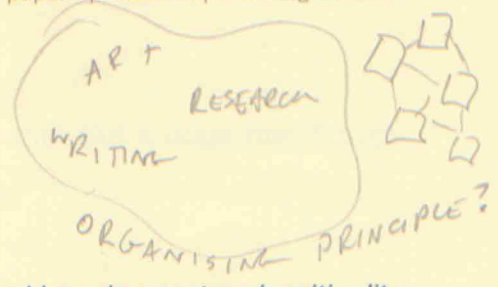


Mimesis ↑

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TITLE

Untimely findings: Art-research and the Extra-disciplinary

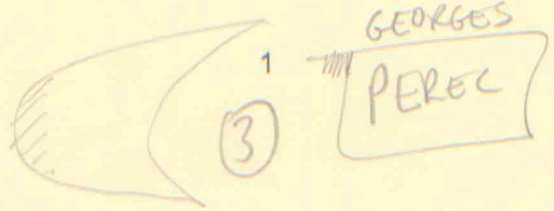
I was asked the question by an external examiner recently: *How do you teach criticality to undergraduate Fine Art students?* It has come up again in the preparations for the Paradox conference. When I was asked previously I felt I had an answer but the question has been haunting me since because of the accelerating pressures on the teaching of critical thinking—much evidence of which could be given if there were time. There is no definitive way of protecting critical thought in the current institution but there are strategies that can be employed, which I'll try to outline. The argument here will be that when work and play are tied up together, when we can assemble our working processes in unexpected ways, then there is the potential for emergent properties—which is to say, elements of our working practices that are characterised by their novelty and their indeterminate place, which makes them more resistant to the attack. It may appear odd to propose that such properties are forms of criticality on account of their emergence. But it's something along those lines I want to suggest.

Specifically, I'm thinking about the assemblage 'art-research-writing', where the hyphenated form implies a strategic ambiguity, so giving rise to elements characterised by their temporality and ephemerality. Art-writing-research might replace so-called 'critical studies'—or more accurately might manifest criticality in a new and more potent way.

An important question, then, is already implied. How might the uncertainty of the assemblage be preserved, on the one hand to forbid its homogenising into a stable form of practice and on the other to arrest the tendencies its parts might have to separate and to organise once again along disciplinary lines? The case I'm going to discuss is found in the work of Georges Perec, in his novel *Life A User's Manual*.<sup>1</sup> Perec makes an interesting case because of his ambivalence with the disciplines of literature. His struggle with the conventions of narrative is dramatised well in a remark quoted by David Bellos, his biographer:

<sup>1</sup> Perec, G. *Life A User's Manual*, David Bellos (trans.), London: Harvill, 1996.

... 2+ odds with his discipline.



THINGS: A STORY  
↓  
LIFE A USER'S MANUAL



START →

“Only complete discontinuity—fragments—can save me! But it bugs me! It bugs me!”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in the case that interests me, Perec’s writing is not saved by fragmentation. He achieves something much more significant by mobilising the diverse elements, the heterogeneity of his writing. It will be important not to regard the case as a model in any straightforward way; the logic of identifying models is part of the problem, part of what erases the specific contribution of art-research-writing.

In practice, a heterogeneous art-research-writing might mean, for instance working with different materialities, thematically in several directions, allowing ‘voices’ to change—even to change abruptly—mobilising different forms of the image, deviating from a scholarly approach into fabulation, and so on. But in order to avoid this being merely a work with fragments it must be allowed that some element comes to organise the whole. For the structure to remain assemblage in the sense I intend, the organising principle has to be not wilfully imposed, not something appropriated or applied, not a model adhered to. Instead, it has ~~instead~~ to have the property of emergence.

From the angle of teaching, when working with students for whom it may not be immediately apparent what ‘criticality’ is, or how they can achieve it, it’s valuable to be able to show them that they’re already doing it. Sensitivity to the maintaining of a fragile assemblage of diverse processes not normally thought compatible can be argued as criticality, or that’s the proposition I want to test. If so, when they have such sensitivity, then art-research-writers at all stages of their development can understand themselves as already mobilising their abilities where criticality is concerned. There are numerous advantages. The disastrous, institutional division of creativity and criticality is reversed and critical practice is given back its potency and radicality, if only for a moment.

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Perec quoted in Bellos, D. *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, London: The Harvill Press, 1993, [p. ?]



