

Alexis Harding: Substance & Accident

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The relationship between what has happened, and what has been done, is not always clear in Alexis Harding's work. Nor is the status of the material his practice corrals into place a clear cut question of cause and effect, or of the essential and the superfluously contingent. An awareness of questions of agency and possibility, the structures in which these occur, and the ways in which these react back upon one another are part of the disruptive but fecund power of his paintings.

There is a strong impulse to want to write 'towards' these paintings rather than about them; to fold them into the text somehow. Rather than trying to represent them, instead it seems better to explore their workings, their dynamics, via the forces and schemas through which they come to be. This sense of doing rather than saying echoes Rosalind Krauss' idea, via Georges Bataille, that Robert Morris' anti-form work of the 1960s did not thematise notions of formlessness or dissolution so much as mobilise these forces as productive operations. This seems appropriate to Harding's work as well and we might ask how such a reading operates now, on the terrain of contemporary painting. David Ryan has recently observed that, while of course painting does not stand apart from the current legitimising structures of the contemporary art world and their own myriad tensions and problems, it is still present as 'concentrated fields of intentionality and reception'ⁱ. Despite this, he remarks that it has been increasingly difficult to discuss painting without invoking 'a network, an institution, a whole culture even'ⁱⁱ, and suggests that:

'...central to serious painting practice is a philosophical core lying somewhere between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical, and any attempt to get to the heart of the matter would seem to revisit these, even if to find a way to think out of them'ⁱⁱⁱ

If the suggestion is perhaps that we cannot understand larger structures unless we understand something about our insertion into them, then the material locality of painting might present its value exactly at the point where it seems to slip away from us. In Harding's work the normal emphasis on paint's capacity to fix, emerges as a form of interpretative move rather than an inevitable property.

The sense of Harding's paintings as silted traces of the situations they come from and are projected into is reflected in the complexities of their making, and the outcomes explore, among other things, the question of what counts as an object, or what it means for an entity to be coherent. That these mobile ideas are framed so forcefully and materially in the paintings is one of the many interesting things about them, and Ryan's evocation of phenomenology is also apt in as much as that discourse would frame philosophy as predicament more than instrument. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, perhaps to remind himself as much as others, 'philosophy limps'^{iv}, and as philosophy limps, so here we might say that painting sags, puckers and ripples.

Recent paintings demonstrate a technical approach in some respects unchanged from earlier work, but are offered up as a difference on another level, like the same sound caught by differently configured microphones. A graduated spectrum of gloss paint poured through a partitioned container and moved across a surface of wet oil colour on panel is a recent organising principle. These panels often take a regularised format, the 8' x 4' of a standard mdf sheet, or perhaps the circular tondo form. The upper skin of the paint in some of these works has left incremental ridges depending on interruptions of its journey across the surface, these ridges acting as a different sort of graphic trace to the initial frictionless pouring.

For all their arresting power, these paintings remain in some way spare or frail, a trail of matter, and we might think of the etymological echoes of that word: meter, matrix, material^v. Some of the results coincide with certain other sorts of matrices: practices of looking, aesthetic paradigms and models. The paintings can present a grand aspect here, a baroque dynamism there, and recently, a new sort of blankness or lack of modulation, seeming to emphasise the 'thingness' of the works, the way they articulate with the architecture of their display, and a new sharpening of their address to our mobile bodily encounter with them. This can induce some reflection on the layering of our relations towards objects and, like reflecting on the meaning of a sentence one has just spoken, there is a kind of refraction of attention or divided agency in doing this. Perhaps this artist would be wary of - or simply cannot afford - an over emphasis on an idea of an aestheticised presence, such is the delicacy of these works' coming together, their fugitive status and diffuse temporality. Every painting is one of many possible works in its respective mode, each trope gaining ground and coherence through its repetition, paradoxically making repetition in a sense the bearer of a kind of authenticity^{vi}. One recent

work presents the removal of the surface altogether, fading our apprehension of the gestures at work into those perhaps considered more pragmatic, peripheral and supporting, as this 'erasure' is fixed by the positive gesture of presentation. Matter then, is never apart from its conditioning, another way of saying that a relationship is the smallest unit of our attention. This also applies to how the physical frame of painting is activated in these works in that it funnels painterly matter through and across its conditioning field.

