

**Cath Ferguson: 'The Life of Forms in Painting: the work of Juan Usle'**  
presented at 'The Work of Gilles Deleuze' Conference, University of Greenwich,  
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This paper is a work-in-progress and is rather speculative in places; it forms part of a research degree which will be completed later this year which is both practice and thesis based, although my overarching interest is to make paintings and so the writing is really orientated to that end. I haven't written about my own paintings, I'm not sure why, although practice informs my approach to other artists work chosen because it has intrigued me in some way – paintings by Tim Renshaw, the French artist Bernard Frize and the Spanish painter Juan Usle – who is the subject of today's talk. In fact it is the intrigue that I have tried to unfold in writing – that aspect of the work that escapes representation, that can't be pointed to and described. During this research I have increasingly drawn on the philosophy of Deleuze whose work I have interpreted according to my own needs (and in this sense the relation of my work to Deleuze repeats what I am about to say about the relation of Juan Usle's photography to the genesis of his paintings). By this I mean that I have not sought to re-present Deleuze but to appropriate concepts as necessary in order to expand my perceptions.

If, following Deleuze, art produces a new way of sensing the world then, from an artist's point of view, writing based on judgments about sense-experience in relation to pre-determined values and concepts has little relevance. However, the possibility of investigating the encounter with a work *as both the creation of sensible qualities and the formation of sensibility itself* is very much to the point. Making work is not a process of finding alternatives from within what is already known but is a process that produces sensible happenings by the destruction of clichés and clear intentions and the creation of new horizons and perspectives.

This is what is at stake, I think, in Deleuze's 'transcendental empiricism'. Even the most effective empirical models of art criticism ultimately rely on a 'representational moment' to the extent that events are engaged with only at the level of their identification and specification in experience. A good example of this would be Yve-Alain Bois whose collection of essays *Painting as Model* was published in the 1990s whose work is one of the best available in terms of giving importance to the primacy

and specificity of the work as the basis for critical analysis, rather than that widespread tendency to centre discourse on a pre-determined theoretical model and use examples of art work to illustrate the argument. Each of the essays in that book begins with a question raised by a specific work or body of work which is investigated by importing a theoretical model in part or whole from other disciplines. The value of each enquiry is that it doesn't seek to represent the work but to determine the question more fully. For this formalist methodology the implication is that form is not a pre-given ideal (as in Modernist discourse, for example) but it is a set of relations produced by the work which can only be grasped by an enquiry into a question; into precisely what cannot be judged.

However, there is a sense in which this methodology does not go far enough. The question effectively stands in for what generates the question so that the subsequent discussion happens at some distance from the concerns of practice. The more interesting and relevant enquiry is into the genetic conditions of the question; or rather the genetic conditions of sensible experience that gave rise to the question. For a transcendental empiricism experience is not the origin of thought but is regarded as the representation of something already formed. The question becomes not about the givens of experience but about how these givens come to be given; of how the sensible is also the genesis of sensibility itself.

I want to draw a parallel between the genesis of the art work as a new way of sensing the world, a new form of sensibility, and the evolution of new organisms and species which can also be said to create new ways of sensing the world. Different species (a bee and a mouse, for example) may live in the same spatial region but according to a biosemiotic model of evolution, as opposed to the more familiar Darwinian account, that environment is filtered or transformed by the living system according to what is important or 'significant' to it (in what the 19<sup>th</sup> C ethologist von Uexkull terms its own Umwelt or *objective world*)<sup>1</sup>. In other words the genesis of a species is not an adaptation to a given environment but it is also the differentiation of a new environment or Umwelt. It is this model which I am going to use to explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bains, 'Umwelten', p138

evolution of Juan Usle's paintings and the differentiation of an environment that includes photography.

Whatever else it may be photography is a mechanical process of capturing light with an apparatus that has a number of variables: precise location in time and place, a lens modified by aperture, shutter speed and focal length and a light sensitive surface which subsequently forms the photograph. What typifies Usle's work is an attention to the act of capturing an image by manipulating these variables rather than with the image itself as 'subject matter'.

This emphasis demonstrates the indexical nature of photography. According to CS Pierce signs work in (at least) three different ways: as index, as icon, as symbol. The typically up-close and parallel view that Usle often chooses denies motifs their symbolic or iconic value by eliminating the object/space duality, which registers as depth in the photographic image. This draws attention to the surface of the photograph and to the surfaces of what is photographed which effectively become a means of manipulating light before it reaches the lens (by reflection, refraction, effacement or absence); in a sense these surfaces become part of the apparatus itself. This manipulation draws attention to light as the very means of forming an image; for light, reflected by external surfaces, having passed through the lens, marks photo-sensitive paper. To this extent the image is formed 'without prejudice'.

