

Jonathan Jones *untitled [heads or tails]*

Published in *Column*, Artspace, 2009

Lily Hibberd

'On the various effects of cross-pollination and the botanical logic of abstraction'

Metric systems, atomic clocks, global economic regulation and remote orientation; everything is measured out and we, the people who create the whole regime, dutifully follow its ordinances. While it seems that rationalism has the upper hand, each of us has admittedly spurned order at some point, pronouncing, 'Let fate decide. I'll take my chances.' What prompts this slippage of reason? Freedom of choice is hard-won but this same autonomy is often overwhelming. Even in the most uncomplicated of situations chance can be called upon to step in where we fear to exercise free will.

The coin is an archetype of fate, fortune and of destiny. Like choice it is dual—it is a single entity with two distinctive sides. Its oppositional status is exemplified by the trope of the toss. Although probability determines the outcome of the final act, to flip a coin involves two parties and several choices: whose small change will be used, who will make the toss, and who will call out 'heads or tails'. As in all interactions with providence the decision is deferred to an agent, albeit a minor authority in the guise of luck. Few seem to care what law or force is given free reign for at the flip of the coin we make the unmitigated admission that chance and design are inseparable as two infatuated lovers. This is just the beginning of our devotion to fate, which additionally turns on the supposition that this life is paradoxically constructed, knowing that the two sides of the coin—the

head and the tail—can never see each other. Nonetheless, oppositional thought makes life easy. It's black or it's white, it's on or it's off, it's dark or it's light.

In his recent Artspace installation *untitled [heads or tails]* Jonathan Jones presents a dualistic scenario. At least that's what the title implies. Look closely, the words comprise a question. Which will you choose? To make matters worse you're standing in a room buzzing with electrical light, as ten individual fluorescent tubes are each rolled into twenty-six cylindrical clusters, each of which either stand up on one end or lay down sideways on the gallery's concrete floor. These gather into parties of two and three or more in arrangements reminiscent of animal behaviour. Like bees or ants, the fittings are orchestrated into groupings, yet they follow no discrete or single rule because of the rule of the 'multitude', also known as the law of many. Order and chaos coexist in this polymorphous dimension just as in games of chance and with the edicts of instinct. Even so, when it comes to art, we hope to find a fixed and meaningful outcome, and its interpretation follows this premise. There are rules of engagement and with installations of this ilk the coin tends to show just one of its sides. The work is therefore regarded either in terms of delimited perceptual experience or as a series of signs already decoded. In Jones's work, however, these rules are effaced; it is at once heads *and* tails, both a phenomenological and hermeneutic encounter, its meaning elicited *through* experience. As such *heads or tails* reveals its origins in ideological forms of art that comprise the common ground between abstraction and ethics.

Attempts at a dialogue between doctrine and real life have constituted the Khyber Pass of philosophy, for the pilgrimage from the abstraction of ideology to the practical application of ethics has been riddled with treacherous roads, insurgents and inclement weather. This road was basically impassable until semiotics unlocked the deep structure of language. It has revealed that

semantics and signification are always in a dialectical momentum, because language is concomitant and reciprocal even though meaning is the highest aim of human will. The Russian formalists argued that readers' pursued meaning in this way due to the force of 'motivation', which literary theorist Raman Selden defined as a refusal 'to allow a text to remain alien and outside our frames of reference' so that 'no matter how formally constructed a work may be, we still often expect it to give us the illusion of the "real"'.ⁱ To say therefore that a work's interpretation cannot go beyond what is manifest in the mere presence of the materials, that art has no other meaning, is an imposition arguably out of step with human engagement.

The tussle between non-objective practice and concerns in regards to its political and ethical relevancy is not a recent preoccupation. It has its roots in early 20th century Russian artistic production, with aforesaid formalist literary theory on the one hand, and with the emergence of suprematist painting and the inspiration of Kazimir Malevich on the other. Although as an installation *heads or tails* is more immediately affiliated with the aesthetics of late minimalism the questions of engagement raised by formalism still apply, and they once more belie the intention of Jones's reductive formal approaches. Calling a work 'untitled', for instance, is the hallmark of modernist abstraction's infamous buffalo stance of empty rhetoric. The premise of the terms was not to enact a total closure of signification but to bring about the contrary. Like Roland Barthes's notion of the 'death of the author', 'untitled' is a sign that the artist has relinquished their authorial role and is intended to engage the viewer in open and multiple interactions with the work.ⁱⁱ But let it be said that far too few artists apply 'untitled' with critical or conceptual intent, and this is even more vacuous in instances where an artist fails to find words to describe their own creation (which is distinct from refusing to apply them). This cannot be said of Jones, who shows us that he is acutely aware of the historical trope. The two parts of his title, 'untitled' and 'heads or tails', contend with each other, throwing doubt on the work's naming, un-naming, and handing

the dilemma over to the viewer, while dryly pointing out the ludicrous semantic permutations of un-titling.

