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The Phenomenon of Historicist Melancholy in Artistic Research and a Deleuzian Alternative

Abstract

In this article, I propose a comparative analysis between two conceptions of artistic research. One governed by historicist melancholy and an alternative model informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. In juxtaposing these two conceptions of artistic research, I explore their theories of materiality and temporality to locate the nexus of their divergence in the realm of the artwork qua sign and the consequent mode of signaling deployed by each position. I am ultimately pointing to the possibility of an art history informed by the thought of Deleuze as capable of abandoning melancholy as a disciplinary and methodological presupposition for the sake of a different affective power: Spinozist joy.

Keywords

Gilles Deleuze, Michael Ann Holly, Aesthetics, Melancholy, Transmissibility

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to complicate a disciplinary presupposition and methodological aim of art-historical research: historicist melancholy.¹ The goal is to provide a comparative theoretical analysis between two conceptions of artistic research: one governed by historicist melancholy and an alternative model informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. As a representative of this first conception, I take Michael Ann Holly's assessment in *The Melancholy Art* as my point of departure, which argues forcefully for

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¹ See Emerling 2019, 14. He notes that, "Research as an experimental methodology must examine itself as much as it does the state of the world."

a self-conscious acceptance of mourning and melancholy as the “twin sisters” accompanying any art-historical endeavor, or mode of artistic research. Conversely, I will detail a Deleuzian alternative that attempts to dispense with all of the melancholic accouterment attached to Holly’s conception by tracing their respective points of difference.

Therefore, my article is separated into two sections, each with two parts. The first section will begin with an account of Holly’s essay *Mourning and Method*; in which Holly advocates for a reassessment of the character of the space between the artwork and the researcher, wherein she locates what she calls the “unresolved mourning” enacted by the object-hood of the artwork (2002, 661).² Following this, I detail Holly’s account of the artwork as an “orphan” encountered by the researcher whose methodological aim is to restore or recover the originary intent, meaning, or value (s e n s e) of said “orphan” to carve out a dwelling place for the artwork in a contemporary setting (2013, 6). Consequently, it will become clear that this historicist melancholy is constituted based on a particular conception of materiality and temporality that seems to deprive the artwork and the artistic researcher of any autonomous creative power by tethering them to a closed and inescapable past.³

The second section begins with an account of an alternative model of both materiality and temporality—and a consequent re-estimation of the artwork and its sense—as Gilles Deleuze advocates. This account is an onto-aesthetic mode of becoming which sustains the affective and trans-historical potential of the artwork as an art-event that produces heterogeneous and aleatory forces for the future. This art-event cannot but help to complicate the ethico-political context in which it is encountered. Following this, I invoke the concept of t r a n s m i s s i b i l i t y (Emerling 2017) as a new mode of artistic research, aiming to replace historicist melancholy with Spinozist joy in artistic research.

² See Holly 2002, 668. She writes, “I am tempted to argue in general that the discipline of art history is eternally fated to be a melancholic one, primarily because the objects it appropriates as its own always and forever keep the wound open (the cut between present and past, word and image)—resistant to interpretation, these works of art nonetheless insistently provoke it.”

³ See Hegel 1975, 10. He notes that art “is a thing of the past.” See further Bergson 2007, 10-14 and 82-84, on the “retrograde movement of truth” and the closed past of a spatialized time.

Unresolved Mourning and the Open Wound of Research

Holly's thesis on the role of mourning in artistic research is predicated upon two interrelated dualisms. Holly intends to advocate for a certain autonomy on the side of the object, contra the somewhat popular view in poststructuralist frameworks, which privileges the utterly subjective status of all interpretative acts: "It had long been a commonplace of poststructuralist thinking that all the energy for interpretation emanates from the 'subjective' side of the equation, and I wanted to restore a certain agency to the objects themselves" (2002, 660). Holly is here interested in the specific power of the artwork, its autonomy, as it works upon the specific kind of subject who enters into artistic research—the mode of prompting that this affective power takes, and what this prompting might illuminate for the self-reflective artistic researcher if this power is rendered solely as arising from the objective side of the equation.

