Painting amongst other things: inter-medial translations and discordances between painting and other media

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Contents

ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

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List of Figures

Abstract

This research project evaluates historical and contemporary approaches to art medium and how problems of medium specificity may be re-thought through the lens of Jean-Luc Nancy's aesthetic materialism and Jacques Rancière's aesthetics of politics. While coming to different conclusions about art's critical potential, both modes of thought are informed by poststructuralist premises.

Nancy's concept of the 'singular-plural' is used to account for both translations and discordances between painting and other mediums such as digital printing and 3D animation. The singular-plural is relevant to the question of medium in contemporary art because it provides a critique of artistic projects that subordinate formal and sensory meaning to conceptually driven ideals beyond material features of artworks. Nancy's materialist aesthetics revitalises the artwork's formal characteristics as capable of rendering sensory meaning without entirely relying on pre-determined significations. This approach is contrasted with 'socially engaged' artistic trends of recent times that privilege a yet to be realised ideal of social re-configuration over the tangible, material characteristics of artworks. Rather than claiming to represent social or political content 'outside' of the sensory impact of the artwork, my practice stages juxtapositions between divergent material supports, suspending conceptual resolution, while heightening effects of difference.

At the same time, in some of my works, formal relations between different media operate alongside symbolic references to typically opposed historical regimes of technological modernity through digital prints, and anti- or pre-modernity through figurative, folk-art type paintings on hessian. Both connections and incompatibilities between differing modes of production are not only explored for their formal and sensible features, but are also deployed for their signifying potential. This approach intersects with philosopher Jacques Rancière's conception of modern art as a surface of conversion between sensory, material aspects of artworks and their discursive re-inscription. In this way, formal components of the artwork generate sensory, inter-medial affects, while also activating diverse conceptual associations related to social and political events. My project contends that formal, inter-medial features of artworks may

be viewed as 'political' through their potential to form new relations of meaning at odds with conventional or singular expectations.

Chapter One

Introduction and literature review—the question of medium

Project Overview

In this thesis I put forward the proposition that the artistic medium is worth interrogating in light of 'post-medium' theories and practises. The result is a revised conception of medium specificity that provides a critique of non-medium specific or 'post-medium' accounts of art. This is achieved by utilising the theoretical framework of Jean-Luc Nancy's aesthetic materialism and Jacques Rancière's aesthetics of politics to demonstrate the historical and theoretical reasons for the undervalued status of medium in recent aesthetic debates. Both Nancy's and Rancière's aesthetic philosophy is used to re-orient conceptions of medium demonstrating its critical potential and productive value in my studio production and the wider field of contemporary art practices. My studio research intersects with their thinking, taking form as a series of relationships and discordances between painting, digital printing and 3D animation processes. I investigate differing and conventionally incompatible methods of artistic production at once for their formal and sensory potential and for their symbolic dimensions.

At the outset of this project I had an implicit conception of how the formal aspects of artworks generate meaning for the beholder through juxtapositions of different material processes not entirely dependent on the author's will or any singular, determining idea. Early on in my research the consequences of inter-medial translation and juxtaposition became strategies by which to produce installations of paintings in proximity to digital prints, videos and at times sculptural objects. The potential of not being bound to one process, of not knowing what the consequences would be of placing seemingly incompatible works and processes in relation to each other, kept open a sense of intellectual freedom and excitement that something new could be forged through open-ended exploration. The fundamental premise of this exploration is based on keeping open an aesthetic space of difference, where sensory and symbolic meaning is made available by both the proximity and distance between differing materials, forms and methods of production. As my research progressed I discovered that this

paradoxical understanding of relations between different media as both proximate and distanced is elaborated in the aesthetic theory of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose thinking on such matters has partially informed this research project.

The early parts of my research involved installations and experiments with works in a range of different mediums such as drawing, video, painting, and kinetic objects, where the deployment of different modes of production and multiple mediums initially appears to conform to aspects of 'post-medium' practice. The broad category of 'post-medium' practice stresses the primacy of the idea 'behind' the work as more important than the sensible form through which the idea is realised. In my own practice, despite using and experimenting with multiple mediums, I felt that there was never a singular driving concept animating the formally divergent works. Rather, internal relations particular to each work and relations between works created unexpected meanings, resulting in a type of reordering or suspension of expectation in general. Whenever I heard the importance of the 'idea' highlighted over and above the sensible and material aspects of the artwork, or when I encountered discourse about a specific work pinned to ideas not materially recognisable in the work itself, I felt that the work performed a sense of closure and exclusion, where the prioritising of a determining idea set up a hierarchy of inequality in which the conceptual was elevated above the sensible or aesthetic aspects of artworks.

Background

In 1967, Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of Conceptual Art, created a series of works titled *Art and Idea as Idea* that consisted of a series of photocopies or 'photostats' of typed dictionary definitions of words such as 'art', 'meaning', 'water'.. (Kosuth 1969). Kosuth described such conceptual works as aiming to purify themselves of 'material dross', thus sublating the physical object under linguistic conceptualisation (Krauss 1999, p.9). This series, along with Kosuth's written polemics, elevate the idea as an active agent, while sensible artistic form is cast as nothing more than a passive and subordinate receptor of concepts. In this way the 'nobility' or 'purity' of ideas is elevated over and above the vulgar matter or dross of sensible form, creating a relation of inequality between the two. This development in art practice is typically viewed as negating the 'elitist'

aesthetic autonomy and focus on formal morphologies associated with Clement Greenberg's brand of formalism of 1950s and '60s. However, it turns out that a jostling over the distance or proximity between art and 'idea' has a rather long history in Western art and thought.

The background to this narrative is based on a presumption that the sensory affectivity of an art medium, its ability to produce a material sense irreducible to language, is somehow inadequate to the task of dealing with the primacy of idea. In other words, an artwork's 'material dross' is treated as secondary to the original idea or Ideal concept, typically understood as formulated by the artist. A binary relationship between active possession of, and passive distance from, an idea can be traced in philosophical thought back to Plato: the privileging of the Ideal, or that which is not visible, over its material manifestation in sensible reality. Idea is a general term that refers to something beyond the materially present, beyond a certain material evidence of form. The idea as metaphysical Ideal has been given many names in the history of Western art and thought: God, Essence, Spirit, Humanity, or Community. In this context I have found the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy to be indispensable for articulating a critique of idealist tendencies within conceptual practices associated with the post-medium condition, while also distancing my project from essentialist tendencies in formalist theories of modernist art.

Nancy's aesthetics and general philosophical position has been described as 'new materialist' (James 2012, pp. 8-22). This broad category, which includes diverse thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Bernard Stiegler, foregrounds the subject's engagement with embodied experience and the material world rather than only looking to the determinations of language and discourse. This distinguishes them from a previous generation of structuralist philosophers[1], who sought to understand and expose the way human subjectivity is structured by language. New materialism instead attempts to think through 'events' of bodily engagement and shared sensible experience as a mode of intelligibility prior to linguistic-structuralist determinations of

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[1] Philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan are often labelled as structuralists, although their work also exhibits post-structuralist tendencies.

experience. New materialist thinking is motivated by a search for new and unexpected meanings outside of consolidated conceptual and linguistic categories.

Nancy's focus on the material and sensible aspects of the artwork as capable of generating aesthetic meaning enables me to use parts of his framework to re-articulate assumptions about formalism, showing the meaningful sensory potential of the medium, as well as providing a theoretical framework for the way I approach painting's relationship to new media and print technology. Relations between artistic materials and supports that model the emergence of sense are at the core of Nancy's speculation about modern artworks.

The writings of Jacques Rancière both overlap with and revise Nancy's framework by combining artworks' sensible affects with a signifying capacity able to undo prescribed and commonplace meanings. The ability of an artwork to undo established forms of meaning is described by Rancière as a challenge to any established 'distribution of the sensible'. The distribution of the sensible has many dimensions in Rancière's thought but in schematic terms it is a framework of sensible intelligibility and correspondence between words, images, sounds, language and human actions, which defines and demarcates what is possible or deemed intelligible within a given cultural or social context. The sensible is articulated by Rancière as an intelligible structure that is not immutable or 'natural' but can be questioned on the grounds of its conventionality and therefore 're-distributed' to activate new instances of potential meaning. From Rancière's perspective aesthetic meaning involves *both* signification and its erasure, where art's content is neither mastered nor settled, and can be re-articulated, opening space for new inscriptions to enter a given matrix of sensible meaning or intelligible. The potential for new inscriptions to disrupt artistic and social conventions within a particular context echoes certain projects of the historical avant-gardes. Yet, the crucial difference is that for Rancière such a project cannot be programmed to an achievable and determinable goal but rather functions as a re-ordering of 'assumed truths' in relation to social, aesthetic and historical contexts.

Rancière speculates about the non-programmable potential of artistic production to suspend hierarchies of sensible and intelligible experience amongst participants. This

occurs where sensible effects and their discursive articulations withdraw or re-arrange established meanings, thereby suspending conventions of what is deemed worthy of visibility and what is considered to be mere 'noise'. The artwork's aesthetic effect is analogous to a type of potentiality, capable of opening new avenues of meaning, of creating unexpected relations of sense that disrupt established correspondences between proper and improper ways of knowing and being. This doesn't mean that the artwork's role is to endlessly produce agreed upon significations of social inequality that confirm existing knowledge about who is disenfranchised in a particular social context. This type of representative function of the artwork inevitably leads for Rancière to a type of stasis precluding the potential for new instances of sensible and discursive meaning.

The shared yet distinct aspects of Nancy's and Rancière's aesthetic philosophies form a broad framework within which to articulate the possibilities of being surprised, and of sensing but not always understanding that a new relation of meaning in the form of the artwork might be in front of me (the artist) and ultimately the beholder. On the one hand, the medium of the artwork is understood not as re-presenting a meaning or sensation outside of itself (the essence of painting, or an image of equality), but as a world itself, a phenomenon that generates sensible intelligence by its disengagement from symbolic language. On the other hand, through Rancière's extension of the sensorial effects of the artwork (which he sometimes refers to as a 'muteness') into the new discursive configurations, I am able to find a middle ground approach to the significance of medium in contemporary art practice. In my studio work sensory affectivity and conceptual meaning come together through a productive tussle, where juxtapositions between differing modes of production and material surfaces simply ask the viewer to actively reflect on and be open to contradiction and difference as generative of meaning.

Post-medium

In the opening pages of *The Muses* (1997) Nancy poses the question of why there are several arts rather than one. This question may appear to be answered without the need for further interrogation because of an evident shift in recent decades away from doctrines of medium specificity in art practice. The turn from medium specificity is apparent where multiple media are staged simultaneously as installations, and is exemplified by artists working across a variety of media, typical of post-minimalist and conceptual tendencies from the late 1960s to the present. Defined by Rosalind Krauss [1999, 2011] as the post-medium condition, the plurality of medial approaches in contemporary art corresponds to a lack of hierarchical distinction between mediums in artistic presentation. This lack of hierarchy between mediums is synonymous with material non-specificity, resulting in the conceptual components of artworks being privileged over their material dimensions. The diminishment of 'plastic' form and privileging of the 'immaterial'—that is, the purely conceptual qualities of language can be traced back to the concerns of Conceptual Art of the 1960s and '70s. Conceptual artists (Art and Language for example) self-consciously sought to demystify, and ultimately overcome the 'visuality' associated with American post-war abstract painting, and to de-neutralise the broader institutional frameworks in which art is encountered (e.g. Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers). Although diverse in approach a primary impulse of early conceptual practices was to expose the primary role language and discourse play in entrenching ideology. Artworks of this period tended to privilege discourse and self-referentiality over and above the perceived 'hegemony of the visual' form (Buchloh 1990, p. 118). Strategies for exposing sense perception as culturally constructed, ideologically loaded and historically contingent included the deployment of cataloguing or archiving techniques, and of transparent and reflective materials such as mirrors.[2] Through such means works staged self-reflexiveness and made discursive and conceptual propositions evident to the beholder that would convey the arbitrary

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[2] Examples include the 1973 publication of 'Blurting in A&L: An Index of Blurts and Their Concatenation', a publication based on theoretical discussions amongst members of the group. Index 01 was exhibited at Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972, housed in eight filling cabinets. Other examples used by Buchloh include Joseph Kosuth's neon light installation from 1965 titled 'Five Fives (to Donald Judd)', which reduces the artwork to an analytical proposition to Robert Morris's 'Untitled -Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal' 1963.

institutional or social conventions that make artistic production and reception possible in a given context. This approach continues a broader modernist project of critical self-awareness prevalent from the mid-nineteenth to the twentieth century, where artworks enact a progressive form of self-critical appraisal.

The emphasis on the conceptual and linguistic in much early conceptual practice was motivated making self-evident the governing conventions of a given social, political and institutional framework. This type of self-reflexivity is questioned by Nancy as the desire for the Idea to be grasped in its 'nakedness' or self-presence, and thus seeking to control and cast off the obfuscating perceptual effects of sensible form (1997, p. 92). In this way, early conceptual art holds to a binary of 'active' idea over 'passive' sensible form, with the former dominant over the latter. Rejecting a historically progressive model of modern art where the 'purification' of sensible form is taken to manifest art's telos, Nancy develops an alternative approach in which the art medium is not treated as a second order, imperfect manifestation of an invisible idea. In broad terms Nancy's materialism takes a critical stance towards 'the presumption that 'ideas' have a shaping role over materiality' (Ross 2015, p.116). His formulations regarding modern art and aesthetic philosophy undo dualisms that privilege the intelligible over the sensible or essence over mere appearances.

However, this duality also occurs in medium-dependent aesthetics when, for instance, medium specificity is essentialised as in Clement Greenberg's brand of formalism that seeks, for example, to demarcate what is unique and irreducible to the painting medium as physical entity. However, even more significantly for my purposes, Nancy's thinking may be used to detect strains of idealism in non-medium-specific theories of art defined as post-medium, which draw on a lineage of Conceptual Art of the 1960s and '70s. Nancy's approach to art radicalises sensible presentation by shifting the generation of meaning away from 'deep signification' or the omnipotent idea to the event of an external sensible relation. The continual stress on the 'external' visibility of sense over the 'invisibility' of ideas in art relates to Nancy's broader philosophical project, which aims to make the material world meaningfully available to us without recourse to any metaphysical (or invisible) causes. In other words, for Nancy the world is simply 'patent' and our sensible relationships to the world can be staged through an artwork. This

would be described by Nancy as a meaningful experience prior to or in excess of the establishment of symbolic representations of the world. The artwork's assembled materiality or formal structure is therefore capable of rendering sensory meaning as *adequate*, without ideas and significations acting as its sole guarantor. Here the artwork is not left 'pending', waiting to be completed by an external ideal reference, where the sensible form is treated as inadequate, but is rather able to generate meaning through sensible affectability (Nancy 1997, p.91).[3]

Sensible 'affectability' is stressed throughout Nancy's writings to underscore that the artwork's production of meaning depends on its ability to affect the senses, and to make embodied material sense without any idealistic displacement by a 'true' conceptual meaning arriving after the fact of sensory encounter with the work. The artwork's ability to present meaning through sensible form has a much broader ambition in Nancy's philosophy, carrying on a phenomenological tradition influenced by Martin Heidegger. This can be described schematically as an ontology aiming to understand things in their particularity through the event of a shared relation and prior to the establishment of fixed signification. For Nancy there is no sense unless it is shared, 'sense is itself the sharing of being' (Nancy, in James 2012, p.46). Art is therefore privileged as a space of meaning making, generated by relations or the 'being-with' of bodies, entities and matter. This open-ended formulation declares that the formal aspects of the artwork can present a shared world as full of meaning rather than deprived of it. In simple terms Nancy is trying to point out something relatively banal: that our perceptions of and interactions with the material world form the foundations of symbolic identification and discourse, but are also never reducible to those structures (James 2012, p. 47).

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[3] Sense is deliberately used by Nancy for its polysemantic connotations. Primarily sense is used to distinguish between sensory meaning and determined signification; the word sense in Latin is *sentire* which means to feel, in French *sens* relates to the five senses and to the *formation* of meaning (James 2006, pp. 8-9). Signification on the other hand is realised when there is an adequate relationship between signifier and signified. Signification is a fixing into stasis of the relationship between the intelligible and sensible in an artwork. Sense for Nancy undoes signification as it is traditionally understood and occurs when the sensible and intelligible *touch* each other in both proximity and distance. Rather than asserting equivalence between the sensible and intelligible, the two touch and displace each other in order to generate non-symbolic meaning and undo idealised regimes of signification.

The central question of sense, which informs Nancy's approach to politics, ontology and aesthetics charts meaningfulness through the concept of the 'singular-plural'. The singular-plural comprises a pairing of specificity and relationality in irreducible terms. The specificity and particularity of an entity (a painting, a digital print, a body, a community) are such because of a necessary sensible relation of difference to another entity. The singular-plural concept is important for a revaluation of artistic medium because it dispenses with a primary concept that seeks to bind different and incommensurate bodies or phenomena under a single unifying principle. Conversely, the singular-plural cannot be thought as an establishment of non-relation where distinct bodies simply exist separately, side by side because of an assumed self-sufficiency specific to each body. The singular-plural is based on a shared and irreducible relation to meaningfulness outside of conceptual, metaphysical or religious schemas.

The purity of painting expressed in Greenbergian formalism is an example of such ideal self-sufficiency. Painting finds its essential identity within itself, expelling over time what is inessential to it, or what it might share with other mediums. Greenberg's much quoted formula is as follows:

> What had to be exhibited and made explicit was what was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through the operations particular to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more secure (Greenberg in Harrison & Wood 2002, p. 755).

Greenberg's student Michael Fried slightly shifts the formalist debate away from the essential physical features of a medium to the function of conventions of a medium built up over time. Thus, for Fried it is possible to interrogate and revise the specificity of a medium from the perspective of history. He states that the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that at a given moment alone are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting (Fried 1967, p. 168 quoted in Costello 2007, p. 23). However, Fried's conflation of the essence and identity of painting with the

history of its conventions ultimately re-establishes the non-relational self-sufficiency of a particular medium. In my view, Nancy's position is more productive as a way of thinking through the possibility of relations between painting and other mediums because it provides an alternative to the establishment of a unique non-relational medium framework.

Another approach to medium that privileges a determining concept 'outside' of the formal and relational aspects of the artwork can be seen in some recent installation practices. For instance, in works labelled as exemplifying 'relational aesthetics' by the French critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud, in a book of the same title first published in English in 2002. Relational aesthetic works use galleries, spaces and museums to stage 'interactions' between people with the aim of facilitating forms of social connection and collective activity. Activities can include pedagogical workshops, games, and the serving of food, and are labelled by Bourriaud as interpersonal 'microtopias' (Bishop 2004, p. 54). The broad aim of relational art is the temporary realisation of ideal, democratic micro-communities, not yet realised in social reality. Bourriaud explains relational aesthetic works as those that take as their 'theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space' (2002, p. 14). The so-called private space attributed to one on one experiences between artwork and viewer is superseded by a set of social relations, where persons relate to each other equally and are thereby absolved of any sense of social difference or inequality between each other.

An example of a relational aesthetic work is Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled* installation at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992. In this work Tiravanija set up a provisional kitchen and a series of tables and chairs and would cook curries for visitors to the gallery. When he wasn't in the gallery the leftover utensils, kitchen and furniture became what the spectator encountered when viewing the installation. The main point of the exhibition was the facilitation of convivial relations between members of the audience and the artist, rendering their status as somehow equal [Bishop 2004, p. 56]. This foregrounding of idealised relations between participants is ultimately an artistic model that seeks to resolve differences rather than expose and intensify them. Bourriaud's account of relational aesthetics has been criticised by Clare Bishop amongst others for echoing a

corporatist model of society where everyone has their allotted place and function, rather than contesting a given social configuration through the airing of antagonistic differences and the exposure of imposed inequalities (Bishop 2004, pp. 51-79).

Installation and post-media works are treated with disdain by Rosalind Krauss for similar reasons. She considers such practices to be derivatives of post-modernism in which the specificity and history of a medium is forgotten, rendering an equivalence between different things. For Krauss, this enacts a levelling or generalising logic of meaningless exchangeability in line with commodity and kitsch culture. The use of multiple mediums in installation practices shifts artworks away from medium specificity, and for Krauss this is akin to forgetting the criteria by which artworks find conditions of possibility and forms of critical self-appraisal that distinguish them from mere commodities. Krauss comments on commodity culture as polluting every sphere of our existence and artistic production. 'This is the 'unbearable lightness' of installation, its simulation of culture…opens directly onto what Cavell calls the fraudulence that not only hounded the unfolding of modernism but has now become "endemic in the experience of contemporary" art' (Krauss 2011, p. 69).

In *Under Blue Cup* (2011), Krauss uses the paradigm of remembering and forgetting to establish the specificity of a medium through the framework of convention. Krauss adopts the American philosopher Stanley Cavell's (1926-2018) theorisation of automatism to shift the specificity of medium away from Greenberg's model of a physical support to one of *logical* convention, in which anything can become a technical support for a work of art. Automatism functions as a framework that acknowledges an established medium convention, a type of registration of an 'undergirding', as well as the possibility of improvisation within that tradition. Krauss describes several artists as seeking to find 'fresh supports', ones untainted by the stigma of tradition as a way of insisting on the medium as a ground of coherence (2011, p. 17). This is the way Krauss is able think about medium as a framework of criticality and continuity beyond Greenberg's medium specific model which was based on the physicality of a given support.

An example of an artist deploying an unconventional support is Ed Rucha's use of the automobile as 'a support' to photograph a series of gas stations from the perspective of a moving car, which provides its own limitations and possibilities regarding the perspective of the camera. Marcel Broodthaers' *Voyage on the North Sea*, (Fig. 1.1) in which a six-minute film is structured as if the viewer was turning the pages of a book, is another example of experimentation within a given tradition. *Voyage on the North Sea* was presented by Broodthaers for the first time in 1974 at Petersburg Press headquarters in London, alongside a published book of the same name and is based on a book Broodthaers found titled *Analyse d'une Peinture—DASHHow to Analyse a Painting* [Macba.cat, 2018]. The four-minute, 16mm film is an early example of a 'hybrid media' work that combines different media (the book, film, photograph and painting) without collapsing them into a unified whole. The progression of the film is augmented by the appearance of unfolding page numbers. This inferred temporality is also simultaneously arrested by motionless single frame shots of boats sailing, referencing the stillness of painting and photography. Krauss describes Broodthaers as a 'knight' because he 'toasts' the tradition of painting with this work (Krauss 2011, p. 32). This means that he works within a pictorial tradition of painting but is also critical of it by testing the conventions of possibility and thereby borrowing from other traditions. The film establishes a basic temporal narrative of a boat sailing out and returning from sea, depicted through a series of stills showing a painting of boats, as well as photographic stills of a boat on a harbor. The film begins with a single screen shot of the text *Voyage on the North Sea* that is followed by a series of numbered stills referring to the action of turning pages in a book. Each 'new page' is either a wide angle or close up of the same photograph, as well as single motionless shots of a painting Broodthaers bought in a Paris book shop, titled *Voyage on the North Sea*. In addition, we see single shot close-ups of details of the found painting and a monochromatic gridded surface that appears to be its material support. Movement, stasis, abstraction, intention and chance are all perceptual affects presented through the simultaneous staging of different modes of production—this way each medium asserts its specificity but does so through a relation to the other. In my view however, Marcel Broodthaers *Voyage on the North Sea* functions less as an evocation of the tradition of painting as described by Krauss, and more in line within Nancy's singular-plural framework. This occurs through

the simultaneous presentation of differing modes of production, where each medium generates distinctive perceptual affects through a nexus of formal relations. This is what makes *Voyage on the North Sea* so compelling and equally difficult to articulate: the moment a specific material quality of a medium is registered, a second contesting aspect works in tension with that quality, generating sensory affects tied to plural relations of medium that exceed conceptual unification.
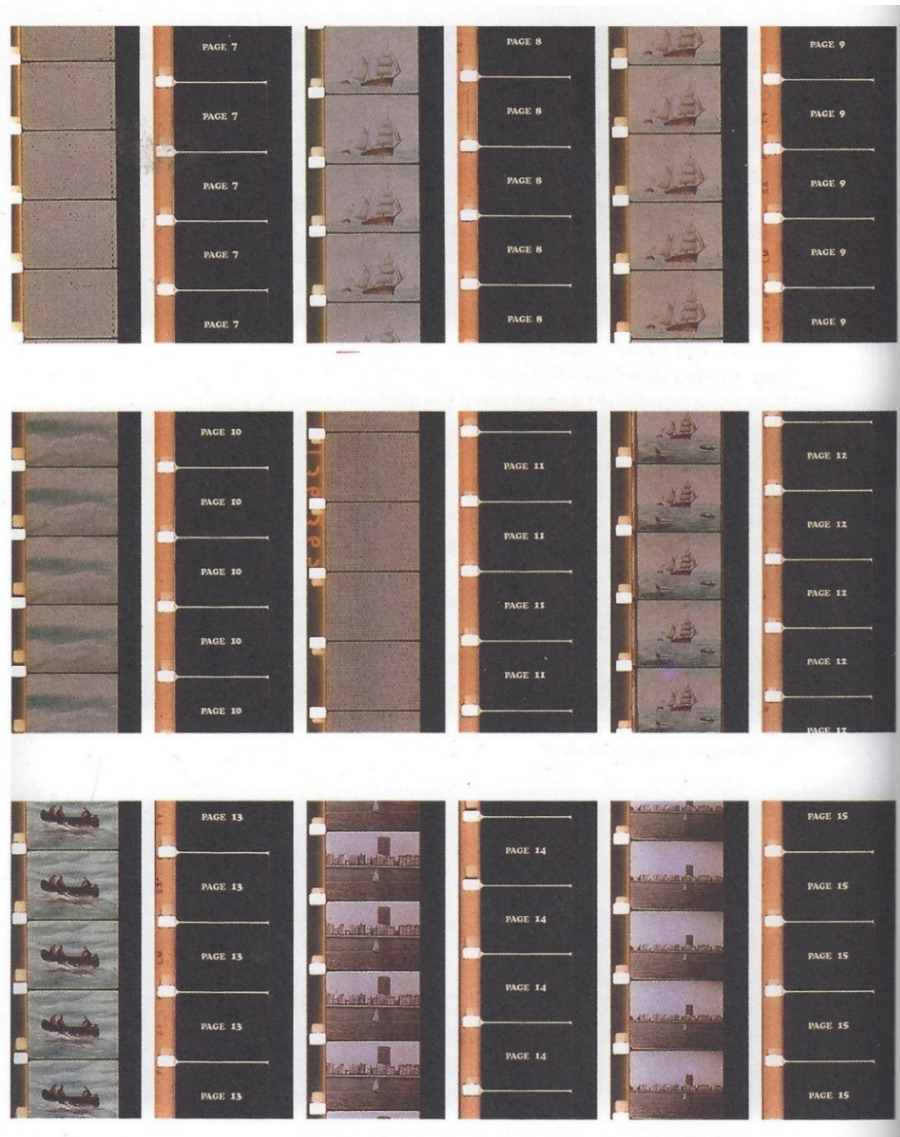
Figure 1.1 Marcel Broodthaers 1973-1974, Stills from: *Voyage on the North Sea* 16mm film, 4min 15secs, in Krauss 2011, p.46

Hybrid practice vs differential specificity

Unlike *Voyage on the North Sea*, recent examples of hybrid practices tend to meld rather than heighten differences between media. The exhibitions titled *Animated Painting* [2008] and *Art Post-Internet* [2014][4] are instances of this logic. *Animated Painting* included artists such as the late Jeremy Blake, William Kentridge, Ann Lislegaard and Kota Ezawa, while *Art Post-Internet* included Cory Arcangel, Hito Steyerl and Artie Vierkant, among others. These exhibitions focus on processes of translation between different media resulting in what Lev Manovich has described as *hybrid media* [Remixtheory.net, 2018]. In the case of *Animated Painting* two general approaches prevail. First is the *merging* of material-based practices such as drawing and painting with durational media such as film or digital video, as in the works of Kentridge and Ezawa. Second is a *deep remix* of divergent media in the form of digital layers, as in the works of Blake and Lislegaard. The artworks included in *Animated Painting*, and the theorisation of their work by Manovich and Betti-Sue Hertz, attempt to establish a post-medium paradigm for works that are digital and function in a hybrid manner, bringing together and re-mixing the logics of different media in digital form.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Art Post-Internet*, Karen Archey formulates the mixing of media to produce hybrid configurations in a similar way, describing the work of Arcangel and Aude Pariset as painting interpreted via software engineering and distribution networks. Archey speaks of the image in these paintings as the result of transformation across media, resulting in a *merging* of various sources (UCCA, 2014). The exhibition charts the transformation of traditional forms such as sculpture and performance via current digital technologies, and also considers various digital modes of distribution enabled by the Internet.

While my early research included aspects of these approaches, my project differs by seeking to develop a thinking and practice of hybrid media forms that incorporates a revised conception of media specificity arising from hybridization. In studio research I staged inter-medial relationships that resist seamless translation, irreconcilable and at

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[4] *Animated Painting* was staged at the San Diego Museum of Art between October 13, 2007 and January 13, 2008 and *Art Post-Internet* was held at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing between March 01 and May 11, 2014.

times contradictory relationships between different works and processes. The process of making occurs when non-representational oil paintings are translated into digital prints created with 3D visualisation software. The aim is to stage a series of formal relations in which no material support is more dominant than any other. The 'digital' paintings/prints are not realised and 'authenticated' by the act of painting. Conversely the materially constructed paintings are not virtualised into a 'more current' language of new media. The relational process of making and eventually exhibiting distinct works alongside each other stages a relationship that also leaves different media 'intact', resisting amalgamation into a singular form. Two works that have been created and displayed in a relational manner are *The Fall* (Fig. 1.3), which is an image created inside 3D software and printed onto linen, and *Red, Yellow and Blue,* an oil painting on canvas (Fig. 1.2). I describe the process of constructing these works in detail in Chapter Two.

Figure 1.2 Peter Alwast 2015, *Red, Yellow and Blue*, oil and acrylic on polycotton, 80x80cm

Figure 1.3 Peter Alwast 2015, *The Fall*, UV cured ink on linen print, 90x80cm

Nancy's singular plural formulation inscribes *both* differential and specific relations (Krauss, 1999, Hawker, 2007, 2009) of medium, where meaning understood as sensory effect is created through a non-transferable relation. The differential and specific functions of medium were first articulated by Krauss in *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Post-Medium Condition* (1999) as way of calling attention to the continued relevance of medium in the wake of post-modern and post-medial practices. As discussed above, for Krauss, medium is understood as a series of historical conventions that need to be evoked or 'remembered', providing a structure for critical interrogation and invention by the artist. Broodthaers is one artist who combines but does not collapse the specificity of different media, deploying outmoded technologies to save them from the indistinction of post-medium and technologically mediated practices (Krauss, 1999).

Rosemary Hawker's writing on relations between painting and photography provides an important benchmark for aspects of my theoretical research. Hawker develops Krauss's

ideas around the differential and specificity functions of medium, adding features from Jacques Derrida's discussion of *idiom.* Referring to artists such as Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth and Gerhard Richter, who work with either photography or painting but who sustain a certain resistance to amalgamation between the two mediums. Hawker's interpretation of Gerhard Richter's work via Derrida's concept of idiom intersects with how I understand Nancy's singular-plural formulation and am applying it to rethinking of inter-medial relations.

For Derrida the idiom of any language, or that which is unique to it, can only ever be known through a process of translation. Derrida's motivation here is to unground self-same governing concepts aimed at determining singular coherent identities. He demonstrates that what we know of something in its 'particularity' is always through a relation with another. Yet this relation is not a seamless process of amalgamation that delivers a coherent identity. Rather it is defined by a failure of complete translation between the idiomatic features of different languages. In this way we come to know something through a certain blockage of translation, less as unique identity in its own right and more as an inviolable difference from something else. As Hawker puts it: 'It is this impossibility—'its necessity as impossibility'—that enables translation to produce meaning. It is translation's inability to thoroughly re-make a meaning from another language that enables it to make yet another meaning, to produce something else again through the process of translation' (Hawker 2009, p. 24). The details of Hawker's engagement with Derrida's concept of idiom and its relationship to Richter's artistic translations between photography and painting are developed in Chapter Two. There I also discuss how Nancy's formulations are important to my own inter-medial works, making a claim for the importance of medium in contemporary practice through the concept of the singular-plural. Nancy's singular-plural framework relates to Derrida's conceptualisation of idiom because it describes the specificity of anything as always determined by its relation to something else. In this framework it is through that external and non-transferable relation that we come to know something specifically. An entity cannot have a meaning in the singular or through an enclosed system (as was the case in Greenberg's essentialist formalism) but must come into contact with another and thereby generate its specificity in a relational manner. The singular plural also

disputes the attempt to establish a common ideal that is 'shared' across a series *of particularities*. The concept of the singular plural means that medium is neither an essence, via its unique physical properties, nor a vessel, wherein specific qualities are appropriated by ideal meanings or singular concepts.

Post-medium approaches to painting

Nancy's materialist aesthetic theory wants us to accept that the formal and material components of the artwork are affective and *substantial* in the generation of meaning. Nancy essentially wants to point out that the artwork does not have to be reliant on determining signification, but can make apparent a propensity or potentiality towards meaning before symbolic constructions. In other words, Nancy wants to re-articulate sensible form as generative of meaning, with the broader aim of showing that we are capable of sharing meaning despite a failure of the metaphysical programs of human emancipation he calls 'exhausted regimes of meaning', which need not be rehabilitated in art (Ross 2008, p. 21).

Aspects of Nancy's reappraisal of the formal dimension of artworks can be seen in a number of recent exhibitions and publications. The two most convincing contributions to a thinking of medium as *both* specific and relational are a recent conference and subsequent publication titled *Painting beyond itself—The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (2016), and two essays by David Joselit: 'Painting Beside Itself '(2009) and its updated iteration 'Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age' (2016). I will examine Carol Armstrong's and Isabelle Graw's essays from *Painting beyond itself—The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* first and then turn to Joselit's writings.

Armstrong reminds us of the fundamental definition of medium as 'something which is 'intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes; a middle state' (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016, p.123). Armstrong refers to a range of paintings, including those of Sigmar Polke and Ellen Gallagher that incorporate other media, describing this intermediate condition as an interlacing of thought and matter, as when 'facture and techne are put to the service, not of craft alone or technique per se, but of some kind of *material* thinking' (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016, p.125). Armstrong's treatment of the sensible and material dimensions of the artwork as active in the

generation of meaning aligns with Nancy's project more broadly. For example, she echoes Nancy when she describes painting 'as a medium within a matrix of other mediums and its potential as once singular (painting) and plural (painting becoming everything else)' (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth 2016, p.143). In the same publication, Isabelle Graw puts forward a way of thinking about the importance of medium via the indexical presence of the artist in a painting. She uses Charles S. Peirce's model of the index as a sign with a physical cause, where the painting evokes a 'ghost like' presence of artistic labor, which then leads to its 'symbolic value' (2016, p.97). While Graw fails to articulate how 'the author's quasi-presence as an effect' is relevant to the issue of medium and post-medium aesthetics, she describes painting as having 'power due to its proximity to the artist's body—like a relic it has been in touch with its maker and his life—it is charged with it ' (2016, p.86). This amounts to an expressionist argument where the medium is treated as a second order vehicle for representing the transcendent ideal of the person of the artist. This is precisely the type of representational model of art that Nancy is at pains to question. Nancy does stress sense production in the aesthetic sphere as a way of generating non-conceptual meaning, but he doesn't idealise self-presence based on the artist's personality or body. Rather, he describes artistic production that includes instruments, tools and materials—a *technical* and *poetic* production that form a network of intensities, continuities and disruptions.

