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## Between Philosophy and Art: A Collaboration at *The Lock-Up*, Newcastle<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*At The Lock-Up in Newcastle one weekend in September 2015, a group of artists, musicians and performers, performed to an audience which included philosopher commentators. The idea was to look for points of intersection, interface or divergence between art and philosophy. However, what we found was that the commentators were not engaged in analysing what was simply given them, but instead actively constructing the meaning they would ascribe to the work. As such they were co-creators. The objective of this report of the event is to establish a basis for more collaboration between art and philosophy in the future on the assumption that interdisciplinarity reveals possibilities and perspectives masked by the general insularity of well-established disciplines.<sup>2</sup>*

KEY WORDS: art, philosophy, aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic ideas, semiotics, Kant

### Introduction

Similarity and difference, patterns of variation, consistency and coherence: these are the reference points of the philosopher. Understanding experience, exploring ideas through particular instantiations, novel and innovative thinking: these are the reference points of the artist. However, at certain points in the proceedings of our Symposium titled, *Next to Nothing: Art as Performance*, this characterisation of philosopher and artist respectively might have been construed the other way around. The commentator/philosophers referenced their philosophical interests through the particular examples/instantiations created by the artist and in virtue of which they were then able to engage with novel and

innovative thinking. From the artists' presentations, on the other hand, emerged a series of contrasts within which philosophical and artistic ideas resonated. This interface of philosopher-artist bore witness to the fact that just as art approaches philosophy in providing its own analysis, philosophy approaches art in being a co-creator of art's meaning. In what follows, we discuss the conception of philosophy-art that emerged from the Symposium, and the methodological minimalism which we employed in order to achieve it. We conclude by drawing out an implication of the Symposium's achievement which is that a counterpoint to Institutional theories of art may well be the point from which future directions will take hold, if philosophy-art gains traction.

[Image 1 inserted here]

### **Philosophy as Art and Aesthetic Ideas**

The echoes of Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp in the title of this Symposium reveal the aspiration of its curators, Jennifer McMahon and Sean Lowry, to explore the limits of artistic meaningfulness in a context that questions or blurs the distinction between art and the philosophy of art – although what we are to understand as 'philosophy of art' was itself called into question. Philosophy of art is standardly conceived as an analysis of art as though art is something simply given as an object fully formed in every sense and awaits analysis. However, at this event there was a notable shift in our conception of art, from art-as-object to art-as-action; and a subsequent shift in our conception of philosophy of art, from mere analysis of artwork, to co-creation of its meaning. This is not a new idea, having been explored by the contemporary American philosopher Stanley Cavell (2002) but it is an idea that has not managed to infiltrate the consciousness of philosophers of art in the Anglo-

American tradition who persist in treating their work as analysis, as if meaning were discovered rather than created (see Abell 2012, Carlson 2008, Davies 2006). In this paper the performative nature of the commentaries and the way they were edited and augmented through discussion with artists, will be referred to as philosophy-art to distinguish it from the philosophy of art.

The recognition that philosophy-art contributes to the meaning of art rather than engages in analysing what is simply given by the artwork can be given an even older pedigree in what for theorists of popular culture would be a rather unexpected source, the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant (2000). Popular culture studies sit at a juncture between criticism of the capitalist ideology represented within products of the culture industry, on the one hand, and studies that aim to understand popular culture as a site for the creativity of individuals and the creation of cultural identities and communities, on the other. The study of popular culture emerged as a response to what were considered elitist attacks on the arts of the masses from critical theorists within the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944), who thought the culture industry complicit in the continuation of capitalism by creating diversions that encouraged people to be passive within the system. For example, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that the concept of taste was developed to uphold a concept of high culture that was intended to reinforce class distinctions. Kant's aesthetic theory was often inadvertently caricatured in support of those defending a concept of high culture (see McMahon 2016).