As such, Holly's interest is in dubbing the affective power of the object, as it acts on the artistic researcher, "unresolved mourning" in the sense that the object elicits in the subject a desire to pursue an ultimately futile activity of sense-production that can never provide a satisfactory fulfillment or completion fitting such a hyperbolic demand. Further, "The very materiality of objects with which we [artistic researchers] deal presents historians of art with an interpretative paradox absent in other historical inquiries, for works of art are at the same time lost and found, past and present" (Holly 2002, 661). That is, the concomitant status of the artwork as lost-found presents the artistic researcher with a materially given image that bespeaks an anterior significance now lost to a distant past.⁴

The first dualism originates then with the classic subject-object paradigm that locates on the side of the subject a rational or linguistic power—what Holly labels as the "word"—and on the objective side, the phenomenon as a locus of representational immediacy—what Holly calls the "image." This image-word dualism constitutes a gap in the sense that Holly sees as being paradoxically both insurmountable and yet ever-beckoning for the artistic researcher: "The constitutional inability of the discipline to possess objective meanings, to make contemporary words say something definitive about historical images—however much its practitioners might genuinely try—is what I imagine to be the source of its institutional melancholy" (2002,

⁴ See Panofsky 1955, 24. He notes, "The humanities are not faced by the task of arresting what would otherwise slip away, but enlivening what would otherwise remain dead."

667). Therefore, the artistic researcher is called upon by the objects themselves to restore or recover a past home that these artworks used to maintain: to rehabilitate a world of signification that is only implicated by the artwork as a contextual fragment. The preeminence of a contextualist teleology of the image as a (re)presentation of a lost past of meaningful content brings forth our second dualism: past-present.

Holly's conception of the labor of artistic researchers as "narratives of desire, doomed searches after lost origins" (2002, 667) is conditioned by what she calls an "ethical commitment to the past" (2002, 667). However, the past Holly envisions here is one she admittedly shares with Johann Joachim Winckelmann as being utterly "beyond resurrection, possibly even [beyond] recognition" (2002, 667).⁵ This second dualism is, therefore, a conception of the artwork as a confrontation of past-present in its material structure—a dualism reflected in the space of the artistic researcher's confrontation with the artwork as a contextual fragment of an irrecoverable past in the moment of encounter. Thus, artistic research is doomed to a melancholic malaise because of an inherent alienation and separation of sense: the artwork, as estranged from its original world, from its Idea, is subjected to a never-ending process of relative meanings which fail to capture the absolute sense that remains locked in a past that never returns. A past whose sole purpose is to render artistic research a backward-facing enterprise as it compels those researchers who encounter the work in the present to compile endless interpretations of possible significations that can only ever approximate an inceptive sense that is now utterly absent: "The discipline of art history is eternally fated to be a melancholic one, primarily because the objects it appropriates as its own always and forever keep the wound open (the cut between present and past, word and image)—resistant to interpretation, these works of art nonetheless insistently provoke it" (Holly 2002, 668). Therefore, the structuration of the sense of the artwork is what must be addressed if we are to gain clarity as to how the artwork as an object exercises its melancholic force.

⁵ See Winckelmann 1968, 364-365. He writes, "[We] have [...] nothing but the shadowy outline left of the object of our wishes, but that very indistinctness awakens only a more earnest longing for what we have lost. [...] we must not shrink from seeking after the truth, even though its discovery wounds our self-esteem."

Holly and the Artwork as Orphan

According to Holly, the orphan-hood of the artwork is predicated upon two constitutive facets of the object-hood of every artwork: its materiality and temporality (2013, xi).⁶ As such, the artistic encounter specific to the art historian is itself conditioned by these self-same facets; that is, every art-historical encounter with an artwork is mediated by a theory of materiality and temporality which inaugurates the melancholic passion of aesthetic reception suffered by the artistic researcher. As already alluded to, this theory of materiality privileges an original sense or Idea that holds sway over the researcher, and this theory of temporality privileges a closed and unalterable past that demands the researcher's indefinite homage. Let us explore these two facets of an artwork's sense-structure to draw out their melancholic force in more detail.

