ART • WRITING • DIAGRAMMATICS

In a recent *Art Monthly* article John Douglas Miller addresses the evolving status of writing in art (2014, pp. 9-11). Artists are embracing diverse processes with words, establishing writing as a material practice within art. These innovations are significant. On the other hand, if it becomes apparent that closely related literary practices and histories are not being figured in the discourse around such work, the significance of the artists' work becomes less certain. The art world's "soft embrace" is Millar's name for a failure of criticality he finds to be widespread and that needs to be addressed by art-writers and commentators on art-writing.

While it would be a mistake to reject the demand for more rigorous critical attention paid to artists' work, Millar's perspective underestimates the way that writing in realms of art constitutes a critical work in its own right. The idea here proposed is that the current status of writing in art is better examined for its potential as a new interrogation of the image. I want to sketch out a project; to evade as far as is possible the disciplinary battle already there in the name 'art-writing' and to suggest an extra-disciplinary work where the image is concerned.

The term 'image' tends to evoke a specific material support: the photographic surface, for instance. It is the power of the concept to point thought in that direction. And as 'image' is equated with the specific, material *actuality*, it is bracketed out of time, the event of encounter forgotten. Consequently, the idea of image stillness gives us no difficulty when in fact it is an odd and implausible notion. In his writing on gesture, Giorgio Agamben makes the point. He remarks of the "mythic rigidity of the image" and calls for a new work to undo its paralysing power (2000, p. 56). My argument is that the current status of writing in art is best understood as an interrogation of the image, an undermining of the ideology of image-stillness. This extra-disciplinary work can be named 'diagrammatics'.

Diagrams and their various uses in recent philosophical practice is a theme explored by John Mullarkey in *Post-Continental Philosophy* (2006), one short

quotation from which provides a good starting point. His topic is the procedure of putting words 'under erasure'. A line is scored through a word on the page in such a way that the word remains legible. As Mullarkey explains, this form of crossing out "makes the indiscernible partially discernible" (2006, p. 158). The remark is notable as a reversal of common sense. Normally our crossing out of a word, if not purely an attempt to do the opposite, to *make the discernible indiscernible*, tends in that direction; a word scored through is meant to be understood by the reader as better ignored. The philosopher's scoring-out inflicts a subtler damage. In falling short of the negation of legibility it allows reading to persist. At the same time, in implying the word as image, in admitting the visual, it changes the nature of reading. When words are too readable they short-circuit the more vital, deviant unfolding of thought. And thought's vitality here is nothing but the implication of images within words, from which new streams of words will issue.

Following Mullarkey, I want to explore the diagrammatic procedure, to plot the diversity of ways in which a subtle cancelation of textual material gives birth to images, the way that images when similarly confounded can generate words and revitalised thought. The examples that follow are from literature of one kind or another. That fact might appear to restate the order of word and image, but it would do so only for 'image' understood in its conventional sense equated with and reduced to the support. The point here is that images are latent in the sentence, in the word; words emerge from images. The work of diagrammatics is to intervene where it can, to operate on the stasis that is both a power of images and of disciplinary thought, to make thought deviate once more and so to make it think. The liberation of new visibilities from within the readable and new legibilities within the visual are the effects towards which a diagrammatic practice aims.

Just as it is impossible in a diagrammatic practice to say which is primary, word or image, so the apparent origins of the practice itself will tend to multiply. A sentence from a book by John Mullarkey has already been given as "starting point" but there is another beginning, an incident, an anecdote, that demands to be recounted as such. I had been browsing in a second-hand bookshop, looking through the Science-Fiction shelves with an idea that the cover illustrations of books published in the

1970s might be of interest. As it happened, I had Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A story of Wall Street* on my mind in a way that one does sometimes when the reading is fresh (1853). Bartleby is a character whose subtly inflicted damage on the normal conventions of conversation precipitate catastrophes that ultimately cause his own downfall. In one passage of the story he is described obscured behind a screen in the office in which he works as a copy clerk. Remembering it, I found myself thinking of a verse from the *Book of Jonah* in which the Prophet is described occupying what would seem to be a similar kind of structure. As the King James Version puts it:

> so Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the East side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. (chapter 4, verse 5)

Jonah and Bartleby already share an obstinacy. The curiosity that they should be pictured in similar architectural structures makes the equation more compelling still. While Bartleby's booth is not necessarily out of keeping with the kind of structure one might expect to find in an solicitor's office, Jonah's booth is puzzling. On the one hand the verse indicates clearly enough its probable purpose, to protect Jonah from the sun while he waits to see the fate of the people of Nineveh, whom he has been insisting must repent. On the other hand, the archaic language conflicts with that more straightforward sense to liberate something unexpected, so that Jonah's waiting is invested with a new kind of quality. The space demarcated renders different what might have been taken otherwise as simple inactivity. In his booth he becomes the paradoxical administrator of his nothing-doing. The reader sees the act of the character's waiting as an intensive and inventive choreography. And in this respect the parallels with Bartleby intensify.

