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## Deconstructing and reconstructing artists with PhDs

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### Abstract

The fine art PhD raises several questions about the relationship between art and knowledge: does the research process contaminate art? Can the verbal categories used in knowledge claims capture the content of art? Isn't art impossible to pin down in conceptual or cognitive terms anyway? These questions assume that art and the categories used in knowledge claims are opposed. This chapter sets out to show that conceiving of art and knowledge as a binary distinction is too simplistic, and that categories are in a state of movement in such a way that prevents any clear cut division between art and knowledge, where this lack of division is a positive outcome. The basis for discussion is the deconstruction–reconstruction contest in philosophy over the political effectiveness of deconstruction and, in particular, Jürgen Habermas's assertion that Jacques Derrida's perpetual playing with categories denies the possibility of real-world, political reconstruction. At the centre of the Derrida–Habermas dispute, I argue, is a difference over how movement between categories (what I term 'cross-categoriality') is understood to account for the cognitive and political effectiveness of art, aesthetics and deconstruction. I do not argue for one side over the other, but I do show how the competing models of cross-categoriality in the deconstruction–reconstruction debate lead to a series of mutually compatible approaches to fine art research. The emphasis on cross-categoriality is particularly useful, I maintain, because it demonstrates how subjective aesthetic judgments, through the crossing of categories, act upon the network of concepts used in knowledge claims. The mutually compatible nature of the approaches to fine art research, while not pointing to any immediate resolution in the deconstruction–reconstruction contest, does nevertheless suggest ways in which the two sides might orient themselves other than diametric opposition.

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN: There are hundreds of kids in Britain doing PhDs – *PbDs!* – in fine art. And the terrible thing is, where does a PhD have meaning? In the art world? No. It has meaning in one place.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Teaching.

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN: Now what's going to happen is we're going to end up with schools that are entirely run by people with PhDs, who have no experience of the art world at all. It could not be a worse situation...

[Artists] are doing the highest-level research in the world. If you want the highest-level research, you need to go to Jeff Wall or whomever. You need people who are out there, in the world, doing what it is that an artist does.

(Baldessari and Craig-Martin 2009, 45-6; original emphasis)

Except: 'what does an artist do?' Is there a definition or a set of necessary or sufficient conditions which captures and describes what an artist does? Arguably, since the transition in the twentieth century from the readymade, through happenings and conceptual art, to socially-engaged art practice, there is no longer a set of clearly defined actions or properties which belong exclusively to art practice. Art is now an open concept, appropriating, subverting, challenging or rearticulating any context or discourse with which it comes into contact.

The quotation displays Craig-Martin's exasperation at the advent of the PhD in fine art. His antipathy is directed against the idea that artists might treat the PhD as an endorsement of their status as artists, a badge of honour or achievement, when the

qualification has no currency or value in the art world in this respect. On this matter, he is probably right. However, unacknowledged and unchecked in Craig-Martin's statements is the complex of competing institutional forces which constitutes the art world. He does not make explicit what he means by 'art world' but, as far as he is concerned, it rules supreme as the domain which counts when it comes to being an artist. He assumes, admittedly with assistance from Baldessari (his conversation partner), that the interests of teaching are opposed to those of being an artist. This would seem to suggest a highly compartmentalized metaphysics is at work: learning, teaching, the construction of knowledge lie over there in the academic world; the creation of art sits over here in the art world. An ironic state of affairs given that Craig-Martin's reputation in the art world rests equally upon his practice as an artist and upon his being the head of the fine art department at Goldsmiths in the late 1980s when the YBAs – the Young British Artists, made up of Goldsmiths students including Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Michael Landy, and Sarah Lucas – exploded onto the London art scene. There is no acknowledgment that both academia and the art world are institutions steered by economic and political forces (including patronage, selection for posts or shows, and a celebrity or star system) and, as such, may be able to work with or against one another (or any conciliatory or subversive relation in between) in affecting those forces.

Most disappointingly, there is no acknowledgment from Craig-Martin that the intersection between art and research culture might generate insights or resistances which are exciting for reasons either internal or external to the art world, or a series of hybrid, interdisciplinary practices which upset conventional assessment criteria (which arguably would be a good thing). While Craig-Martin might think that the concept of what an artist does is readily available and can be unproblematically relied upon, I suspect that an audience familiar with contemporary art, if pressed to write a list under the heading 'What an artist does', would arrive at a long, sprawling and possibly contradictory sequence or cloud of terms. To my mind, 'length', 'sprawl' and 'contradiction' would all be desirable qualities. But the longer or fatter, more sprawling and contradictory the list or cloud became, the weaker 'what an artist does' would

become as a straightforward idea, easily isolatable from questions of learning, teaching, and the construction of knowledge.