Under Holly's rubric, the materiality and temporality of the artwork functions along an axis of presence-absence. Holly writes, "The melancholy that courses through the history of art is a product of its perhaps unconscious awareness that works that seem so present are absent; they look back at you, but whose gaze is it? It is the estrangement embedded in this ambiguity that both haunts and animates art historians' activities" (2013, xii). The "animate absence" of the artwork's significance that Holly invokes here is derived from the confrontation of a physical-material presence of the artwork as a concrete entity exiting in the spectator's space, and the "wordlessness" of that same entity now deprived of its proper signified: the referent as lost to the linear trajectory of an unalterable past-time. The confrontation of these two poles produces that personal unfamiliarity that grips each spectator when they encounter an artwork: an image as intuitively decipherable yet deprived of its original sense-making framework and consequently rendered as ultimately unintelligible or uncanny.⁷ Holly's move here is to equate the artwork as an existing entity with a contentless matter-form hybrid:

⁶ See Holly 2013, 16. She writes, "The emotional life of art history is predicated upon loss (of time, of context), even though it is refracted through objects, shadows of their former selves, that insistently persist in occupying a strange and lonely contemporary space."

⁷ See Holly 2013, 20. She notes, "Most of us, both experts and laypersons, know that the past is irrecoverable, but what do we do with relics and material orphans so vivid, so tantalizingly concrete, that we cannot help but feel deprived' in their presence? This is the distinctive dilemma of the history of art from which we cannot escape, and melancholy is the key that locks us in."

an essentially empty yet materially composed structure whose standard components only cohere insofar as an unknown and impenetrable sense remains forever withdrawn from rational access. This withdrawn content is raised to the level of a suprasensible Idea whose force of power as the *archē* is sustained by a mechanism of internal resemblance: progressive approximations toward an ethereal signified that can only ever be pursued but never captured.⁸ The artwork so encountered is given to the artistic researcher as a failed or failing signifier whose vitality is only manifest as a fading cry from oblivion.

The object as an orphan “comes to us from an unknowable past,” but it beseeches us “for attention and care in the present.. And their [artwork’s] meanings, ironically, reside in their perpetual loss of meaning” (Holly 2013, 7). Consequently, temporality arrives on the scene as the mechanism by which the “animate absence” of an artwork’s ultimate meaning remains forever in abeyance. That is, trapped in an unalterable past from which the contemporary researcher only encounters a fragment or remnant in the form of the artwork-turned-artifact in the present: as a hyperbolic signal emitted from the artwork qua contextual sign of a once unified whole.

We might say that there exists, for Holly, in effect, two series of sense operating on the plane of an artwork’s affective enactments. Primarily, the closed past permanently captures an ultimate or essentially withdrawn meaning. This meaning leaves the materially composed structure of an artwork in a contentless state of “animate absence,” deprived of an absolute sense. Nevertheless, the residual materiality, the quasi-emptied form, remains like an abandoned corpse prompting the artistic researcher—now turned detective—to enter into a quest for restoration and recovery. Regardless of the irrevocably withdrawn nature of this ultimate meaning, the detective’s work of hopeless recovery provides the artwork with a second series of potentially infinite meanings aimed at filling the unfillable void left by the first, making the second series both logically dependent upon the first and ontologically echoic of its primordial Idea. Thus, artistic research for Holly

⁸ See Deleuze 1990, 257. He writes, “For if copies or icons are good images and are well-founded, it is because they are endowed with resemblance. But resemblance should not be understood as an external relation. It goes less from one thing to another than from one thing to an Idea, since it is the Idea which comprehends the relations and proportions constitutive of the internal essence... The copy truly resembles something only to the degree that it resembles the Idea... In short, it is the superior identity of the Idea which founds the good pretension of the copies, as it bases it on an internal or derived resemblance.”

intends to “make visible the absence that is past,” but it is also the “activity that perpetually resurrects the desire to make meaning where it might no longer exist” (2013, xx).

