our relationships to matter, and by extension the body, desire, nature and language. The same argument needs to be made for reconsidering the work of matter in relation to the work of art, which acknowledges its activity and how this activity connects to social practices. This requires an account of the conditions that produce signifying practices, which acknowledge the activity of matter, its forming potential. Greenberg's focus on a medium's specificity, the often-quoted flatness or non-illusionistic surface of painting for example, is problematic because it's predicated on an understanding of matter as merely a means to a transcendent truth; the more transparent the better. The challenge is to articulate the work of matter outside these well-worn tracks of oppositional thinking.

TN: I would start with Manet. I have been quite obsessed with his *Execution of Maximillian* pictures, that extraordinary set of paintings and prints, which depict Emperor Maximillian being executed by firing squad in Mexico in 1867. Manet is also an artist with a special place in the formalist canon. For Greenberg, Manet is the painter who begins the self-reflexive historical process which would eliminate all except what is unique and proper to painting, a process that ends with colour field painting. The frank use of paint as a material is certainly something that is very present in those *Execution* paintings. It is part of how he stages his struggle with the painting's subject in successive versions of that contemporary event, the execution of a puppet leader of a failed and illegal colonial invasion, Manet's Iraq. But it is not the formal invention of the painting that compel us in those paintings *in their own right*, but *in their relation* to a whole set of problems: how we narrate through images the facts of our contemporary life; how we imagine an event that is

psychologically close but physically remote; how the 'speed' of real time events and the 'time' of a painting address one another; how regarding and understanding suffering do not always coincide; how images evolve swinging between the necessity to resolve them internally and an incessant reaching beyond, to other images, to other paintings, to chains of imaginary presences; how our rage at political injustice and the coolness of an image wrestle one another. A formalist reading of Manet cannot allow these rich (and very current) dimensions of the *Execution* pictures. What is 'live' in Manet – the very things that he could not resolve and that become the subject of the incompleteness of those pictures – is also where Greenberg's account no longer functions. His formalist account collapses at first base. It is autistic.

TB: The *Execution of Maximillian* is an interesting example, and I guess my point would be that it's interesting not simply because of what it narrates but how. This 'how' concerns the force of what appears, how it is produced through and in relationships with the materiality of painting, as an effect of the operations of various procedures or techniques. This relates to the decisions of what is detailed, or rendered clearly, and what is not. In conjunction with the considered composition of the firing squad, the detached preoccupations of the soldier preparing to deliver the coup de grâce, even the white belts and spats of the apparently invented uniform. In addition to the division of the picture plane through the positioning of the grey wall separating the witnesses from the site of execution. This is the *work* of the painting, a relationship of matter, technique and appearance, which produces its unresolved singularity, in turn inviting speculation on what it stages. It is through this materiality that it negotiates a relationship between the internal world it depicts and one beyond where its effects engage with other events, their politics and social practices.

In a similar manner Bianca's installation stages its relationship to an exteriority, albeit through markedly different operations. For example there is also a grey wall, constructed from cement blocks positioned towards the far end of the gallery at an odd angle, which together with the low perimeter wall, formed with the same blocks, produces an arena. This arena is activated by an array of objects, materials and animate beings; animals and people instructed to carry out actions or simply positioned in the space. Then there is the viewer who unscripted, spontaneously engages. It is this spontaneous engagement that triggers a whole series of questions about the hospitality of the situation, in terms of the degree to which it needs to be controlled in order to be hosted. As the host Bianca exercises her authorship, choosing when to alter interventions or restore the work in order to allow others to engage. This 'exercising of agency,' that of the scripted and unscripted participants' as well as the artist's agency, is a process of constant negotiation.

TN: The grey wall at the end of the space is an odd, inadvertent link between Manet's *Execution* and Bianca's work. It's a critical form in her installation, and I found myself walking around it repeatedly. One of the acute passages in the installation is that wall's relationship to the blue line of unbroken masking tape which runs the length of the space, continues around a corner and ends where a small hole has been punched into the end wall of the space. That blue line is very beautifully 'of' the body, attached to the wall at the reach of Bianca's body (it sways and dips as it runs along the wall with the irregularity of the body's work, and then dips down at the corner, where she

clearly couldn't stand as close to the wall as she reached up to the wall). That tape registers the presence of the body through its rhythm, but also draws out this presence into what must be a 40-metre unbroken line, a kind of massively extended or distilled body, a form which conflates registering the gesture of the body and charting that gesture's duration. The grey wall breaks that line. It means that there is no place in the gallery where we can stand and see the blue line from beginning to end (or, which introduces the idea that we need to climb the wall and stand on top of it as the only place where the blue line would be fully visible). I found myself moving around the space, mobilized by the relationship between these two forms with such radically different material qualities, one compact and massively heavy, the other so physically light but enormously long. In art historical terms, their relationship suggested the encounter between two ways to figure the body in a sculptural form, a face-off between Carl Andre and Eva Hesse. It also made me reflect upon the way Bianca's installation swings between an extreme open-ness and changeability – spaces in which anything might occur – and very definitive decisions by the artist which cannot be changed, which must simply be reckoned with. The grey wall is one of the work's unchangeable forms. It is one of the few forms which has been made and which cannot easily be undone (unlike the bricks around the perimeter of the space, which are only joined together by gravity). The grey wall breaks the blue line, but also the possibility of everything in that space being re-formed endlessly. It performs a refusal.