Sometimes iconoclastic, formalist art is by no means devoid of meaning. Arthur C Danto addressed the paradox of the negative frame of Malevich's non-objective art, saying that the 'idea behind what Malevich called suprematism is that you cannot carry things beyond *Black Square*. It is as far as you can go: You have reached a point of absolute zero. Which isn't to say that *Black Square* is empty—there is, after all, a difference between not being a picture and being a picture of nothing!'ⁱⁱⁱ In Malevich we also see the intersection of art and social reality. His theory of painting held that the organisation of its elements as pure geometry released the image into space, a realm that viewers would encounter as reality. Somewhere between monument and sculpture, his impossible skyscrapers, called 'architektons', were utopian prototypes for the later work of the constructivists under the direction of the Russian state in the mid to late 1920s. The failure of these models can be attributed to their forms being 'cemented' instead of being active works of art, design and architecture, and similarly it is the materiality of suprematism that prevented its realisation as an art of sensation. Regardless, for Malevich, it was via the aesthetics of pure feeling that suprematism upheld social transformation as its core ethos (even though this concept led to a schism between those who believed art could transport the people beyond the mundane to a higher existence and those who pursued it in service of society). With hindsight it is possible to contend that the formlessness of contemporary installation practice has arisen as an unsurpassed artform of sensation. If only the suprematists had been able to foresee that utopian experience would find its apotheosis in 20th century art in the medium of light.

The shift from the representation of light in art to the enactment of direct experience followed the invention of the incandescent light globe and the mass distribution of electricity in the late 1800s. Art movements of the 20th century, such as futurism, constructivism, and kinetic art, were fascinated with the dynamic and effects of artificial light. Artists and filmmakers like Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy saw manufactured light as one of the greatest technical advancements of the modern age and a sign of its social and material revolutionary capacity. Since the early 1960s light has been a prominent feature of installation, sculpture, land art, and interactive or virtual and immersive environments. Minimalism revived the ideals of Russian utopian architecture of the 1920s, taking the rationale of reductive design to an extreme in which the future spared no room for any vestiges of the past. A curious exception to this rule is Dan Flavin's *Monument to V. Tatlin* (1966–69). This sculpture emulates Vladimir Tatlin's famous 1919 constructivist design, *Monument to the Third International*, yet evades historicism or monumentality because of his choice of the dynamic material of light.

Flavin's fluorescent tubing sculpture is the obvious correlate of Jones's work with light. Yet comparisons of form risk overly restrictive readings, particularly given the possibilities that artists like Bruce Nauman have brought to the same materials. Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* (1970), for example, inverts the object-viewer hierarchy, as two very closely placed walls and a changing display of electric light make captive the viewer who walks its length and thus engages in a transformative physical and perceptual process. This participatory format aligns Nauman with the interests of more recent practice, for, while Dan Flavin's light sculptures are static objects, light-based artworks tend not to be inert. Contemporary artists such as James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson and Cerith Wyn Evans, for instance, rely on the active quality of light and how it pivots on the

interaction of entities, in what could be sometimes be seen as an operation of as the artist-as-physicist.

Untitled [heads or tails] functions on this level. Yet it speaks through its phenomenology, just by 'being', without aggrandising the technological or scientific status of the materials. What does it say? Well, any attempt at semantics would be a brutish imposition, so all that can be reasonably surmised are patterns of behaviour, determined by way of interaction. Being pure energy, light is measureable by its level of activity. Like all matter, it has specific properties, which are its intensity, frequency, polarisation, and its phase or duration. These features can be present on the level of human awareness or exist beneath perception. In Jones's installation the effects of light take over the conscious analysis of its outward form. The behaviour of light in *head or tails* is particular to the phenomenology of fluorescent lamplight. The two most noticeable features are its distinctive colouration and its differential electrical charge, which sometimes appears as an uneven emission of light or 'flickering'. For all that fine adjustments to the phosphor coating and the speed of the recharge have made for a more pleasing medium, fluorescent light is exotic. Its being is oppositional, based on binaries of attraction-repulsion and positive-negative charge. And many argue that such conditions of light have a profound effect on the human psyche. Nonetheless, high levels of light exposure seem to influence mood in positive ways, whereas rapid fluctuations of light have nasty consequences for certain individuals, especially for those with neurological conditions such as epilepsy. The visual perception of light phenomena has a semantic construction too. Its capacity extends to association with the unseen, from the uncanny to the spectral. On the level of its social and physical reality, light persists within the canon of social and spiritual archetypes. Its positive imagery is associated with faith, beauty, life, enlightenment,

illumination, therapy, fantasy, healing and intense exhilaration, and yet light can be hazardous, it can burn, induce a bad trip, alienate or terrify.