Furthermore, this “desire” is the product of an inalienable law of derivation that renders all second-series meanings, perforce, inadequate to the role of ever providing a sufficient meaning when an artwork confronts one.⁹ Sufficiency here does not denote exhaustiveness or completeness. Instead, sufficient to go beyond this degenerating practice of indefinite approximation by abandoning the activity of constantly rejecting one insufficient meaning after another for the sake of growing ever-closer to an originary goal whose withdrawn character is insurmountable.

This adequation of sense and absence seems to not only neuter the artwork of all autonomy at the entitative level—insofar as the artwork stands as a void in need of continual re-filling—but worse, it relegates the would-be creative force and affective potency of the work to the derivative realm of pure subservience to the project of contextual reconstruction.¹⁰ Rehabilitating a lost world of ultimate sense through a revolving process of relative sense is the price one pays for participating in the melancholy art: “Given that the focus of the history of art’s labors is always toward recovering that which is almost gone, this primal desire must be labeled melancholic... In the plaintive writing of art history, we have a ‘loss without a lost object’ (an authentic melancholic predicament) in which the object is both held onto and gone astray simultaneously” (Holly 2013, 6). In sum, the disci-

⁹ Although Holly attempts to nominate melancholy as “the creative principle” of artistic research, the ontogenetic element here cannot be ignored (Holly 2013, xxi). That is, melancholy unquestionably originates in a lack (negative determination as founding movement of desire)—as such, this ‘creativity’ is reactive (precisely in the Nietzschean sense of the term) and is thus confined to a life of servitude operating under the auspices of a transcendent and ineffable Idea. Just because there are reactive modes of activity that undoubtedly ‘create’ does not by any means demonstrate that such ‘creativity’ adequately or accurately expresses the real autonomy of either the artworks or the artistic researcher—both of whom exceed the boundaries of contextualism in virtue of their very contact with one another in the extra-historical compulsion felt by a researcher when confronted by an artwork from an entirely unrelated context than his own.

¹⁰ Despite Holly’s claim to the contrary, the autonomy of the artwork seems to be hardly obtainable on the basis of its being conceived of as a positivized void whose inherent emptiness entombs the researcher in an always already failed quest of insufficient sense-production. All creative possibility is de-fanged from the start under the guise of an ethical commitment to generate meaning that must be judged by an impassable absence. See Harman 2019, for an account of the complications within contemporary aesthetics on the problem of the autonomy of the art-object.

plinary project of artistic research, on Holly's account, is to approximate an original (diachronic) unity of the artwork forever; while providing admittedly and constitutionally inadequate senses whose fruit it is to maintain an illusion of imperfect relevancy while being haunted by a withdrawn and incommunicable content¹¹ whose primordial force exercises its impassable authority through a supposed absence in the present. This absence automatically denigrates any second-series ascriptions of sense by directing them to a mysterious past's always and already determined verdict. Thus, on Holly's account, an artwork is inherently meaningless and impotent in principle on account of its constitutive facets: its materiality bespeaks an immediate inadequacy of sense and Idea, leaving the artwork to exist as an empty sepulcher, housing a physical absence; and its temporality is eo ipso self-alienating as it instills, within itself, a fundamental activity of invalidating its own properly aesthetic operation. The melancholic force of an artwork here, its aesthetic power, is its haunting call, its mournful beckoning for repetitive encounters with an abyssal void of pointless and empty presence.¹²

¹¹ Holly attempts to expand her formulation of temporality outward towards the future by invoking Aby Warburg's concept of the *Nachleben* in her discussion of artworks as "psychic repositories of time" (Holly 2013, 76). However, this "afterlife" of an artwork's affective power is rendered in Holly's framing as more of a hauntology than anything else, as evinced by her broader project of discussing "cultural memory" under the rubric of "presence and absence." Thus, Holly situates her invocation of the *Nachleben* within the confines of Baxandall's "idiosyncratic brand of melancholic history writing" and Benjamin's theories concerning Baroque "mourning plays." Interestingly though, Holly does not contend with Benjamin's account of the now intransmissible character of tradition is his rendering of modern art's "new barbarism" (Benjamin 1999, 773). The import here being that it is not at all necessary to treat the irretrievability of original context as the impetuous for insufficient returns of relative sense still subjugated to the Idea; rather, the openness of a future freed from such pretensions would render the past itself anew through artistic research. In Deleuzian language: the irretrievability of original context does not testify to the mystery and transcendence of the Idea but reveals its weakness in attempting to subordinate the anarchical powers of difference to the regulatory functions of identify. Thus there is merely an anemic sense of the future in Holly's formulation of temporality.

