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T R I C K S T E R S E E S

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Tricksters, Troubadours—and Bartleby

On Art from a State of Emergency *Jean Fisher*

Debates on the relationship of artistic practice to the sociopolitical sphere have gained momentum as the more immiserating effects of globalisation have extended ‘states of emergency’ beyond their earlier restriction to colonial geographies. My interest in this issue stems from a long engagement with artists emerging from a political history of colonial violence and cultural dispossession, whose work may be described as an aesthetics of resistance against the truth claims of repressive regimes. A constellation of questions presents itself, among them: Do these practices differ from social activism in their affect? Do they offer a means to reclaim political agency? How might one characterise the tropes they employ? This presentation focuses on a particular set of tropes associated with the Hermetic [see below;

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ed.] or hermeneutic play of the ‘trickster’ and the ‘troubadour’: encountering, trespassing, vectoring and opportunism.

In his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ Walter Benjamin states, “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”¹ I read this from the perspective of colonised peoples deprived of ancestral belonging, self-representation and political agency, and subjected to extraordinarily repressive laws by the occupying power. This violence against the colonised ‘other’ diminishes the humanity of this latter by framing it within a reality not of its own making. It is also a betrayal by the law and language of dominance of its Enlightenment promise of universal franchise—a violation of principle that could only be rationalised by reducing the colonised to the status of less-than-human. From the point of view of the disenfranchised, resistance to power—or, more accurately, *force*—implies agency, which demands a proactive subject. The problem is that, according to the Foucauldian schema, the subject is not only oppressed by power but is itself its product, suggesting that the subject is always somehow complicit in its subjugation. However, this says nothing about the potential for resistance. How could one imagine a politically viable agency capable of exiting from this impasse? Short of armed resistance, Frantz Fanon insisted it was impossible to do so by a melancholy retreat into some lost or fragmented past identity. One had to begin by recognising the dynamics of repression and reconfiguring social narratives from the conditions of the present, a role he assigned to the intellectual and storyteller.² To reclaim agency means re-founding a place of dwelling in and against dominant language; to be ‘at home’ is first to be at home in a language capable of re-imagining a meaningful existence not defined by trauma and victimhood. Only then could one turn a sceptical eye upon the truth claims of policing regimes. For Edward Said the intellectual had a responsibility to speak truth to power: to give voice to un-freedom and injustice.³ But how does one do that when power is deaf, indifferent or illiberal? If one alternative is to turn aside from power, is this also not an abdication of political agency, since agency requires taking a position, however contingent, in relation to power? So, is there such a thing as a position without complicity, or resistance without violent confrontation?

1. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, [1961], trans. Constance Farrington, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 193.

3. Edward W. Said, ‘Speaking Truth to Power,’ in *Representations of the Intellectual*, (London: Vintage, 1994), 65.

One way out of this impasse is to say that hegemonic power is not absolute. Neither is subjectivity. The distribution of power within the social sphere may be controlled by a hegemonic discourse, but this does not preclude pockets of resentment, latent counter-hegemonies, or wars of position. For instance, for the colonial subject dispossessed by force, resistance had, of necessity, to operate clandestinely at the micro-social level. An example is syncretism in *santería*, the Afro-Cuban plantation religion, where a Catholic saint was mapped over or merged with a prohibited Yoruban orisha: one might be looking at St Anthony of Padua but appealing to Eleggúa, keeper of the crossroads. This constituted a political gesture insofar as it was a tactic of apparent conformity while retaining some measure of self-empowerment; a means of working within the framework of power without fully subscribing to its truths. At the same time, this opens onto the domain of *ambivalence*, where something cannot be determined as one thing or another, and whose value is firstly emotional. Naturally, it has been the drive of Western rationalism to eliminate such troublesome uncertainties.

What is notable in the *santería* example is that cultural resistance worked through a re-motivation of visual and material signs. (Incidentally, this has a bearing on debates over whether globalisation leads to the homogenisation of art, or whether the ‘local’ resignifies the ‘global’ on its own terms, as suggested by Gerardo Mosquera.)⁴ It is this thought of re-motivation that I want to carry over into questions of art’s affective capacity to challenge hegemonic truth claims. At a more fundamental level, this is to ask: how and what does art communicate, if anything?

