



“The materia prima [raw material] is what exists prior to the division operated by meaning: an enormous paradox since nothing, in the human order, comes to man unless it is immediately accompanied by a meaning, the meaning which other men have given it, and so on, in an infinite regress. The demiurgic power of the painter is in this, that he makes the materials exist as matter; even if some meaning comes out of the painting, pencil and colour remain as “things”, as stubborn substances whose obstinacy in “being there” nothing (no subsequent meaning) can destroy.”

*Roland Barthes, The Wisdom of Art **

**Roland Barthes, “The Wisdom of Art,” in Nicola Del Roscio (Ed),
Writings on Cy Twombly, (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002). p. 102.*

*Cy Twombly: Untitled, Lexington, 1959.
House paint, crayon and graphite on canvas. 152.5 × 188.5 cm, 60 × 74 1/4 in.
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[Un]common Sense and [Un]disciplined Gestures

Abstract: Difference, not identity, is the primary quality of language. This difference is initially argued to be an “[un]common sense;” one which does not emerge from a ground, origin, or operate within a dialectic of essence/appearance, but which consists of an economy of acoustic surfaces/timings/spatialities: diffuse, interpenetrative, and unclassifiable: a “sensual” logic. Traditional philosophies of language tend to flatten out and simplify the space/time/material relations of language, in favour of a stable, timeless, fixed identity, which makes logical thought possible, through fixed, linear, disciplinary forms. This paper seeks instead to extend and complicate categories of logic, to include doubt, paradox, infinity and “[un]disciplined” forms of understanding, as evidence of difference as the primary quality of language: a “mimetologic” as Lacoue-Labarthe has termed it, formed of a wildly [un]disciplined set of (re-)marks and gestures.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze suggests that an understanding of difference might initially be conceived as occupying a midway position between two extremes. Indifference, is either an indeterminate field out of which nothing distinct arises: “the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved”,¹ in other words, an abyss. Or it is comprised of a series of disconnected, mutually indifferent elements, which appear in the “[W]hite nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members.”² Such fragmentary, mutually exclusive determinations are no less indifferent than the first version, since they lack overall coherence, each being a singular indifference. In either case, the problem for Deleuze is that difference is presented as a relation *between* elements, and its production relies upon the ability to draw sharp divisions between the constituent parts of previously undifferentiated fields, concepts, or elements, such that the figure is set in a determinate relation to a ground.³ This attitude, Deleuze suggests, invokes the allure of the deep cut, the either/or, the right/wrong, and the classical laws of thought as set out by Aristotle.⁴ This paper will argue that the simultaneity of reading and seeing,

72|73

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, (Continuum: London and New York, 2001), p. 28.

2. And further: “...a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows.” Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, Ibid.

3. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 31–69.

4. Aristotelian logic is based on the following three Laws of Thought: The Principle of Identity (where A is A), the Principle of Contradiction, (where A cannot be *both* B and not B at the same time); and the Principle of the Excluded Middle (where A is located *either* on one side or the other side, but not in between A and B). In *The Wisdom of Art*, Barthes suggests that Twombly’s work is differently configured: “It is in a way another logic, a kind of challenge, on the part of the poet (and the painter)

of drawing as both trace and performance in Cy Twombly's work, collapses the relationship between figure and ground, and does so in a way that acknowledges an immanent notion of difference.

For Deleuze, pure difference is not to be found in the distinction *from* something else, in the *difference between* two things, but in an immanent, intrinsic (singular, unilateral) differing within the object, thought, event, in itself; one which nonetheless persistently carries along with it, its relation to that from which it seeks individuation. This form of difference then becomes the new extreme in thought, since, rather than a difference in which the boundaries are observable, exterior to the object or concept under consideration, and satisfyingly (clearly) drawn, Deleuze suggests that true difference is a question of "determination *as such*"⁵ or difference in-itself: "[I]nstead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something that distinguishes itself—and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it."⁶