Bourdieu's influential work on the development of aesthetic judgement, which associated aesthetic appreciation with a process through which an elite marked its identity and separated itself from popular culture, was central to the process of marginalisation of aesthetics within the field. In the process, philosophical aesthetics and in particular, a

distorted version of Kant's conception of the beautiful based on a reading of only the first half of the *Critique of Judgment*, became associated with the concept of a 'pure aesthetic' which was mistakenly interpreted as providing an objective account of beauty whose principles were only accessible to those with refined or upper class taste (Bourdieu 1987). Within the various approaches to the study of popular culture, emphasis has been placed on a method of description (as opposed to evaluation) in order to avoid the relativism of values (Madden 1973) and this was seen as an alternative to the aesthetics of culture. Nonetheless, sporadic attempts were made to develop an aesthetics of popular culture throughout the 1980s and 90s (see Coleman 1985; Fluck 1988; Ruesga 1996). However, this project remains unrealised.

Recent research indicates that the notion of an aesthetics of popular culture was never made entirely redundant. For example, aesthetic evaluations of the films of the 1980s were based on specific theories of art (Nelson 2013) and furthermore, the term 'aesthetic' operates within a discourse of legitimation for emerging art forms such as video games and fan fiction (Flegel and Roth 2014). Yet, within contemporary focuses on the active audience and their creativity, there remains a need to account for producers' choices. Without this, an aesthetics of popular culture remains an aesthetics of reception. For example, Henry Jenkin's (2006) provides an account of fan communities as 'prosumers' (producers and consumers) of popular culture and folk art, without addressing the role of the artist or producer. One way to address both the role of producer and 'prosumer' is through a study of imagination, a process the study of which is back in vogue within philosophy (see Crowther 2015, Langland-Hassan 2011, Nanay 2016). Imagination by these accounts is central to the process of artistic creation and reception. However, even the most recent

accounts of imagination once applied to the processes of artistic creation and reception can be seen to have their origins in Kant's account of aesthetic ideas.

Aesthetic ideas, according to Kant, are ideas which go beyond the concept we have of an object and draw together fragments, nuances, traces and impressions which may not have been experienced before within the same mental frame. As such, aesthetic ideas further understanding in some way and can be prompted by nature and artworks. Kant provides a way of articulating this process (including the meaning that is created in reception) but he emphasised that the expression of aesthetic ideas are acculturating because in attempting to make one's aesthetic ideas understood by others, one inadvertently calibrates the terms of reference one employs in one's private experience with those of one's community. This suggests that the expression of aesthetic ideas is both what the artist does in making art and also what the audience does in interpreting it. In this symposium we witnessed philosophy-art in terms of this very process.

[Image 2 inserted here]

Among the works performed were Steve Dutton's ontologically unstable art-forms hovering between image and text. Dutton occupied the main gallery of *The Lock-Up*, ran workshops prior to the weekend of the Symposium with Postgraduate students from the University of Newcastle, and delivered a key-note address at the Symposium. He demonstrated, performed and explained through these various modes the way the content of art is neither idiosyncratic impression nor explicit concept but somewhere in-between. His point of departure was the space between image and text. This was so very nicely encapsulated by Braddon Snape's exploration of the imagination of disaster, the sublime

thrill involved in inflating a large shiny steel balloon in a small enclosed space, every pop and buckle of the beautiful metal pillow a potential catastrophe for the all-too-embodied viewer. Interestingly, it was a work that evoked all kinds of emotive sounds from those in attendance and at some points, frightened gasps. Yet after it was over, everyone showed their appreciation with smiles and a generally elevated energy and enthusiasm but no one seemed to need to discuss the work as such. We were more inclined to ask Braddon to discuss his artistic trajectory, to understand how he emerged at this point in time with this very affecting and absorbing technique. There were many more performances by artists, musicians and writers, many from the staff at the University of Newcastle but also including independent artists who had answered an EOI. The possibilities of meaning in all these cases emerged from the indeterminacy of the work; that is, a kind of open-ended suggestiveness entertained in a purposeful way. The mental frameworks we entertained during the Symposium were co-created by the artists' performances and the ensuing discussions.