The network as a metaphor for inter-media relationships is also explored in David Joselit's essay 'Painting Beside Itself' (2009). Joselit asks how the materiality of painting can be retained after having gone through a series of network transformations. The network functions as a series of iterative transformations that changes the singular model of a painting. Joselit theorises the medium of painting as being put into a relation with something outside of itself, which is at first glance similar to Nancy's concept of the singular plural, according to which a painting in the singular might be defined through its relation and dispersion with other entities. Joselit cites Stephen Prina, Jutta Koether, Wade Guyton and R.H Quaytman as examples of artists who visualise the 'transitive passage' of action from a painting out to a 'social network (or body)', and from this network back onto painting (2009, pp.125-129). The unconvincing aspect to Joselit's

writing is that too often the artworks he analyses predetermine the results of a painting being interfaced with a network and become conceptually illustrative of that process.

One example of the network function as a pre-determining condition by which a painting is processed is in Joselit's discussion of an exhibition by Jutta Koether in 2009 at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York. The exhibition consisted of a painting mounted onto a white structure and placed in a gallery space as an object. The painting's imagery consisted of a direct quotation of Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape During a Thunderstorm with Pyramus and Thisbe*, 1651 – a tale of death and love (Fig. 1.4). In addition to evoking hybridity between sculpture and painting, Koether performed throughout the exhibition a 'collaged' text in front of the painting. The range of signifiers Koether attempted to represent in the work is quite different to the 'unscripted' open-ended process of Nancy's singular-plural functions in artistic production and reception. Koether's deployment of various contextual references from art history and nightclub spaces is a strategy used by many artists prior to the invention of the internet, on which Joselit network theory depends. In this way it isn't clear or convincingly articulated what actually constitutes a network for Joselit in distinction to Nancy's theorisation of the role of the sensible via the singular-plural model.

In a recent catalogue publication titled *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age,* Joselit extends and updates his earlier essay, tracing an art historical lineage from synthetic cubist works that break open the specific medium of painting by incorporating other media, through to current paintings that are symptomatic of the information age and are informed by networks such as television and the internet. Joselit describes network paintings as suturing spectators into '*extra-perceptual* social networks, rather than situating them in a phenomenological relationship of individual perception' (2016, p.173 emphasis in original). Joselit's theorisation of painting as part of a system of circulation that suspends the resolution of a stable, singular object, is fundamentally a post-medium position where the concept of the network gains more purchase than the artwork's material and formal dimensions. Joselit writes: 'first, we must discard the concept of medium (along with its mirror image, the post-medium), which has been fundamental to art history and criticism for generations. This category privileges discrete objects—even objects that are attenuated, mute, distributed, or

dematerialised' (Joselit 2013, p. 2). For Joselit the artwork passes through a series of iterative networked transformations so that the material support becomes irrelevant, functioning as an amalgamation and representation of those processes. In contrast for Nancy, differing mediums come into contact with each other but are not transformed by that relation and retain their formal specificity through relations of co-appearance.

Figure 1.4 Jutta Koether 2009, *Hot Rod (after Poussin)*, installed painting, in Joselit 2009, p.128

Nancy and the sensible domain of art

Nancy's wants us to accept that 'non-conceptual' artistic forms are *substantial* in their capacity to make meaningfulness possible. The open-ended event of the singular plural opens a space of difference as active in the establishment of new aesthetic meaning. Artworks stage meaning 'as a rhythm among forms or presences that do not pre-exist it, definitively, but that arise from it as such' (Nancy 1997, p.24). This aesthetic position is based on a formalist suspension of content, which inscribes meaning as sensory effect, foregrounding form without its determination by any particular cause, conclusion or singular signification.

While Nancy's thinking is philosophically dense it may be applied to amplify how certain artworks arrest beholders and even make them smile, because they encounter different modalities of production that are put into unexpected relationships, retaining their specificity and suspending any definite resolution. An example of this can be found in a work of John M. Armleder, *Cimicifuga Cordifolia* (Fig. 1.4), which consists of an abstract painting installed on top of a graphic wall painting made of a pattern of repeated red and blue lobsters. The result is surprising and slightly silly, but also invites us to take in two incommensurable things simultaneously. The shine and sparkle of the glitter embedded in the gravity bound blue, red, and burgundy paint is made all the more materially apparent when juxtaposed against the clean graphic lines depicting flattened silhouetted shapes of lobsters. The graphic motif of lobsters is put into a proximate relationship with the unintentional effects of pouring paint on the surface of the canvas, but the lobsters will never 'leap into' and become incorporated into the painted surface, nor will the flowing paint cover over and incorporate the motif of lobsters. Two distinct components 'touch' each other and are put into an aesthetic play, staying 'intact'. The overall composition amounts to the suspension of resolution and a unified composition, which is achieved through divergent formal components and material processes. In this way the differing formal aspects of the work retain their particularities, thereby enacting Nancy's concept of the singular-plural as both specific and differential in the generation of aesthetic meaning.

Jacques Rancière's inter-weaving of language and sense

Nancy's aesthetic theory has been significant in driving my research because it provides a way of re-articulating the importance of medium, while acknowledging and taking account of post-medium practices and debates of recent decades. Nonetheless, in the process of my research I have discerned some limitations to Nancy's predominantly formalist approach to art. In Chapters Three and Four, I explore subtle shifts over time in my studio research, as well as similarities and differences between Nancy's and Jacques Rancière's thinking of aesthetics and contemporary art. The reason for introducing Rancière is not to choose a victor between the two philosophers, but to find a framework that can illuminate later developments in my studio research.

In schematic terms, Nancy foregrounds the artwork's formal properties as creating sensible meaning distinct from discourse and linguistic signification. However, Nancy's tendency to locate the artwork's meaning outside of historical and discursive contexts has been questioned by Rancière on the grounds that it seeks a 'universal form of experience prior to signification' (2013, p. 196). Even though Nancy believes that sense understood as material meaning with 'no final higher causes' is a concern 'of our time', his project can be charged with attributing a timeless essence of art, as when he speculates 'perhaps the 'singular plural' has in fact been at work ever since there have been humans' (Nancy 2013, p.190). In contrast, for Rancière aesthetic experience and art does not refer to a common sensory realm prior to signification, but rather to art and the aesthetic's capacity to withdraw from or redraw established significations, disputing the so-called 'common' or 'universal' space of sensory meaning. Moreover, the sensorial effects of the artwork are for Rancière subject to diverse associations that can be articulated in discursive terms. He is more interested in sustaining a dialectical tension between a type of 'muteness' of the artwork that is formally disruptive of programmatic signification, and the important function played by language in rendering intelligible and communicable instances of sensorial meaning.

Figure 1.5 John M. Armleder 2008, *Cimicifuga Cordifolia*, mixed media on canvas, in Clark, M., Shalgosky, S. and Sturgis, D. 2011, p.59

The way an artwork might deploy a series of references has slightly different consequences for the two philosophers. Nancy's project consistently casts the artwork as presenting non-determined meaning through its activation of differing material relations that are devoid of any idealistic resolution, as in Armleder's juxtaposition of an abstract painting placed over a kitsch wallpaper of graphic lobster motifs. However, as I will shortly demonstrate, an account of the Armleder work may be extended by reference to Rancière's claim that the artwork may activate a form of 'conversion' between muteness and intelligibility. For him, unlike Nancy, the function of discourse is not to constrain and prescribe every element of the artwork but rather to raise aspects of it to the level of perception. Rancière describes this nexus as a type of 'analogon' between words (discourse) and sensorial effects, able to 'construct a surface of

conversion, a surface of forms-signs which is the real medium of painting—a medium that is not identified with the propriety of any support or any material' (2009, p.87, 2014, p.82). Considering Armleder's work from Rancière's perspective, certain referential associations it generates may be discerned. Rather than accounting for meaning in purely formal and sensory terms, the work can be understood as a type of re-ordering of signifying expectations and a way of activating unexpected associative meanings. *Cimicifuga Cordifolia* (Fig. 1.5) stages a correlation between an abstract painting, which functions as a signifier of the achievements of 'high' modernist painting, and a decorative pattern of red and blue lobster motifs, likely to be found in modest seafood restaurants anywhere in the world. A typical post-modernist reading of the work would point to the use of irony and pastiche to deflate the heroic achievements of modernist abstraction and force a conclusion about the 'irrelevance' of such painting to contemporary art practice. However, for Rancière meaning is never entirely settled, and can be recombined to new ends, weaving new correspondences between forms, words and significations. To illustrate this point Rancière describes Romanticism's reworking of Greek art as inscribing new meanings into artworks of the past as 'forms for new contents or raw materials for new formations…that can be re-viewed, re-framed, re-read, re-made…allowing for instance, Manet to become a painter of modern life by re-painting Velasquez and Titian' (2010, p. 133). Similarly, Armleder's work performs a re-staging and re-inscription of *both* the material and conceptual possibilities of painterly abstraction associated with The New York School during the 1950's. The abstract painting placed on top of the graphic motifs of lobsters has decorative glitter embedded in the surface of the paint, a formal decision that would never have been taken by a 'pure' abstract painter such as Morris Louis, whose painting's made of veils of pigment submitted to gravity are cited in Armleder's work. Nor would the decision to include such a kitsch material as glitter in the painting have been accepted by Clement Greenberg, who drew a stark demarcation between high art and kitsch culture. The assemblage by Armleder brings together the 'pure' sensory and optical effects typical of colour field painting associated with American abstraction of the post-war period, with the common world of seafood restaurants or decorated entrances to sea world theme parks. Based on this analysis, the differing art historical and cultural referents staged by the work function as both an exchange and a disagreement, like a dinner conversation

between Clement Greenberg and Norman Rockwell, discussing the possibility that 'living culture' could be found in avant-garde galleries as well as in unexpected places such as lobster restaurants. The combination of incongruent formal elements results in significations that reorder and defy expectation, weaving together the perceptual effects of 'pure' abstraction with banal wallpaper or advertising. This work performs an unfinished dance between the broad painterly paradigms of abstraction and figuration, where the two approaches are put into dialogue or even pitted against each other without a sense of resolution, leaving the way open for new combinations of associative meaning. It could be argued that from Rancière's perspective Armleder's work sustains a tension between discordant sensorial effects in excess of discursive explication, while also generating a range of contextual and symbolic associations linked to these effects.

Maintaining and extending the importance of medium

Towards the second half of this research project, while I was working through the complexities Nancy's singular plural formulation, Donald Trump was elected as president of the United States. Waves of nostalgic populism programmed to negate social and ethnic differences continue to rise across Europe, in Poland, Slovakia, Germany, and have been identified with the Brexit outcome. In relation to this context, Nancy's formal and sensory model of art continues to have relevance for my studio research because it provides a distinct domain of aesthetic meaning independent to the ceaseless flow of information and 'fake news'. The question of medium as a source of sensible meaning plays a role in my later studio research, where there is a lack of contextual signification, giving the works a sense of aesthetic autonomy. By autonomy I mean the foregrounding of the sensual, formal relations of the work over and above the deployment of specific social or political referents. The staging of formal relations is a way of rendering aesthetic meaning as distinct from the exchangeable flow of information typical of our information-saturated culture. These works instead focus on internal aesthetic relations and can therefore be described as 'asymptological' of a context. The asymptological function of art interrupts exchangeable information by staging aesthetic effects that block commonplace significations. Gabriel Rockhill articulates asymptological as 'political' because it is an '*obstacle* to interpretation rather

than a symptom of latent meaning' of a broader culture (Rockhill & Watts 2009, p.198, emphasis in original). Nancy reinforces this position when he says that 'art today is faced with too many significations' (2010, p. 95). In this light the importance of medium is apparent, because the formal, sensible operations of an artwork function as strategies to assert difference and quasi-independence from the seamless exchange of cultural signs.

Rancière's thinking overlaps with but also refigures Nancy's 'asymptological' approach. The formally interruptive gestures of the artwork are for Rancière equally reversible into signs, discourse and symbolic associations. Rancière identifies the double poetics of the image (understood broadly) 'as a cipher of a history written in visible form and as obtuse reality, impeding meaning and history' (2009, p. 12). This means that the artwork can have a double or reversible function, as blocking or suspending meaning, and as translating these effects into conceptual and contextual associations. Rancière's approach extends my original question about the importance of medium, by enabling play with conceptual associations from within the singular-plural relations of divergent mediums. This occurs when associative relations are mobilised by installing differing material supports and methods of production in proximity to each other. The final aspects of my studio research aim to register a double approach to medium that foregrounds the materiality of the artwork and suspends signification, as well as using imagery to stage a tension between different regimes of identification. This can most simply be described as staging irreconcilabilities between non-representational 'abstract' prints and image-inspired figurative paintings. On the one hand, the suspension of signification is achieved through formal relations between paintings, abstract prints and collages. On the other hand, 'abstraction' is used as an historical *referent,* as a signifier of modernity, progress and technology. This referential use of abstraction is put into tension with romantic, folk art-like paintings that convey various associations of 'anti-modernity'. These figurative paintings have rough hessian supports and depict populist marches, crowds dancing or gathering around camp fires, commemorative flags wrapped around trees in European landscapes, evoking a dreamy, sentimental, folksy sensibility. The 'anti-modernist' associations of these works arise from the formal logic of the singular plural, which is activated by putting two distinct

surfaces and methods of making into a series of inter-medial relations. In this way, distinct mediums co-exist and generate meaning through contradictory formal and discursive relations.

The aim of these works is to activate an unresolved encounter between signification and its effacement. The divergent formal properties of distinct media suspend or block access to a singular content, which can be described, following Rancière as a type of 'muteness', while also gesturing to diverse associations. This allows me to still produce work that might be viewed through Nancy's framework, focusing on formal relations independent of concepts, while also putting into play referential associations. Rancière's mobilisation of the referent where 'anything' can speak and be re-constituted as art is borne out in a final body of work in which the sensorial and associative are juxtaposed against and in relation to each other. This is achieved through layering, collage, placing in proximity differing surfaces, imagery, and processes in which the sensory and associative function of medium is in active play.

Summary

In this thesis I explore theoretical and philosophical aspects of the question of artistic medium, and then apply and evaluate this knowledge with a selection of contemporary artworks and my own studio research. The thesis is structured as five chapters – Chapter Two provides the background to Nancy's revision of G.W.F. Hegel's claim that 'art is the sensible presentation of idea' (Hegel in Nancy 1997, p.88). Hegel's aesthetic philosophy claims art to be a mode of sensuous expression of idealised instances of human freedom. Art, like philosophy, religion and modern civil institutions contributes to the teleological realisation of *the Absolute.* The manifestation of the Absolute functions in Hegel's philosophy as a mode of rational self-awareness and communal recognition between individuals within a society. At its structural level the Absolute is a speculative concept that reconciles the Ideal concept of freedom with empirical and sensible reality. I explore the relation that Hegel sets up between the idealistic aspirations art and his speculation on the necessity of its sensible dimension, through his analysis of three broad historical epochs of art, which he names the Symbolic, Classical and Romantic. The three main epochs of art eventually lead to Hegel's formulation about the end of

'art's higher vocation', signifying that he believed art to no longer have the same important status it once had in past societies. Against this background, I explain how Nancy points to a certain impasse in Hegel's aesthetic system, which in his view is not able to deal with the sensible dimension of art adequately. Nancy demonstrates how the sensible formal dimension of art can be considered a positive point of orientation, rather than be treated as incomplete. Concluding this chapter, I critically evaluate idealist tendencies in some recent collaborative, cross media works by Australian artists Lyndell Brown, Charles Green and Jon Cattapan, and analyse a collaborative painting work by Francis Alÿs that aligns with Nancy's model of the singular-plural medium.

In Chapter Three I investigate how Nancy's aesthetics are informed by the contradictions in Hegel's thought. I then discuss how the singular-plural foregrounds the sensible and formal possibilities of the artwork, accounting for a revised theory of medium which is at once specific and relational. The background to the singular-plural is also discussed noting its relationship to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive brand of post-structuralism. I then apply the singular plural to Rosemary Hawker's treatment of Gerhard Richter's work, which draws on Derrida's concept of translation. Hawker's application of Derrida's concept of idiom and translation relates in part to my studio research in which I focus on a range of inter-medial relationships between paintings and their translation into prints via 3D new media software. I discuss how my studio work revises conceptions of medium by employing a relational and specific model between paintings and new media prints. In the final part of this chapter, I provide an account of studio research which sought but stumbled somewhat, in extending inter-medial relations and disruptions by through paintings, sculptural objects and videos.

Chapter Four revaluates and modifies Nancy's overall argument regarding art and medium by comparing it to Jacques Rancière's aesthetic theory. This chapter is important in the development of my studio research as it provides a comprehensive background to Rancière's aesthetic ideas, which I use in part as a framework for the final stages of my studio research. Rancière treats the medium of art as a mode that suspends the beholder's ability to identify determinant significations and as a model for the inscription for new discursive meanings and associations. I develop in detail the

respective positions of Nancy and Rancière's on the function of sensible meaning in modern and contemporary art, through their analysis of various sculptures from antiquity. In the final part of this chapter I apply Rancière's insights on the aesthetic and political dimension of art to recent video works by David Claerbout and James Coleman.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I focus on the most recent stages of my studio research. Here, borrowing aspects of Nancy's and Rancière's thinking, I develop an argument about the importance of medium as a source of sensible and associative meaning in the context of contemporary art. I provide a framework for my works between the type of sensible formal meaning Jean-Luc Nancy promotes, and the inscription of this formal meaning into new configurations of symbolic association typical of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic regime of art. I discuss how the importance of medium is asserted through a series of formal juxtapositions between two conventionally incongruent processes of production. I also discuss the contextual motivations behind a series of figurative folk-like paintings and abstracted prints created with new media software.
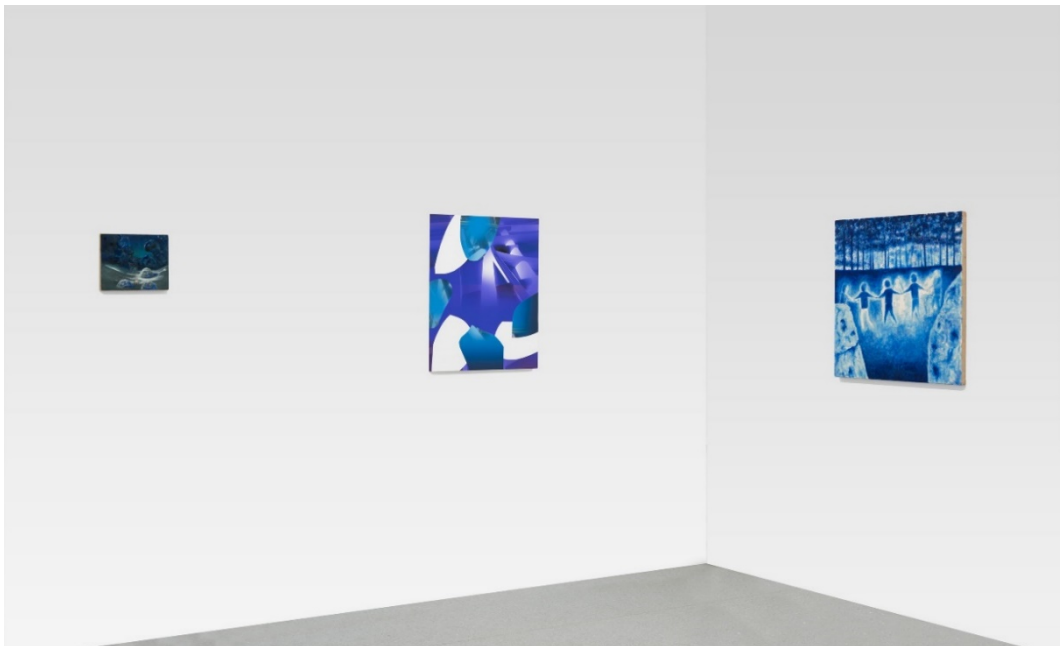
Figure 1.6 Peter Alwast 2018, Installation shot

Figure 1.7 Peter Alwast 2017, *The Dance*, Oil on Hessian, 55x55cm

Chapter Two

Jean-Luc Nancy on Hegel

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of how Jean-Luc Nancy both draws on and departs from G.W.F Hegel's aesthetic framework by interrogating the consequences of Hegel's dictum that *art is the sensible presentation of idea*. Nancy's focus on the artwork's material processes and sensory aspects rehabilitates something of formalist aesthetics, providing pertinent insights into contemporary debates regarding post-medium art practices. Nancy locates aesthetic meaning in the material aspects of the artwork, where *sense* is generated without recourse to any determining idea or ideal. To fully comprehend what is at stake for Nancy it is important to know the Hegelian background that informs his project.

Hegel considered art to be integral to the expression of human freedom because it provides sensible instances of meaning that show a society at any given time an ideal of freedom and self-understanding. For Hegel expressions of freedom by artworks form a broader teleological process of rational progress towards the realisation of the Absolute. In broad terms, the Absolute is the self-conscious realisation of freedom within a culture. Freedom is not simply the liberty of an individual to do whatever they please, but is understood as the realisation of circumstances that reconcile the particular needs of the individual with general, accepted norms of a society. Hegel believed that during his time this process had begun to be realised through social and political institutions, and that art's social utility as the sensuous expression of human freedom had become a thing of the past.

Nancy's book *The Muses*, draws out the logical consequences of two important aspects of Hegel's theory of art. The first relates to art's central role in society if it had, as Hegel said, become a thing of the past. The second point relates to the importance Hegel places on art's communication of metaphysical Ideals of freedom in concrete form. These two points inform Nancy's articulation of how art as sensible form can still present a type of truth and societal self-understanding without being reliant on the Idealism that

informs Hegel's philosophy. In the last part of this chapter Nancy's non-idealistic approach to the function of the artwork is applied to critically assess some recent collaborative, cross media works by Australian artists Lyndell Brown, Charles Green and Jon Cattapan. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a collaborative work by contemporary artist Francis Alÿs that offers an alternative to the idealist impetus I ascribe to the works of Brown, Green and Cattapan.

Before charting Nancy's aesthetic theory further it is important to emphasise the studio-driven impetus of my PhD research. Nancy's thinking about art provides a useful parallel to my studio research, which has developed alongside the discourses and debates I examine in this thesis. I mention this not to privilege art practice over theory, but to indicate that my practice is in some respects closely aligned with Nancy's thinking about art. At the same time, the theoretical approach I adopt in this chapter is not a clear system with distinct properties under which the artistic output of my studio research can be finally categorised and justified. Rather, understood in terms of Nancy's thinking, my practice undoes assumptions that privilege fixed meaning that is assumed to be passively embodied or represented through material or visible forms of the art work. I explore in detail the way my studio research intersects with Nancy's conception of the artwork in the next chapter. But put simply, Nancy champions artworks that disclose meaning through sensible relations rather than subordinating such relations to any higher principle, idea or concept. He describes the relation between the intelligible and the sensible in oxymoronic terms, as one of 'distant proximity', or of both contact and separation. For Nancy, the material and sensuous aspects of art works interrupt discursive resolution or systematicity. Nancy wants to make a claim in support of sensible meaning, which is not entirely reducible to language and discourse. Importantly, however, he is not describing a type of meaning that is inaccessible to perception, but something that can be felt to be significant, something like 'an event of meaningfulness itself', that is unique to artistic production (Pippin 2014, p. 109). Nancy uses a double formulation of contact and separation between the sensible and intelligible in order to maintain the sensible as a mode of pre-discursive meaning that remains distinct from the coordinating function of a determining idea. Transmission of the intelligible or conceptual is inevitably dependent on material presentation and is

therefore necessarily touched by the sensible. Throughout Nancy's writing he therefore deploys words such as 'touch', 'tact', 'distinct' and 'proximity' to underscore the sensible, affective dimensions of art's ability to make meaning, understood as a claim to 'truth' through formal and material characteristics rather than conceptualisation alone.

The theoretical approach to art that Nancy develops is intricately bound to and critical of Hegel's treatment of art in his Aesthetics lectures. It is an attempt to think through the consequences of Hegel's contention that the historical progression of art since Ancient times has resulted in the demise of what Hegel considers art's highest vocation or social role. This is sometimes described as Hegel's 'end of art' thesis. Nancy follows Hegel's aesthetic theory through to its logical conclusion, which insists on the *necessity* of the sensible manifestation of ideas. The necessity of the sensible dimension of art is based on Hegel's belief that historically art played an important role in making intelligible to a people or community concepts of human freedom. Without art's sensible dimension the ideal concept of what freedom may look like remains unrealised, abstract and not able to be communicated to a given culture. Art's 'highest' vocation is therefore to give sensuous expression to the unfolding of an inherent human rationality as it attempts to develop better understandings of itself and become more self-conscious over historical time. As I will explain below, the essential drive of this type of teleological rationality towards higher instances of self-understanding remains the same throughout history, but the form it takes in art changes over time. As will also be explored, Hegel thought that art no longer held the same kind of social importance it once did, that with the loss of its function of expressing a society's highest ideals and values art turns inwards to focus on itself, that is, on its own techniques. He also noted that art began to become more interested in prosaic subject matter.

As I will discuss Nancy refigures Hegel's philosophy by insisting that the artwork's sensible form can still be thought of as meaningful, or revealing an aspect of human freedom, without being subordinated to any determining Ideal. The foregrounding of meaningfulness in artworks without recourse to an anterior concept has allowed me to analyse how the sensible dimensions of art have been marginalised or occluded in recent debates on the post-medium condition of contemporary art.

Hegel's speculative idealism and the role of sensible presentation in art

Hegel's theory of art relates to broader aspects of his philosophical system that will be outlined in what follows. Human beings are both objects of nature and rational subjects capable of communicating with each other. As sensible beings able to speculate, use language, create art and think morally, we embody an imminent rationality that allows us to overcome the limitations of our natural environment in the pursuit of self-determination (Houlgate 2016, para 9). Rationality provides the foundation for self-consciousness, not just at an individual level but at a social level, functioning as a mode of shared self-understanding that is described by Hegel as *Geist*. The English equivalent of this word is Spirit. Geist is not only a transcendent Ideal beyond material reality, but is a process of its own realisation and presentation in empirical form. The historical unfolding or movement of Geist forms the basis of Hegel's dialectical system. The dialectic involves the manifestation of Geist as Ideal concept (freedom, self-knowledge) in empirical reality as it progresses through ever-higher stages of its realisation in reality. The dialectical process consists of human's capacity to reason and project beyond their mere material existence, creating Ideal concepts (a thesis), which then need to be tested and realised in empirical reality. Through the process of confronting contradictions or barriers to (antithesis) Geist's manifestation, more adequate forms of its realisation emerge progressively within different phases of civilization. Hegel claims that self-consciousness involves 'a return from otherness', which means that in order to progress, Geist (as the quest to realise human freedom) must confront and overcome barriers to its flowering, or instances of 'otherness' such as social alienation, injustice or inequality in a particular historical period or societal configuration. This involves a teleological progression toward more reconciled or ideal forms of social reality driven by human's innate capacity as reason producing beings. Rationality enables humans to overcome the limitations of the natural and social worlds in search of higher forms of self-understanding. The Absolute is the final realisation of Geist, marking the fulfilment of its historical and dialectical unfolding as the harmonious binding of Ideal content in sensible or empirical reality. Hegel is affirming a form of rational self-consciousness where humans are free at both the personal and social level. Freedom here functions as a mode of communal self-awareness where the specific needs or desires of the

individual are in balance with the necessary limitations on an individual's freedom within a given community. At a structural level the manifestation of Geist entails the synthesis and realisation of Ideal content (freedom, self-consciousness) in social reality. Robert Pippin describes this process in the following way:

> comprehension of that "same content"—the achievement of which is understood to be the realization of human freedom—is understood by Hegel as a comprehensive form of Geist's self-knowledge, where Geist is understood as a collective subject, a communal or common like-mindedness inheriting the aspirations of a distinct artistic, religious, and philosophical tradition and as finally fulfilling those aspirations (2014, p. 6).

For Hegel a free and self-determining society is managed through various institutions: civil, legal, familial and religious for example. However, it is philosophy, namely Hegel's own, that provides the best possible way of understanding how and why Geist takes on particular forms in the process of its self-conscious development (Houlgate 2016, para 10). But in addition to philosophy, art has exemplary status in Hegel's thought as the sensuous expression of Geist's historical unfolding. Art functions as a vehicle in which the Idea manifests itself in sensuous form, rendering intelligible and collectively communicatable instances of Absolute *Spirit* as it progressively comes to know itself over historical time. As explained above, Absolute Spirit for Hegel refers to the ultimate realisation of human freedom and self-understanding. The Absolute functions as a mode of conciliation between the inner or idealistic speculative necessity of Geist and its external, sensory manifestation. For Hegel, the beautiful artwork models this dynamic as it expresses a yet-to-be-realised Ideal of freedom in ways not normally available in day-to-day life. Art's sensible dimensions enable the presentation of speculative ideas in material form making it a significant vehicle for rendering Geist communicable to a particular society. Without such sensible, determinate incarnations the Ideal of human freedom risks remaining a mere abstraction, or to pre-empt Nancy's critique of Hegel, the Ideal is at risk of remaining 'invisible' to a society. Hegel describes the artwork as involved in a process of doubling, where Geist is realised in the sensuous form of the artwork so that it can be understood collectively. Pippin paraphrases Hegel as follows:

Geist, must "double itself" (*sich verdoppeln*) (*A*, 1:31) in order to be able to experience and understand itself in its deeds and objects. (And with that one characterization, we are already in uncharted waters; art does not double or imitate reality as in so many mimetic theories, but rather in art, Geist, some sort of achieved collective like-mindedness, doubles *itself*.) And this occurs within an ongoing collective, continuous attempt at self-knowledge over historical time, a project one had to understand in the light of interconnected attempts at such knowledge in religion, philosophy, and even in the social and political practices of an age (2014, p. 32).

Art's doubling of Geist makes it a 'secondary' material manifestation of the Ideal of human freedom. The key point about the concept of doubling is that it demonstrates how in Hegel's philosophical system, an Ideal concept necessarily depends on its material or sensible actualisation to be understood and acted upon within a society. Geist doubles itself in empirical reality providing intelligible forms of communal self-understanding. This is described by Pippin as a process of working through various forms of 'irrationality' so that an individual's free actions or deeds are recognised at the social level and, in turn, the individual's self-knowledge reflects the self-awareness and equality of a given culture (Hussain 2011, para 3). The absence of mutual forms of recognition within a society results in inequality, repression and irrational acts of violence, which Geist needs to work through and resolve. As mentioned above, freedom for Hegel is not simply the right of the individual to do whatever he or she wants or to be free of any type of external constraint (social or natural). Rather, freedom is understood as the realisation that we are subjects who may freely own our actions within a society while also being aware that our deeds may be an obstacle to someone else's freedom. Identification with our deeds 'as truly ours' and the simultaneous recognition of another's actions and right to freedom that may impede our freedom is a dynamic that involves a 'return from otherness', which is in keeping with Hegelian dialectics. Pippin describes the realisation of Geist as a form of communal like-mindedness: 'Only in a social world that has achieved some mutuality of recognition or mutuality of recognitive institutional statuses can social norms play the appropriately constitutive role they do in my own attempts to count this as such and such a deed'

(Pippin 2014, p. 20). Art contributes to the progressive development of a culture's self-awareness by doubling Geist, giving material form to the Ideal of freedom, thus reflecting the level of social and inter-subjective self-understanding of a society as it evolves historically (Pippin 2011, p. 2).

Hegel's History of Art

Hegel's thinking about the emergence of modern art proceeds from his identification of three broad historical periods of art prior to modernity: Symbolic, Classical and Romantic. In each period, art plays an important role in revealing to society its sense of self-understanding. To understand how Hegel conceives of the 'last' broad period of art (just prior to his own time), which he defines as Romantic, a sketch of the other two periods of artistic development is necessary.

The Symbolic period is comprised of four stages: the first is the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism (founded approximately 3500 years ago); the second is Hindu art (again from a very broad period which could be dated from 550BC through to sixth century AD); the third stage is that of Ancient Egyptian culture, its pyramids and sculpture (2000BC to 100AD); and the fourth stage includes what Hegel identifies as the sublime art of the Jewish people and 'oriental pantheism' (poetry found in Islamic, Persian and Turkish cultures. The details of these phases are not relevant here, but put simply, Hegel views Symbolic art as a too abstract sensible manifestation of Geist, which for him means that the cultures involved lacked a certain maturity and self-consciousness in humanistic terms. Of course such claims have been roundly criticised since Hegel's time. However, I need to rehearse his reasoning on this matter in order to later discuss Nancy's critical refiguring of Hegel's aesthetic theory.   According to Hegel, in Zoroastrianism and Hindu art the spiritual is tied up with the natural world and can only be represented through anthropomorphic distortions, such as sculptural and imagistic hybrids of human and animal figures with multiple arms and limbs. In Egyptian art the representation of the spiritual shifts from divine/natural representations to an evocation of spirit that is symbolic and intangible. For Hegel, Egyptian art in the form of The Sphinx, death masks and the pyramids partially reveals an Idea of Geist, but it largely remains hidden from view. Moreover, Egyptian art is preoccupied with representations

of an afterlife and therefore lacks any direct representation of human freedom on earth (Holgate 2016, para 43).