Difference conceived in this way, is the ability to be both distinguished from, but at the same time to stay *with*, that which foregrounds it, such that figure and ground are mutually implicated. He uses the following example: while lightening might take its distinguishing character from the black sky, that sky is simultaneously, and inextricably, part of what gives the lightening its form (and therefore its meaning). In such a relation: "It is as if the ground rose to be surface, without ceasing to be ground."⁷ Figure and ground are as one; empirically interdependent, but consistently interrelated, without being posed in a hierarchy, or severing the figure from a ground conceived as an origin. The sky trails the lightening, while the lightening insistently seeks to be relieved of that relation, in a tight and tense interlocking and weaving of the different and the indifferent. In the same way, Twombly's work is simultaneously a performance of the work, in which the process cannot be divorced from the outcome, and whose heterogeneity, or "excess" is always primary. Any satisfying unification of the disparate and dissolute, the sign

to the Aristotelian rules of structure" pp. 107-108.

5. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, p. 28

6. Ibid.

7. Deleuze, in quoting Artaud's definition of cruelty, as "[n]othing but determination *as such*, that precise point at which the determined maintains its relation to the undetermined," goes on to explain that such cruelty is the defining character of thinking itself. Here, Deleuze, in following Artaud, argues that thought maintains its precise and "unilateral" relation to the indeterminate. There is a cold, clinical dialectic at play in this withholding relation between the indeterminate and the determinate; one fraught with tension and paradox, since "there is no sin other than raising the ground and dissolving the form." This violence of distinction and form-giving is often named as reason itself, prompting Deleuze to concentrate on the "irrational" and "monstrous" as a way to seize productive difference. But see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 28-40. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Vol 1 and Vol 2, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

and the signified, under a final concept or representation, is withheld. Deleuze will call this experience a form of “cruelty” to thought, since the desired flight from the “elusive adversary” (the indifferent), can never fully take place.⁸ In other words: the “deep cut” which establishes meaning as difference, is illusory. Difference is the refusal of the power of representation (based on identity, sameness, resemblance, or similarity) as a means of unproblematically engaging ideas/objects. “Difference,” explains Deleuze, “is not the difference between different forms, or the difference from some original model, difference is the power that over and over again produces new forms.”⁹ As a producer of “new forms”, this Deleuzian form of difference offers instead an affirmative, immanent materiality, one which proliferates, and becomes productive. Being is understood, then, as a singular multiplicity, a unilateral distinction, not a distinction *from*, but a distinction *with*.¹⁰ Rather than a “without,” difference is “made” by the interpenetration of an autonomous ground rising to the surface, the form[s] which dissolve in it, and the movement of both, which collapses determinations and the indeterminate in a single move.¹¹

A similar move can be seen with repetition as mimesis, the non-imitative, non-communicable form of expression, both immanent to art and language, and one that finds its home there, similarly collapses binaric determinations, in a fluid movement and exchange between word and thing, subject and object, forfeiting the kind of clarity and sharp delineations necessary for rationality to flourish, by bringing ground, surface and form[s] into a non-equivalent, pulsating relation. In rationality, real difference is cursed, made “monstrous”, if it forfeits a willing surrender to the determinate. Similarly, that which constitutes “common sense” can be understood as that which is taken as a given in thought; it consists of consciously (or otherwise) “agreed upon” terms of reference, which allow thought to conspire around unexamined, unproblematic concepts.¹² In distinction to this move, and as

74|75

8. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Ibid. This “elusive adversary” is posed as the intimate, entwined, but ultimately paralyzing relationship between the different and the indifferent, which cannot be undone.

9. Claire Colebrook, *Routledge Guide to Critical Thinkers: Gilles Deleuze*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 123.

10. Jean Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, translated by Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000), pp. 1-100.

11. See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, where he writes, “Form distinguishes itself from matter, or the ground, but not the converse, since distinction is itself a form,” p. 28.

