DIGESTION AND REGURGITATION: METHODS OF CONTESTATION IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH.
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Abstract
The question of eating ourselves (and of eating others) seems particularly pertinent in the context of artistic research, where, in its focus upon subjectivity and affirmation, the issue of framing an opposition can all too easily become moot. Orthorexia refers to an obsession with only ingesting food that is ‘pure’. What is considered to be ‘pure’ or ‘impure’ varies from person to person, but an individual’s belief about what constitutes healthy food may lead them to exclude certain nutrients or entire food groups from their diet, resulting in a cannibalisation of their internal resources. Conditions such as orthorexia, anorexia and bulimia reflect a set of broadly immanent, and affective concerns, whilst nevertheless embodying somewhat tensile attitudes towards relation. As such, they provide an interesting perspective from which we might address notions of affirmation, argumentation and opposition in a creative-research context.

Arguably, anorexia is an auto-cannibalistic, overtly non-relational activity. That is to say, in avoiding consumption, the anorexic tends towards the imperceptible, whilst ultimately consuming themselves from within. In contrast to this, the bulimic appears to gorge on relations – tasting, affirming, and ingesting everything – whilst subsequently purging it from the body in a partially digested fashion. Interestingly, both conditions are accompanied by symptoms of body dysmorphia, a mode of self-caricature that also functions as a regulatory motif. Nevertheless, the bulimic remains close to average bodyweight whilst the anorexic withers away.

With these observations in mind, this paper explores strategies of contestation and negation as they occur in Deleuzian philosophy – a philosophy highly influential in the formation of practices of artistic research, which is likewise associated with the affirmation of relations and with becoming imperceptible. It is claimed here, firstly that Deleuze’s mode of criticism is bulimic in character - that his directive that we should strive to become imperceptible can proceed only after he has first ‘virtualised’ his opponents – reducing their difference to self-identity, and secondly, that it is through consideration of Deleuze’s virtualisation of others, that we might develop strategies of argumentation and creative contestation that are still noticeably lacking in the context of artistic research.
Introduction

This paper explores the inception and transformation of artistic research through the lens of the differential modes of being that are more commonly categorised as eating ‘disorders’. Conditions such as orthorexia, anorexia and bulimia reflect a set of broadly immanent, and affective concerns, whilst nevertheless embodying somewhat tensile attitudes towards relation. That is to say, eating is a relational activity, that may involve exploration, consumption, and digestion as well as rejection, expulsion and regurgitation. The process of eating per se places us in intimate relation with other things, whilst at the same time subjecting them to a form of dissolution – we partially absorb what we consume, whilst expelling the remainder from our bodies – sometimes in the form of vomit – but most often in the form of urine or faecal matter – a series of ‘waste’ substances, which nevertheless still teem with microbial life. In this sense, modes of consumption provide an interesting perspective from which we might address both the relational practice of affirmation, and non-relational practices of argumentation and opposition in the context of artistic research.

We will begin by exploring certain orthorexic tendencies that characterized the early stages of the debate concerning the legitimacy of artistic research. Orthorexia refers to an obsession with only ingesting food that is ‘pure’. As we shall see, the inception of artistic research took place in a climate of contestation – in which overtly purist, somewhat caricatured notions of both ‘research’ and ‘art’ were placed into opposition. It is significant, for instance that Christopher Frayling’s (1994) oft cited seminal paper which purported to provide an overview of stake-holding positions at the argument’s inception, began not by examining any actual voice within the debate, but chose instead to interrogate a series of Hollywood stereotypes.

In the context of his discussion, Frayling presented us with a series of pure but lifeless stereotypes and caricatures – those of the impassioned, lunatic artist, the pragmatic designer-boffin, the designer-semiotician (as a surfer of signs and culture) and contrasting clichés of the ‘saintly’ and ‘mad’ scientist (Ibid, pp.3-4). Such abstractions enabled Frayling to stage a set of oppositions, but there is an important sense in which his paper failed to critically engage with the complexities of any position as it was actually held – preferring instead to debate a series of rather idealised, ghostly representations (Borgdorff, 2012, p.5).