Adorno notes that an artwork is not to be explained “in terms of the categories of communication,”⁵ contrary to the assumption, prevalent in oppositional activist art, that images are directly communicable. This assumption does not account for either the inherent polysemy of words and images or the haptic, synaesthetic means by which art captures understanding. By contrast, poetics mobilises this indeterminacy to interrupt the signifying chain and disarticulate conventional meanings, potentially opening up new pathways of thought. In light of this, we can correlate art making with the trickster. A trickster tale illustrates the point:

4. Gerardo Mosquera, ‘Alien-Own/Own-Alien,’ in Nikos Papastergiadis, ed. *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, (London: Rivers Oram, 2003), 18 – 29.

5. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 109.

6. Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 28.

In a famous episode from the Winnebago narrative cycle,⁶ trickster sees some plums in a stream and dives in to get them, but only brings up stones. On the next attempt he knocks himself out on the rocky bottom. When he comes to, he is floating face-up in the water, from which position he then sees the real plums in the overhanging tree. That is, trickster discovers a new insight—the difference between a thing and its representation—through a momentary loss of consciousness and change in perspective. This is analogous to Catherine Clément’s description of *syncope*—a suspended moment in time—as the condition for creative insight;⁷ that is, a suspension of everyday subjectivity triggered by an encounter with uncertainty (the ‘otherness’ of the situation), and a key to understanding how an event of art might provoke a new thought.

7. Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, trans. Sally O’Driscoll and Deirdre M. Mahoney, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1994), 5, 236 – 250.

James Coleman’s early work possessed a non-didactic political resonance that was difficult to pin down, although one might detect veiled allusions to the legacy of Anglo-Irish colonial relations. One particularly affective work, which induced an unaccountable sense of loss and uncertainty, was *A-Kōan*, 1976. It consisted of an 8mm looped colour film projection of the Irish tricolour flapping on a flagpole over a cluster of public address speakers. The accompanying soundtrack mixed a rumbling bass note with a child’s voice calling plaintively: ‘Mummy, I’m ready/ I’ve done a poo/ I’m calling you...’ The title is a phonetic pun on two meanings of ‘a koan’. One is the enigmatic or paradoxical Zen Buddhist saying that cannot be grasped by logical reasoning, but can be realised by sense; its purpose is to dislocate and free the mind from habitual ideas of reality according to the given laws of society.⁸ ‘Acoan’ is a Gaelic word meaning ‘keening’—a lament or lullaby. We are therefore given an audiovisual experience that oscillates across several undecidable registers between comedy and pathos. For Irish audiences at the time it suggested the celebration of Irish nationalism alongside its failure to deliver; at a deeper level it evoked the impotence of the embodied self and its betrayal by instrumentalised language.

8. Etymologically, a kōan is a judge’s bench—a place of adjudication and decision, placing paradox at the heart of the law.

There is an echo here of James Joyce, who exiled himself from Ireland because he could find no place as a speaking subject under conditions established by English colonial rule and a reactionary Irish identity founded in pre-Christian myth (precisely the ‘lost’ past that Fanon rejected). In *A*

¹⁶ In/Print June 2013

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, following a meeting with his English dean of studies, Stephen Dedalus says: “My soul frets in the shadow of his language.”⁹ With *Finnegans Wake* Joyce conducted what Seamus Deane calls a “Babelian act of war” against English, in which writing was not to be the foundation of a new subjectivity for this notoriously itinerant writer, but a re-founding of language itself through the ludic humour of phonetic puns, Gaelic syntax, ployglot neologisms, and above all *embodied speech*.¹⁰ *Finnegans Wake* is inscrutable unless read aloud, preferably with an Irish accent. Likewise, Coleman is very particular about what Roland Barthes called the ‘grain of the voice’ as a transmitter of the sensible, redeploying the visual with a material speech rooted in storytelling traditions.¹¹

9. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916), (London: Penguin, 1996), 215.

10. Seamus Deane, ‘Introduction’ to James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, (1939), (London: Penguin, 1992), vii – xlix.

11. Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice,’ *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath, (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

Jimmie Durham’s trajectory is uncannily similar. He exiled himself from the United States, a political entity to which, he says, as a Cherokee he never belonged anyway. When asked about his nomadic exile he said: “It’s my ambition to become a homeless orphan. I don’t want to be at home,” where home means ‘secure knowledge’, ‘mastery’, ‘lack of doubt’—in other words, freedom from those violent forms of identity and subjectivity to which the disenfranchised ‘other’ is subjected.¹² Although speaking from a crisis in Native American subjectivity (in a persistent ‘state of emergency’), Durham’s work has never offered an illustrative or autobiographical account. Instead, it presents a provocation to the language codes and visual conventions by which the subject is constructed and subjected to forms of power. Much of his work in the US articulated around seriocomic commentaries on white America’s representations of ‘Indians’: scripto-visual, *faux*-primitive drawings, and sculptures made from found junk. Typical of his style of misdirection was *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian*, 1985, a spoof on the ethnographic museum display and white presumptions of native ‘primitiveness’: a parasitisation of authoritative language that barely concealed a tragic human loss.

12. Jimmie Durham, *Jimmie Durham*, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2004), 123 – 125

Durham’s work in Europe continues to challenge prescribed subjectivities and ways of thinking. In the short video *13 rue Fénelon* (1995) we see a quiet street corner where nothing happens, until a rock smashes through a glass shop-front, surprisingly *from the inside*. While this and other similar sculptural gestures are ‘violent’, they are also encounters that

¹⁷ Jean Fisher, *Tricksters, Troubadours—and Bartleby: On Art from a State of Emergency*

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2 E V I D D N A M A E R T T R E A M A N D D I V E S
U B M E H T T E G O T N I I N T O G E T T H E M B U
P U 2 G N I R B Y L N O T T O N L Y B R I N G S U P
E N E H T N O 2 E N O T 2 S T O N E S O N T H E N E
N K E H T P M E T T A T X X T A T T E M P T H E K N
U O F L E 2 M I H 2 K C O O C K S H I M S E L F O U
O B Y K C O R E H T N O T T O N T H E R O C K Y B O
M O C E H N E H W M O T T T T O M W H E N H E C O M
T A O L F 2 I E H O T 2 E E S T O H E I S F L O A T
H T N I P U E C A F G N I I N G F A C E U P I N T H
I H W M O R F R E T A W E E W A T E R F R O M W H I
T E H N O I T I 2 O P H C C H P O S I T I O N H E T
A E R E H T 2 E E 2 N E H H E N S E E S T H E R E A
V O R H T N I 2 M U L P L L P L U M S I N T H R O V
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induce a change in material state. Common tropes in Durham's work are finding, associating and re-motivating objects and words such that the concealed or overlooked becomes manifest. Durham's stated intentions are to open a space of doubt and confusion in which the viewer is not belittled or intimidated but encouraged to *think*. Humour is one of his traits, but it is not the humour of Freud's 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,' which concerns mastery over the 'other,' but of the later essay—a humour that "smiles through tears," which concerns the self's amelioration of traumatic life.¹³

13. Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1927), in Freud 14: *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 427 – 433.

Emily Jacir's work seems close to Durham's insofar as she too, speaks from crisis without illustrating it, seeking to challenge the credibility of hegemonic truth. Although the controversial project, *Material for a Film—retracing Wael Zuaiter*, 2003, has been accused of being partisan, its intent is rather to confront us with the violence of our own prejudices. Among these is the conflation of Arab (multi-faith) ethnicity with Islam, which turns a colonial dispute over territory into a religious conflict. This, I suspect, was the problem behind the fate of Jacir's project, *stazione*, for the Palestine c/o Venice event at the Venice Biennale 2009. The intention of *stazione* was to celebrate Venice's historic maritime relation with the East Mediterranean, notable as a station for Christian pilgrims on the way to the Holy Land. The idea, initially approved, was to add Arabic translations to the names of the *vaporetto* stops on Line 1, which runs through the Grand Canal past several *palazzi* displaying Arabic design influences. The project alluded to the often forgotten shared history of European and Arabic cultures, including the contribution of Arabic lyric poetry to the troubadour tradition. The canal provided a compelling metaphor: a neutral zone in which ideological positions are suspended. Each stop is a momentary pause in a journey where the traveller may change direction; analogously, at each stop, the Arabic script would create an unexpected interference prompting a different awareness of cultural space. In addition, the project reflected the nature of the Biennale itself as a temporary rendezvous of contemporary artist-troubadours: a site of exchange and migration of aesthetic ideas and experiences. *stazione* was an elegant *secular* project, whose political dimension resided in interpretative extrapolations from the relations to