12. Deleuze does not think of problems as there to be solved, but as ideas, which, unlike closed concepts, continue to proliferate and be productive. To be unproblematic, for Deleuze, is to deny the creative potential of thought. What is so “common” about common sense is that it relies upon specific analytic of judgment, one involving recognition, opposition, analogy and similarity (all mechanisms of the faculties). It recalls, rather than encounters an object of thought. Thinking, which for Deleuze can only be sensed rather than recognized (as in the form of a representation, grounded in identity-thinking), and which implies immanent encounters and events, ends, where agreement and conceptual

the starting point for Deleuze's philosophy of difference; we have what could be termed an "[un]common sense," one that explodes the mythical "common" which orients sense in relation to the same (identity), rather than to difference.

With this new orientation toward difference that Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a vital, urgent space for conceptualising real difference is established. Rather than presenting difference as a "not-belonging" (an outsider or other), it would make nonsense, paradox and "that which does not fit in" an attribute of, rather than a negation of, sense. Paradox would no longer be the insoluble, the unwelcome, the trivialized epiphenomenon, but evidence of real difference at work, and of multiple time[ing]s.

The gestures/traces of language seen in the sensual surfaces of undifferentiated marks and sounds, would be meaningful, and "name" meaning differently. In [un]common sense, cruelty becomes productive, and the monstrous becomes a refusal of assimilation to a norm. Both escape the tyranny of representation and identity politics.¹³ In place of sharp determinations, difference founded on opposition, and a form of thinking grounded in identity and the same, one finds, indetermination, difference-in-itself, intensity, and paradox, all of which are posed as a violently "discordant harmony", which run counter to common sense, and in turn invoke the richly productive conflict between imagination and reason which drives the Kantian sublime.¹⁴ Thinking, as this form of difference, becomes a material intensity without being sutured to the symbolic; logic-sense that embraces rather than opposes nonsense and negation; posing them as freedom, not loss. Such intensity, while escaping the trap of representation in thought, simultaneously denies the power of grammar and logic as imprisonments of thought.¹⁵

The sign or point of departure for that which forces thought is thus the coexistence of contraries, the coexistence of more and less in an unlimited qualitative becoming. Recognition, by contrast, measures and limits the quality by relating it to something, thereby interrupting the mad-becoming.¹⁶

identification begins. Thought's dynamic is tempered by the object of thought which has been tamed, de-intensified, reconciled via "a little bit of order" which takes us out of the pre-philosophical chaos, but halts thought, as it culminates in transcendence.

13. Cf. Kant's reference to the "prodigious" or "monstrous" as being at, or exceeding the limit of, the sublime as a pure (immanent) magnitude. He writes, "An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept." Immanuel Kant, § 26, "On Estimating the Magnitude", *Critique of Judgment*, translated by W. S. Pluhar, (New York: Hackett, 1987), pp. 109 and 253, respectively. In this sense, the monstrous can be seen aggressively to exceed and consume its own concept, courting self-destruction. This form of the sublime violates the commonality of judgments by exceeding our powers of apprehension.

14. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 146

15. Colebrook, *Deleuze*, p. 14.

16. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 141.

Paradox names or embodies such a “mad-becoming”. Contraries co-exist in, at, and upon the interruption of this “mad-becoming”. More and less are intertwined, and as a profound, radical simultaneity/contradiction, repetition and difference at one and the same time a paradox becomes the pure, unassimilable event; it features the “indissoluble something” which haunts the concept.¹⁷ In the opening pages of *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze develops the argument, showing how, via Lewis Carroll’s “Alice stories,” the paradox as “pure event” is revealed through the materiality of language. In the statement: “Alice becomes larger,” the familiar linear time/space relations in language give way to an ever-deferred present, characterized by an essential simultaneity, involving two or more things happening at the same time. In this case, both larger and smaller in/at the same instant; pulling in/at both directions at once; unfixable, mobile in any present. Alice is both smaller and larger at the same time by virtue of a paradoxical fabric of language whereby in the instant of saying “Alice becomes larger,” she is by necessity both larger than she was, but at the same time smaller than she will be. Language as “becoming” is irreconcilable with fixity, permanence and identity: its requirement is multivalent time[s].