¹² See Baudrillard 2005, 47. He notes, "I have the impression that a good portion of art today is conspiring in a process of deterrence, a work of mourning the image and the imaginary, a work of aesthetic mourning. This work usually fails, leading to the general melancholy of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive by recycling its history and its vestiges."

Past-Present or Past-Future: Deleuze and Openness

As noted, the closed past that entombs the artwork's Idea and the researcher's unresolved wound is based on a structuration of sense that entails a specific theory of materiality and temporality. If there is to be an alternative to this historicist melancholy, it must be identified based on isolating an alternative sense of sense and a corresponding alteration in the component theories undergirding that new sense: matter and time. Nevertheless, beyond just the isolation of a different configuration, we must also ascertain whether there is cause to believe in the applicability of this new configuration to the practice of artistic research. In what follows, I will thus target the two points of contrast between Holly's conception of sense and Deleuze's; and then invoke the recent work of Jae Emerling to demonstrate the applicability of this configuration and its power to replace melancholy with joy.

The implicated semiotic operating in Holly's theory of sense maintains, in essence, two unassailable principles: a power of the past to animate the present and a hylomorphism—whose conjoined powers harbor the call of aesthetic mourning. Let us take them in turn, beginning with the power of the past to animate the present.

Contra Holly, for Deleuze, art is a "power of the future" (Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 108). Moreover, the future is the extimate¹³ power that animates the past (Emerling 2017, 8-9). At least two important implications must be drawn from this dethroning of the past. First, as is well known, Deleuze's philosophy of time is heavily indebted to the Bergsonian notion of the pure past (Deleuze 1991). Time is not divisible into discrete tenses of past, present, and future as if time itself were to be cleanly differentiated into unrelated substantial categories of successive simultaneities. Instead, following Bergson, there are only degrees of co-existence and transformation wherein the pure past coexists with each present—wherein every present serves as a contraction of the pure past, which is itself transformed with every new contraction (Deleuze 1991). The interpenetration of the past-present on this account requires an "outside" force animating each of the novel cracks and fissures that initiate these past-present contractions. Secondly, the future, as an extimate power that animates the past itself, is the desire for immanence:

¹³ Extimacy is a concept taken from Jacques Lacan that indicates an intimate exteriority, a power that resides deep within and whose force arrives from without. See Lacan 1997, 139. As Deleuze writes, "an inside that would be deeper than any interior world and an outside that would be more distant than every external world." See Deleuze 1988, 96.

a revolutionary force always seeking “more connections and assemblages” (Deleuze, Parnet 2007, 79). Emerling explains, “The future is the desire to search the past and make different presents livable; it is the desire to actualize different configurations and effects in lieu of the present. For Deleuze, an event is nothing other than a movement of becoming that traverses time immanently, repeating and thus differentiating anew the [pure] succession of past, present, and future” (2017, 8).

Therefore, the extimate power of the future is generative of events, and the mode of the event is “the problematic” (Deleuze 1990, 54).¹⁴ For our purposes, what matters here is the indefiniteness of the problematic, its lack of origination and destination: and its radical openness for an aleatory and heterogeneous set of possible re-encounters.¹⁵ This philosophy of time leads Deleuze to speak of art in the same vein as the Swiss-German visual artist Paul Klee: as always needing a people to come.¹⁶ That is, as essentially future-oriented in its potentially anarchic openness.¹⁷ The art-event is constituted, in part, based on this openness qua inherent and subsistent power of possibility: an art-event that is at once past-future.¹⁸ Deleuze, with Guattari, writes, “It is true that every work of art is a *monument*, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument’s action is not

