

ERIN MANNING: Art as Way

Problematic:

How does the question of art shift when we think of art in its medieval definition as “way”? This opening toward what I call the artful, or “aesthetic yield,” will allow us to consider the activity of the hyphen in “research-creation.” How does the commitment to practice at the heart of the artful alter the question of life itself? What are its modes of existence? What else can be heard in the making? Issues around black life and neurodiversity will be at the forefront of a journeying into where the political does its work in the ethico-aesthetic.

1. Art as Way

In the revaluation of value that occurs when we speak of how research infolds artistic practice, we have to be careful not to fall prey to the amplification of a certain narrative of usefulness whereby the object becomes the purpose of the inquiry. Art must resist the framing of itself as simply a conduit to what has use-value for the systems in which it operates. This turn against neoliberal capital’s valuation of art as mode of capture for affective knowledge is what SenseLab has tried to counter with its theorization of research-creation as study. That is to say, our work over the past almost twenty years has been to wrest the theoretical from its tendency to act as an envelope for practice, tuning art toward social scientific measure. In our estimation, research *is* creative, and art is a way that emboldens that creative potential.

Art as way, as I argued in *The Minor Gesture*, works from the process-out, recognizing the object as an inflection of that process but not reducing the process to it. The object is the force of how a process gets underway. And by object I don’t necessarily mean a fixed form – this can be a performance or even an ephemeral activity. The object activates the work as terminus, as William James might say, motivating it. But as James also says, most termini never reach their so-called “ends.” Termini are lures, orientors, tensors. They make the path.

Art as way comes from a liberty I took with the German word “die Art” which means “manner” or “mode.” Through a return to art as way, I would like to propose a new kind of art-as-practice that begins “not with the object, but with what else art can do. I want to propose we engage first and foremost with the manner of practice and not the end result. What else can artistic practice become when the object is not the goal, but the activator, the conduit toward new modes of existence?”

“In Romantic languages, where “art” as a word has been retained, mode or manner is eclipsed by a definition of art that emphasizes “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination.” Art is not only reduced entirely to human expression; it is also synonymous, as the Oxford English Dictionary (oed) would have it, with “visual form . . . appreciated primarily for [its] beauty and emotional power.”” (*Minor Gesture* 46)

“This current definition of art signals the way the object continues to play a key role in artistic practice, holding art to a passive-active organization that segregates maker from beholder. For

those whose practice opens the way toward processual concerns, the old definition will feel outdated. And yet there is no question that the object's hold remains strong.
(*Minor Gesture* 46)

2. Intuition

The danger of using research as the value-added of artistic practice is that it invariably puts the practice on the side of the raw material and the research on the side of what really advances knowledge. For that to become scalable, it also requires us to foster a vocabulary of methodology that, no matter how open it promises to be, delimits practice by making it repeatable. After all, methodology gets its value from the notion that it is generalizable across more than one iteration. This requires an importation of criteria from outside the sphere of the ways of practice, the paths practice makes operative. The criteria, as mentioned above, tend to come from the social sciences. Here, where knowledge has always felt threatened (after all, these are not hard sciences), a central aim is to prove that knowledge is transferable. The conditions for this transferability are borne out of a certain implicit valuation. This implicit bias has to do with how knowledge is registered. In the context of the university, it is informed by whiteness as much as by neurotypicality. To know is to know executively, that is, with intact executive function, and to be able to coalesce that knowledge into a form that is registerable in a system that will always privilege a certain version of reason.

Intuition is anathema to this system, and yet art as way depends on it. Intuition as mobilized here comes from the work of Henri Bergson. For Bergson, intuition is the opening onto a process that gathers it toward its operative problem. In doing so, intuition creates a breach in time.

Intuition's durational fold brings the problem into event-time, shifting it away from the metric or chronological time which would swerve it toward use-value. Intuition produces this fold in time in order to allow something more intangible than use-value to surface. The intangibility that is activated through intuition – when honed through years of practice – is what allows the process to detour from what Bergson calls “false problems,” problems that already carry their solutions.

If we consider the way intuition works in an artistic process, we recognize a certain lapsing of subject-centredness as being key to it. The posture of an encounter with intuition is one of side-stepping, of getting out of the way. What we are getting out of the way of is chronological time, time that matches activity to product.