Perhaps most interestingly, in this early point in the discussion, Frayling stated in no uncertain terms that he could not see how raw, un-textually mediated artistic
production could speak to the category of research, and that as a consequence he was unsure of how the term could be meaningfully employed. Frayling’s empty category of ‘research for art’ set the tone for the critique of the subjectivity, ineffability and lack of communication that coloured critical accounts of artistic practice, and which dominated much of the early debate concerning the legitimacy of artistic research. Ironically, however, it is Frayling’s disputed category of research for art that has come to prominence in more recent times, and which has been brought into focus in the performative context of artistic research - notably due to a turn away from epistemology and towards a series of more ontologically focused concerns.

**The Orthorexic Inception of Artistic Research**

The early contestation of what, in an Anglophone context, was once known as practice-based or practice-led research can be seen as orthorexic in the sense that it driven by overtly narrow, and somewhat purist conceptions of both research and art. That is to say, in the early stages of the debate the image of artistic practice from the perspective of its critics was that of an impure, or tainted food that was not fit for consumption. Those who aligned themselves with ‘traditional’ modes of research saw artistic practice, as resulting in ill defined, highly subjective outcomes, which were poorly suited to what were taken to be the at once objective, rigorous, and communicative demands of academia. Those hostile to practice-led modes of enquiry focused upon what they too to be the impurity of artistic practice when seen from a traditional academic perspective. That is to say, they focused upon the ways in which the idea of artistic research seemed to jar with academic values and to square poorly with what they took to be its rational, investigative ideals (Frayling, 1994; Elkins, 2009; Durling, 2002; Biggs & Büchler, 2010). In short, when seen from the perspective of more traditional research paradigms, modes of artistic research in which sensation, or the subjectivity of artistic practice played a major part, were simply not considered Kosha food.

Whilst, much criticism focused upon the practicalities of assessment and the difficulties in determining the degree to which knowledge might be tacitly encoded in artistic artefacts, it was the performative dimension of the artwork that seemed most unpalatable to critics, with particular scrutiny being cast upon the subjective and interpretative context of artistic exhibition (Durling, 2002; Biggs, 2002; 2008).

It seems clear today that the issue of ‘purity’ from the perspective of the academy foregrounded a somewhat positivistic research agenda, whilst aligning this with particularly propositional view of language. Those critical of artistic modes of research frequently took issue with what was perceived to be artistic researchers’
resistance to, or reluctance to engage with verbal or textual modes of argumentation (Durling, Friedman & Gutherson, 2003; Elkins, 2009) - the importance of language in the formulation and structuring of argument was stressed, along with its power to capture, compare, and evaluate information (Biggs, 2002; 2003). We might say that for the critics of artistic research, it was important not only to consume the right food, but also to eat with the correct implements, and with the appropriate kind of decorum. The idea that there might be more visceral approaches to the consumption of food - that we might choose to eat with our hands, for instance or that artefacts as performative assemblages could in any sense ‘speak for themselves’ was initially granted very little countenance.

It is important to recognise, however, that issues of ‘purity’ in representation were not limited to those who purported to speak for the academy. Whilst orthorexics are united in their belief that the food which they ingest must be ‘pure’, there is an important sense in which what is considered to be ‘pure’ or ‘impure’ varies from individual to individual, and many practitioners were outraged at the prospect of a mode of artistic research that did not sanction artistic practice as a way of engaging with the world. Here the notion of purity centred upon the artwork, and the potential for it to become tainted in its intersection with positivistic and overly rationalised research processes. Thus, commentators such as Dennis Strand (1998. p.16) stressed the way in which the methodologies of artistic researchers are “in the arts”, and that their investigations are “in their practice”. Likewise, Brad Haseman (2006), suggested that artistic researchers were ‘impatient with the methodological restrictions ...and the emphasis on written outcomes’ (Ibid, p. 3). Haseman noted how artistic researchers preferred to construct experiential starting points, to ‘lead research through practice’ and to explore presentational forms that are ‘not bound by the linear and sequential constraints of discursive or arithmetic writing’ (Ibid, p. 5). In a similar vein, Haseman articulated an important tension between practice-led research and the idea of ‘narrow problem setting’ (Ibid, p. 4) or of rigid methodological requirements being imposed at a project’s outset. Such observations served to fuel the debate over the extent to which research in the creative arts might consist of artworks or exhibitions, as well as the idea that artistic practice tainted by an academic research context could only result in art that was in some sense ‘bad’, or simply illustrative of an underlying theoretical position.

