

CONSTRUCTING THE PAST

*Every thought is a fiat, expressing a throw of the dice: constructivism.*¹

The question of how art is to think its history incessantly haunts its production.

Whether as explicit confrontation, outright rejection, or implicit persistence of an unacknowledged horizon, it is a question that stubbornly clings to art's task.

It is a question that, refracted through a historical dynamic initiated by modernity's challenge to tradition for the sake of the new, has become fraught, and exhausted to the point where, in our contemporary moment, it is an almost imperceptible concern.

And yet, despite the most valiant attempts to suppress it, it will not disappear, its insistence an everpresent reminder that there can be no production without a relation to what has gone before – even if in what this “before” is constituted remains to be determined.

Indeed, art must confront itself to the thought of its own history if it is to attempt to rise above the repetition of its recognisable forms in the present, and construct the new.

This might seem to be a somewhat paradoxical demand – this imperative to return to art history in order to construct the new that breaks through the standardised forms of the present. But we are not here speaking of a past tradition, or indeed of past actualities – the actualities that art in its search for the new as the *overcoming* of the past has historically rejected. We are not speaking of a reverence for the given forms of the past, or a tracery of its most glorious moments. Rather it is the return of the past in its *difference*, in its excess to the actualised forms of art history, the return of that which has been imperceptible in that past, with which art's thought of its history for the sake of a construction of the new must concern itself.

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This question of how art is to think its history comprises the consistent horizon of John Murphy's practice.

It is one that is not posed explicitly, and never finds a formal articulation. Rather, it is continually posed as an insistence without reflection, in a series of staged collisions between past works of art and his own.

These collisions are not staged in the regime of resemblance, fidelity, re-presentation, or quotation. They do not repeat the forms of the past, and they bear no allegiance to the category of influence. They do not treat the past work of art as an original, a model, or an object of reference. Neither do they have an announced thematic, or declared purpose.

In vain would one strive to extract meaning and intent from these couplings. Indeed, they defy description of their workings, and interpretation of their meaning. There is instead at

play here a wilful unintelligibility, a resistance to signification and representation that forces a new kind of experience where the perception of “before” and “after” is destabilised.

It is this construction of time in an experience of the staged simultaneity of past and present that marks the insistent, if unconscious, problematic of Murphy's works and their displacement of art history.

The fact that these couplings are staged only for the duration of the exhibition in question (they are dismantled after the exhibition's end) is one that is crucial to this operation of destabilisation. For the disruption of chronology and historical border is itself *performative*, enacted in the temporary time of the exhibition, rather than presented as “products” with permanence.

As such Murphy's practice operates on two temporal orders. On the one hand, the works indeed exist as formal products, emerging from and re-possessed by the history of art – the history, that is, of a succession of art-forms. On the other, as fleeting collisions with past works of art, they resist such art historical integration, articulating instead an alternative construction of time, a time of coexistence that forcibly disrupts chronological sense and placement whilst disturbing the continuity of the former temporal register in which the works are inscribed (and in turn obscuring a sense of chronology or totality to his “body” of work). As an impermanent staging for the exhibition's duration, this construction resists objectification as a “work”, leaving no formal trace for future repetition of the encounter. Its “work” is instead processual – a *staging* rather than a staged product – and in this processuality initiates a new order of experience, of a shock of time with no index.

As a *relational* practice, Murphy's collisions operate as a perpetual ungrounding of the transitory “identities” his works assume. And it must be emphasised that Murphy never makes work “in response” to past works of art – which would uphold the structure of referentiality – but stages new relations between past and present without premeditation, on the basis of intuitions that bear no name.

We will say that in place of any tracery of the extant forms of the past, Murphy puts to work a “diagramming” of relations, a construction as a mapping of relations rather than forms, relations of forces that were never till now actualised, of spatio-temporal dynamisms that slice across the structured plane of historical time. Through these diagrams, it is not what we already know of the past that is brought back to us. It is not a return of the same past, but the return of the past in a form in which it never was, a “before” that is not what actually was, but returns as the unintelligible excess to past actuality.

It is as diagrammatic method with its challenge to historical referentiality, it is as a relational practice with its challenge to the historical identity of the artwork, it is as transhistorical encounter that renders unrecognisable both elements of the collision whilst giving birth to something new, in which the provocation of Murphy's work consists – a provocation that resists identification with the “contemporary” to produce new conduits of time.

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 75