which it alludes. Alas, it was abruptly cancelled without explanation.

What I am attempting to present is an art that intervenes at the interface of subjects to ask whether there are not other truths of reality than those marketed by dominant ideologies. Herman Melville wrote,

in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.¹⁴

I am not concerned with some Platonic transcendental Truth, if this is what Melville meant, but with how we might think "cunning glimpses" of truths that matter to lived reality. So we shall now turn to the hermeneutic figure of cunning, trickster, which is neither ethnic specific nor confined to some pre-modern past.

It was through doing background research on Durham's work that I inevitably encountered the Native American trickster, central to narrative traditions and native hermeneutics. Although trickster appears in earlier post-encounter Native American tales satirising the white man, it is remobilised in literature and art as a symbolic vector of anti-colonial resistance and cultural resurgence from the 1970s on. This is also true for contemporary expressions of trickster in African and African diasporic literature and film;¹⁵ and, of course, Henry Louis Gates' theoretical work on 'signifyin' monkey,' about which he says, "[trickster] provokes a re-translation of the given world by cunning and a skilful, often humorous articulation of the corporeal and the linguistic."¹⁶

Cultural anthropology frames trickster as a character, which misses the point that it is not a subject in Western narrative terms, but a tropic figure; and its world is not anthropocentric but cosmogonic—world-transforming—aimed not at individual but collective renewal. None of the artists quoted above either illustrate or personify trickster; but they reveal the bricoleur's re-articulation of material—words, images and objects—mobilised towards a critical interrogation of the languages of dominance typical of trickster tropes.

A way out of anthropology may be found through the work of mythographer Karl Kerényi. He suggested that Nietzsche's dualistic division

14. Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24, 1850 <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/nh/hahm.html>

15. For example, Melvin van Peebles' film *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*; Patrick Chamoiseau's novels *Solibo Magnificent* and *Texaco*; Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*; and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

16. Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial' Self*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54.

of human culture into the rational Apollonian and the non-rational Dionysian should be supplemented by a third aspect, the Hermetic. The Hermetic, spelt with a capital H, refers to Hermes, the classical Greek trickster-messenger, not directly to alchemy. Kerényi describes it as “a specific quality in the nature, achievements, and life patterns of mankind, as well as the corresponding traits of roguery to be found on the surface of man’s world.”¹⁷ It is not a transcendental figure, but is grounded in body-world transactions concerned with agency, communicability and interpretation. As Gates says of trickster, it does not signify some thing but a way of doing that opens onto the indeterminacy of interpretation.¹⁸

For Michel Serres, true communication means not the passive relay of information but an active, transformative relation that necessarily includes difference and translation, without which nothing significant can be communicated. Serres’ focus is therefore on mediation. In contemplating what activates a successful communication, he concludes that it requires *contradictory* conditions: the presence of noise (interference), since a signal can be distinguished only against a background of noise; and total exclusion of what it needs to include, namely, noise.¹⁹ Serres names this the ‘parasite,’ the uninvited guest at the host’s dinner table who disrupts the established order, which can only be restored by excluding it; but disequilibrium has already transformed relations. The parasite obeys the logic of the excluded third and the included third:

a producer and inducer, not of a meaning, but exactly of a direction, excluding others, including the meaning/direction that leads to the collapse of the system and to its perpetual renewal.²⁰

Among Serres’ other ‘excluded thirds’ are Hermes and the troubadour, vectors that are characterised by a non-place: “neither *positioned* nor *opposed*, increasingly *exposed*.”²¹

The troubadour, implied in Jacir’s work, re-enters my narrative through the work of Sonia Boyce. Troubadours (men and women) were travelling composers assigned to courts—much like contemporary artists have residencies—whose songs often concerned the politics of the day. Their origins may lie in the transmission of Arabic song into Europe via Al-Andalus. The word troubadour or trouvère means both ‘trope’ and ‘finder.’