**Orthorexic Subtraction**

Ultimately, an orthorexic’s belief about what constitutes ‘healthy’ food can lead them to exclude certain nutrients or entire food groups from their diet. Thus, critics who purported to speak in the name of the institution attempted to exclude
the artwork, subjectivity, sensation and affect from the research context, unless they were mediated through some kind of textual production; whilst those who spoke in the name of artistic practice attempted to exclude the written word and what was taken to be an overly impersonal, positivistic concern with objectivity from their enquiry, unless they were encountered in a performative context - or in a somewhat satirical fashion.

The issue of othorexic opposition was perhaps exacerbated by the way in which many of the prominent institutional voices such as Michael Biggs and James Elkins - were individuals who pointedly framed themselves as ‘ex-practitioners’. Biggs, in collaboration with the ex-architect and designer Daniela Büchler (now deceased) stood as one of the most extreme voices with respect to institutional alignment. Biggs and Büchler were particularly sceptical of the role of the artwork in the practice-based submission - positioning artistic activity and its outcomes as in some sense inessential with respect to the requirements of legitimate research practice (Biggs, 2004; Biggs & Büchler, 2008).

Many of Biggs’ and Büchler’s writings sought to diminish the importance of sensation and to subtract the performative dimension of the artwork. Biggs suggested that what we ordinarily think of as experiential feeling should be repositioned as a ‘representation’ of a more fundamental ‘experiential content’ which, he claimed was propositional in character, and connected with the ‘meaning’ of an experience (Biggs, 2004, p.4). Whilst Biggs positioned his distinction between ‘experiential feeling’ and ‘experiential content’ as something which was self-evident, or at least ‘relatively straightforward’, early critics such as the craft and design researcher Kristina Niedderer noted the way in which Biggs’ concept of experiential content and its relationship to experiential feeling was ill defined (Niedderer, 2008).

Whatever the exact nature of Biggs’ ‘experiential content’, it is clear that he was attempting to populate this concept in a way that leaned towards and ultimately privileged qualities of a linguistic and conceptual order. That is to say, Biggs claimed that experiential content is connected with ‘the meaning’ of an experience, and with ‘the way in which it might be related to our shared context’ (Biggs, 2004, p.4). Thus Biggs’ concept of experiential content was discursively focused, and had a predominately conceptual orientation. Conversely, experience was positioned in secondary terms, as a shadowy reflection of its conceptual other. That is to say, Biggs suggested that the representations that constitute experiential feeling were in some sense partial, confused and in need of clarification. Such remarks were typically accompanied by suggestions that the work of clarification
could be undertaken through a form of conceptual and linguistic analysis, and this served further to privilege a textual mode of exposition (Ibid, p.20).

As is often the case in the context of orthorexia, the exclusion of certain food groups results in a cannibalisation of internal resources. Having virtually excluded art and sensation from their diet, Biggs and Büchler were forced to live off the more paltry visual and performative resources aligned with and sanctioned by more traditional modes of research - namely the graph, the Venn diagram, and a series of other broadly representational diagramming procedures. When artworks did feature, they did so in a secondary, textually mediated fashion - functioning as symptoms of a partially veiled territory that could then be unpacked through language (Ibid, p.10).

In discussion of the relationship between language and the artwork in the context of research, Biggs made use of the Münsterberg illusion (see below - the horizontal straight lines are supposed to appear crooked). This image was drawn from the work of Richard Gregory in the field of the psychology of perception, and was discussed alongside Johannes Itten's use of illusions of simultaneous brightness contrast at the Bauhaus.