The pure event, is one in which sense, speed, dimension, intensity, and direction are available at any given moment. Moving away from the rigidity and a-temporality on the part of identity-thinking, that have for so long thwarted conceptual suppleness, forces us to reconsider notions of permanence, fixed qualities, chronology [time/temporality] and the “present tense” of language upon which numerous accounts of meaning are founded. Bergson puts it like this:

76|77

The real, the experienced, and the concrete are recognized by the fact that they are variability itself; the element by the fact that it is invariable. And the element is invariable by definition, being a diagram, a simplified reconstruction, often a mere symbol, in any case a motionless view of the moving reality.¹⁸

17. A point that echoes (though in quite a different manner) throughout Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. For Adorno, The “indissoluble something” is the non-identical aspect of any concept, which cannot be absorbed into the concept nor represented by it, but nevertheless persists. Its incomposability and indispensability brings forth truth. The collision of concept and object always leaves a remainder, which thought cannot erase by any effort. When the concept of paradox meets its object, a “something” is released which is irreducible to the concept. As we will see shortly, we move from Adorno’s “non-identical” to Twombly’s dissolute graphemes: his undisciplined gestures. But see Theodor Adorno, “The Indissoluble Something,” *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 135–136.

18. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1999). p.42.

It is at this point that we return to Cy Twombly's work. Neither founded on invariable symbolic elements nor attempting to reconstruct the diagram (or any other entity) as something that lies beyond itself, Twombly refuses any form of pointing, proposing, or designating. Its grammar is non-indicative; its form non-denotational. In its inhabitation of matter as meaning[full]-in-itself, and its refusal to hold the figural to its promise of an uncomplicated and distinct relation to the ground, Twombly's work acknowledges the potential in Deleuze's claim that representational thinking based on the identical, the similar, the analogous, universal, oppositional and contradictory (thesis/anti-thesis; this/not-this and so on) is too limited; it cannot provide a space for real difference to emerge. In denying the inevitability of sameness or recognition, as a way to make meaning, it celebrates divergence, disparateness, and the dissimilar.¹⁹ Twombly's work exemplifies the power of negative as *affirmation*, not erasure; of the mobile, transitory, and un-nameable contradictory impulses and drives of thought; of movement and becoming in place of abstract concepts; of immanence, mutability; of the infinite nature and instability of paradox, which coalesces in an [un]common sense, and a making sense of the uncommon.

For Benjamin, thought necessarily involves the discontinuous presentation of "fragments of thoughts", set in an interruptive relationship of infinite detours. Coherence is to be found in the "flashes" and gaps in and between perceptible knowledge, rather than in the coherent sequencing of ideas or in the relatively uncomplicated collision of ideas and their presentation. Dissolution and dissonance, rather than denotation; heterophony rather than homophony; elision rather than elucidation – all bring meaning [truth, sense] into view.²⁰ To put this slightly differently: ideas may precede presentation, but the materializing of meaning, of truth, can only be sought in the interstices, the oblique, the constellatory.²¹ In this way, the

19. Barthes, *The Wisdom of Art*, op. cite.

20. Heterophony, a term originally found in Plato, is a form of music in which a single melodic line is the point of departure for simultaneous and overlapping variants, played at different rhythms, frequently at odds with conventional harmonic structure, and creating its own intricate dissonant textures. It can be found in many non-western forms of music. But see Plato, "Book II," in his *Laws*, translated by Benjamin Jowitt (The Project Gutenberg Ebook of Laws by Plato), last updated Jan 15, 2013 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.htm>.

