

Drumming Order

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Abstract: Michel De Certeau describes urban space as organized by an 'ensemble of possibilities and interdictions'¹, by boundaries, walls, and thoroughfares which the urban user actualizes in a variety of ways. It is, as such, a specific coded spatial order. In Francis Alys' video work *Railings (Fitzroy Square)* 2004 he records himself moving around the interior perimeter of the affluent Fitzroy Square in London with wooden drumstick in hand beating a rhythm on the black railings that front its facades. The work can be understood as a critical, bodily intervention into the interdictive, proprietorial function of the facades of Fitzroy Square's architecture. In the paper I will argue that in *Railings* Alys re-enacts, within a public, urban context, a form of interaction with his physical surroundings that is akin to that of a child – a child's pre-reflexive initiation of a bodily and acoustic relation to space is central to his or her appropriation of those surroundings, to making them his or her own 'world'. This will be developed, firstly, via Henri Lefebvre's theoretical articulation of the concept of 'gestural space' and, secondly, through Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the territorializing work of the 'refrain'. For Lefebvre gestural space is a corporeal means by which space comes to be produced and reproduced. The implication of iteration inherent in the concept introduces the idea that this gestural production of space might be understood as performative. In Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the child's or the bird's song, the acoustic refrain is a fragile means of establishing order in the midst of chaos. Or, in the case of Alys, the refrain establishes a counter-order, the possibility of an alternative coding of space. Acoustic marks do not respect given boundaries but establish an order – the beginnings of a world – through their own minimal acoustic cohesion.

Paper:

In Francis Alys' *Railings (Fitzroy Square)*² the artist is filmed walking around the iron railings of the perimeter of Fitzroy Square in London with a drumstick in hand. The rhythm is simple initially but in time it gains force and dynamism to develop a form of autonomy. The film was subsequently shown in the exhibition staged by Artangel called *Francis Alys Seven Walks*. There the audio from the film, while not overwhelming, had an insistent presence throughout the two-storey exhibition space, like something staking a sonic claim.

The railings of Fitzroy Square (a very affluent part of London) are very clear in their meaning: they are interdictive, they assert property lines and delimit where one can and cannot go. What I

¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 98

² The work can be accessed at <http://www.francisalys.com/public/railingsfitz.html>

want to consider in respect of this work is the extent to which Alys' performance *works on* the site to transform and decode its fixed spatial demarcations. And that it marks a drive to dissolve them.

There are two interconnected dimensions to the performance, the gestural and the acoustic. Alys' gestural movement of running the drumstick across the railings has a clear affinity with the action of a child skimming his hand over a surface while walking, adamant, even if unconsciously, that his relationship with his surroundings will be one of direct bodily contact. The gestural in Alys' performance clearly coincides with the acoustic. It does so on an obvious level – in the sense that the sound is indexically produced by the tactile relationship. I will argue that they are linked on a more structural level as well, in terms of how they are developed as a method of spatializing.

I will begin by looking at them separately, starting with the acoustic. Alys' deployment of sound in this work lends itself very easily to an analysis via Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain. I will subsequently tie this to Henri Lefebvre's ideas on bodily gestural space and Piaget's description of topological spatial understanding.

The concept of the refrain as developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* is an exemplary case of a 'method' that carries within itself, in its very structure, the capacity to be both territorializing and deterritorializing. The concept is first traced with the image of a child who, fearful in the dark, sings a repetitive song to him or herself as a means of some kind of stabilization and comfort, as a means of establishing a minimal order, a stable center in the midst of the forces of chaos. This is presented as a necessarily fragile order: *[The] song jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos [but] is in danger of breaking apart at any moment*³

The child's song is linked in turn with the animal call, for example, the birdsong. Here we move away from the defensive function of the refrain to its more aggressive, assertive capacities. The song is the bird's assertion and expression of its place in a particular territorial abode. Its function is spatial. the song of the bird is *'not the constituted mark of a subject but the constituting mark of a domain or abode... not the indication of a person but the chancy formation of a domain'*.⁴ A portable territory is articulated. (And Alys' improvised rhythm that operates unmistakably as in this sense – as a territorial challenge and claim)

For Deleuze and Guattari the same refrain can also develop to a very different effect: *'one launches forth, hazards an improvisation... To improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it.*

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1999) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Athlone Press, London, p 311

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 316

*One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.*⁵ Here, then, the refrain becomes a deterritorializing 'line of flight'. The paradoxical nature of the refrain, then, is to be both a force of gravity (the 'Natal') and levity (flight, dispersal).

