

## Writing on Art (Case Study: *The Buddhist Puja*)

Simon O'Sullivan

*As for painting, any discourse on it, beside it or above, always strikes me as silly, both didactic and incantory, programmed, worked by the compulsion of mastery, be it poetical or philosophical, always, and the more so when it is pertinent, in the position of chitchat, unequal and unproductive in the sight of what, at a stroke [d'un trait], does without or goes beyond this language, remaining heterogeneous to it or denying it any overview.<sup>1</sup>*

Like Derrida, I find the talking, and writing, about painting – visual art in general – silly. Why write about an object – or experience – which, in itself, is alien to discourse? What could motivate such a project besides a desire for colonization, or, more specifically, a desire for meaning? Indeed one of Derrida's intentions in *The Truth in Painting* – from where the above quotation is taken – is precisely to demonstrate that such a desire has motivated and animated the discourse of aesthetics from its inception. Aesthetics here understood as a discourse *on* (beside, above?) the art experience. It is not my intention to rehearse Derrida's argument. Suffice it to say aesthetics, at least as Derrida reads it, involves, as its animating force, a desire for meaning, ultimately a desire for self presence. It is, of course, also Derrida's point that the object *frustrates* this desire. Art outruns any discourse *on* it.

So much for the deconstructive project. But what about something more *affirmative*? A kind of writing that does not seek to colonize, but instead parallels in some way the 'work' of the art object. A kind of writing – or intervention – which does not reduce or seek to limit the art experience, but rather opens it up to further adventures. What would this kind of writing look like? What would its relation be to that object/experience which has, at least in some senses, motivated it?

What we are interested in, you see, are modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons or subjects: the individuation, say, of a time of day, of a region, a climate, a river or a wind, of an event. And maybe it's a mistake to believe in the existence of things, persons, or subjects.<sup>2</sup>

From Derrida to Deleuze – and to a different project altogether. No longer a *reading* of preexisting objects but an attempt to rethink the object, the *thing*, itself.<sup>3</sup> Art then as a kind of *event*. And writing (on art) as another kind of event. In this place the problems of the determinate relation between art and writing disappears (it was a fiction anyway). The distinction (or binary) between presentation and *representation* is flattened; art, like writing, becomes, as Lyotard might say, just one more adventure on the skin drive. At stake here is more than just a novel way of approaching art. Rethinking the art object means rethinking the subject (rethinking representation). Indeed, art looked at (interacted with) in this way implicitly calls for a new kind of subject – or proto-subject; in fact, in this place, discrete boundaries are blurred – between object, writing and subject. Each become haecceities, moments of intensity, in a process with no origin nor *telos*.

So no ‘apparatus of capture’, no colonization, but a shared project of deterritorialization. Art, and the writing on art, as a line of flight away from rigid stratification. These escape routes/roots will take different forms. Writing on conceptual art might involve itself in the co-project of active concept creation (problem solving).<sup>4</sup> Writing on painting, on the other hand, might involve itself in a kind of co-project of becoming; an affirmation of the non-human becomings which painting has always been about (the production of *affects*).<sup>5</sup> Such writing might involve the unravelling of the knot that art *is*; a mapping of the ‘past’ (art history) and ‘future’ (virtual) potentialities of the object. Meaning, if this is still a useful term, would be a diagram of these movements.<sup>6</sup>

But this is still to approach the art object through, in this case, *Deleuzian* terminology. Which is to say there is still a determinate relation at work (the ‘application’ of theory to art). In some senses there is no way out of this inherent paradox (indeed what follows is, at least in one sense, a Deleuzian ‘reading’ of its object). Writing on art is not art production.<sup>7</sup> Each has their own specificity (their own codes, their own *affects*). The relation between the two will always be fraught and unequal. But there might be a way of lessening this inevitable friction – not only through a celebration of the latter as a *productive* friction but also by appreciating the work the art object is already doing – and somehow paralleling this work, which might mean writing in a different, seemingly tangential manner (no *reading* of objects) and on an apparently unrelated subject (no art object at all).

