

New Realism

In the 13 years between the publication of the first and fourth volumes of *Modern Painters*, in 1843 and 1856 respectively, John Ruskin seems to have changed his mind. His statement that 'a generalisation of a pony and pig' would be 'bad drawing' is followed by this, in volume four: 'Try to draw a bank of grass, with all its leaves; and you will soon begin to understand under what a universal law of obscurity we live, and perceive that all *distinct* drawing must be *bad* drawing, and that nothing can be right, till it is unintelligible.'

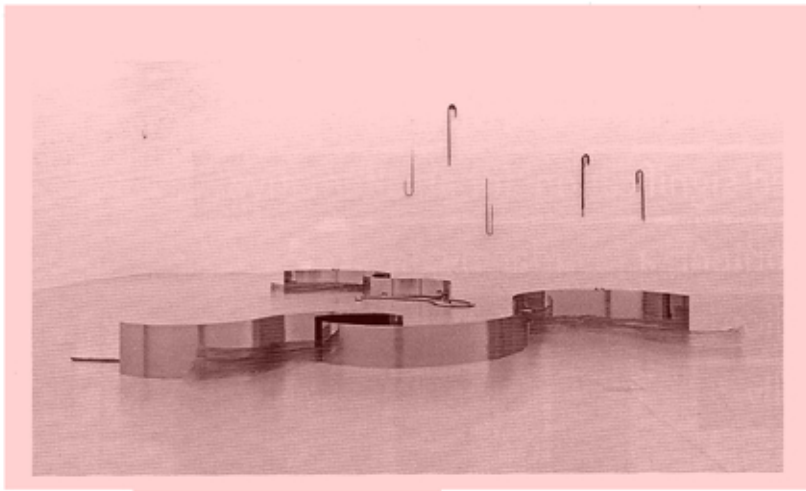
These two apparently contradictory quotes straddle two definitions of representation. Firstly, as a logical process of mimetic description. Secondly, as an artifice that comprehends its otherness from its subject, and only in that otherness can represent it. In the space between these definitions a linear process has become circuitous, riddled

with paradox, and any unequivocal congruence between subject (the artist's perceiving self) and subject (subject matter) has broken down. Ruskin's developing ambivalence questions the efficacy of 'a perfectly transparent plate-glassy style', in Walt Whitman's phrase.

That art's specificity to an external subject should take priority over the subject's catalysing of a functioning artifice has tended to be a British eccentricity. In an American or mainland European context it has seldom been an issue. And in British art, from the late 1980s onwards, there was a shift of emphasis away from empirical representation towards the manipulation of found objects as signs. Damien Hirst has spoken of his regard for and debt to Francis Bacon, but if Bacon's 1960s portraits are intended as evocations of a specific human presence – typically a friend or lover – Hirst took Bacon's drastic attempts to reinvent

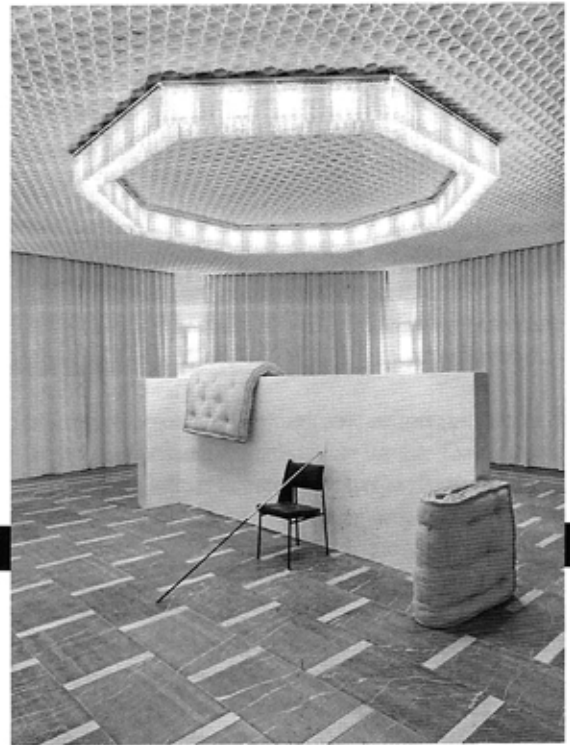
Sofia Hultén
Altered Fates 2013





Alice Channer
Soft Shell 2013 installation detail
 at Kunstverein Freiburg

Tatiana Trouvé
Somewhere, 18-12-95. An Unknown. 1981, 2014
 installation view at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin



painterly representation as symbols of existentialist dread – that is, as *grand guignol*. By the early 2000s, this tendency had become hermetically art-referential. Empirical structuralism had ceded to a post-structuralistic evasion of the avowal of subjectivity implicit in the attempt to represent primary experience. Instead of seeking equivalents to the mysterious collocation of perceiver, registering medium and what is perceived, artists elicited signs that had already been invested in their materials by previous art or the culture at large.

In the past decade there has been a striving for liberation from received signification, for an alternative to already-mediated content; a resurfacing, in British art, of realist idioms and a reflection of this tendency internationally. Signs cede to specific objects, or to representations so thoroughly invested in the specificity of their referent that they challenge the generalisation implicit in the act of signification. 'Specific objects' invokes a minimalist inheritance, which seems to contradict the theme of representation but comprehends a model of art-making as an act of attention to an as-yet-unmediated reality. Since the late 1980s, British sculpture has tended towards the literal, with the circuitousness of metaphor superseded by the simple but effective similes of found-object assemblage: a fried egg is like a breast, a cucumber like a penis, to paraphrase Sarah Lucas. Alice Channer's cultivation of a less blatant relation between art and reality recalls the glamorous, machined abstraction of New Generation formalism of the 1950s, as well as the conflation of minimalist, figurative and found-object modes which characterised the work of British sculptors, such as Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg, who emerged in the early 1980s. Channer's sculptures are not representations of something else, or the something else itself, or self-referential configurations of materials, but possibly unprecedented hybrids of all three. Hanging strips of Day-Glo-tinted polyurethane resin are casts of women's leggings, and therefore causal representations; but they resemble esoteric remnants of industrial manufacture, or relics of biological life honed by forces of natural erosion that have come and gone. Perversely, their artificiality, their very unnaturalness, is a realist conceit based on metaphor's fusion of unlikenesses – the high-tech fossil, for example – rather than an unambiguous semblance to objects, ie the leggings from which they are cast. The original clothing has imparted the texture of synthetic fabric on to objects unlike but possibly suggestive of it, in the tangential sense that the translucency of resin might constitute a remote analogy to the semi-transparency of viscose. This partial indexical trace recalls Rachel Whiteread's idiom, but rejects the implicit pathos of Whiteread's retrospection. The causal veracity of Channer's representation is subverted by colours and materials which belie their connection to the objects represented.

The Croatian artist Tatiana Trouvé plants casts of everyday objects into sculptural installations which render them as elements within a theatrical

mise-en-scène. Fiction frustrates a realist conceit but, conversely, in order to render it more realistic – in the sense of disillusioned – by subverting its claim to possess a reality beyond its own materiality. Hence the overtly minimalistic elements, such as a bare plasterboard wall, which are 'dressed' – in the installation *Somewhere, 18-12-95. An Unknown. 1981, 2014* – by casts of mattresses, chairs and plastic bags. In contrast with the cast elements, the blank temporary wall suggests both a theatre prop and the referential amnesia of minimalist sculpture. The quasi-fictional scenario with which her representational conceit is framed makes Trouvé's use of the causal imprint critical of the technique's implication in the hands of an artist such as Whiteread. The pathos of representational veracity is dismissed as a sentimental fiction.

As Channer's organic/synthetic synthesis connects back to the sculpture of Deacon, so Merlin James's use of overtly self-reflexive process to both challenge and enable representational motifs recalls the methods of Bacon, and those of his peers Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. These painters took primary experience as the basis for painting which paradoxically sought representational specificity from methods deriving from mid-20th-century modernist abstraction. If 'a picture is laid against reality like a measure' – to quote Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* – the measuring impulse remains while the measure's notation has become unintelligible. In James's case, the subjectivity of a representation's testimony – the contour of a facial profile, or the angle of a pier's recession into dusk-greyed surf – is tempered by its doubling as an art-historical archetype, as well as by its function as a pretext for a process that strays into an obliviousness of the image it is creating. Pictorial memory traces ironically divest themselves of their pretensions to record by acknowledging their default to a stock motif or to solipsistic mark-making. The effect is to designate the salvaged specificity as a sign of what Roland

In the past decade there has been a striving for liberation from received signification, for an alternative to already-mediated content; a resurfacing, in British art, of realist idioms, and a reflection of this tendency internationally.

