

The Intentional Brushstroke

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Introduction

Can there be an intentional, authentic brushstroke if I know that my subjectivity has been constructed by my social and political environment?

The question of the nature of subjectivity is central to the practice of abstract painting. In the history of Western abstract painting we go from one extreme of the fully autonomous, free agent to another extreme of ironic expressive mannerisms as a semiotic show of fake subjectivity.

How can I, as an abstract painter today, approach subjectivity and, is it possible to find a new, critical intentionality beyond both the fully autonomous agent and irony?

Contemporary thinking sees subjectivity as something constructed by culture and ideology. We see gender as constructed, we see our political views, even our likes and dislikes as being constructed. In the first section of my paper, drawing on the work of Judith Butler, I look at constructed subjectivity and explore the possibility of a fluid, ever-changing subjectivity and the potential of agency in this context.

The idea of the self as something that has been constructed has also been explored by Buddhist philosophy 2500 years ago. The Buddhist concept of anatta, non-self, deconstructs

the 'self' into bundles of impermanent aspects. The bundles or aggregates of clinging, as they are called, together construct an illusion of a coherent, permanent self. In the second section of my paper I discuss the Buddhist concept of anatta and, in combination with Western ideas, I establish a sketch of a self-less subjectivity, focussing on the ever-changing quality of subjectivity and the collective nature of construction.

In the third section I examine the implications of my thinking on subjectivity on abstract painting. What are the implications on originality, authenticity and intention? And so, the nature of intention in the brushstroke? I will discuss how, knowing that the things that arise in my awareness are conditioned and constructed, I can make this the locus of my practice. This provisional relationship with subjectivity, a relationship held lightly, ready to be questioned, can become the starting point of painting that engages with subjectivity. The mark on the surface is not an index of my 'self'. It does not speak of an unchanging, fixed subjectivity. It *does* however speak of specific moments and specific conditions. It becomes almost like a game, a playful watching of a subjectivity that is not a thing I can ever fully get to know.

A fluid, ever-changing subjectivity

What form can agency take in a constructed subject? Accepting social constructionism as a given could easily lead to a defeatist stance, an excuse against taking ethical or political action. Judith Butler writes:

The question of locating “agency” is usually associated with the viability of the “subject”, where the “subject” is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or, if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness. On such a model, “culture” and “discourse” *mire* the subject, but do not constitute the subject. This move to qualify and enmire the pre-existing subject has appeared necessary to establish a point of agency that is not fully *determined* by that culture and discourse. And yet, this kind of reasoning falsely presumes (a) agency can only be established through recourse to a pre-discursive “I,” even if that “I” is found in the midst of a discursive convergence, and (b) that to be *constituted* by discourse is to be *determined* by discourse, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency.¹

Butler states that the assumption that there cannot be agency from an “I” that is constituted by discourse, that is culturally constructed, is false. That means there needs to be a possibility of agency from a subject that is embedded by discourse.

Butler suggests that agency is possible because construction depends on repetition. As each constructed aspect needs to be continually repeated, it is also never entirely stable.

Judith Butler, in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (1991):

“...if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? If there is, as it were, always a compulsion to repeat, repetition never fully

¹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

accomplishes identity. That there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval”²

This means that agency is possible in deliberately influencing repetitions, or affecting the discourse from within the discourse, as Foucault would describe it. Butler describes this in terms of performance and performativity. Anita Brady and Tony Schirato write:

For Butler gender is a performance, and a performance is not something one has or something one is, but rather something one does. Because gender is a performance, a culturally sanctioned doing, then the opportunity to undo, or to at least intervene in that doing, must reside in the very means by which gender is produced. The task, as she sees it, is to rethink the ‘possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself’³ rather than seeking to locate resistance outside or prior to a heteronormative signifying system.⁴

Butler, of course, focuses on gender and sexuality but I believe this is valid for all aspects of subjectivity. It is important to remember that Judith Butler stresses that with performativity of gender she does not mean that a subject simply chooses a gender – it is not a position of full autonomy – but that gender can be affected from within the discourse and this is where agency is located.

² Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”. Salih, Sara, ed. *The Judith Butler Reader*. Blackwell Publishing: Malden MA, 2004. p119

³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁴ Brady, Anita & Schirato, Tony. *Understanding Judith Butler*. London: Sage Publications, 2011. p49

To sum up: I have described a subjectivity that is firstly, never static, never entirely stable or solid but always fluid; secondly, without an essence of pre-discursive selfhood; and thirdly imbued with agency to affect the discourse from within. Something ever-changing is also something impermanent and this leads us to Buddhist ideas of construction of the self.

The practice of Anatta

The Pali word *anatta* is usually translated as non-self. *Atta* is the word for self (atman in Sanskrit) and *an-* is a negation.

With the teaching of anatta, non-self, the Buddha's motivation was not to lay down a theory on the nature of the self or lack thereof, but rather to find a practical solution to the problem of suffering. It needs to be seen as a practice, not a theory. At the time of the Buddha, around 500 BCE, in Northern India, there were many seekers of spiritual enlightenment. This quest was usually focused around discovering the true self. This true self was thought to be eternal, unchanging and hidden beneath non-eternal and changing aspects.⁵ This is comparable to the idea of a pre-discursive self. The Buddha's insight was that this belief in an unchanging eternal self is a hindrance on the quest to finding an end to suffering. Finding an end to suffering was the Buddha's primary intention. "Both in the past and now I set forth just this: *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*."⁶ It is important to see the teaching of *anatta* in this context as a practice to instigate change.

⁵ Harvey, Peter. *The Selfless Mind*. London: Routledge, 1995. p1

⁶ "Alagaddūpama Sutta: Sutta 22" in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Translated by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995. p234

The Buddha investigated his experience of being in meditation to see if he could find any evidence of such an unchanging self. He divided the entirety of human experience into what is known as the five clinging aggregates. They are form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. In his second sermon, the teaching on anatta, the Buddha goes through these aggregates one by one and shows how no permanent, unchanging self can be found in them. From the Anatta-lakkhana Sutta:

"Bhikkhus, how do you conceive it: is form permanent or impermanent?" — "Impermanent, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?" — "Painful, venerable Sir." — "Now is what is impermanent, what is painful since subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self'?" — "No, venerable sir."

"So, bhikkhus any kind of form whatever, whether past, future or presently arisen, whether gross or subtle, whether in oneself or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must with right understanding how it is, be regarded thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.'⁷

This teaching has often been misunderstood as meaning that Buddhism teaches that there is no self. There is no mention in any of the suttas of the Buddha saying that there is no self. What the Buddha does say is that all aspects of our personhood that we experience, all our physical experience, all our thoughts, feelings, volitions, even our consciousness itself is observably impermanent and so non-self, as a 'self', the way it had been understood by the

⁷ "The Characteristic of Nonsself" in "Khandhasamyutta" in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000. pp901-902

Buddha's contemporaries, would need to be something permanent and unchanging. What he denies is an unchanging, pre-discursive self.

The aggregates of clinging together construct an illusion of a coherent, permanent self. Just as in the Western model the social construction might erroneously be perceived as an essential self. It is this illusion the Buddhist practitioner tries to see through with the help of meditation and reflection.

Furthermore, just as in Butler's theory, Buddhist philosophy does not think that this construction happens just once but that it keeps recurring. The Buddhist teaching of conditionality theorizes that each thing in the world, and this includes mental objects such as thoughts and emotions, is continuously being caused and causing in an endless stream of conditionality. The teaching of anatta is intertwined with the teaching of conditionality. The aggregates of clinging continuously arise and fade due to conditions, the person being a stream of continuity of conditioned moments of experience. Each moment, action, etc. is conditioning the next. So, a being is both continuously conditioned as well as continuously conditioning.