![The Münsterberg Illusion](image)

From Biggs’ perspective, visual illusions were interesting in so far as they were capable of eliciting an unusual form of experience that stood as a symptom of something else which was worthy of further investigation (Biggs, 2007, p.9). It is in this capacity that Biggs saw optical illusions as being in some sense analogous to artistic artefacts - with the caveat that conceptual analysis might be substituted for scientific investigation in this domain. Adopting something of a positivistic register, Biggs emphasised the way in which subjects ‘consistently experienced’
(Ibid, p.8) the horizontal lines in this figure as crooked - resulting in a distorted figure, that is nevertheless stable – an example of ‘good’ Gestaltist form.

Whilst there is a sense in which we might describe this, or any other optical illusion in affective or performative terms, the Münsterberg illusion is peculiarly settled in its effects - it possesses a quasi-object-like constancy - offering something of a one-dimensional performance, which serves to accentuate its affinity with the linguistic proposition. Thus, there is an epistemic confidence in Biggs approach to this question which will shortly be subjected to scrutiny.

Thus far, we have seen how more positivistically inclined researchers had attempted to expel the artwork and had limited themselves to the consumption of the rather conventional diagrammatic resources associated with more traditional modes of research. There is, however, a way in which, the practitioner’s aversion to text could be said to have resulted in a similar cannibalisation of the textual resources internal to artistic practice - with text being sanctioned only when mediated through art - when appearing as a textual trope, or in the form of performative writing. Whilst we might make the case that the resistance to conventional textual exposition, could serve to limit the critical power of a research project, there is another sense in which such practices provide an important key to understanding a way in which text can nevertheless function as a mode of affective critique. That is to say, there is something valuable for our purposes here in recognising the processual dimension of textual production and the way in which it might be aligned with more tacit, material and affective modes of engaging with the world.

As the Deleuzian theorist Manuel DeLanda (2011) has noted, despite the association with conceptual and propositional views of language, the activities of reading, writing and arguing persuasively are ultimately skill based - and as such they are learnt via a mode of material apprenticeship. As a prerequisite, they require a vast array of embodied, tacit knowledge, and as rhetorical practices they are as much concerned with affect as they are with propositional discourse. Likewise, the notion that writing might be considered a form of creative, long durational, intertextual (relational) composition is a persistent trope in philosophical reflection on writing and the arts. What can be found initially in the writings of a number of prominent figures from the history of process philosophy – e.g. John Dewey, Susanne Langer, is later expressed in post structural terms by figures such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes.
Dewey, writing long before the post-structural turn, recognised the emergent, developmental, and corporeal process of writing, along with the artificial, cultural isolation of its product. In the opening to his *Art as Experience* he stated that the book, which he aligns with the work of art, ‘somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being ... a wall is built around [it]’ (Dewey, 1934). He went on to stress that ‘if one sets out to understand the flowering of plants, he is committed to finding out something about the interactions of soil, air, water and sunlight that condition [their] growth’ (Ibid). Dewey’s initial observations concerning the creative, processual character of writing and making, were extended by Deleuze and by a number of other late twentieth century theorists - albeit in a slightly less personal fashion - into the realm of intertextuality and material relationality. Thus, for Deleuze a book is ‘a collection of bifurcating, divergent and muddled lines’ that ‘are unattributable to individuals’ (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, pp. ix-x), which has ‘has only itself, in connection with other assemblages’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4.), and perhaps most importantly for our purposes here, it is “a tiny cog in an extra-textual machine” (cited in Bearn, 2000).

Accordingly, the work of Dewey et al points to a long intellectual history underpinning the idea that written objects and artefacts embody a convoluted developmental and relational history. It should be clear that there is a sense in which, the purist conception of a text as a static object or as a stable propositional structure masks a complex productive history in the form of substitutions, redevelopments and the emergence of ideas that take place over the course of its composition – which is to say that a text embodies a developmental complexity of a logical, aesthetic and semantic order - and in this sense, it is anything other than pure.

The figure of Deleuze has become increasingly important in this latter half of my paper - this is largely due to the ascendency of Deleuzian thought in the domain of contemporary artistic research. That is to say, the initial climate of ‘purity’ and ‘contestation’ dissipated as the notion of artistic research as a mode of relational, or rhizomatic investigation began to emerge. Over time, the broadly orthorexic context of the debate has undergone something of a significant shift - this was perhaps mostly due to the way in which an ever-escalating diversity of artistic research practices began to embrace the visceral impurities of materiality, contingency, and the encounter - as well as beginning to recognise the ‘impurity’ of traditional research processes, in a bid to find ways of operating smoothly in the context of increasingly striated institutions - I’m thinking here of Borgdorff’s application of Latour’s Actor Network Theory to the traditional academic
context, and his ‘performing artistic research into existence’ through conferences such as this, and organisations such as SAR (Borgdorff, 2013).