TB: I wonder what that refuses is? What it refuses, and what effects that refusal produces?

The wall does obstruct an unhindered view of the thin blue line of tape, together with an all-encompassing view of the gallery from a single vantage point, but in doing so it also enables. Like all the elements of the installation its function is multiple, it participates in the formation of numerous assemblages. In one instance the wall works as a surface against which to kick or throw a ball. As a wall/ball/sound assemblage it returns the energy with which it is struck, activating a different dynamic than it does as a vertical element or a built form. As a built form it combines with other constructed elements such as the nearby OSB wall blocking access to a neighbouring gallery; the tall leaning timber frame on which a stitched patch work fabric hangs; the two timber lattice-like screens with diagonal slats painted pink and beige, and the built form of the gallery itself, revealed by the small hole you mention at the tapes terminus, high up on the back wall. The multiple potential of all the installation's elements produce an operational mobility that elaborates the effects of the work, the relationships it forms, along with the sense or meaning that these provoke.

The wall also mobilizes any engagement, as you note, to view the work you have to move around it, or more precisely move around in it. The way the work situates its audience, unselfconsciously as yet another element, as a part of the work, is particularly interesting. It's one of the ways the installation creates an ambiguity between what is inside and outside the work of art. This situating of the audience also connects to what the work refuses - a privileging of an ocularcentric relationship that perpetuates a disembodied theater of knowledge. This refusal is evident in this installation's emphasis on corporeality and materiality, the way it re-imagines matter and bodies as other than an idea of the mind in favour of an active undecidability.

TN: I like the moments in Bianca's installation where her decisions assert themselves in this way – like the wall – and I agree that these paradoxically enable open-ended process of forming to occur around them, with them or against them. The possibility of the work changing during its life is constrained – and is interesting because it is constrained, because the work invites our intervention but also resists it, or guides it. This is part of the problem of how traces of actions beget further actions (an existential problem critical to art but also beyond art which I think is part of what the work is ultimately 'getting at'). Traces of Bianca's activity create the terms for our own activity in that space. The two wrestle one another in different ways at different moments in the installation, and with different degrees of earnestness and levity. At the risk of labouring the curious link to the *Execution* pictures, Manet's grey wall is also a refusal, a refusal of illusionism. It screens the landscape behind the scene, and, through the visual rhyme between the wall and the painting's physical surface, forces the scene of the *Execution* into our own space, deflecting the expectation of an illusionistic and distant space back to the viewer who stands before the painting, a kind of invasion of the work's meaning into our own time. This is part of the complex way that the work's formal qualities articulate a quality internal to the work but also continually implicate the work and its narrative in the world outside itself. I think Bianca's wall is involved in the same questions. It is part of the way the work shifts subtly between complex relationships internal to the work and implicit links to the world outside the installation. As I spent time with the installation I found myself meditating on these shifts, and the way that the grey wall – and also the pile of dirt and the (almost) immovable rock at the entrance – animate this shifting.

TB: This inadvertent connection of grey walls keeps returning, but I think it's productive. As already mentioned, one of the illusions Bianca's installation denies is the possibility of a singular masterful comprehension of the work. This refusal operates through various procedures, like the way the installation moves you around and by activating the potential of each element to participate in multiple assemblages within the work. For example, the blue box steel fabricated gantries, which act as camera dollies, connect with other blue linear elements in the installation forming one assemblage. And at the same time, link with other provisional placed devices to form another, devices such as the timber lattice-like screens and propped timber frame. The refusal of a singular comprehension also takes place through the shifts you mention – in and out of the frame. I'm interested in what connections this shifting stages. As Manet's wall screens the landscape and also forms a stage, so to Bianca's wall is part of her work's staging - one on which we are enlisted. In one sense it's a staging of relations, internal and external, the hinging of worlds as an effect of material operations. The mudstone rock and pile of dirt perform this function, around which the work pivots. In breaking with the world they participate in the formation of multiple assemblages within, and between the elements in the installation - what you suggest could be understood in classic formalist terms as solely an internal dialogue. But this would be to miss or misunderstand the work they perform. Within the installation they have a presence as objects as well as acting as props. The mudstone sits on a disk of blue rubber to which chains are connected indicating its potential to be shifted. The pile of dirt is another prop where actions take place, as well as being in a state of flux as its contours are continually rearranged. The surface of the mudstone has been replicated

through casting processes connecting with other cast replicas of seemingly 'natural' objects, like a small trees trunk and rock, and what become by way of contrast 'unnatural' objects like rolls of tape. However the mudstone and the pile of dirt also retain associations with the world that connects beyond the frame of the gallery. Both have associations with building industry or urban environment, the persistent reforming of the world through construction. The temporality of this economy contrasts, on the one hand, with the scale of geological time evident in the mudstone, and on the other, with the weeds sprouting in the pile of dirt. The hinging operation these two elements perform isn't a blurring of the boundaries between 'art and life,' but a confrontation that oscillates across this threshold.

