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## Exhausting metaphor – Andrea Fisher and the infinitely deferred image

My starting point is a question: what do you do when you don't know what to do, and, more specifically, how do you make something meaningful when you can't find a meaning.

These are, I think, common, mundane questions we all experience when encountering art and images. They are also, of course, exhaustingly contemporary political and social questions for us all, right now.

The reason I'm starting my presentation with this question, though, is because metaphor and resemblance – the attempt to make meaning by building connections within an already known sematic web; and that meaning can be made by establishing resemblance, similarity or relation – are essential processes that help us try to understand the unknown and unfamiliar. It's also what we (artists, makers, filmmakers, and people who think about art and images) are taught to do at art school at an early stage.

What I want to propose, though, is that this process, this use of metaphor and the implicit construction of relation it implies, is in crisis: that there's a problem with metaphor. The history of modernism's use of metaphor – in early romanticism, in Surrealism, in modernist montage –

is unavailable to us as a device to bridge the gap between sensory, visual experience and some kind of constructed meaning. Basically, we can no longer use metaphor in the way Richard Shiff suggested when he said that “art [is a] metaphor linking the individual to [an] expanding world”. The dialectical or syllogistic leap that connects things through resemblance isn’t a reliable interpretative, associative tool for us – something isn’t working in generating new experience or meaning.

Now I may be overstating the problem in this presentation for the purposes of provocation, but I do think this is a genuine issue about how art and images are made today. The way I want to explore this is by thinking about the work of Andrea Fisher. I don’t think Fisher’s work is that well known today: her career was tragically cut short with a diagnosis of cancer when she was still only 47, and she has rather fallen out of critical view. Chronologically and stylistically, her work falls into the space between the generation of artists who came through CSM’s (at the time) more conceptual sculpture course from the mid-seventies, and the group of artists subsequently associated with Goldsmiths (where she taught). Today, her work could be described as responding to the so-called ‘sculptural turn’ in photography, as her practice used both objects and images in gallery-based installations.

If you're able to ever see her work, the initial experience often seems to feel like you've entered a laboratory or the workspace of a particularly fastidious picture editor or even somewhere where an autopsy could be carried out. The work encourages a meditative and precise absorption with the images and objects, while you try to work out what the connection or 'story' is between the different component parts. The art historian and critic Stella Santacaterina describes it rather well when she writes:

“[The] elements and symbols [used in Fisher's work] are distributed in a way which creates an impression of fragmentation, of a perplexity and uncertainty of position, of a suspension of meaning [...] the operation carried out by the artist tends not to distort the contents of the image and symbol, but rather withdraw from and reverse their original meaning”

I hesitate to describe Fisher's work as literal or in some way purposefully 'anti-metaphorical' (and actually, I'm not even sure I'd know what that might mean), but the process of imaginative invention whereby the viewer 'finds' meaning by syntactically creating visual links between the known and the unknown (that is to say, that the viewer invents a language to interpret the work), doesn't seem to apply with Fisher's pieces.

Let me explain what this might look like.

I'm thinking about what the framing and sculptural elements do when they're considered as blockages in conducting connection or relation between parts of one of Fisher's installation; what does it mean – or what happens – when two images don't or can't or are physically restrained from touching? If, in some strange way, you tried to picture the connection between the elements in a piece like *Impossible Relations III* as the edit or dissolve between frames of film, then you could say that in a way the transition is too 'glitch-y', it actively draws attention to the lack of ease between the elements of the work. The way the parts lean against each other seems to focus attention on awkwardness or an apparent arbitrariness of the placement and link between the parts. It also compounds an uncertainty about whether the pictures are objects (so should they be physically fused together?) or images (and if so, the inability of, for example, the hands to ever touch – separated as they are by being in different frames and distances, as they're literally in different planes of focus and depths of field). All these things seems to indicate a gap between or something collapsed between the pictures and parts of the work. Fisher, although clearly informed by her knowledge of minimalism, is not seeking to make a sinuous relationship between the elements of her installations: these are not

abstract planes of mysterious material like we might find in Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* where there are metaphysical and theological nuances to think about while we simultaneously experience a material thing, an apparently blank canvas. Neither are Fisher's works purely focussed on phenomenological experience that emphasise now-ness or presence, like we might see in Ellsworth Kelly's work, or even Brice Marden, where the viewer's experience of the transition between surfaces – the gap – is actually central to the experience of a piece 'bringing things together' in a work. What I'm getting at in these references is that Fisher is using the breaks between surfaces to emphasise not a transition the between planes and objects to suggest movement, but to stress the way the surface is a place of blockage, where we're brought up short. Obviously, her use of documentary photographs in conjunction with the stylistic allusions to minimalism indicates something quite distinct to what these other works I've just mentioned were doing, but I'm trying to make a point about how Fisher's work seems preoccupied with not letting the viewer 'out' into another space or place, either literally or imaginatively or metaphorically. This is one of the reasons why I think her work is interesting in relation to the topic of today's symposium.

If we turn to the photographic images, I also think that Fisher's installations, with their focus on trying to both show – and resist showing – the spectacle of trauma, hint at why the processes of metaphor might become stalled or problematic. There is something in Fisher's work which requires interpretation and translation, but it isn't obvious how to go about this: the work, for me, is an example of where I seem to know what's going on, but that I struggle with when I try to put that sensation into words. Returning to Shiff's essay on metaphor, he says: the "public representation of private experience must depend on a medium or metaphor" (Shiff, p.116) but then he goes on to add:

"The ultimately successful work of art would employ a metaphor not recognizable as such"

So that:

"the passage from the world of life to the world of art would seem to occupy neither space nor time."