In Classical Art, which Hegel broadly attributes to ancient Greece, Geist is no longer presented at a remove as in Symbolic art. This period sees a shift from artistic uses of symbol and allegory to more humanistic representations of spiritual life. In drama, pottery and sculpture Greek art presents the lives of Gods as if they were human agents involved the daily drama of life. Greek Gods are free spirits embodied in human form and therefore present a perfect union between the free spiritual life and the confines or constraints of the natural and material world. Such a union exemplifies Ideal content and sensuous form existing in a state of resolution. For Hegel, Greek art represents an unsurpassed moment in Western history when the embodiment of ideal content in sensible form renders visible and intelligible the Ideal of human freedom. Such resolved sensuous expression of spiritual freedom is what Hegel identifies as true beauty in art (Holgate 2016, para 19). Another way of putting this would be to say the Hegel defines artistic beauty as the perfect merging of form and content. Gyorgy Markus states that Hegel's notion of truth and beauty is historicist. He writes: 'This means primarily that a genuine work of art makes manifest what was or is, for a people or epoch, the Absolute– that is, that which is for them unconditionally and universally valid or significant, the centre of any society's highest interests, aspirations and values' (1996, p. 12). However, Hegel's account of the progressive, historical unfolding of Geist means that what he saw as the perfect synthesis of idea and sensible form in Greek art must ultimately superseded as Geist seeks even higher forms of its realisation over time. As Hegel contended, while Ancient Greek art marked a high point of Western cultural production, Greek Gods were nonetheless *idealised* human characters, and therefore not anthropomorphic or human enough. They lacked a sense of inward thinking or self-consciousness that is required for higher levels of self-consciousness. The Romantic period of, which refers to the impact of Christianity on art more broadly, follows the Classical, and is seen by Hegel as a more direct, anthropocentric embodiment of Idea than existed in previous epochs. Hegel refers to Christianity as 'revealed religion', because it renders the figure of Jesus as both the embodiment of the Holy Spirit and as a human figure who has suffered and died like any other human being. In this way

Romantic art presents both inward spirituality and human suffering, revealing spiritual freedom and the limitations of human nature together. Despite their differences, the common feature that binds all three of Hegel's periods of artistic production is that art is orientated towards divine or other-worldly life.

According to Hegel, with the advent of the Reformation, religion and faith are no longer as dependent on art's sensible presentation of spiritual freedom, but rather turn inwards and away from religious iconography. Romantic art as the last 'great' period of art paves the way for higher forms of spirituality which are taken over by religious faith, philosophy and social institutions. This is because Romantic art reveals the freedom of spirit as something 'beyond art' by disclosing the inner necessity of Geist in the corporeal form of Christ (Holgate 2016, para 66). Hegel speculated that Geist withdraws from sensible presentation after Romantic art so that it might know itself without the necessity of any material grounding. The overcoming of revealed religion is also synonymous with Hegel's formulation of the end of art, or the end of art's highest vocation in his theory: to present Ideals of freedom in sensible form.

Hegel's end of art thesis

Hegel's infamous formulation of the end of art announces the end of art's centrality to the presentation of religious and divine themes. Becoming secularised, art in the modern period takes up prosaic subject matter, which for Hegel means that art no longer holds the same high value and central societal role it had in the past. Art is therefore no longer central to a society's progress towards self-understanding. Hegel draws this conclusion because he believed that the realisation of human freedom was becoming empirical fact through the rationalising mechanism of modern civil institutions during his time. Speculative rationality or 'thought itself' operated through the political and civil institutions emergent in Europe from the early nineteenth century. Consequently, Hegel's claim about the end of art does not refer to apocalyptic end to human civilisation or to the production of art, it rather signals that for Hegel the realisation of the Absolute in reality was coming to fruition in his own time. Hegel thought that because modern society had become fundamentally rational it no longer required art to provide sensible incarnations of the Ideal of freedom because resolution

of issues related to individual and societal freedoms could be worked out through a complex web of modern social and political institutions. Hegel contends: 'art no longer affords the satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone…Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past' (Hegel quoted in Markus 1996, p. 7).

For Hegel, the establishment of secure rational foundations in modern civil institutions meant that societal contradictions and irrationality could be worked through and resolved through those very institutions. It hardly needs acknowledging how wrong Hegel was about the realisation of freedom in modern European culture, which in the next one hundred years would see some of the greatest displays of human irrationality ever seen, in the form of war, manipulated famine and genocide. However, two general points that can be drawn about the role of art in the context of modernity from Hegel's incorrect conclusions about civil society of the 1820s. The first, which I mention briefly for now, involves the role of art in gesturing to better or more ideal configurations of social and communal life. Because any society has varying levels of irrationality present within it at any given time to work through, the modern artwork might be viewed as reflecting on these contradictions and conflicts over freedom with the aim of encouraging aspiration towards improved configurations of social and subjective life in the future. This motivation has informed many modernist artworks and avant-garde manifestoes in the past and the present, and it prolongs Hegelian tradition by looking to critique forms of social repression in anticipation of their eventual amelioration. Art aspires to function as a mode of self-knowledge that works through unresolved instances of irrationality (in Hegel's terms) such as social inequality or a lack of freedom for some members of society. In response to the otherness it finds in the social works, art takes up the role of presenting back to society self-critical ideas about itself in order to model or encourage more resolved forms of understanding. Characterised this way modern art conforms to the same Hegelian teleological drive to find resolution between an Ideal model of society and its realisation in empirical form.

Pippin has argued that in modernity, art continues a self-critical project because it has a capacity to show what might be wrong or failing in a culture more broadly by questioning the relevance and intelligibility of established or normative artistic

conventions. In its distinct sensible-intelligible way art communicates 'what forms of mutual intelligibility are beginning to fail' (Pippin 2011, p. 4). Pippin refers to the paintings of Edouard Manet (1832-1883) to demonstrate such questioning and reconfiguration of pictorial conventions of mid-nineteenth century academic painting as a model of Hegelian-type self-criticality. In this way art continues to be a mode of self-critical communication spurred by social contradictions, and with the aim of establishing more 'rational' modes of social self-understanding in the future. Conflicts over injustice, inequality and the truncation of freedoms in the social world orientate and motivate modern artworks that continue the Hegelian tradition. Art in this context has a function to 'work through' unresolved social and political problems and to present ideas that reflect the self-awareness of a culture so that it may realise better kinds of understanding in the future.

The other position art might be said to occupy after Hegel's end of art proposition involves its role as a type of 'sensible remainder' (Nancy 1997, pp. 24-32). As Nancy points out, the 'failure' of the reconciliation of spirit with itself leaves the sensible component of art without any 'higher function' in Hegel's theory. Nancy takes this proposition at its word by concurring with Hegel's suggestion that the role of art in expressing metaphysical ideals has indeed become a thing of the past. However, Nancy seeks to elevate the sensible, material dimension of art as a 'meaningful' and valuable remainder because it is devoid of determination by the metaphysical. The conclusion Nancy draws from Hegel revives art as capable of rendering 'truth', understood as shared meaning in this material world. This is the asymptomatic approach of art, where its motivations withdraw from attempting to rectify or resolve symptoms of irrationality and the lack of freedom, in order to progress more ideal social configuration in the future.

Nancy's takes an asymptomatic approach to art because he sees it as able to interrupt or disturb communication and settled signification, at odds with the aforementioned idea of art as seeking resolution or healing of unreconciled social bonds. This is what the exposure to sense means for Nancy: it is sensible meaning shared between bodies and entities that while irreducible to discourse can generate a form of shared meaning. Nancy treats this as a possibility to show via the artwork that sensible reality is necessary

as a mode of collective mutuality prior to symbolic consolidation. Another way of phrasing this would be to say that pre-symbolic sense experience for Nancy functions a somewhat like the resolution between the individual and the collective in Hegel's Absolute. In Nancy's thinking, however, this 'resolution' pertains to an awareness of sense as an event of *relation*: a relation between an embodied individual's affect on others and that individual's receptiveness to be affected by others (Ross 2007, p.149). The artwork can model this kind of sensible material matrix by foregrounding formal and sensory relations rather than prioritising Ideal concepts. Nancy mobilises formal and sensory meaning against this background, where what remains of the artwork after its 'highest vocation' has passed, is its sensible meaningful dimension.

The importance of the sensible dimension of art for Nancy

Hegel's speculation about the end of art signals the subordination of the sensible by rational thought. This moment in Hegel's writing represents for Nancy a blockage in the unfolding of the dialectic as Hegel conceived it. This blockage refers to the necessary material moment of Geist's externalisation that resists appropriation into higher forms of self-understanding. The 'stalled' moment of the dialectic occurs when an Ideal remains permanently unrealised. The unrealised Ideal is a motif that Nancy uses to question art works that mourn for something invisible or non-apparent in their sensible form. In contrast, Nancy activates the 'coming-to-presence' of sensible form as artistic meaning devoid of any longing for an orientating schema or higher principle such as the Absolute (1997, p. 98). As noted previously, Nancy's broader aim is to amplify the material and sensuous properties of art that Hegel *needs* but which are ultimately negated in his theory. Following Hegel, Nancy uses the inscription of sensuous form as a *necessity*, but he diverges from Hegel's thinking by locating meaning in that which blocks the passage of the dialectic, that which remains unsubordinated to a 'higher' principle. The sensory externalisation or presentation of Idea here resists conciliation into higher forms of rational speculation, and therefore withdraws because of its irreconcilability with an adequate form. Nancy points out that this is for Hegel an unresolvable contradiction or gap between content and form, or between Idea and its sensible realisation. Mobilising this sensible 'excess', Nancy imbues it with a generative and critical potential and thereby treats *sense* as the source of artistic meaning.

Hegel's assertion of the *necessity* of sensible presentation in art represents for Nancy a type of disavowal that exposes a fault line within Hegel's system. This contradiction is registered in Hegel's writing, where art is sublated into the 'pure element of thinking', thereby negating the necessity of the encounter with exteriority or otherness in the dialectic. On this matter, Nancy cites Hegel as follows:

> Thinking, however, results in thought alone; it evaporates the form of reality into the form of the pure Concept, and even if it grasps and apprehends real things in their particular character and real existence, it nevertheless lifts even this particular sphere into the element of the universal and ideal wherein alone thinking is at home with itself… Thinking is only a reconciliation between reality and truth within thinking itself. But poetic creation and formation is a reconciliation in the form of a real phenomenon itself, even if this form be presented only spiritually (Hegel cited in Nancy 1996, p. 43).

Here Hegel claims that poetic language is a more *adequate* realisation of Idea than thinking itself, however Nancy as a typical poststructuralist points out that poetic and philosophical language are no less a material forms than painting or sculpture. The rhythmic and the sonorous are sensible properties of language, and can be treated as sensible meaning instead of being merely at the service of a higher motivating cause or idea. Hegel's 'spiritualisation' of poetic language as the final 'dissolution' of art endangers and breaks Hegel's own 'law' of the necessity of sensible presentation. Nancy uses Hegel's own term 'endangering' to mean two things. Firstly, art's viability is endangered because poetic language exhausts the necessity of sensible exteriorisation, losing itself in a transition from the region of sense into that of pure Idea, and thereby dissolving any need for sensible exteriorisation (Nancy 1997, p. 42). Secondly, poetic and philosophical language endangers the more historical need that gave art its social function, which is the presentation of Idea in the unfolding of Absolute Spirit. With that function now gone, art in Hegel's formulation becomes a thing of the past. The sensible remainder left behind with the withdrawal of Idea from art is not something Hegel's aesthetic system could account for. As Gyorgy Markus states: 'Hegel's aesthetics do not really offer a conceptual framework for what a purely aesthetic framework for an

artwork would be and [...] Hegelian thought cannot admit the possibility of a form which could create its own content, independent of any pre-given meaning' (1996, p. 20). The end of art formulation marks a limit to Hegel's dialectical method, which is unable to conceptualise the irreducible, sensible insistence of art after pure thought is evacuated from or lost to art. Nancy shows how Hegel's own system, which stressed the necessity of sensibility in the realisation of the Absolute, ends up privileging the Ideal over and above its material embodiment.

Hegel's end of art proposition relates to what Nancy calls the moment of 'separate exteriority': when art is emancipated from Idea or 'deep signification', and its sensible status is treated independently of any governing concepts (Nancy 1997, p. 43). Nancy declares art's sensible dimensions to be its *essence*—a deliberate provocation that conflates materiality and essence in order to dismantle the privileging of the Ideal over the sensible in Hegel's system. This strategy no longer treats the sensible, material dimensions of art as secondary derivations of an ideational essence. Instead, 'truth' is characterised as open-ended, never complete or reaching a resolved status in an artistic form. This is not 'truth' traditionally understood in philosophy, science or art associated with a specific content, or the truth of medium as physical essence, rather this truth refers to meaning or content on the verge of its emergence, understood as a sensible event which is itself meaningful (Ross 2008, p. 46). The absence of Ideal content in sensible form, or its lost status in the presentation of the Absolute is described by Nancy as generating a type of anxiety about incompleteness, where the intrinsic quality of the artwork—that is, its sensible form—is seen as insubstantial in its ability to be meaningful to us (Nancy 1997, pp.90-96).

The incompleteness of 'truth' perceived as lacking from sensible form instils a longing for its eventual empirical realisation. The lack of Geist (or communal validation and self-understanding) in a culture results in a quest to find that which is either not yet materially present, or already lost; that is, a better society assumed to realisable in the future or as once present in the past but now lost. In various writings Nancy describes this as a form of *peredition*, referencing Christian theological notions of being submitted to perpetual punishment and a sense of inadequacy (1997, p.91). In this way he questions an onto-theological impulse in art that privileges the Ideal, the unrealised or

the invisible over the *substantial* possibilities of sensible artistic forms. He writes: 'Because there is no longer any Idea to present, or because the artist no longer wants to do so (or else has lost the sense of the Idea)…So we ask the artist more or less explicitly, to rediscover the Idea, the Good, the True, the Beautiful' (1997, p.91). Nancy interprets the quest to discover or rediscover something that is not sensibly present through the structure of Christian sacrifice. The Idea sacrifices its own unity through a process of externalisation (the birth of Jesus, or the manifestation of Geist in sensible form), and either the Idea returns to itself in a higher form of understanding (the reunion of Jesus with the Holy Spirit, realisation of *The* Absolute), or this sacrifice of the Idea's self-sameness remains permanently stalled in a state of pending completion. An example of a Christian ritual that seeks to close the gap between the Spirit and its realisation in material form is the taking of Eucharist, which is a symbol for the consubstantiality of body and spirit (James 2006, p. 142). Nancy's aim is to question and displace such theological impulses that continue to orientate art practices. He proposes that the sensory and formal aspects of the artwork are not in need of animation by invisible Ideals, they instead reveal something meaningful about our shared *material* existence. Against the former position, he writes:

> In this regard, art is the sensible visibility of this intelligible, that is, invisible, visibility…All the great theories of 'imitation' have never been anything but theories of the imitation, or the image, of the Idea (which is itself the *self-imitation* of being, its transcendent or transcendental miming) and reciprocally, all thinking about the Idea is thinking about the image or imitation…All this thinking is thus theological, turning obstinately around the great motif of *the visible image of the invisible God*, which for Origen is the definition of Christ…Therefore, all of modernity that speaks of the invisible or the unpresentable is always at least on the verge of renewing this motif (Nancy 1997, p. 89).

The point being made here is that even though Western art has been thoroughly secularised as Hegel anticipated, ongoing attempts to heal the irreconciled state between Idea and sensibility repeats an onto-theological impulse evident in Hegel's thought.

Nancy's criticisms of Hegelian idealism also encompass art motivated by the sublime. In the aesthetics of the sublime, art is involved in the presentation of the *unpresentable*. The sublime event in nature is one that exceeds our capacity to apply an adequate concept to it. Sublime experience pertains to something that exceeds or eludes the faculty of understanding, where the mind's inability to match meaning with some perceived phenomenon points to the limits of human knowledge. This unbridgeable gap between understanding and perceived phenomena has motivated some modern art, where the possibility of exchange between an Ideal concept and sensible form is permanently forestalled. The registration of a lack of meaning via the artwork's materiality signals the inadequacy of the mind to make sense of and master sensible form. It registers a type of debt to the unpresentable, in a similar way to theological traditions that continually ritualise the gap between our embodied worldly existence and the unknowable divine knowledge of a creator.[5] The artistic sublime thus represents another version of the onto-theological impulse described by Nancy, where the unthinkable or invisible is given priority over the sensible, with the latter being implicitly cast as a second order imitation of the invisible Idea. In contrast, Nancy wants to think of art's critical potential arising there where the 'Idea withdraws'. This entails turning away from forms of theological anguish that seek to reinstate the lost Idea, to touch it or make its absence into a presence, to seek in Nancy's words, the 'visible image of the invisible God' (Nancy 1997, p. 89). Nancy's contribution to the question of medium exposes how idealistic and metaphysical tendencies persist in modern art, subsuming material and sensible significance under ideational content situated beyond appearances. This impulse is for Nancy a negation of realised and shared sensible meaning.

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[5] This is a very general account of The Sublime; see Lyotard, Jean-François 1992. Trans Geoffrey Bennington *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. 1st Edition. Stanford University Press and Ross, Toni 2002. Art in the "Post-Medium" Era: Aesthetics and Conceptualism in the Art of Jeff Wall. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(3), pp.555–572. Available at:https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/south_atlantic_quarterly/v101/101.3ross.html[Accessed August 19, 2015].

Grasping after the invisible in the artwork

In the final section of this chapter I wish to apply aspects of Nancy's critique of Hegelian idealism in the domain of art to some examples of contemporary art. In a recent exhibition titled *Spook Country: A Collaboration*[6], Lyndell Brown, Charles Green and Jon Cattapan displayed a series of collaborative works that combined various techniques of presentation—painting, appropriated journalistic photography, drawing and found imagery—in singular works. This project arose from the artists receiving commissions from the Australian War Memorial to access areas where Australian soldiers are deployed in combat zones. In 2007 Green and Brown were deployed for six weeks in remote military bases (Australian and US bases) across Iraq and Afghanistan. They later finished a commission of thirty-three paintings and a series of mural-sized photographs that documented the aforementioned combat zones for the Australian War Memorial (Green, Brown and Cattapan 2015). Cattapan was deployed as the 65th Official Australian War Artist in 2008, creating a series of paintings and drawings from his observations in Timor-Leste, where Australian Defence personnel were engaged in peacekeeping operations related to conflict between Indonesian militia and the newly independent Timor-Leste.

Starting in 2011, the three artists decided to work collaboratively to produce a series of on-going works that in 2014 were exhibited at Station and Arc One Galleries in Melbourne. These collaborative works present a clash of different media and artistic points of view. For example, *War and Peace #17 (*Fig. 2.9) consists of a series of green and grey figures that have been painted in spidery lines. The figures sit on top of a range of collaged imagery that has been printed onto duraclear film. The montaged imagery consists of figures and scenes, which presumably make contextual reference to significant events related to war. The clash of different mediums and dense visual layering weaves together divergent and multilayered information, which has the effect of staging a failure to render experiences and effects of contemporary warfare immediately intelligible. The collaborative, playful approach to constructing the composition is perhaps the most innovative aspect of these works, in which the burden

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[6] The exhibition was held at Arc One Gallery, Melbourne between 20 August and 20 September 2014, and Station Gallery, Melbourne between 21 August and 27 September 2014.

to represent the 'truth' of war is negated in favour of an open-ended artistic process between different individuals. In sympathy with this aspect of the work, it is not the truth of military conflict that is staged, but rather the emergence of meaning generated through plural modes of presentation and authorial subjectivities coming into contact with each other. The aesthetic provocation of the works offers no final representation, resolution or critique of the conflicts they refer to. With no singular idea or origin outside the intermeshing of various types of aesthetic presentation, what remains is the very simple proposition that despite the complexity and violence of the actual situations from which the images are drawn, the artwork can create new meaning through a nexus of different artists and material processes. In this respect, the artwork could be seen to generate aesthetic meaningfulness independent to war and conflict representations.

However, there is also a sense of anguish animating these works and especially the discourse that frames them about a capacity or incapacity to represent an adequate idea of war at this time. In the co-written catalogue essay 'The Obscure Dimensions of Conflict' the artists outline the complex history of war representation and also allude to the ambition of their work as neither 'triumphalist' nor 'traumatic', but as engaged with a post-medium contemporaneity: 'We argue that this new mode of expression may play a role in challenging the public's investment in national stories that have been made manifest in official war art and photography' (Green, Brown and Cattapan, 2015, p. 159). The essay alludes to the intention of re-framing martial conflict as an alternative to conventional forms of information transmission about this topic. The artists define the re-configured task of the war artist as an inventor of new documentary methods that 'frame, re-present and even advance new ideas in themselves, both about war and aftermath, and as artistic innovations or presentations in themselves' [Green, Brown and Cattapan, 2015, p.166). This statement expresses the ambition of the three practitioners to be a new kind of war artist better able to witness war in a contemporary context. Thus, the various mixed media strategies used by the artists are motivated by an anterior idea, as a strategy to bring forth and make visible something invisible, in this

case the movement of a 'bleak past into the unwelcoming present' (Green, Brown and Cattapan 2015, p. 173).

Figure 2.8 Brown, Green and Cattapan, 2014, *War and peace #16: medicine Lesson Plan #2,* oil and acrylic on digital print on duraclear film, 127x178cm, courtesy of the artists

Figure 2.9 Brown, Green and Cattapan, 2014, *War and Peace #17: The Voice,* oil and acrylic on digital print on duraclear film, 110x140cm, National Gallery of Australia

The artists claim: 'We wanted to know how to revise the rhetoric—both pro- and antiwar—surrounding images of war, which remain indisputably important in the formation of national identity in Australia and are also deeply resonant in our age' (Green, Brown and Cattapan 2015, p.168). The contradiction between the inscription of idea in sensible form and its loss is played out towards the end of the essay when the artists quote art writer Amelia Douglas. We are encouraged by the artists to read their collaborative works through Douglas's explanation of them, inflected by the sublime, as negative representations; or as premised on a 'inability to re-present events which elude representation' (2009, p. 173). What is this invisibility in the work and how are we to think of it? How are we to know it is there, and if it isn't there, what are we left with, and can this be spoken about directly or is it a case of evoking that which cannot be touched? Is this the desire to name and incarnate something that cannot be seen in sensible form? Each artist was embedded in the conflict zones they visited. They saw, touched, spoke to and even ate with soldiers. Yet a certain anguish related to a sense of distance from events permeates these works and commentary on them, functioning like a thwarted desire to make tangible the invisible or unrepresentable.

In War and peace #16: medicine Lesson Plan #2 (Fig. 2.8) we are presented with a montage of images associated with war: communal assembly; fragments from popular culture; journalistic images of historical events; appropriated images of artworks; drawings created by the artists, as well as fragments of correspondence between the artists. The centre of the composition is dominated by an image of fabric, which blocks our view of the imagery that lies underneath. The context of each image is not explained in the artists' statement and is therefore not immediately apparent in text or images, yet we know that various contexts of war are driving the presentation of images within the composition. The hybrid process of creating the work consists of photographing an arranged archive of source imagery and text, and then printing the resulting images onto semi-transparent duraclear film. This surface was then subjected to painterly interventions by Jon Cattapan in the form of three hovering figures painted in simplified graphic style on top of the montaged imagery. The three semi-abstract figures do not interact with each other, nor do they have any apparent compositional link with the

digital background. The figures also face away from the viewer and appear to hover at a distance from the background they are set against.

The different techniques of production used to create the composition recall collage practices of the twentieth century, except that in these works format functions to balance and ultimately equalise the differing imagery, unlike the deliberately asymmetrical collages of Kurt Schwitters, for example. This formally synthetic quality of the work can then be read as a type of gathering together of information *across* media and time, in an attempt to represent history and make it more tangible and understandable. The will to make actual something absent is also played out in a didactic panel that accompanied the work when it was exhibited in 'Colour my world: Handcoloured Australian Photography.'[7] The panel describes the work as a contemporary historical record that 'demonstrates that history is always in the present, to the extent that the present can only ever be experienced as a series of recollections'. The effect of viewing *War and peace #16: medicine Lesson Plan #2* is similar to looking at a series of shadows, at once present everywhere through myriad forms of representation, while simultaneously nowhere to be seen. If concepts of cultural memory, national identity and the effects of conflict cannot be adequately represented, then the only way the works and their commentaries acknowledge this failure is by reference to the homily of the unpresentable idea. The black 'shroud' placed in centre of the composition blocks vision, calling attention to an inability to see or make sense of something apparent. Amelia Barikin echoes the representative logic of the works, which asserts that they are about 'the realization and reconstitution of events. As such, they constitute a deeply political project' (Barikin 2015, p.501). The works convey a certain undecidability about their status as aesthetically meaningful. On the one hand, the use of various mediums and the collaborative approach taken can be interpreted as the presentation of sensible meaning through the works' internal formal dynamics. For example, the way in which the viscous material density of paint acts as a point of distinction from the dematerialised layering of mediated imagery on which it sits. This type of formal play stages relationships between differing material surfaces as a series of discontinuities and intensities. The sensible effects of these l formal relationships

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[7] National Gallery of Australia, 3 April-20 September 2015.

could be taken as meaningful without the need of an external concept of war. Yet, on the other hand, the formal relations of the work function to reference the impossibility of meaning, which the work attempts but fails to inscribe in material form. Consequently, the statement by the artists and description of the works by Amelia Barikin point to an unbridgeable absence in these works.

Figure 2.10 Brown, Green and Cattapan, 2014, [detail] *War and peace #16: medicine Lesson Plan #2,* oil and acrylic on digital print on duraclear film, 127x178cm, courtesy of the artists

Staging the visible in the artwork

To conclude this chapter, the following discusses a collaborative work by Francis Alÿs. *New York triptych* (Fig. 2.11) which is not a work that is animated by an event or idea outside of its formal construction. It is rather the presentation of works by different artists using different processes that come into relation with each other. The triptych consists three painted canvases next to each other, created by three different artists. Each canvas depicts a banal scene of buildings and background sky based on the New York skyline. The project began with Alÿs creating a small painting of the New York skyline (Fig. 2.14). This work was then given to two local sign painters to reproduce on

a larger scale. Each iteration of Alÿs's painting differs slightly in method of execution and image depiction. The middle painting by Enrique Huerta (Fig. 2.12) appropriates and slightly amplifies the muted palette of Alÿs's piece, while duplicating its compositional arrangement. However, Huerta's painting differs in execution, displaying a crisper application of enamel paint on metal. The work on the right (Fig. 2.13) was painted by Emilio Rivera and shifts the scale to something between the previous two works, thereby breaking any sense of unity regarding the format of the three works. Rivera's painting intensifies the colour relationships of the previous two works, using high-key greens for the buildings and intense light blues for the sky. The work was produced with an airbrush, effacing any signs of painterly gesturality that can be seen in the other two works.

The play of formal differences and similarities between the three canvases means that both visual continuity and its disruption infiltrate the work as a whole. Another example of this is how the softness and frayed edges of Alÿs's canvas (Fig. 2.14) counterpoints the rigid metal support of the works by Huerta and Rivera (Fig. 2.12 and Fig. 2.13). Additionally, colour changes in each version of the New York skyline image, making the relation between each painting both strange and familiar. The work might be interpreted as blurring of boundaries between fine and commercial art practice, or as a sceptical, postmodernist disavowal of singular authorship and authenticity. However, the thing I find most interesting about this project is the way each painting renders the same image of the New York skyline differently. The particularity of each painting in the suite arises from both its difference from and its connection to the others. In this way the work disrupts a chronological reading of its development.

Alÿs's initial painting is not made from an original source of individual inspiration, but is rather a banal image of the New York skyline that is already a repetition of a repetition, a clichéd image impressed in public memory through continual circulation. In other words, Alÿs's decision to paint an image based on the New York skyline prevents that painting from functioning as an origin in the collaboration, making it difficult to read as a founding point of orientation that binds together different authors and techniques. Overall, the collaboration reads instead as a series of differences that can only emerge out of relationships with others. Therefore, Alÿs's initial work cannot be read as a

singular determining concept in the series that gathers the other paintings under its banner. Nor does the work play into the negative aesthetics of the sublime, staging the impossibility of representing something that remains 'unpresentable'. The painting on the right by Emilio Rivera can equally be apprehended as a beginning to this series, as can the work by Alÿs on the left. Each collaborator's version of the image of New York is established through relations with the others as an event of *sharing* their distinct experiences of stereotypical image. The work makes *sense* because we see differences generated through the sharing of what it is to see something in the both singular and plural. In Nancy's theory, sense operates as a type of linking term, something that happens on the surface—a meeting between distinct bodies that allows for a meaningful experience to take place. In his concept of the 'singular-plural' the specificity of one thing always arises from its relation to something else. The particularity of something is achieved through its relations with others, rather than relying on a determining idea. The concept of the singular-plural is developed in more depth in the following chapter, including how it relates to my research.

Figure 2.11 Francis Alÿs 1995-1996, *New York triptych*, a - oil on canvas;13.5 x 15.8 x 2 cm, b - enamel on metal; 91 x 120 x 4 cm, c - enamel on metal; 60 x 75 x 2 cm, series consisting of one painting by Francis Alÿs and by Enrique Huerta (centre) and Emilio Rivera (right), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Figure 2.12 b. Enrique Huerta

Figure 2.14 a. Francis Alÿs
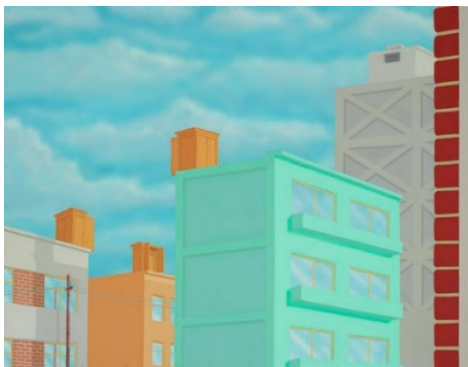
Figure 2.13 c. Emilio Rivera

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the Hegelian background to Nancy's aesthetic theory, which in privileging the sensible and formal appearances revises Hegel's ultimately idealist framework. Hegel believed art to be the sensible embodiment of ideas and that it developed more resolved representations of Geist progressively over time. The sensuous presentations of art gave form to, and reflected back to a culture what Ideal freedom may look like. The three stages of art Hegel identifies are examples of progressive stages of art contributing to a society's progress towards the realisation of *The* Absolute or human freedom. Trusting in the rationality of social and political institutions of his day, Hegel believed that a kind of conciliation had begun to be achieved between the rights of individuals and the collective norms of society, and that

art no longer played the same vital role it once had in revealing Ideal presentations of freedom in divine life. In the modern period rational thought had begun to be reconciled with itself and that this situation would continue to be managed through modern social institutions. But this leaves open a question that Hegel's aesthetic theory is not able to answer adequately: what might be the role of art when it lost its highest social function in Hegel's terms? The question of art's role in modern times is taken up by Nancy who focusses on what remains as meaningful aesthetic experience when art no longer plays a role in presenting religious and metaphysical ideals and values. Undoubtedly, Nancy wants to revive art's special status, but without reinstating and prioritising Ideal significations. For him, the sensible material dimension of art is what remains as an active locus of shared meaning. This situation should not be cause for mourning nor should it be the motivation behind quests for fully reconciled meaning or social harmonisation in the future.

Chapter Three

The singular and plural function of medium in studio research

Introduction

In the previous chapter, Nancy's aesthetic philosophy was used to provide an alternative to conceptions of art that privilege the conceptual over sensible aspects of artistic presentation. In this chapter I examine Nancy's concept of the singular-plural and apply it to a series of my works made during 2015. The basis of these works is a process of translation between handmade paintings and digitally rendered stills which are then printed onto paper or canvas. I also discuss another body of work created towards the end of 2015, which sought to extend inter-medial relationships to video and sculpture. Nancy's singular-plural formulation is relevant to the question of medium because it provides a critique of approaches in art theory and practice that subordinate formal and sensory meaning of the artwork to a series of ideals that remain perpetually unrealised or 'invisible', to use Nancy's terminology. In this way, Nancy's materially based aesthetic theory revitalises aesthetic meaning as located in the artwork's formal characteristics or 'surface' features, rather than being dependent on an animating anterior idea.

Background to sense as meaning and the singular-plural

For Nancy, aesthetic meaning emerges through the artwork's sensibility features. In fact, it is the formal features and method of production that generate sense without being subordinated to any higher 'theological' principle, to cite Nancy's lexicon. In some respects he continues a Hegelian tradition which places importance on the role of art in revealing instances of shared 'truth'; in less lofty language, his aim is to describe the conditions of possibility that make art meaningful and vital to our society. However, he also inverts this same tradition by putting forth the proposition that art can maintain its important status without having to function as a carrier of ideal concepts or significations. In this way the artwork reveals sense, or non-determined meaning, as something embodied in its formal structure. The exposure to sense acts as a counterpoint to aesthetic theories and artworks that repeatedly point to an absence of available meaning in sensible reality. This tendency is marked by an unresolved

relationship between an ideal concept and its unavailability in sensible form. Examples of this, from the previous chapter, include religious and sublime aesthetics, and Hegel's own speculative idealism, which ultimately prioritised the metaphysical aspects of Geist over its realisation in sensible artistic forms. The sensible dimension of art, which Hegel believed to be necessary in the manifestation of Ideal representations of human freedom, was ultimately seen by him as inadequate and no longer holding the same meaningful status it had in earlier times. What remains, if art no longer subscribes to idealised regimes of signification, is its sensible dimension and its ability to render sense as aesthetic meaning. For Nancy, the artwork's sensible dimension is a mode of intelligibility that makes meaning available for the beholder, but it is an experience that undoes signification as it is traditionally understood. Signification occurs when there is a 'correspondence' between a word and concept, or a sensible object and an idea. Instead of there being a resolution between the sensible and the intelligible the two touch and displace each other, and undo idealised and closed regimes of signification. Sense is the meeting of distinct bodies or entities that touch each other both in proximity and at a distance. Touch is used throughout Nancy's writings to draw attention to the sensory and sensible aspects of meaning—sustaining the contradictory dynamic of 'self in the other'. Touch functions as an instance of continuity (proximity) and discontinuity (distance) between self and other, and it is through this relation of distant proximity that things make and share sense through relations. 'Sense, as the middle term between material bodies and ideal meanings, remaining beyond both of them but touching them as their outer limits, is what allows for a "meaningful experience" of singular beings' (Morin 2012, p. 132). The dynamic between the self and other as a process of mutual recognition in the realisation of Hegel's concept of the Absolute was discussed in the previous chapter. Hegel began to believe Geist no longer needed to be embodied in material reality, but could be reconciled with itself as pure thought with the aid of philosophy, and be managed through social and political institutions. In distinction for Nancy, the way to achieve this type of reciprocity between self and other is without any guiding ideal principle outside the sensible relation (like Hegel's notion of Geist), but rather through an acknowledgement of our relational embeddedness in the material world around us. For Nancy, sensible materiality persists as a type of meaning-making possibility in art after the failure of emancipatory projects associated with the

Enlightenment. In this way, sense, understood as a middle term of meaning between entities and bodies, functions in a similar way to the type of mutual recognition between self and other that Hegel strived for.

Against this background, Nancy's project radicalises sensible presentation in art by shifting the generation of meaning away from 'deep signification' or invisible idea to the event of an external sensible relation. Externality and visibility continually feature in Nancy's lexicon to describe sensible meaning as bound to perceptible material reality and not dependent on the unrealised and therefore invisible ideal. In this context, artworks are not left pending, to be completed by an ideal reference, but rather have the potential to generate sense independently of those ideals (Ross 2007, pp. 151-153). The invisible or ideal is used by Nancy to point to a dynamic in artworks and criticism that foregrounds the determining power of ideas over materiality, typically and erroneously conceived, for him, as mute and passive. The absence of an ideal signification in material reality signals a gap between what is available as meaning in the present and the full presence of its realisation in the future. To resolve this disparity the artwork functions as a mediator, with the goal of finding a resolution between the ideal concept and its embodiment in sensible form.

