Difference in Practice

The relation of theory to practice in painting arises within the art of each individual artist, yet most artists also respond to theoretical frameworks from beyond their practice. This extra - practical relation to theory arises from a range of perspectives, art history being the most obvious. Writing from Philosophy, Feminism, and a wide variety of social theory often finds the analysis of art useful. Such writing's relation to the practices of art making is never a simple matter. Abstract art in particular has often been closely linked with theory and has just as often resisted theory.

We live in an era witnessing a vast expansion of 'practices'. With contemporary technology we practice within mediums when we actively structure the proliferating surfaces of such media: communities of interest, social networking, individual curatorial practices, journalism blending into participant blogs, and other transformations arriving with contemporary networks. At the level of individual agency this is practical behavior. Creative participation with such media contrasts with the relatively passive reception with older popular media such as television. We are living in an era of exponentially increasing creative agency within divergent technological horizons.

Painters are responding to this expansive horizon just like everyone else, but, as painters they are also thinking within the media environment of painting. They are individuals with a distinctive creative practice in an age that is replete with ever increasing and overlapping media practices. This is not to equate the experience of one medium with the other. To do so would be to misunderstand the structuring force of media and mediums. Creative activity in one medium differs from creative activities within another medium.

Our vast and broad immersion in contemporary technology effectively interrogates postmodern methods for situating abstract painting, and more generally, the nature of creative practices. If participation within mediums is understood as structure forming activity, then the thinking surrounding making is once again foregrounded in interpretation and theory.

A link between contemporary technology and contemporary art should not be considered as over determining art making practices. It is not that contemporary painting is, or should be taking contemporary technology as its subject or motivation. Though surely this is often happening. Nor is it the case that contemporary painting must respond, or will respond, to these influences. Rather, if a changed attitude towards media has transformed the ground of painting it would be best to think of this as resulting from an expanding 'background' of practices at play in culture. Think of this transformed ground more as a 'surrounding ground' than a 'grounding cause'. The proliferation of media in contemporary culture re-situates many practices, painting included. This essay might be thought of as a survey of 'backgrounds' for thinking about how painting continues to make sense, and this would include the broad and diffuse 'background' of technological becoming.

In this period one can productively question the relation of practice and theory in art yet again. In fact, it is an evolving sense of 'practice' that is the more compelling question rather than its relation to technology in isolation. One can describe practice within mediums as generative forces within art, rather than understanding practice as either a mere demonstration of theory, or to think practice as a kind of base behavior that only achieves meaning with theory supplied from speaking or writing about art.

A painter's practice is the whole constellation of their history of vision as projectively organized by their creative endeavor. Their practice includes: their thinking as related to their painting, their perceptual sensitivity, technique, skill, and experience with materials, as well as their ever growing range of conceptual motivations arising both from within painting as an activity and from their living responses beyond the acts of painting, and would also include the historical situation that informs their individual habitation of a medium. Their practice is their manner of being within the creative processes of painting. It is more accurate to say that painters dwell in

mediums rather than to say that they use them.

This essay speculates about concepts of 'difference'.[1] Thinking difference begins by thinking the studio. A painter's experience of working on a painting is always caught up with its being a moving, evolving, differing thing, mutating and growing before the artist. They bear witness to its differing of their sensations and thinking. Working leads to further differing. Work is continually divergent. As the form settles over time their thinking about the painting need not settle at all. Often, as a work comes to finish it expands further in the thinking of the artist, particularly in relation to other things they have seen or made or thought. Experiencing this may be better thought of as a continual differing that circumnavigates out from the painting while cyclically returning to the specificity of the work itself.

The essay speculates within two analytical trajectories. First, it examines competing conceptions of language that have surrounded visual art practices in postmodernism, suggesting that some of these conceptions may better apply to the situation of contemporary abstract painting than do others. Secondly, it presents an inversion of our usual habits for thinking identity and difference in relation to practice. This includes a kind of critique of the 'critique of representation' as it is so often utilized as a framework for theorizing images. These two trajectories effect a transition from a theoretical focus on language to a focus on time structured within mediums.