What has the prospect of artists having PhDs got to do with the legacy of deconstruction, the focus of the *Myths of Contemporaneity* project? The project has two aims (quoting from the original workshop brief): (1) to assess whether deconstruction ‘can still represent a resource, or contain a series of criticalities, that denounces [philosophical, moral, political] insufficiency in some manner’, and (2) to establish whether these criticalities ‘can find their outcome in a different sensitivity, mainly attentive on the aspects of the reconstruction of meaning, that seem to have shown themselves on more levels in the last two decades’. Decisive for both aims is the distinction between deconstruction and reconstruction. The distinction embodies the tensions, contradictions and demands which arise once one begins to ask about the practical, moral and political application of deconstruction. Reconstruction in the context of political philosophy expects philosophy to make proposals or intervene in society in the interests of generating better forms of life socially, politically, technologically, and culturally. Habermas has serious reservations about the capacity of deconstruction to answer ethical and political questions. In his first, notorious engagement with deconstruction, he accuses Derrida of levelling the distinction between philosophy and literature and, in so doing, losing sight of the specific way in which each mediates between ‘expert cultures and the everyday world’ (Habermas 2006, 30). In his Habermas-inspired critique, McCarthy argues that deconstruction’s vocabulary of ‘contradiction’, ‘destabilization’, ‘interruption’, and ‘undermining’, does not lend itself to the projects of constructing and reconstructing the ideals, principles and laws which shape our lives. However, for others, it is precisely deconstruction’s generation of undecidability which confirms its political relevance, for example, with Connolly, introducing a dissonance–concordance relation into politics to make room for unheard voices (Connolly 1987, 138; quoted in McCarthy 1991, 76) or, with Critchley, questioning a political regime’s claims to legitimacy by demonstrating its reliance upon undecidable propositions (Critchley 1999, 199). For some critics, there remains the problem with deconstruction that it reduces the human subject to being the effect of a textual or structural process, such as difference or desire, an epiphenomenon of a

process which applies to meaning and the world in general. There is therefore nothing that is proper to the subject. As Feltham and Clemens make the point, ‘in poststructuralism there is no distinction between the general field of ontology and a theory of the subject; there is no tension between the being of the subject and being in general’ (Feltham and Clemens 2003, 4). This is something to which the philosophies of reconstruction and, more recently, of immanence, have responded.

Artists having PhDs, I want to argue, becomes a case in point for the legacy of deconstruction in that fine art research forces us to consider the ontology of art – its nature, its presence, its amenability to categorization, whether it is a thing in itself – and the relationships it has with what lies ‘outside’ art. What the fine art PhD does is prevent art from being *on its own*. It affirms the idea that art is not a domain with a set of defining properties *which it can call its own* (recall the problems I highlight for Craig-Martin’s concept of artists ‘doing what artists do’). Art practice, generated in the context of a PhD, is required to make a contribution to knowledge. This happens through the artistic process intersecting with or being subject to processes of recording, documentation, transcription, contextualization, theorization, argumentation, evaluation, and ultimately being located as an intervention in a discourse. Some commentators have identified interdisciplinarity, or the requirement that art engages with the non-artistic, as being the source of the value of fine art research. According to Sullivan, art is an activity in which visual and cultural understanding is refracted and transformed, and which allows us to observe the processes of refraction and transformation taking place (Sullivan 2005, 86). Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, whether deconstruction is appropriate for visual as opposed to verbal art forms, and Habermas’s call for a new constellation of art and lifeworld, bear on this topic because they offer competing models of how art entails or opens onto the non-artistic. As aspects of the deconstruction–reconstruction debate, these concerns converge on the ontology of aesthetico-political expression: what forms and contexts might an art practice take that is crossing categories in either a deconstructively textual or lifeworldly communicative fashion? And how is the ‘either–or’, the contest between deconstruction and reconstruction, to be addressed in this context? For both deconstruction and critical theory attend to the role of concepts in discourse, and to the

various elements of conceptuality which can impinge upon the direction of thought and action. Most importantly, movement between categories is central to their projects, but the nature of the movement and the end which it works towards are different.

My paper is in two parts. (1) The first explicates the different understandings of the movement between categories (hereafter ‘cross-categoriality’) in Derrida’s deconstruction and Habermas’s critical theory. (2) Part two exercises these differences in cross-categoriality in relation to a hypothetical example of fine art research: a project to explore the possibilities of cycling as an art practice. Considering deconstructive and reconstructive philosophies in relation to a specific art project is by no means straightforward. Art that is required to make a contribution to knowledge creates a series of competing demands, and this allows the deconstruction–reconstruction opposition to operate beyond a simple binary relation of undecidability and effectiveness.

### Crossing categories

Movement between categories holds different meaning in deconstruction and critical theory. With deconstruction, the issue can be approached by asking whether reference to ‘what an artist does’, as an area of thought and action which has unique properties, is possible. That is, is it possible to refer to art as an essence, as a thing in itself? As far as deconstruction is concerned, belief in such a possibility counts as an instance of the metaphysics of presence: commitment to the notion that thought and perception directly refer to and engage with an entity, without recognition of the web-like structure of concepts which simultaneously makes thought and perception possible but also redirects or blocks them through its own autonomy and density. Any attempt to assert that this property belongs uniquely to a domain, for example, ‘art’, will inevitably apply a concept which, in virtue of its relationship with other concepts, will bring with it associations from those other concepts, thereby contaminating any intended reference to a pure content. In an interview with Brunette and Wills, Derrida declares:

There cannot be anything, and in particular any art, that isn't textualized in the sense I give to the word 'text' – which goes beyond the purely discursive – [therefore] there is a text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial. There is text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also because even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization. For this reason, the expansion of the concept of text is strategically decisive here. So the works of art that are the most overwhelmingly silent cannot help but be caught within a network of differences and references that give them a textual structure.

(Derrida 1994, 14-15).

The concept of text does not refer exclusively to written material. It is 'expanded' beyond the purely discursive to embrace the 'artistic, visual or spatial'. Initially, it seems as if this is the result of there always being 'a little discourse' present in the arts, but then Derrida goes further, admitting that 'even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization'. What might this mean?