This logic is repeated in Marxist aesthetics, where art's sensible function is subordinated to Idea as a critique of existing social and political conditions that gives insights into dominant forms of social arrangements. This insight, or 'referential ideality', understood as a strived-for self-knowledge, motivates a more adequate Idea or understanding of sociality. The prior or future Idea of a reconciled community determines aesthetic form in anticipation of the 'as yet to be realised'; therefore, the artwork is 'left pending', and endlessly repeats the mantra of unrealised potential. In modern art these approaches therefore continue a version of the Hegelian teleological project, which seeks the same kind of resolution between the Idea and material reality in the progressive unfolding of Geist. This could then include the utopian aspirations of early Russian avant-garde practices, such as Alexander Rodchenko's 'Slogans', published in 1920, that display the temporal projection logic of Russian Constructivist art: 'Constructivist life is the art of the future'; or, Naum Gabo's manifesto from 1920, which echoes a similar sentiment: 'What does Art carry into this unfolding epoch of human history? Does it possess the

means necessary for the construction of the new Great Style?' (Alexander Rodchenko & Naum Gabo in Harrison & Wood 2002, p. 315 & p. 297). The desire to realise the invisible is also evident in Romantic aesthetics associated with American abstract expressionism. The pictorial surface was seen by critics of the time, like Harold Rosenberg, as a direct presentation of the artist's subjectivity and integral to the reconfiguration of social and political relations. 'The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence…liberation from the object meant liberation from the "nature", society and art already there. It was a movement to leave behind the self that wished to choose his future and to nullify its promissory notes to the past' (Harold Rosenberg 1952 in Harrison & Wood 2002, pp. 582-583). The future orientated tendency of certain types of modernist artworks and criticism that attempt to bridge the gap to that which is missing or unavailable in sensible form replay a dynamic of metaphysical longing, presenting the artwork and material reality as structurally incomplete. In contrast, Nancy wants to mobilise this perceived 'incompleteness' as a capacity of the artwork to show that meaning is possible as something embodied and materially present. The stress placed by Nancy on the external and relational aspects of the artwork is an attempt to demarcate a space of aesthetic meaning which is independent of the will of a 'sense making subject' (1997, pp. 9-18). In this way, the artwork is not a passive receptor for the will of an author with a determining idea, nor does it function as an imitation or copy of something outside of itself; instead, it generates meaning through a network of relations between differing material forms and processes. Nancy describes this as 'finite thinking', where meaning is contained and bound by the possibilities of the sensible, rather than the infinite and unbounded possibilities of metaphysical speculations (James 2012, pp. 45-46).

The post-structuralist background to Nancy's aesthetics

Nancy's non-metaphysical and non-representational accounts of art do not attempt to find a specific and unifying reason for the empirical plurality of artistic production (James 2006, p. 217). Rather, he aims to interrogate the way a singular theory of medium is always divided into a series of relations outside of itself. This displacement of 'origin' or the unique property of a particular medium signals the influence of poststructuralism on Nancy's thinking. A former student of Jacques Derrida, his work is influenced by

Derrida's deconstructive method that attempts to displace foundational thinking through a number of deliberately effusive terms. The most pertinent concept is 'archi-writing', which provides a background to Nancy's concept of the singular-plural. Archi-writing displaces attempts to find an original generative structure, or Ideal concept, behind material reality. By positing something as an origin, a binary relation is established. One example of this in philosophy is the distinction between nature and concept, or phusis and logos, where our 'original nature' is thought to exist prior to and outside the realm of language, by which it has been displaced (James 2006, p. 147). Our 'original nature' becomes a lost signification, which cannot be adequately incorporated into the realm of language and concepts. In this binary structure, nature and concept remain self-identical, and, depending on the context, one gains primacy over the other. For example, in Romantic thought the 'lost natural self' is that which has been displaced by the processes of industrialisation and the realm of rational thinking, and must be found again for humanity to be fully realised. From another perspective, this 'lost nature' of humanity could be seen as an unnecessary passion, and reason is prioritised as a determining factor in the quest for human knowledge or emancipation. However, following Derridian deconstruction, the distinctions between these binaries are inherently unstable because there is no possibility of anything being self-present to itself without an original *difference.* Derrida conceives of this as an 'original' spacing or differentiation that provides the conditions of possibility for something to identify itself in its singularity. With the aim of unpicking a history of binary thinking, Derrida invents the word '*Différance',* which is an amalgamation of the phrases 'to differ' and 'to defer'. In this light, 'nature' functions as a discursive construct that simply differs from, but does not gain any priority over, the attributes of 'reason'. Therefore, differences thought of in non-binary terms function so as to defer the realisation of a self-sufficient and non-dependent concept. An essential concept can only be known through a difference and spacing from something else, rather than through having a fundamental or unique quality. In very schematic terms, this foundational thinking goes all the way back to Plato, who believed that behind every appearance there was an original prior 'form' which shaped material reality and which, through deductive reasoning, could be fully understood. An 'origin' is nothing more than a spacing and difference from something else, another origin.

In this deconstructive framework, an origin is framed by Derrida as 'original supplementarity'. Derrida's use of the word 'supplement' can be understood as 'that which is missing and that which is extra', thereby flipping the missing 'origin' into its supplementary opposite and undoing any conceptual unity associated with seeking a self-sufficient foundational idea.[8] The point Derrida makes is that in a binary structure one concept is necessarily dependent on and spaced from the other, rather than having priority over the other. Traditionally understood, an origin or an Ideal concept is conceived of as 'complete' and lacking nothing; thus it should not be dependent on its opposite. Another example of instability in binary structures is the way written or spoken language is thought of as a displacement of 'authentic' sensory and perceptual experience. In structuralist or semiotic parlance, language is a system of differentiation, displacing our direct 'access' to the sensory realm. It is never 'the thing', but a second order representation of it. Yet, simultaneously, language is the structure by which we come to know and recognise things and differentiate them from each other and it therefore enables is to say that something might be 'missing' from language. Therefore, language as a 'supplementary extra' is 'inessential' to the origin (sensory experience), and yet also flips into being essential by filling an original lack in the so-called 'complete' concept of original sensory experience. Nancy evocatively conjures the conundrum of our attempting to gain access to a complete truth when he describes our desire for access to something fundamental, like our 'true' self, or a total understanding of death.

> In the singularity that he exposes, each child that is born has already concealed the access that he is "for himself" and in which he will conceal himself "within himself", just as he will one day hide under the final expression of a dead face. This is why we scrutinize these faces with such curiosity, in search of identification, looking to see whom the child looks like, and to see if death looks like itself. What we are looking for there, like in the photographs, is not an image; it is an access. (Nancy 2000, p. 14)

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[8] This general concept comes from Alan Bass's class, 'Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction', 2001, New School University, New York. 'Supplement' is also replaced by other words that enact the process of deconstruction, such as 'trace', 'pharmakon', 'differance', and figures in Derrida's, *Writing and Difference* (1978).

Nancy's point here is that the desire for access to an ultimate truth or essence can never be completely fulfilled. However, if the aim of an ultimate signification is subtracted from this quest and if we come to understand that nothing 'complete' lies behind or beyond the surface of the face, there still persists the need for an access to make sense of things or, in Nancy's terms, for the exposure to sense. We make sense of things and understand ourselves not through the attempt to gain access to an impenetrable secret or essence, but through our sensible relations with each other. This is a type of event or passage with no origin or destination, and is framed by Nancy within the concept of the singular-plural.

The singular-plural

The singular-plural is not a guiding or determining concept but functions more like an open framework that attempts to describe the disclosure of meaningful sensible experience prior to its inscription into discursive language. This description of an exposure to sense as something 'prior' to language may well set off alarm bells in light of the above critique of binary thinking, and the privileging of one concept over another as prior or more authentic. However, Nancy frequently uses the dual formulas of inscription and excription to describe the weaving together of sense as meaning and its transmission into intelligible language. Language, in this light, is not the mode of intelligibility that masters and adequately contains the sensible dimension of experience, nor is it deemed secondary to a more authentic mode of human sensible understanding. Instead, sense and signifying discourse affect and inflect each other, but without a direct continuity between them. In this way, sense inscribes and exscribes itself into and out of signifying discourse. Nancy describes it this way:

> Sense requires a thickness, a density, a mass and therefore an opacity, an obscurity by which it gives purchase, it lets iself be touched *as sense* precisely there where it absents itself as discourse. It is the point at which all writing *is exscribed*, places itself outside of the sense it inscribes, in the things of which this sense is supposed to form the inscription. (Nancy 1997, p.79 in James 2006, p. 204, emphasis in original).

The exposure to sense functions in a self-reflexive manner, interlacing instances of sensory meaning with self-awareness, and for Nancy this exposure provides the grounds of possibility for something like a 'self'. Yet this is not an authentic interiority that determines the relation to the other. It is, rather, an event based on the same kind of spacing logic as Derrida's concept of *Différance.* The individual is the result of an inter-subjective exchange of sensible co-relations—with other people, objects and entities—and in this way sense is pre-subjective and that which makes a singularity possible through its plural relations. Sense is therefore the result of an openness to the reality of a coexistence with or 'being with' the other. Ian James describes the priority Nancy ascribes to sense and 'being with', before the formation of any sense of individuality, as follows: 'sense, in its sharing and understood as the being-of-all-with-each-other, is that from which any experience of self-reflexivity, individual subjectivity or of personal individuation can arise as such' (2012, p. 49).

The concept of the singular-plural builds on the insights provided by Nancy about sense as something always registered within the domain of 'being with' and generated among bodies in space. In other words, an entity doesn't have a meaning, or a particularity in the singular as an enclosed self-sufficient system prior to a sharing of sense. As Nancy puts it: 'Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself as *such*' (2000, p. 3). Meaningfulness, understood as sense, is therefore relational; it is not a determining concept that exists prior to the 'we' of a relation. For Nancy it is, rather, the other way around—the sharing of sense, or the 'we' and plural relation, comes before the demarcation of the singular. This means that the logic of the singular-plural is a critique of two different frameworks of subjectivation. If 'being' is not dependent on the logic of sharing, then what results is a series of self-sufficient entities that exist alongside each other, and this is a logic of individuation and not of relation. This is inherent in the underlying framework of the neo-liberal self, according to which the rights of individuals, clustered together, are prioritised over any sense of relation amongst them. In other words, a strong society is one comprised of self-sufficient individuals. The other framework that the singular-plural dispenses with is that of the foundational ideal. This functions when an ideal principle, like 'The American People' or 'God', guarantees the specificity of a group and

gathers together a series of particularities, binding them together under a single determining Idea. Marie-Eve Morin describes the singular-plural as a reaction to both 'the pure exteriority of relations and the pure interiority of a common substance, in both the I-subject without any essential relation to otherness (the I that has its meaning in itself) and the We-subject that gathers all I's into itself (the We that is the meaning of all I's)', in which 'there is no place for a being-with' (Morin 2012, p. 134). The being-with that interests Nancy functions as a type of positing operation, placing entities in a relation of contact and separation where the singular (interiority) and the plural (exteriority) are not appropriated into one another. The togetherness or 'being-with' is the event of making sense through a series of continuities and stoppages between bodies, matter, language, and technical instruments. This could be described as that the material world is always available to us and made sensibly meaningful through the event of singular-plural. The exposure to sense is never a foundation itself but is, more simply, what results from a folding together of differences and spaces between things. Things touch each other in processes of proximity and distance; this is a series of interactions between bodies and technical processes, the being-together of which makes 'sense'. What Nancy is describing here is that regardless of how refractive or deferred a relation between entities might be, there still persist a sensible awareness of the other. This is not a content driven framework but rather the sensed proximity and distance of someone else being there, and it is this 'dust' of sensible meaning that is foundational to the awareness of self and other (Nancy 1992, p. 47 in Candler Hayes 2003).

The differential and specific function of medium

It should be clear that the framework of the singular-plural and Nancy's foregrounding of sense as the horizon of shared meaning could never be a prescriptive framework or the criteria for what constitutes a successful artwork. It is, instead, useful as an interrogation of how the question of sense might be dismissed or ignored in some contemporary artworks. The singular-plural provides the critical backdrop to assumptions that privilege ideas and signification, which often unwittingly negate the sensible meaning of the artwork. In broad terms, I take Nancy's foregrounding of the sensible dimension to mean that the form of the artwork—that is, the medium in which it is realised and sensibly apprehended—can be generative of non-idealistic meaning.

Moreover, the framework of the singular-plural can account for a theory of medium which is at once specific and relational. In my research I have not found a better resource than Nancy's aesthetic philosophy to provide such insights, where the claims of sense as artistic meaning, or the singular-plural function of art, are given such a comprehensive philosophical background. There are, however, compelling overlaps in what I have understood to be the aims of Nancy's aesthetic position and the work of Rosalind Krauss and Rosemary Hawker on the role of medium in recent art. Working through problems associated with the post-medium condition, Rosalind Krauss and Rosemary Hawker follow a similar logic to Nancy's in applying a differential and specific framework to questions around medium specificity. In different ways, they each propose that the specificity of a medium is determined by its relation to another medium.

In the Introduction to this thesis I have discussed aspects of Krauss's differential specific argument, which involves exploration of the possibilities of a given medium within its conventional history. In this way mediums can be put into differential relations with each other and still maintain a conventional 'undergirding' that defines their specificity (Krauss 2011, p. 19). This is Krauss's way of moving beyond the identification of the unique qualities of a medium solely through the physicality of its support, as was the case with Clement Greenberg's treatise on the specificity of painting during the 1950s and 1960s. Krauss's essays and books on the topic identify the results of certain artists' innovations with a specific set of conventional possibilities within a medium's history. However, in my opinion, Krauss misses the mark on the question of how an artist might see a set of possibilities within a studio practice and the process of putting things into relation with each other. The open-ended way my studio research functions to realise formal relations between different artworks is more aligned to Nancy's discussions of sensibility and the singular-plural, than Krauss's evocation of a medium tradition.

Hawker posits that the specificity of a medium is grounded on its non-transferable relation with another medium. To achieve this framework Hawker appropriates Derrida's examination of idiom to explain how the specificity of a language might be defined by its relationship to something else. Idiom derives its common usage from its Latin roots, meaning to have a special and specific quality, and 'idios' means to have

something of one's own. In the 'Tower of Babel' essay, Derrida uses the myth of the same title, which describes how humanity came to speak many languages, beginning with a single one (Derrida 1985). Derrida points out that misunderstandings between people of different languages are the result of the impossibility of exactly and completely translating meanings from one language to another. It is thus through the failure of translation, or through that which resists transmission from one language medium to the other, that we come to know what the particular idiomatic features of a certain language are. Furthermore, through the example of identifying the unique features of a language via the refracted process of translation, Derrida points out that we never come to know something without some form of mediation. In this way, the particularity of something is always dependent on something else, and exceeds the transmissions of that relationship. This proposition echoes Nancy's singular-plural model, in which two entities come into a relation of 'distant proximity' with each other; they touch and transmit to each other but also remain intact. Hawker's use of Derrida's concept of idiom displaces a model of translation that seeks to amalgamate irreducible differences between mediums into a synthetic whole. In contrast, the concept of idiom attempts to chart what is *specific* to each medium as a *result* of translation (Hawker 2007, pp. 43-59). From this perspective, translation may be conceived less as a process of merging different mediums together under a totalising concept, and more as a type of failure of translation, where the inability to wholly transfer a meaning from one language or medium to another asserts the specificity of a medium.

Hawker deploys the Derridean formulation of idiom in her discussion of Gerhard Richter's translation between painting and photography. She writes: 'it is the function of idiom as the failure of translation that results in the nature of painting or photography only being graspable in another medium' (Hawker 2007, p. 45). The failure of translation between painting and photography in Richter's work displaces conceptions of medium that seek the essence of a medium, or that claim to know the thing in itself without mediation or relation. This logic relates to Derrida's deconstruction of binaries as discussed above, which dispenses with the notion that there is an original and complete essence that has been lost through processes of mediation. Instead of an origin with essential attributes, something is known by its relationship to something else through

spacing and difference. Based on Hawker's referencing of Derrida's essay, one can propose that a relationship of reciprocity is established between the singularity of a medium and the plurality of what it is not. This move displaces a medium-specific account of painting because we come to understand the specificity of painting and photography through the translation of one into the other and through the failure of a complete or seamless translation. Hawker develops this argument by examining Richter's photo paintings and over-paintings as examples in which the distinctiveness of painting and photography come together to form something new, as well as enabling an understanding of painting and photography respectively. She asserts that 'it is only through this sense of an exchange or dialogue that they are able to mutually assume their respective qualities' (Hawker 2007, p. 53).

Richter's engagement with the photographic alongside the painterly has a significant bearing on my own project. I first encountered his work while doing my undergraduate degree in Brisbane (1993–1997), and in 2002 I attended his retrospective at the Museum of Modern of Art in New York. More recently I viewed a smaller scale retrospective exhibited in 2018 at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, which Hawker co-curated. Despite sustained exposure to his work, it is only in my current research that aspects of his practice, and Hawker's writing on the artist, have provided a pertinent context for my research. Much has been written about Richter over the course of his career, but my brief discussion of this renowned artist's work is focussed on how it provides a significant touchstone for my research project, while also indicating how my practice departs from Richter's on the matter of thinking about relations between media.

Even though Richter's work does put painting into a non-transferable relationship with photography and the readymade[9]—that is, exposing painting to what it is not—he is commonly acclaimed as the 'greatest living painter', suggesting that the critical reception of his art tends to privilege the painting medium. This observation is not made to undermine the importance of Richter's project for modern and contemporary art practice. After all, his work has granted permission for a number of contemporary

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[9] I am using 'readymade' in the context of Richter's work to mean also 'unintentionality', which is evident in his abstract smear painting and randomised colour chart works, as well as in his Atlas project, which is a collection of found photographs thematically organised.

painters, such as Luc Tuymans and, most recently, Wilhelm Sasnal, to work productively between the painterly and photographic. I simply raise the previous point because my research both draws from Richter's work and differs from it. Like Richter, I expose paintings to other mediums by developing processes of translation and disruption between them. However, unlike in Richter's work, the processes of translation result in paintings and new media prints displayed next to or in relation to each other. The simultaneity of different material supports appearing next to each other functions to block the complete amalgamation of one medium with the other. Below, I explain in more detail how this operates in my studio work; however, the fundamental point is that the medium of painting is treated as a formal equivalence with or node of translation to another medium.

It could be argued that accounts of Richter's work tend to privilege the medium of painting over all the other medial experimentations he deploys. No matter what medial detour his work might take, the results are all conceived under the identity of painting. In regard to Richter's juxtapositions between painting and photography, Hawker observes that the lack of painterly materiality in the medium of photography, and hence its 'insubstantiality', is translated into the medium of painting. 'Reality [for Richter] is the physical materiality of paint, its existence as substance—this is contrasted with the relative insubstantiality of the photograph, its lack of physical presence, its limited reality in this sense' (Hawker 2007, p. 52). This subtle point made by Hawker reflects how the medium of painting, understood as more 'real' than photography because of its material surface, gains a certain level of purchase over the other mediums Richter uses. Hawker does, however, go on to contend that in Richter's over-paintings (Fig. 3.15), which involve the artist dabbing and pouring paint onto photographs, the substantial materiality of paint meets in equal measure the mimetic verisimilitude associated with the photograph. Thus, both painting and photography retain a level of specificity by resisting seamless translation one to the other. Hawker points out that this is not a matter of the triumph of one medium over another; rather, 'Richter aims to bring "aspects of the problem together", where the problem is that of making images today' (2007, p. 54). Hawker's use of Richter's phrase 'bringing aspects of the problem together' refers to the struggle to make art adequately meaningful to a society

after the horrors of the Second World War. To simply make another painting or photograph is deemed unsubstantial in the face of the 'unrepresentability' of human extermination and suffering during the war period. As it has been addressed by many writers, Richter's work has struggled with and referred to, either directly or obliquely, Germany's role in the Holocaust. In reference to this context, Richter's work more broadly exposes the limits of painterly and photographic representation.[10] In reference to the role of medium in these works, there is a staged lack of resolution that influences the way I set up relations spatial between works of different media in my studio research. In *11.3.08* (Fig. 3.15) a series of pinkish and red poured blobs of paint project outwards from an image of what appears to be an abandoned quarry site. The paint smears block the viewer's full access to what is shown in the photographic image, causing us to see both the photograph and the intrusive pigment simultaneously, and thereby bringing together two incommensurable or conflicting ways of presenting 'reality'. The indexical quality of the photograph functions as witness to the imprint of physical reality outside of artistic intervention, while the poured viscous paint stands in for matter itself being freed from the intentionality of pictorial representation. In this way 'the problem is brought together' by staging two forms of medial presentation where neither dominates the other. There is a visual oscillation between the two mediums, producing a sense of uncertainty; perceptual certainty is put in question trough the weaving and fracturing of photographic imagery and irregular smears of paint.

In Richter's blurred paintings there does seem to be less formal ambiguity and more dominance of the painterly over the photographic medium. Richter's 'photo paintings' are made by feathering and smudging the visual clarity of a painting of a photographic image. In this way Richter transposes the convention of the photographic blur into the materiality of the painterly smear. In this process of translation of photography into painting, we come to know the idiomatic feature of one medium through its relation to the other. The photographic blur is associated with the limits of lens focus or the camera's inability to catch quick movements in front of the lens; however, in Richter's process the photographic blur is translated as the registration of the manual act of

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[10] See T Ross (2018), 'Stimulating thinking, feeling and seeing, Gerhard Richter at GOMA'.

pulling the material elasticity of oil paint across the surface of a canvas. In this way the specificity of the photographic medium (that is, the use of lenses, the indexical imprint of light on film or digital chip) is made apparent through the failure of complete translation into the material language of painting. Hawker describes the blur as that which effaces the legibility of an image in both figurative painting and photography, and as something common to both mediums, yet the way each medium deploys the blur is not totally translatable.

> The paradox of the blur is that it represents the un-representable (what is beyond the limits of the photograph's technology, what is outside the visible and recognisable in painting) and as such is the founding trace of photography and painting—the site at which both media begin and end—and therefore idiomatic of both painting and photography. (Hawker 2007, p. 52)

Figure 3.15 Gerhard Richter 2008, *11.3.08*, lacquer on colour photograph, 9.8x14.9cm

Trees in a Field (Fig. 3.16) originates from a banal snapshot of trees and a hedge, and unlike in Richter's over-paintings, here the photographic source is completely amalgamated into the medium of painting. The translation of the photographic blur into painting neutralises the mechanical precision of the camera by privileging touch and painterly gesture, and this, in my opinion, neutralises the lack of formal resolve evident in the over-paintings, where the two mediums relate but exist as distinct material entities alongside each other. I raise these subtle distinctions because while my project relates to Richter's oeuvre, it also departs from it by separating different media within a spatial setting rather than amalgamating them in single compositions; or, as I will demonstrate below, painting is put into a non-subsuming relation with non-painting, where sense as aesthetic effect occurs when things take place alongside each other. In my work Nancy's singular-plural is staged through a process of spacing: an entity (painting, in this case) is exposed to what it is not, a detour that continually forestalls any conception of self-enclosed identity or unified composition.

Figure 3.16 Gerhard Richter 1988, *Trees in a Field*, Oil on Canvas, 82x112cm

Following Nancy's formulation of the singular-plural, I want to demonstrate that the 'with' operating between different mediums in my installations is not based on a singular originating principle. Rather, the rapport established between works is constituted by both their material specificity and their signifying potential. The aim of this phase of my research is to co-present painting with other media in a way that un-grounds self-same concepts of mediums such as painting, photography and new media, and foregrounds their specificity through these relations.

I will therefore outline in broad terms how my work engages with the notion of the singular-plural, pointing to the importance of medium through processes of production and different qualities of materiality. As I have demonstrated above and in earlier chapters, Nancy questions a long-standing philosophical tradition according to which ideas are assumed to be prior to and distinct from their material or sensuous presentation.[11] In contrast, for him, meaning emerges from a relational process between distinct entities, without any drive towards ultimate ideational consolidation. He speaks of the 'coming to presence' of meaning. This phrasing is a way for Nancy to use language that points to a sensible intensity generated by the artwork as something sensed and felt, to which we are exposed, and through exposure to which a type of truth is disclosed. 'Truth' is certainly considered an outmoded word in general art history and criticism, but Nancy inverts its usual connotations. For him, it is not an all encompassing final truth, like representation of emancipation or redemption. What interests him is something much more down to earth—it is the ability to be receptive to the effect of sense, understood as meaning before its being appropriated into a signifying structure. In this way we 'face' sense as it unfolds before us to become meaningful with no determined origin or designated destination. 'One may also recall that the word "face" comes from the root that means "to pose, to set": to pose, present, expose without reference to anything' (Nancy 2007, p. 97). The radicality of Nancy's proposition should

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[11] In Plato, the relationship between material entities is one of visual semblance, where the re-presentation of Idea in material form is mimetic, distinct and distanced from the original, a secondary copy that has *no active participation* in the Idea. In post-Platonic Christian thought, the divine is embodied as a restricted visual semblance. The incarnation of God in human spirit is a necessary representation of that which cannot be comprehended in human consciousness. 'Further, the question of the exigency of this relation is taken up in the frame of the history of redemption: it is because human resources are unequal to the task and goal of salvation that the divine is compelled to be presented in the world' (Ross 2007, p. 3).

be apparent when we think about how much discourse, in the form of artistic statements, criticism and theory, is about 'something', namely ideas and concepts. Nancy is simply proposing a certain attentiveness to meaning which is difficult to communicate literally but which can be made apparent through the artwork's formal features. The kind of speculation Nancy provides on sense comes very close to the way certain artists make and think about work in the studio. In my case, many of the formal and material decisions—including what colour to use next to another, what pressure to apply the brush with, how viscous to make a territory of paint, how rough to make a surface to either print or paint on—involve a series of decisions that are about making sense of material and process through a series of relations, disruptions and intensities. In this way, there is no determining concept that I am attempting to represent in the work; my process functions more like the realisation of something as it begins to be sensibly meaningful.

The processes of studio production

I would now like to give an account of my studio processes and describe in procedural terms how translation functions in my studio research. Process or meaning as 'coming to presence' is important for Nancy because it is a way to conceive of the medium as generating aesthetic meaning through the potential of its material configurations. The body of work I created during this present period of research was motivated by a response to something 'patent' or materially present before me. This was a strategy to deploy a level of non-intentionality in the process of making both the analogue and digital works, rather than starting with a predetermined concept. A starting point might be a colour that I applied provisionally to a previously worked on but unfinished painting, or it might be a crease on the surface of the canvas that occurred during stretching. The response to something that is already there is important because it frees one from the motivation to invent from the imagination, or to preconceive what the painting may look like when it is finished. From any number of patent possibilities, a series of formal choices are made, each affecting the others, spurring each other on in

Figure 3.17 Simon Hantaï 1974, *Blanc*, acrylic on canvas 251x238cm

an open-ended process until a work is deemed finished. This type of non-representational painting doesn't function as an abstraction of an image, nor is it an approach to painting based on a preconceived concept. Rather, there is an emphasis on the material process functioning as something open and responsive.

The improvisational approach to composition has an established history within the context of twentieth century European and American abstract painting. Nancy, for example, describes how French artist Simon Hantaï's folded abstract paintings embody material non-intentionality and generate sensible meaning through the processes of

their own production (Candler Hayes 2003) Hantaï's work was created with a process he called *pliage*, which in French means 'to fold' (Fig. 3.17). The technique involved folding an unpainted canvas into various configurations, then painting on the exposed surfaces and subsequently unfolding and stretching the final work. The process results in a scattering of irregular coloured shapes across the ground of the canvas. The composition results from a series of contacts and discontinuities between the artist's brush and the folds of the canvas, an unfolding formal meaning with no anticipation of a determined outcome. Yve-Alain Bois identifies non-composition as one of the main strategies of abstract painting,[12] used to negate romantic models of artistic agency. He writes: 'The work must be produced by means that do not rely on the artist's subjectivity, and…this independence must be plainly visible to all—it must be part and parcel of the artwork itself' (Bois et al. 2013, p. 10). In a similar way, I was interested in setting up working processes that functioned independently of preconceived ideas about composition or specific content, where I didn't have to invent everything from scratch but could make decisions about things that already existed.

During 2015 I completed two distinct bodies of work. The first was shown at Gallery 9 in Sydney, in an exhibition titled *1,2,3*. The second exhibition, titled *Being Together*, took place in Brisbane at Queensland University of Technology. In *1,2,3* I adopted three distinct processes to create paintings and digital prints, and exhibited all three sets of works simultaneously. Unplanned, process-driven oil paintings were exhibited alongside imagery generated through 3D visualisation software that was printed onto both canvas and paper. The exhibition itself presented reciprocal relations generated between works during processes of production in the studio, which were then extended and reactivated spatially in the exhibition context. The exhibition as a whole functioned like a spatial collage of different mediums that were presented one alongside the other, resisting amalgamation into a singular composition or overriding concept. Conversely, the spatial proximity of distinct works created formal relations, undoing the premise that each work is self-sufficient and without relation to another. The installation shots (Fig. 3.18 and Fig. 3.21) show how the gallery space was used to configure relationships

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[12] Bois defines six main categories of non-intentionality and includes artists such as Giacomo Balla, Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber, Robert Delaunay, Pollock etc. (See Bois et al. 2013.)

between the different works. Figure 3.18 shows a large grey oil painting placed on the back wall of the gallery space; to the right and left of the painting I placed a series of smaller prints onto canvas. The centre of the room is occupied by a large giclée print (*Barney's Joy*, 220x130cm) placed flat on top of a timber structure. *The Universe* (Fig. 3.19) is the first work that a viewer is likely to see upon entering this room of the exhibition. The central blue, white and grey motif swells and shifts as if in a state of flux, differentiating itself against a field of an intensely scattered irregular cerulean blue daubs of paint. The swelling and vaporous effect of the central form is evocative of something on the verge of recognisability, like a changing cloud, obscured face or voluminous fog. The oscillations between the figure and ground, and the provisional finish to the painting, give the impression that it is in process and about to change into another image.

Figure 3.18 Peter Alwast 2015, 1,2,3 Installation shot (Room 01), Gallery 9, Sydney

Figure 3.19 Peter Alwast 2015, *The Universe*, oil on polycotton 140x140cm

Figure 3.20 Peter Alwast 2015, *Front and Back*, UV cured ink on linen, 90x70cm

Figure 3.21 Peter Alwast 2015, 1,2,3, Installation shot (Room 01), Gallery 9, Sydney

After encountering *The Universe* (Fig. 3.19), the viewer might then move to an adjacent work, *Front and Back* (Fig. 3.20), that is made by printing a computer generated image onto an exposed linen ground. This process involves the insertion of a photograph of the original of a chosen painting into a digital scene generated inside the software. This photograph is then placed onto a virtual wire mesh object that has been digitally constructed inside the software. As a medium, the 3D software sits between painting and photography, because it generates forms drawn from scratch (like in a painting) and combines them with photographic source imagery. The main difference between the 3D software and other still mediums is that the user is able to traverse the virtual on-screen space that objects occupy. This is done by moving an imaginary camera to find suitable angles and perspectives to determine a final still for printing. The software functions as a medium of translation, weaving together painting, photography and new media processes. Yet the final prints bring together the logic of different mediums without a simple fusion.
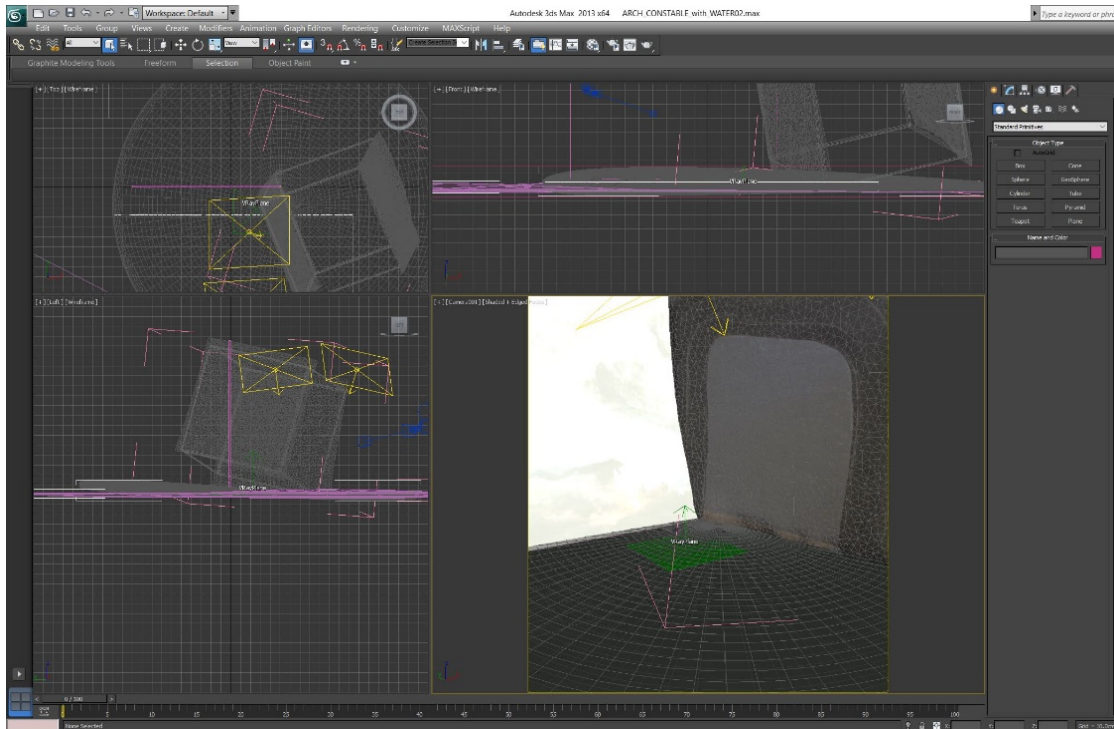
Figure 3.22 Peter Alwast 2015 example of 3D digital workspace

The digital print *Front and Back* (Fig. 3.20) was made by inserting a photo of *The Universe* (Fig. 3.19) onto a series of 3D generated curved billowing forms. *Front and Back* is the result of a series of photographic and new media translations of formal and metaphoric qualities of *The Universe*. This process uses discursive and visual associations, such as *flux*, *beginning*, *end*, *facing*, *not-facing*, *almost*, *no-thing*, to establish the composition inside 3D software before it is then printed onto linen. This associative process led me to use a photograph of the back of my young daughter's head as a type of equivalence to the sensible effects of *The Universe*. The main point of motivation for the process of translation was the sense of indeterminate modulation of the figure–ground relationship in *The Universe*. The curved forms in *Front and Back* function as multiplying figures, yet their billowing, paper-like appearance gives them a weightless quality, enclosing an empty central void. The void in the centre of *Front and Back* has a similar effect to the indeterminate central motif of *The Universe*, where the middle of the composition has had identifiable information or forms subtracted from it. The 'centre' in both compositions is without specific visual attributes—a vacant or indeterminate space that makes it difficult to fix a specific meaning or concept to each work. The

93

multiple billowing forms depicting the back of the head hide the identity of the face and reference a long tradition of Rückenfigur paintings,[13] the aims of which were to depict the experience of the figure to the beholder—'to see' what she sees. Yet in *Front and Back* the viewer's gaze hovers above the curved forms and there is 'nothing' to be seen except a vacant central space which is enveloped by multiple and intersecting forms. In this way the viewer's gaze never aligns with that of the figure; there is no common visible object which they both grasp. A similar effect of negation occurs in *The Universe*, where the composition deflects the ability of the beholder to fix a central image or locate the conceptual determination of the composition. *The Universe* suggests imagery, yet the smeared and blurred central form withdraws and functions like a type of void with no identifiable visual imagery.