Such practices have a strong affinity with a number of broadly Deleuzian concerns, and it is perhaps due to a certain affinity between Deleuzian thinking and the emerging tenets of artistic research that Deleuzian philosophy has proved so attractive to many artistic researchers. Accordingly, the value of the process-philosophical take on writing - and on the ontogenetic context of textual production, is useful in so far as it enables us to think of the production of textuality in material and transformative terms. That is to say, there is a way in which a text - be it propositional or rhetorical in character - can become yet one more register of affect.

Given the prevalence of Deleuzean thought in the setting of artistic research, it is all too easy to forget that despite his veneration of material-sensation Deleuze was predominately a writer - albeit a writer with an affective and corporeal agenda - who advocated a peculiarly operatic conception of philosophy, claiming in Negotiations that:

Style in philosophy strains toward three different poles: concepts, or new ways of thinking; percepts, or new ways of seeing and construing; and affects, or new ways of feeling. They’re the philosophical trinity, philosophy as opera. You need all three to get things moving.
(Deleuze, 1995, pp. 164-165)

It is this notion of mobilization or movement, that can be utilized to frame a notion of Deleuzian contestation. Given the Deleuzian emphasis upon affirmation, one might be forgiven for thinking that processes of research inspired by Deleuze, should revel in their impurity and indiscriminately gorge on relations. However, it is important to distinguish between straightforward relational gluttony, and a bulimic consumption of relations that is, I think, closest to Deleuze own philosophical approach. It is likewise important to be wary of how easily the latter can slide into an anorexic mode of critique, that is ultimately non-relational in character.

Deleuze, Anorexia, Bulimia and Contestation
What I am describing as an anorexic take on Deleuze arises when the emphasis upon artistic subjectivity takes too much of a hold. What perhaps begins as a kind of line of flight - as molecular movement in the face of an at once molar and entrenched opposition, becomes firstly a turning away, and ultimately a turning inward (a self-enfolding). When taken en-mass, such practices perhaps serve as a performative reminder of the multiplicity of ways of being in the world - and thus
in some ways they collectively contest myths of universality. However, it is also the case that when taken in their singularity, they lose much of their political force. Thus, it becomes difficult to address the significance of such projects - to specify exactly what they oppose or what is at stake. Whilst actual, lived forms of alterity and difference are of great importance to a post-structural political setting, there is a danger that the context of extreme qualitative specificity dilutes any collective political power. Perhaps a way out of this impasse might be to consider the many practices performed in the name of artistic research in relation to something like the affinity politics of Haraway (1991). That is to say, we might position artistic research per se as a banner under which a radical plurality and diversity of actual subject positions might find a kind of affinity or investment, whilst nevertheless retaining a palpable sense of individual specificity and difference.

Ultimately, however, there is something strangely anorexic and non-relational about such quasi-solipsistic activity. Whilst it is clear that artistic research has generated a cacophony of tiny voices, it is sometimes less clear to me whether we are swimming or drowning in this Leibnizian sea - an observation inspired by Mick Wilson’s paper that was delivered at the first Deleuze and Artistic Research conference (Wilson, 2017).

For Deleuze, the danger of what he and Guattari described as ‘the black hole of subjectivity’ was that it can result in a kind of micro-facism - in a self-consumed desiring subject pursing its own end whilst failing either to engage with alternative planes of becoming, or to innovate through the release of any energy of its own (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p.207). Ultimately, this mode of anorexic, auto-cannibalism results in kind of a withering - in a becoming something less than imperceptible - it is the virtual divested of its power.