Yet, unlike Butler's model, this conditioning is not just a cultural human network of power but something that includes all existence. The person is just as intertwined with the non-human world (animals, plants, inanimate objects) as with other persons. The German philosopher Wolfgang Iser, in his recent book 'Ästhetische Welterfahrung –

Zeitgenössische Kunst zwischen Natur und Kultur',⁸ advocates the importance of changing our dualistic human vs. non-human worldview to a nondualist one of interconnectedness with nature, shifting the relationship of human and world from one of opposition to "Innesein" - interconnectedness. The cultural sensitivity of Western Theory and the nondualistic worldview of Buddhist Philosophy needs to be brought together to create sustainable attitude towards subjectivity.

The teaching of anatta does, of course, also raise question regarding agency, mostly because, as in Butler's example there is an assumption that there needs to be an unchanging essence or self for there to be agency. If this assumption is dropped there is no conflict. Agency, in Buddhist thinking, is connected to conditionality and interconnectedness. Although my personhood is being caused, I am also causing and this causing is my responsibility, my agency.

This is a potentially revolutionary teaching as it undermines the "truth" of any ideology, including its own. The practitioner who is continuously questioning if something is permanent/impermanent, self/non-self, including given 'truths', becomes more difficult to control, to subject.

⁸ Welsch, Wolfgang. *Ästhetische Welterfahrung – Zeitgenössische Kunst zwischen Natur und Kultur*. Wilhelm Fink: Paderborn, 2016.

Self-less Painting

How can we, as abstract painters today, approach subjectivity and, is it possible to find a new, critical intentionality beyond both the autonomous agent and irony?

The Ironic Brushstroke

It is clear that a position of unselfconscious belief in full autonomy of the subject is not tenable in our intellectual age. But what of irony?

Mark Godfrey, in his 2014 ARTFORUM essay 'Statements of Intent: The Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl'⁹ shows evidence of a renewed interest in finding a new, critical intentionality and agency within abstract painting, beyond irony. He demonstrates how 'all four of these painters, (...), in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of mid-century and the emptied postmodern gesture.'¹⁰ He writes:

"Emerging within (...) different contexts, each of these painters would be highly conscious of the heroic and gendered associations of the AbEx and Informel brushstroke, though they also recognized that generations of artists before them, from Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein to Polke, had deflated these gestures. They would also have taken note of postmodern parodies and appropriations of certain kinds of brushstrokes. But they understood that to base a practice on mapping abstraction's failures or exposing styles of paint application as empty conventions was no longer valid."¹¹

⁹ Godfrey, Mark. *Statements of Intent: The Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl*. Artforum May 2014

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

Irony and parody can, of course, undermine the illusion of a solid, permanent self behind the brushstroke and so be a strong critical method within painterly discourse. Yet, however useful irony is or has been in the history of painting, I do not think that it can be continued indefinitely. Irony depends on sincerity to work. If all work becomes ironic and sincerity lies too far in the past, irony will no longer work. I say it is possible to be critical and self-conscious without having to be ironic. Godfrey writes that:

“Sillman’s strategy has been to deploy this gestural mode, but in such a way as to indicate a kind of hesitancy about its use. Each of her strokes reveals itself not as the final masterful decision but as just one more application on a surface already covered with other strokes, which you can see behind the last one.”¹²

In my practice, I also deploy this gestural mode, but from a position of acknowledging subjectivity as something that is always in flux, a stream of continuity. The brushstroke is not an index of my ‘self’. It does not speak of an unchanging, fixed subjectivity. The brushstroke *does*, however, speak of specific moments and specific conditions. The key, in my practice, to a critical intentionality lies in examining my attitude towards subjectivity, agency or authorship and the relationship between the subject and ‘the world’.

Authorship and Originality

Stepping away from strict dualism and seeing all things and beings as interconnected and part of a net of mutual conditions and constructions, the idea of ‘I made this object’

¹² Godfrey, Mark. *Statements of Intent: The Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl*. Artforum May 2014

becomes somewhat meaningless as the object also makes me and we are both 'made' by other conditions.