As much as these works inflect each other with sensory and associative meaning, there are also points of separation that keep the works distinct from each other through the differing material supports and processes of construction. *The Universe* (Fig. 3.19) is created via an improvisational painterly process where colour as paint matter sits on the canvas surface, generating luminosity through various painterly daubs and smears. In contradistinction, the surface of *Front and Back* (Fig. 3.20) is created by UV printing, which involves the ink's being heat cured into the weave of the linen during the process of printing, resulting in an image that is more fused with its material support. This leads to the simultaneous awareness of a material ground in tension the immaterial qualities of the printed image. In fact, for the lighter highlights, the image is left exposed and contains no printed colour, revealing the untreated colour of the linen. The relational and differing materialities of the works generate distinct sensory experiences of viewing and, because the works are kept separate, negate the possibility of their cohering into a singular composition. In this way the sensible function of each medium is asserted in a differential and specific manner. The works are installed in physical proximity and qualities of one are visible in the other; yet there is also an irreducibility between them, with the differences of medium and methods of production sustained through visible relations.

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[13] '*Rückenfigur*', in German, means 'figure from the back'.
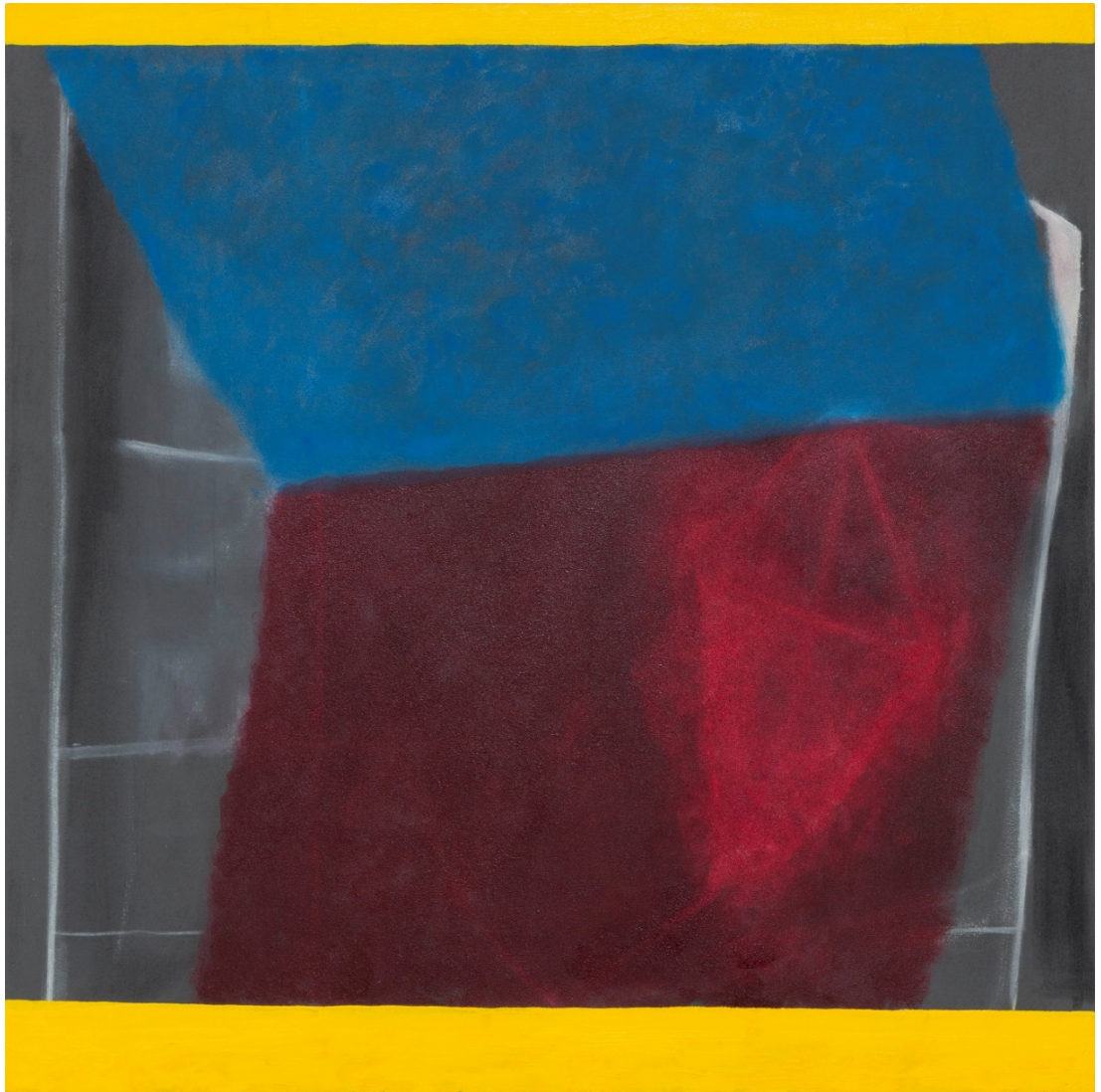
Figure 3.23 Peter Alwast 2015, *Red, Yellow and Blue*, Oil on polycotton, 80x80cm
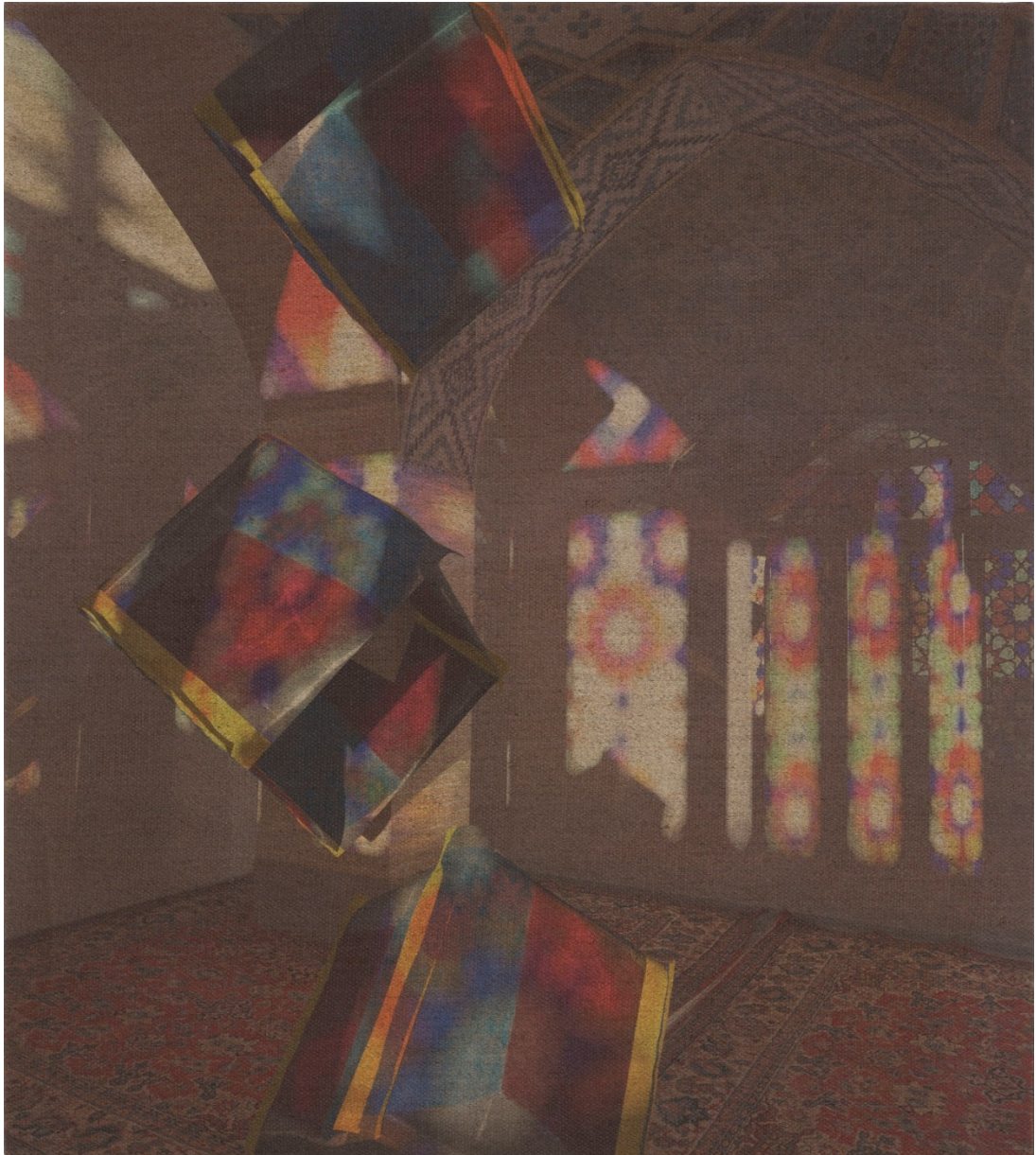
Figure 3.24 Peter Alwast 2015, *In the Beginning*, UV cured ink print on linen, 50x45cm

Another example of works that stage a series of translations and disruptions between mediums occurs in another room of the exhibition, where a beholder might first encounter *Red, Yellow and Blue* (Fig. 3.23). This modest sized oil painting began with a series of cursory white marks applied to a grey canvas, over which I added blue and red colour glazes in an open-ended process, without any final composition in mind. The work is titled after the colours used, but also evokes historical associations with the ways these colours have been used in modern painting. The surface of *Red, Yellow and Blue* is coarse and granular, which is achieved by using an acrylic medium to seal the

polyester/canvas ground onto which the paint is applied. This gives the grey background a physical density, and that counteracts the semi-transparent red and blue rectangles that seemingly float on top of the grey ground. The yellow horizontal bands across the top and bottom of the canvas assert another type of material presence through the application of a more elastic paint. The rubber-like yellow has a different sensible presence to the semi-glossy modulations of red and blue, and is less dense than the granular grey background. The skewed angle in the red and blue rectangles hints at the opening of pictorial space, yet the beholder is brought back to the coarse ground of the painting which is partially visible under the modulating forms. The painting shifts between an opening of pictorial space and the registration of a flat material object. This is achieved through the hinging of the red and blue rectangles, as well as the shift in chromatic saturation of the colours; the yellow is much brighter than the crimson red and cerulean blue, while the original linear marks are gestures which project forward in relation to the darker blue and red forms. Yet despite all the subtle allusions to pictorial space, the material surface brings a density and physical presence, asserting the object-like status of the painting. The formal relationships in this work (and in others in the exhibition) effect a series of metaphoric associations that I use as the basis of translation into other works. This, for me, is akin to the way Nancy describes the sensible as touching, or being inscribed into language, without being entirely contained by it. The associations therefore are not a content that is represented to the beholder, but function more as a process of making sense of something without ever drawing a resolved conclusion. Translation is a type of passage, a way of thinking and feeling my way through what is in front of me and responding to its sensible effect.

In *Red, Yellow and Blue* (Fig. 3.23) the white linear gestures towards the bottom right of the painting began as marks spurred by a series of words of association, like 'kite' and 'crucifix'. 'Kite' and 'crucifix' relate to each other because they have a sense of idealism about them. To fly a kite is to play as a child does—a kite is not earth-bound and evokes a sense of weightless freedom—while the crucifix is the ultimate icon for the Christian faith, standing for the one who exited his earth-bound body and returned to heaven. A sense of idealism also relates to the symbolic function of red, yellow and blue, which have an iconic status in modernist painting. This was evident in 1921, when

Alexander Rodchenko declared the end and the beginning of painting simultaneously by exhibiting his three monochrome paintings. In this context, Rodchenko's declaration identifies with modernist ideals of progress towards a more equal society. The iconic status of the three colours is also evident in a series of red, yellow and blue paintings made by Barnett Newman between 1966 and 1970. (Two of these works were attacked by members of the public because they were perceived to be denigrating of the German flag.) In this way, the lack of 'content' in the paintings by Newman instilled a sense of anguish, as if the formal and sensory aspects of the colour field paintings had 'no-meaning' and were deemed insubstantial.

In the Beginning (Fig. 3.24) takes as its point of departure these associations and the formal qualities of *Red, Yellow and Blue* (Fig. 3.23), incorporating photographic images which are then inserted onto a series of hollow box structures, using 3D software. These geometric forms tumble into an image of the interior of a mosque, which has also been created inside the software, rather than being a photographic document of a specific place. The hollow forms encroach upon the space but are also seemingly suspended in mid-flight and hover like celestial bodies. The red, blue and yellow surfaces of the cubes are intermixed with the play of colours reflecting from the stained glass inside the mosque. This creates a sense of equivalence between the 'modernist cubes' and 'anti-modernist' mosque, as if the ideals of modernity and religious worship amount to a play of light and shadow, evoking fleeting light and shadow effects rather than delivering solid truths. These shared associations and visual attributes are generated by sensible and formal relationships between the two works, yet there is also a suspension of formal resolution. This highlights their differences, and in this way the specificity of each work is defined and accentuated by a relation to the other, operating as an instance of the singular and plural.

Finally, to demonstrate that the singular-plural is not only established between pairs of works, I placed a third type of work—a large giclée print on a horizontal wooden support—in the centre of each room of the exhibition (Figs. 3.25 & 3.26).
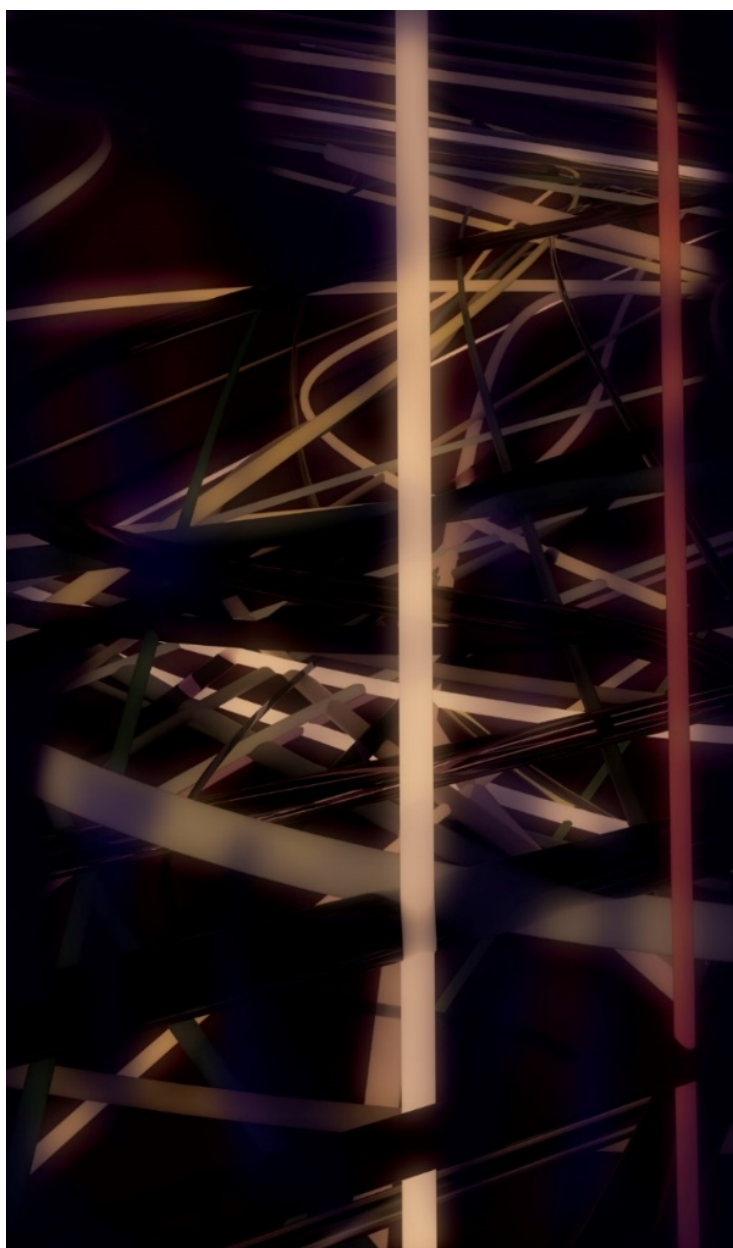
Figure 3.25 Peter Alwast 2015, *Barney's Joy*, giclée print on Hahnemuhle paper 130x220cm
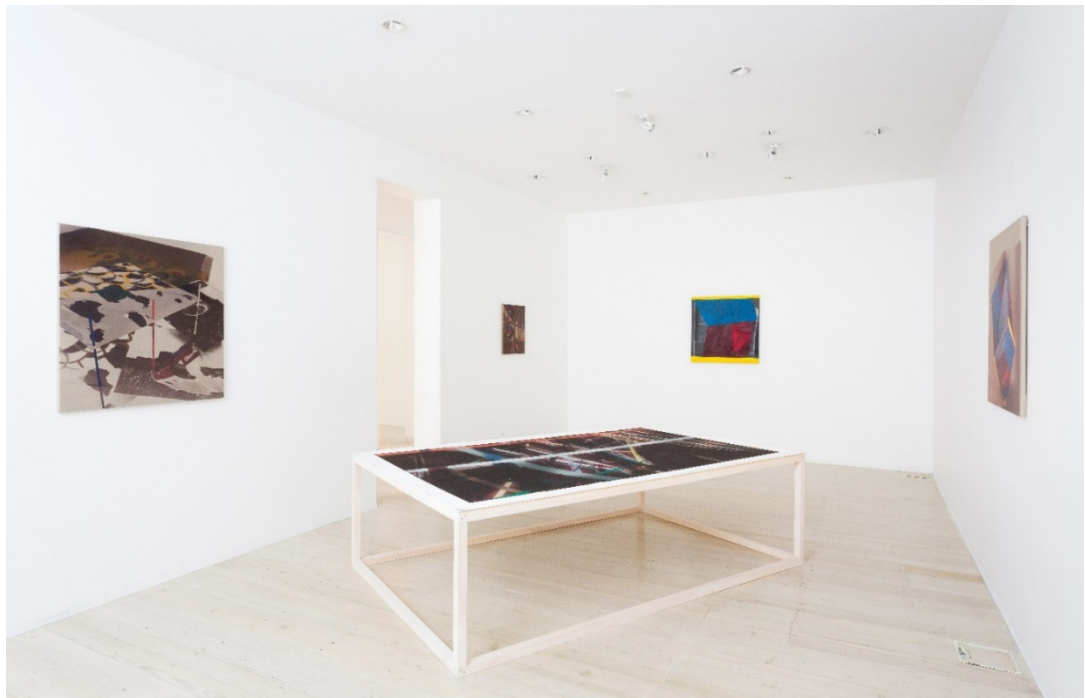
Figure 3.26 Peter Alwast 2015, *1,2,3,* Installation shot (Room 02), Gallery 9, Sydney

These prints create the visual effect of separating and connecting different works, compelling the viewer to move around the space to varying positions in relation to the works. The linear quality in these works suggests conduits that enable digital information to travel across space, functioning like a horizontal map, creating endless connections between various works in each room of the exhibition. These horizontally placed prints are a response to formal aspects of the oil paintings, and appropriate specific sequences of colour into a virtual working process. The 3D software engine generates specific linear forms to create spatial relationships where other 'real-world' factors can be added, such as directional light, transparency, opacity and type—the imitation of actual materials such as glass or neon lights. Yet my use of the 3D software in generating the tube-like imagery is closer to painting than to photographic imagery because the images contain no recognisable referents in the world and refer, rather, to the language of painterly abstraction.

Studio experimentation based on the use of multiple mediums

In October of 2015, I created another body of work that brought together various mediums. This was exhibited under the title *Being Together*, at Queensland University of Technology. The works in this exhibition comprised new paintings, readymade sculptural objects, and two distinct video works—one a projection and the other a series of seven LCD screens of video portraits. The exhibition was a means of combining discreet works that I had been working on subsequent to the *1,2,3* exhibition. This new body of work was a way of pushing forward and experimenting with what I had done earlier in my year of studio research, and an attempt to experiment and to test how far I could push inter-medial relations, testing the relevance of medium beyond painting and printing. However, in retrospect, I realise that the exhibition wasn't entirely resolved and perhaps added too many elements into formal and conceptual relations. This meant that the kind of relational and specific function of medium operating in *1,2,3* was dispersed in *Being Together*, and thus not evident in the latter exhibition as a whole. The diversity of mediums used, and seeming micro-thematics throughout the exhibition, were driven more by conceptual associations and less by formal and sensible relations. This was precisely the kind of logic I was seeking to avoid with the earlier body of work exhibited in *1,2,3*, where the formal relations between works generated sensible meaning, rather than being governed by a pre-existing concept. What follows is a general account and description of the works in the *Being Together* exhibition, rather than an attempt to demonstrate how the singular-plural logic of Nancy's philosophy is enacted in these works. My intention, which stumbled somewhat, was for the new body of work to function in similar ways to the earlier paintings and prints, where there is evidence of continuity and displacement between mediums. What resulted, however, was a series of works in which formal and conceptual relationships were not apparent enough, resulting in a series of discrete and not easily relatable works.

The *Being Together* exhibition was staged in three rooms. The first room was themed around putting together two different and historically separate kinds of production, reflecting my activities as an artist and my father's as a technician of gold and silver chain making equipment. In the second room I installed a video projection titled *The World as I Found It*, in which, in a corporate sponsored public space, a group of young students

talk and play music in a park rotunda. Finally, in the third room, seven LCD screens of video portraits were installed in a corner configuration. The video portraits were of current or former Brisbane artists whose artistic practices I respected, chosen by me for their divergent works. The artists were Scott Redford, Mark Webb, Daniel Mafe, Chris Howlett, Dirk Yates, Gemma Smith and Archie Moore.

Figure 3.27 Peter Alwast 2015, *Being Together*, Installation shot, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane

The largest space of the exhibition was occupied by three gold and silver chain making machines that belonged to my father. The machines were positioned on top of three floor paintings, which enclosed and framed the operating machines. A further sense of enclosure was achieved with two suspended walls, which were supports for a series of small paintings (Figs. 3.27 & 3.29). The suspended walls and the floor paintings formed an open enclosure around the moving machines, so that two different processes of production were in evidence alongside each other: painting, and gold and silver chain making. The mechanical movements of the machines generated a repetitive sound that pervaded the entire room and was evident to a person viewing the paintings, and in this
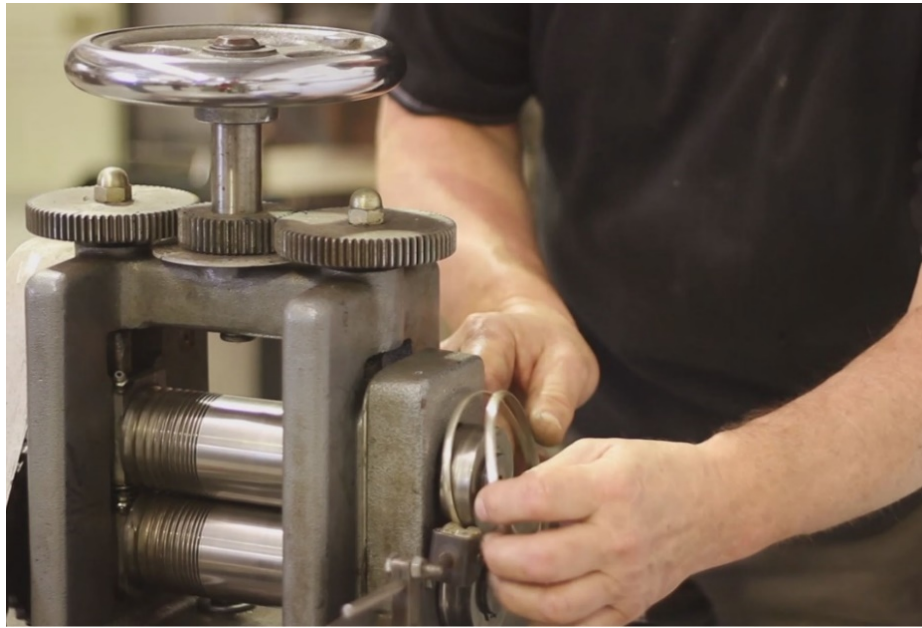
Figure 3.28 Still from video 2015, *Queensland Chains*, HD video 4min

way the mechanical repetition of the machines functioned as a type of auditory disruption to the normally silent status of paintings. Yet the hierarchical distinction between these two poles of production flipped, and the activity of the craftsman technician mimicked art-making and conversely the paintings adopted a repetitious format. In an attempt to 'forge' a link between chain making and painting, I installed a large screen depicting the movement of a technician's hand (my father's) making the wire that is eventually pressed into gold and silver wires. The hands of the worker delicately feed in and take away wires, making various adjustments to their forms (Fig. 3.28), thus making something from a raw material in the way a painter works paint matter into a finished work. In this way, the singular individual's hands added a sense of touch and craft to an activity otherwise associated with mechanical production, while the unique status of the paintings was disrupted by their serialisation—the same size and format was used in each work and so each painting appeared like an instance of repetitive production. The motivation for this room of the installation was to bring together two apparently incompatible methods of making—the poetic and the technical.

Figure 3.29 Peter Alwast 2015, *Being Together*, Installation shot, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane

From the main space of the exhibition two back rooms are visible, in which I installed video works. One room contained a large projection of a video titled *The World as I Found It*. In this video, three young people occupy the Colgate Palmolive sponsored rotunda in a suburban park on the Gold Coast of Queensland. They sit and talk while one of them plays an acoustic guitar version of Claude Debussy's *Clair De Lune*, an impressionistic musical score from 1905 (Fig. 3.30). The video captures a picturesque moment of private social interaction, framed by the Colgate Palmolive corporation's sponsored park, thus making the intentions and actions of the protagonists ambiguous—are they merely elements of corporate advertising, or a subtle form of resistance it to? About half way through the video the romantically inspired video sequences of trees, lawns and clouds, underscored by Debussy's music, is interrupted by a young teenage boy who approaches the three figures while bouncing a basketball. A stand-off ensues as the three youths stare back, failing to communicate and include the new boy on the scene (Fig. 3.31). From here the pictorial idealism of the park shifts, becoming a site that maintains social and racial difference. The small gathering of three protagonists is initially presented through the lens of romantic motifs that point to

shared sensibilities and something in common, yet what is also made apparent in the video is that these shared impressions seem to be available only to some, to the exclusion of the other.

Figure 3.30 Peter Alwast 2015, still from *The World as I Found It*, , HD video 3.5min

Figure 3.31 Peter Alwast 2015, still from *The World as I Found It*, HD video 3.5min

The final room of the exhibition contained a series of seven silent video portraits, reminiscent of Warhol's *Screen Tests* (Fig. 3.32). These portraits were much shorter than Warhol's work (approximately 3–4minutes) and captured subtle changes in the facial expressions of each subject. Identical screen formats equalised the subjects as they looked back towards the viewer. The motivation for this work, titled *Being Together*, was to put a diverse group of artists from the local Brisbane art scene into proximity with each other. However, the artists' divergent approaches to and thoughts on art resulted in many local conflicts that were aired publicly, such as those between Mark Webb and Scott Redford, or Daniel Mafe and Mark Webb. In the videos, the artists' faces were placed next to each other, yet there was no sense of relation between them, which had the effect of simply placing discreet individuals next to each other rather than staging a sense of commonality.

Overall, *Being Together*, as an exhibition, was an important step in my research because it resulted in works that were not resolved, and that were, in hindsight, overly complicated in their relationships. This was an important part of the studio research because it refocussed my attention onto relational formal processes which, through their web of interactions, generate unprescribed sensory and conceptual meanings.

Summary

In this chapter I have elaborated Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the singular-plural, demonstrating its importance as a framework for understanding the relational and specific function of medium in my studio research. The foregrounding of medium as a source of aesthetic meaning relates to Nancy's broader intention of making sense 'the central question of our time', when past ideational aesthetic frameworks replay an endless logic of temporally deferring the realisation of shared aesthetic meaning as a possibility of the future (Ross 2008, pp.18-40). In contrast, for Nancy, the artwork has the potential to show meaning realised and available to the beholder. This is achieved through a series of artistic processes which are inextricably linked to the material possibilities of a given medium, yet this medial specificity exists, or is made sensibly apparent, because it is put into a relation with another medium. The relational aspect of an artistic process or formal component of an artwork can be shown to be both

unique and implicated in a matrix of relations outside of itself. These relations are based on the acknowledgement of differences between things and are the foundation of how sense as meaning is generated. The artwork that presents this type of sensible meaning through its formal structure does not do so by representing sense through a picture of it, but is the result of a series of material operations that place things into relations of meaning. In this way sense has no particular origin or signifying destination but occurs through a series of irreducible relations between distinct entities. To elaborate on this point, Gerhard Richter's translations between painting and photography were discussed, with reference to Rosemary Hawker's adoption of Derrida's concept of idiom, which overlaps with Nancy's framework of the singular-plural. The idiomatic or unique features of a medium are made apparent in Richter's work via the transcription of photography into painting, where that which cannot be translated exposes an irreducible feature of each medium.

My studio work was discussed in reference to Richter's inter-medial approach, to show how it relates to but also departs from his work, keeping open differences between mediums by showing them simultaneously. The process-based approach of my studio research has foregrounded the sensible aspects of the artwork over the dictates of a determining concept, relating to issues of non-composition or non-intentionality identified in the work of Simon Hantaï and the historical backdrop of these tendencies as discussed by Yve-Alain Bois. The discussion of my studio research thus far tends to place emphasis on sense as meaning derived from formal relationships, aligning with Nancy's broader aim to rehabilitate a formal materialist aesthetic program. In addition to the artwork's potential to generate sense through formal relationships, I have also discussed the generative potential of the singular-plural as involving metaphoric associations, where the sensible and intelligible inflect each other. The generative translations between different mediums are therefore not only based in the suspension of a determining concept, as tends to be Nancy's position, but are also motivated by the signifying potential of sensible effects. In the next chapter I examine the overlaps of Nancy's aesthetics with that of Jacques Rancière, while also pointing to some limitations of Nancy's predominately formalist position. The aim of this comparison is to find a trajectory and account for a final body of work that foregrounds the relational function

of medium, while also discussing how anachronistic methods of artistic production motivate a range of social and political references. In this way, the translations and fissures between distinct forms and processes are treated not only for their sensible effects but also for their inscriptions into associative language.
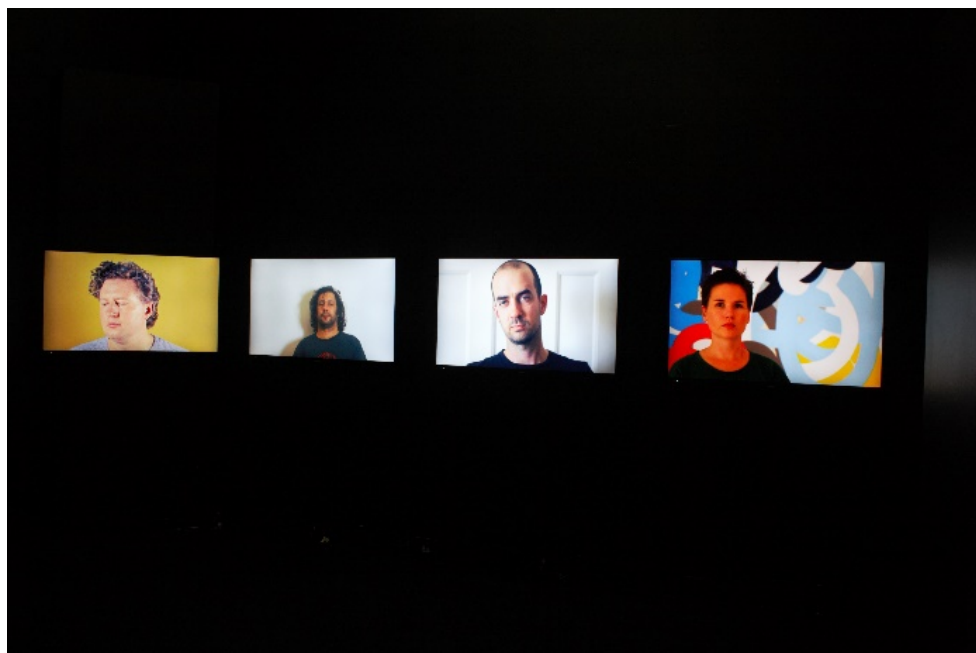
Figure 3.32 Peter Alwast 2015, *Being Together*, Installation shot, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane

Chapter Four

The sensible partition between Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce Jacques Rancière's theories on art, as a way of providing a counterpoint to Nancy's aesthetics, which I have focussed on so far. Rancière's insights both overlap with and differ from Nancy's, and are an important framework in which to account for the subtle shifts in my studio research. In a published talk, Jean-Luc Nancy (2010, pp. 91-99) proposes that contemporary art's exceptionality lies in its withdrawal from the realm of everyday signification; its aesthetic potential counteracts the boundless flow of information and commonplace signification typical of our digital consumerist age. Moreover, the absence of determining criteria in contemporary art generates competing artistic strategies, resulting in 'closed' significations aimed at re-establishing aesthetic categories or expressing mourning for the loss of art's 'higher' functions. The lack of determining criteria is synonymous with a 'fragmentation' of hierarchical and codified conventions of judgement typical of the Beaux-Arts system prevalent in France until the late nineteenth century. In the wake of this system's dissolution Nancy describes art as appearing 'very precisely in the hollow opened up by a problematic of "ends", which itself emerged from the fading of given and fixed finalities' (2013, p. 189). The end of the Beaux-Arts system signals the overcoming of determining criteria that functioned to maintain codified relationships between subject matter and methods of expression specific to artistic mediums. Nancy describes the end of this system as a confrontation with the 'absence of meaning' (2013, p. 189). Nancy's use of this phrase is designed to provoke reflection on the role of modern art when its meaning is no longer assured by the codified system that linked appropriate methods with worthy subject matter typical of the Beaux-Arts system. When art's role in representing grand historical events or mythological and religious themes 'is a thing of the past', attempts are made to reinstate criteria that vouchsafe its meaningful role and status in society. For Nancy these attempts result in closed artistic strategies that conceal the possibilities of an open artistic 'gesture'. Closed artistic strategies are

evident in a range of artworks and theories that foreground idea over the potential of sensible formal meaning. (The background to this was discussed in detail in Chapter Two, focussing on Nancy's interpretation of Hegel's aesthetics.) Nancy defines an artistic gesture as 'something other than a signification', and as 'the accompaniment of an intention but one that, in itself, remains foreign to the intention' (2010, p. 97). In other words, Nancy believes that modern art's role is to render aesthetic meaning without needing the orientation of predetermined significations that take priority over the open sensory potential of the artwork. This proposition aligns with his philosophical project more broadly, which aims to bring our awareness to meaningful sensible existence—what he describes as an 'exposure to the sense' (James 2006, p. 133). The exposure to sense was discussed in detail in the previous chapter and involves a nexus of sensible intelligible experience that is meaningful prior to established rational categories that we use to mediate our experiences. In this way the artwork isn't a mere representation of an original intention or idea 'outside' of its formal and sensory dynamics, but presents or generates meaning as a type of event. The sensible in art can be realised in the use of a certain material or technical process which results in an artistic form whose aesthetic effects make sense in ways that are not easily appropriated into signifying language, but which nonetheless embody a type of shared 'truth'.

