Patches: a dialogue between the concrete and gesture in painting, process and production

Introduction

In my introduction I would like to make two points about construction and art history.
Firstly, this talk will be presented taking inspiration from my artist friend Jeffrey Steele, and the *form* that his writing takes. A recent article he wrote for a Dutch Journal *Aesthetic Investigations* was constructed as a series of small chapters or short essays. Each essay has a one word heading and contains what seems like a list of often one sentence paragraphs and initially they can read as a series of unrelated ideas and questions. Each of the following parts of my talk today may also seem like isolated enquiries but I hope that some connections may be made in the end.

The following is an on-going enquiry but I hope to propose that in the painting that I have been studying, and the new conclusion I am beginning to make about my own recent work, is that the *process of production is* the work – and not a means to an end. The production of painting – the processes – the making – the methodologies of construction are what generate the aesthetic – they *are* the work.

Secondly, and related to the first point, an extract from the beginning of Steele's essay makes a point about chronology. In my PhD research I am interested in how to read historical paintings through the undertaking of a particular practice based method – a visual reading. I am ultimately interested in how my work lies in relation to the constructivism and formalism of twentieth century modernism but I am discovering what this is through a kind of mediation - an investigation into paintings by Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca and, from four hundred years later, Edouard Manet – both Modernists in their own time.

This short extract from Steele's essay argues that the development of both art and its concepts is never strictly diachronic.

Konsequenz

"The industry for authenticating works of art insists on having, for every object offered for sale, a name, a date, and a provenance. Thus opening up a field for a secondary industry in fraudulent attributions.

This is one reason why the establishment of reliable chronologies is important.

But there is also a Proustian sense in which the antiquarian concept of chronology is rearranged, so that the events of the wasted time are transposed into a zone that is itself outside time. Proust reminds us several times that his work is a <u>construction</u>.

*In 1960 when I painted my first 'hard edged' geometric paintings, some
friends asked: 'why are you painting pictures that belong in the 1930s?'[1]*
…he goes on to mention that a painting conceived in the 1960s was only later realised in
2016.

abstract expressionism or gesture painting

Abstract expressionism is a strange contradictory term in that does not seem to describe
the painting that is labelled in that way or 'how' that painting has come about. I wonder if it
is an oxymoron? It seems that 'expressionism' in art has to be representative of something
and 'abstract' painting non-figurative. The word 'abstract' could mean conceptual, non-
specific, non-physical in – and non-illusionistic. Expressionism suggests to me a 'method'
that is undertaken in order to try to convey feelings and emotions. These two notions seem
to contradict each other.

Perhaps 'gesture painting' or 'action painting' describes this method of painting more
accurately.

expressionism

What is expressionism? I need to examine the term.
When I turned to making non-representational painting it was in part a rejection of any form
of expressionism. When I look back, I think I was confused about the two terms
expressionism and *gesture* and conflated them. I didn't really know what expressionism
was. I had a vague idea that I should be spewing out stories and images from somewhere
inside – a process that I claimed was at least an honest endeavour. It was an awkward mix
of transformation, mimesis and abstraction. This kind of story telling became an
unsatisfactory way to carry on. I decided to reject what Hal Foster describes as, *"a play at
expression[ism]. […] a 'gestuary' of largely self-aware acts."* For me, the presentation of any
kind of narrative – personal or otherwise – had become a problem of falsehood and fiction.
I did not want to *'play with expression'*.

gesture

At this time, simultaneously, I decided to, temporarily at least, reject the pre-planned
production of a *painterly gesture*. Whether it had a function in the rendering of an image,
or whether the gestural mark stood alone, I became too conscious of its material existence
and its contrivance and stared down perplexed. I began to see the gesture as a pretty mark
– a decoration – the trace of a period of painting activity that was, perhaps, visually pleasing
but had become, for me, a futile act.

Is story telling a form of literature and not visual art? Gesture an index or trace?

I had seriously begun to challenge the concepts in these two questions.

Kandinsky

In *The Expressive Fallacy* in 1982[2] Hal Foster argues that expressionism can be seen as a 'language' and not a 'style'. In fact, he argues that not only is there no possibility of expressionism being a 'style' but more importantly it can never be truthfully carried out.

