

Hamish Clayton

You've a leaning towards densely philosophical writers and thinkers—Baruch Spinoza, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, for instance—often invoking them as parallel exemplars of your own work; yet your deployment of those models, it seems to me, is as much swayed by an aesthetic appreciation, an intuition, for the elegance of theory, where it exists, as much as its contents and discontents.

There is a posture, a certain sense of performance and handling, which underlies and freights theoretical approaches to reason that your work seems to imitate in a visual language. How do you see theory and philosophy in relation to your creative, artistic practice?

Kim Pieters

Bouts of reading have played a large role at various times in my life and in the last five or six years I have read generally European philosophical thinkers intensively and with much pleasure. The writers I enjoy the most discuss life with discernment and imagination; the living of it and very often the creative act itself. There is a depth and play that I am acutely interested in; that I relate to and recognise; it is a great joy. This has been exceptionally liberating for me, as, before this, my action in the world was more a leap of faith, in the Kierkegaardian sense. That is, without anchor in my social milieu and certainly not within any major art historical framework of my time. Nowhere did I recognise myself (perhaps a blindness) but in these texts, Yes.

The tendency in thought that I follow is discussed by such thinkers as Spinoza, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, and Agamben, amongst many others. All these have an inclination to examine what it is to live a life as a human being—here, now; you, me; i and us. Deleuze especially investigates a transcendental empiricism, which makes its appearance as an experience without either consciousness or subject; this paradox particularly intrigues me.

And then there are some beautifully elegant writers as you say; Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot spring to mind; they are magnificent. The happiness in coming across a new musing that pleases me is a wonderful experience in itself, as is the development of intricacies within familiar thinking. What happens here is a discovery of a complex articulation within philosophical writings of an instinctive or intuitive act that I have followed since I began to make art, many years ago—more than thirty years ago, perhaps. I can only surmise that what I am doing is quite human. How I now use that articulation is perhaps another matter. And yes, there is something in what you say about a parallel tone.

HC Your work feels remarkably articulate, eloquent, but in a quite paradoxical sense: something is happening, something is being said, but it is expressed in a language refined as if to a register or a pitch beyond human hearing. Or, alternatively, as if whatever is being said is open to negotiation, perhaps even interpretation.

KP ... or could I venture open to 'transmutation'? This idea of response to the work of art as a transmutation appeals to me, especially if the manner employed is that of a type of return gesture: to resolve the work's intention into a gesture or a constellation of gestures. I think you do this sometimes, as a writer, in a beautiful way; so I thank you; this acuteness of observation makes me very happy. Perhaps it is a matter of holding, at the same time, something and nothing.

HC Paintings that refuse to resolve themselves into stable subject matter must be, to my mind, paintings that look towards both figuration and abstraction. They must hover at some cusp, however shifting. Equally, the way you seem to either channel or manipulate a text suggests a finely-poised balance between yielding to a field of knowledge on the one hand and yet remaining resistant to claims of universal truth on the other. In this way I can see, I think, why a poet like Stéphane Mallarmé appeals to you.

KP Figuration or representation is definitely opaque in what I do; I actually look away from it. Abstraction is my field; for me it is ‘the open’; to interpret elliptically is a reasonable notion when considering my work. Mallarmé of course explored this territory extensively, for example he touches on many wonderful ideas in his poem ‘A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance’(1897): the constellation, the night sky, the space of thought, and the question of god. But I think he did a sorrowful thing in opposing chance and necessity.

In my work I fuse the two; for me it is vital that chance and necessity work together. I tend not to ask the question ‘what is the truth?’ but instead ‘what is a life?’. This returns me to the now which is a necessary place for me. Being there makes innocence and affirmation imperatives—a nihilistic attitude to life is anathema to me. But this does not mean I will exclude an analytical view, even though the majority of my attention and time I prefer to spend elsewhere.