In this example *S.T. Colosia* the image is taken parallel to a door or screen, excluding any contextual information. The image has little spatial or symbolic interest but as the image has been formed indexically 'without prejudice' what grabs our attention is the pattern of light spots that continue across the surface. Despite the continuity of appearance, the pattern has been formed in different ways: the spots on top by an absence of light caused by the screen that blocks light and the spots on the bottom by the presence of light as it falls onto the paving stones. The point is that the pattern becomes interesting because the causal link between appearance and formation has been broken and this happens when the surfaces of the objects in the photographs become part of the photographic apparatus i.e. when they become functions and not identities.

Despite a lack of similarity of appearance Usle's paintings have something of the photograph in them. A discourse on 'influences' generally assumes a causal model for which the cause is effectively made of the same stuff as its effect, in other words it is a narrative that ignores the material specificity of both. The alternative is to examine the *relation* between these terms as it were not a given, as a relation of difference that is not subsumed by an overarching term of reference. This suggests the possibility that the painting/photograph connection can be thought despite the fact that it is not verifiable in terms of what can be described, in terms of empirical experience.

What I referred to earlier as a biosemiotic model of evolution is useful in this respect because the connection between organism and environment is not one of cause and effect. Most people are familiar with a general idea of Darwin's theory of natural selection: an organism that is best suited to survive in its environment will be able to pass on its advantageous form in reproduction. Subsequent scientific discoveries (of DNA, for example) have inevitably changed evolutionary studies but two important principles continue to underpin what has become known as neo-Darwinism: mechanism and finalism. Finalism posits a direction to evolution towards greater complexity which is a process that is causally explained by the mechanism of natural selection.

The challenge to neo-Darwinism from the field of biosemiotics provides a way of thinking about how species evolve not to adapt to an environment in order to fulfil a pre-given purpose but evolve to create new ways of sensing the world and of differentiating new environments; and by the same token how painting could evolve to do the same. As the name suggests biosemiotics has introduced theory from cultural studies into scientific study. In their papers on the semiotic metaphor in biology Emmeche and Hoffmeyer approach a critique of natural selection by questioning the logic of such a mechanism as a way of understanding how new forms are generated<sup>2</sup> and for the purposes of this discussion, how new forms of sensibility are generated. They argue that formal diversity cannot be produced by an incremental process based on the gradual improvement of function because this mechanism only modifies patterns already given. This is to suggest that natural selection is not enough

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<sup>2</sup> 'Code-Duality and the Semiotics of Nature'

to determine what new life forms will develop - only those that are not viable. They argue that the creation of new form is actually the creation of new formal patterns not substances. Accordingly, for biosemiotics, the organism is not formed by obeying the command of DNA as if it passively receives instructions. This is not to deny the importance of DNA but to argue that its importance is to inform the system about itself in such a way that its development involves the subjective interpretation of information from its environment. Thus DNA is understood within an alternative concept of information which is based on difference. The number of potential differences that surround the system is infinite, however, so that for differences to become information they must first be selected by some kind of 'mind'; the recipient system. For example, reading is a response by the sensory organ of the eye to multiple differences in ink and paper, not to ink itself. Information is conceived of as *difference that makes a difference to the recipient*. In this case information is not substance or energy but 'news of difference' or a sign.

This is difficult to grasp. The system forms itself dynamically by interpreting information in the course of its development, but how does it come to know which differences to select? Emmeche and Hoffmeyer suggest the idea of genetic *code-duality* to account for this. This duality consists of a phase of the code that is digital which re-describes the system as a set of structural relations in space and time, it is the 'memory' of the system; and a phase of the code that is analogue according to which this memory is expressed by the selection of actual differences from the environment by which the organism develops.

What the expression of code-duality implies is that the work or more precisely our encounter with the work as a new form of sensibility is not an encounter that can be measured relative to a representation of the past: neither the past as a representation of the environment in which the work evolved nor the past represented by a supposed plan or aim that has within it conceptions and memories of what painting is. We are forced to realise that these ideas are fictions which satisfy a need to represent the experience of the work in terms of other things. According to the temporal conundrum of code-duality the future is not determined by a plan or aim or by the environment but must be undetermined. The organism does not evolve according to a mechanism towards a pre-established end rather it is a system of relations that differentiates fields

of intensity within an unpredictable environment according to what is relevant and what is not. Through the materials and processes that create the (open) system the past (the digital aspect) is not reproduced but is re-coded according to the environment which (as a new form, a new form of sensibility) it also creates.

What is at stake in the art work understood to be a living organism produced by the expression of code-duality is that the digitally encoded 'memory' of painting and its expression in the analogue phase, in the interpretation of its environment cannot be understood as representations of the works' past and present that can be projected into the work as meaning (which would serve the interests of a model of interpretation outside of the work – a form of finalism). In an important way these aspects, memory and environment, are not identities that precede the work but are only formed in the genesis of the work. How can a 'memory' of the system be formed only in the present, isn't this a contradiction in terms?