Deleuze and Guattari's reflections on the refrain are clearly underpinned theoretically by Deleuze's concept of repetition. For Deleuze repetition necessarily involves a synthesis or determination within a field of pure undetermined differences. For James Williams,⁶ reading Deleuze, one repeats to connect and one repeats to forget – in other words, repetition carries the force of a bringing together and consolidation (habit at its extreme pole) and the force of dispersal (it carries the capacity to break a given order and the illusion of fixity (a good example is Judith Butler's 'parodic repetition' as a subversion of gender norms – producing difference within seemingly stable forms). Repetition, then, both produces and unravels.

As an intervention within urban space *Railings* can, I think, be understood as an improvisatory disassembling and over-riding of the seeming immutability of Fitzroy Square's exterior architecture. The rhythms that Alys beats across the span of the square's railings are variable and improvised but they nonetheless *cohere* into a provisional unity. They operate as an acoustic appropriation of that boundary, one that claims it, decodes and recodes it again, even if temporarily. And the spatializing claim it performs in the face of privatized urban space denaturalizes those boundaries. It is, here, that we can understand the force of repetition and the refrain as a means of dismantling and forgetting, but also as a provisional recoding. In the way that even the most delicate of birdsongs are unmistakably assertions, Alys' intervention is both modest and surprisingly emphatic.

To substantiate this further and at the same time to begin the process of tying together the acoustic and gestural dimensions of *Railings*, I want to draw together Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between meter which they describe as dogmatic (mechanical, a repetition of the same) vs. rhythm which they assert is 'critical' and to tie the grounding of this distinction to Henri Lefebvre's analysis of a gestural production of space. What is intended with the idea that rhythm is critical is that it '*...ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another.*'⁷ Meter is tied to counting, to measure and, as such, it assumes a homogenous ground from which it proceeds. (Anything that can be counted is necessarily homogenous to allow for the counting operation) Rhythm, on the other hand, assumes no such homogenous ground but operates in 'heterogeneous blocks'. Bachelard in *The Dialectics of Duration* similarly argues that the nature of duration is that it never pre-exists rhythm but is

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 311

⁶ James Williams (2003) *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and repetition : a critical introduction and guide*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 313

produced and qualified by it. At issue here is the production and specification of the container *by* the contained. Alys' rhythm is variable and but it maintains a coherence and unity that allows it to function as a form of grasping that is the production of a new order and consistency.

In *The Production of Space* Henri Lefebvre puts forward the idea of 'gestural space'. As an example he refers to the ritualized movements of monks walking in the space of a cloister. Of these movements Lefebvre comments:

*Organized gestures, which is to say ritualized and codified gestures, are not simply performed in "physical" space, in the space of bodies. Bodies themselves generate spaces, which are produced by and for their gestures.*⁸

For Lefebvre these ritualized sequences of gestural movement themselves 'generate' space. In the specific way that this is articulated here, distinctions between both subject and object and between container and contained are disrupted. The gestural act is at once subject and object: space is simultaneously produced by the monk's gestures and the space produced makes these gestures possible. It is not the case that space (as container) is available and then one occupies it (as content). Rather the ritualized gestural sequence produces it as specific and as available – produces and reproduces it. Likewise, for Janz, the birdsong is produced in reaction to an environment but it also creates that environment, '...its repetition produces its place, itself'⁹. He also refers to this as the production of a container, deploying the German term *Gefassete* which is a conjunction of *Gefasse* (container) with *fassen* (fasten, grasp). [It is worth noting that Lefebvre refers only to the 'production of space' – not place. This can, I think, be understood as tactical. The gist of Lefebvre's argument is that all space is produced, and hence, specific. I would guess that the reason that he makes no reference to the concept of place (as opposed to space) is that it would court the danger of conceiving of place within a generalized 'space', a misunderstanding that he clearly wants to avoid.]

While there are important theoretical divergences between Deleuze and Guattari and Lefebvre, a commonality exists in their conceptualization of space as produced rather than as pre-existent ground.

In drawing on Lefebvre thus I am beginning to collapse the sonorous repetition of the refrain with gestural repetition. I am going to shift now to focus more closely on the question of the gestural itself to consider whether one can conceive of bodily sequences as having a kinship with the logic of the refrain, in other words, as involving that crucially productive combination of a minimal order and repetition.

⁸ Henri Lefebvre (1991) *The Production of Space* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 216

⁹ Bruno B. Janz (2002) 'The Territory is not the map: place, Deleuze, Guattari and African Philosophy', p.6 <http://philpapers.org/rec/JANTTI-2>

In Piaget's writing on the child's early conception of space, he argues that space in the first stages of a child's development is exclusively topological. De Certeau distinguishes between the topological and the topical in a concise and useful way in the distinction he makes between the 'tour' and the map. Unlike the map, the tour is temporally imbricated; it implies action through time. The distinction can be summed up simply as the distinction between the statement 'it is' and a description that conjures directionality: 'you go'. In other words, in de Certeau's own example of occupant's description of domestic space the distinction is that between 'the bathroom is beside the bedroom' and 'you turn left from the bedroom'¹⁰. In other words, the subject and his or her sequence of movements are embedded in the description. The distinction, then, is between what claims to be an objective representation and a strictly positioned understanding. There is a close relationship here as well between the distinction Deleuze and Guattari draw between sedentary space with fixed boundaries and orientation markers and the space of the desert where no locality can become stabilized and where spatiality hinges instead on the body's sequences of movement – and where we find a radical realization of the concept of movement for itself.