Cavell, the American philosopher mentioned earlier, apparently warned his students: 'Remember it is philosophy you are studying, exactly the subject whose problems must not be taken as given, as if their importance is assured, the discipline whose very existence, and importance are to be held at risk' (1986: 171-177). Philosophy, like art, is an exploration of one's way of seeing things, and as such, is an intimate engagement with one's imaginative vision and understanding, the depths of one's entire sensibility. As artist Fay Neilson's reflections on the work of Michaela Gleave made vivid, in suffering the endless repetitions of time, artists and philosophers are attempting to make the ordinary extraordinary. And yet, one can argue that as Beckett puts it, 'To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail' (1987, 125), that is, as art and philosophy essentially fail because they aim to articulate that

aspect of experience that eludes articulation. However, this failure, if we agree to construe it as failure, can be productive. It makes possible an ever-evolving sense of things, an ever-evolving understanding of experience. This was Kant's point when he argued that the expression of aesthetic ideas was a furthering of life without which culture was impossible. In this Symposium we treated the blurring of the boundaries between philosophy and art as an uncovering of what philosophy essentially is rather than a new development of its possibilities.

### **The Symposium and Aesthetic Pleasure**

The achievement of this symposium in bringing the essence of philosophy into view was possible due to a number of factors. Bringing artists and philosophers together has floundered in the past because the right context and format were not found. In this case, its success was possibly due in part to the fact that both philosophers and artists were displaced from their usual practice and placed in unfamiliar circumstances. We could say, both philosophers and artists 'performed' their practice in new contexts. In other words, a key to the success of this venture was that both philosophers and artists were pushed beyond their comfort zones into a realm where rules, customs and familiar routines did not readily apply. We were all outside our usual practice of work and that created the conditions for an openness and naivety of response as well as allowing for improvisations on/about art/philosophy.

The artists had responded to a brief which asked them to consider the minimum requirements for their creative practice. A key term was 'performance'. This brought together artists working in various modes and prevented the philosophers from settling on philosophical assumptions about any particular artform. Another of the reasons the

Symposium worked was a methodological decision to focus on minimalism; not in terms of the established art discourse around the artistic movement known by that name but in its more general sense. We were in a disused exercise yard and at times the presentations spread out into gutted police cells. This was neither the minimalism that would like to pretend the past never happened – all around us in the Hunter Street Gallery *The Lock-Up* were traces of the ‘minimum’ to which state power for over a century had stripped back the lives of those incarcerated there – nor the minimalism that imagines that with the right amount of abstraction, philosophy and art could clamber upon a common ground, hit upon a common language. That is, the potential of the philosophy-art interface did not emerge from consensus. The rich possibilities relied on the opposite. Deceleration more than reductionism describes the approach adopted to the weekend by many of the artists involved: rather than reaching for a conceptual discourse that risked erasing their art’s irreducibility to philosophy, they spelt, acted and laid out the components of their practice and thereby gave the audience the time, the space and the chance to inspect them and to engage with them.

[Image 3 inserted here]

Julie Vulcan slowly panned the walls of the exercise yard for a live feed in close-up in an adjoining cell. The mood in the yard as we watched her intense focus and incremental movements along the wall reflected her intensity and calm. Nothing else seemed to matter apart from what Julie had before her eyes. The intricate details of the deteriorating scraps of paint as they peeled off the heritage listed wall, seemed to take on a significance and interest one could not have imagined before Julie’s actions. This performance primed us for



the keynote address that followed by Dutton, discussed above. The following day, Kris Smith's demonstration of the potentiality of the photographer's medium involved movement, provided by the audience. We entered a confined space and witnessed the effects of our movements on the colours which appeared on the screen; with every move changing each colour's edging into its complementary hue. The sheer dynamism of colour and the way the photographer must understand its interplay with light became our focus. And Kris directed us through this by sharing his knowledge of the way a photographic image for the photographer is always an experiment in the potentiality of light. Later that day we focussed on another kind of potential. Deidre Brollo and Deb Mansfield's game of Chinese whispers with volunteers and mobile phones, parodied the unsolvable riddle of art, by finding its own path to an enigma. What was heard in whispers seemed more influenced by what a hearer already knew than what was said.