A clue comes at the end of the quotation: it is the 'network of differences and references' which gives rise to a textual structure. How are we to understand 'the effect of spacing' and 'a network of differences and references' in extralinguistic terms? I suggest that elements from Kant's and Heidegger's philosophies are present here. Experience is organized, determined; it occurs in segments and chunks. In Kantian terms, 'a network of differences and references' would designate the conceptually-organized and conceptually-saturated nature of experience. Experience does not come to us pure, unadulterated, but is rendered intelligible by concepts shaping it into stable, continuous, recognizable lumps. With Heidegger, human being is a *being-there*, a *Da-sein*, a state of being located in a situation in which things necessarily occur as *something or another*.<sup>1</sup> We are always rooted in an environment, working with an environmentally-relevant aim or ambition, and so everything is experienced as a meaningful 'this' or 'that', as either ambition-related or ambition-unrelated. Our 'encounters' with objects though are not strictly encounters in the sense that an external object is met by an

internal subject. Rather, they are a series of attitudes or concerns in as much as what we perceive (through the senses), think about and act upon (all that we would customarily take to be experiences or volitions *inside us*) occur as the interplays of situatedness and directedness which define *Da-sein*, being-there, and which cannot be divided into 'subject' and 'object'. This overcoming or avoidance of subject–object metaphysics is manifest in deconstruction through the acknowledgment that authorial intention (again, something we would customarily take to be *inside us*) is an impulse within the play of concepts that is textuality. Both philosophies make the point that our experience of the world is a continuum organized by certain structures, principles, and frames. It is, I propose, this property of organization which Derrida refers to as 'text' and which deconstruction works on, focusing on the contradictions, slippages and plays introduced by concepts but always mindful that the deconstructionist's stance will itself be constructed by concepts and therefore always open to further contradiction.

Does this apply to non-verbal media and experience though? Isn't deconstruction essentially a linguistic strategy, a critical reading which can only set to work if verbal categories prone to wordplay, metaphor or binary inversion are present? What would count as the deconstruction of categories at work in visual art and knowledge? Melville provides a helpful study of the deconstruction of colour in art history (Melville 1994). Colour and art history, for Melville, play the respective roles of extralinguistic experience and linguistically-saturated knowledge. He argues against the increasing dominance of semiotics in art history, and its tendency to turn artefacts into occasions for linguistic, structural reading which, he maintains, say more about the ease and fluidity of signification than the materiality of the artefact. In the perception and interpretation of colour, Melville argues, there is always a particularity of sensation which exceeds signification. What is novel about his account is how he positions this excess. He locates it as a crisis in propriety: deconstruction of the visual as the calling-into-question of the appropriateness of each and every theoretical framework. 'What transpires between the texts of deconstruction as they currently stand and the visual arts, their criticism and history', he argues,



is neither appropriation nor depropriation of the one activity or object to the other [(sic)], but a warping in the grammar of propriety itself. One might then say that the demand is for the visual arts and their discipline to appropriate themselves otherwise. But the deeper demand is for them to acknowledge that they have always done so.

(Melville 1994, 46-7)

Melville effectively uses art history's theorization of colour to deconstruct the linguistic-extralinguistic distinction. The particularity of colour is fully acknowledged, but rather than placing it outside discourse, it is positioned as an 'oscillation' or 'vibration' disturbing the borders of art history and all adjacent theoretical frameworks (Melville 1994, 45). This puts the deconstructionist critic in the position where they must be mindful of the contingency of any theoretical reading of an artwork and permanently open to the claims from alternative and possibly opposing theories. On this reading, the visual work of art is a text and, therefore, a contender for deconstruction because its properties, its determinations, the concepts which shape our engagement with it, plus any historical or theoretical discourse which surrounds it, are part of a network of differences and references. These are always open to reappraisal on account of the fact that each and every experience or perception of the work will involve differences and slippages between properties, determinations, and concepts. We still think and speak in categories but these are always already looking towards or opening onto other categories.

The movement between categories as it affects art, and what lies beyond it, is different for Habermas. How can art within modernity work against its own inner logic, the drive to be 'for its own sake', to promote the cross-referral of categories in the interests of social reintegration? This is the question Habermas puts to himself in his 1980 essay 'Modernity versus Postmodernity'. Artistic production, Habermas declares, 'would dry up, if it were not carried out in the form of a specialized treatment of autonomous problems, and if it were to cease to be the concern of experts who do not pay so much attention to exoteric questions' (Habermas 2000a, 275). These problems are 'autonomous' in the sense that they pertain to the Enlightenment project of

specialization. So far so good, as far as Craig-Martin's notion of a pure fine art is concerned, with the added support of experts who are content to discuss art for art's sake. However, Habermas continues:

this sharp delineation, this exclusive concentration on one aspect of validity alone, and the exclusion of aspects of truth and justice, breaks down *as soon as aesthetic experience is drawn into an individual life history and is absorbed into ordinary life*. The reception of art by the layman, or by the 'everyday expert', goes in a rather different direction than the reception of art by the professional critic.

(Habermas 2000a, 275; emphasis added)

In his attempt to overcome the division between the everyday and the professional, Habermas draws upon the claim from Albrecht Wellmer that (in Habermas's words) as soon as an aesthetic experience 'is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic' (Habermas 2000a, 275). This promises, as far as Habermas is concerned, 'a *changed constellation* of art and the lifeworld':

If aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of individual life-histories, if it is utilized to illuminate a situation and to throw light on individual life-problems – if it communicated to all its impulses to a collective form of life – then art enters into a language game which is no longer that of aesthetic criticism, but belongs, rather, to everyday communicative practice... It reaches into our cognitive interpretations and normative expectations and transforms the totality in which these moments are related to each other.

