

Midnight All Day: Notes on Mitch Cairns' New Work

Matthew Holt 2015

Private Symbolic Language

Buildings at night, birds, black and blue, cartoons, parched and restrained brush work, suggestions of anagrams, reversals of text and image, windows blacked out, shades of pop erotica, concrete poetry, chess pieces, glimpses of modernist Australiana, zigzags... The task of inventing a private symbolic language is often overlooked in contemporary art criticism which searches instead for patterns of history, insists on the politicisation of context and, more worryingly, follows a need to find evidence of an ongoing denial of aptitude (against trend, Mitch Cairns can paint). But a formal and symbolic language is the only thing an artist explores (or better: a painter explores – for painting is still a fundamentally solitary act and therefore lends itself to such a pursuit). A symbolic language is a way to code experience and memory and taste (all of which, in turn, comes to the painter already coded) – paintings are acts of transcription, an incessant translation, a message to oneself without a committed codebook. The message could be a specific shape an artist gravitates to, a colour palette, a brush size, a technique of application, a certain compositional puzzle or formal problem – and this search for a language is by no means consciously undertaken, certainly not in the sense of a plan (painters are rarely designers in this regard), but as a specific form of 'indirect' and sensuous knowledge – a knowledge explored through association, kinship, through 'elective affinities'. All artists make a montage of their own unconscious predilections and then test them out. Painters are falsifiers in Karl Popper's terms, *bricoleur* scientists of vision.

Savage Thought

'Mythical thought... is imprisoned in the events and experiences it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning'. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*

The Architecture of Pedagogy

The spectacle of an education that has vanished, all that remains is the stage – the set – a solitary sculpture in a blank field . . . all that remains is a twisted Baconesque figure insignificant almost redundant but full of coiled energy – its reservations and its hesitancy exposed by an amplified *contro posto*.

Esse est percipi

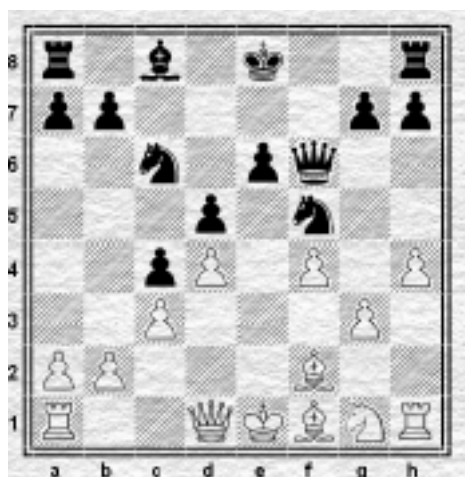
'To perceive means to guess at something somewhere...'.
Gombrich, *Art & Illusion*

Black

Cairns paints a good black. This is not as simple as it seems.

Chess, Art & Symbolic Language

Chess and art have a longstanding relationship, most famously and notably – because of his serious talent as a player – in the figure of Marcel Duchamp (he won games against the Belgian champions Edgar Colle and Georges Koltanowski, drew with the Woman's World Champion of the time, Vera Menchik, and so too with the very talented music and literary critic and chess author, Eugene Alexandrovich Znosko-Borovsky; he also played in the French Championships and in the Olympiads between 1928-1933). In an address to the annual banquet of the New York State Chess Association in 1952, Marcel Duchamp explained, 'the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem'. This statement was followed by an emphasis on the 'visual pleasure' of a combination whose 'beautifully elaborated... conception' takes the form of an 'ideographic story'.



This is not one of Duchamp's games, but a position to be found in a photograph of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin playing while both are in exile in Skovsbostrand, Denmark, 1934 (Brecht has the white pieces, the outcome of the game is unknown) – Q. The relation between chess and exile and art? A. Every game (art) is not an exile from the ambiguous rules of amity and collegiality, but an abstract intensification of them.

Perspective

A cursory glance at Renaissance art shows that the human figure is placed into the painted architectural space as a way of rendering scale and perspective comprehensible – utterly unlike Gothic art wherein the figure is to populate a story or moral. Later, in Poussin for example, figures persist but they are receding, literally diminishing, and they disappear altogether in the ruined fantasies of de Chirico, Klee, and contemporaneously in experimental film – witness the opening of Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* which images a theatre that is only ever-so-slowly occupied; imagine too, later, the face of Marcello Mastroianni in sunglasses at night – a face can be an empty scene. Think of the photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, indifference and presence of an edifice simultaneously evoking and denying human company. We are now only an inadvertent population of an already fabricated environment (all is pre-fabricated: people a module in a modular construction, a figure among other figures; we share a world that delights in our absence). Thus in modernism, the experimentation with mapping the dimensions of perception becomes dystopic, or at the very least surreal, certainly more idiomatic, more suspiciously deployed – no longer an investigation into the visual mechanics of reality, but into the distorted psychological space of the viewer's own pictorial hesitancy. Nonetheless the crisis of independent vision is already implicit in perspective itself according to Panofsky (*Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 1927), who claimed that perspective is subjectivity made objective (subjective vision literally made concrete, literally clarified as a grid, as an extension of its supposed rational core). Once subjectivity begins to doubt itself, however, that is, when the rationality of its methods of truth-making and representation have been cast into doubt by its own self-reflection – the Age of Suspicion – extended subjectivity does not find itself gleaming in pictographic clarity but awake at midnight on an empty street, in a deserted square, staring at a dark and still and indifferent art school.