¹⁴ See Emerling 2017, 5. He writes, “A problematic is a conjunction of question and answer beyond the logic of everyday usage and life” (2017). See also, Deleuze 1990, 56, where he writes: “The question is developed in problems, and the problems are enveloped in a fundamental question. And just as solutions do not suppress problems, but on the contrary discover in them the subsisting conditions without which they would have no sense, answers do not at all suppress, nor do they saturate, the question, which persists in all of the answers. There is therefore an aspect in which problems remain without a solution, and the question without an answer.”

¹⁵ See Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 177-178 on the relation of art and possibility.

¹⁶ See Klee 1964, 114. He writes, “We still lack the ultimate power, for: the people are not with us. But we seek a people.” See also, Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 110. They write, “The artist or philosopher is quite incapable of creating a people, each can only summon it with all his strength. A people can only be created in abominable sufferings, and it cannot be concerned any more with art or philosophy. But books of philosophy and works of art also contain their sum of unimaginable sufferings that forewarn of the advent of a people. They have resistance in common—their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present.”

¹⁷ See Wind 1985, 6. He writes, “the magic of art is inseparable from its risks.”

¹⁸ See Emerling, Preziosi 2015, on art as an event in contemporary aesthetics.

memory but fabulation" (1994, 167-168).¹⁹ Moreover, again, "A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-created protestations, their constantly resumed struggles" (1994, 176-177).

As we saw with Holly's account of the temporal facet of an artwork's sense, the tyranny of the past bespoke an insurmountable alienation between the artwork's originary Idea and the consequent series of infinite ascriptions of relative senses that all, perforce, fall short of re-establishing an imagined anterior unity, and Deleuze's imagery of a "monument" seems to be rife for such analysis; and yet, importantly, the openness of the "ear of the future" perverts the logic of the artwork's Idea under the condition of the art-event as being at once a past-future linkage. For Deleuze, the Idea does not pre-exist sense-making, but is constituted in the arrival of the force of those "persistent sensations" transmitted forever forward and onward. Thus, there is no mourning over the inherent insufficiency of sense, no pinning for a mythic unity lost to the irrecoverable past, and no world-poverty of the artwork to haunt the researcher-turned-detective. There is only the urge to attune one's ears to the vibrations and resonances of the opening that is an art-event.

On Holly's account of materiality, matter is conceived of hylomorphically.²⁰ That is, matter under this rubric is still a reactive and passive vessel awaiting the activity of a form to provide the principle for the content of its expression. Thus, devoid of an ultimate sense—acting as an inceptive Idea lost to the irrecoverable past—the contentless matter, as a remnant tethered to the materiality of the artwork, manifests as a present absence: the past-present dualism of Holly's philosophy of time. Contra this theory of materiality, Deleuze argues for a conception of matter as that which "fills both space and time" (Emerling 2017, 8) as "an entire energetic materiality in movement" (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 408). Matter is the Body without Organs that opposes the organized organism (hylomorphic entity) (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 43 and 158)—a matter freed from the tyranny of external law, no longer subjected to a pre-formed content, no longer restrained by the oversight of an originary and pre-existing Idea. The hylomorphic dualism of mat-

¹⁹ See Bogue 2010, for an in-depth account of Deleuze's ad(a/o)ption of Bergson's concept of fabulation.

²⁰ See Holly 2014, 15. She writes, "I regard materiality as *the meeting of matter and imagination*, the place where opposites take refuge from their perpetual strife."