This breach fosters a durational field. The durational field is unquantifiable. Entering the field requires an encounter with this unquantifiable share of experience. I call this the pragmatics of the useless.

The pragmatics of the useless entails a revaluation of value – it is useless precisely because it does not coincide with that which already has value. Intuition does its work by necessity – to open up onto a process such that an operative problem can be set into motion requires an opening onto unknowability.

In the encounter with unknowability, we find ourselves in the midst. This is why the experience is no longer one of subject-centredness. We are taken by the process as much as the process is oriented by us. We are moved. In time, as intuition is honed, we begin to know when and how to follow that movement.

3. Movement-Moving

When movement becomes the focus rather than subject-centredness, a deviation from the object as end-effect also occurs. This is because subject and object always operate on a see-saw. Subject-centredness is only possible when a delimited object exists. But a delimited object is as much a construction as is a self-centred subject. Form simply doesn't exist in that hardened a state.

This is what art as way teaches – what art makes is not an object even when it passes through objectness. The object is an inflection that enfolds how the durational fold of the operative problem takes shape. This taking-shape tends to be aligned to a certain field of materiality. Every artist has their preference. This preference is a mix of habit and appetite. Habit in the sense that there are materials with which we have experimented in an array of ways that have allowed us to encounter them rigorously over time, and appetite in the sense that those material affordances drew us in because of something we intuited they could allow us to draw out. This double preference plays a role in the taking-shape. It allows the process to be foregrounded in certain phases, and the materials backgrounded. Once the durational fold of intuition begins to do its work, this is what occurs.

Let me take an example from my own practice. Recently, I have been tufting. When I tuft, I work on a large canvas, using both mechanical and electrical tools. Though tufting is a new practice for me, I approach it with some sense of previous acquaintance because of my history as a painter. Years of working with textile also produce a certain ease with the new medium. Entering into a process, I therefore tend to begin with those existing tendencies. But the yarn and the tools require shifts in my habits. If I am not careful, those shifts will be muted by what habitually happens when my body encounters a canvas. Intuition does its work here not by providing a form or an image. It does its work by qualitatively shifting the scene. This qualitative shift could feel like a rhythm, could orient toward colour, might draw out a shape. The following of that process leaves my habitual body behind, often inciting unease. The movement of the work is beginning to take over. As this movement takes over, the materials themselves become backgrounded to the extent that I am less concerned about the object taking form than the way movement is moving. If the work is moving along well, a relay will soon set in whereby a continual calibration of movement and material takes place. If this occurs, what has happened is that the material has become movement. A work is forming itself.

In the working of the work, the material begins to exceed itself. That is to say, it opens up to an operative problem it has now been called to carry. This quality of movement-moving is what intuition motors. It's very easy at this stage to trip up the process by inserting ourselves into it as editors. I do it all the time. What is interesting to me is this tension between the way and the inflection that carries its objectness. If the objectness becomes too centred, there is a tendency to move quickly to habits of making, producing a certain recognizability. There is of course no

issue with repetition – it’s a necessary part of honing intuition. The issue is with holding back materiality’s potential by hardening it into a form too quickly.

If the focus is on the way rather than the endpoint, and if the objectness is what inflects rather than what coalesces, we begin to see things from another perspective. The material conditions and the force-of-form they call forth are not how the work encapsulates itself but how the work gets moving. In this way of thinking, the work necessarily becomes a series. What is made is in a rhythm of durational folding. The effect of this over time is that material specificity may become backgrounded. For instance, a problem may be lured into expression through paint but find its way through words, or vice versa.

4. The Art of Time

The art-based research model that aligns to social science methodologies eclipses the art of time. In the place of the durational fold of intuition, what is valued is framing. What this usually means in practice is that artists work out how to bend their processes to the necessary framings. In the best case scenario this is simply a waste of time. In the worst case scenario, the work suffers.