TN: Not many of the objects in Bianca's installation display a history that precedes the show. The mudstone rock and the pile of dirt (which is distinctly non-pristine and to me suggested something excavated for an inner city construction) are exceptional. In the case of the mudstone rock this exceptional status is extreme – it not only introduces to the show a time outside the space of the show, but a massive stretch of time, a geologically-scaled process of auto-formation. Of course everything in the show has a 'history'. The masking tape was originally unformed matter, was manufactured by workers somewhere, shipped here, sold somewhere, etc.. But the material in the installation – like a product we might buy at our local hardware store – mostly does not articulate this history but rather presents itself as new, as yet-to-be acted upon. The Besser bricks around the perimeter of the space don't seem recycled. They look like they have been bought new. It is the nature of masking tape that it can only be used new. You don't wind the tape up again after you have used it. This quality in the installation – material articulating itself as new - is part of the important distinction between Bianca's work and the environments of Joseph Beuys. It is also part of the installation's very consistent resistance to being read allegorically. One thing does not stand for another, for an idea. It insists upon itself, and upon our relation to it as matter. The strong sense that, for the most part, the material in the installation, does not have a history before or outside the work is also important because it privileges the histories the work acquires in the gallery space. The installation has our disjointed (sometimes even solitary) accumulative collective experience of the exhibition as the history of this work, as its duration. I think this is why the mudstone rock near the entrance is an important form. It links the whole enterprise of the installation to another time, and another time scale. And it figures our relationship to this other time – and to the world we inherit and bequeath – as the form in the show which, by virtue of its weight, would most resist our intervention, our re-forming. As you say, the set up with the disk and the chain invites us to move it – and specifically seems to invite a group of willing participants to heave it somewhere else in the space, a collective sculptural activity – but its weight expresses a different invitation: to move *ourselves* around *it*, to look at it, to think.

TB: It's hard to get past this idea that at some point matter is 'unformed,' its indicative of the oppositional thinking I mentioned at the out set. My reference to the boundaries of 'art and life' fall into the same problematic of finding a language to describe the operations of matter in a way that isn't predetermined by a dualistic hierarchy. As you say everything in the installation has a history, and I think this can be extended to an understanding

of matter as never 'unformed.' It's always in some form, just not yet formed or purposefully deployed by us.

Although it's of a different register to the mudstone and pile of dirt, perhaps the other example that has the exceptional status you comment on is the horse, which has entered the installation a couple of times as one of the scripted intermittent actions. Whilst it has the potential to be read allegorically, it is also oddly disruptive - the unpredictability of an animal out of its milieu has an unsettling presence that punctures the predominate staging of the installation. It also exploits the confrontation of differing temporalities made evident through the mudstone and pile of dirt. This brings into play something similar to what you remarked on in Manet's paintings: a confrontation between the 'speed' of real time and the multiple temporalities of Bianca's installation.

TN: The duration of Manet's *Execution* pictures as a body of work, registered as an overt incompleteness in the first two versions, is important. It indicates that the process of giving form to something takes place in a duration. The changes that occurred to the composition of the image reflected both the flow of information from Mexico to France (the paintings evolved as the facts slowly became apparent) as well as the complicated encounter between Manet's ideas for the painting and the matter of painting itself. And in the case of these paintings, this very pronounced duration is set against the violent speed of killing someone by firing squad. In a related way, I agree that time becomes central to Bianca's installation and what it means. Her work figures facts as processes, and asserts an important parallel between perceiving and forming as *always being in a duration, as never finalized*. This linking of perceiving and forming as potentially ongoing processes sets up a very mobile encounter with the installation. The work triggers a constant back and forth between seeing and acting. This back and forth is sometimes funny, sometimes highly serious, but it always takes place through our faculties of imagination. This, I think, is the most profound sense in which the work activates a complex and important relationship between the world inside the work and the world outside it, that relationship which Greenberg's version of formalism cannot allow. The work suggests – or powers – the idea that we might bring to bear these faculties of imagination on the world beyond the work, an ongoing process of inventing and re-inventing the forms of our everyday living.

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ⁱ 'Formalist' derives its currency from the writings of Clement Greenberg, the predominant art critic and spokesman for Modernism from the 1930s through to the 1970s. Greenberg maintained, "the unique and proper area of competence of each art form coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium." [Battcock 1973 68] He argued the specific nature of the medium's unique character evolves over time through innovations in response, or resistance to the conventions associated with specific art forms. These conventions facilitate communication by way of shared forms that necessarily constrain any transformation to take

place from within [Greenberg 1999 45]. Through this process Greenberg observed, "the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition" [Battcock 1973 68]. Not surprisingly, he focused on the inherited program of technical concerns in the practices he admired, arguing they offered a greater satisfaction because of the way they formalized aesthetic experience. It is this undue focus on a technical agenda and formalized approach to art making that is often referred to today when an artwork is considered 'formalist.'

Battcock, Gregory, ed. 1973. *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Dutton.