Art School

The relation between art and pedagogy is vexed. We have learnt, quite literally, that art is supposed to educate us by actually withdrawing from instruction – we learn by being confused, disturbed, numbed or surprised, not tutored, informed, organized. Instead, painting well, beautifully, intelligently, in tune, as MC does, demands that theoretical prescription match the dedication of the act of painting; it demands the explanation to derive from MC's persistence, writing on painting can only ever

be indirect, it should match something else than a 'idea'. Art pedagogy as an empty stage at night – as an open window onto a scene – an attempt at philosophical defenestration.

Painting and Architecture

No architecture without media, pictures have always accompanied buildings, buildings mediated by pictures. The history of painting could be rezoned under the by-laws of architectural discourse, that is, the associated ideas of place, siting, zoning, and configuring (or structuring) space, rather than seeing it as species of subjective vision and therefore of cathexis (of the emotional investment in an object – interestingly the awkward term 'cathexis' is an Anglo-Latinate translation of Freud's *Besetzung* which means in German 'to put in place'). There is an anonymity, as it were, preceding subjective experience – a metaphor before intention, an encoding of appearance, a bird in flight staring at you puzzled, surprised, caught out of place. (Louis Daguerre's 1839 image, *Boulevard du temple*, is often considered the first photograph of people. But even the most off-the-cuff glance at the image will confirm that it is first and foremost a photograph of buildings – of architecture. The people are a happy accident.)

Seeing Yourself Seeing

I was talking to myself over dinner the other night. I wasn't surprised by the various topics raised or the set of opinions offered on them, but only in the manner in which the actual dinner came to pass. Earlier I was in a bar alone with plans only to have a few drinks and return home to eat leftovers. My partner was away overseas. I hate the word 'partner'. I was poured a beer and I waved away an offer of nuts. The first sip convinced me to remain a functioning alcoholic. I took another sip and looked down the length of the bar. At its end I sat. I looked away. I looked back down the bar. I gazed longer this time, risking rudeness. But it was definitely me. Who, me? Why? I looked away again feeling something like shame. I nodded to the barman when he pointed at my empty glass. Picking up my new drink I looked back down at the bar and as I turned my head, he – me – smiled. He motioned to me and I picked up my drink and joined him. I asked myself whether I suffered from nephritis and I said no, why? I don't know, but I find the very word frightening – is it bad? Someone famous had it once but I can't remember whom. Neither can I, I said. We decided to eat together – to get something in our stomachs.

Black and Blue

I was already too old for the 90s – I wanted to be thin as David Niven, have hair dense as a snake, high cheekbones, big eyes. I wanted to lounge on striped mattress without a sheet echoing a drug haze on an album cover, reading Camus, whom I had already read in the 80s. I miss Berlin even though I have never been there. The artist enclaves, the clubs, Nick Cave's ousted shadow, the chipped concrete, tram sparks in the rain, the voices, the whole Wim Wenders thing, the rejection of neo-liberal ideals, old people sharing bratwurst in an old square, the name of which is too long for thought, and the children running past incensed by climate change.

Studio Visits

Writers are to focus on the art laid politely out for them when visiting the artist's studio but, in reality, they look everywhere else – for clues, for sources of inspiration, for tell-tale hearts buried under the floorboards, but even then that search is something of a lie. Really they are jealous. Jealous of the relative seclusion, the space dedicated to conception, the quarantine of fantasy that others need but can never articulate, and they are even more jealous that the artist is still smoking when everyone else has given up, including, more often than not, the writer. Every writer comes out of an artist's studio with the plan to get their own studio, a perpetually unfulfilled design painfully and gloriously reignited only with the next studio visit. But what they perhaps don't realise is that this supposed autonomy without surveillance can be the most extreme form of surveillance – self-surveillance. A painter in a studio is always surveying his- or herself in every moment in every gesture in every perception in every object that they see and touch – be careful of what you are jealous of.

Music

An environment, a language in the dark.

Dead Birds in Art

A well-known art historian once said to me she would like to write a book on dead birds on art. When you think about it there are a lot of dead birds in art, many more than their living cousins. Dead birds abound in the genre of *nature morte*, occupying an esteemed place alongside hares, fruit, fish and unrealistically arranged tablecloths. In the Beaux art tradition flying birds are much more rare beasts, instead their aquatic relatives dominate – for example, Courbet's *Trout*. If not dead, birds still appear inevitably stunned by paint; they do

not want to be acknowledged, as if caught pursuing some secret and perverse mission.

Idea for a Story

A rich old man, disturbed by the poverty in the world, sets up an institute to enquire into its causes. After some years of research the institute reports back that the cause is, without question, himself.

Matthew Holt is a writer and playwright, academic and designer who lives in Sydney. Three of his plays have been produced. His first collection of short fiction, Asymmetries, is being published by Puncher & Wattmann in early 2015.

This essay was written on the occasion of Mitch Cairns' exhibition, 'FINCHES', at The Commercial Gallery, Sydney, 13/02/15 - 14/03/15.

www.thecommercialgallery.com