So much for a manifesto. What about the writing on art itself? One thing is certain: such a meeting – between art and writing – must, if only as a first gambit, involve a description – a ‘conjuring up’ – of its object, in this case a kind of installation. And, to circumnavigate, as Lyotard might say, you westerners (read semioticians), something from the east, something *pagan*: the Buddhist Puja.

## The Puja

Ritual practices within the Buddhist tradition are referred to as *Puja*, which means ‘devotional worship’ [...] These practices are usually performed with a number of people in a room which is focussed on

the beauty of a 'shrine', with its Buddha image, flowers, flickering candles, and fragrant incense.<sup>8</sup>

The puja is a Buddhist ceremony centred on the shrine, itself an arrangement of objects centred – more often than not – on a *rupa*; the figure of the Buddha.<sup>9</sup> But the puja is also an experience, a *ritual*, in which words are spoken, actions are performed, and other realities are accessed. The puja is then an *immersive* space, one in which all the senses are engaged (albeit some of them in a *micro* fashion). As such the puja is *not* representational but something altogether different: a summoning of other *beings* – a space – and a practice of incarnation – in which the *invisible* (that which lies outside the human register, outside 'the fantasies of realism',<sup>10</sup> outside 'mundane time'<sup>11</sup>) is made *visible*.<sup>12</sup> The puja operates as a portal into/onto these other worlds – precisely as a kind of space-time machine.

And the experience of the puja is not a singular thing, but involves complexes of sensations and becomings. As such the puja – like any ritual activity – has different moments of intensity. For example: The *rupa*, which is not a representation of the Buddha (not, strictly speaking, an *image*) but an announcement of the Buddha's presence (the Buddha as *omnipresent*). Here, the Buddha works as border guard/guide between worlds and also as a manifestation of the possibility of moving into those other worlds. Here the Buddha is an ally and an anomaly; a figure located at the edge. A sorcerer and shaman.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally the figured Buddha, the Enlightened one, is Shakyamuni – the historical Buddha. But such a figure is, in essence, *all* Buddhas of past, present and future. 'He' is also an incarnation of *reality*; a multiplicity, a vortex of energy, a 'region of fire'.<sup>14</sup> The Buddha then is the possibility of what we can become (a vision and aspiration). An intense, and alien figure. The face in the fire, the figure in the trees. The cusp. Human but also *transhuman*.

And then there is meditation: a focused state of *listening*, of *waiting*, for moments of intensity (a *trembling*).<sup>15</sup> The suspension of usual sensory distractions; a preparation and an intense threshold. Traditionally, and specifically within the puja, this space is a ground for the arising of the *Bodichitta* – 'the will to Enlightenment' – a kind of transpersonal consciousness which we might characterize as aesthetic. Such self overcoming is the goal of the puja. The puja does not, in this sense, *transport*, or promise to transport us to some 'Other' place – rather it activates an awareness of that which accompanies, and has always accompanied, our sense of self; not a pre-Oedipal *chora* but our 'experimental milieu', the smooth space upon which the 'I' is a mere striation. In fact, in building our shrine, we are assembling our Body without Organs; and in participating in the puja we are allowing intensities to flow *across* our body-shrine assemblage; intensities – or *affects* – which are of an asignifying and specifically *nonhuman* nature.

Another component: mantras. 'Lines of sound', signifying but also, and at the same time, manifesting *affects*. Mantras, in this sense, are 'beings of sensations'; the sounds *vibrate*, *resonate* together and *move apart* from one another. Mantras (*refrains*) build a house – a territory – but only so that this territory can be deterritorialized; a line of flight out into the cosmos/Universe.<sup>16</sup> And the recitation of the Heart Sutra; the experience – the *percept* – of an Enlightened being. A sermon, a spell, spoken by

someone, something, not of this world. A fragment of insight into a reality *beyond* the ego.

Lastly there is the business of making offerings to the Buddha (and to all Buddhas), to this individual who is not only an individual. These offerings are complex. Fragments of our own reality but also of reality in general. These offerings are not signs – or at least they do not only signify. They are bundles of energy which incarnate around themselves the world (they work metonymically). As such what the offering is, is less important than our involvement (our *awareness*) of it; *everything* can operate as an offering in this sense. This offering, this ‘giving up’, involves a letting go of part of ourselves, a surrendering of possessions (traditionally, a ‘breaking of fetters’). In making our offering we access that ‘incorporeal universe’ beyond the known.