As regards the early development of children's spatial cognition and representation, Piaget¹¹ proposes a shift from what he terms 'egocentric' perception (of which the topological is the spatial category) to what is commonly referred to as allocentric perception. This is essentially a shift from a subjective understanding (where the child cannot yet conceive of object permanence, in other words, his or her shifting array of sensory perceptions do not yet consolidate into a stable object) to a fully objective conception that incorporates spatial representation. Some of the details of Piaget's account are worth dwelling on, in particular his account of the phenomena of recognition – for example, the recognition of the mother's face – which occurs relatively early in a child's development. Earlier accounts had attributed the phenomena of recognition at this early stage to an already existent capacity to retain and evoke mental images. In other words, in order to recognize an object, it was necessary to be able to already form a stable image of that thing which could be present when the object itself is absent. Piaget disagrees with this account, however, asserting that at this early stage recognition must instead be located in the child's own motor-sensory schema:

For recognition to begin, it is enough that the attitude previously adopted with regard to the thing will be set in motion... The impression of satisfaction and familiarity peculiar to recognition could thus stem only from the essential fact of the continuity of a schema: the subject recognizes his own

¹⁰ De Certeau, *Practice*, p.116-117

¹¹ Jean Piaget (1955) *The Child's Construction of Reality*, trans. M. Cook, Routledge & Paul, London

*reaction before he recognizes the object as such... [Recognition] accordingly begins by being subjective before it becomes object recognition...*¹²

Piaget describes here the beginnings of a relationship to a 'world' via the instance of a bodily repetition – located in a particular temporal and spatial configuration of that body: I recognize that I have produced this sequence of movements and sensations before. As such it forms a continuous and coherent whole, a delimited 'unit' in relation to which I register the pleasure and surprise of 'recognition'.

At this stage in the child's cognitive development. 'form' (whether that be the form of an object or spatial form) and its relative stabilization needs to be understood as a product of a coordination or sequence of movements. It is a synthesis of those movements that comes to be understood as whole, via its repetition. In his topological presentation of 'recognition' the mother's face becomes but one discreet element in the movement sequence as a whole. The bodily sequence itself is more accurately the real object of recognition and knowledge at this stage.

In Newcombe and Huttenlocher's recent study¹³ they argue against Piaget's model as a strictly developmental one – i.e., where allocentric coding supersedes topological cognition. As regards spatial cognition and orientation they argue that its grounding becomes instead a question of emphases and choices, with cognition via motor sequences still capable of dominating over other forms of orientation in particular situations rather than disappearing altogether. In respect of the Mark Cousins description of the home as a specific spatial and temporal configuration of bodily movement is relevant. In other words, if the home is a mnemonic site, this needs to be understood in terms of its configuration of bodily movement and not only as localized and material 'place'. The home, then, is a site where a topological spatial understanding tends to dominate and, as such, the body takes precedence as its generative center. And it is this idea of bodily configurations or sequences that I am tying to the concept of the refrain.

I want to conclude by returning back to the image of the old woman at the end of the film and to consider why this interchange seems so significant. In the closing sequence of *Railings* the camera swaps to the old woman who uses the same railings that Alys uses so playfully as an improvised musical instrument as a means of support and reassurance against the threat of falling on the slippery ice. It marks two contrasting manifestations of a tactile form of contact – one that depends on the solidity and certainty of the railings as an object support and the other that uses them in an improvised way. Of Alys' performance, what I want to suggest of its gestural logic is that through it, the railing as a 'thing', a solid existent object, undergoes a transformation.

¹² Piaget *The Child's Construction of Reality*, , p 5-6)

¹³ Nora S. Newcombe, Janellen Huttenlocher, 2000, *Making Space: the development of spatial representation and reasoning*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

It is recast to become, instead, the line of a bodily trajectory, a mere adjunct to a sequence of movement. And I would suggest that this idea itself is key to so much of the child's relationship to 'things' in its world, spatial or otherwise, why the tactile dimension remains so critical beyond a strictly functional form of orientation or support (i.e., why the egocentric persists beyond the development of the allocentric). The solidity, fixity, even monumentality of the 'it is' of the object is dissolved and it is transformed to become a prop within a movement sequence. And this is where the theme of levity is centered. The gestural can, also be understood to become refrain-like then in its force of levity, in its capacity for improvisation, for opening out. To rephrase Deleuze and Guattari: 'one ventures from home on the thread of a dance'.