HC Your recourse to philosophy doesn’t necessarily require that theory is cleaved to in order to generate meaning—there are others ways of ‘reading’. So to be versant in philosophy or poetry is not a prerequisite to be versant in the paintings. There is a potentially complex system of values in play here: when you nominate, for instance, an inclination towards the “enigmatic, beautiful, [and] intelligent.”¹

Thinking more about the play of paradox in your work, I want to call on Abby Cunnane’s idea: “everything in [your films] is first like something else, then itself.”² To elaborate on that, as I see it, everything feels “like” something else, until, in a logical head-spin, it ends up feeling “like” “itself”. This idea feels paradoxical, though not necessarily problematic: her suggestion reminded me, for instance, of your view that image and text can occupy, or hold, or represent, “two autonomous moments” in the same painting.³

KP Theory as sentience is a very nice idea! And again it was Mallarmé who wrote, in a now-famous letter to his friend Henri Cazalis in October 1864: “To paint, not the thing itself but the effect it produces”; in a beautiful twist the effect returns the thing to itself. Let’s quote Abby Cunnane again: “everything in [my films] is first like something else,

then itself.” The clearing or gap generated by situating two autonomous elements beside each other can open out into a golden field. This field is knowable and truly is itself, but remains unsayable. I feel the only requirement needed to enjoy the paintings is a certain sense of humanness. Being human of course is a complicated business.

HC I don’t really find a tension between the image and the text in your work—I’m not sure that there is, necessarily, or entirely, a “disjunction between ... elliptically evoked texts and ... images”.⁴ I wonder if this disjunction is an assumption; one rooted in an essential difference, at an abstract or fundamental or theoretical level, between text and image. It seems to me, in terms of the timbre of the language and the image, that there is a similarity, in the fleeting sense of meaning and subject and narrative, which your images share with your choice of texts. And through this, then, there may be a dedication to formalism, a delicacy in evocation. So Mallarmé is invoked in both the theoretical and aesthetic senses.

I would say there is a harmony between the measured refusal of your painted images to ever resolve themselves into specific subject matter and the obfuscating effects of accompanying texts, whether texts chosen by you in support of your work or those you’ve written yourself—such as the elegantly unspooling titles.

KP Yes more or less so; the tension is perhaps only aggravated in those who seek a naming or a defining representation. Those who are at home in affect, in tones, in qualities, will feel less tension. But there is certainly also an intentional disjunction; it is positioned with respect to the original autonomy of each of the elements. The air is purposeful if quiet (or not) between image and text in the paintings; between sound and image in the audio-visuals, and between the juxtaposition of two photographs side by side. Here, something is summoned; a further pressure of unsayability is presented in the opening between. It is from this lack of clarity that meaning, thinking, feeling has the opportunity to unfold or, alternatively perhaps, merely to carry potential.

HC There is, then, a quality of suspension between one element and another—between the image and the text, between the corporeal and the cerebral; perhaps a space that is struck like a chord—in both artistic expression and the formulation behind those screens. As if there is a principle of suspension holding all the elements in place.

KP The work sounds a suspension! Very good; I am happy. Perhaps we are inside Paul Celan's "Breathturn": stepping out into the world itself, its material presence, yet turning toward the human. Difference is encountered here but quite safely; difference and a type of freedom.

After all those words uttered on the rostrum (it's the scaffold)—what a word!

It is a counter word, a word that snaps the 'wire', a word that no longer bows to 'history's loiterers and parade horses', it is an act of freedom. It is a step.⁵

This opening has, I would venture, the atmosphere of the virtual. What is suspended here is the potentiality of thought and sentience. The work is a gift to the other. I give free access as much as I can beyond the reserve that must remain. To explore that access belongs to the attention given to each encounter. The meeting can be as light or as heavy or as empty as anyone will make it.

HC I like the way you describe your approach to abstraction; that is, as "an exploration of the world at the limits of language".⁶ I wonder if some would have an aversion to this conception of abstraction; it doesn't strike me as necessarily problematic, but it seems to represent a turning back towards the real world, back to the threshold of experience and away from total abstraction.

KP Certainly it is *this* world that holds my attention; transcendent other-worldly concepts generally do not; if this is what you mean by 'total abstraction'. The experience of the unintelligibility inherent in this life, within this life, which we live here now; that, for me, is a very interesting thing to explore. My work is abstract in this sense. It can be full or quiet in abstract gestures but these gestures are acts in the world.

I compose these gestures in an improvisational manner within a field and without predetermination. I do not know what I am going to produce; I do not want to know; the decisions I make are not arbitrary but necessary to the field. To make a painting, as it is to create anything, is to be inside an age-old and decidedly human experience. I act in response to the thinking and the sentience; to the time and the space in which I find myself with my materials.

Two things happen here that interest me. One, the gestures made are to themselves: signs without meaning, the material of gesture, gesture as such, there is no communication or information from me to the other, only a presentation of matter, a clearing in which the work acts as an impetus, or an initiator, or a silence. And two, this clearing sits completely at the limits of language, it is an unnameable place.