If I assume that my being is a stream of conditioned and conditioning continuity and that there is no such thing as an unchanging, unconditioned essence of selfhood within me, there can be no such thing as originality or authenticity in my work, in the sense of something being of its own origin and not conditioned by something else. Indeed, if everything in the world is conditioned, there can be no originality in the world, only change. There can be agency, however, as agency does not require originality.

Authorship as something coming from an original source is invalid. Yet, each stream of continuity is a singular combination, singular if not original. This means that each being has their own variation of experience which overlaps with others in a collective process of meaning-making. Each person contributes to this collective process of meaning-making, be it through repetition of ideology or a concerted effort to resist. In this sense everybody is an author.

Fluid Subjectivity as the Locus of Practice

Can there be intentionality, that is, agency, in the brushstroke? We have already seen that agency does not require a permanent or pre-discursive self. Although, it will be a different kind of agency, not a genius creator who is expressing something original, but a much humbler position. One that acknowledges both its fluid and its constructed, unoriginal nature as well as its responsibility as a constructing, causing power.

It is important that we remember that, although, it is imperative that we question cultural conditioning, we need to be aware that our questioning is also subject to conditions. This relationship with subjectivity is always something provisional. Intentionality needs to be seen as provisional.

This provisional relationship with subjectivity, a relationship held lightly, ready to be questioned, can become the starting point of painting that engages with subjectivity.

Within my practice I play with painting as meditation and with meditation as art in a blurring of art and life. The practice of meditation – the watching of impermanence and conditionality, the watching of my stream of subjectivity and how it is interconnected with the world around me – overlaps and intermingles with the practice of painting in a game of watching and contributing.

I see the brushstroke not as an expression of 'selfhood' but as a place of contact, of interface between my stream of continuity and "the world", a place where the interconnectedness between the two can be observed. As the painter I am both observer and doer. Watching the conditioned arise and interacting with it. It is not just a blurring of art and life but also a blurring of internal and external, of constructed and constructor. Painting is an experimental lab then, an alchemist's workshop, a watching of change.

That painting should be abstract is important to me in this project. It is a taking apart of things, the thing in its separate, impermanent parts not as an illusory whole; the subject deconstructed; each sensation a sensation observed on its own.

Knowing that the things that arise in my awareness are conditioned, I can make this the locus of my practice. I make an intentional brush stroke but I also know that this intention is provisional, in the sense that it does not come from an unchanging position but from a position that is itself in continuous flux. The mark on the surface is not an index of my 'self'. It does not speak of an unchanging, fixed subjectivity. It *does* speak of specific moments and specific conditions. It becomes almost like a game, a playful watching of a subjectivity that is not a thing I can ever fully get to know. Painting becomes an interaction with change, a subtle interplay between volition and things outside of my control.

If painting is not an expression of originality but a conscious partaking in interconnectedness and collective construction, even if a painting is made by a single person, it is also a move away from an ego-focussed and dualistic world-view. If my subjectivity is not based on an essential self but an ever-changing, perpetually in flux stream of being that is at least in part collective, then there is no image of self to fix on.

Painting becomes a primer then of a life lived more self-lessly – self-less in the sense of not referring to an unchanging, essential self – a primer for approaching life as an active contributor to collectivity.

Conclusion

I am proposing an approach to subjectivity as something that does not come from a fixed, permanent self but from a stream of continuity, a subjectivity that is something in perpetual flux rather than something fixed, as well as being conditioned and culturally constructed. I

argue that this does not preclude agency, although it is an agency of a somewhat different sort, it is not an agency that comes from an original source but one that is already deeply interconnected with the world and one that recognises that every action is a causal force in the world and accepts the responsibility associated with this.

For the painter this opens opportunities to approach painting as something much more connected with the world. The painter is not an autonomous, original creator but already interconnected with the materials and the cultural discourse. Using agency, intention, she or he can partake in an interplay of causation. Painting, here, is not an expression of an individual but something that explores the self-less through critical intentionality.

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