The gap between artistic intentionality and aesthetic reception is also a key notion operative within the paradigm of modern art, that Jacques Rancière names the 'aesthetic regime of art' (2004). The lack of a determining schema or causal framework signals, for Rancière, a break with what he calls the 'representative regime of art', a break he identifies with the socio-political upheavals of the French Revolution and the subsequent dissolution of the Beaux-Arts system in the nineteenth century. Both philosophers imbue their aesthetic philosophies with an anti-essentialist, materialist orientation, rendering contemporary art as a sensory realm distinct from objects of consumption and conventional forms of signification.

For Nancy, an example of this can be found in the process-driven abstract paintings of Simon Hantaï. Hantaï's paintings, which described in the previous chapter, deploy a process of folding the canvas of the painting prior to stretching and painting the exposed parts of the canvas with various colours. The painting's composition and sensory effects

are linked to an open-ended material process, which means that the locus of meaning is internal to the work rather than being reliant on prefigured significations outside of it. In a similar way, for Rancière, the artwork is capable of staging formal relationships that suspend determining relationships between form and content. Instead of representing content which the 'informed' viewer can decode and trace back to an identifiable intention, the artwork functions as a type of suspension of preconceived content. The defiance of expectation opens the work to a multitude of discursive readings and sensible effects. An example of this is John Armleder's *Cimicifuga Cordifolia*, 2008, described in detail in the Introduction, which juxtaposes an abstract painting with a banal wall paper motif of lobsters. The surprising effect of the work is the way an abstract painting conventionally considered to be 'high-art' is put into a type of equivalence with a 'low' and seemingly incompatible form. The result is an aesthetic play between incongruent formal elements that generate unexpected sensory effects and conceptual associations by defying consolidated expectations. The artwork's ability to disrupt 'settled' or agreed upon significations is analogous to Rancière's broader philosophical project of equality, which seeks to dismantle the assumption that social hierarchies are immutable and inevitable. Armleder's work isn't predicated on a singular hidden message that the so-called expert can take possession of because he has predetermined knowledge, nor does it represent an agreed upon framework of what a painting should be. In fact, the formal clash in the work renders sensible and discursive possibility by reconfiguring certain expectations of what can be conventionally thought, done and seen in a painting.

Nancy and Rancière use the disjunction between 'poesies' [production or intention] and 'aesthesis' [reception] to slightly different ends. Nancy claims that modern art should expose 'sense' without a reliance on 'predetermined schemas or Ideas' (2010, pp. 91-99). The emphasis on the meaningful potential of the sensible aspects of the artworks is in contrast to a representative model, in which the formal aspects of the artwork illustrate pre-existing content, such as religious and historical narratives. Nancy's exposure to sense can be understood as an event-based ontology that foregrounds sensible relations between distinct bodies or entities, showing meaning as an open-ended process. The flickering colour-fields of Simon Hantaï's paintings are the result of

relations between a body, matter, form and technique, which generate meaning through the matrix of their interactions.

In a recently published dialogue between the two philosophers, Rancière declares that he cannot agree with Nancy's position on art, which, he asserts, seeks a 'universal form of experience prior to signification' (2013, p. 196). In contrast, for Rancière, modern art stages ongoing contestations of hierarchies that unequally distribute roles and parts in relation to a common sensory fabric. For Nancy, art's independence from normative criteria and prescribed significations opens it to the possibility of showing our shared relationship to the sensible world, independent of an orientating idealistic or theological framework. Even though Nancy believes that sense, as embedded meaning in a world with 'no final higher causes', is a contemporary concern, his aesthetic project can be critiqued as attempting to find a timeless motivating essence in art. This kind of atemporal speculation occurs when Nancy says that 'perhaps the "singular plural" has in fact been at work ever since there have been humans' (2013, p. 190). For Rancière, however, art disputes the 'common' or 'universal' space of sensory meaning created within the artistic sphere, by reordering the models of meanings and the way they are conventionally understood. Nancy's access to 'sense', according to Rancière, cannot be framed as timeless and beyond division, because sensible meaning is always 'situated for whom meaning makes sense' (2013, p. 194). Sense experience is not shared through a common pre-symbolic framework but structured by consolidated hierarchies which predetermine possibilities of production and intelligible reception. Therefore, claims of universal sensible meaning risk establishing inequalites and hierarchies by which some have access to a 'shared' sensory realm while others do not. Rancière thinks that instead of striving for a shared sensible sphere, modern art has the potential to contest 'timeless' meanings 'by undoing the ordered correspondence of things, words and speakers' (2013, p. 194). The modern artwork has the capacity to undo configurations of meaning which historically may have been understood as natural or conclusive. In this way, its ability to suspend consolidated expectations and to reinscribe and make intelligible new meanings marks the aesthetic sphere as a space of political potential. In contradistinction, Nancy's aesthetic project tries to show that we are all subjects and objects of sensible relations and are equally exposed to sense; therefore, equality is

made apparent through the awareness 'our being with' each other in sensible relations, independent of governing ideological frameworks.

Figure 4.33 Illustration from *The Muses* 2007 Jean-Luc Nancy, p.40

Figure 4.34 Jean Auguste Barre 1866, *Pomona*, The Louvre, Paris

The offerings of inactivity—Nancy's analysis of Hegel's conclusions on classical sculpture

To begin a comparison between Nancy's and Rancière's positions on modern and contemporary art, I want to examine Nancy's analysis, in the second chapter of *The Muses* (Nancy 1997), of an engraving which also features in Hegel's *Phenomenology of The Spirit* and *Lectures on Fine Art* (Fig. 4.33)*.* The engraving is based on an unspecified Greco-Roman sculpture of a figure bearing an offering—the most likely candidate is Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruitful abundance of which I show an example by Jean Auguste Barre (Fig. 4.34). In the rest of this chapter I will first focus on the conclusions Nancy draws about the sculpture via Hegel's aesthetics, and then turn to Rancière's analysis of two different sculptures from antiquity—the *Juno Ludovisi* (first century CE)

and the *Belvedere Torso* (circa 1430s)*.* The overlaps and differences in the treatment of the sculptures by these two philosophers will help me to describe in more depth a framework within which I can present their respective positions, as well as the final body of my studio work, that sits broadly between their two positions. In Chapter Two, I discussed Nancy's reworking of Hegel's end of art formulation. Put briefly, the end of art, for Hegel, is the dissolution of art's presumed capacity to be a representative vehicle for divine presentation and a sensible vehicle for the realisation of human freedom. This withdrawal of what Hegel deems to be art's 'sole service' to society is also synonymous with the dissolution of academic hierarchies of different artistic genres, such as history, genre or portrait painting. With the end of these determinative criteria, art begins to become a problem for itself; this is to say, its own 'open' conditions of possibility become the source of artistic production and discursive speculation (Pippin 2014, p. 8). For Nancy, these shifts inaugurate art's 'plastic independence' from predetermined criteria, and the emergence of its 'irreducible plurality' (1997, p. 43). 'Irreducible plurality' is Nancy's way of stressing the artwork's potential to make apparent an 'infinite' amount of formal and sensible configurations, irreducible to a singular concept or signification. This is to show that the artwork can answer the call for its status to be meaningful to a society in the absence of idealised frameworks or determining criteria. In Nancy's writing, the consistent stress on sensible meaning relates to his broader aim of showing that shared meaning can be made available through the artwork, similarly to the embodied relations we share with each other and with the material world, which, for him, are prior to the foundations of moral and social institutions.

The marble sculpture *Pomona* by Jean Auguste Barre (Fig. 4.34), (of which there are many interpretations other sculptors and painters), depicts a mythical Roman goddess of fruit and vegetal abundance. This sculpted Pomona presents an indifferent expression on her face and carries fruit in her apron that appears to tumble forward from her grasp. The linear engraving used in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*, also of Pomona, is a simplified version based on the sculptural form and other painterly depictions of the goddess (Fig. 4.33). The engraving depicts an expressionless female figure with slightly tilted head, carrying in one hand a basket, presumably containing fruit, and in the other a tambourine. Hegel describes the engraving as a melancholic

figure who offers fruits which no longer contain their former divine properties. This offering of fruit bears no resemblance to the 'divine life that animated them but is rather a vestige of what has come to pass' (Nancy 1997, p. 95). 'Vestige' derives its meaning from the word '*vestigare*', which means to follow the traces of something that has an unknown origin or destination, and is an action separated from a determining action. For Hegel, Pomona is no longer the bearer of a divine power or the representation of *Geist*. Instead, she offers fruits that are sensuous in their exteriority but are detached from their inner spiritual function. Nancy's interpretation of Hegel's text describes the figure of Pomona as making an offering which is an offer of nothing more than the sensuous presence of the fruit itself. Nancy points out how Hegel struggles to conceptualise the meaningful dimension of artistic forms when metaphysical frameworks for art's role no longer seem viable; when all that remains is the necessary sensibility of art, which is no longer animated by Geist and is 'barely worthy of the name art' (Nancy 1997, p. 53).

> The girl of the *Phenomenology*, transported into the *Aesthetics*, constitutes this infinitely complex figure in which ancient art is both immobilized and transported into the elements of Christian art, in which the gaze is lit up in the presentation of gazeless forms, in which inwardness shines and offers itself gracefully, without however, offering anything other than its grace. A figure that seems to be nothing other than a rhetorical figure for illustrating a 'friendly fate' is revealed (without revealing anything) as being secretly the unique plastic figure of an art that is barely worthy of the name art, but this form has secretly the power to preserve, in spite of all religion either the past or to come, an irreducible, indisputable exigency of sensuous form. (Nancy 1997, p. 53)

The 'gazeless' figure of Pomona bears the fruit that is the presentation of nothing other than 'grace'; this 'grace' has no inward spiritual motivation, which, according to Hegel, is withdrawn and replaced by the gesture of offering. What Pomona offers is analogous to what the potential might be for art's sensible dimension when it no longer holds the same importance it had in the past. The grace of the figure is exemplified by the sculpture's indifferent expression and self-sufficiency. Her gaze towards the beholder

lacks the animation of a determining interiority, or Spirit, yet she does present an offering. However, this offering is no longer the promise of a better future. Nancy focusses on a long passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which describes statues from antiquity as 'cadavers from which the living soul has flown, just as hymns are words from which belief has gone'. No longer holding a spiritual function, Pomona presents a 'passive' offering which is nothing more than 'the graceful consistency of the form itself' (Nancy 1997, p. 46). The offer of the fruits can be understood as a gesture towards the presentation of meaning or 'truth' with no 'higher' qualification. Pomona's offer is a gesture detached from any inward or spiritual dimension, an event of meaning nonetheless, where we see and (in imagination) smell the fruit of her offering. The passiveness of Pomona's gaze, and the offering of fruit devoid of spiritual functions, are gestures of inactivity, insofar as they interrupt the movement towards stages of self-understanding in the progression of Hegelian dialectical logic. In this way, art, for Nancy, becomes an external sensible manifestation and offering of a type of 'truth'.

Nancy deliberately appropriates the word 'truth' in relation to sensible presentation to call attention to sensibility itself as an *adequate* event of shared human meaning, devoid of idealistic projections. Art does not need to 'become a thing of the past' as Hegel states in his Aesthetic lectures (circa 1835), mourning its 'lost' ethical function within society as it is surpassed by philosophy and modern social institutions. Rather, art can show that aesthetic meaning is possible through its sensible and formal possibilities. The withdrawal of the art's former spiritual function paves the way for what Nancy describes as the 'infinite diversity of its elaborations' (1997, p. 54). The infinite possibilities of art are not an endless recycling of agreed upon themes and significations. The infinite diversity of art functions as the suspension of a logic of ends, disrupting the representation of a determining concept in sensible form. This is the collapse of a distinction between product and process, and the inauguration of productive technique. '*Techné poiétiké*', or productive technique, is thus an offering without progress, a sensible articulation: 'each time it offers *perfect completion*, not perfection as a goal toward which one advances, but perfection that has to do with the coming and the presentation of a single thing…thus it is a perfection that is always in *progress*' (Nancy 1997, p. 87 emphasis in original). The Hegelian formulation of 'art becoming a thing of

the past' signifies for Nancy an end of its idealistic aspirations and the inauguration of its generative capacity as 'truthful' sensible form. Nancy wonders: 'What if art were never anything but the necessarily plural, singular art of consenting to death, of consenting to existence?' (1997, p.55). The 'consenting to existence' involves the recognition that art exposes meaning as something immanently bound to its status as a material and sensible object. *Techné poiétiké* is therefore most simply understood as the process of producing meaning through the artwork's formal potential. It is not a process with a destination of delivering resolved truths, nor is it the representation of the singular will of the artist. It is something like an event beyond clear discursive intelligibility, a result of relations and disruptions between process and forms. The background to Nancy's position has already been described in Chapter Two and Three, but to summarise its Heideggerian influence I refer to Ingvild Torsen's brief but lucid distinction between the role art played for Hegel and for Heidegger: 'The difference that makes the strongest case for Hegel's approach over Heidegger's has to do with the way the event of art can be understood: the event character of art can on Hegel's story also be understood as a *deed*, as something achieved *by* and *amongst* us, whereas Heidegger emphasizes the artwork as something that happens *to* us' (Torsen 2014, para 10). Nancy's aesthetics are influenced by Heidegger; promoting a disclosure of sensible meaning at the limit of discursive language as an event that 'happens to us'. Rancière's position in some respects overlaps with Hegel's, where art is a mode of intelligibility understood in relation to a social and historical context. For Rancière art is therefore not only a blockage to signification but also a mode of intelligible communication 'amongst us' so that social and aesthetic 'norms' are registered by the artwork precisely when they are failing.

Background to Jacques Rancière's aesthetics

Rancière designates three models or regimes into which art can be categorised. These regimes are broadly historical; however, features of each regime still operate in aspects of contemporary art practices and discourses. The first model is the *ethical regime*: ethics or ethos is broadly defined as a way of being or dwelling, signaling that art in the ethical regime is used as a vehicle for imparting knowledge about how a society should function according to its own ethical standards. An artwork is deemed to be effective

through the strength of its claims to impart a sense of ethical thought and feeling in members of the community. When describing features of the ethical regime, Rancière frequently references the function of art in Plato's Republic. A 'truthful' artwork has a determined goal, and its ethical voracity is determined by the impact it might have on a community. An effective ethical model of art is Plato's discussion of theatre, which can mobilise and include spectators as a 'true living community' through their involvement in song and dance (Rancière 2007, p. 272). The spectator is no longer passively witnessing a mere artistic spectacle before him or her, but is rather 'actively' involved in the production and understanding of communal ethical imperatives. In this way the artwork is instrumentalised as it 'mobilises' the spectator to act in an ethical way or understand an ethical idea. The artwork is deemed effective when it is 'closer' to an ideal ethical model like democracy for example, rather than a mere artistic imitation of it. Rancière describes this ethical functionality in the following way: 'there are true arts, that is to say forms of knowledge based on the imitation of a model with precise ends, and artistic simulacra that imitate simple appearances' (2006, p. 20). The primary critique Rancière would make of the ethical function in contemporary art is that it sets up a binary model of inequality predicated on the division between capacity and incapacity. The art work that is close to an ideal ethic model is judged as good and true over one that is deemed to be unmotivated by ethical imperatives and therefore a mere secondary sensible imitation of that model. In other words, those who are not ethically 'activated' by the artwork lack the necessary knowledge for their own emancipation.

Countless examples of the ethical and pedagogical aspects of this regime appear in contemporary art. A recent case is the discourse surrounding the exhibition of contemporary art titled *documenta14* (2017), which in addition to being traditionally staged in Kassel, Germany also contained a component exhibited in Athens, Greece. For artistic director Adam Szymczyk the choice of Athens as an additional site was motivated by the goal of 'showing how bad things can get in the world' (*Learning from Athens*, 2017). This is a reference to the recent controversies surrounding the bail-out of the Greek economy, when Germany imposed a series of austerity measures on Greece with quite devasting impacts on the local economy and social welfare of the Greek people. As a response to 'how bad things are or can get', the curators of *documenta14* chose to

extend an olive branch to the people of Greece and stage a major contemporary art event in various locations around Athens (*Learning from Athens*, 2017). The ethical model of this event was to step in and 'help' achieve a sense of ethos in the community and a more adequate model of democracy. A section of the exhibition statement reads:

> What remains? while investigating the relationship between art, education, and the aesthetics of human togetherness through the collective activation of the body—shifting from day to night. What does it mean to come together? How and where do we come together? And what can we do when we come together? The Parliament of Bodies, the Public Programs of documenta 14, emerged from the experience of the so-called long summer of migration in Europe, which revealed the simultaneous failure not only of modern representative democratic institutions but also of ethical practices of hospitality. The Parliament was in ruins. The real Parliament was on the streets, constituted by unrepresented and undocumented bodies resisting austerity measures and xenophobic policies. (*Learning from Athens* 2017)

In summary, the exhibitions in Athens and Kassel had the goal of educating and imparting an ethical attitude to issues such as global capitalism, refugee migration, social displacement, and various forms of social repression. The discursive framework surrounding *documenta14* aims to strip away the artifice of repressive social reality and expose certain 'truths' which may be hidden from ordinary view, compelling a more ethical and 'active' understanding of community and democracy.

The second episteme of art designated by Rancière is the 'representative regime', which shifts from a Platonic model of art's ethical function to Aristotelian aesthetic theory. In the latter, according to Rancière, art is no longer assessed according to good or bad imitations of an original ideal, nor is it verified by the effectiveness of its ethical lessons. Instead, poeisis, mimesis and aesthesis (or production, imitation and aesthetic reception) relate to each other through a series of established conventions. As its name implies, the fundamental function of this regime is to represent, yet not only is the function of representation governed by an ethical imperative but it serves to represent a series of 'norms'. Normative ends determine the way particular techniques (painting,

sculpting, dramatic fictional writing) are assigned to the 'proper' way of depicting certain subject matter. Normativity is codified as the 'proper' relationship between subject matter and the method of its production. This establishes a hierarchical criterion where certain subjects are deemed more important than others and require predetermined methods of depiction. For example, the feelings, actions and thoughts of Napoléon Bonaparte must be painted with the utmost naturalism and with subject centred in the canvas, representing his historical importance. In this way, history painting is considered much more important than the painting of ordinary and everyday subjects such as 'common' people and mundane objects. Art's take on truth is judged in terms of its ability to represent an action, express an emotion, or tell a story in a manner appropriate to the subject matter. In a novel or piece of theatre, men of high social standing are represented using the correct and appropriate lexicon of words, which is different from the representation of those of lower standing. This means that the representative regime is synonymous with maintaining a series of artistic conventions, reflecting norms that govern people's positions within a social hierarchy. Priority is therefore given to language and speech as determinators of 'great' actions and 'extraordinary' feelings of those subjects deemed worthy of visibility and representation. The priority ascribed to certain subject matter simultaneously functions as a demarcation of subjects unworthy of representation. Gabriel Rockhill explains that 'rather than reproduce reality, works within the representative regime obey a series of axioms that define the arts' proper forms: the hierarchy of genres and subject matter, the principle of appropriateness that adapts forms of expression and action to the subjects represented and to the proper genre, the ideal of speech as act that privileges language over visible imagery that supplements it' (Rancière 2004, p. 91). Aspects of the representative regime regularly feature in various aspects of contemporary art. One example is the explanatory wall texts in contemporary museums and galleries that seek to establish a direct correspondence between the identifiable intentions of the artist and the manifestation of these in the artwork. This exercise attempts to assign an intelligible identity to various sensible components of the artwork. Additionally, electronic announcements of exhibitions posted by online journals such as *eflux*[14]

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[14] See <http://www.e-flux.com/>.

prioritise the 'urgency' of certain subject matters, and circulate pedagogical texts that create a hierarchy of themes deemed more appropriate to contemporary art. The representative regime functions not to challenge what can be done, seen and perceived in art, but to reinforce things we already know or agree about.

An example of this representative logic can be found in Ben Quilty's recent series of paintings of lifejackets. *High Tide Mark* (Fig. 3.35) is a painting of a life jacket on a dark grey ground. The inspiration for the painting comes from Quilty's travels to Greece, Syria and Lebanon and his observing countless abandoned jackets on a beach in Lesbos. The painting is rendered in Quilty's signature impasto gestural style, foregrounding the physical process of painting over a more nuanced form of naturalism. The typically bright orange colour of the jacket is dulled as though it has been used and discarded. The energetic and 'expressive' brush marks stand in for the representation of emotion and, in relation to this subject matter, represent the 'anger' people feel when confronted with the often cruel and inhuman treatment of asylum seekers. This style of painting is associated with twentieth century expressionism, and the technique of painting in this manner signifies the expression of the 'inner feelings' of the artist, unfettered by the constraints of 'realistic' representation. I have no doubt that Quilty had strong feelings when he witnessed discarded life jackets on a beach in Lesbos[15]; the point is that most people would. In this way the work reiterates what we already know about the unfolding refugee crisis in Europe and Australia and confirms the sense of indignation people feel about this issue. The painting therefore represents 'important' subject matter and marries it with an appropriate 'feeling'-imbued technique. The dirtied colour of the life jacket and the use of an expressive gestural painterly technique can be understood as standing in for 'strong' emotions more generally, yet by representing what we already know and agree upon in an 'appropriate' technique, the painting maintains rather than challenges aesthetic expectations. This is to say that it serves to maintain a safe distance between those who want to see their empathy and emotions represented through the artwork, and those who seek visibility through basic human rights.

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[15] See *High tide mark | Ben QUILTY | NGV | View Work*, viewed 9 July 2018, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/122147/>.

Figure 4.35 Ben Quilty 2016, *High Tide Mark*, oil on canvas, 170.5x160.4cm, National Gallery of Victoria

In Rancière's third and final model, the aesthetic regime of modern art, there is a sense of indifference to the prioritisation of some subject matters over others, and to the aesthetic methods with which subject matter and content are realised. The aesthetic regime uncouples the predetermined relationship between a content and its appropriate realisation in an artistic form, overcoming the hierarchical system of means and ends typical of the representational regime. In the aesthetic regime there is an equality accorded to all artistic techniques and subject matters, which means that art is understood in the singular, where 'no particular kinds of figures can be consecrated above others' (Ross 2007, p. 154). Art in the singular means that there is no longer a stratification of different arts in relations of hierarchy—with, say, history painting at the top and genre painting at the bottom. Rather, every subject matter and technique can be counted as art in the singular. In addition, the heteroclite tendencies of the aesthetic regime mean that anything, as subject matter, can enter as unscripted meaning, without a 'proper' or predetermined destiny of reception. Central to this regime is the potential of new configurations of sensible meaning, which undo the bonds that predetermine

and normalise what can be seen and how it should be realised. As its name implies, the focus of this regime relates to the function of aesthetic meaning in the artwork, but also inflects the possible contestation of normalised sensible meaning more broadly. Rancière locates the beginnings of the aesthetic regime in the later parts of the eighteenth century, and in the works of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and a whole range of other Romantic writers and artists who sought to think through the emancipatory potentials of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic regime follows the dissolution of the representative regime and is essentially a mode of sensible and intelligible possibility that challenges the prescriptive criteria of the representative regime. In addition, the lack of prescription in this regime is treated by Rancière as a form of political contestation that disrupts and interjects into the hierarchical distribution of social roles.

> In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional. (Rancière 2004, p. 23)

The passage above refers to the way sensible meaning in the aesthetic regime is no longer bound to and determined by prescriptive artistic norms, but also, more broadly, to the way a shared sensible domain can be reconfigured and contested from 'its ordinary connections', allowing something new and unscripted to enter into visibility. The sensible is, for Rancière, a type of a distribution; that is to say, a shared sensible world among various bodies and modes of discourse that in any social context is unequal, yet in virtue of its own heterogeneity (lack of normative and prescriptive criteria) can play a role in generating new and unconsolidated aesthetic meaning. Thought that 'becomes foreign to itself' finds sensible configurations and is capable of showing and contesting how a given sensible distribution is determined by a broader social order (James 2012, p. 107).

The offerings of inactivity—Rancière's analysis of the *Juno Ludovisi* and the *Belvedere Torso*

Art in the aesthetic regime can be understood as disrupting the means–ends rationality that is evident in the representative regime. The causal logic of the representative regime functions by making an intended action, idea or thought legible in the sensible features of the artwork. As a way of immobilising the identifiable features of actions, Rancière employs terms such as 'inactivity' and 'passiveness' in his analysis of the *Juno Ludovisi* and *Belvedere Torso* statues. The *Juno Ludovisi* (Figs. 4.36 and 4.38) is a colossal marble head, based on the idealised depiction of Antonia Minor, daughter of the Roman Emperor, Mark Antony. In this sculpture, Antonia Minor is depicted as the mythical ancient Roman goddess Juno, the protector of the state. The enormous marble head appears expressionless, as if withdrawn in a state of deep reverie. The lack of sculpted detail in the eyes, or the 'windows to the soul', makes the thoughts and emotions of the figure depicted even less accessible. The *Belvedere Torso* is also a marble sculpture, but it is damaged, missing the head and all four limbs (Fig. 4.37). The sculpture depicts the mythical figure of Hercules who was revered as the divine hero of virile masculinity and a champion of courage and action. The damage sustained to the sculpture is therefore at odds with a figure who supposedly embodies qualities of strength and action. Rancière describes Friedrich von Schiller's analysis of the *Juno Ludovisi* sculpture as the 'unsurpassed original scene of aesthetics', and locates a similar framework in Johann Winckelmann's commentary on the *Belvedere Torso* in his *History of Ancient Art* (2010, p. 126). Friedrich von Schiller was a German philosopher, poet, historian and playwright who lived from 1759 to 1805. His philosophical work titled *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, published in 1794, deals with his disappointment with the failure of the French Revolution to realise ideals of human freedom and mutual understanding. In response to the violence and terror of the French Revolution, Schiller believed that an attentiveness to the aesthetic dimension of life could facilitate resolution of conflicts between humans' sensuous nature and their capacity for reasoning.   Johann Winckelmann (1717–1768) was a German art historian and archaeologist. *The History of Ancient Art* was published in 1764 and became a popular treatise on the revival of classical theories of art from the Roman and Greek periods. Winckelmann is credited as having a significant influence on the neoclassical movement in the late eighteenth

century. In both cases, Rancière identifies commentaries by Schiller and Winckelmann on the two statues with the emergence of the aesthetic regime of art.

In analysing Schiller's writing on *Juno Ludovisi* (published in *The Aesthetic Education of Man* in 1794) and Winckelmann's account of the *Belvedere Torso* (published in *The History of Ancient Art*, vol.II in 1880), Rancière notes that both writers stress a certain passivity—the 'idle' *Juno Ludovisi* is 'self-contained' and 'dwells in herself', and the mutilated body of the *Belvedere Torso* 'represents the greatest active hero miscast in the total inactivity of pure thought' (2010, p. 125; 2013, p. 6). The lack of an identifiable emotion and the indifferent expression of the *Juno Ludovisi* means that the beholder encounters a featureless gaze in which it is impossible to read a motivating interior thought or emotion. Similarly, in the *Belvedere Torso* the lack of limbs and head on the sculpture takes away the beholder's ability to identify any recognisable action, functioning as an interruption of the movement associated with the active and masculine figure of Hercules. In both cases a 'radical inexpressivity' suspends of a logic of cause and effect, so that neither the *Juno Ludovisi* nor the *Belvedere Torso* directly expresses a determining idea, thought or emotion. The head of the *Juno Ludovisi* is a fragment detached from a body, and, according to Schiller, the goddess both 'attracts and repels', her self-sufficiency blocks access to any inner motivations behind her expression.

Figure 4.36 *Juno Ludovisi*, first century CE, National Roman Museum, Rome

Figure 4.37 *Belvedere Torso*, first century BCE, Vatican Museum, Rome

Figure 4.38 *Juno Ludovisi*, first century CE, National Roman Museum, Rome

Like the 'gazeless' *Pomona* described by Nancy above, the *Juno Ludovisi* offers no determinate message. Rancière writes:

> The statue is 'self-contained' and 'dwells in itself' as befits the traits of the
> divinity: her 'idleness', her distance from any care or duty, from any purpose
> or volition. The goddess is such because she wears no trace of will or aim….
> The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what
> was never an object of will. (Rancière 2010, p. 125)

In Winckelmann's meditation on the *Belvedere Torso*, Rancière detects a similar paradox. On the one hand, Winckelmann attempts to project a classical model of beauty upon the fragmented statue. In classical aesthetics, beauty is defined as a harmony and balance of parts in relation to a determining whole, like an action or thought. Yet the lack of a head and limbs disrupts our ability to judge the defining characteristics of an action in the mutilated form of the sculpture. As Rancière says, 'it will be forever impossible to judge whether the arms and legs of the *Belvedere Hercules* are in material harmony with the torso of the hero, forever impossible to know whether his face and his limbs are in spiritual harmony with the traits with which the myth represents him' (2013, pp. 3-5). Hercules, the Greek god of heroic deeds, is instead presented in a state of reverie. The 'inactivity' of pure thought means that the sculpture no longer presents an identifiable action and can no longer be judged through the casual logic of the representative regime. Instead, this 'inactivity' opens up the possibility of aesthetic reverie in the beholder, whose ability to connect means and ends in the sensible form is detached to wander freely. The *Juno Ludovisi*, the *Belvedere Torso* and *Pomona* offer no specific concept, withdrawing any recognisable actions, thoughts or expressions that could be identified and traced back to a determining will. This 'withdrawal' has the effect of indeterminacy, whereby the suspension of action and its determinate identification undoes our ability to apply representative criteria of evaluation to the aesthetic experience of the sculptures.

The withdrawal of harmonious coalescence between form and concept, as described in these accounts of sculptures from Antiquity, disrupts links between cause and effect, signalling the suspension of *mimesis* or art's telling of a story, whereby actions and ideas

are represented in sensible form. In this context, a lack of design or will in the artwork creates an incongruity or gap between *poiesis* and *aesthesis* (production and reception). The mediating function of *mimesis* (representation) is withdrawn, resulting in the suspension of evaluative criteria that seek to bind a specific idea with its codified realisation in sensible form. The interruption of determinate causes and their visible effects undoes pretensions to conceptual mastery by presenting the 'beautiful as that which pleases without a concept' (Rancière 2013, p. 10). The suspension of determinate judgement in aesthetic experience is a typical feature of Kantian aesthetics, which broadly influences both Nancy's and Rancière's thinking on aesthetics. For example, Nancy states that 'it is not possible to touch (through the discourse of sense) on the work of art. It is only possible to bring this work into the medium of *sense,* first of all into the medium of an eventual "sense of art" as such (and of a "sense" of the word "art"), by *interrupting* the hold of discourse' (1997, p. 35, emphasis in original). Likewise, the interruption of determined content is one key dimension of Rancière's aesthetic regime of art: 'aesthetics is a field where the relations of power that frame the experience of the subject as knowledge, desire and action are suspended…the free appearance stands before the subject and is unavailable to the domination of knowledge or will' (2004, p. 12). The suspension of evaluative criteria results in an implosion of categories separating the arts, creating art in the singular into which anything can enter as subject matter, to be altered and reassigned to new, non-determined aesthetic meanings.

Art and non-art in Rancière's aesthetics

Rancière's thinking presents a nexus that combines two logics that initially seem to be contradictory: art and non-art, autonomy (art removed from commonplace signification and established modes of sensible meaning) and heteronomy (art becoming part of life by using everyday subject matter or materials or deploying aesthetic strategies beyond prescribed conventions). He describes this nexus in the following way: 'art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it' (Rancière 2013, p. 10). Art as an autonomous sensory realm is constituted and transformed by the overcoming of the hierarchical systems of normative criteria operative in the representational regime, and becomes receptive to the prosaic world, the beginnings of which Rancière locates

in nineteenth century Romantic and Realist literature. On the one hand, art in the aesthetic regime presents a 'distinct sensorium' by suspending determinate judgements and hierarchies of representation. This is the disruption or suspension of a means–ends logic that he identifies with Kant's theorisation of beauty and the open-ended sense of reverie it engenders. On the other hand, the autonomy of art exists as such because, unlike the hierarchical social world that distributes 'assigned plots and capacities', anything and anyone can enter into or be counted in art's delimitations, making the 'play of aesthetic ideas' in the aesthetic regime analogous to the suspension of social hierarchies more broadly. The lack of predetermined criteria in the aesthetic regime means that any subject matter, technique and meaning can be inscribed, making its structure heterogeneous and open to endless contestation and reconfiguration. 'Naturalised' modes of perception in the social world—defined as self-evident facts, as 'modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done' (Rockhill in Rancière 2004, p. 85)—are reconfigured and reconstituted to new ends within the distinct sphere of art. The lack of normative and prescriptive frameworks in the aesthetic regime means that the artwork can defy an expectation and reconfigure sensible meaning. Rancière describes this as staging a form of *dissensus* or disagreement to any unequal configuration of a shared sensible context.   The 'distribution' of the sensible is the process of demarcating roles, parts and, ultimately, hierarchies in relation to a shared sensible world. This means that any given social context will have a certain kind of distribution, where some members of a community are assigned a place within a sensible distribution while others are excluded from participation and visibility in that shared space—as in the determination, in a patriarchal system, of what is the proper or improper behaviour of women. The sensible, then, is not only the domain of art; it is also political, because it is a reframing and contestation of common sensible experience. This explains why, for Rancière, the political is something other than traditional politics conducted through political institutions, which tend to implement a program that serves vested interests that maintain social divisions or 'partitions of the sensible'.