(Habermas 2000b, 280)

The 'changed constellation' whereby art has the potential to make a difference within everyday communicative practice comes about 'if [art] is utilized to illuminate a situation and to throw light on individual life-problems'. But what brings Habermas's changed

constellation about? He refers to the actions or forces responsible for these cross-categorical movements in the following ways: ‘aesthetic is experience is *drawn into* an individual life’ and aesthetic experience ‘*is used to illuminate* a life-historical situation and is related to life problems’, but how and for whom we are not told. This is clarified by Wellmer. The work of art, he writes (quoted by Habermas), ‘as a symbolic formation with an aesthetic validity claim, is at the same time an object of the lifeworld experience, in which the three validity domains are unmetaphorically intermeshed’ (Habermas 2000b, 281). The ‘validity claim’ is Habermas’s technical term, from *The Theory of Communicative Action*, for the conditions surrounding an utterance which confirm that it is made in the interests of arriving at a rational consensus (Habermas 1984, 99-100). The three validity domains are: truth, being right in accordance with a normative context, and genuine intention on the part of the speaker. The key premise in Wellmer’s argument is that the artwork, as ‘a symbolic formation’, as something made, constructed, organized in accordance with (or against) certain conventions, is just as much an occupant of the art world as it is of the everyday world.

There are similarities here with Kant’s aesthetics and epistemology in that aesthetic judgment, on Kant’s terms, is not formed from concepts peculiar to the aesthetic but is instead constituted by a state of free play (or ‘purposiveness’ in Kant’s terms) in our moral and cognitive capacities. This could be construed as the aesthetic at work in the lifeworld. Duvenage lends support to this reading. ‘The world-disclosing force of the aesthetic’, he asserts, lies for Wellmer in its ‘constantly interacting with the moral and cognitive perspectives of the world... leading readers to questions rather than answers, opening readers to new experiences of otherness, and disrupting previous fixities’, where ‘world disclosure’ refers to the Kantian–Heideggerian ontological model of mutual subject–object (with Kant) or being–world (with Heidegger) organization (Duvenage 2003, 137). This interpretation goes against the formalist reading of Kant’s aesthetics, which concentrates upon his notion that aesthetic judgment is disinterested, that is to say, it does not employ a determinate concept, and so all that matters regarding the object of appreciation is the way in which its sensory properties are arranged in space or time. The formalist account values aesthetic properties for themselves but is difficult to sustain as a Kantian position, I would argue, because it pays no heed to that

part of the aesthetic which purposively stimulates our cognitive and moral faculties, the bridging role which Kant has the aesthetic play between the architectonics of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant 1929; 1956).

My comparison of cross-categoriality in Derrida and Habermas would seem to suggest they converge, or at least are leaning that way. On my reading, both have sympathies with the Kantian notion that art interrupts stable patterns of categorization, with the political value of such interruption being that room is made for alternative forms of thinking or practice. This would not be the first time that the philosophies of Derrida and Habermas are judged to be heading in the same direction. As Critchley writes:

Derrida's work is oriented around the quasi-normative axis of an emancipatory, democratic politics, based on the undeconstructible, context-transcendent, formal universality of justice. *Kurz gesagt*, Derrida sounds like Habermas, doesn't he?

(Critchley 2006, 100)

But, Critchley goes on, despite the agreements between Derrida and Habermas, important differences remain: (1) Derrida would object to Habermas's requirement that (in Critchley's words) 'all matters must be either empirically or normatively justified'; (2) from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, Derrida's work (Critchley again) is '*too exclusively philosophical*, and belongs to what Horkheimer would call traditional rather than critical theory' (Critchley 2006, 100-1); that is to say, Derrida concentrates upon metaphysical or logocentric concepts as they operate in texts from the history of philosophy at the expense of considering their sociological application; and (3) they differ over the intersubjective nature of the concrete linguistic event: Derrida regards it as a singularity, an experience of 'infinite indebtedness' containing an obligation that no interlocutor could meet, while Habermas's Kantianism, based on the premise of the equal treatment of all human beings, means he configures the linguistic event as a symmetrical meeting of equals, devoid of any unevenness or asymmetry introduced by a sense of obligation.

There is not room in this paper to pursue a fine-grained analysis of the differences between Derrida and Habermas. However, running through the differences is a theme which marks a clear division between deconstruction and critical theory over the interruption caused to conceptualization by cross-categorical aesthetics. A deconstructive crossing of categories occurs as a thoroughgoing (or infinite if we follow Critchley) questioning of the category or theoretical framework which is applied at every particular instant. We might recall Melville's suggestion that the deconstruction of visual art functions as a challenge to propriety, a perpetual attentiveness to the contingency of all frameworks. In contrast, with Habermas and Wellmer, the interruption caused to conceptualization by cross-categorical aesthetics requires mediation to the point where it can be answerable to validity claims. No matter how novel, stimulating or disruptive an artwork, the transition in categories which it instigates has to occur as part of the translation of art into an everyday context, into a setting where the validity of whatever change or novelty has been introduced can be confirmed (or denied). For Habermas, this occurs in terms of consensus based on the ideal speech situation in which participants work towards a mutual understanding free from the pressures that can be introduced by self-interest and other agendas. With Wellmer, there is mediation between the world-disclosing force of the aesthetic and discursive reason via, according to Duvenage, an 'interrelated model of validity spheres of truth' which places emphasis on 'interpretations and judgments of all kinds' and 'finding a horizon such that plural values and needs can become part of rational arguments and discourse ethics on an equal basis' (Duvenage 2003, 137).<sup>2</sup>