History Again

With the rise of conceptual art in the late 1970s art making seemingly moves past the practices of art to theories of art. Stated too bluntly, art becomes theory. It is too simple to think of this as a sudden break. The theory and practice of art have always been fused. How could they not be? Yet, the relation of theory and practice in the arts is always a tense and contested issue.[2] Abstract painting has been a boon for theory and at the same time a recurrent anomaly. This is particularly so in how it has complicated perspectives based in representation and mimesis. Broadly, this has played out in two ways, first, abstract painting was linked to ideas of rational history, modernism thought narrowly, and secondly, in postmodernism, abstract painting was viewed as politically irresponsible. It now seems that both of these frames for abstraction are less relevant.

Forty years ago the dominating discourses surrounding abstract painting still imagined it as an insular, reductive, rational project, defining its own positivist essence. This was the supposed modernist project of painting. As this conception of modernism seemingly dissolves, abstract painting, understood as the emblem of modernism, moves to its second formulation: abstract painting as irrelevant visual spectacle. The insistent inventiveness of abstraction as well as its foregrounding of optical, rather than discursive values was thought to irresponsibly mask the operations of ideology in culture. In this second formulation abstract painting was being scolded for its imaginative visual inventiveness by those who write about art from a perspective which holds that all cultural relationships are at bottom wholly political, nothing more, nothing less. This aspect of postmodernism established a new reductive framework for theorizing cultural forms. At that time many artists responded by producing art that attempts to insert itself into a critical engagement with cultural representations. These representations, as categorically demonstrated in semiotics, exemplified 'systems of signs' structured by the ideological functioning of language. 'Systems of language' included visual 'signs', ensuring that visual art would be understood as primarily discursive rather than as primarily visual. Unfortunately this could devolve into judgments of value based upon who had 'political legitimacy' to speak critically, and whether the art was made from a list of seemingly pre-approved 'topics'. The complex and contradictory individual artist with their own personal experience, let alone any aesthetic sensibility, was methodologically filtered out of consideration by such theory. A personal creative practice capable of producing anything different theoretically disappears.

This divide suggests a distinction between methods and mediums. Theoreticians create conceptual frames and gather evidence, as well as construct arguments in support of their conceptual projection. Artists inhabit mediums that produce divergent thinking. Whereas methodologies select and organize information to centralize hypothesis and concept, mediums select, organize, and intensify sensual being so that it becomes different, making present new and

renewed experiences of thinking. A methodology seeks to arrive at predictable, stable, and portable knowledge. Mediums produce dimension within specific knowledge events. Methods are convergent. Mediums are divergent. Both structure thinking, both convey content, albeit differently.

This essay advocates for a better understanding of the creative force of mediums. This implies valuing the generative over the critical. This is too simple a contrast. In the best art the generative and the critical find common ground in as much as the critical is generative. Critical semiotics and identity politics admirably nurture our sense of history as an evolving project of justice. Though technology frames the future too, it is seldom thought anymore to necessarily lead to a more utopian or rationally attuned future. Though this may happen (think of the Arab Spring in relation to socially networked communities), it is more apparent that contemporary technology will lead to a future of increasing and proliferating surfaces within media.

Our grounding habits within perception are becoming increasingly ornate with virtual elaborations and supplements. We live physically, as beings vulnerable to illness and limitations, but also as beings dwelling alongside our more mediated lives. Our sense experience is more everywhere and nowhere. With this intensification time and space compress, our perception is altered, and it is difficult to parse how this effects our circumspectual potentials.

Does our participation with contemporary media more often compress and enclose our experience, folding it inward, making us less present to our existential horizons?[3] Are the formations of new relations within contemporary media too often masking the architecture of such media? Is our constitution of community within media environments determinatively patterned as exchanges of data necessitated by the architecture of such media? Especially as that architecture, the fundamental structure of a data-base, remains invisible in use. What are the effects of living within 'machines we do not see as machines'?