Rancière ties heteronomy and autonomy together, echoing Schiller's formula that 'man is only completely human when he plays' (2010, p. 131). Schiller's formula ties together

the indeterminate play of aesthetic impressions—that serve no practical ends—and a potential for realising what it is to be truly human. Thus the aesthetic is a sensible realm distinct from everyday life, that serves as a promise of a better future for humanity. Rancière contends that this paradox is capable 'of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living' (2010, p. 160). The art of the beautiful is a suspension of any normative and prescriptive logic, a type of unprogrammable 'uselessness', yet it is also linked to its opposite, the art of the living, that is, the promise of a better life. This is the node at which art and non-art art, autonomy and heteronomy are reversible with each other in Rancière's aesthetics. The aesthetic regime is structured by a logic of suspension of means and ends designed to keep sensible meaning in its determined or conventionalised place; the aesthetic domain of art effects a distinct sensorium that reorders determined relations of meaning and is thereby imbued with a type of reconfiguring potential. The key point here is the function of potential as that which points to 'a better life'. This aesthetic potential cannot be instrumentalised, otherwise it would function as a closed system of representation or take on a programmatic function at odds with the indeterminate play of the aesthetic. Therefore, the aesthetic dimension of art promises something it cannot fully deliver, which Rancière describes as being 'caught between two vanishing points' (2010, p. 164). If true freedom or equality were to be realised, then there would be no need for the autonomous sphere of art; and conversely, if we only think of art as autonomous, we neglect its historical foundations as a source of sensible meaning motivated by the redesigning of inequitable social life. 'That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy' Rancière (2010, p. 141).

The function of sense for Nancy and Rancière

The *Juno Ludovisi,* the *Belvedere Torso* and *Pomona* 'do nothing' and address no one in particular. Instead of representing 'glorious' deeds that esteemed men judge in accordance with predetermined criteria, the suspension of action, narrative and expression in the sculptures interrupts means–ends causality. In Nancy's formulation, the subtraction of determined schemas breaks the hierarchy between a determining

prior essence and its representation in the passive sensible form. This has two broader implications. In the first instance, art functions as an event or operation that reveals 'forgotten comportments of wonder', stripped of metaphysical significance (Ross 2008, p.24). This signals the formal sensual dimension of the artwork as compelling meaning, without the determining criteria of the representative regime. The second consequence is that Nancy portrays access to sensible meaning as an instance of equality. Sensible meaning is no longer dictated by the codified system of the representative regime which prioritises certain themes and techniques over others. Moreover, the sensible dimension, for Nancy, produces meaning through relations between bodies, forms, processes that point to the shared sensible dimension of human existence prior to the establishment of social hierarchies.

> This is why 'art' can no longer suffice for us, if art signifies a privileging of chosen, sublated, sublime, exquisite figures. For meaning has, on the contrary, no chosen or privileged ones, no heroes or saints, and it is rather a formidable destiny of *common destiny* that is brought to light, to our light, the entire weight of a community of equals that does not come from a measure, but from the incommensurable opacity of meaning, which is the meaning of all and of each (and of no one) (Nancy in Ross 2007, p. 154, emphasis in original).

The artwork's ability to make non-determined sensible meaning, or, as Nancy frames it, 'the incommensurable opacity of meaning', is about the withdrawal of the beholder's mastery of the artwork's signifying function. The artwork renders a type of meaning that is in excess of discursive language or predetermined evaluative criteria, which means it cannot be mastered by a so-called 'expert' and thus evades being the property of a 'chosen one'. This excess points to the sensible dimension of artistic meaning as not being the property of 'someone', nor the privileging of one theme over another, but something shared in common. For Rancière, too, art of the aesthetic regime holds the promise of equality, yet it is a potential in excess of programmatic calculation, offering something unplanned and foreign to the dictates of normalised social relations and cultural formulae. The withdrawal of prescriptive criteria opens the aesthetic regime to the potentials of contestation and re-ordering, in which are abolished hierarchies that

structure identities, roles and 'naturalised' social determinations. In other words, the lack of normative criteria and the suspension of conceptual mastery result in a mode of sensible experience that addresses spectators indiscriminately, undoing a division between those who possess 'active sensibility' and those who are excluded and merely 'passive' objects of another's knowledge.

In both Nancy's and Rancière's accounts, art has the potential to disrupt the relationship between intelligible 'fact' and sensible 'fiction', treating the aesthetic experience not as the sole property of art but as a domain of common sensible meaning. Nancy's concept of the singular-plural is an exposure to sense whereby a 'common' intelligibility is realised through an event of proximity and distance between bodies. The 'common' is not an orientating principle or 'fact' prior to its actualisation, but occurs through a relation that overcomes distinctions between intelligibility and sensibility, charging Nancy's aesthetics with potentials of equality similar to those of Rancière's. In Nancy's figuration, 'co-appearance' is the locus of sensible meaning, a process of shared affectability. Alison Ross describes the effects of exposure to sense as a relationship 'in the form of being-affected-by, and consequently in the form of being-affectable-by' (2007, p. 149). This means that there are sensible relations between entities which are not the sole property of that entity and cannot be mastered in the singular but exist as something plural and shared.

The potential for reorganised modes of sensible meaning features in Rancière's aesthetic regime of art, binding it to a politics of equality, which he describes as a process of 'dis-identification', or an undoing of bonds between intelligibility and sensibility. This rupture between concepts and the sensible is defined by Rancière as 'dissensus', where instances of perceptibility enter and disrupt prescribed configurations of the sensible. Steven Corcoran describes the event of dissensus as a 'scene that is liable to emerge anywhere, at any time'; dissensus means 'an organization of the sensible in which there is no hidden reality underneath appearances, or a unique regime of presentation of the given imposing its self-evidence on everyone' (Rancière 2010, p. 27). The 'hidden reality' Corcoran is referring to can be understood as a series of principles or ideas that determine and distribute possibilities within the sensible, and which are presented as 'facts' accessible only to those who are in a position of mastery

or authority. Consequently, the critical or political potential of art has slightly different nuances for the two philosophers. For Nancy, art provides a common and yet irreducible sensory realm, capable of opening up multiple configurations of meaning through an external network of relations—a type of *perfection*, to use Nancy's lexicon. Whereas for Rancière, the *common* of sensible experience is already unequally distributed and needs to be subject to contestation and reinscription.

Having considered some intersections of the ways 'potential' is framed via the aesthetic experience by Nancy and Rancière, I would like to now underline some differences in the way each philosopher treats the question of access to sense as a framing of equality. Nancy frequently defines his position on art as an undoing of the privilege accorded to ideal essences over sensible appearance. In an effort to dismantle metaphysics in aesthetic presentation, he puts forward a condition of sensible/intelligible exposure, which remains concealed through the prioritisation of idealised regimes of signification. Art stages the 'genesis of sense', intervening in codified regimes of sensibility, opening up instances of shared sensible meaning. The presentation of sense is therefore an 'offering without an offering'; it is an aesthetic gesture with no determinate signification, an opening to sensory meaning that, as Nancy (2013, p. 214) speculates, 'may have always been the condition of art in the singular plural'. In response to Nancy's framing of the singular-plural in universal terms, Rancière disagrees with any idea of a constant condition of art. For Rancière, the sensible is divided unequally and in different contexts functions as a partition[16] between those who have access to sense and those who are precluded from taking part in it. This includes the distribution of sensible and intelligible possibility within art, where the artwork is able to defy expectation and reinscribe new instances of sensible meaning by undoing conventionalised distributions of sensible meaning. The first difference between Nancy and Rancière is in the way each philosopher understands the function of sense experience generated by the artwork. In both Nancy's and Rancière's thinking, the distinct mode of experience in the aesthetic

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[16] 'Partition' is used by Rancière in a polemical way, signifying division and exclusion. 'Partition' is used interchangeably with 'distribution': the distribution of a part or taking part in the sensible, which is distributed in accordance with 'self-evident facts' in which some take part while others are excluded. Fundamentally, the word plays on the significance of taking part in and being divided by or from a common sensible world.

sphere has the potential to suspend 'a distribution' of roles and capacities in relation to a common sensory fabric. For Nancy, this is figured as an opening to the *infinite* number of ways in which an equally shared sensible world can be modelled by the artwork. In contrast, for Rancière, participation in a common sensory realm is 'always defined in its difference with another common', and therefore the framework that declares an exposure to universal sense must be contested and perpetually forestalled (2013, p. 197). In other words, exposure to a *common* sensory realm is fraught for Rancière, because with the establishment of a structure of equivalence, a *consensus* is projected onto incompatible and unequal ways of making sense. The logic of suspension in the aesthetic regime is precisely a type of dissensus that eschews the establishment of a common and timeless aspect of sensible meaning through aesthetic presentation. The aesthetic regime of art is characterised by Rancière as a sphere of potential that never *realises* the promise of a 'new life', forestalling an actual program of equality. Instead, *potential* functions as an invariant axiom, an *unconditioned* cause charging aesthetic reverie with temporal projections of equality.

An example of aesthetic reverie used by Rancière on a number of occasions involves the actual diary entry of a worker in 1848, who, while laying the floor in someone else's house, disassociates from the manual task he has been assigned. His attention instead moves to the sense of beauty of the outside landscape framed by an open window in the room. The aesthetic feeling produced by the landscape, combined with the quality of light within the room, beget a sense of reverie in the worker, who no longer associates with his tasks but thinks of the room momentarily as if it were his own. In this way, the aesthetic acts as the suspension of a determined social role, or a type of sensible distribution. The worker's receptiveness to the aesthetic effects cause him to stop work and look out of the window in the same way that the owner would. The aesthetic in this way is political, because it suspends an expectation which defines one's role in relation to a community of sense. The owner of the property acts 'as if' he is of a higher social rank than the worker, yet this is a type of fictional distribution made suspended by the reordering potential of aesthetic experience.

> Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he
> has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or

commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination towards the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences. (G Gauny, 'Le travail à la tache' cited in Rancière 2006, p. 4)

Rancière links art and politics as sensible regimes of meaning which have a potential to undo any consolidated consensus. As Nancy describes Rancière position: there is 'a distancing or silent suspension' with regard to both politics and aesthetics (2009, p. 85). For Rancière politics and art are never subsumed into one another as this would result in programs of consensus; however, by presenting and reworking distributions of inequality, and introducing lines of 'disincorporation' into naturalised sensible orderings, they *exceed* the situation in which they are found. This is how Nancy frames the 'excess' of Rancière's project which he thinks is driven by an implicit metaphysical impulse. 'Withdrawing what they offer', the *Juno Ludovisi* and the *Belvedere Torso* signal the contradictory logic of the aesthetic regime of art as a distinct sensorium that *offers* and *retracts* the promise of moving beyond itself and putting into place a program of a better society.

Yet the two philosophers intersect, Nancy's *Pomona* withdraws art from its 'highest function', offering meaning as a proliferation of irreducible and realised instances of shared sensibility. Similarly, Rancière (2013, p. 20) describes the mutilated *Belvedere Torso* as 'perfect' and capable of 'proliferating into a multiplicity of unknown bodies'. Could this not be the same 'perfect, infinite finishing' of innumerable and yet unknown sensible manifestations that Nancy describes as the bearing of Pomona's fruit? The *partition* of that which is shared by and that which separates Nancy and Rancière, to my mind, oscillates: between that which is sensibly *realised* in the artwork—making us aware of what it means to be with other objects and bodies in mutual sensible relations—and an opening of the *potential* of equality through the re-ordering and expectation defying functions of aesthetic meaning. According to Nancy, we share and participate in sensible meaning because it is what 'happens to us' in the present. According to Rancière, the configuration of the present is suspended 'amongst us' so that something new might happen in the future.

Figure 4.39 David Claerbout 2013, installation shot: *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*, single channel video projection, HD animation, colour, silent, endless, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Figure 4.40 David Claerbout 2013, *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*, single channel video projection, HD animation, colour, silent, endless, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Two Video Works by David Claerbout and James Coleman

In a recent exhibition titled *Warten* [Waiting], staged at the Hamburger Kunsthalle between 17 February and 18 June 2017, David Claerbout presented a video animation based on a captioned photograph he found in a library (Figs. 4.39-4.42). The video animation is presented from the perspective of a virtual camera that circles endlessly around a 3D scene constructed from the original photograph. The scene is of oil workers, some standing motionless and some sitting on scooters, under a bridge, waiting for a heavy downpour of rain to pass. The animation is comprised of a digital re-creation of the original photograph using 3D technology, which involves photographing real people, fabrics and textures and then mapping this photographic information onto a series of virtual meshes inside 3D software to create an illusion of a photograph. This process is similar to the one I described in the previous chapter, where I translated photographic information of actual paintings, using 3D software, into imagery that is printed onto paper or canvas.

Claerbout's video begins with a stationary shot that initially seems to be a still photograph. After approximately one minute the camera begins to move slowly in an ellipse, angling around the group of workers. The camera glides past the motionless faces of the workers and dips down to capture, full-screen, a light brown surface that appears to be a mixture of mud, water and oil. The moving camera lingers on this abstract surface for almost a minute, providing no pictorial information (Fig. 4.42), and then returns to its original position. There is no action in the animation; everything in shot takes on the momentary suspension of photographic time, except for the slow mechanical movement of a virtual camera traversing the scene. The work thus collapses two contradictory perceptual registers: the temporal unfolding of a space through the movement of a virtual camera, and the static photographic moment. Movement and stasis are also treated metaphorically: the workers travelling home, in movement, are forced to stand (or sit) and wait under a bridge for the rain to pass. It has been suggested that the video signifies socio-political issues, rendering a moment of 'unproductive time' when the workers negate the standardised time of material labour by waiting, doing nothing, and undoing their assigned place as productive and exploited bodies (Cohen &

Streitberger 2016, p. 55). With its lack of an identifiable ethical message, as spectators we know very little about what precedes and what follows the moment captured in the photograph, because of a suspension of action and lack of narrative. The original found photograph was not intended to be an artwork and perhaps was taken by a passer-by, which makes its original context equal to the status of non-art and demonstrates that any technique or subject matter can be mobilised within the aesthetic regime of art. Additionally, the aesthetic components of the work are elevated over a lack of evident criticality about issues of the violence, famine and poverty that affect many Nigerians. In a recent conversation[17], Claerbout talks about the video animation as a 'surface event' and describes the technical difficulties of constructing the work as well as his interest in the formal qualities of the image, such as the play of reflections, colour of shadows and the mapping of textures in 3D space to construct a wet oil-like surface in the foreground of the scene. It would be relatively straightforward, then, to use this work as an example of an artwork that fits into the open model of Rancière's aesthetic regime of art. Yet there are dimensions about this work that to my mind make it too calculative, and instead position it in a framework typical of the representative regime of art.

Figure 4.41 David Claerbout 2013, installation shot: *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*, single channel video projection, HD animation, colour, silent, endless, Hamburger

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[17] *Oil Workers further reading - David Claerbout* 2017: interview took place between David Claerbout and Chus Martinez at the Schaulager, Basel, December 2015.

Figure 4.42 David Claerbout 2013, installation shot: Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain, single channel video projection, HD animation, colour, silent, endless, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

The main problem with the work is that everything remains in its place for the duration of the animation—there is no symbolic or formal play that undoes the expected narratives of the men's physical and social positions. As the title suggests, the 'workers' stay in their places, waiting, out of the rain, and we, as watchers, are kept at a constant distance through the mechanical circling motion of the camera. This group pauses from the rain, yet the distance between the spectator and the men as 'workers' is maintained through the mechanical circling motion of the camera. The possibility of reframing of the scene, where the spectator does not relentlessly inspect these men captured in their social roles, is never figured in this work. The first shot of the animation matches the last; the men begin and end as oil workers simply waiting—waiting as objects of a gaze that inspects, mediated through the technological apparatus of the virtual camera. The moving camera mechanically dissects the scene, merging the language of photography with that of 3D animation, rendering visible the possibilities of a technical process rather than the reconfigured potential of symbolic meaning, and we as spectators are effortlessly transported around the scene in an unremitting cycle. In this way, we, the beholders, are not exposed to the open-ended aspects of aesthesis, of thinking or seeing something for ourselves. All this projected video presents is a type of eternal present of

the image as it disappears from view and subsequently reappears. There is a moment when the camera glides across the brown ripples of muddy water and all that is in view is a field of abstracted murky reflective colour (Fig. 4.42). It is in this part of the video sequence that I began to think about different possibilities—where those motorbike riders might go after the rain, how they might interact with each other after they had finished posing for the camera. Perhaps the panning shot should have simply stopped on this muddy water, interrupting a return of the same and opening new poetic possibilities of what may happen after waiting for the rain to pass. Even though we know 'nothing' of the actions of the workers in the image, we know that they are exploited, we know that as subjects of a video work they are turned into artistic signifiers of global disparity. There are aspects of this work that simply function to represent this content and to realise it in a 'current' technique without questioning the parameters of its delivery and efficacy. Everything in the animation is given to the vision of the spectator; we know more, we see more than do those men before us. This work functions within the same logic as Rancière's representative regime of art, where the theme of 'poor workers in Nigeria' is represented through 'sophisticated' high definition 3D animation. Striking a symmetrical correlation between 'appropriate' subject matter and relevant technical process which delivers a vision of the present unchanged.

Figure 4.43 James Coleman 2011–2015, *Untitled*, LED video installation, sound, Marian Goodman Gallery, London

Figure 4.44 James Coleman 2011–2015, *Untitled*, LED video installation, sound, Marian Goodman Gallery, London

Figure 4.45 James Coleman 2011–2015, *Untitled*, LED video installation, sound, Marian Goodman Gallery, London

In James Coleman's *Untitled,* 2011–2015 (Figs 4.43–4.45), nine photographic stills are used to form a sequence of arrhythmic images and sounds which is displayed repetitiously on a large-scale LED screen.[18] Unlike Claerbout's work, discussed above, this work employs an innovative and unexpected use of the formal possibilities of video, producing confounding aesthetic effects. Coleman's choice of LED video monitors, typically used to present advertising in public spaces or replay the action of sporting matches, disturbs our expectation. Displayed on this support, what would conventionally be a seamless video sequence is now reconfigured to new ends. The imagery in the video consists of a single close-up shot of an amusement park carousel as it spins, taking the same people into and out of the viewer's line of sight. The viewer's perception of the spinning motion of the carousel is disturbed by Coleman's extraction of stills from the video sequence, resulting in the contradictory sensory effects of disruption and continuity, as the repetitious movement of the carousel is punctuated by

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[18] This work was shown at Marian Goodman Gallery in London between March 04 and April 16 2016.

a staccato rhythm—there is a sense of constant and repetitive movement as the carousel spins around, but this movement is also punctuated by our apprehension of the individual stills within the video sequence. Imagery flashes in and out of intelligibility—facial expressions of people on the flying chairs are shown and then instantly supplanted with blurred colour, other bodies, and geometry. The carousel in the video rotates to a droning sound, similar to the sound made when a record ends but the needle is left to circle around on the outer ridge of the vinyl. Each rotation of the carousel is marked by a single image frame and accompanying sound, bringing into view what has disappeared moments before, creating the effect of anticipation and retrospection. There is no chance to apprehend any determinate information about each image frame, to find something to understand about a familiar face, or the location and context of the event—each image is instantly withdrawn the moment it comes into view. The technical support of the LED screen writes the image into a ghost-like presence but is also responsible for its effacement. The viewer's awareness of people in chairs switches between image and pixeled support of the LED screen, without allowing the eye to settle on either. Likewise, the lack of any identifiable narrative in the video suspends our ability to fix the representation of any determinate actions or stories. There is no allusion to 'noble' or 'urgent' themes in the work. Rather, it presents a banal event treated with a certain indifference that the LED screen is able to deliver. This gives Coleman's *Untitled* a different quality to Claerbout's work, the latter imposing artistic operations (technical, aesthetic) onto a found image in an attempt to 'see more' of the photograph, to find a 'truth' to the subject matter by moving the spectator around the extrapolated virtual space of the photograph. In contrast, in Coleman's *Untitled,* the camera remains stationary and the aesthetic operations constituting the work are driven by the experience of the event itself, which makes Coleman a type of co-author who brings our attention to something already in the world. The repetition in the video is analogous to the actual rotations of the carousel, creating a correlation between the carousel's mechanised movements and the mechanical procession of images and sounds displayed on the screen. Except this is a carousel that doesn't turn in an effortless rotation; it is as though there is a mechanical fault, which causes each image to halt momentarily as if stuck to the material surface of the LED screen. This results in the perceptual registration of suspended movement, which is then hastily superseded

by movement as the still image is withdrawn from view and reconstituted into the endless flashing procession of information. Coleman adopts the repetitive technique of spectacle visible on LED screens in amusement parks, public spaces or techno music halls, and redistributes its staccato rhythms, bringing attention to an event that would normally go unnoticed. The endless vanishing and return of the same imagery sets up the anticipation of its own conclusion. This is a desire to make the sequence and sounds of the work conform into legibility, so that it might yield more information. And yet, as the sequence never settles or stops, it remains inaccessible, creating a sense of distance and discomfort. The function of repetition and suspension of content does not amount to a simple formulation of cultural critique, with the programmed effects of leisure time and the spectacle laid bare to the viewer, showing a hidden reality of ideological control. We, as viewers, are never elevated to a position of conceptual authority or mastery—in fact, the combined throbbing pulse of sound and image abolishes a sense of gravity, leaving the viewer ungrounded, as though anything could happen, and in a state of aesthetic play, engendering sensations similar to those once experienced by those people in the flying chairs.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided an account of Jacques Rancière's aesthetics, showing how his conception of the artwork's sensible dimension overlaps with Nancy's position, while also departing from it slightly. Nancy frames the sensible and formal aspects of the artwork as being capable of making the beholder aware of and sensitive to a shared domain of meaning, which is available through a pre-discursive event. For Rancière, the artwork's aesthetic dimension, as in Nancy's conceptions of sense, withdraws from a representative framework, suspending the beholder's ability to identify determinant significations in the formal structure of the artwork. The aesthetic experience is not only an event that defies systematic categorisation, but also one that breaks down conventional relationships of meaning and consolidated expectations and thereby allows for something new to enter into the matrix of shared sensible meaning. In this light, Rancière cannot agree with the seemingly 'universal' traits of Nancy's theorisation of sense, because they would foreclose the possibility of that type of meaning being re-figured into new networks and symbolic associations. Instead, for Rancière, the re-

ordering potential of the aesthetic is both the suspension of normalised meaning—a sensible effect that defies linguistic categorisation and expectation—and the reinscription of this effect into new discursive frameworks. Both philosophers provide some fascinating insights and critiques of modern and contemporary works of art, and, perhaps to the surprise of the reader of this thesis, I will continue to read their works on aesthetics beyond finishing my PhD research. Fundamentally, the nuances of their respective positions have two consequences for my practice, which are not exclusive but are interrelated. The sensible effects generated by the function of medium in the artwork can produce a meaning that is substantial in and of itself: this is the event of the sensible that Nancy refers to—as if something is happening to us and between us, of which we are aware. This type of sensible meaning, to which it is difficult to give determinate reason, is, in my mind, not excluded from the ability to enter into new and unexpected symbolic associations—that is to say, in the way Rancière treats the distribution of sensible meaning, as something to be contested, redistributed and reinscribed with new aesthetic meaning. In the next and final chapter, I focus closely on the final body of work created during my research, which engages with the type of formal meaning Nancy promotes but also enters into unexpected formal relations to generate a range of symbolic associations.

Chapter Five

Weaving together paintings, new media prints and words

Introduction

In this chapter I largely focus on the final stages of my studio practice during this research project. I shall elaborate on a number of shifts in these most recent works, and situate them between the sensible formal aspect of the artwork that Jean-Luc Nancy promotes, and the inscription of this formal meaning into symbolic associations typical of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic regime of art. In this most recent phase of studio research the generative function of medium is realised as a series of formal juxtapositions between two conventionally incongruent processes of production: romantic, folk art-like imagery painted onto hessian is exhibited alongside printed imagery generated through 3D software. These irreconcilable and contradictory formal relations are mobilised for their symbolic references to technological modernity and anti-modernity. In this way, formal components of the artwork generate sensory, inter-medial effects, while also activating diverse conceptual associations related to social and political events.

The signifying potential of medium in Rancière's aesthetic theory

In *The Future of The Image* (2007), Rancière discusses how normal expectations are interrupted by features of Robert Bresson's film *Au hazard Balthazar*, 1966 (usually translated as *Balthazar at random*). He argues that in Bresson's hands the medium of cinema presents something 'Other' or unscripted, compared to the endless repetition of the 'Same' played out in popular culture or mainstream narrative cinema. Rancière argues that the inventive potential of an artwork is never simply a question of its technical features related to medium, such as the use of various types of exposure, depth of field, long takes or rapid cutting. In addition to these sensory effects, Bresson's film surprises expectations by interrupting the intelligible sequence of imagery, arranging and joining sounds and visual sequences to create sensory and symbolic effects that derail the anticipation of consolidated meaning.

Bresson's film presents the life of a donkey (Balthazar) that is moved from one owner to the other and treated badly by most of them. The film begins with a vignette of Balthazar and his first owner, a young farm girl called Marie. The two are eventually separated, and the rest of the film follows their parallel lives, which intersect through bad treatment dealt out to both, often at the hands of the same people. In one part of the film Bresson applies a series of short cuts that flip between close-ups of Balthazar's face and the faces of animals in a zoo. In this sequence the camera is positioned at head height of the donkey and all we see of human action is the waist and hand of an owner who holds Balthazar's lead, pulling him along a road. This shot is followed by a rapid sequence of close-ups of zoo animal's faces, giving the impression that they are exchanging looks of sympathy with each other about the way in which animals are so often submitted to use and abuse by humans. The low height of the camera suggests animal points of view typically invisible to human eyes, which undoes a still common convention that cinema and literary forms focus on the dramas of a human-centred world. As Rancière suggests, Bresson deploys the technical capacities of cinema not to draw attention to its specificity as a medium but rather to take a 'a systematic distance from its ordinary employment' (Rancière 2009, p. 5).

In the same chapter of *The Future of The Image* Rancière discusses Roland Barthes's well-known book *Camera Lucida* (1981)*,* and its theorisation of the 'punctum' effect of analogue photography. For Barthes, the punctum effect is related to what he views as analogue photography's unique technical specificity that sets it apart from other mediums. This pertains to the photograph's indexical connection to the thing photographed and also to what some commentators have described as the weakness of photography as a vehicle of artistic intention. This simply means that while the photographer may be able to manipulate the image in various ways to communicate a particular meaning, the photograph also automatically captures details anterior to or in excess of the image-maker's symbolic intent. The punctum effect for Barthes arises from random details in photographs captured accidentally by the camera. While they contribute little to the photographer's symbolic aims they generate a powerful emotional effect upon particular viewers. The punctum is a sense event that Barthes describes as an element from a 'scene that shoots out of it like an arrow…for the

punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole–and also a cast of dice' (1981, pp. 26-27). Since the punctum is connected to a feeling or emotion felt by individual viewers of certain photographs it is entirely subjective and therefore, according to Barthes, cannot be translated into coded knowledge to be shared by others. In this respect the punctum is a 'mute' sign or sensory event that resists discursive translation, yet emotionally touches particular viewers.

Barthes contrasts the photographic punctum with the studium, which is allied to symbolic and discourse based aspects of photographs put into play by the intentions of the photographer that are interpreted according to coded, generalised knowledge by viewers. The term 'studium' derives from Latin, meaning 'to study', and refers to the way a photograph is both made or interpreted according to social or political contexts, recognisable codes and conventions and symbolic schemas. Barthes says: 'thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture' (1981, p. 26). In contrast, the punctum is a sense event that 'arrests' the studium, it resists appropriation to rational knowledge. Barthes implicitly casts the punctum effect as the essential and distinctive feature of the photographic medium, which is able to register the remains of a mute reality stripped bare of social and cultural significations—a type of non-meaning.

An analogy might be drawn between Barthes's argument about the punctum and Nancy's theorisation of sensible meaning in relation to art. Sensible meaning is for Nancy transmitted via sensory affect, and is pre-symbolic or resistant to conceptual subsumption. Barthes maintains an opposition between the non-signifying yet feeling arousing punctum and the studium that translates sensory events into determinate ideas. In a similar way, art for Nancy stages non-signifying sensory events, thereby bearing witness to the sensible dimension of human existence more broadly. Nancy like Barthes strategically privileges sense experience over discursive operations.

There are, however, differences between Nancy's position and Barthes's. One key difference is that Nancy does not privilege one medium or technical process over any

other as able to render sensory meaning palpable. For him, plural instances of sense can come into being through diverse processes and forms of art. In fact, the plurality of mediums and technical processes deployed in modern and contemporary art offer 'infinite' manifestations of sense effects. Alternatively, Barthes follows the tradition of medium specificity by pinning the sensory event of the punctum to an ontological account of the photographic medium that finds its essence in its indexical capacity to register a reality that exceeds symbolic appropriation: the thing itself.

Despite these differences, Nancy and Barthes are compelled to employ symbolic metaphors and cultural knowledge to isolate that, which exceeds or resists both. As Jacques Rancière notes, in this respect the 'muteness' of sensory affect is not 'opposed' to discourse, rather both function on a principle of reversibility. He describes this reversibility in the following way: 'The semiologist who reads the encoded messages of images and the theoretician of the punctum of wordless images base themselves on the same principle: a principle of reversible equivalence between the silence of images and what they say' (Rancière 2009, p. 11). It is this reversibility between muteness and speech, or between aconceptual sensorial signs and their translation into language that Rancière makes central to the operations of the aesthetic regime of art. Unlike Barthes and Nancy he does not privilege one side of the equation over the other.

As discussed in the previous chapter, what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime of art is structured as a suspended dialectic, as a paradoxical conjoining of meaning and non-meaning. For him, modern art suspends established discursive meanings, and through this suspension opens up the possibility for new combinations of sensory affect and symbolic potential. Rather that privileging the non-signifying, asymbolic 'punctum' of the non-art of photography as Barthes does, or Nancy's pre-symbolic account of sensory affect, Rancière insists on a reversible relation between sensory muteness and discursive translation. As described in the previous chapter, the overcoming of the representative regime of artistic norms signals the dissolution of a system that prescribed what were considered worthy subjects for art and the manner or mediums in which they could be represented. In the aesthetic regime of art, however, there are no definitive prescriptions of what the subject matter of an artwork should be or the means through which a subject or content might be realised. Therefore, nothing can be

'unpresentable' or beyond representation within the aesthetic regime. This opens up potential for proliferating ways in which sensory/formal and conceptual operations in art can be choreographed. Rancière describes the aesthetic regime as breaking with a determining correlation between form and content in art: 'It is in the representational regime that you can find unpresentable subject matters, meaning those for which form and matter cannot be fitted together in any way. The 'loss of a steady relation' between the sensible and the intelligible is not the loss of the power of relating, but the multiplication of its forms' (2009, p. 139).

The lack of determining criteria for how something should be represented opens up possibilities for new or unscripted strategies and meanings to be activated by artworks. This argument does not call solely for the blocking of signification through formal or perceptual operations of a medium, rather signification and its suspension go hand in hand. This is what Toni Ross (2010, p. 157) describes as the 'twofold potential of the aesthetic image' described by Rancière, which entails an interplay between the registration of meaning and its effacement or suspension. As Rancière puts it, aesthetic image is both 'the inscription of the signs of a history and the affective power of sheer presence that is no longer exchanged for anything' (Rancière 2009, p. 17). This argument differentiates Rancière's position slightly from that of Nancy and Barthes.

For Nancy, art presents pre-signifying experiences, where sensory events remain at the threshold of intelligibility. Alternatively, for Rancière, the aesthetic effect of the artwork pertains to sensory events allied with a potential to reconfigure or disorder established discourse, and create new possibilities of shared meaning. For Rancière this indicates that artistic meaning is never ultimately settled, but is open to contestation and reinterpretation.

I have devoted substantial time to researching the complex thought of Nancy in this project because his aesthetic theory resonated strongly with my feelings and thoughts about art practice. However, in the process of becoming deeply familiar with Nancy's philosophy I have perhaps predictably become aware of what might be perceived as some shortcomings of his theory. I subsequently turned to the thinking of Rancière because his reflections on art and aesthetics echo aspects of Nancy's formulations while

also ameliorating what some might view as Nancy's excessive formalism. My research into the thought of Rancière has inflected the latter phases of my practice for this PhD by giving a kind of permission to produce works created with different mediums that might be considered historically incompatible (modern and pre-modern for example), and to emphasise *both* symbolic associations and a Nancy-like materialism expressed by these works.

Rancière points to the way meaning can be infinitely re-made in art by referring to Romanticism's inscription of new meanings within the artistic tradition of Ancient Greek art. He insists that the art of modernity is not so much obsessed with the new but with reworking, revising or refiguring art of the past. In *The Politics of Aesthetics,* he describes the aesthetic regime of art as 'incessantly restaging the past…inventing new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been'* (2004, p. 24). Thus, historical 'facts' about art remain open for interpretation, open to new readings and combinations in which established axioms are reassembled to alternative ends. Rancière views modern art as *both* challenging established distributions of the sensible in art or society, and as linking the sensible and the discursive in new modes of sensible intelligibility: 'this means that the visible forms speak and that words possess the weight of visible realities; that signs and forms mutually revive their powers of material presentation and signification' (2009, p. 35). Likewise, in *The Future of The Image,* Rancière describes the entanglement of painting and discourse in some forms of modern art, not as an overcoming of language but rather as a 'different way of conjoining them' (2009, p. 76). The latest phase of my studio practice is also about conjoining distinct processes of production and 'incompatible' mediums, not only for their sensible effects but also for the way they impart certain symbolic associations.

Recent Works

The Night Sky (Figs. 5.46 & 5.47) and *Heidegger's Hut* (Figs. 5.48 & 5.49) are two of my recent works that in some ways refer back to a larger series I produced between 2015 and 2017. In this earlier series I combined non-representational paintings with printed collages created with 3D software. The series was an offshoot of works I discussed in Chapter Three, where I sought to enact processes of both exchange and dissonance

between painting, photography and new media prints. The difference in this more recent body of work is that I have combined paintings and new media prints within single compositions. Here paintings are mounted on digital prints, rather than being separated and exhibited in spatial relationship with each other in the gallery space. *The Night Sky* consists of two distinct mediums and methods of production overlayed. One part of the work consists of a small oil and exposed pigment painting on linen that is mounted on layered and collaged giclée printed paper. I created the painted component by using a palette knife to add and subtract oil paint and paint pigment from an adhesive ground. A series of luminous blue and white dots are placed across the bottom and top of the canvas, which contrast with the black and vermillion ground of the painting. The constellation of luminous dots is broken up with dark red diagonals, traversing the canvas from lower left to upper right. The painting exhibits a rough granularity achieved through the exposed pigment, yet the contrast of saturated colour generates a sense of projective luminosity. Tactile materiality and luminous evanescence operate together.