The wasting of time is experienced as bad management of chronological time. Event-time feels different. Here, where what moves experience is unquantifiable, processes phase and dephase, opening themselves up to their own differential potential. That is to say: there is no frame onto which or through which the process plays itself out. No longer outside the process looking in, we find ourselves motored by it. This vertigo-inducing activity often leaves us uneasy, breathless, unsure. There is no guarantee that the work will please us, or that we will feel easy with it. But there is a qualitative sense, in all cases, that time has shifted to expose layers of complexity that would otherwise have been backgrounded. “The art of time is not about definitions so much as about sensations, about the affective force of the making of time where “we are no longer beings but vibrations, effects of resonance, ‘tonalities’ of different amplitudes” (Lapoujade 2010: 9; my translations throughout). Nor is the art of time about economy, about marking the worthiness of a given experience, the usefulness of time spent. “We must become capable of thinking . . . change without anything changing” (Lapoujade 2010: 12). Duration is time felt in the beyond of apparent change, independently of any notion of linear succession.” (*The Minor Gesture*, 49).

The rift in knowing occasioned by the durational fold of intuition is the way of research-creation. That is to say, what research-creation can do is shift the contours of what it means to know. This is the research at the heart of creative work, percolating at the infrathin edgings of what exceeds linguistic expression in the artistic process and is made thinkable through the materiality of the concept. Philosophy and art are neither one nor are they juxtaposed. There is no seesaw. Research-creation is the productive hyphenation activated in the art of time that produces an opening onto duration in the work’s work. This can easily be squashed through manhandling. To insert a theory, to impose a frame, to coalesce too quickly into a form, to announce too forcefully a didactic stance – these always take the wind out of it. This is as much the case for writing as for any material practice. It is the work itself that teaches us how to think, not the other way around.

5. The Work's Work (*faire oeuvre*)

By work's work, I don't mean an endpoint. I mean the way. I mean a honing of intuition that allows us to follow, rigorously, where those preferential materials can take us, including to those places we didn't formerly know how to get to. In Bergson's work, intuition is always accompanied by what he calls "sympathy." Sympathy must here be understood beyond any subject-centredness. Sympathy is the feel the process has for where it needs to go. "Henri Bergson writes: We call intuition that sympathy by which we are transported to the interior of an object to coincide with what it has that is unique and, consequently, inexpressible" (in Lapoujade 2010: 53). Sympathy as the motor of excavation allows the movement to be felt, opens experience to the complexities of its own unfolding." (*The Minor Gesture* 50).

"What is intuited is not matter per se: "There is therefore no intuition of matter, of life, of society in and of themselves, that is, as nouns" (Lapoujade 2010: 56). There is intuition of forces, of qualities that escape the superficial interrogation of that which has already taken its place. Intuition is always and only compelled by what is on its way." (*The Minor Gesture* 50).

In time, in the art of time, what is activated is not a subject or an object, but a field of expression through which a different quality of experience is crafted. What art can do is to bypass the object as such and make felt instead the dissonance, the dephasing, the complementarity of the between, of what Deleuze calls the "revelatory" or refracting milieu (1972: 47). It does so when it is capable of making operative its minor gesture. The refraction produces not a third object but a quality of experience that reaches the edgings into form of the material's intuition. When this occurs, matter intuits its relational movement, activating from within its qualitative resonance an event that makes time for that which cannot quite be seen but is felt in all its uncanny difference. Intuition, in its amplification of the technicity of a process, in its capacity to think the more-than as memory of the future, forecasts what Deleuze calls "an original time" which "surmounts its series and its dimensions," a "complicated time" "deployed and developed," a time devoid of preconceptions, a time that makes its own way (1972: 61)." (*The Minor Gesture* 51).

The minor gesture is always active at the interstices of those folds in the art of time. A gesture in the sense that it inflects a process, a minor gesture is not mine to make. A minor gesture makes itself, angling the field such that a certain quality of experience can be foregrounded. "Allied to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor, it is the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation." (*The Minor Gesture* 1).

6. Artfulness

Artfulness is the conduit to the minor gesture, "the momentary capture of an aesthetic yield in an evolving ecology." (*The Minor Gesture* 58).

"The complex ecology of a process outdoing itself that is made operational by the minor gesture is felt, in its intensity, in the artful: the artful is palpably transindividual. In the context of art as manner, artfulness is therefore closer to the differential than to any object, a differential that has been activated through the punctuality of a minor gesture's movement through the process. This is not to suggest that the crafting of operational problems through intuition, the activation of

minor gestures through sympathy for the event, the coming-into-expression of artfulness are quickly or easily done: when writing about intuition's role in the crafting of a problem, Bergson speaks of the necessity of a long camaraderie engendered by a relationship of trust that leads toward an engagement with that which goes beyond premature observations and preconceived neutralizing facts (in Lapoujade 2008: 12). Intuition is a rigorous process that agitates at the very limits of an encounter with the as-yet-unthought. Artfulness is the sympathetic expression of this encounter.