Immersed in a sense of futurity projected upon technological horizons, we may become less able to imagine ourselves within a history of moral, ethical, or rational projects. We may find ourselves less as participants in history and more located in structural relations of mutating technology. Perhaps this is too pessimistic. Yet, at present it seems that contemporary technology is more often being organized for systems of surveillance and for the automated mining of information for economic purposes, even as it is also building communities of interest. Though we live in a highly creative moment, it is a moment that leaves us needing to re-imagine what we mean by depth.

Language and Difference

Many visual artists have been influenced by 'French Theory': post - structuralism and variants of postmodernism. A central aspect of such theory was its decisive conceptions of language.[4] 'French Theory' finds language to be incapable of arriving at a stable state of knowledge in relationship to any concrete, physical reality. Language cannot represent the world. This is important in the sense that it presumes that we all believe that language can have or should have a stable, direct, kind on one to one correspondence to reality, rather than an interpretive correspondence. This presumption of belief is something of a straw dog, a too simple claim for a belief. It presumes the belief that language could have that kind of stability, when in practice we very frequently use language as a test of belief, as a balancing of belief and doubt.[5] It seems that the post-structuralist incredulity with the mutability of language serves as a set up for other purposes. One purpose being a skeptical penchant for critiques of representation as this serves as a continuing paradigm for leveraging exercises in skepticism generally.

Deconstruction, closely aligned with semiotics, has been highly influential in the arts and humanities. Deconstruction finds any term in language as a fluid term systematically in tension with other terms. So for example, to deconstruct an idea of the 'feminine', one does not find any stable definition of the 'feminine', but rather a concept dispersed across a variety of other concepts, such as, 'gentleness', 'empathy', 'delicacy', 'sensitivity', and opposed to the 'masculine'. Deconstruction as an analytical method operates by finding slippage, movement, and gaps rather

than some supposed expectation of an almost scientific stability in a single defining term.[6] Think of this movement as a play of identity and difference. Any single term can only mark identity by relating identity to difference. Deconstruction finds difference rather than identity.

With Deconstruction, 'Difference', is re-termed 'Differance' by Jacques Derrida , to capture both the idea of 'differing' and 'deferral'. Differing indicating an instability that is co-present with identity, and 'deferral' indicating the way meanings are deferred, how final meaning is always delayed in language. Stable meaning never arrives. For the post-structuralist, the movement within language stays within language. Language re-presents itself. There is 'nothing outside the text'. If language systems are understood to be closed systems, if language cannot occur with the real, then it is a system already positioned for postmodern projects. It is already limited to the construction of cultural norms. The 'fluid gap' of non-identity is positioned as a problem of representation that can be analyzed in terms of grounding conditions within social reality relevant for an ideological analysis.

This approach, finding 'problems within language', often understood as a 'problems of representation', has a long history. Throughout the history of the writing that surrounds images, critiques of representation have very often been starting points for analysis. Plato finds images as representations three times removed from timeless forms. Art is mimesis, it mimics. Images are representations of representations, 'shadows of shadows', and are inherently deceptive. They can never approach 'truth' in any kind of empirically verifiable sense. If one begins with an understanding of art as representation comparatively in tension with truth claims, then this beginning frames all that follows within a project of skepticism.

What if Plato was right to think that art was 'different' than truth? That rather than operate as a truth statement, a convergence, or a be-stilling of knowledge in essence, what if art offers a circumspection, an outward-inward cycle of thinking… a 'differing - relating'. What if, rather than be thought as a falsifying representation, this differing could be thought of as a surplus?

What if this surplus was thought 'good' rather than thought 'true'? Could this cycle of differing anchored in the specificity of the art be thought as event more than object, as process more than substance? As event, could differing be understood as 'good', in the sense that it enlarges the dimensions of experience?… that is, we become more fully present to experience with this 'good'.[7]

Everything in our experience moves and becomes different, it is just that in art we may see this in relation to the specificity of the work. What if one began an analysis of art with an exposition of tensions of difference? Isn't this especially consistent with the history of abstraction in painting? Abstraction most often presents itself as explicitly different from mimesis. The specificity of art stands in relation to its proliferation within experience. This is one description of the temporality of art.