We have two kinds of resistance: thoroughgoing or infinite with Derrida, and translated or mediated with Habermas and Wellmer. In the context of the deconstruction–reconstruction contest, it is a question of the nature or possibly even the ontology of the resistance: what form or shape it is, in which direction or directions it is pointing or whether it needs to point at all. The last phrase is an acknowledgment that the resistance may not necessarily be an obstacle *between us* and an understanding or goal or the world, but instead might be something we are already in, something which is constitutive of our being in the world, a period in which we are situated in treacle, metaphorically and ontologically speaking: modes of thinking and action we normally take for granted are

suspended, taken over by the ‘infinite demand’ of ‘How to judge? Which concept to apply?’ once one becomes mindful of the open and contingent nature of categorization. How might this difference be illuminated? J.L. Austin’s distinction between performative and constative statements could apply (Austin 1971). ‘Performative’ refers to utterances which act or bring into being the very thing they name, for example, saying ‘I promise’ is both an utterance (the locutionary act, in Austin’s idiom) and an action produced by the utterance (the illocutionary act). In contrast, constative expressions are merely locutionary acts: they describe or refer to the world but no action comes from them; they have no illocutionary force other than possibly the bringing-into-being of the very general action of drawing attention to how things are in the world. Habermas’s requirement that all claims must be either empirically or normatively justified assumes a constative, referential relation with the world or at least a *translation* between the constative and the performative, whereas Derrida activates word plays, near synonyms, and root metaphors to make us aware that language is a condition of textuality in which we are located. However, the performative–constative distinction is not something which should be immune from deconstruction, as Derrida observes, but I shall not have time to pursue this avenue (Derrida 2002, 204). For the moment we must be content with examining the resistances in translation, mediation and performativity.

#### Deconstruction, reconstruction and fine art research

One of the aims of this book (and the project which inspired it) is to establish whether the criticalities of deconstruction ‘can find their outcome in a different sensitivity, mainly attentive on the aspects of the reconstruction of meaning, that seem to have shown themselves on more levels in the last two decades’. It is at this point where I think consideration of visual art research can help. What would Derridean deconstruction v. Habermasian reconstruction be like within visual practice? How would their contrasting attitudes to cross-categoriality manifest themselves visually? What might fine art, under the research imperative of not being on its own but contributing to knowledge, add to the understanding of the resistance generated by

movement between categories? How might this make a difference to the deconstruction–reconstruction opposition? The question which started us on this path concerned the opposition between fine art and fine art research. Let us consider an example.

Suppose I am an artist who wants to explore the possibilities of cycling as an art practice. Not in the form of the depiction or representation of cycling, as in the case, for example, of Umberto Boccioni's 1913 painting *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, expressing the Futurists' celebration of machines, but in a way which draws upon the activity of cycling itself. The former presents us with questions of how one medium, say paint or stone, might be manipulated to evoke or recreate *the appearance or other aspects of cycling*, whereas the latter asks us to consider the embodied, technological or social dimension of cycling as the foundation for an artistic event. Why the latter and not the former? It is not as if one promises more opportunities for cross-categorical activity than the other. It is certainly the case that studies of representation and expression are more extensive and further underway in art history and philosophical aesthetics. The competing discourses in these studies would be grist to the deconstructionist's mill in as much as a deconstructed art history would have to terms with the contingency of its discourses and the potential for differential or cross-framework critique.

I can only answer the question from within the context of the example. Hypothetically, I am an artist who cycles and who, given the almost-infinite potential of what can now become art, is interested in how the range of physical, technological, environmental and social dimensions of cycling might be manipulated, heightened, elevated or transformed to become art, but not *just* to become art. My interest (as a hypothetical artist) also lies in how the relationship between concepts might be configured given the degree of borrowing or exchange which occurs between the concepts of 'art' or 'aesthetics' and 'technology', 'ecology', 'politics', 'society' and 'the everyday'. Since the relations between these concepts will be anything but a series of distinct, isolated, non-overlapping domains, this hypothetical interest should be useful in bringing to light a vocabulary of exchanges, manipulations, elevations, and transformations operating within fine art and adjacent practices and, therefore, be highly pertinent in a context where cross-

categoriality is key. On the basis of the Kantian epistemology underpinning Derrida's and Habermas's theories, wherein experience is formulated as a process constructed by categories, if we pay attention to the different kinds of movement within this vocabulary, and the movements articulated by the various methods used to formulate art as a contribution to knowledge, then we shall begin to witness how and where fine art research stands in relation to Derrida's and Habermas's competing, cross-categorical resistances. Because the range of methods available to the fine art researcher is extensive – Gray and Malins list fourteen (Gray and Malins 2004, 103) – I shall, for reasons of space, limit my attention to one method: the critical, contextual survey as a provider of both research background and direction. This will also help to explain the significance of the example for the deconstruction–reconstruction contest.