Serres describes it as the creator who does not seek but finds, linking knowledge and learning to travel, encountering, crossing frontiers and the “felicitous use of language.”²² Like trickster—or Oscar Wilde’s dandy—troubadour engages in unequal exchange: food for hot air, as Serres says—the measurable for the all-or-nothing of art.

Boyce has been interested in Serres’ parasitic trope both as a means of challenging the stereotypical identity imposed on her as a black British artist and as a way of exploring art’s sociality through projects involving singing and carnival. The collaborative work, *For you, only you*, 2007, began with an invitation to work with Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford University. Boyce chose to stage a vocal performance in the space, and appointed two disparate performers as collaborators: Mikhail Karikis, a Greek performance artist specialising in modernist vocalisations drawing on all body cavities; and the Early Music choir, Alamire, directed by David Skinner. Karikis and Skinner agreed to work with a motet, *Tu solus qui facis mirabilia*, by the Franco-Flemish Renaissance composer Josquin Desprez, which Karikis rescored using call-and-response. The collaboration was performed in the Chapel to an Oxford audience whose expectations were, needless to say, confounded.²³

The motet is a choral form in which each word syllable is given its own musical note—that is, a rigid structure incompatible with modern vocal styles. In effect, Boyce forced a syncopic moment, in which each performer had to modify its identity to accommodate the other’s difference. Since authorship was distributed across a range of collaborators, her role was invisible and ambiguous. One might say she functioned as the ‘finder’ and catalyst of a transforming signifying chain, *relating to the relation itself*, not to the points of emission or reception. As Serres writes, the producers play the *contents*, the *para*-site the *position*; but s/he who plays the position plays the relation between subjects, and is thus the master. Is this then the real space of political agency?

What I have outlined so far are artistic tactics that seek agency through resistance to hegemonic truth claims. But I shall now turn to a paradox raised by Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*.²⁴ One might assume that in the present context the author’s *The Confidence-Man* would be

22. Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, p 104.

23. *For you, only you: A project by Sonia Boyce*, (Oxford: Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, 2007).

24. Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853), (Hoboken,

17. Karl Kerényi, *Mythology and Humanism, The Correspondence of Thomas Mann and Karl Kerényi*, trans. Alexander Gelley, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), 9

18. Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Figures in Black*, p 239. See also Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

19. Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, (eds.) Josué V. Hari and David F. Bell, (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), xxv-xxvi and 66-67.

20. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans Lawrence R Schehr, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 187 – 88.

21. Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 12.

more appropriate, since it deliberately plays with Hermetic tropes and the discursive elaborations typical of oral storytelling. But Bartleby is the ghost haunting this text.

Bartleby the Scrivener has received considerable interpretative commentary, but from my point of view, it presents a *kōan*—a mote inside the eye of the law. I shall call this mote *imagination*, because the first thing that Bartleby ‘would prefer not to’ is his work as a law-copyist—a role that prohibits imaginative thought. Bartleby—about whom we are told next to nothing (he is another ‘homeless orphan’)—is not a character, subject, or hero, but a paradoxical tropic figure, whose primary trait (non-compliance, or suspension of communication) is always already embedded in Hermetic ambivalence. It presents an attenuated syncopic suspension of time. But is Bartleby’s indifference to power a gesture of resignation that offers no hope of agency? Is doing *nothing* still doing *something*? As it happens, this question is presupposed in the reverse axiom, ‘Sometimes making something leads to nothing,’ which underlies Francis Alÿs’s action *Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997) where he pushed a block of ice round Mexico City until it melted away.