If the digital 'memory' of the system is understood to be not a memory of instances that could be reproduced but (I very tentatively suggest) understood as a past that is formed alongside the present, and therefore a past that also accompanies every present as a synthesis of those past presents, the present becomes a reservoir of future interpretations. The 'memory' of painting is thus not fixed and representable but a past inscribed in the present, interpreted at the same time as it interprets its environment.

In making a related point in a discussion on Cinema Christian Kerslake puts it succinctly:

Because the content of each present cannot simply be delimited as soon as the moment has passed, and because it therefore remains open for future reinterpretation, we must assume that the past is somehow formed 'alongside' the present: for otherwise we are left without a measure for determining how the past remains *that* past. Bergson's paradoxical resolution, according to Deleuze, is that 'no present would ever pass were it not past "at the same time" as it is present...The past is contemporaneous with the present that it *was*. In other words, each actual present is somehow doubled by a virtual 'shadow' of itself, which enables it to be re-actualised as the past it will have been.

As Kerslake goes on to point out this ‘double inscription’ of past and present is not experienced as such in normal circumstances; when our attention is directed towards the future, however, I want to argue that in the encounter with the work our attention is arrested. In this situation neither can our attention be directed towards the past; to those representations of the environment or plans prior to the work. In this situation I want to argue that the unplanned as a set of possibilities based on probability becomes something that could never have been planned: it is *only* possible i.e. not real or more correctly virtual. This virtual clearly cannot be functional. The biosemiotic model rejects a mode of formal development based on functionalism. Instead organisms are understood to evolve as self-organising, self-referring systems or ‘autopoietic entities’. It follows that the virtual (in its lack of functionality) is the site of formal development.

In fact one of the aspects I most enjoy about Usle’s paintings is that they seem to have been made with great freedom as if painting is an opportunity to act without a function or pre-determined end in mind. Here composition is not an organisation of forms in space, marks and motifs seem to occur rather than having been planned in advance. It is as if they have been made off the cuff with no great worry about the difficulty of painting or its status. In other words they do not refer themselves to an identity painting may have but the stake is to add something, not to render what is past old but to re-distribute the past in the creation of the new.

In terms of such a re-distribution the digital aspect of the code could be thought of as the re-description of painting as a system which constructs a relation between literal, physical surface and a pictorial ‘space’ (although it is not easy to say what ‘pictorial space’ is – not illusionistic depth necessarily but something that has a lineage, in the Western tradition, back to a space in which meaning happens). For photography to be a differentiation of a field of intensity in the environment (a ‘perceptual sign’ rather than a causal impulse) it would not be as image but as a form of difference; a difference that made a difference to that pictorial system which differentiates surface and space.

Usle does not disguise objects in the photographs as in a TV quiz ( which works by minimizing the clues that lead to recognition) but, based on the earlier discussion the differentials of the photograph occur in the appearance of a continuous pattern which has been formed discontinuously. The light spots/bands are all in fact the trace of light that has passed through the lens and fallen on the photosensitive paper, the absence or presence of light is the only difference that makes a difference here, there is no discrimination as to how the light got there and in this sense this indexical formation is a corporeal formation. On the other hand the fact that we know that the pattern of light spots have been formed in different ways could be said to be an incorporeal formation; so that the photographs affect a disjunction of a corporeal formation and an incorporeal formation.

This disjuncture happens because space is not allowed to operate as the foundation which distinguishes different objects. The objects in the photograph become surfaces (the screen and the paving stones) and it is light rather than space that is, not an a priori form, but the means by which these surfaces become functions. The absence of an overarching space is the condition of possibility for light to lose its identity forming function and to be split into its indexical (corporeal) function and its signifying, narrative, descriptive (incorporeal) function.

How does this difference make a difference to the painting system re-described by the digital code? It is not possible for painting to repeat the same act of disjuncture because the relations that I have described in photography depend on its indexical nature and painting is made from different materials and processes – this is why the connection can't be on the level of appearance, of image.

In front of the work it is still possible to tell that Usle paints on a carefully-prepared surface: layers of gesso sanded down to create a smooth texture that is slightly absorbent. This absorbency ensures that every nuance of hesitantly applied paint registers with great clarity; the marks are prevented from being wholly gestural by this very material process and yet they are neither purely formal as they retain an evidently graphic quality reinforced by a picture plane established by bands of paint repeated across the surface. Thus the materials and processes that are particular to Usle's work are able to repeat those relations established in photography: there is no



overarching pictorial space to which each brush stroke refers; no tension across the surface or semi-figurative form; rather the identity-forming function of the brush stroke (as the unit of facture) is split in to an indexical (corporeal) function which insists on the planarity of the surface and into a graphic (incorporeal) function.

