

Dr. Sheena Calvert

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In Defence of [Un]disciplined Gestures

Proposal for Extending Gesture, A Colloquium at the University of Edinburgh

1. The Gesture of Paradox

A series of paradoxical gestures, as part presentation/part performance, to include:

Print • Dance • Voice

“... make language stammer, or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities.” —Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

As Adorno states in *Negative Dialectics*, the extension of the stringency of Enlightenment thought involves the “punishment of undisciplined gestures”. It follows that in philosophical logic, an undisciplined gesture would arrive in the form of a paradox; something unthinkable; incommensurable; irreconcilable.

Through experiments in dance/performance, print, and voice, this presentation will pose the possibility that, the undisciplined gesture of paradox *is* the *is* of language, that it's the relation; the techné; the grasp; evidence of the persistence of *doubt*. Rather than seeking to eliminate it as what has been termed a 'viral' presence in any system (mathematical/ linguistic/artistic), paradox is evidence of the very 'doubt-full' dynamic that keeps the system from atrophying: that which keeps it open and full; alive to potential; ever in movement. These points will be posed through work[s]-in progress, which suggest that paradox is the non-categorical; the non-identical; that which holds language/thought, apart and together, at one and the same instant. Through various media and experiences, paradox will be posed as the art and gesture of an assemblage which is consistently and restlessly re-assembling itself; flipping between sense and nonsense; evidencing, and repeating difference, not identity; and thus placing such difference, and not identity at the core of language/thought.

For example, the gesture of silence involves revealing and concealing in the same moment. By offering the gesture of withholding, while at the same time, drawing attention to that which is ordinarily unheard, Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, Beckett, and Cage all invoke silence as a particular form of undisciplined gesture. Poets try and take language to its limit, which ultimately means (paradoxically) silence. The spaces between words, are the gesture of silence at the heart of written language: meaningless, yet also full of meaning. The 'Cretan', or 'The Liar Paradox' are different names for the type of self-referential statements such as “this sentence is a lie”, which thwart attempts at stable assignment of truth/validity, being simultaneously both true and false: constituting a paradox, and destabilizing identity as formed through language.

Vilém Flusser, in ‘The Gesture of Writing’, and ‘Does Writing Have a Future?’ establishes that “we do not think about writing while writing”; a paradox at the core of our engagement with language, which Giorgio Agamben invokes slightly differently:

“To bring the word to a stop is to pull it out of the flux of meaning, to exhibit it as such” —Giorgio Agamben, *Difference and Repetition* from: *Texts of the Situationist International* p.317

This proposal therefore takes as its point of departure, the claim that difference, not identity, is the primary quality of language. This difference is argued to consist of an economy of acoustic surfaces/timings/spatialities: diffuse, interpenetrative, and unclassifiable: a ‘sensual’ logic, not a logic based on identity, or metaphysics. 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. They claim that language is able to unambiguously locate concepts, concretely, in time and space, unproblematically supporting thought. In contrast, the proposal is part of a group of works which seek to extend and complicate categories of logic, to include doubt, paradox, infinity and ‘unstable’ forms of understanding, as evidence of difference as the primary quality of language: a “mimetologic” as Lacoue-Labarthe has termed it, or what Adorno calls an anti-system, or Negative Dialectic. The ‘difference’ which paradox, in its ability to be this/not this, embodies, shows us the limits of representational thinking; as it strains against that limit, while simultaneously (and paradoxically), retrieving the intensity of thought.

A Brief Philosophical Background

According to Adorno, the presupposition that language is the sole sanctioned vehicle for philosophical reflection is also its source of vulnerability. He explains how Walter Benjamin claims a role for the ‘impermissible ‘poetic’ expression’, where the mutual interdependence of stringency (discipline), and expression (un-discipline) in the gesture(s) of philosophical expression is retained. Each requires the other for the fullness of thought to take place (Adorno, 1966. p.18)

As Nietzsche reminds us, thought itself is infinitely complex in ways which the disciplinary mechanisms of logic cannot capture:

“Causality eludes us; to suppose a direct causal link between thoughts, as logic does—that is the consequence of the crudest and clumsiest observation. Between two thoughts, all kinds of affects play their game: but their motions are too fast, therefore we fail to recognize them, we deny them” —Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 477

While the stability of identity thinking reassures, and language supports and participates in its myth, the particularized movement(s) which are a part of language/thought, are, it will be argued, what makes language ‘work’. Rather than seeking to eliminate contradiction, or to ignore the swift affects which are immanent to language, in favour of the firm but reductive ground of identity thinking, if the ‘play’ of paradox-as-doubt could be retained as a mobile/transitory, and fractured ‘ground’ for language, then what kind of thought would be possible?