Of course, paint has never really been itself, but in Harding's work this sense is very acute, confronted as we are by these indices of its channelling, sieving, drying and movement through specially constructed tools and supports. There is perhaps something contrary about how Harding works in that his is an attempt to organise material that is revealed, as he puts it, as 'tenuous', which is perhaps why the words excitement and trauma are often in close proximity when he discusses his work. The nature of the work also begins to allow a sense of the studio and gallery as tools and active elements, and of the works as in some sense by-products, rather than endpoints.

The elliptical making process involved has much to do with waiting, curing (more like farming than painting, the artist has said) and so revolves around many different registers of decision making, courting this productive confusion between, again, what has happened and what has been done. These works might also be deceptive in terms of how long they take - not so much as individual objects, but more in the sense of how the various factors that make them up are orchestrated. The shift in the paintings to a larger scale took some years for example, and this is down to the way that they register, perhaps more than most painting, the conditions that produce them. Here the artist is as much constructing situations as objects, evident in the paintings' need for extravagant leeway and time, their right to range from dainty or flippant to something like an industrial accident. Their capacity is to articulate these general ideas in a powerfully particular way. The relationship of the materials to their other uses, and the associations of the visual fragments that might be images also draws attention to the borders or frames of the work as productive forces. The commercial gloss paint, the wrinkled oil, the retro graphics look - these things are as if muffled somehow, or as if vastly enlarged, suggestive of a productive myopia.

There is a sensory scrambling in the paintings' flirtation with imagery. What is happening here? In his essay on Russian revolutionary art, Benjamin Buchloh discusses the notion of *faktura*, which as

he describes it is the 'quasi-scientific, systematic manner in which the constructivists...pursued their investigation of pictorial and sculptural constructs, as well as the perceptual interaction with the viewer they generate'^{vii}. A far cry from what Buchloh positions as a neoromantic call for synaesthesia to be found in the work of artists like Kandinsky, the concept of *faktura* is distanced from that of the *facture* of the masterful painter's hand seen as 'spiritualising' the brute materiality of a pictorial structure, and dubiously guaranteeing its authenticity. Instead, Buchloh's example of a more systematic attitude to making, enables an address to the apparatus of visual sign production more generally^{viii}.

All of this is bound up with the various dynamics of modernist strategies of collage, montage and fragmentation, and makes vivid the notions of coherence, unity and how things come to be. Buchloh's example is grounded in a very specific historical situation of course, and it is notable how quickly in that context such critical dynamics became the sharp questions of the construction of institutions themselves. In this sense, the difficulty mentioned earlier of attending to the particulars of painting emerge as the need to argue for what sort of attention to the practice would open up new horizons as part of wider communities of interest. With this in mind, the idea that Harding's paintings register the impact of the many debates on art, spectatorship and its institutions that precede them is persuasive. They do not of course illustrate any of these, or operate on the level of a meta strategy, but it is hard to see how they would be possible without them. Perhaps it is the sense that the practice is conscious of its own skin, and that it might find its power by pressing against it. Questions of wider institutional forces in this sense go all the way down and are present here in the compression of these works; focused as opposed to parochial, reduced rather than reductive. This might be seen as an advantage of the relative autonomy that painting might achieve, but on this score we might also consider again the discourse of phenomenology and see some of its problems as a cautionary tale. Phenomenology's initial 'thickening' of philosophy is immensely productive as Dermot Moran summarises:

"Most philosophy concentrates on the processes of sophisticated, well-formed, rational thought, on our use of concepts and of language. What is ignored here is what Merleau-Ponty aptly calls "the experience of rationality", the manner in which thought and conceptual ability arise out of a more primordial, less articulated form of experience which he calls, following Husserl "the pre-predicative life of

consciousness”...that is experience not yet articulated in prepositional form (i.e. subject/predicate form)...This pre-predicative experience is always the experience of a being with a body caught up in a finite and limited situation but nevertheless with the experience of possibilities within that situation. ^{xix}

This imbrication of the general and particular is perhaps the most powerful but also the most problematic challenge of phenomenology, in that it is the moment of an opening out of embodied experience onto a world that is social and historical that is at issue. Historically, this discourse begins with Edmund Husserl's idea that philosophy needs to begin with a reduction of attention to how things are presented to us in consciousness, rather than the positing of a world as if from some Archimedean standpoint outside of it. With this, issues of causality, foundations, or of the mobile self making its grounds as it goes come into play. However, this move to focus on what is given to consciousness is in danger of presupposing what it sets out to discover, and it is true that too straightforward an appeal to 'the things themselves'^x courts a reductively subjectivist individualism, negating a sense of the social structures that go down to our roots, those other matrices inseparable from ourselves. Husserl's own thought was often charged with being mystifying and isolating on this score. Marxian critiques of phenomenology have pointed up its symmetry with - or have even seen it as the apotheosis of - an egregious sort of bourgeois individualism, the contemplative consciousness perceiving in isolation. An absence of an address to power and conflict is certainly there in some of those coming after Husserl, like Gadamer, whose initially appealing description of history as something like 'the conversation that we are'^{xi} tends to posit that continuum as unbroken and devoid of rupture. Various linguistic turns in philosophy have also highlighted those structures of subjectivity that, like language, are ineluctably shared, social and historical. The displacement of full presence by poststructuralist thought further problematise ideas of 'givenness' and experience, but in a sense points up the dimension of phenomenology that has always been a tightrope between poles of excessive reduction, be they of empiricist or idealist variety, and so also the reasons it is not so easy to dismiss.

Some of this would echo a similar exaggeration of the autonomy of painting, in so far as that might demonstrate an impatience with systemic thought or with the inclusion of wider historical determinants and constraints in our critical field. Instead of an appeal to the mystifyingly intuitive, it

may be worth thinking about that attention to nascent or emerging structures and a sense of the tacit shaping of everyday experience precisely in terms of questions of ideology. To say there is a sense in which even our most ambiguous experiences are tacitly shaped and conditioned by larger forces is not the same as saying they are determined by them. This sense of the possibility of change tends toward the ethical and it is worth thinking of how this might change our address to critical thought. For instance, the example of the process of deconstruction being, in that favourite phrase of Derrida's 'always already' at work is a case in point, in that pushed to an extreme it can seem (bizarrely) almost as if it is a natural process towards which we need only finesse our sensitivity. Such critical processes of course are not simply things that just happen to which we must dutifully attend; any more than language works by itself or that subjectivities are merely passive effects of larger determinants.

Though it is true that major critical insights such as Derrida's do seem to powerfully resonate back towards us from the past; they are also deceptive in that there is a temptation to disavow such insights as interventions themselves. So when thinking here about what Harding's paintings might do, it is to emphasise that they invite, or allow us to imagine, a sort of 'hooking on' that foregrounds agency as much as attention. This runs against the idea that we would simply have our initial position and orientation pleasurably confirmed, but if this is to be so, then genuine failure has to be a real prospect, as it is in Harding's practice.