One can say that Bartleby’s in-action prompts action by others: they are forced into decisions. Like other artistic tactics I have described, Bartleby presents a reproach to social demands for conformity: “I know you,” he says to the lawyer, “and I want nothing to say to you.” *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a cautionary tale that exposes the duplicitous nature of power. Its significance lies in asking the *reader* to recognise subjectivity as an artifice of language that betrays the self’s imaginative potential. As *The Confidence-Man* makes clear, Melville is concerned with the means by which understanding is transmitted, where the paradoxical and polysemous nature of language persistently threatens to undermine epistemic certainty: the obligation of meaning is deferred to the reader, who engages in an act of interpretation that is itself a part of the creative process.

Bartleby comes to mind in relation to Alÿs, another ‘homeless’ exile also known, like Durham, for absurdist gestures. And like Boyce, Alÿs has often deferred authorship to others, notably the *copyist*, as in his collection of found amateur paintings of *Fabiola*, where a collective sameness is revealed

as a plurality of singularities. That Alÿs himself is concerned with art’s relation to the political is clear in the walk he performed in Jerusalem (2004) designed to test the axioms, *Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic*. Note his emphasis on ‘doing,’ recalling the Hermetic as not signifying some *thing* but a way of *doing*. In Jerusalem Alÿs was faced with a divisive political situation that invited taking up partisan positions; but, in effect, he preferred not to.

He began with a map reference: the line drawn on a map of Jerusalem with a thick grease pencil by Moishe Dayan following the Arab border war in 1949. Known as the ‘green line,’ it was intended to separate Israeli and Palestinian territories, and yet any boundary inexorably unites as it separates. But the map line represents a tract of land several metres wide—so who owned the wide of the line? Alÿs walked this line with green paint dribbled from a punctured can. The extended work is a DVD projection of his journey, reframed by audiotaped interviews that discuss the sociopolitical consequences of the ‘green line’ from Palestinian and Israeli perspectives, not all of which are favourably disposed towards Alÿs’s gesture. Alÿs occupied no definable subjective position, literally withdrawing to the ambivalent, non-place of the boundary itself, where no one has the authority to speak: an aporia (a psychic and political impasse) but topographically porous. In parasitised this *non-place* of indeterminacy, Alÿs also parasitized the founding political gesture of its inscription, never established by law, disclosing the absurd but tragic paralysis of communication that this enforced. In other words, Alÿs’s absurdist gesture avoided partisan politics, or ‘contents,’ whilst opening a space to consider the contingent play of relations that constitute political power.

Derrida’s description of Bartleby’s gestures as “response without response,”²⁵ may fit Alÿs’s gesture of responding to a situation without responding overtly to its politics and parallels the underlying ethics of James Coleman’s work; but it also recalls what Michel de Certeau said about strategies that ‘navigate’ and often ‘short-circuit’ or ‘substitute’ a set of social rules. “Analogy,” he writes,

is the foundation of all these procedures, which are transgressions of the symbolic order and the limits it sets. They are camouflaged

25. Jacques Derrida, ‘Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)’, in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 74.

transgressions, inserted metaphors and, precisely in that measure, they become acceptable, taken as legitimate since they respect the distinctions established by language even as they undermine them. From this point of view, to acknowledge the authority of rules *is exactly the opposite of applying them*.

He adds, rather presciently: “This fundamental chiasm may be returning today, since we have to apply laws whose authority we no longer recognise.”²⁶

26. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F Rendall, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 54 – 55. Transgression here means a crosswise movement, not rebellious shocks.

In sum, the Hermetic aspect in art works in and against the linguistic, material and emotional realities of the sociopolitical to disclose the extent to which we are framed and constrained by ideologies and representations that cripple our capacity to *imagine* other ways of being in and interpreting the world. It neither rejects power nor acquiesces to it, but parasitizes and interrupts its channels of communication to provoke encounters with difference. This provocation encourages a loss of subjective certitude from which we may acquire a different perception of reality. Such art practices present a profoundly ethical challenge, for they entreat the viewer to engage with the struggle for social justice in a political and economic landscape bereft of ethics and scarred by violence and dissimulation. My only—provisional—conclusion is that this ethical battle is best fought on the side of the victims not the victors of history.

The above is a revised version of the Norma U Lifton Lecture, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, November 2009.