21. Originally developed by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "constellation" was developed by Benjamin to name montage, fragmentary, disjunctive, often temporally unrelated configurations, which nevertheless produce meaning by allowing unseen correspondences to emerge instantaneously. Most famously developed in his *The Arcades Project*, (New York: Belknap Press, 2002). This methodological preference shares the original affinity with Adorno's notion of constellation, developed by Adorno as the process that unlocks the "specific side of the object", and, in so doing, exceeds conceptual categories. For Adorno, "constellation" named, amongst other things, the political economy of advanced capitalism. See Theodor Adorno, "Constellation," *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 162 and developed in detail in his *Aesthetic Theory*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2004), especially in "Situation," "Semblance and Expression," and "Towards a

mimetic faculty allows us to perceive what Benjamin calls nonsensuous (nonsensible) similarities, where the ordered surface[s] of language, which ordinarily conceal and subordinate the multiplicity of relationships of similarity within language, are abruptly broken, such that: “something similar can become apparent instantaneously, in a flash.”²² These types of discontinuous assemblages which Barthes, referring to the spatial qualities of Twombly’s work, calls “rare” (from the Latin for gaps or interstices, sparse, porous, scattered), are not a subordinate form of understanding, but make meaning precisely an [un]common sense.²³

Cy Twombly’s work not only makes matter materialise; it makes matter *matter*. In place of concepts, which inhibit thought’s intensity, permits ideas and problems to proliferate, without suffering the fatal closure of representation, it proposes an “event” of mark-making without determination, as an exemplification of non-representational thought, and a paradoxical, plural performance of *materia prima* [raw material] as stubborn indeterminacy and refusal to submit to a closure which proliferates a form of unproductive cruelty.²⁴ In its indifference to the harsh division of meaning (being immanently and obstinately *in-difference*), Twombly’s work wildly materialises sense in all its provocatively undisciplined slices, gestures and immanent differentiations. Benjamin’s proposal, that art “is always a question of, and questioning of, understanding” becomes, for Twombly – and for us – the embodiment and proliferation of such [un]disciplined gestures, which in turn form an [un]common sense.²⁵

78|79

Theory of the Artwork,” pp. 16–44, 100–117, 175–198, respectively.

22. Developed in 1933 as part of the general discussion on mimesis, see Walter Benjamin, *The Doctrine of the Similar*, (1933) originally in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Vol II, (Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 1977), pp. 204–210 and reproduced with permission at <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/488010?uid=3738032&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21102817560141>

23. Barthes, *The Art of Wisdom*, p. 105.

24. Cruelty, for both Deleuze, and Artaud, is a productive force, in its creation of a dynamic tension, and an aesthetic. Cruelty pushes thought to its limit, gives it definition, while simultaneously (paradoxically), enacting the deep-cut of meaning. However, in another reading of Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*, p.28), determinations, and fixed points of reference, are conceits of the intellect, which restrain and limit thought. In other words: they are a cruelty within thought, and do it harm. In contrast, Deleuze also proposes that language is not representation, or comprised of a series of fixed, static points, but pure becoming. Concepts cannot fix ideas, since ideas will always expand beyond the boundaries that seek to contain them, and are thus simplified and restrictive in comparison.

25. Carol Jacobs, “Letters From Walter Benjamin,” in her *In The Language of Walter Benjamin*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1999), p.1. On the question of gesture and its paradox as “outside” and “dirtying” the logic of representation and semiotics, see for example an early discussion by Barthes, where he writes: “[T]hese gestures, which aim to establish matter as fact, are all associated with making something dirty. Here is a paradox: a fact is more purely defined if it is not clean. Take a common object: it is not its new and virgin state which best accounts for its essence; it is rather a state in which it is deformed, a little worn, a little dirtied, a little forlorn: the truth of things is best read in refuse. It is in a smear that we find the truth of redness; it is in a wobbly line that we find the truth of pencil. Ideas (in the Platonic sense of the word) are not metallic and shiny Figures, in conceptual corsets, but rather faint shaky stains, on a vague background.” Barthes, *The Wisdom of Art*, p. 104.