Contemporary installation has seen the proliferation of embodied art, in an exacerbation of the effects of the physically 'immersive' experience. In its most outlandish incarnations, recent video and sculptural works have been criticised for providing spectacle at the cost of meaningful engagement. This betrays the core ethos of conceptual art, which has always held to the precept that its imagery exists as a powerful form of 'mental sculpture' and not in empty gesture. The logic of abstraction in the realm of conceptual art remains uncertain nonetheless. Further clarification, however, can be found in the permutations of philosophy and mathematics. In the mid-1960s Jacques Lacan took up the non-objective elements of communication, or the logic of abstraction that comprises structuralist linguistics, to significantly reform theories of subjectivity.^{iv} As such, abstract relations like semiotics have underpinned many modern conceptions of the human subject, but it is only more recently, in the last 20 years, that a path has been cleared from abstract to ethical thought through the work of Alain Badiou. Coming from mathematics, Badiou has articulated a theory of being and multiplicity via the praxis of set theory. Badiou takes the empty set at the centre of this mathematical schema to offer a way to reconceptualise the philosophy of being as heterogeneous, multiple and temporalised, and this forms the crux of his thesis on ethics. Badiou then extends the correspondence of ethics to abstract formulation to encompass the problem of the estrangement of the individual from capitalist society.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have also addressed the notion of multiplicity as a conduit of political agency. Across their three major works, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and, more recently, *Commonwealth* (2009), and Hardt and Negri have

revived the Platonic notion of the 'multitude' to argue for the inherent power of the masses to resist political repression.^v This follows Michel Foucault's assertion in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that since the Victorian age social subjugation has been founded on reciprocity; that the socialisation of the masses has taken place through their willingness to conform.^{vi} Foucault claimed that this coincided with an embrace of repression's verbal terms, which gave birth to the language of repression, which operated under a law of silence.

Sexual expression has been wedded to the art of allusion ever since. And, odd as it may seem, innuendo is what I took to be the inference of the title of Jones's installation: surely, apart from choosing which side of a coin to bet on, 'heads or tails' is one of those cheeky propositions made when two or more mates are entwined in bed?

Yet none of Badiou, Hardt, Negri or Foucault seem to be that interested in the ethical primacy of sexual choice. We find elsewhere, however, that sexual behaviour operates not only in a purely social sense but in a generative biological way too. Marcel Proust makes this point in the extended allusive description of an aristocrat's seduction of a tailor in the opening passage of *The Cities of the Plain* from *The Remembrance of Things Past*. His narration continues a notion introduced at the end of the preceding volume, *The Guermantes Way*, in which Proust describes in great detail the process of pollination of an orchid by a bee. *Cities of the Plain* commences with Proust's description of the humorous episode of the passionate encounter of aristocrat M. de Charlus and Jupien the tailor, making the following botanical comparison: 'I found the pantomime, incomprehensible to me at first, of Jupien and M. de Charlus as curious as those seductive gestures addressed, Darwin tells us, to insects not only by the flowers called composite which

erect the florets of their capitals so as to be seen from a greater distance, such as a certain heterostyle ...^{vii}

This fleeting reference reveals the importance of Charles Darwin to Proust's story arc. In *On the Various Contrivances by Which British and Foreign Orchids Are Fertilised by Insects, and on the good effects of intercrossing* (1862), Darwin established the adaptive characteristics of flowering orchids and the evolution of behaviours that augment the survival of the species. Proust divulges his fascination with Darwinian theories of sexual selection in his extended allegory. At the outset of *Cities of the Plain* Proust argues for the necessity of the cross-fertilisation and the bee in the natural world: 'If the visit of an insect, that is to say, the transportation of the seed of one flower is generally necessary for the fertilisation of another, that is, because of autofecundation, the fertilisation of a flower by itself, would lead, like a succession of intermarriages in the same family, to degeneracy and sterility, whereas the crossing effected by the insects gives to the subsequent generations of the same species a vigour unknown to their forebears.'^{viii} While Darwin's ideas regarding genetic diversity are well understood today, Proust's story seemingly appropriates the former's claims regarding the prowess of orchids in seducing bees. What becomes politically prescient in terms of the multitude is that flowers offer an argument for the role of liberated sexual practices in genetic diversification. Just as the bee pollinates across the field of flowers, M. de Charlus spreads his seed by a principle of pure attraction. A lovely paradox emerges here: homosexual intercourse thwarts any reproductive capacity but, particularly for an aristocrat, sexual partnership being confined to a family or genetic 'set' poses the danger of inbreeding. Far better to have less reproduction and more diversification than genetic mutilation. The added rationale of this form of multiplicity is that it defies the monoculture and conformities of patriarchy and so deviance from its moribund conjugal relations can therefore be seen as a necessary act of survival.