Such a process involves a devotional aspect (worship creates a sacred space-time). The ‘breaking down of the ontological iron curtain between objects and things’ (Guattari) entails a certain surrendering of one’s self to that which lies beyond oneself; the latter thought not as transcendent but as *immanent*. These other worlds are not *possible* but *virtual*; it is not a question of realizing them – but of *actualizing* them.<sup>17</sup> The puja performs precisely this actualizing function. This surrendering also involves gratitude. Indeed from another perspective, one without this feeling of gratitude, the *transhuman* experience is one of anxiety and fear (fear of the loss of the self). The puja instead celebrates this line of flight from the self as an affirmation of the potentiality of all beings to become more than what they already are (to *transform* themselves). In the puja, as in Buddhism itself, expansiveness replaces negation. Art here is no longer an (always already frustrated) defence mechanism against the temporality of the world (de Man)<sup>18</sup> but an access point into/onto this reality. Celebrated in the puja is not the precarious victory of immortality but the reality of impermanence, insubstantiality and interconnectedness. Art here is no longer a reassuring mirror of our own subjectivity, but an experiment in exploring what lies *beyond* our subjectivity. The puja is then a zone of transformation. An *aesthetic* zone in which discrete boundaries between subjects, and between subjects and objects are blurred.

As such we could describe the puja, following Felix Guattari, as a *machinic assemblage*, in which the shrine, offerings, participants, space – and time – of the ceremony are all components.<sup>19</sup> As such the *puja machine* requires a certain kind of *subject machine*, hence the importance of the confession of faults (the clearing of blockages and resistances). Hence also the fact that the puja is not to be taken in isolation, but is rather part of an integrated programme of meditation, ethics and other devotional practices – all aimed, ultimately, at replicating the Buddha’s experience of Enlightenment (insight into reality). Indeed, ideally, as Buddhists (or, as *pagans*) we relate to the world as we do the puja; the border between ritual practice and life blurs. In such a machinic model we are interested in *affects* rather than meanings. In *experience* rather than understanding. And in *transformation* rather than representation. At stake here is a reconfiguration of subjectivity (a *resingularization* as Guattari would say).<sup>20</sup> We return from the puja different from when we entered that sacred space.

And so we can understand the puja, like all art, as operating on different registers. It contains moments of figuration – of representation – but this is not its point (there

are always those who will *interpret* dreams just as there will always be those who *figure* art as *text*). These moments are also access nodes into/onto something else (the molar aggregates that mask the molecular (the realm of *affects*)). Like the Buddha himself the experience of the puja is *in* this world but not *of* it.

The puja as access point onto other worlds might not be a bad model for all art. For all art is ritual in this sense. It may invite a *reading*. Indeed it may invite a *deconstruction*. But to remain solely within this remit is to miss what art does best: effects a transformation. As such art, like the puja itself, calls for a different mode of interaction: participation. To miss – or elide – this magical – and *immanent* – function is to remain unaffected by art. To remain within one’s own boundaries – to remain within one’s own, known, world. In this latter place art might still have a role; as self contemplation and shield from mortality. But it is a role at once fascistic and conservative. It restricts the possibilities of life and reifies the notion of what art is. As such art becomes a machine for increasing alienation rather than the means with which to overcome it.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McCleod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.155.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.26.

<sup>3</sup> A *reading* being precisely that mechanism which *fixes* the object.

<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of their chapter on art, ‘Percept, Affect and Concept’, in *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), Deleuze and Guattari are rather disparaging about conceptual art – which they see as being in danger of becoming merely ‘informative’: ‘the sensation depends upon the simple “opinion” of a spectator who determines whether or not to “materialise” the sensation, that is to say, decides whether or not it is art’ (p.198). Indeed, this ‘opinion’ is very much the target of *What is Philosophy?* However, it could be argued that conceptual art – as it was most rigorously practised – has more to do with what Deleuze and Guattari would call philosophy – the formation of concepts – than with what they say about art (although Deleuze and Guattari’s tripartite division of thought into science, philosophy and art might well render the notion ‘conceptual art’ redundant). Here is not the place to go into the workings of the concept as it is worked out in *What is Philosophy?* although it is worth noting that the formation of concepts has a lot to do with the posing of problems: ‘All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges’ (p.16).