Speech

Rather than begin again and again by framing the analysis of images within critiques of representation … where the movement between identity and difference is a problem of belief, why not begin otherwise? It is clear that no one really believes that an image can be true as some sort of assertion of stable meaning, yet some persist in pretending otherwise as a kind of methodological threshold, as a strategy for some further skeptical purpose.

In contrast, a 'practical' conception of language, one that is ancient but which 'French Theory' has found suspicious, finds speech as the primary site of language. In the 'speech act' language constitutes a field of relationships encompassing both identity and difference. In speech, language is a specific becoming, a specific event of fluid thinking within living conversation. In this practical - constitutive sense of language, speech is a dialogue that continually grows as a series of 'tests with language'. This practice of testing is distinct from our efficient conventional uses of language.

Much of our speech is conventional rather than creative. It is rapid and utilitarian.[8] And, this needs to be the case. It is not always best to open language to circumspection, sometimes you just have to tell a child to get out of the street. We use efficient, conventional speech everyday, it is just that the constitutive sense of language, where language is an event that expands our understanding arises most clearly at the intersection of difficulty and care.

That which is unsettled in our being continually lives in creative becoming. If I were to talk with you about the loss of someone I love and we invest this conversation with care, we will have to continually test our language, we will have to search for senses within language that expand and stretch our usage as we try and account for this loss. Our speech will necessarily qualify its claims and we will arrive at balance points of nuance and suggestion that simultaneously map both our belief and our uncertainty. Our use of language will be provisional and self-critical. Speaking will differ our thinking. It will open onto this 'fluid gap' where you and I live trying to understand our being in light of the specific situation of this loss. The conversation will structure our relationship as speaker and listener, as mutual participants in an expansion of sense. This repetition and return cycles language as an event, it illuminates difference, it moves our knowing across its limitations while creating a larger field of sense as this loss becomes known. This practical conception of language is a more compelling way to think about how art making practices are akin to living language.

If we can think language as a process for testing and differing, if we can think of mediums as divergent processes, we come closer to understanding art - making practices. This whole line of thinking is a comparison between process philosophy and substance philosophy.

Territory and Map

Throughout the history of abstract art artists have repeatedly invoked the goal of creating new sensations that expand the dimensions of experience. Cubist artists translate and differ our perceptions. Non-objective painters claim to have no basis in representation whatsoever as they produce new and singular demonstrations of visual sense with shape, line, and color. The goal of extending sensation arises again and again in both realist and abstract impulses. Kandinsky and Mondrian saw their work this way and so do many contemporary artists.

Map and Territory is a recurrent formulation framing tensions between identity and difference. Map is positioned as a negation of territory in the formulation 'the map is not the territory'. This comparison is most often meant to frame problems of representation, where a map is understood as a falsifying representation of territory. Rather than think the map as a subtractive derivative of territory… invert this formulation and think that the territory includes the potential of the map. This does not equate map and territory though it changes how we think of the relation, it is a contrast of addition and subtraction.

This inversion coheres with Henri Bergson's idea that images are real in the sense that all of physical reality includes appearance; physical reality includes its potential images. A specific tree, for example, includes within the density of its being all the potentials of its being, including all 'imaging' of its being. This is metaphorically akin to the idea that the tree as a genetic structure is a density of both its past evolution and its future potentials for mutation. The tree is a becoming of its potentials. Images that grow from the territory have their own surplus being, they are part of the projective becoming of that territory. Being includes becoming different, in the sense of becoming a different 'organism'. Being also includes becoming in difference, becoming different in relationships, including relations of appearance.

To think this way is to speculate on the density of being but also the relations of being to being and therefore to think of our creativity as practices that can participate in differing potentials of relations of being to being. Our creativity is a differential. We creatively 'grow' maps and differ territory. In this formulation, maps are not derivatives they are developed potentials. The map opens the territory, it differs the 'network' of relations the territory 'holds' within its potency. The map is a surplus of creative becoming.[9]

Art making creatively differs and enlarges experience. In an inverted formulation of territory and map we would imagine the map to be an extension of the territory rather than an inadequate supposed replacement, a 'falsifying representation'. Tellingly, this inversion describes a potency in difference, a 'growth', rather than a 'negation': a surplus rather than a void.