The research process begins with a proposal which sets out the question, places it in its subject context, and gives an indication as to why it is important. As with any research proposal, we do not want something so singular and 'out of the blue' that there are no competing, surrounding or neighbouring practices to give the proposal context. In broad terms, one might look to the walking and other everyday or culturally-embedded practices which have been included in or forced a widening of concepts of art and aesthetics in recent decades, such as the work of Hamish Fulton, Richard Long, Simon Pope (all walking artists), and Tino Sehgal (conversation), Hans Haacke and the Austrian artists' group WochenKlausur (administration). The critical themes behind these artists' works are: the challenge to the conventional notion of the art object; the identification of aesthetic observations in everyday settings; the injection of the aesthetic into the everyday to create novel, social events or relationships; and the rendering visible, tangible or social what happens when categories intersect (that is, the physical, sensory form taken by these processes, and the meanings given to them by their physical, sensory form), with the consequent demand to audiences, critics, theorists and the artists themselves to evaluate the renderings in a context where categories are far from stable.

More specifically, a number of artists in the last ten years have used cycling in their work. In 2009, Steven Levon Ounanian completed a thirty-day, 1,000 mile 'ecological



pilgrimage by bicycle' around Britain, called *Ritualride*. Ounanian visited 'ecologically-significant' sites such as farms, solar-panelled mosques, micro-climates, and McDonalds, and invited people involved with each site to tell stories related to or create myths which could be attached to the local environment. For her 2010 performance *Body as Machine Experiment 1: RAW* in Glasgow, Scotland, Kate Stannard sought to recreate the physical demands of the annual 'Race Across the West' endurance cycle event. The ride is a time trial across North America covering 3,000 miles with the fastest solo participants completing the course in just over eight days, achieving an average speed of approximately fifteen miles per hour and getting the recommended minimum of 90 minutes sleep per day. Stannard trained as if she were taking part and then, for the public performance, cycled on an indoor cycle training machine in an art centre continuously for four days, breaking for the daily recommended minimum sleep period. A forty-one mile ride across the Tabernas desert in Spain on an improvised electric bicycle was the basis for Simon Starling's 2004 piece *Tabernas Desert Run*. The bicycle was driven by a 900 watt electric motor which was in turn powered by a portable fuel cell attached to the bicycle's frame. The only waste product from the motor was pure water, which Starling used to create a large, botanical-style watercolour painting (the size of the bicycle) of an opuntia cactus, a species introduced to the desert by the film director Sergio Leone during the production of his spaghetti westerns. As an exhibited work, the bicycle and the painting are sealed in a perspex vitrine, with the painting visible from one side, the bicycle from the other.

What are the critical contexts here? There are similar themes to the walking, conversational and administrative art practices outlined above. The conventional notion of the art object is by-passed. All three are primarily cycle rides or performances. Only Starling's *Tabernas Desert Run* takes the form of exhibited objects, but arguably the combination of a painting, an improvised electric bicycle and the explanatory text points strongly towards the painting and the bicycle being stages in a process. Ounanian's ride and Stannard's performance also have enduring traces – a video, and photographs and first-person commentary on a blog respectively – but these are primarily documentary in nature, although the capacity of documentation to generate new meaning or giving rise to aesthetic qualities is not insignificant. There is the interplay between the aesthetic and

the everyday: the introduction of the aesthetic into the everyday to create novel, social events or relationships, and the scope for aesthetic observations within everyday settings. The novel social events or relationships created via the introduction of the aesthetic include the reactions and greetings received by Ounanian, participation in *Ritualride* by interested cyclists, and the acts of giving elicited from Stannard's audience. Aesthetic observations within these might be the words, phrases, sounds, expressions and gestures which occur as part of the reactions and greetings received by Ounanian, the extreme physical and emotional states endured by Stannard, and the nature of the gifts left for her. There is the poetic, metaphor-like leaping-between-realms of Starling's process: the transition from desert cycling, through motor power, through water, to the painting enabled by the water. The ways in which all these events are described or documented may also be occasions for poetic expression, since verbal language, photographic framing, and video sound and image are media whose specific properties bring with them their own potentials for meaning.

The original deconstruction–reconstruction opposition hinges upon whether deconstruction's vocabulary of 'contradiction', 'destabilization', 'interruption', and 'undermining' lends itself to or disables the projects of constructing and reconstructing the ideals, principles and laws which shape our lives. How might fine art research, as a novel context for the deconstruction–reconstruction opposition, affect the stand-off? Answering this would be to view fine art research as a form of aesthetico-political expression whose mode or modes of cross-categorical resistance might help to crystallize or generate relations between deconstruction and reconstruction other than a stand-off. The expectation is not that any of the works described or any future art–cycling work targets a philosophical position, but that the works themselves, through their internal organization, the placing of one thing in relation to another or the eliciting of one thing by another, exercise concepts, throw concepts together, enable one concept to open onto another. The arrangement and constitution of the artworks tug on the Kantianism underlying Derrida's and Habermas's philosophies in as much as each thing, each aspect, each affect, each collision, and each evocation will involve a concept. Any intelligible unit of experience requires a concept, and aesthetic moments, those which Kant claims ostensibly occur disinterestedly in the absence of a concept, are occasions

when our cognitive faculties are in a state of freeplay looking for a concept. As far as the art–cycling theme is concerned, demonstrating the impact of fine art research on the deconstruction–reconstruction opposition will be a matter of assessing the conceptual movements generated by art–cycling in terms of the resistance they present in the transition from one category to another.