Foucault has also propounded in *The History of Sexuality* that the nuclear family is part of a hegemonic order of social institutions, and that any break with its binding social mores was unlikely as it would entail the individual coming extricating themselves from the matrix of society (which inscribed social meaning within the subject in the first place). Dismantling the familial order has been a preoccupation and a myth of rampant individualism in the neoliberal West. But 20th century sexual liberation has not brought the freedom from ideological constraints that it was supposed to, as the 'family' remains in place as an overriding ideal of capitalist society. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make precisely this point in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). They too discuss Proust's extended Darwinian allegory to make an argument for liberated sexual desire. They contend that Charlus's form of bisexuality offers of the chief means of resisting the repressive function of gendered sexual categorisations under patriarchy, saying 'the innocence of flowers' has an added message, that 'everyone is bisexual, everyone has two sexes, but partitioned, noncommunicating; the man is merely the one in whom the male part, and the woman the one in whom the female part, dominates statistically.'^{ix} The core thesis of *Anti-Oedipus* pivots on the liberation of desire from patriarchal and Oedipal precepts.

Deleuze and Guattari contend that people, as part of capitalist machine, are denied their bisexuality or their 'partial objects', which cuts off the 'nonpersonal flows that pass from one person to another'.^x This asserted stands true for today, for society remains intent on maintaining the regime intact, even though genetic engineering has radically transformed notions of breeding from a simple meeting of two sexes into a radical multiplicity of species, genomes and rhizomatic configurations of gender. So, while genetic research sheds all the old rules and cross-fertilises to

its heart's content, absurdity reigns as further constraints and moral codes further designate the parameters of our exclusion.

I'm usually wary of overstating the political import of art, so let me clarify here that the parallels I am about to draw are present in the work only because I can relate them to direct experience—to the unfolding of thinking that takes place in the company of the art object. Such an encounter occurs only occasionally, but it brings about a transubstantiation from form to concept, and this is experience that *untitled [heads or tails]* engenders.

Light behaves in this work like organic-sexuality. It implicates us in an orgasmic play of multiplicity. This behaviour, like the waywardness of Charlus's sexual desire, has nothing to do with perversion but constitutes an anti-Oedipal 'desiring-production', which Deleuze and Guattari have argued is the paramount, albeit repressed, order of desire.^{xi} So, apart from the immediate pleasure of bright reverberating light, *heads or tails* has the radical potential of the bee, one that spans aesthetic form, conceptual premises and ideological agendas. In this instance the 'untitled' work transcends the empty signifier and becomes the site of a potential event, one that incites us to act like a free radical. In this way it liberates us of a plethora of oppressive (and artful or clever) duties, if only for a moment. The possibilities of the event are limitless: if you are willing, *untitled* might excite you like a positive electron in a charged field, taking you somewhere between lightness and electrical cables, to the intermediary zone of earthly pleasure, freedom and the entanglement of others.

ⁱ Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989, p. 14 & 35.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana, London, 1977.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arthur C Danto, 'Kazimir Malevich' in *Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 252.

^{iv} Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis (Séminar XI, 1964)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans Alain Sheridan, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1979.

^v Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2000; *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Press, New York, 2004; and *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2009.

^{vi} Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, an introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, London, 1990.

^{vii} Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain I* in *The Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 4, trans. CK Scott Moncrieff, Chatto & Windus, London, 1957, p. 35.

^{viii} *ibid.*, p. 12.

^{ix} Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R, Continuum, London, 2004, p. 77.

^x *ibid.*

^{xi} This notion emanates out of a Spinozan formulation of desire as the 'conatus', the innate striving of a living thing to continue to exist, or its 'perseverance in being'. Cf. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, Penguin Books, London, 1996.