Figure 5.46 Peter Alwast 2017, *The Night Sky* (detail), Oil and pigment on linen mounted on collaged, giclée prints, 137x165, 2017

Figure 5.47 Peter Alwast 2017, *The Night Sky*, oil paint and pigment on linen mounted onto collaged giclée prints, 137x165cm

Heidegger's Hut (Figs. 5.48 & 5.49), is another work from this series that continues experimentation with formal interrelations from the previous works. The mounted painting is comprised of small daubs of yellow, white and pink paint that create a flickering optical effect against a dark green and brown ground. Electric blue, painted lines were used to sketch a folk art-style image of a hut with two windows. The top of the painting consists heavy black impasto applied to the bottom part of gold glitter paper glued to the top-most edge of the painting. *Heidegger's Hut* displays the same kind of incongruous cross-medium and colour relationships as *The Night Sky,* where the prominent matter of pigment is transferred into a dematerialised image via 3D software, and printed onto paper. The title of the work implies a meeting of advanced technology with the handcraft of painting. *Heidegger's Hut* also obviously refers to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who addressed the way in which modern technology had become an instrument of violent destruction in warfare and in the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment. But he also acknowledged the role of technologies in enhancing communicative and poetic possibilities in the social world. Thus Heidegger expressed an ambivalent attitude towards technological drive of modernity. Moreover as the naively rendered hut in my painting indicates, much of Heidegger's speculation on the question of technology was written in his rustic hut built with his own hands and set in a bucolic environment at the edge of the Black Forest in southwest Germany. This place of philosophical reflection on technology was situated in a place devoid of signs of modernity and advanced technology. In *Heidegger's Hut* I employed formal means and a combination of very different media to suggest a clash between the 'contemporaneity' of technological advancement and the backward looking 'naivety' and material palpability of the mounted painting. This formal and symbolic registration of the anachronistic within the modern, of the past within the present, of interrelating perceived incompatible tendencies is extended and intensified in the last phase of my practice for this PhD project.

Figure 5.48 Peter Alwast 2017, *Heidegger's Hut* (detail), Oil and glitter paper on linen mounted on collaged, giclée prints, 145x160cm
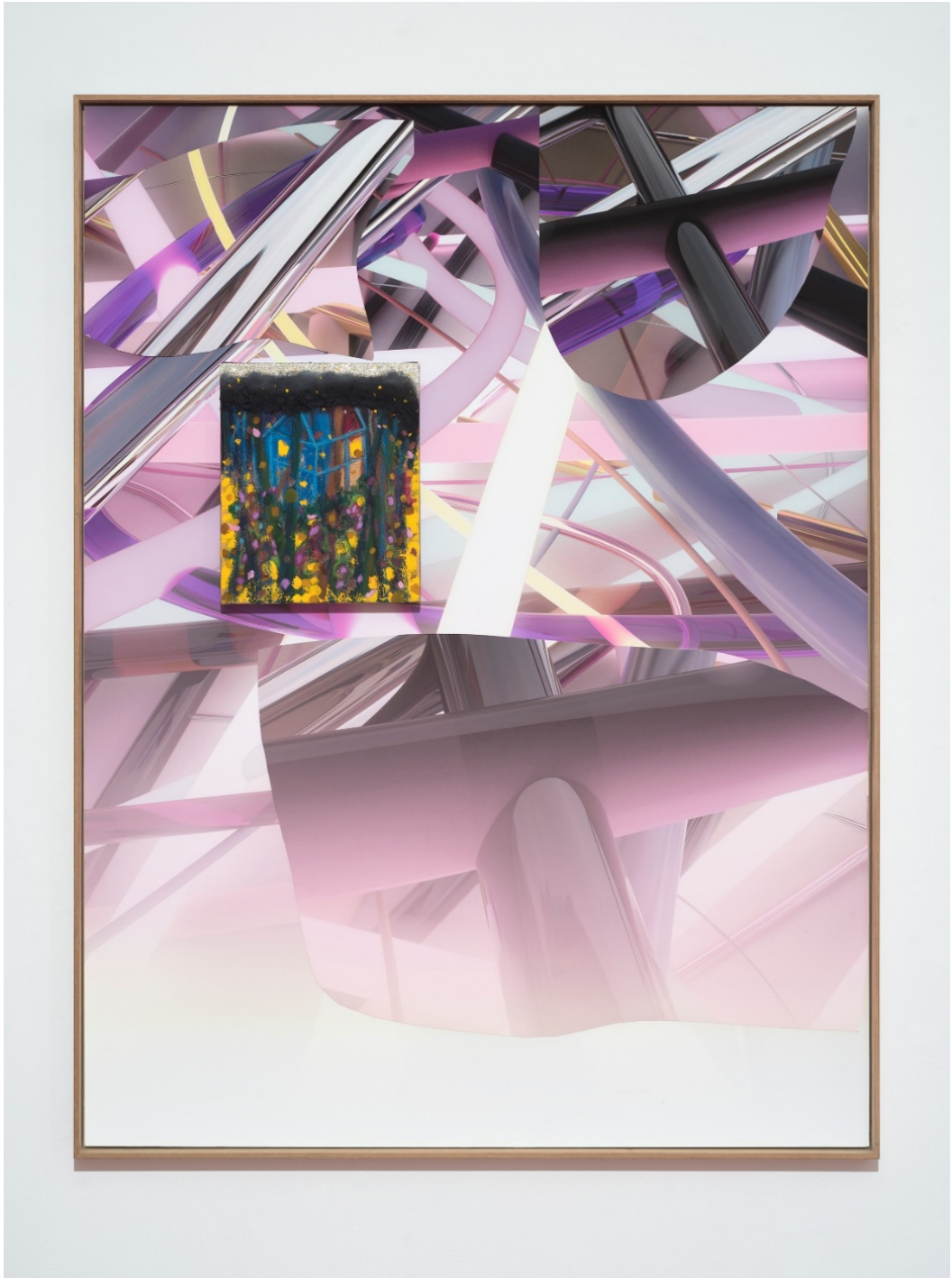
Figure 5.49 Peter Alwast 2017, *Heidegger's Hut*, Oil and glitter paper on linen mounted on collaged, giclée prints, 145x160cm, 2017

From a theoretical perspective my most recent practice sits between Nancy's non-discursive formalism and the manipulation of formal and sensible operations to configure new symbolic associations that Rancière ascribes to the aesthetic regime of art. The impetus for this latest suite of works was a painting I discovered while researching works from the end of the nineteenth century by the French post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), known for the naïve or 'primitive' themes and style he adopted. Titled *Centennial of Independence*, 1892, (Fig. 5.50), the painting depicts a group of peasants dancing the farandole (a popular dance in southern France) to celebrate French nationalism and commemorate 100 years of the French Republic. The scene is presented in vivid, non-naturalistic colours and the figures in folk art style that evokes rustic simplicity. The middle and top part of the painting shows three trees and rows of coloured flags flying to celebrate the National holiday. The large central tree acts as an anchor around which the peasants circle, dancing with linked hands. Two women standing on either side of the tree trunk hold flags representing the First and Third French Republics. My encounter with this painting opened unexpected and generative possibilities for the series of works I produced after discovering it.

The imagery and symbolic associations of *Centennial of Independence* seem quite at odds with the technological 'sophistication' of the 3D generated imagery I had been using in my previous works. The naïve, folk-like imagery and 'unrefined' painting technique show a fervent celebration of French nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. This subject matter brought to my mind the more recent rise of populist nationalist movements across Europe and the United States. Much of the rhetoric around nationalist sentiments expresses a desire to reinstate a perceived ideal community that existed in the past but has been lost or destroyed. Donald Trump's 'let's make America great again' slogan echoes those of right-wing French, German and Polish nationalist politics in recent times. While this type of communal nostalgia looks to a better future it models that future on what is cast as an idealised past.

In my final body of work I am not concerned with directly representing or critiquing contemporary revivals of populist nationalism, although they could of course be cited as exemplifying a thinking of community (identity based and resistant to otherness) that Nancy's writing on aesthetics and political theory seeks to question. However, the

works I have produced in this final phase are more concerned with staging relations between *incompatible* methods of production and stylistic references (modern and non-modern) and the symbolic associations these imply. Put another way, I wanted to explore how a work such as the aforementioned painting by Rousseau seems so out of place or anachronistic when put alongside more recent modes of artistic production. This endeavour is related to how Rancière formulates the politics of aesthetics. For him, critical art need not be predicated on representing some pre-determined content, say the 'truth' of what the rise of populist nationalisms means in reality. Instead art can be deemed political if it redeploys given forms, processes and signs to formal or conceptual ends that defy established expectations. According to Rancière, art's capacity to refigure or reframe established regimes of perception and their meanings is what ties art and politics together. As he puts it: 'politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done' (2004, p. 39).

Figure 5.50 Henri Rousseau 1892, *Centennial of Independence*, oil on canvas, 111.8 × 158.1 cm, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Figure 5.51 Peter Alwast 2017, *The Dance*, oil on hessian, 110x110cm, 2017

Figure 5.52 Peter Alwast, P 2017, unfinished, oil on hessian, 110x110cm

Figure 5.53 Peter Alwast 2017, unfinished, oil on canvas 110x65cm

The Dance (Fig. 5.51) was the first painting that I was satisfied with as a response to Rousseau's *Centennial of Independence*. In two earlier, unfinished works I adopted the motif of the communal activity of people dancing (Figs. 5.52 and 5.53). I abandoned these works shown in Figures 5.52 and 5.53 because the first, I realised, was a too realistic depiction that diminished the naïve style of Rousseau's canvas, and the second was too similar to Rousseau's picture and therefore might have been interpreted as a parody of the original painting rather than as a reconfiguration of its meaning in the contemporary context. Subsequently *The Dance* was painted in a single sitting by applying a range of light and dark blues hues onto a wet ground of warm white oil paint. This *alla-prima* process of painting resulted in blues and whites bleeding into each other in a way that gave the painting a provisional, sketch-like quality. The handling of light effects in the painting is neither real nor completely unreal, and evokes either dusk or early morning. The light illuminates the hazy, silhouetted figures as they link hands and dance or gather around a fire in a forest. A copse of trees in horizontal formation fills the top section of the painting, and in the foreground two large, semi-abstract boulders frame the forest revellers. The painting evokes romantic ideas of a 'simpler-time' and of human communion with nature. The reason for the forest gathering is not revealed in the picture or its title. But the depiction cultivates associations with cult worship, drug-fuelled revelry, or people wanting to be together away from the constraints of modern, urban life. The style used to depict the figures makes them look child-like and innocent. These romantically inflected suggestions of a secluded world of unspoiled nature untainted by the incursions of modernity and advanced technology are underpinned by the choice of course hessian as the painting's support. Hessian has a variety of non-art uses such as coffee bags, rope and embroidery support, for which its open weave is well suited. Hessian is also traditionally considered a 'unsophisticated' painting support, a cheaper, coarser alternative to the 'fine' linen commonly used by professional artists. The combination here of naïve painterly depiction, setting in bucolic nature and rustic support is meant to suggest nostalgia for a past way of being together and in the world at odds with modern times.

The longing for a supposedly more authentic, pre-modern community is not just a symptom of recent waves of populist nationalism. As Nancy notes, this longing was a

feature of European Romantic art and thought of the late eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries. For example, the Enlightenment philosopher and political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) set the alienating effects of modern society in opposition to a 'mythical natural community' that modernity has destroyed (Devisch 2018, para 18). Although social contexts may change historically, a human longing for lost communal unity stubbornly persists over time. Nancy refers to:

> The natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was tight and bound to harmonious bonds in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy and autonomy (Nancy 1992, p.9 in Devisch 2018).

This nostalgia for a lost, ideal community is questioned extensively in Nancy's writings on community and politics. However, the pertinent point here is that his foregrounding of sensible experience in art is related to this questioning. As I have explained, he amplifies the sensory and formal presentations of art a way of countering metaphysical, idealistic and nostalgic regimes of identification that displace the immanent meaningfulness of 'this' world to higher theological orders or to an imagined, ideal past. In other words, the ontology of 'being with' or the event of the singular-plural motivates embodied sensible relations that dispel any quest for 'lost' forms of unified or resolved communal identity. Nancy facilitates a rethinking of art medium in non-idealistic, non-essentalist and relational terms, something that I have found extremely productive for my research project. However, as mentioned previously, I have found that Nancy's thinking of medium and art may be usefully supplemented by Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art that combines the resistance of sensory affect to conceptual domination with a claim for art's capacity to rework or refigure established regimes signification. In what follows I discuss a number of figurative paintings produced in the last phase of this research that are inflected by Rancièrian thinking.

Figure 5.54 Peter Alwast 2017, *The Grenfell Tower*, oil on hessian, 45x45cm

Figure 5.55 Peter Alwast 2018, *Gathering*, oil on hessian, 45x35cm

Figure 5.56 Peter Alwast 2018, *Fire*, UV-cured ink print and oil pastel on hessian, 40x35cm

Figure 5.57 Peter Alwast, *Tower*, oil and pumice gel on hessian, 2018, 110x55cm

My three works *The Grenfell Tower* (Fig. 5.54), *Gathering* (Fig. 5.55) and *Tower* (Fig. 5.57), continue the abbreviated and somewhat naive graphic idiom of *The Dance* (Fig. 5.51) alongside intrusive and more free flowing application of paint create imagery derived from recent historical events with strong political or social significance. Two of these events are the Grenfell Tower fire, London of 2017 (Fig. 5.54), and crowd flying flags on a nationalist holiday that I witnessed in Poland in 2018 (Fig. 5.55). The intimate scale of these paintings, the use of 'expressive' colour and flattened or invented imagery evokes a tradition of easel painting associated with a post-impressionist group of artists called the *Nabis*, who were active in Paris between 1890 and 1910, and Fauvist artists such as André Derain (1880-1954). The Nabis included Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and Paul Sérusier (1864–1927) whose practices were influenced by Japanese woodblock prints, and deployed intense colour, simple imagery and unorthodox painting supports like cardboard, felt and hessian. It is the sense of painterly directness, intense colour, naivety and romanticism associated with what might be considered an 'outmoded' form of easel painting that interests me. I find this kind of painting particularly resonant because it was identified as regressively bourgeois, and backward looking by the Russian avant-garde during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary years of the Soviet experiment.

The abstraction championed by artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), Varvara Stepanova, (1894-1958), Lyubov Popova (1889-1924), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Kazimir Malevich (1879-1953), rejected the fauvist and post-impressionist works of the previous generation, casting such practices as a thing of the past. These sentiments are clearly expressed in the following passage penned in 1924 by the Russian author and critic Osip Brik (1888-1945), where easel painting is described as an impediment to social progress:

> Easel-painting is not only unnecessary to our present day art culture, but is one of the most powerful brakes to its development…only those artists who have broken once and for all with easel-artistry, who have in fact recognised production work as not only an equally legitimate aspect of art work, but as the only one possible—only these artists can undertake the solving of the

problems of production art will come (Brik 1924 in Harrison & Wood 2001, p. 327).

Abstract paintings, applied arts such as graphics and the newer technologies of photography and film were seen by the Russian avant-garde as the means for overcoming capitalist culture and paving the way towards a future socialist society. The easel tradition prior to this generation was associated with the 'individual' impressions of the anti-modernist romantic artist and the commodity culture of capitalism, rather than more collective and utilitarian forms of aesthetic production typical of the early Russian avant-garde art.

All four works of my works— *The Grenfell Tower* (Fig. 5.54), *Gathering* (Fig. 5.55) and *Tower* (Fig. 5.57) and *The Dance* (Fig. 5.51)—lack the appearance of technological mediation, deploy heightened colour, and use simplified imagery out of joint with the technological imagery of the digital prints I have produced during the course of my research. By installing these works in proximity to each other, there is a sense of clash between two competing regimes of aesthetic and historical identification. Signs of the pre-modern, the 'primitive' and an idealised lost past exist in uncomfortable proximity with signs of technological sophistication and advancement. These two competing sensible registers relate to a broader social context in which populist revivals of an imaginary, ideal past jostle with a future-orientated, technologically obsessed society. For me this suggests two irreconciled pathologies of modernity, one guided by the goal of a utopian, highly technologised future, and the other mourning the loss of a more authentic sense of community.

The splitting of the so-called present into a longing for a lost past and a fervent desire to realise an ideal future is not only a symptom of recent times. The sense of dissatisfaction with social and economic inequality felt by many of Europeans at the beginning of the twentieth century led to two tensions described by Robert Pippin:

> On the one hand, Nationalist Socialism consisted of various forms of regressive identifications with a 'blood and soil primitivism' predicated on a rejection of modernity, at least at the symbolic level. On the other hand, the Communist regime of the Soviet Union prescribed to goal of an ideal future

when capitalist modernity would be vanquished. This ambition, like Nazism, resulted in the loss of millions of lives (2011, p. 4).

It is important reiterate that this body of work is not about analysing specifics of the aforementioned historical developments and tendencies so that it can be represented in the works. Rather, internal formal relations of particular works and their associative relations with other works I have produced seek to express an absence of hierarchical distinction between different regimes of sensible identification. Therefore, the works are not political in terms of what they represent as content, but are political in the way they generate formal disruptions by being joined together in unexpected ways.

Figure 5.58 Peter Alwast 2018, *Flag Day*, oil on hessian, 35x25cm

My work *Flag Day* (Fig. 5.58) is small landscape painting that evokes European forests through the use of saturated forest greens and the depiction of a copse of birch trees in the foreground. Landscape was a favoured genre in Romantic painting, exemplified by the paintings of well-known art historical figures such as Casper David Fredrich (1774-1840) and Joseph Mallord Turner (1775-1851). Favouring feeling over the rational and ordered geometric symmetry of classical painting and sculpture, the romantics used landscape as a signifier of genuine, deeply felt emotion, and to articulate a vision of humanity's harmonious relationship with the natural world that was seen as threatened by the advent of modernity. Disappointed with the violence of the French Revolution and the continuation of social stratification and inequality of this 'democratic' revolution, romantic artists turned away from society to nature as the source of absolute reason and truth. Moreover, many works from this period incorporated prior works from Greek and Roman art, deploying these in their own context to depict closer ties between 'men' and nature. In *Flag Day*, the red, yellow and blue flags attached to the birch trees suggest that an event is about to take place, or has already taken place in this picturesque setting. The flags are long and split into two points. This heraldic style of flag came into prominence during the fourteenth century as way of representing the high social rank of particular members of society. In the present day they evoke nostalgia for the pre-modern and can be seen during medieval festivals throughout Europe. The familiarity of imagery in *Flag Day* functions as a romantic cliché, yet there is also a brooding, sinister feeling to the work. The flags function as code for something that remains unknown that demarcates a physical territory. A sense of unease is also created through non-naturalistic colour, and the way in which the background sky fails to match the directional light in the rest of the scene pervading it with a sense of unreality and discord.

A similar dreamy, romantic mood pervades my painting *The Summit at Koblenz* (Fig. 5.59), which depicts a snow-covered field surrounded by looming trees. In the centre of the painting tiny figures gather around a fire in what appears to be a remote natural location. The title of the work references the staging of a summit of far-right European leaders in the town of Koblenz in Sothern Germany. This event, branded a 'counter-summit', occurred on January 21, 2017 and sought to rally nationalist support from

people disenchanted by mainstream European politics and desirous of a past with less immigration and stronger national borders. The summit was attended by people such as Geert Wilders, chairman of the Dutch Party of Freedom, Maire Le Pen, chairwoman of the French National Front, and Frauke Petry, chairwoman of the Alternative for Germany party, all of whom represent growing far-right-wing persuasions in Europe. This painting also adopts the visual language of Romantic painting and links this to the nostalgia driven imaginary of extreme right wing politics of the past and the present. Referencing and refiguring the tradition of Romantic painting, and choreographing formal relations between figurative painting and the abstract forms of the digital prints enables such symbolic associations.

Figure 5.59 Peter Alwast 2017, The Summit at Koblenz, oil on hessian, 35x25cm

Summary

In this chapter I discussed some recent shifts in my art practice. The works discussed stage both dialogues and disruptions between distinct mediums and processes of production, generating unexpected or anomalous sensible effects that point to an unresolved conflict or tension between 'progressive' technological modernity and 'regressive' anti-modernity. The possibilities of medium are used to open a range of sense effects within the collages and hessian prints relatable to Nancy's materialist-inspired formalism. At the same time, I have discussed how the works' sensory affects and my experiments with different media and art historical sources generate symbolic associations. With these works I have taken a small step further than Nancy's materialist formalism, which I have found so enabling as a way of refreshing thinking about the question of medium. In this last phase of my project I have wanted to emphasise how formal operations may impart meanings and sensory affects that confound expectation by reorganising accepted ways of viewing artistic and social temporalities and what counts as 'political' significance. The freedom to conjoin forms, mediums and discourses in a way contrary to established patterns or regimes is the possibility aligned with Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art.

Conclusion

After three and a half years of intense theoretical and studio-based research the time has come to write a conclusion. The typical way to approach this problem is to summarise key concepts developed in the thesis, synthesise them, extract the knowledge learned and situate it within my field of inquiry. I intend to follow this framework below but would like to begin by discussing what might be at stake in writing a conclusion when the fundamental findings of my research point to its suspension. The complex aesthetic philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière tend to reject instrumental thinking and predetermined outcomes in art and in the philosophical sphere. For this reason I have found their work particularly sympathetic for and to unanticipated possibilities of art production.

Nancy's foregrounding of the sensible and formal aspects of the artwork insists that aesthetic meaning can occur without reliance on ideal and determining concepts. This is a reaction against Hegel's ideas according to which art was deemed to be no longer the bearer of the highest ideals of freedom, and no longer held the same religious and metaphysical importance it had for past cultures, and 'had become a thing of the past'. For Nancy, if art no longer functions according to these 'exhausted', idealist regimes of signification, then its claims to meaningfulness need to be addressed in different ways. According to Nancy's theory, the externalised, visible, sensible aspects of art comprise a remainder that persists as a source of aesthetic meaning when 'the divine life that animated these (artistic) forms has come to pass' (Nancy 1997, p. 95). Thus, what counts as meaningfulness in modern art, for Nancy, is its potential to manifest 'shared sense' at the limit of symbolic and discursive language.

Nancy believes that this mode of meaning generation is possible through the artwork's sensuous exteriority. This is to say that the artwork suspends its representative or mimetic function a vehicle of pre-existing concepts or ideals and reorients aesthetic meaning towards material and formal processes of the medium. This is the presentation, or generation of sensible meaning, which for Nancy has the broader ambition of making us attentive to the sensory-material world around us. The singular

and plural 'being with' of bodies, forms and entities is the genesis of all sense for Nancy. He privileges art because it has the capacity to stage the emergence of sense in the world. This process is conceived as our exposure to sense—an event of meaningfulness prior to consolidated conceptual frameworks, which makes apparent the generative potential of a world that is present, rather than one dreamed of as in the past or in the future. The formal dimensions of the artwork are important for Nancy's aesthetic theory because they function to make evident the open and infinite formal possibilities of art mediums. This is where singular forms are put into plural relations, in defiance of 'conclusions', such as gesturing to significations that lie outside or beyond material mediums. I have taken up Nancy's formulations in this thesis and my practice to revise current thinking about matters of medium in contemporary art. This re-articulation of conventional understandings of medium rejects ideas of medium as a mere vehicle or secondary expression of ideal significations, a premise that I have shown to be operative in contemporary art that claims to be post-medium. I have stressed that my project also rejects medium specific doctrines that seek to identify essential physical properties of different art mediums. Instead, investigations in my practice have operated in parallel with Nancy's thinking and have therefore explored the possibilities of different mediums as they touch on and inflect the artistic possibilities of other mediums.

For Nancy, the artwork incarnates meaning by opening up a shared pre-symbolic domain of sensory experience. Art's formal processes assemble intersections of differing materialities that, in their particularity, touch upon our senses. In contrast, for Rancière, aesthetic meaning can never be entirely tied to the material-sensory dimensions of a medium, nor do the sensory impacts of art devolve from a timeless dimension of sensible experience. Instead, for Rancière, the artwork performs a two-fold function: 'naturalised significations' are suspended as an aesthetic effect creating a void within conceptual or sensory recognition, but this hollowing out of familiar ways of doing opens up alternative modes of intelligibility. Here the aesthetic functions as type of re-ordering of consolidated meanings and a re-organisation of sensible regimes that have become codified as collective forms of identification. Unlike Nancy's emphasis on art's staging of events of 'timeless' sensory (non)meaning, the aesthetic effect of the artwork for Rancière disputes hierarchical distributions of sense perception and symbolic

meaning that privilege some kinds of meaning over others. Aesthetics in Rancière's framework refers to the disruption of final conclusions about what constitutes social roles and capacities within a community, or what constitutes artistic practice. For Rancière, equality is achieved not within a shared realm of non-signifying sensory experience, but rather through a process of disrupting given orders of perception and meaning.

A compelling aspect of Rancière's thought is that art is not conceived as modelling programs to be implemented so that better societies or communities might be built, but rather as a field of experimentation that activates the possibility of alternative meanings to be inscribed within shared regimes of identification. Art is political when it calls into question prevailing distributions of sensible meaning in any social realm. Art of the aesthetic regime for Rancière stages different or conflicting regimes of identification, in the process exhibiting their non-definitive status. In my art this occurs by putting what might be considered 'incompatible' mediums and processes in relation to each other. The sensory effects generated by this at once relational and non-transitive interweaving of mediums does operate according to Nancy's singular-plural formulation. But at the same time, as indicated in Chapter Five, these formal operations have symbolic significance. The symbolic associations generated by my recent work articulate a tension between two seemingly irreconcilable regimes of sensible identification: the longing for communal unity lost in the past and its antinomy of a technologically determined future. This most recent aspect of my studio research contributes to post-medial debates by demonstrating that medium can be thought as political not in terms content represented, nor according to how up to date a medium is said to be, but rather according to how they contest and re-order what counts as sense experience.

Finally, I would like to speak about the sense of freedom that the philosophical writings of Nancy and Rancière have gifted to my studio research during my PhD candidature, and relate this to a work that represents one of the new direction in my practice. To speak of how the thinking of Nancy and Rancière foster the possibility of freedom or at least adventurousness in aesthetic practice is apt in the context of writing a conclusion to a PhD project. But their writing on art and aesthetics also gestures to something like an equal community of sense 'without end' that I find increasingly interesting. This is

especially so in a contemporary art world context dominated by financial and vested interests and neoliberal values and economies.

In a recent interview, artist Richard Tuttle tells us that art is a human invention that exists so that we know how to be free (2008). I would like to take him at his word, put this statement to the test, and consider what the implications might be for an artist to speak of freedom at this time. Throughout Tuttle's long, celebrated and at times controversial career he has described the diverse range of his artistic output as simply 'drawing', an interchangeable term that resists strict reduction to some essence of his project. This restlessness is a type of productive meandering spurred by not knowing one's place, like undertaking a journey without a preconceived idea of where one begins or where one might end. For me open possibilities are related to my experiments with artistic mediums: to create innumerable configurations of sensible meaning in the hope of refiguring how forms and meanings fit together.

Plato proposed that a well-ordered community consisted of each person doing the one thing they were destined to do. To do more than one thing defied the assignment of social places to different people and threatened the harmonious order of the communal whole. According to Plato, the gods placed gold in the souls of those who rule the city, while artisans' souls were filled with iron (Rancière 2006, pp. 5-8). The role of artisan or artist was to make or do what he or she was destined for, and certainly not change places with the rulers of the city. In this model of community those with souls of gold rule and those with souls of iron remain tied to their designated craft. To make paintings amongst other things is about moving beyond doing and being one thing. This doesn't amount to simplistic aesthetic belligerence or wilful irony, because it is something much more nuanced: it is knowledge borne from a freely applied misrecognition of what is expected from a prescribed category. Misrecognition is not ignorance that comes before recognition—freedom of choice occurs the other way around. Misrecognition comes after the recognition of a limit. By misrecognising and thus refusing to accept any fundamental order of things we can find ways through given 'distributions of sense,' meander off well-trodden paths, and make connections between objects, thoughts and words in our own way. This is to refuse a certain inevitability about things remaining in their so-called destined place. In this way freedom in this research project looks like the

misrecognition of commonplace expectations of how painting, drawing and new media technology both interact and remain distant from each other.

This type of artistic speculation occurs in my work titled *For Plumbers Who Work at Night* (Fig. 6.60), where several different material supports are brought together ensuring that the work cannot be categorised as drawing, painting, or new media print. Every material and surface inscription in this work comes into either direct or implied contact with each of the others, yet this physical proximity between elements fails to cohere as a unified composition. A haptic dimension to this work is achieved by sustaining material differences, where the specificity of each element only makes sense because of its relationship with something else. For example, the optical and spatial effects generated by intersecting luminous lines are brought into tension with the overt materialism of layers of hessian and glitter paper. Illusionistic space exists alongside and over coarse hessian and granular pumice gel. The scale of the work draws us into a small world where disparate materials—oil pastel, glitter paper, hessian, digitally printed paper—hang together precariously imparting a temporary or provisional sense of togetherness. The lower section of the composition consists of a flimsy, vertically placed sheet of glitter paper, which appears to anchor the top-heavy composition above. A diagonal form placed in the middle of the composition appears to be detached from the hessian pieces on which it sits as if unbound by gravity. Yet the force of gravity is reasserted by the curved fall of two pieces of string attached with pumice gel, and cut outs of coloured giclee print. The combination of elements might conjure associations with architecture, technological networks or fragmented wholes. The deployment of multiple and incongruous materials articulates the identity of mediums as at once singular and plural, as distinct yet dependent on relations with other mediums.

Knowing how to be free involves ways of being together that cannot be programmed by single determining causes or destinations. Attempts to gather differences into cohesive wholes have resulted historically in programs of authoritarian control and, most recently, in revivals of populist nationalism. Nor can 'being with' be defined as a collection of separate individuals, where self-interest is set above any responsibility to others. The tangible, material features of *For Plumbers Who Work at Night* draw attention to what is all around us in the world, to relations of compatibility and

incompatibility, to sensory intensities and interactions that help us make sense by being together.
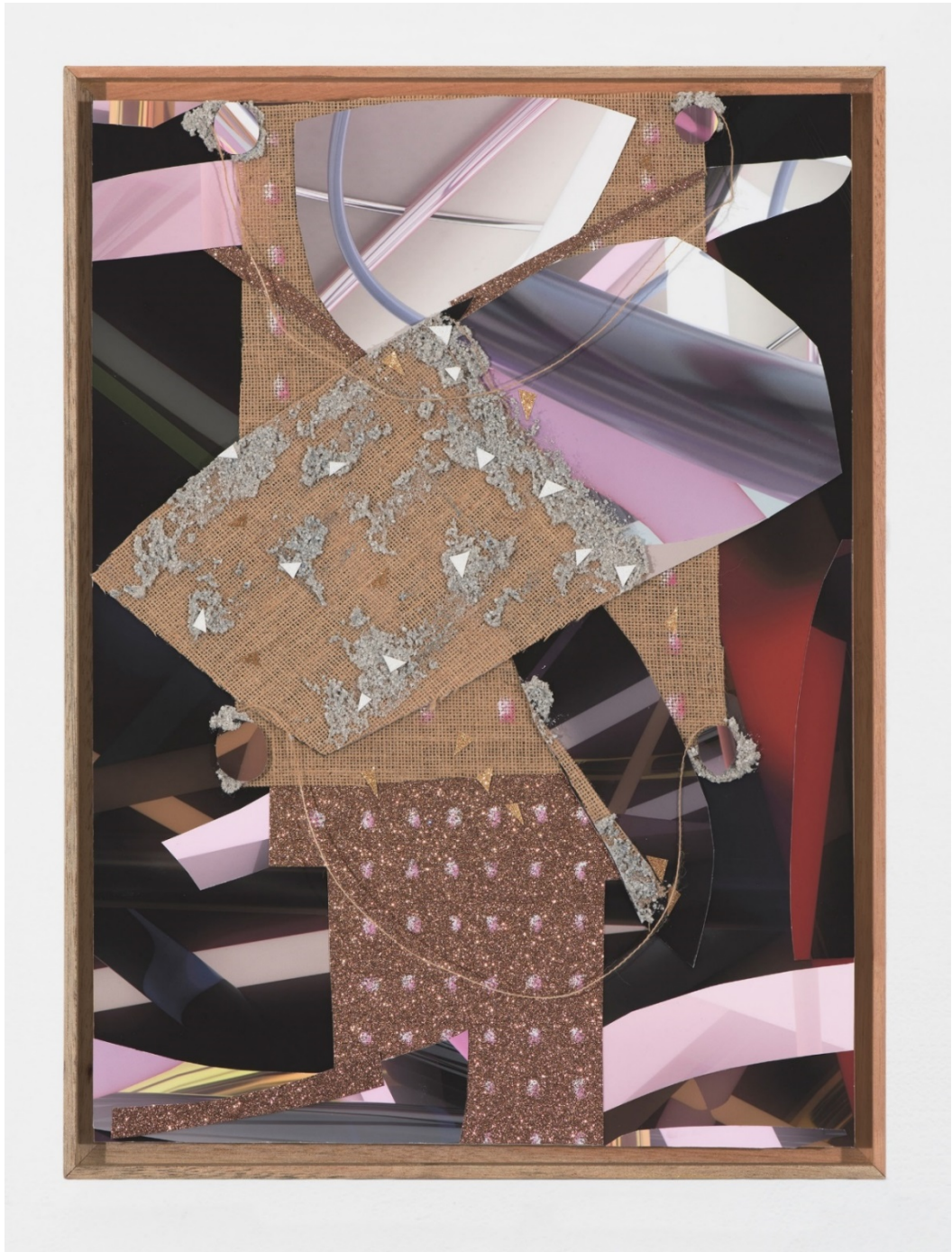

Figure 6.60 Peter Alwast 2018, *For Plumbers Who Work at Night*, Collaged giclee prints, hessian, glitter paper, oil pastel, pumice gel, string, 60 x 40 cm

In *For Plumbers Who Work at Night* images come into visibility or are blocked out by opaque forms, illusion is confounded by the palpable materiality of elements that expose the process of construction. One of the things I sought with this work was to assemble discordant materials and processes so that the beholder would be invited to translate or interpret its divergent compositional turns, processes and media relations in their own way. This is one kind of freedom that art can offer. It need not claim to have an answer or solution to social problems nor be a vehicle of ideological messaging. Rather based on the research I have conducted art may be conceived as able to reconfigure the inevitable state of things, to detach things from their assigned places, to show how new configurations of sensible meaning can be made, seen and interpreted. Politics is, as Jacques Rancière tells us, 'before all else, an intervention in the visible and the sayable' (2010, p. 132). This attitude hints at the 'Geist' of my research: where I have attempted to engage with the complex philosophical writing of Nancy and Rancière to show that I can switch places with them, to be not only be defined as one who makes art, but one who has the capacity to think like a philosopher. This has been a journey of translation, of joining and separating words, discourses and artistic processes, of redefining the possibilities of studio research so as to be confounded and surprised, and to present painting amongst other things.

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