All of the artists who performed during the weekend demonstrated what they could do with the bare essentials of their respective arts and the bare essentials of the venue; and so did the commentators. There was a minimalism in listening and asking questions on the basis of what one has heard, rather than in slotting the presentations into a pre-existing theory, or at least we avoided this to the extent that this is possible, given our theoretically loaded perceptions. The only constraint was to make oneself understood.

Image 4 inserted here

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* touches upon the universalism to which this minimalism might aspire in its discussion of the universal voice to which a speaker lays claim in calling something beautiful. The universal voice of the pure aesthetic judgement of free beauty

makes its claim unsupported by any appeal to the objective criteria by which we otherwise order and evaluate the world around us. Kant investigates the disinterest invoked by the speech act 'This x is beautiful' without assuming that the commitments embedded in the form of the utterance align with the psychology of the speaker. The pleasure of the beautiful is inexplicable as a merely private affair (why do we say that something *is* beautiful rather than simply 'I like this'?). It takes us outside of ourselves. Kant's pure aesthetic judgement is a judgement whose touchstone is pleasure alone, a pleasure that calls out to the pleasure of others without any recognised model to anchor it or any codified criteria that might appear to make 'sense' of it. An art that gives itself over to experimentation, declining to be appropriated to any set of established measures, turns its back on one community to lie in readiness for another whose unexternalisable bond is pleasure. The pleasure cannot be planned for, without compromising aesthetic judgement's distinctness from cognitive judgement. While understandably philosophy can offer no concrete guidance in how art might occasion a pure aesthetic judgement, it can in its own wariness towards positivism help foster vigilance in which experimentation – and the pleasure to which it can give rise – receives its due politically as an agent of community.

### **Counterpoint to Institutional Theories of Art: aesthetic ideas, pleasure and semiotics**

When artists research a new work, project or just look for ideas, the process can take a myriad of forms and encompass any and all 'things', materials and approaches. The primary output for artists is some kind of idea or expression which may or may not have material or conceptual form. This seems open ended, amorphous and problematic, partly because it implies 'anything can be art' (see de Duve 2014). For many artists however, in the right context, or with framing, or maybe with intention, anything might be considered art. A

question related to those raised earlier emerges regarding how one comes to know the difference.

One way to approach this question is by experiencing the way artists exercise judgment in their practice. Working seemingly beyond rules or formula, the work presented at this Symposium was nonetheless communicative, rather than idiosyncratic. While the artist/performers welcomed all manner of interpretations, there was still the possibility that someone could get them just plain wrong. It was as if the artists were guided by a rule but a rule that could not be articulated, or not discursively. Perhaps we might refer to it as a visual, musical or performative idea, metaphor or trope. The artist approached her work guided by the idea/construct but not with a predetermined outcome in mind. The outcomes that eventuated were not forced but emerged from the artist's interactions with media/experiments. The process appeared purposive but without a set, preordained end. That is, we had to see and hear what the interactions yielded before we could glimpse an outcome. The basis of this process is what Dutton had called the mid-point, as discussed above, and it is at the very heart of what philosophers call aesthetic reflective judgment: that what is engaged with, in engaging with art, is neither fully formed concept, nor idiosyncratic impressions, but something in-between.

According to the institutional theory of art, something can become art only within an institutional context (Dickie 1969, Danto 1964, Bourdieu, 1987) for this very reason. The institution gives the work the conventional basis from which meaning can be ascribed. However, the art presented in this Symposium, reaffirmed the value of art as a source of communication by not only exploiting cultural reference points but also exploiting the affordances provided by materiality. In many cases, the artist's 'minimal' performance was created through engagement with the sensory qualities of a material or environment, the

social or cultural codes that might be associated with those qualities, and the extended connotations of those codes. These elements enabled the artists to create work that was meaningful for the audience. This approach resonates not simply relative to a western institution of art, but as a practice found across all cultures, a fact that is particularly evident where the basis of one's experience is both the process of creation and the context of reception. In an influential account of this expressive process for use in anthropological studies, George Mills argued that 'art is the creation, by manipulating a medium, of public objects or events that serve as deliberately organized sets of conditions for experience in qualitative mode' (1971, p. 95). Qualitative experiences, according to Mills, are a result of presentation, suggestion and structure. Materials of creation, such as paint and sound, arouse sensations that have qualities. Mills construes qualities like shiny or dull surfaces, mellow or sharp sounds, fast or slow movements and monumental, swirling or chaotic structures as metaphoric in themselves, that is, without institutional context. This possibility informed the minimalism of the Symposium. While the artists pushed this into more theoretically informed spaces, nonetheless, the semiotics of qualitative experience was to the fore.