It is from this place that meaning proper to each person can be created. The gesture/the act in life opens itself to an engendering of meaning. The composition is not exhausted by its material completion but remains alive. To begin here again, in the now, as the one who meets the work: to feel free to explore, to invent, to remain open and not to close down; to consider new possibilities each time. The work is empty and potent simultaneously; a paradox, as you say, that contains within it the capability of a continuing living existence.

There is nothing transcendent here but (to borrow a Deleuzian neologism) "immanate" life, that is life itself, inside itself and its potentials. This is an encounter with the real. It is a call to the person who pays attention, to generate meaning for themselves, from their own sensitivities and knowledge, and in their own way, or—and this is valuable—if they so desire, to allow an absence of meaning. I myself lean toward this absence; it lets me breathe and in this silence the work breathes also. There is this suspension, as you have said, that allows the potential to remain. This potential is not clear and it never will be clear.

HC The audio-visual work strikes a compelling, complementary tone to the painted. What comes first in those audio-visual works, the image or the music? There is a very gently emergent narrative sense in some of the films, evoking the same feeling as many of your colour field paintings.

KP With the audio-visual work I prefer to start with sound and this sound is most often sourced from practitioners of experimental music who I know. The albums or collected sound files are usually created in total isolation and intention from the visual image. I have years of moving-image archives, which I collect like photographs: as images, now digital, from which I will search for the right visual sensibility. Early on, the videos were used as supplements to live music events. Experiencing one of those shocks, when watching a narrative-less moving image against an improvised sound piece on my computer (or originally on a TV monitor, as I made the first films very primitively on VHS, pressing the pause and record button), made me realise I actually had a discrete event right there. Something was happening but I really did not know what, only that I liked it and that it was significant to me. I had stumbled on something necessary. It was a great delight to read Deleuze's book *Cinema II*, many years later, where the penny dropped about why such things had a compelling presence for me. It was again an evocation of this place of the un-thought, from which thought itself might appear and evolve in the now of the experience.

HC Even though the paintings remain recognisably the same, you write prolifically as well, and, I notice, often update and refine those texts written to accompany, for example, exhibitions. Are things constantly changing for you, I mean in the way the theory is deployed in the paintings, or through the audio-visuals, or underlying your understanding of your chosen poetical and philosophical models?

KP I am not sure I write prolifically; more I write spasmodically! There has always been a stone I have had a tendency to throw and to follow. A paradigm that spins in the air. I work with materials in a similar way, whether paint or pencil or film or sound or the photograph or even graphics, computers and writing, no matter. It is a type of abstract improvisation.

I pay attention to the constellation of elements in that space and in that time; an investigation of a particular set of relations where chance, contingency, and necessity are vital to the process; as are images of thought, the light in the sky, my health, opaque individual and community considerations,

and all the other arbitrary knowledges that coalesce in that particular focus. These various constituents form a stable, if flexible matrix, in which particular ideas/materials seem to return, always differently, expanding and contracting as they are wont. Other subjects fall out and don't come back; new things may enter, take effect, and make themselves at home, but a constant remains, providing a reasonably enduring base from which I can act.

This action is a total event, whereby I have to pull in all my resources to create something that must work as 'Art', but which remains a mystery to me. Something gets made, a thing of sorts. When I feel it stands, I may send it out into the world. I wave it off with my handkerchief. There, its fate is no longer with me but with the world. A gift which holds its reserve, from me to you, with—I would normally, I think, hesitate to say 'love'—but perhaps it is! I will say it! With love.

- 1 Kim Pieters, 'Abstraction', 2014, unpublished notes.
- 2 Abby Cunnane, 'There Is Time For Waking Slowly—Kim Pieters' *The Golden Fields*', Circuit, <http://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/201401>, 2014.
- 3 Kim Pieters, 'Language & Image', *The Mallarmé Suite Manuscript* [unpublished], 2014.
- 4 Kim Pieters, 'Abstraction', 2014, unpublished notes.
- 5 Paul Celan, 'The Meridian Speech: On the Occasion of the Award of the Georg Büchner Prize', 1961, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner, 2001, p. 403.
- 6 Kim Pieters, 'Abstraction', 2014, unpublished notes.
- 7 Deleuze states: "A cause is immanent ... when its effect is 'immanate' in the cause, rather than emanating from it." See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone Books, New York, 1990, p. 172.

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