Conceptual art, I would argue, is also connected to problems in this sense.

<sup>5</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, in particular chapter 3, ‘Percept, Affect and Concept’, and even more specifically, as regards the affect and becoming, pp.169–173. Whereas Lyotard takes his notion of the affect from Freud, Deleuze has in mind a more Spinozist understanding. See for example his ‘Spinoza and the Three Ethics’, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael Greco (London: Verso, 1998), where ‘affect’ is defined as the effect affections have on the body’s duration, the ‘passages, becomings, rises and falls, continuous variations of power (*puissance*) that pass from one state to another. We will call them *affects*, strictly speaking, and no longer affections. They are signs of increase and decrease, signs that are *vectorial*, (of the joy-sadness type) and no longer scalar like the affections, sensations or perceptions’ (p.139).

For my own thinking through of affect – and of its relation to the practices of art history – see this paper’s companion piece, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, *Angelaki*, 6(3), 2001.

<sup>6</sup> For Brian Massumi, following Deleuze and Guattari, meaning can be thought in precisely this way. In his book, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Boston: MIT Press, 1993), meaning is portrayed as the envelopment of a potential, a contraction of the past – and the future – in an event/object which has the capacity to affect or be affected. It is the work of ‘interpretation’ to unravel these ‘virtual’ processes encapsulated within the

object. See specifically chapter 1, 'Force', and more specifically pp.10–21.

<sup>7</sup> Writing itself can, of course, be art production; writing can and does produce *affects* as well as inviting *interpretations*. In this sense poetry, where rhythm and repetition are foregrounded, is where writing becomes most art. But poetry is not necessarily writing on an object. For this, and in the context of this article, we must look to the east and to *Haiku*; the writing *on* an object, more often than not, nature, where the point is *not* to record *reactions* (no self involved) but to present the thing as it is. As such *Haiku*, traditionally, is tied to the time, and often space, of its writing. Indeed *Haiku* poetry is often dated. These short verses summon up an event, a moment of intensity (often they set up a resonance – a 'clinch' – between two sensations). The 'object' is, as it were, laid before us – to be reactivated by us. Writing operates here as a mechanism to access the event.

<sup>8</sup> Sangharakshita, *The FWBO Puja Book: A Book of Buddhist Devotional Texts* (Norwich: Windhorse, 1973), p.8.

<sup>9</sup> More generically the puja is a Hindu ceremony.

<sup>10</sup> This phrase, 'fantasies of realism', is taken from Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'Appendix: Answering the question: What is Postmodernism?', *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi and Geoff Bennington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). For Lyotard, art works precisely against these fantasies which operate 'whenever the objective is to stabilise the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognisable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them' (p.74).

<sup>11</sup> Bataille is good on this. See for example his essay on *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: MacMillan, 1980). Bataille contrasts mundane – or 'work' – time (to do with utility; with *being human*) with 'sacred time', precisely a transgression of this norm (a move into the natural/cosmic realm). For Bataille it is this temporal reorientation of being which prehistoric cave painting, understood as a ritual activity, activates.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly Julia Kristeva comes up with a very similar notion as regards contemporary installation art: 'In an installation it is the *body* in its entirety which is asked to participate through its sensations, through *vision* obviously, but also *hearing*, *touch*, on occasions *smell*. As if these artists, in the place of

an 'object' sought to place us in a space at the limits of the sacred, and asked us not to contemplate images but to communicate with beings. I had the impression that [the artists] were communicating this: that the ultimate aim of art is perhaps what was formerly celebrated under the term of *incarnation*. I mean by that a wish to make us feel, through the abstractions, the forms, the colours, the volumes, the sensations, a *real experience*', quoted in Stephen Bann, 'Three Images for Kristeva: From Bellini to Proust', *parallax*, 4(8) (1998), p.69.