The Site of Mediums

A semiotic theoretical frame sees mediums as conventions within systems of signification. Recent generations of artists assert that they choose the medium that is right for their concept. This way of thinking about mediums prescribes the medium as something of a 'noun' chosen ahead of making, a form of conventional identity. For any artist a medium is also a 'verb', it is a moving constellation of potentials. Mediums actively structure processes of sensing, thinking, and making, while evolving perception within what is perceptible. Think mediums in art as mediations of becoming, as having a forward momentum rather than a referential function.

The reader may think that an inverted interpretation of territory and map, when it describes territory as a repository of density, maintains a realist impulse. This makes sense. The individual tree 'holds' its images or mappings within its density of potentials. This description is not discordant with the idea that a photographic image is a 'relic' or 'trace' of what was actually present before a lens. Yet the photograph is different from what was before the lens, and to assign priority to what was before the lens does not capture what is different in the photograph. The technical unfolding of the medium produces difference with what is before the lens. This difference is a photograph. So what changes with this differential concept? If we say that the medium differs what is before the lens and opens it to divergent thinking, this sounds accurate, but it locates the difference in our thinking rather than in the potentials of what is before the lens. Rather than locate the differential in a fixed density of the real, or exclusively in our thinking, we would do better to think the real, in its very being, as a potent network of differential relationships. To think this way we need to revise our habit of thinking the real as a stable given, and rather think of the real as an expansive mobile event. An event that includes becoming 'differently -visible.'

However, to move to a discussion of mediums is to pivot away from the 'thickness' of density to the edges of the same potency, where mediating processes filter relationships of being to being. Territory is thought differently when it is thought as a network of related being, rather than as an inventory of separate beings. Each specific being can be thought an object, but it can also be thought of as an interface, a meeting place. The individual tree in my example is a singular being, but it is also an interface of light, water, and nutrition. This is the tree's technique, its mediation of its individual nature in differential relation with what it is not.

Mediums inhabit membranes of beings. A membrane of technique is an interface of selection and organization. This site of relation, as a membrane of organization, is a site of difference. The middle zone of interaction between the specific intensity of the tree and the extensive potentials of its networks is the mediating technique of the tree. Technique is intensive – extensive.

When we participate with being we do so as the deeply technical beings we are. Rather than think of technique as only utilitarian, think technique as a membrane of sense at play within potentials. An artist's expansion of sense and thought through technical becoming is a differential at the 'in-between' of potential becoming. Technique beyond utility profoundly enlarges sense and thought. To think mediums and technique this way is to think them as being inherently transformative, as being capable of producing differences that are more than functional relationships. Mediums can structure and grow new and renewed relations of surplus becoming. Mediums are an unfolding force. Think of this in relation to abstract painting. A focus on mediums suggests a way to think creative relations between potential, actual, and virtual. Transpose this last sentence as a description of painting.

The artist extends territory by dwelling within mediums. If we can think that the density of the territory can include an unknowable number of maps, then we can begin to think about how the structuring processes of mediums can 'grow' diverse maps. Film processes structure one

momentum for becoming different; painting processes present another momentum for becoming different. Mediums have material increments, stone, plaster, paint… digital codes. Mediums have speed increments, photographs can be rapid while carving stone can be slow. Mediums hold time differently and they engender participation, circumspection, contemplation, and reflection differently. Each medium unfolds within its agency differently.

Difference in Practice

Difference is a broad concept, but should be thought generally as 'the creative'. When an artist invests in process their thinking and sensing accumulates in series of investigations. Their perception becomes mobile while accidents and moments of blindness produce tensions that continuously deconstruct and reconstruct sense. As they work, their forms, ideas, and normative categories of understanding move and differ. Mediums structure selection and successive organizations. Mediums demonstrate both limitations and potentials. Mediums concentrate and intensify sense. Mediums 'gather up' these events of sense. As the audience circulates their thinking through the experience of art they differ their normative categorical habits, and expand the dimensions of their consciousness, making it anew. Art structures circumspection in tension with habit, effecting a differentiating - renewing field. The experience of art offers more than a confirmation of what we already know: it differs what we know, and re-locates our being.