It is a common experience to find work's stable unfolding confounded. The moment can be characterised affectively in different ways. It's by no means always a negative experience. Imagine you are working. You have an idea about what you want to do, feel the excitement of that possibility. The work goes well. Then it becomes impossible to proceed. Such is the normal business of art, of research, of writing. There is much at stake in the way that we respond to the crisis. It's an ethics of work invoked here, to say that the better practice is produced when that which comes to disrupt the stable unfolding of work is somehow inscribed into the work. This paper is based to some extent on a perception that the skill to do so always has to be learned again; what it's possible to identify (rather too abstractly) as a commonality of the assembled process in fact appears differently every time. The aim in looking closely at a case in the work of Georges Perec is, as I said, not to present a model but rather to establish a coordinate for the ethics in question.

About half-way through Georges Perec's novel, *Life A User's Manual* (1978) the reader comes across a passage that seems familiar.<sup>3</sup> Pausing, turning back to the book's opening, the suspicion is confirmed. The first part of chapter 44 repeats the book's preamble. The author does not signal in any direct way that a repetition is taking place but leaves it to be discovered by the attentive reader. Consequently, the discovery affects the course of reading all the more markedly. The discovery of the repeated section provokes a kind of hiatus in reading. In whatever way she or he favours—with a bookmark of some kind—the reader marks the page then turns back to read again the earlier passage before returning once more. At that point too, perhaps, reading is suspended as the reader ponders the question of why Georges Perec might have included the same passage of writing twice.

An interest that artists, art-researchers and art-research-writers might have in such procedures of reading is one shared by Georges Perec, for instance in his essay entitled 'Reading: A Socio-Physiological Outline'.<sup>4</sup> There is a bigger project indicated here to establish what artists as researchers/writers bring to the broader research culture

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<sup>3</sup> Perec, G. *Life A User's Manual*, David Bellos (trans.), London: Harvill, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Perec, G. *Species of Spaces*, John Sturrock (trans.) London: Penguin, 1997.

in the humanities. This is one that the collective *Information As Material* have explored, notably with their 'pirating' of *Species of Spaces*, making an identical copy of the book except with the pages in which Perec explores the choreographies of reading replaced in their version with photographs of pigeons (a reference to Perec's remarks on the way the reader's eye in fact does not follow lines in an orderly way but darts around over the words like a bird pecking at seeds.)

On one level, the effect of the doubled passage in *Life A User's Manual* is clear enough. It underscores a sequence of ideas, presenting them as a potential organising principle for the book's diverse themes—'potential' because the reader may choose to dismiss the author's emphasis. However, if the reader does not, the repetition is a point in the text around which a contemplative work of the reading procedure can then take place. Or perhaps better to say that the repetition gives rise to an odd elasticity or play in the relation of parts. What's provided is a way of negotiating with the novel's potentially disorientating heterogeneity.

The passage in question concerning <sup>is</sup> jigsaw puzzles—the puzzle-solver's experience and the puzzle-maker's craft <sup>IT</sup>—is not accidentally chosen. By drawing this passage out of the book's continuum, underscoring it through repetition, Perec encourages an analogy. The parts of the novel, though they are arranged in the usual way as chapters, are in another sense individual parts with which one might play in the attempt to find an order. No doubt the metaphor is best restrained, not just to avoid the implication that there is only one solution to the novel-reading, but to remember that beyond the particular ideas and images making up the section of the novel repeated as preamble, the fact of the repetition itself is a cue for the reader to consider that, from a certain perspective, the idea or the image in any passage might emerge to organise the whole in its own way before submerging into the continuity of the writing once more. Perec gives his reader a nudge in the form of an implicit proposition: "you can use this passage as a key for how the parts of the novel might be organised". And that proposition implies in turn that other such keys can be found.

An 'organising principle', as it will operate in work comprised of heterogeneous elements, is an emergent property. Organising principles will appear and sink unpredictably as different readings are facilitated. In Perec's novel, there is only one



preamble and so by definition, in so far as he embraces conventions of novelistic form, only one opportunity to guide the reader to a potential principle of the novel's organisation. But as the reader becomes aware that the novel can be approached this way, the passages that might function to gather the whole begin to become apparent.