As it became apparent to me how many of the 1970s Science-Fiction novels on the shelves of the second-hand bookshop had covers showing a desert landscape I began to see Jonah in his 'booth' as inhabitant of one such place. Following from that it became irresistible to imagine Melville's story set in the same location and then to wonder if the two stories could be republished, bound as one volume in

order to provoke the comparisons, with an extra-terrestrial desert scene as the cover. I left the book shop that day inspired to write a proposal, to pitch the idea as an important edition that would allow both stories to be seen in a new light.

With the unexpected pairing of Jonah the Prophet and Bartleby the Scrivener, a pattern for the diagrammatic project is established. A second pair comprises Murphy from Samuel Beckett's novel of the same name and the artist Robert Smithson. Like Jonah and Bartleby, these two sit awkwardly next to one another—not least in this case because one character is fictional, the other art-historical. As their shared traits are drawn out a new kind of deviation from the orthodoxy of each text will become apparent.

Murphy is standing on a street corner. His eyes are cast down towards a document held in a two-handed grasp: what's described here is an impression, one subject to the shortcomings of memory. Such is the effective way of underscoring intensive relations of word and image. In this case the image is being allowed to come first, to take precedence over what a more studious reading of the text would reveal. The document Murphy holds is a star chart. It is not stated but the emphasis on the character's location along with the nature of his movements suggest that Murphy is imagining the map as a tool for orientation in the city. To better read the information on the sheet he stoops. Again, a doubt creeps in as to the veracity of the account. The passage as remembered is reminiscent of other pieces by Beckett where humour is derived from the body-mechanics of characters. It is not impossible that Murphy is being confused or conflated with a character from another of Beckett's novels (Watt?). No matter. The diagrammatic procedure admits just this kind of distance from literary scholarship. Murphy is described straining to look up at the night sky. Then he stoops again to scrutinise the page before looking up once more, and so on. The description of these odd, jerking movements continues until his absurdity is not in question.

In the meantime, a prospective suitor has arrived. Celia, having recognised in Murphy a person of the margins like herself, wants to attract his attention. To that end she places herself where she might be in Murphy's line of vision. At least, Murphy may see her if he stops for a moment his erratic movements. Although he

does not acknowledge it at first, he is aware of Celia's arrival. He catches a fleeting sight of her between his genuflecting and upwards-peering. Despite how it might appear, his is a purposeful form of looking. While he denies her his foveal vision, in allowing himself only a peripheral sight Murphy subverts the dyspraxia that would have forbade him contact with the woman. He can relate to Celia to the extent that the direct relationship is disrupted.

What's true of Murphy's encounter with Celia can be said too of his encounter with the city. His flashes of horizontal gaze, coming between looking up and looking down, render at least *partially discernible* what would have been *indiscernible* otherwise, which is to say his place in the world of West London.

As suggested already, it is perhaps especially odd to find Robert Smithson referred to as a 'character'. However, licence for the diagrammatic fictioning is found in Smithson's own writing in his use of the first person. And in this case it has added value, addressing the increasing appearance of Robert Smithson as an example. Smithson the artist and his work have become rather too comprehensible on account of being the subject already of so many discussions, arguments, interpretations and exhibitions. The tools of fiction-writing operate now as a way of rendering him less familiar. This work of defamiliarising cannot be done indiscriminately. When we invoke Smithson free reign cannot be given to invention. Our work on this familiar name of contemporary art history must know the threshold beyond which the name no longer operates. The all-too discernible proper name has to be rendered partially indiscernible and not merely obliterated. To fictionalise in this way has a forceful aspect. But that forcefulness is diverted, as it has been in the other cases, by a level of playfulness.