The insistence on the surface plane by repeating marks or forms across the surface or gathered into regions insist that the graphic elements do not refer to a spatial identity that would mediate difference in relation to itself; rather elements relate according to their intrinsic difference. The spatial discontinuity in Usle's painting is not a signified discontinuity as in Fiona Rae's paintings in which there is no effective rupture between the corporeal and the incorporeal: the discontinuous space bears no vital relation to the corporeal surface which becomes a mere support. In Usle's work the disjuncture ungrounds all the terms that can be used to describe the literal paint marks and the illusion or meaning that is created. Without harmony between the corporeal and the incorporeal a continuous space these terms do not have a ground – they are effectively judgements about experience, perceptions that fit with a language already formed but without its representational foundation that spatialises context they have no a priori against which to measure.

This disjuncture creates a heterogeneity that makes it impossible to unify our experience of the work – our sense of the work does not match what we can recognise in it. We are forced to reinterpret the past. This is not a simple as saying that these paintings are different from other paintings because that would be to compare past and present paintings according to a (transcendent) representational concept. Instead I am claiming that the works produce a new form of sensibility that is not defined by old forms of sensibility rather it is a new form of sensibility because the work reinterprets the past, not as a fixed past that can be 'read' in different ways (a repetition of the same) but as a past actualised as a repetition of difference.

If we claim that the Idea of a figural abstraction is undetermined in terms of the understanding because it is a contradiction in terms (that both the literal and the illusory co-exist) then we could say that this rises to the surface in Usle's painting, in the sense that the literal, the corporeal, is separated from the incorporeal which become surface effects(?). ('Paradox appears as a dismissal of depth.' P9)

I want to demonstrate that the process of evolution (or individuation) that I have introduced with respect to Usle's paintings and photographs can also be understood as a dramatisation of 'the situation of the fractured I' (Kerslake, p15).

The argument that the paintings repeat relations formed in his photographs is to say that the paintings do not repeat the same but repeat pure difference. The paintings repeat the difference of continuity/discontinuity or what I have explained as a rupture of the corporeal and the incorporeal. Why does this dramatise the 'situation of the fractured I'?)

If we say that the 'digital code' repeats the memory of 'painting' as a system of structural relations we could say that this is a contraction of previous instances of painting so that there is an expectancy that painting (with an ancestry as a cultural species) will repeat what it has been in the past. As this digital code is expressed in the analogue phase we could also say, referring to Deleuze-Bergson, that it is a present that also constitutes the past as past at the same time as it is present. This double inscription of past and present

Kerslake puts it like this:

'The important point, as Deleuze comes to realise in the Cinema books, is to help us conceive how attention to an actual object at any given moment may be filled out by an appeal to different layers of the past where that object is embedded in different remembered contexts, and conversely to conceive how each past may contain more in it than has been actualised by any subsequent attempt to recall it.'

I want to argue that Usle's paintings cut the pure past from the future as a 'radical failure of empirical unification' by enacting this repetition of difference; in the continuity of the surface and the discontinuity of pictorial space.

We could say that this disjuncture is built upon the expectancy that the surface and pictorial space support one another. In Old Master painting the surface becomes invisible and in Modernist abstraction the flatness of the surface is evident and a continuous optical space replaces depth. In Usles work the discontinuity is not signified by it is an incorporeal that is in relation to the corporeal surface, although this is a relation of difference.

[How does this disjuncture ‘provide the space for the appearance of the Cogito, as empty, as a pure form, and as Other’?] What then is the relation between past paintings/experiences and these paintings such that these paintings create a radical cut between the before and the after? This is what I am arguing is the act of the organism interpreting its Umwelt rather than the process of natural selection which has a causal mechanism and a purpose. The semiosis of biosemiotics relies on the notion of an autopoietic entity that creates its own Umwelt. Thus the radical cut is the heterogeneity of autopoietic organism and Umwelt.

This may be speculative but if information or knowledge is based on difference then information is created by selection not reception. In the creation of knowledge we also create non-knowledge which is the unselected. Deleuze makes a related point in his discussion of Bergson’s work when he notes that for Bergson, ‘perception is not the object *plus* something, but the object *minus* something, minus everything that does not interest us.’<sup>3</sup> Looked at with this in mind the sense of looking without purpose or conclusion, a disinterested vision, seems to involve being forced to think beyond perception, beyond experience if that is defined as conceptual recognition which, paradoxically, in Deleuze’s terminology is to operate as ‘sign’; as something that can *only* be felt or sensed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p25

<sup>4</sup> A full discussion of this can be found in Daniel Smith’s essay ‘Deleuze’s Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality’ in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, p32