It is interesting in this regard to think again of the work of Merleau Ponty with respect to 'failure', or 'dysfunction'. Merleau Ponty's insight was that we cannot understand our temporally incarnated existence until we attend to instances where our assumed relations or 'matrices of habitual action' are disrupted^{xii}. In *Phenomenology of Perception* we see this in his examination of motor and linguistic dysfunction, dyspraxia, dysphasia and so on. Of course, notions of norm and dysfunction are bound up with our often conflicting interests, worlds constructed as much as given, and this is why there is value in the varying registers of coming together and falling apart in Harding's work. To return to an earlier point, such things are operative rather than thematic, and so far from the arch fetishisation of failure, or of flux and fluidity for their own sake. After all, resolution, stability, and even progress are also crucial to the intensity of his works. The idea of the risk of failure comes into the frame in terms of what happens to the fragile dynamics of these paintings, their slack and give, their different moments of tension, resistance, breakdown and transformation. These qualities are not

simply recuperated, but made more clearly thinkable by their organisation. We can follow some of the ideas sketched out here as they pass through phenomenology, philosophy's attention to language and the encounter of these 'turns' with questions of power and the body in the work of Judith Butler. What she has to say about bodies might also help us to think through the material art object, and as she has written, in terms of the kind of materiality proposed by Karl Marx in his theses on Feuerbach, objects are not only things that are transformed but that material and objects *are* transformative activity itself:

'(if) praxis is understood as socially transformative activity, then such activity is understood as constitutive of materiality itself... In other words, the object materialises to the extent that it is a site of temporal transformation. The materiality of objects then, is in no sense static, spatial, or given, but is constituted in and as transformative activity.'^{xiii}

This links very closely to questions of what material 'counts' as intelligible, and as Butler puts it: 'In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where "to matter" means at once "to materialise" and "to mean"^{xiv}. This would seem to shed light on Harding's paintings and their contemporary relevance, that their energies seem often to be latent and delicately held, and that their problems are worthwhile.

ⁱ Ryan, D. (2012). On Painting. Art Monthly. 355 (April), p.9.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p.10.

^{iv} Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge p.431.

^v See Judith Butler's discussion of matter and form, also in relation to Aristotle's ontological categories in: Butler, J (2011). Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex . London: Routledge.

^{vi} Dermot Moran discusses this in terms of the relationship between perception and signification in his summary of Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology: *'In agreement with Heidegger, and against Husserl, Derrida criticises the presumption that the present is the totally real moment which gives itself to us in our intuitions. Husserl thought of the paradigmatic case of perceptual intuition as one in which what is meant or intended is fully present in our intuition, as when I perceive something in front of me; the thing is given with what Husserl called 'bodily presence' (Leibhaftigkeit). As we have seen, Husserl's foundational*

principle of phenomenology, his 'principle of all principles', assumed a core of self-giving, presenting intuitions, intuitions which, in a quasi-Cartesian manner, guaranteed their own validity...More generally, Derrida is critical of Husserl's apparent avoidance or postponement of the question of the role of language and signification in phenomenology. As Derrida says, for Husserl, "the unity of ordinary language (or the language of traditional metaphysics) and the language of phenomenology is never broken" (SP 8; 6). Derrida believes Husserl assumed that logic is at the essence of language, and hence ignored the crucial role of the act of signification itself. He accuses Husserl of misunderstanding the nature of the sign, and, therefore, of never questioning metaphysical assumptions that suggested it mediated between the sensible and the intelligible. Instead of recognising, with Saussure and the semiotic tradition, the primordially of the sign, Husserl wants to make signification depend on prior presence.' Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge. p.457.

^{vii} Buchloh, B. (1984). From Faktura to Factography . October. 30 (Autumn), p.87.

^{viii} Ibid. (Thanks are owed to Mick Finch for directing me to this source)

^{ix} Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge p.419.

^x Husserl's oft-repeated slogan: 'Back to the things themselves!' first written in his "Logical Investigations". See Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge p.9.

^{xi} This in fact refers to neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty's development of Gadamer's notions of conversation. See Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge p.285.

^{xii} Moran, D (1999). Introduction to Phenomenology. London: Routledge p.419

^{xiii} Butler, J (2011). Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex. London: Routledge p.191.

^{xiv} Ibid. p.7.