Territory, map, speech, and medium are frames for thinking about the centrality of the practical in art making. This clarifies both our distance from and connection with the legacy of the 'linguistic turn' in theory witnessed since the late 1970s. Semiotics, in the indirect way that it was employed within critical paradigms seems less relevant to much contemporary painting. Deconstruction remains relevant to this analysis as a process that structures difference.

Habitual experience aligned with contemporary technology may not produce the more circumspect and existential response to the complexity of our being within technique that is advocated for here precisely because habit collapses difference. And, it may be that technological structures mask historical consciousness even as they seem to lend a breadth of creativity. Yet the proliferation of media in our experience, as it structures a 'surrounding ground' of becoming in practices, leverages a re-thinking of the creative nature of mediums. Our immersion in technology requires us to re-think technique. This essay is an effort in that direction. The most crucial belief to question in the former dominance of 'French Theory' is the insistence that language be understood as a closed system. If visual art is still to be thought as some sort of language then the model of the 'speech act' best demonstrates differing in practice. This 'differing in practice' is conceived on a deeper creative plane if it is thought as open-ended and outward-relating.

Seeing is Promiscuous - Touch Invests

Contemporary vision is promiscuous. Never before have we been so swamped in innumerable images and yet so depthless in relation to them. The very speed and ubiquity of contemporary technology strives to colonize our being while our capacity to reflect upon the experience of vision becomes less present to thinking. Ironically in our technically saturated age we seldom see technique. How can we gain productive distance within our visual experience and better understand our seeing, its selectivity, its habits, its blindness, its openings onto our potentials and limitations, and its persistent strangeness?

Some mediums make differing more visible than others. As we 'fall into' a narrative on television the immediacy of television immerses us while masking its technique. We give ourselves over to its temporal sequence. Mediums that foreground visible technique expand perception in a manner that is particularly relevant to this era. With the promiscuity of contemporary seeing there is much that we do not see, but when we see painting 'as painting' we see technique as a performance of difference. Seeing the technical becoming of painting we see its medium structuring difference framed for perception and therefore see our agency as technical beings made present.

Touch invests vision. Rather than think of painting as an antidote to our immersion in images, think of painting as a complement, a concentration of seeing operating as a completion, where the rhythms of adjacent but distinct media experiences structure a field of tensions and painting becomes as painting in difference within an expanded field. The poverty and plenitude of painting, its limits and potentials circulate vision and touch. Every touch is a movement through blindness and complexity to a singular impulse. In this cycle touch returns as difference expands.

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[1] The discussion of difference is broadly informed by the writings of Gilles Deleuze.

[2] There are very many examples of this, often framed as contrasts between thought and material labor, as in the familiar notion that guild practices are supplanted by the theory in the Renaissance.

[3] 'Folded inward' meaning an amassing of equalizing surfaces in contrast to an unfolding of differences.

[4] Broadly speaking, the 'Linguistic Turn in Theory' describes the centrality of skeptical critiques of language in much postmodern theory and art. The 'theory-laden', or 'theory-ready' nature of a lot of postmodern art is a symptom of this.

[5] See page 24ff in Richard Shiff, "Doubt", Routledge, 2008.

[6] Post-structuralists critique 'logocentric' conceptions of language, and indeed there is the idea that physical reality is 'articulated' into parts that can align with language directly. To the degree that this critique presents a procedural and relational view of language it is consistent with the view of differing presented here. The issue is whether or not processes of differing are limited to the play of language or if differing is present at a deeper level of relation within the real itself.

[7] There is a tension between 'truth' and the 'good' in early Greek thought. Perhaps the stability of 'truth', its being beyond time, can be contrasted with the eventfulness of the 'good'. Perhaps this describes the 'good' as a kind of ritual of becoming in time.

[8] More akin to a semiotic 'system of signs'.

[9] Maps and mapping systems have been prevalent in recent abstraction. See, for example, catalog for the exhibit, "Remote Viewing (Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing), Elizabeth Sussman, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005.