“The presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it, but immanent to its idea. Its integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression

is objectified only by presentation in language". —Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.18

As a way to preface these questions, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that dialectics privileges the relation between language and thought: consciously centering thought (and content) upon it. However, he points out the paradoxical nature of this relation: "Mythical is that which never changes, ultimately diluted to a formal legality of thought". For Adorno, there is a problem when:

"[T]he appearance of *identity* is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend" —Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.5

He claims that abstract conceptualization, paradoxically reaches toward, but cannot account for, nor can it contain, the object of that thought: there is always a 'something', beyond conceptual thinking, which metaphysical schemas such as dialectics, by virtue of their very nature, cannot attain. "it indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (Adorno, 1966. p.5). If "conceptual totality is mere appearance" (Adorno, 1966. p.5), then the only realistic challenge to it is to shatter that illusion on its own terms. However, this would involve a challenge to logic, which will not admit of anything which stands outside its terms: all non-conforming aspects are subsumed under the principle of contradiction, and dealt with as aggressive and unwelcome antinomies: unthinkable (paradoxes).

As Adorno establishes, in this schema, identity thinking (paradoxically) reigns, since to possess a concept of the contradictory/the negative means to set that thought (to counterpose it) in opposition to the unity of the concept (again, establishing it in relation to identity).

"Identity and thought are welded together. Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification. Contradiction is non-identity under the rule of a law that affects the nonidentical as well" (Adorno, 1966. p.5).

In other words: there is no negation without a positive term of reference, leading Adorno to conclude that: "Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity" (Adorno, 1966. p.5). We differentiate by having something against which to compare, to identify in relation to. That which is *not*, is contrasted to that which *is*, and this is *still* identity thinking, leading us back to a paradox.

The Experimental/[Un]disciplined Gestures Workshop

This leads to the following considerations: what does it mean to have pure difference in language/thought? What would thought's relation be to this type of language? If language is not posed as identity, but as something truly differentiated, as a pure multiplicity, then how does/can language support thought, at the level of praxis? What sort of thinking becomes possible if, instead of seeing language as fixed, immutable, stable, and metaphysical, language is posed as a series of 'undisciplined gestures', which stand outside the 'Archimedean Point' of identity thinking?

For the purposes of posing these kind of questions, in the form of the proposed group of presentations and engagements (print/dance/voice), language might be thought of as differently 'tensioned', as in the skin of a drum which involves the literal tensioning of a surface to achieve acoustic modulations, and which involve various resonances,

expansions, excursions, contractions, temporalities, movements. Does it follow that in place of “instrumental” forms of language, we could productively contemplate language as an instrument?

Truth for Walter Benjamin is performance (Darstellung). For the artist Cy Twombly, truth is the ‘unworking’ of language as a *performance* of writing, not writing (language) itself: an ‘[Un]disciplined gesture’. The associated essay: [Un]disciplined Gestures and [Un]common sense will give an overview of the ways in which both Benjamin and Twombly’s work supports the proposed presentation, which aims to enact these (and other) thoughts in a participatory way, through printing (a small letterpress is to be provided), dance/performance screening (collaboration with Hannah Lammin), and voice (Sheena Calvert/Jonathan Kemp/Ken Hollings ‘other’).

The experience for the participants of this 1 hour session will involve exposure to a range of gestures related to these questions of paradox, doubt, and the non-identical in language. Taken together, these form a group of [Un]disciplined gestures, which point towards some of the philosophical issues which Flusser and others raise with respect to language/writing/gesture. A print will be made by each participant, and taken away as part of the session.

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