Let us focus on a particular example from one of the works described so far: a video clip from one of the many which are freely available on Ounanian’s *Ritualride* website. The clip, entitled ‘Doncaster Earth Centre’, is 1 minute and 57 seconds long, and surveys a large area of flat tarmac, fenced off from surrounding heathland and occupied by different kinds of junk, from a dilapidated milk float and an old fire engine with the sign ‘Earth Centre’ on one of its doors, to what looks like the flattened remains of office interiors and a wooden porter’s hut, painted black and in incongruously good condition (fig. 1). The video takes us step-by-step around the site, and Ounanian’s voiceover ironically presents it as an exhibit at Doncaster’s Earth Centre in Yorkshire, England. The irony coheres with the humour in the commentaries on some of the other video excerpts, but is also pertinent here because Doncaster’s Earth Centre, designed as a world-centre for the display of leading sustainability theory and practice, closed in 2004 after only five years’ operation due to lack of funding.

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 Insert fig. 1: Steven Levon Ounanian, *Ritualride* (2009). [www.ritualride.com](http://www.ritualride.com) (seen 25.11.2011).  
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Where are the resistances? From a deconstructive point of view, the properties of a work of art, the concepts which shape our engagement with it, plus any historical or theoretical discourse which surrounds it, are part of a network of differences and references. These are open to constant reappraisal (or infinite demand) because each and every experience or perception of the work will involve differences and slippages between properties, determinations, and concepts. *Ritualride* is not an object with a readily identifiable set of properties but a two-month long event with an ongoing

identity via web and video documentation. It has a variety of forms. Should we look to the stated aims of the project or work with selected, particular aspects of it? Although the ‘Doncaster Earth Centre’ excerpt adheres to the aim of visiting ‘ecologically-significant’ sites, no other voices are heard, which runs counter to the stated aim of inviting stories from others, unless we accept the ‘welcome to the exhibit’ commentary as the story. Ounanian uses humour and irony in his commentary, thereby introducing new concepts and ones which entail playfulness and the suspension or cancellation of assertion. We are placed in a situation where, because of the multifaceted nature of the work, we face an array of concepts – cycling, ecology, wasteland, junk, recycling, failure, encountering others (or not), storytelling (or not), irony, humour, hand-held video – which make it ambiguous in which direction we should move to begin making a conceptual or declarative commitment which can be subject to deconstruction.

We do not know from which conceptual perspective to approach the work. Is our situation one of utter undecidability in which we cannot even begin to apply concepts as the starting-points for cross-categorical slippages? If it were, it could be construed either as an exemplary deconstructive encounter with an artwork or as an encounter which refuses the stable application of categories, depending upon whether utter undecidability is taken to stretch textuality to its limit or to cancel it completely respectively. On closer inspection, however, this predicament turns out not to be the case. As hinted at above, the ‘stated aims’ of the work introduce concepts which we can work from. More importantly, *Ritualride* is being considered in relation to art–cycling as fine art research, so ‘cycling as art’ introduces a line of enquiry which obliges us to use concepts and make claims. ‘Cycling’ here is not just one term among many but the term which *becomes art* in virtue of the art histories and theories which expand upon mechanisms of becoming, appropriation, defamiliarization, institutional baptism, metaphor, performativity, transformation, and the process of categorization itself, since with some epistemologies, assigning the category is sufficient. Even if a case can be made for establishing which theory is or theories are most applicable, the deconstructionist must be mindful of the contingency of any theoretical reading of an artwork and permanently open to the claims from alternative and possibly opposing theories.

If cycling is *to become art*, then we need familiarity with the theories of ‘becoming art’ which will explain the process. The work itself cannot tell us how its cycling-content became art, because there is no work itself outside of the textual play of categories. Rather, it will be a matter of: (a) the categories which *can be applied* to cycling and what *cycling leads to, opens onto or invites as accompaniment* (such as arrival at junkyards and sites of failure, encountering others (or not), humour, and hand-held video); (b) the theories or ontologies of ‘becoming art’ which underpin the mechanisms of transition or accompaniment; and (c) mindfulness of the contingency of the categories’ and theories’ application. The observation that theories of becoming will be applied to ‘cycling’ and what it *leads to, opens onto or invites as accompaniment?* shows that we cannot even reach a presence, a thing, an activity called ‘cycling’ because whatever instance or occasion is offered as a contender source item will itself already be on the way to somewhere else. A colour image of a bicycle against a white background will suggest ‘age’ (of the bike and its rider), ‘gender’, an object of ‘desire’ or ‘use’, an ‘environment’, and a ‘kind of cycling’ (road, mountain, touring).

No cycling or bicycles feature in the ‘Doncaster Earth Centre’ video. It is a location that has been reached (one assumes) by cycling. The idea that cycling as art leads to forms (in this case, video) in which objects and events *other than cycling* appear is, ironically, highly deconstructionist, in as much as it enacts *differance*, the action whereby any attempt to privilege or rely heavily upon a term ends up initiating a series of deferrals in which terms other than the one intended are invoked. It has not been my intention to apply deconstruction to fine art research in the hope of finding an instance of categorical movement which can be labelled ‘deconstructionist’, but it appears we have found one. Turning to another aspect of the video, it is a sequence which moves around the junkyard area in a fashion which indicates ‘hand-held camera’, suggesting portability. Here, cycling indirectly informs the mode of representation: rather than selecting an audiovisual form for *Ritualride* from all the possible forms it could take, for example, a greater filmic quality, a more overt association with a film genre appropriate to the story to be told (whatever this might be), fuller attention paid to establishing the *mise en scène*, the audiovisual form of the video adheres to what can simply be achieved by editing material obtained from a portable video camera on location.