As Alanna Risse explains, all expressions are delivered through our culture and experience so there can never be pure acts of a natural self. Any attempt to express a 'primitive animalistic' side will always be a reaction against ones cultural identity and background: the "I" can only refer back to itself, and to be truly free can have no relevant content that refers to its historical perspective.[3]

In parenthesis Foster asserts, however, that Abstract Expressionism and German Expressionism _are_ 'styles' or have become 'styles' that can now be _used_ - either appropriated or as second degree Image-repertoires.

The idea of expressionism as a 'language' is difficult to argue because it has been in denial of its own 'rhetorical nature'. The rhetoric suggests that expressionism is the way to express the nature of the self – oneself – and is therefore in denial of its own status as a language: *Foster: "a denial that is necessary given the Expressionist claim to immediacy and stress on the self as originary."*

Foster further explains: the paradox of expressionism is that it is a type of representation that asserts presence – the presence of the artist, of the *real*. And this expressionist presence is by proxy only, signalled by indexical traces – the brushstrokes.

So, if expressionism is a language it has codes. As he points out the expressionist Kandinsky just replaced one set of codes for another when he 'broke through' representation. He replaced one form for another form – "a representation oriented […] to reality (the coded, realist outer world), to expression (the coded, symbolist inner world). Kandinsky's 'inner necessity' conceived via abstraction becomes a coded formula – "one that suppresses its rhetorical nature but a formula nonetheless."

When Lawrence Gowing discusses Cézanne's 'patches' of paint in his essay, *Cézanne: The Logic of Organized Sensations*, he uses terms like systematisation, composition, arrangement, fragmentation, and importantly disintegration. This he suggests was the first phase towards the most significant development: modulation. To quote Gowing: *'The move toward a disintegration of the object in some of the most memorable works of a painter so attached to objects is the attraction and the riddle of Cézanne's last phase.'*

"patches"

In 1866, earlier in Cézanne's career, he had used a palette knife for a time to shape his patches of paint: patches of paint with straight edges. But although this had been done before, as Gowing says:

'Cezanne instinctively knew that if this approach was to be used at all it should be done consistently throughout the picture – and that the 'handling' was the picture.' 'The consistency of facture that Cézanne achieved makes a new kind of intrinsic material unity, which links the picture not only with the material significance of the objects, but with the common consistency of the material world.'

"handling"

A few years later patches applied with a knife, together with new ideas about colour differentiation, appeared in the painting *L'Etang des Soeurs* in 1875 and were, as Gowing suggests, crucial to the development of his method. His essay sets out in detail the development of a modular approach and how Cézanne began to organise colour systematically in sequences.

Gowing again: 'For him colour modulation was the sense of the painting…. Cézanne himself referred to the colour patches that he was using in 1905 as abstractions, and he felt them to be in need of explanation. But he made it clear that they possessed a systematic figurative function, a function which though not descriptive was expository – the history of these expository systems of colour appeared in the later watercolours and now ultimately permeated Cézanne's whole art.'

Gowing's analysis of Cézanne's late paintings reveals how his thinking as a painter translated itself into the construction of the paintings, and proposes that *'he was well aware that his mutations of colour originated as much in theory as in observation'*. In perfect synchronicity the theory originated in ideas about form: *'Modulation implies a transition through perceptible stages. Smooth monochromatic modelling always seemed to Cézanne a falsification.'*[4]

abstraction➜disintegration➜modulation⬅➜construction

If you become interested in the idea of construction, as an artist, then you encounter a contradiction to the idea of everything being abstraction: 'form' becomes the beginning, middle and the end: the noun, the verb, and its own sentence.

In a recent interview, Peter Lowe, one of the participants of the Systems Group founded in 1969, was asked: *'The Systems Group has been described as being involved in the promotion or practice of 'syntactic art'. How would you describe the concept of artistic syntax?'*

concrete

He answers:

'Jeffrey Steele proposed the word 'syntactic' as an alternative to, or subtext to 'systems'. I argued that the word 'systems' was preferable to 'syntactic' since it was the more common usage. We could have translated the term 'art concret' but although 'concrete' is the

antonym to 'abstract', it also has the misleading connotation in English of a mix of stones, sand and cement. Syntactic tendencies are found in most cultures whereas Western European art is preoccupied with mimesis and symbolism.'

If the word syntax means the arrangement of things in order to generate a clearer meaning through some kind of logical order, the Systems artists never had the intention to obfuscate and make it difficult for people to understand and enjoy the artworks, but wanted to present something that in its declared rationality was there to be interpreted by the viewer in its own terms.