ter-form is replaced by “material-force” (Deleuze 1993, 35); and “all force is appropriation, domination, exploitation of a quantity of reality” (Deleuze 1983, 3); and “all reality is already a quantity of force” (Deleuze 1983, 40). For Deleuze, therefore, the coalescence or contact of any two forces constitutes a body, and a body is thus the product of chance—a chance which is the essence of force itself as the dynamic and incalculable dice throw of an eternal return (Deleuze 1983). In other words, matter is the flux of immanence, active and not passive or static. Aesthetically speaking, matter passes into a sensation in the art-event (Deleuze, Guattari 1994; Deleuze 1993), and sensation is therefore the composition of affects and percepts as the respective modes of force which operate on the viewer-spectator as a “present bloc of sensations”: or, as a monument (Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 167). This Body without Organs, as the matter of a semiotic of material-force that thoroughly permeates any and every plane of immanence, describes a conception of materiality that leaves little room for discerning an absence in the artwork as the remainder of a past-present Idea. Instead, as the constant and perpetual eruption of forces coming into contact with one another, matter itself becomes a symptom of the future, which finds its meaning in an existing amalgamation of forces as past-present contractions that are rendered aesthetically as past-future disruptions: an art-event as a sign whose “Idea refers to a para-sense” as the disjunctive synthetic opening of possibility as such (Deleuze 1994, 146).²¹

Thus, an art-event is constituted along the asymptotic becoming of the two lines of past-future and material-force. Therefore, Deleuze’s alternative sense of sense is one of pure affirmation—an openness to the opening of the future rendered by the arrival of a monument. For Deleuze, “there is always a plurality of senses” with no ultimate sense or pre-existent Idea as absolute determining the denigrated role of relative senses (1983, 7). This plurality of senses is a “constellation,” a “complex of successions but also co-existences which make interpretation an art” (1983, 3-4). This art of interpretation comprises the role and task of the artistic researcher.

Therefore, we now turn to the concept of transmissibility to explicate the potential applicability of this Deleuzian art in the context of providing an alternative to historicist melancholy.

²¹ See further Deleuze 1994, 214 and 260.

Transmissibility and the Art of Interpretation

A monument arrives in the present and is erected here and now, but its futural force is not always received even though it is constantly being transmitted. Thus, we must consider the monument qua art-event as a sign whose manner of signaling is transmitting.²² Emerling writes,

I define transmissibility as a mode of an artwork and thus as a creative aim of artistic re-search. It posits that ontologically and aesthetically an artwork traces the lines of time that deframe and compose the present. But, transmissibility has nothing to do with representing the cultural past. Instead, it has everything to do with a temporal deframing of any cultural representation *and* with the composition of other modes of culture within the present. For me, this is what makes artistic re-search vital and creative. Artistic re-search is a futural force that creates ontological, ethical, and epistemic effects, if only because it reveals how and why varying temporalities and hence different becomings are immanently enfolded within each supposed discrete tense (past, present, future) (2017, 3).

According to Emerling, therefore, transmissibility qua mode of an art-event has two constitutive movements: deframing and composition. Thus, transmissibility qua mode of artistic research has two constitutive movements: weighing and selecting. The artistic researcher open to the opening of the art-event qua sign can appropriate a transmitted force. That is, to deframe the present is to weigh the futural power made available by the arrival of a monument—by recognizing that “not every sense has the same value” and that each monument has an essence as “that one [sense], among all the senses of a thing, which gives it the force with which it has the most affinity” (Deleuze 1983, 5). The coalescence of affinity and a singular monument’s highest force is the concrete expression of chance in art’s disruptive, creative, and critical action: “It is this action—*transmissibility*—that allows becoming to unfold. This becoming ensnares the work as much as the artist and the viewer/listener/reader” (Emerling 2017, 6). *To weigh* is the interpretative and evaluative function of the artistic researcher’s engaging with a monument.

Consequently, to select is to affirm the necessity of that chance—the becoming of the monument’s past-future character as “that sort of crowned anarchy, that overturned hierarchy which, in order to ensure the selection of difference, begins by subordinating the identical to the different” (Deleuze 1994, 41). *Selection* is the act by which the artistic researcher embraces

²² See further Deleuze 1994, 20. See also Emerling 2023, 3-4.

the production of sense based on a futural difference made possible in the present and not an original Idea pre-existing the meaning of an art-event. Stated otherwise, this is an “untimely procedure” marking the emergence of “another actuality, another becoming” that shapes an immanent difference that has not been but *will have been* through such an interpretative-innovative encounter (Emerling 2005, 242).²³ Of course, this autonomy of the artistic researcher is not the enactment of a liberal will freely exercising its demand to determine the sense of an art-event; instead,

Eternal return alone effects the true selection, because it eliminates the average forms and uncovers ‘the superior form of everything that is.’ The extreme is not the identity of opposites, but rather the univocity of the different; the superior form is not the infinite, but rather the eternal formlessness of the eternal return itself, throughout its metamorphoses and transformations. Eternal return ‘makes’ the difference because it creates the superior form (Deleuze 1994, 55).