The first lines of Smithson's essay from 1967, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic', give an account of the author's preparations for a journey (1996). It is unclear if the trip to Passaic, New Jersey—the town in which Smithson grew up—is one he planned in the way he describes or not. In any event, in the essay, as he gets on the bus he has with him two pieces of reading matter. One is a copy of the *New York Times*, the other is a Science-Fiction novel by Brian Aldiss entitled *Earthworks* (1965). With our basic knowledge of the artist we are aware that the title of this

second piece of reading matter is significant, sharing its name with the sub-classification of sculpture that Smithson and some of his colleagues were promoting at the time. Smithson does not comment on the coincidence. Research would be needed to establish if Aldiss' novel provided Smithson with the name for his particular expansion of the field of sculpture or if he came across the novel after having come up with the name himself. In any event, his cryptic remarks make apparent a hidden level in the writing—not only where Aldiss' novel is concerned but regarding the significance of his other reading matter. He is doing something with these pages of text. As we begin reading, we don't yet know what. The subterranean passages interfere with what's on the surface. 'A Tour' is a tricky read, the kind of essay one can return to repeatedly and never be sure if the ideas retained are actual or if they have been dreamt. But new generations of readers have learned to see past the shortcomings of Smithson's literary technique. And if they have done so it is in part because of the potential the writing has as a critique of dominant forms of thought too enamoured with established disciplines.

The scenario is familiar enough. You are browsing in a book shop. One publication attracts your interest. You take it down off the shelf and stand holding it for a moment, looking at its cover illustration, at the title, at the font chosen by the designer. While your attention is most certainly directed at the thing, in a sense you're looking through it. An unexpected line of sight opens up on account of the thing's material presence. Like the Seer who predicts the future by looking through a hole in a stone you can see potentiality for future work. A number of thoughts crowd into your mind at once. You have an idea. A trajectory for work is appearing in the most vital way. You have become unaware of your surroundings. Other customers brush past, irritated, as you stand in a reverie. If it is not so unusual to find browsers in a bookshop rapt in their reading, this case is different because you are not reading but merely standing, staring down at the item, which you hold in a two-handed grip.

The process of thought is possible only when the pages of the volume that focus attention so forcefully are not being read. Likewise, the gaze is not any straightforward interrogation of the cover illustration—that kind of looking is not quite what's taking place either. To direct conscious attention towards the picture would be an equally effective way of spoiling the mechanism here generating

thought. Then again, while the title-text falls within the field of vision, while that text is both read and treated as an image, it is one more incident of a generative interference involving the book's thickness, its flexibility and the details of the background against which the thing held is seen.

Smithson makes passing remarks about how he has "read the blurbs" and "skimmed through" the pages of *Earthworks* (1996, p. 69). These are ways of saying he has not read the book, ways of affirming a necessity that he keeps the volume closed. Similarly, when he writes more explicitly of the novel's themes his tone is casual verging on dismissive: "it seemed the book was about a soil shortage" (1996, p. 69). Each of these remarks testifies to the artist's extra-literary procedure.

By way of the hidden substrates in his writing Smithson testifies to what has occurred to him, which is that the Science-Fiction novel called *Earthworks* allows him to imagine his own work in the present as a proposition of the far future of art; that his work as an artist might be not to make the work of the present but of the future, where that untimeliness is just what the present of art demands. Insofar as there is already a series of equations to be drawn between his installations and the industrial infrastructures of Passaic, those sites are his works and the art of the future. Let's say this sequence of ideas is germinal as Robert Smithson walks, exploring Passaic; let's say he has his camera and his reading matter. The potential in these ideas to be formulated in an illustrated essay and disseminated in that way is already being realised as he adopts what he imagines to be the voice of the Science-Fiction text and gives it to his subvocal narrative. His walk is the preparation, the diagram from which the essay will be written.

Like Murphy, Smithson's diagrammatic practice uses the object/image of published matter, the text/image of inscriptions, so that one visibility, one readability, is cancelled and another allowed to emerge. Their diagrammatics admits the kind of elaboration that perverts historical facts and literary accuracy but makes possible an unexpected discernibility. And as thought is generated in new ways the practice of diagrammatics begins to establish its politics.

Aldiss, B., 1965. *Earthworks*, London: Faber & Faber.

Agamben, G., 2000. 'Notes on Gesture', *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Melville, H., 1853. *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, [online]. Available on http://www.bartleby.com/129/ [accessed 19 February 2016].

Millar, J. D., 2014. 'Art/Write', *Art Monthly* 375: April, 9-11.

Mullarkey, J., 2006. *Post-Continental Philosophy*, London: Continuum.

Smithson, R., 1996. 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, London: University of California Press.