Illustration

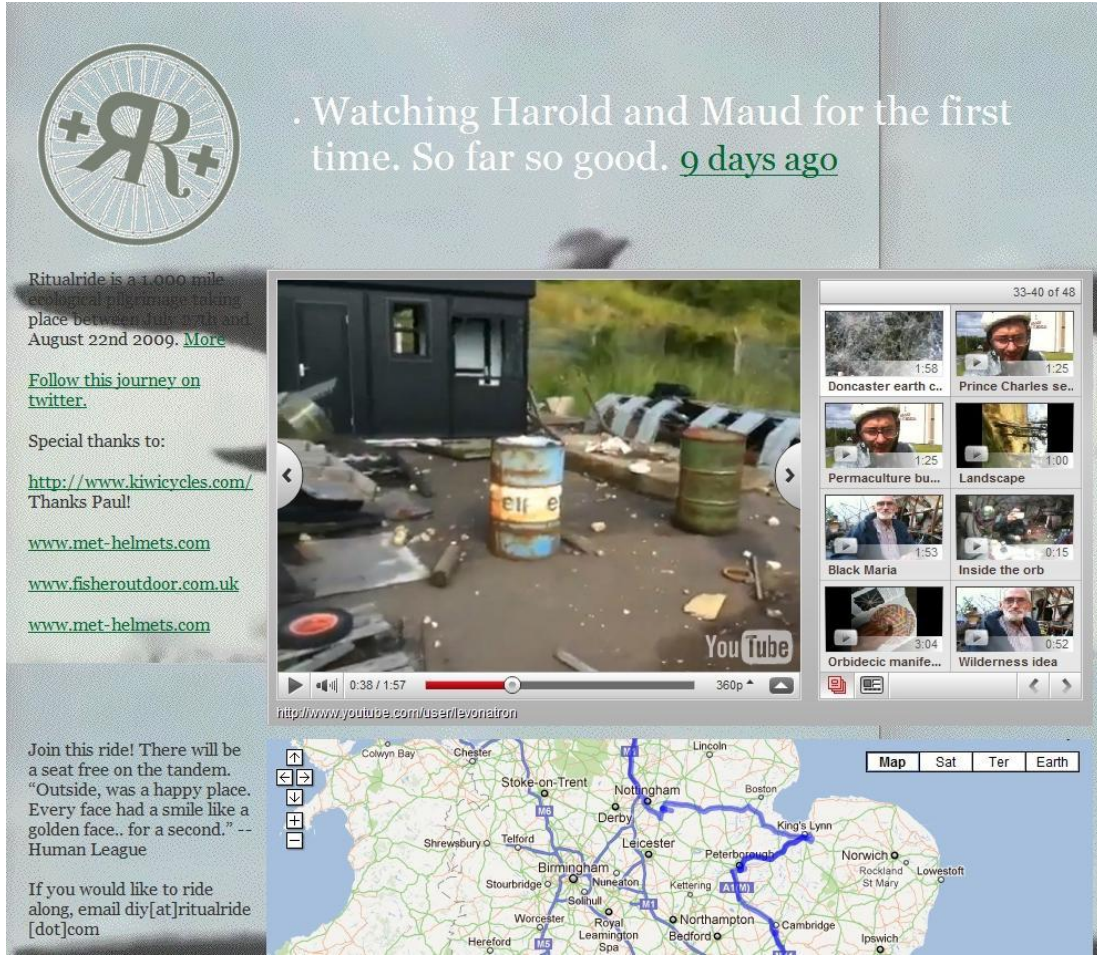


Fig. 1: Steven Levon Ounanian, *Ritualride* (2009). [www.ritualride.com](http://www.ritualride.com) (accessed 25.11.2011).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> As Stambaugh notes in her 1996 translation of *Being and Time*, ‘it was Heidegger’s express wish that in future translations the word *Dasein* should be hyphenated’. Heidegger’s thinking, Stambaugh continues, was that, with hyphenation,

the reader will be less prone to assume he or she understands it to refer to ‘existence’ (which is the orthodox translation of *Dasein*) and with that translation surreptitiously bring along all sorts of psychological connotations. It was Heidegger’s insight that human being is *uncanny*: we do not know who, or what, that is, although, or perhaps precisely because, we *are* it.

With Stambaugh, the hyphen in Da-sein introduces a sense of the uncanny. Rather than having Da-sein remain as a word which refers straightforwardly to human being as a clearly circumscribed thing – to existence or to the subject – the hyphen maintains the reference to us but at the same time makes it other than us. It emphasizes that human being is distributed in a way that dualistic, Cartesian, subject–object terminology does not easily accommodate: a ‘being there’, an entity whose *being* is located and extended *in the world*. See Stambaugh 1996, xiv.

<sup>2</sup> There is a subtle but important difference between Habermas’s and Wellmer’s positions at this point: the former requires the formation of a shared understanding, whereas the latter refers to a horizon for argument, which implies that only *the conditions*

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*for dialogue*, as opposed to actual agreement, are involved. Irrespective of this difference, both see the aesthetic undergoing a process of mediation so that its terms can be adapted to apply to objects or events in the interests of promoting sincere, reliable and verifiable discourse.