Peter Lowe explains:

'There is more than one way of seeing syntactic works and this ambiguity adds to their richness. Some people say that to understand something ruins their enjoyment. Sometimes ignorance is bliss but understanding heightens perceptions. Viewers are encouraged to look at syntactic art without interpreting it in literary or figurative terms. It is not always appropriate to look at things as metaphor. We never see the raw visual fact of anything if we insist on looking at everything in terms of something else.'

We could use the analogy of the constructivist artist as a builder who has the intention of creating something 'concrete' – something new in the sense that it has never been seen before – and not an abstraction. So, in this case, the builder needs to have some building blocks with which to build. Peter Lowe describes his as 'units'- He explains: *'When or where to start and stop ordinarily besets creative enterprise. Kenneth and Mary Martin used permutations which contain a beginning and an end. I invented an alternative conclusive method using identical units. Four units combined, layer upon layer, form a cube. This allows me to convey direction, growth and scale.'*

He was asked: *"Is one aim of systems art to eliminate all evidence of the personality of the artist?"*
'Not only the Constructivists but also some of the Dadaists and Surrealists shared this aim when they experimented with chance. Syntactic art does not glorify idiosynchrasies of craftsmanship like the brush mark. Bravura performances of technical skill or lack of it are not essential. But, for better or worse, the personality of the artist will emerge whatever systems or structures are in place.'[5]

systems

In opposition to other Systems artists Jeffrey Steele insists that the mathematical system in his paintings _is_ the work – and not just a tool or a means to an end. I think this is what he takes from Cézanne and I compare this notion to the 'handling' that Gowing now realised that Cézanne realised 'was' the picture. Referring back to the idea that constructivist or systems art is an embodiment of the terms from language: noun, verb and sentence, they could be translated as unit, action (or construction) and syntax. The meaning is generated from within itself: from its 'handling', its arrangement – its agency.

colour systems

Some artists, such as Richard Paul Lohse and Jean Spencer developed colour systems. The colour systems *are* the subject matter of the paintings – they *are* the work.

verb - a word used to describe an action:
'to look'

In my own research I am discovering that – the how to – the process, in Gowing's words: Cezanne's 'handling', has become the most important part of the visual investigation. You could say that the 'handling' in my own method is, in the first instance, quite simply a process of 'looking' – perhaps what could be described as an event or a series of *looking events*. I have then translated these acts of 'looking' into a set of practical and textual investigations – now transcribed into a set of instructions: a kind of manual for working. A set of prompts have essentially become a new system and to mirror Steele's argument <u>is</u> the work.

verb - a word used to describe an action:
'to point'

The supplementary activity to the act of 'looking', in my method, is the act of 'pointing'. Pointers – the tools used – take different forms and mutate into paintings. You could describe this process as a kind of mapping.

verb - a word used to describe an action:
'to describe'

I have extracted some of the art historian Michael Baxandall's methods for the investigation of paintings to develop the practical guide that I follow. He insists that the activity of 'description' is essential to any attempt to explain of an historical painting. The 'description' should be a formal one. The paintings and prints in my current project are descriptions.

looking-making←→transposition/construction→reflexivity

My research is rooted in the idea that it is possible to re-evaluate history; a visual re-evaluation of art historical paintings – a new visual realisation. The methodology I have developed takes the idea of 'mirroring' as part of this re-evaluation process.

Taking the concept of two way reflection a step further the research undertaken is also intended to be reflexive. By this I mean that the transposition process, which, to reiterate, involves the act of looking and making: 'looking-making', will in turn generate a new way to read historical paintings. I have used the word *transposition* as an overarching concept but I am still reflecting upon the new work and its implications.

[1] Jeffrey Steele, Notes on Conceptual Art, 2018 http://www.aestheticinvestigations.eu/index.php/journal

[2] Hal Foster, The Expressive Fallacy', Art in America (January 1983), reprinted in Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Seattle, 1985)

[3] http://alannarisse.com/blog/hal-foster-the-expressive-fallacy/

[4] Lawrence Gowing, Cézanne: The Logic of Organized Sensations, 1977, Conversations with Cézanne, ed Michael Doran, University of California Press, 2001

[5] Peter Lowe interviewed by Alan Fowler, May 2005: www.peter-lowe.com/