For artist Honi Ryan performing could be a decision or intention. She drew attention to this possibility by distinguishing one moment from another in creatively relevant ways. One way to make sense of this is to understand art as research, as each artist like Ryan worked with a material which in her case was her own body in movement. In other words, artistic process involved a material investigation. The properties of these materials might be assessed for their tactile, haptic or sensuous values alongside the semiotic, symbolic or metaphorical presence they embodied. For example, musician Richard Kean explored the sounds of a single stringed bow. It might be perceived as a functioning musical instrument, a

musical teacher's tool, an alerting device or a toy. But it might also be employed to stand as a prop - a stand-in for the idea of musical creation. Furthermore, it might be intended as a metaphor for simplicity of expression or a finely tuned performance of art or life.

The success or failure of a form's ability to occupy metaphorical and semiotic status is in the hands of the artist and their task would seem to involve finding complicated signifiers to engage their audience in the appropriate experience and reflection. Some artists of course opt to work primarily with ideas, but at this Symposium each artist brought material into the arena of their work, even when it was their own body. Ryan's work mentioned above, involved transforming at will her act of walking along a street into an artwork. Art, when understood in terms of research, does not define it as a specific kind of product produced for a gallery. On the contrary, Ryan's art was produced outside this context, emphasising the continuities between our daily 'non-artistic' lives, popular culture and fine art. Nonetheless, fine art might be thought of as a meta-narrative that throws the qualities and connotations of the everyday into relief, and Ryan's work certainly achieved this.

[Image 5 inserted here]

The semiotics of materiality addresses the space between image and text, and a performance rich in metaphoric references was that of Emily Parsons-Lord. The connotations and values associated with sensory qualities as demonstrated in the discussions surrounding her performance were very affecting, yet not private nor personal to any individual. Her work relied on a code of semiotics that enabled her to exploit metaphors and associations that the audience would recognise. Her performance entitled, 'You will always be wanted by me', explored the act of naming stars and 'dedicating' them

to loved ones. She represented each star by mimicking perceived properties of its chemical structure in a smoke bomb, each combination creating distinct combinations of colours. She interwove these explosions of colour and smoke with explanations of astronomy and the narratives of the names they were given. The names were remarkable such as: *'The only lie I ever told "I never loved you"'*; *'Remember me exactly this way'*; and *'I am so so so so sorry Katherine'*. As audience members we were invited to participate in the collective imagination of the galaxy as described through astronomy, colonialism and the social, emotive associations of stars, and we accepted. This interplay between the physical and ephemeral, the sublime and trite romanticism, sincerity and commercialism could only make sense within a communicative structure in which we collectively participated. The anthropological view of a connection between the values and connotations of sensory impressions in everyday life and art is the opposite of Jean Baudrillard's discussion of the postmodern condition. According to Baudrillard, the once separated domains of economy, art, politics and sexuality collapse into one another (1993). However, Parsons-Lord's work denies that these domains were ever autonomous. The semiotic code is why art may 'comment', so devastatingly at times, so beautifully at others, on life.

The semiotic code also speaks to our capacity to imagine. When we imagine we do not leave our particular experience, knowledge and training behind. That is, we do not enter an artworld bubble. Certain examples brought this home such as artist Miranda Lawry's finely tuned documentations of the bizarre practices currently driving hospital design in the region where our Symposium took place. The work got under our skin because it explored the themes from within, using imagery, personal stories and anecdotes, beautifully calibrated into a work presented as hard-bound books. A community based hospital where surgeons out surfing knew when their shift was to begin when their beach towel was hung from a

windowsill, is just one of the delightful examples we were given of what was replaced by a new state of the art building whose medical staff were confined to windowless spaces for their downtime; as though the way to boost patient morale had nothing to do with the moral of the medical staff.