Tapping into the differential, artfulness opens the world to the kind of novelty Alfred North Whitehead foregrounds—a novelty not concerned with the capitalist sense of the newest new, but novelty as the creation of mixtures that produce new openings, new vistas, new complexions for experience in the making. This novelty can never be reduced to art as object: only the artful is truly capable of activating new mixtures. Artfulness does not belong to the artist, nor to art as a discipline. If it need be attached to something, it could be said to be what the most operational process of research-creation seeks to actualize. Artfulness is the operative expression of worlds in the making, the aesthetic yield that opens experience to the participatory quality of the more-than.

Artfulness emerges most actively in the interstices where the world has not yet settled into objects and subjects. When there is artfulness, it is because conditions have been created that enable the art of time. For it is only when there is sympathy for the complexity of the welling event that the more-than of an emergent ecology can truly be perceived. When this happens, a shift is felt toward a sense of immanent movement—and the way at the heart of art is felt. It is not the object that stands out here, not the tree or the sunset or a painting. It is the force of immanent movement the event calls forth that is experienced, a mobility in the making that displaces any discrete notion of subjectivity or objecthood. This does not mean that what is opened up is without a time, a place, a history. Quite the contrary: what emerges at the heart of the artful is always singular—this process, this ecology, this feeling. It is how the constellation of emergent factors co-compose, how they are felt in their emergence, that make this singular event artful, an artfulness that will then, in retrospect, carry a history, a commitment to a cause, mobilizing a politics in the making.” (*The Minor Gesture*, 58-59).

7. A Politics In the Making

The political is always simmering in the minor gesture not as form but as force. In *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten prefer the vocabulary of sociality to the political, their approach always an effort to sideline the state and all that it captures in the frame of neurotypicality and whiteness. Understood as an emergent protopolitical assemblage, sociality is not the social. It is the field of activity through which worlds (re)make themselves.

In my recent book *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, I turn to what I call minor sociality to express this qualitative share of life in the making, listening closely to work around black life and blackness to better understand how to attend to all that neurotypically moves through the framings of our methods.

I foreground neurotypicality for a reason. Neurotypicality grounds our academic endeavours. From very early, we are trained to adhere to modes of knowing which silence our bodies and hold our intuitions in check. Recognition is given at every turn to bodies that hold back, that hold in, bodies that refute any excess on themselves, any leakages. Neurodiverse bodies leak. They shift and squirm and squiggle, their limbs uneasy in the holding. Neurodiverse bodies threaten the framings of knowledge by exposing the docility required to maintain them.

Neurotypicality is always aligned to whiteness. Whiteness is not reducible to white skin, though white skinned people have a special access to it. The horror: those who are not white may mimic neurotypical modalities, but ultimately they will never be formally invited to reflect them. Neurotypicality is colonial through and through.

When I wrote *The Minor Gesture*, Fred Moten made a comment in a manuscript review. He said something like “all black life is neurodiverse life.” This comment came too late in the writing of *The Minor Gesture* to inflect it much. *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* became the conduit to the consequences of the uneasy adequation of black life with neurodiverse life.

I say uneasy because nowhere in my thought (or in Moten’s, I am sure), is there a desire to subjectify either black life or neurodiverse life, thereby turning them into comparable states of being. That is to say, the “is” is more an approximation of proximity than it is a linkage. I am not saying that black folks are autistics or that autistics are black. I am saying that the sociality that is activated in and through blackness is neurodiverse, and that neurodiversity is always a minor sociality.