<sup>13</sup> See the 'Memories of a Sorcerer II' section of '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...' in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), specifically pp.245–246.

<sup>14</sup> *The Buddha*, as proper name, is precisely what Lyotard calls a *tensorial* sign, that is to say a name which demarcates a multiplicity, or, in Lyotard's words, a name which covers 'a region of libidinal space...a region in flames'. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Athlone, 1993), p.56.

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard is useful on this. Here he is from *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), giving what amounts to a programme for meditation – and the latter's relation to the *event*: 'To become open to the "It happens that" rather than the "What happens"', requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences [...] In order to take on this attitude you have to impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it incapable of anticipating the meaning, the "What" of the "It happens..." The secret of such ascesis lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as "directly" as possible without the mediation or protection of a "pre-text". Thus to encounter the event is like bordering on nothingness' (p.18).

<sup>16</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, music, like all art, is involved in this process of framing and deframing. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, pp.189–191.

<sup>17</sup> For a working through of this difference between the virtual and the possible, see Deleuze's *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), specifically pp.96–98. The possible goes through a process of realization, which, as Deleuze remarks, involves 'two essential rules, one of resemblance and another of limitation. For the real is supposed to be in the image of the possible that it realises. It simply has existence or reality added to it [in fact, as Deleuze demonstrates, it is the possible that resembles the real – this possible is then

abstracted from the real and “projected backwards”...And every possible is not realised, realisation involves a limitation by which some possibles are supposed to be repulsed or thwarted, while others “pass” into the real. The virtual, on the other hand, does not have to be realised, but rather actualised; and the rules of actualisation are not those of resemblance and limitation, but those of difference or divergence and of creation’ (p.97). Actualization is then a process of differentiation – and, as such, is a genuinely creative movement/moment.

It might appear that this critique of the possible and the real is a critique of utopias. Indeed Deleuze seems to be switching the register away from Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Interestingly however, in their last work together, *What is Philosophy?*, in the section ‘Geophilosophy’, Deleuze and Guattari return to a notion of utopia – and to a notion of what they call *immanent, revolutionary, utopias* (as opposed to authoritarian, transcendent ones). Such utopias are synonymous with what they call political philosophy: ‘that conjunction of philosophy, or of the concept, with the present milieu’ (p.100). For Deleuze and Guattari this utopian impulse in philosophy (which *is* philosophy) involves a ‘resistance to the present. The creation of concepts [which] in itself calls for a future form, for a new people that do not yet exist’ (p.108). That is, precisely, revolution.

Although in ‘Geophilosophy’ a lot is made out of the apparent differences between philosophy (the creation of concepts *on* the plane of immanence; an immanent practice) and religion, or *prephilosophy* (the projection of figures (the Hindu Mandela, the Chinese Hexagram, the Christian Icon) *onto* the plane of immanence; a transcendence) (see pp.88–93) it is this notion of revolution, understood as immanent experimentation and deterritorialization (the constituting of a new earth; the summoning of a new people), which, I would argue, the *puja* actualizes.

<sup>18</sup> It is, at least in one sense, against Paul de Man’s melancholy writings on the aesthetic that this short article was written. See for example his ‘Rhetoric of Temporality’, *Blindness and Insight* (London: Routledge, 1989), where the symbol (the aesthetic moment) is portrayed as a mechanism, or ‘defence strategy’ as de Man calls it, that tries to hide from the ‘negative self knowledge’ of man’s temporal predicament (his mortality) (p.208). It is, of course, de Man’s point that this strategy is always already frustrated (the symbol is but a special case of its supposed opposite, allegory). The promise of the aesthetic is, for de Man, *always* being broken.

<sup>19</sup> Felix Guattari, ‘On Machines’, *Complexity: Architecture / Art / Philosophy*, trans. Vivian Constantinopoulos (London: Academy Editions, 1995), p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), pp.6–7.

**Simon O’Sullivan** is lecturer in Art History and Visual Culture at Goldsmiths College. His research and publications are in the areas of aesthetics, art history and poststructuralist theory.