The contrast between Lawry's topic and that of literary theorist Alexandra Dry did not faze the audience. Dry's team of actors performed an ancient play by the early modern playwright Jane Lumley, whose purpose and conditions of creation were unknown. We imagined all kinds of things and enjoyed the performance on many levels. One line of inquiry, given the play's theme involved a woman being condemned to death by her father who was a high ranking official at the time, and the fact it was an interpretation by a woman of an earlier play, led to reflection on the way semiotic systems can privilege the ruling or dominant class within a society and limit the creative potential of minorities as they determine how a work is framed and received. In our own interpretations of the play, and the interpretation of the earlier play by the playwright, what was on display was the degree to which our imaginations are embedded within our own experiences. Our imaginations might be free to choose topics, themes, methods and associated practices but our understanding of those choices is limited to our cognitive heritage. Lumley made creative choices and we imagined what her choices might have meant.

Over lunch the commentators argued about whether an unperformed play, as this apparently had been, can be rightfully considered a play. This made a difference to the way we thought about what we had witnessed, its significance. Yet it was now a play that had been performed, at least in part. We had been witness to an ontological conversion: the text had not changed, but its significance had, that it was meant to be experienced as spoken within a dramatic context, with all the connotations and innuendo that any context would

provide. This concern draws attention to what imagination can do if not create from nothing. We re-construe, reprioritise and reconfigure; and the work presented could be said to have prompted our imaginative engagement in this respect.

The musician Linda Walsh paraphrased Gaston Bachelard on imagination, where he muses that imagination consists of being freed from reality, a powerful idea for inspiring work like her own. We saw a video clip of her playing the oboe, where the sounds were electronically tuned into a digitally generated water display which reverberated with her playing. The theme relied on our willingness to find pleasure in the moment but our engagement was not freed from reality in as much as imagination necessarily draws upon our past experience, knowledge and training. Nonetheless, what works as a guide in creation is justified in that respect alone regardless of whether it stands analytic scrutiny. In any case, her work might well have prompted a new synthesis of our memory traces, a going beyond the concepts we have at our disposal and in this once again, Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas has explanatory power.

Philip Matthias' presentation of his collaboration with the Murray Island musicians and composers might also be considered in this light. Some audience members objected to a white woman singing a sweet lullaby composed by an indigenous person. The overpowering sense had been that the music and singing were beautiful; but the onus shifted now to those who privileged the pleasures of the imagination to justify their stance in the face of political considerations. Yet aesthetic pleasure may be more than something to exploit for one's ends. It may be something to open one to new perspectives (Kneller, 1998; McMahon, 2014). In other words, this may be another demonstration which denies that the various domains of culture such as economy, art, politics and sexuality were ever autonomous, contra Baudrillard (1993); and that the un-codifiability of aesthetic pleasure



among those who share it, creates the conditions for a new community. To deny the political potential of aesthetic pleasure is to close off an avenue remaining for cultural renewal.

[Image 6 inserted here]

### **Conclusion**

The success of a symposium is always a matter of unfinished business, for it must go only so far in living up to its name in bringing people together. But the genuine spirit of cooperation which prevailed over the weekend produced something which it is difficult to record but left us all feeling a very constructive basis for further collaboration had been established. To come together means not to be a prisoner of one's practices and habits; but it also means that the community in whose horizon we exist has not yet taken shape, that it is a work in progress, that indeed it can only ever be a work in progress if it is not to congeal into a dogma, a nationalism, a jargon. As discussed earlier, "pleasure" understood in the Kantian sense, provides the anchor which defies codification. Philosophy-art gives itself over to experimentation as co-creator of the meaning ascribed to art, both in the general sense of the word and also regarding particular instances of art. In doing so, philosophy-art turns its back on one community, but establishes the conditions for a new one, one made possible by our capacity for the open-ended indeterminacy of the objects of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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<sup>1</sup> URL provided ----

<sup>2</sup> At *The Lock-Up* we made an excellent first step toward facilitating communication and collaboration between the two areas largely thanks to the foresight of ---- The commentators included ---- The curators were ----

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<sup>3</sup> Further projects include ----