This criticism cannot so easily be directed at Deleuze himself. Indeed, Deleuze’s inscription of creativity into the very essence of the world has been positioned as both foundationalist and fundamentalist by many of his commentators (Hallward 2006; May 1997; Mullarkey 2006) - and bearing in mind that Deleuze attempted to take the entire history of representational thinking to task, he can hardly be positioned as having been in any sense critically, or politically demure.

Andrew Culp (2006) has recently produced some interesting work on negativity in Deleuze, which attempts to counter the image of affirmation that is so readily associated with Deleuzian philosophy. In his _Dark Deleuze_, Culp, writing against the affirmative cannon of joy that is typically associated with Deleuzean thinking, emphasises: the prevalence of negative prefixes (such as ‘de’, ‘in’ and ‘non’) that pepper the Deleuzian lexicon; the inability of Deleuze to fully exorcise Nietzsche’s
sense of cruelty or taste for Destruction, and Deleuze’s professed hostility to the idea of communication - a practice which Deleuze saw as resulting in the production of abstract and empty generalities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 28-29).

I would argue that Deleuze’s mode of criticism is neither gluttonous nor anorexic in character - it operates, instead, in a bulimic fashion. The bulimic appears to gorge on relations – tasting, affirming, and ingesting everything – but subsequently purges them from the body in a partially digested fashion. Thus, Deleuze can be seen to proceed by ‘virtualising’ his opponents - by reducing their difference to a kind of self-identity, before going on to expel them from the body. This is perhaps most apparent when we consider his transformative readings of other philosophers, which facilitated the birth of monstrous offspring, and his similarly transformative approach to extant philosophical terminology and ordinary language use. As John Ó Maoilearca (formerly John Mullarkey) has noted, Deleuze has a tendency not only to fuse terms that are traditionally considered as opposites, but also to hijack and subvert the meaning of existing nomenclature (Mullarkey 2006, 17). That is to say, in Deleuze’s hands, repetition becomes the repetition of difference as opposed to the repetition of identity, experience becomes a transcendental, material condition - something that is both sub-representational and, ironically, apriori in character – whilst essence is similarly repositioned as the engine of change.

In the nearest thing that we have to a statement of method in A Thousand Plateaus, we are counselled by Deleuze and Guattari to ‘lodge [ourselves] on a stratum’, and ‘to experiment with the opportunities it offers’ and to ‘try out continuums of intensities segment by segment’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.178). In this paper, I have attempted to draw attention to the context of orthorexic purity underlying the early debate concerning the legitimacy of artistic research. In so doing, I have celebrated the impurity of emerging artistic research processes, whilst in some sense mourning the loss of what was an active - if over simplistic - sense of contestation underpinning the legitimacy debate. I have suggested that in its place, we might embrace the widest possible toolset in exploring abductive strategies of co-deterritorialisation through the employment of concepts, percepts and affects. Whilst artistic research could be said to enable a becoming imperceptible on the part of the practitioner, it might be interesting to entertain the possibility of practices that also engender a co-becoming, which serves to transform the thing from which we flee.

In keeping with this spirit, I will end this paper with a little playful manipulation of the intensities of Biggs’ Münsterberg figure - the image which supported his
overtly propositional view of language and sensation that was introduced earlier in this paper. With the introduction of a curvature in the differential spacing of the cells, a more unsettled, vertiginous counter-image can be produced that exhibits stronger kinetic, performative qualities (of the sort that we might associate with practices of Op Art). Not only do the lines now seem to exhibit a curvature, the curves themselves seem to admit of a broad spectrum of unpredictable variation. Thus, there is clear sense in which this (static) image will neither fully settle nor fully resolve.

Figure 2. The Mobilzed Münsterberg Illusion.

The continuous movement and perceptual variation of the mobilised version of the Münsterberg illusion presents difficulties for Biggs’ propositional approach to the image. This counter motif is intended to problematise Biggs’ argument that the ‘experiential content’ of an image has an affinity with the proposition. Such an idea seems misapplied when we consider our relationship to kinetic imagery that exhibits a resistance to closure of experiential form. These and related forms of illusion - which we might go so far as to position as open, subjectivist forms of animation - employ counterposed, differential and intensive relations - conjuring active, kinetic perceptual spaces, which ultimately resist both conceptual and linguistic capture.
Bibliography