8. Minor Sociality

In the preface of *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, I write: “*For a Pragmatics of the Useless* asks how, in the differential of black sociality, or what Laura Harris calls an “aesthetic sociality of blackness,” aesthetic propositions for living otherwise are crafted, and carried. Harris defines an aesthetic sociality of blackness as “an improvised political assemblage that resides in the heart of the polity but operates under its ground and on its edge” (2012, 53). In this operation “under ground and on edge,” black sociality invents sites of collective expression rather than simply inhabiting them. “Its resources, which can never be fully accessed by the structures and authorities of legitimate political economy, are taken up by the politically and economically illegitimate in their insistence on living otherwise, in ways that resist repression, denigration, and exclusion and violate brutally imposed laws of property and propriety” (Harris 2012, 53). An aesthetics of black sociality grows in the between of ad hoc constructions for a life in the making, aesthetic in its commitment to a lived expression of perception’s differential, social in its consent not to be a single being in an ethos of what Édouard Glissant (1997) would call a poetics of relation.” (7)

Artfulness is thick with lived experience. To say that neither subject nor object determine its force should not be heard as a claim to neutrality. Minor gestures are inflections of processes underway, which makes them even more attuned to all that uneasily moves through them. Through long-standing valuations of the grand gestures of experience, we have been taught the

opposite: that it is the major that carries what matters. Art as way challenges this view, its work always to amplify the conditions of experience that make the work do its work.

What I am gesturing toward here is the danger of emptying out the minor, or the artful. By emptying out I mean acting as though the vectors they produce are wide open, untouched, untethered. This is what whiteness does: it assumes a blank slate onto which experience is then written. This is possible because whiteness never needs to speak of the site from which it does its work. The site is given in advance.

9. Whiteness

To assume a ground is to have become desensitized from movement-moving. It is to have practiced an unfeeling of the uneasiness that comes of the formative force of experience coming into itself. It is to have reduced the encounter to the manageable 1 + 1 of interpersonality, limiting it to what can be accounted for, and counted. “With whiteness as the emblem of neurotypicality, the interpersonal moves at the pace of the norm, revealing a systemic operation more than an individual pathology. This is to say: whiteness is a normopathic condition that incessantly returns to the empty figure of the 1 + 1, a dramaturgy of frontality that only ever serves to reproduce the self-same. For the self-same to operate—which is to say, to reproduce the whiteness that benefits from it—exclusion must remain at the forefront. The interpersonal thrives in the difference with separation that ensues, the one already reproduced as same, same, same. For whiteness, in all its overprivileged violence, is remarkably uncreative: it recognizes only what differs from its image of itself. Same, same, same, other. From here, nothing is possible except the reiteration of what has already been (re)produced.

No sociality is at work here. Sociality has been choreographed out of the equation in the commitment to policing the terms of the encounter. What remains: the form of exclusion. To count is to be counted. 1 + 1 + 1 + 1. Nothing in excess, nothing in germ. Policing, frontality, amplification of the structure. Because that is all whiteness can mobilize: an empty space barricaded from the inside.

To imagine existence excluded from sociality is to have a sense of how limited whiteness is—an existence so narrow as to be a mirage. And yet a mirage that blows itself out of proportion at every turn. This is the power of neurotypicality: that it can structure whole existences without itself existing as such. Whiteness is that very paradox—a mirage policed to retain that which it ultimately never had, that which it never is.

Harney connects the limits of the interpersonal with the concept of the ally. “Who is this someone in solidarity with blackness,” he asks, “who is this ally of blackness, who is this someone with affinity to black struggle?” (2017). To be an ally suggests having a sociality from which to draw. And yet there is no sociality in whiteness, only interpersonality. Only neurotypicality. There is no differential in whiteness, no field of relation that could tune toward socialities in the making. No being of relation. Whiteness is in fact that which can never be an emergent collectivity precisely because it is bounded, fixed, sited. Norm, mirage, whiteness is deadening of life. There is no bridge from whiteness to sociality. “The problem is,

there's no such thing as a white community. A white community is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. You can't organize an oxymoron. The only thing you can do with a white community is work to abolish it" (Harney 2017). (*For a Pragmatics* 62, 63).

This must not be seen as a segueway through whiteness from which another topic will emerge. Whiteness and/as neurotypicality is the shroud that covers all practices in the university, and beyond. The aim in moving through a vocabulary of sociality is to make clear that to think the political and to do the work of art's way requires a commitment to the excess-on-itself of subjectivity. This excess-on-itself of subjectivity – what I have called the more-than human – refuses the humanism at the heart of neurotypicality. It refuses to fall into place.

This refusal must be practiced. That is to say, those of us with special access to whiteness have to recognize how the adherence to the frame facilitates a return to habit that makes method not only possible, but necessary. Framings are never neutral: they frame what we already know, and what we have been taught to believe matters.