Similarly, the autonomy of the art-event is finally obtained. In that,

All this leaves us with the ability to posit that an artwork is what it does: it renders new passages, new modes of becoming, between past and future. These passages are always *untimely* because they are *inherent* unhistorical lines of time that flow within the present. Transmissibility is the power of an artwork to deframe any cultural representation *and* to compose with other modes of culture. Transmissibility is this double movement, which creates aesthetic and historical encounters with singularities rather than subjects (Emerling 2017, 7).

Thus, historicist melancholy—with its reliance upon a sense of sense that necessitates a closed past and hylomorphism as constitutive of artworks, is juxtaposed with joy as the affirmation of openness and possibility. The openness to the future and the possibility to fulfill—to fulfill not only the power of the artwork as art-event, but the power of the artistic researcher as co-creator of this future in the present: to compose with the object of study through weighing and selection. As Deleuze reminds us:

²³ See Emerling 2005, 242–243. See also: “A retrospective figure of what is to come, this *histor* maintains a fidelity to what comes next, after, or beyond our contemporary impasse by citing what remains. This aesthetic figure is guided by an insight that reveals the paradox of transmissibility in its starkest light: passing between what-has-been (*das Gewesene*) and artifice it makes possible an affirmative, creative event of recollection. This confounds historicism while, at the same time, acknowledges that tradition is irreparable.” See further, Emerling 2009.

Joy is everything that consists in fulfilling a power of action (*remplir une puissance*)... You experience joy when you fulfill it, when you realize one of your powers of action. So, what is that? Let's return to some earlier examples: I conquer, however little this might be, a small piece of color, I enter a little further into color. I think that is what joy might be. That's what fulfilling a power of action is, realizing (*effectuer*) a power of action, causing a power of action to be fulfilled (Deleuze 1996).

This mode of research is explicitly and reflexively productive and transformative as it enacts its anarchic style of interpretation. As an active encounter "fulfilling a power of action," the co-creative function of the researcher is no longer rendered as a negatively determined process of recapturing a long-lost sense; but is instead now conceived of as a perpetual means of invention, of "constru(ct)ing" sense.²⁴ Under the mood produced by such joy, artistic researchers can uncover and compose what *will have been* alongside an artwork that works upon them as they work upon it—a radical project of productive conjunction and association.

Concluding Remarks

I proposed a comparative analysis between two conceptions of artistic research, each one commanding disparate theories of both materiality and temporality as constitutive facets of an artwork's sense, and with their respective payouts being two very different modes of affective experience for the researcher encountering an artwork: either melancholy or joy. By first detailing the melancholy art of art history, according to Holly, we identified the essential principles upon which this theory reigns: a closed past and a hylomorphic dualism. Thus, we formulated the perspective of this other, more affirmative approach to artistic research in contradistinction to these essential principles. In so doing, and by following the lines of flight by Deleuze and Emerling, we constructed a mode of encounter between the researcher and the artwork that facilitates autonomous creativity on both the subjective and objective sides of the equation. An artistic practice that restores a properly futural force to the heart of aesthetics—bringing possibility into the realm of criticism and appreciation, thus opening an alternative path for artistic researchers who find that the artwork qua sign signals to them as past-future and not past-present.

²⁴ See Preziosi 1989, 179. And further, see Nietzsche 1947, 374, wherein he writes, "How far the perspective character of existence extends or whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without 'sense,' does not become 'nonsense;' whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially engaged in interpretation."

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