But there are further levels to explore in the effect of the doubled passage. I want to think more carefully through the writer's process in this case relating to the repetition, to do so to the extent that his process of constructing the novel is made evident in the work. As has already been noted, the repeated passage is there to be discovered more than it is signalled; allowed to appear for a moment, even, as a potential oversight on the author's part, all the better to provoke the reader's questioning. But to put it that way is perhaps to imply Perec as more of a strategist than is warranted. More profoundly, one gets the impression that the surprise in the reading is in fact an inscription of the surprise felt by the writer as, after some disorientation, the whole of his project has come into view in an unexpected way. In what Perec does, there is a level of sensitivity to the unfolding work. He inscribes his own affective relations with the emerging work in the work itself. And that's the ethics of practice mentioned previously.

Some remarks made by Bellos in his biography of Perec provide grounds for analysis that this aspect of the novel's structure is a significant interruption to the way that Perec's draft of *Life A User's Manual* unfolded.<sup>5</sup> It's a characteristic of the novel that it was written with remarkably consistent chronology; so much so in fact that some have assumed the manuscript to be an artefact produced retrospectively by Perec so that he might have a unique version as well as the published book. Bellos demonstrates otherwise. One of the few exceptions to the fluent and chronological production of the novel is the preamble, which was added later.

At what point did Perec become aware that the ideas and images in chapter 44 had potential to be a key to the work as a whole? From the biographical account it seems likely that Chapter 44 appeared as a kind of epiphany, with Perec realising at that point what he was doing; not restructuring the work-in-progress in a wholesale fashion but

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<sup>5</sup> Perec left details of his work on *Life A User's Manual* in the form of two black ledgers containing the draft of the text and a dated inventory of his writing sessions. An account is given in Bellos, D. *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, London: Harvill, 1999, pp. 621-623.

writing the epiphany into the work in such a way that the work's tendency to fragment remains a potency of the writing's structure. This reading is supported by the suspicion of a mistake, an inadvertent repetition, which is the affective encounter for the reader of the novel.

The speculation exposes questions about how one deals with the unexpected events that take place in the course of work. Perec's work in *Life A User's Manual* is particularly useful where that question is concerned because of the profoundly systematic nature of his process. Notoriously, in *Life A User's Manual*, Perec used a complex set of constraints or rules for the production of each chapter. He began with his systematic approach defined but with a quotient of unknowing too, feeling his way through the first chapters. Again, Bellos' biographical research supports the assumption, noting that some redrafting of chapters one to eight reveal Perec experimenting with first person narration, which he later abandoned. But that seems to be the extent of the significant redrafting. In other respects, what appears in the manuscript as a fluent and chronological unfolding of the novel is in fact Perec's now more sophisticated implementation of a quality of fragmentation—which we can understand in a sense as the “complete fragmentation” he was affirming in the remarks quoted by Bellos insofar as the (almost perfect) chronological writing of the novel is an almost perfect sequence of fragments, now held together by some qualities that emerge rather than through imposition.

~~It's a consequence of this line of thinking that the criticality in question is prone to remain unrealised as such without discussion and discourse—which is to say a collective phase of work. Insofar as our current education institutions are instruments of market economics, it can be taken as further evidence of potency that the emergent in question denies the supposed values of individualism in cultural work, which our universities promote relentlessly and to the detriment of students and their education.~~



IT'S A CONSEQUENCE OF THIS LINE OF THINKING THAT THE CRITICALITY IN QUESTION IS PRONE TO REMAIN UNREALISED AS SUCH WITHOUT DISCUSSION AND DISCOURSE—WHICH TO SAY WITHOUT A COLLECTIVE PHASE OF WORK, THE COLLECTIVITY IS ALREADY THERE IN A SENSE IN PEREC'S EVIDENT CONVERSATION WITH HIMSELF ("WHAT AM I DOING? AH, THAT'S WHAT I'M DOING!") , WHICH HIS INSCRIPTION OF WORK'S STABLE UNFOLDING DISRUPTED MAKES EVIDENT, AND IT IS THERE AGAIN IN THE READER'S INTERROGATION OF THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION ("WHAT'S HE DOING? AH, THAT'S WHAT HE'S DOING!") THAT REDISCOVERS THE WRITER'S WORK, INSOFAK AS OUR CURRENT EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE INSTRUMENTS OF MARKET ECONOMIES, IT CAN BE TAKEN AS FURTHER EVIDENCE OF POTENCY THAT THE EMERGENCE IN QUESTION WANTS TO BE EXPOSED IN THIS WAY CONTRA THE SUPPOSED VALUES OF INDIVIDUALISM IN CULTURAL WORK THAT OUR UNIVERSITIES PROMOTE RELENTLESSLY AND TO THE DETRIMENT OF STUDENTS AND THEIR EDUCATION.