This suggests a couple of things if we return to Fisher's work. Firstly, that there is a tension between the specific subjective experience (what Shiff calls 'private experience') and the general shared sense of meaning the

work operates in (what Shiff would call the 'world of life'). Secondly, that this has to do with time: that there is a prerequisite for a shared temporal experience to open up any possibility for creating meaning and metaphor. Let me try to explain this via a diagram (slide xx). What I'm trying to illustrate here in this slide in a rather clunky, generalised way is something about the relationship between time and the image and how they may or may not interact. On the left I'm trying to describe how an experience of time, of moving through time, and of time 'progressing', might lead to the gradual disappearance of detail with an accompanied shift towards the general; that there would then be a loss of emotional directness, or affect with a simultaneous reduction in evidential value; there would be a loss of coherent meaning, and a sort of drift into entropy. These types of thing might characterise what happens 'over time'.

By contrast (and continuing to speak generally), the creation of images or art, might operate in these opposite ways: that images transform our experience of reality into specific, though potentially fragmented, details (so art might draw our attention towards the particular); that art would heighten the experience of affect; and the creation of images would contribute towards generating a sense of holding or freezing specific



things or senses, of maintaining things, or allowing things to last or endure.

This is a sweeping generalisation, but what I want my rather iffy diagram to suggest is that there would be a sweet spot, or area of interplay – literally the creation of an inbetween stage – that would, or should, or could link an experience of time with the image, and where art makes time rich and meaningful.

Only, however, if there is some proximity between time and art.

Without this ability to cross between time and the image, something breaks in our experience of the world; when we can't reach across these boundaries and find the interpretive links that allow us to generate meaning, some kind of paralysis, or numbness or an inability to ever reach a harmonious resolution, sets in (which we might also call a bad infinite – a repeated, interminable deferral towards something we're incapable of reaching). In essence, we don't know how to make or create meaningful futures because we lack the structures and forms to invent new modes of being in the world or new ways of being with other, and this relates to metaphor. And the failure of metaphor could, therefore, be described as the failure of time and image to touch.

What are the implications of this?

There are, obviously, several ways to explore this complex idea, but I just want to focus on two possible approaches. Firstly, I want mention Franco Berardi's most recent book *The Third Unconscious*, which was written as a response to the coronavirus pandemic, because Berardi talks extensively about the subject of touch and proximity. Obviously, his primary focus is to think about this in terms of bodies and physical touch, and the book is, in part, an attempt to describe what the fear of closeness and transmission does because, in many respects, Berardi is writing about the failure of touch. Reading the book, his concerns about proxemics can apply to metaphor and what it means when things can't traverse or carry across boundaries. Using the trauma of the coronavirus and the disruption of communication and the breakdown of contact it created, Berardi describes the problem like this: "a trauma can be viewed as a temporary disarrangement of the cognitive chain - first as a breakdown of the nervous automatisms that normally regulate chains of perception-reaction" that then goes on to become a "range of disturbances, interweavings, superpositions" that may (and this is hints at something more positive) "lead to possible unpredictable breakthroughs" p.59. The suggestion being that the breakdown in

communicable contact might yet actually create new (as yet unexperienced) forms of coming together (and this is part of Berardi's argument that we might be living through a period where a new form for the unconscious is developing). Anyway, applying this to the subject of metaphor, the question might then be: Can we metaphorize (and metamorphize) the time we are living in?

The second reference I wanted to make to try and think about the failure of time and image to connect comes from Julia Kristeva. I think that the idea of metaphor as a kind of 'dissociative disorder' is suggestively close to Kristeva's definition of what she calls hysterical time. The hysteric's experience of time is primarily, to paraphrase Kristeva, a dissociated sense of chronology (Kristeva p.135); it is time and recollection as moments of "passionate timelessness" (Kristeva p.133). She goes on to explain that while the link between hysteria and memory has long been established, where "reality" is modified in the hysteric this modification goes hand in hand with a modified time." These disturbances occur as blockages to the interaction between experience and temporality – between the many elements of the psyche and the life world – and might actually emphasise the famous claim by Freud that "The unconscious ignores time." Kristeva puts it more succinctly when she says that "we have a tendency to describe hysteria as a state of psychological

dissociation” p.131 and could be read as being a psychoanalytic variation on what I earlier described as the glitch-y experience of reality when time and subjectivity fail to mesh coherently. It could also lend itself, therefore, as yet another way of describing how metaphor might indeed be out of sync, or out of touch, with time.

The upshot of this is that the ‘bad infinite’ of continually deferred meaning in metaphorical links (when faced with things that we struggle to say or think), and the creativity involved in experiencing art, becomes not the creation of new sensations and new thoughts, but a kind of exhaustion. With the interruption of meaningful conjunction – or the inability to create metaphors – we are left only with fragmenting misconnections. Metaphor becomes a kind of ‘dissociative disorder’.

I want to close, here, by suggesting that Fisher’s work is an attempt to visually, creatively, explore this dissociation. What Fisher’s work shows us or gets us to experience is this moment of dissociation – the moment when images fail to make sense of the world.