Barthes – as though picking up the word from Ruskin – calls the ‘unintelligibility’ of the real: its resistance to being assimilated by representation.

Like Wittgenstein, Auerbach is an immigrant whose work became empirical under the influence of a British context, assimilating itself to a lineage that can be traced back to Walter Sickert, John Constable, Thomas Jones (in his *plein air* oil sketches), William Hogarth and Hans Holbein. The trajectory from Holbein to Auerbach constitutes an evolving recognition of the paradox of art’s attempt to be realistic: that it asserts its otherness from the experience it strives to record, emphasising materiality and process in order to create a living record of that experience. This is as true for the streaks of glazed oil, which stand – but not in any analysable sense – for the dew-drenched hedge out of which Constable’s *Leaping Horse* emerges, as for the geometric puzzles of impasto, which are, in Auerbach’s words, ‘like nothing on earth, but like’ the bone structure of his model.

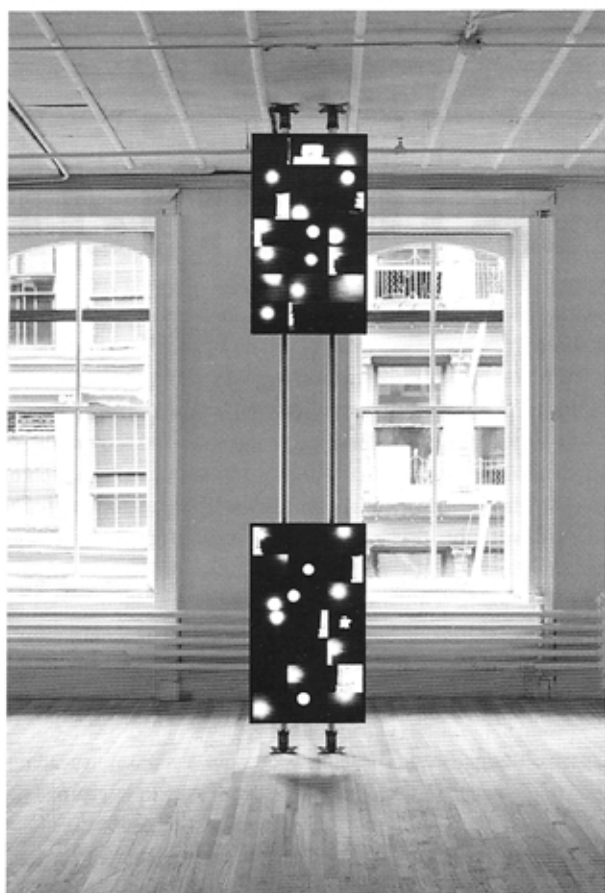
British empirical philosophy from John Locke to Wittgenstein plots a succession of attempts to formulate a description of human knowledge as the result of sensory experience, in opposition to pre-existing theories that we possess innate rationality or morality. The various binary terminologies – analytic/synthetic, deductive/inductive – which structure this discourse describe a clash between *a priori* and *a posteriori* reality models. The artistic tradition has its own equivalent, dialectical binary: between the empirical observation of nature and what Ernst Gombrich called ‘schema’ – the inherited means, evolving through generations without necessarily being tested against experience, by which reality is effectively represented. Comparatively, however, it seems that the artistic tradition may be able to reconcile values which philosophically have remained at odds. For Locke, if all knowledge derives from sensory experience, and each person’s experience is unique, there can be no ‘objective’ knowledge. The paintings of Auerbach, Bacon or Howard Hodgkin mediate between the artist’s subjective experience of a particular subject and a viewer’s confirmation of the credibility of the equivalence (if not its veracity – after all, the subject is probably known to the artist and not the viewer).

Bacon’s or Auerbach’s versions of this process discover specific appearance in non-descriptive facture with a vividness

which the familiarity of conventional, figurative procedures precludes. Their irrational means administer a shock comparable to that of Proust’s involuntary memory, circumventing cognitive filters. They pitch a freshly improvised perceptual connection between artist and viewer, empirically experiential as Gombrich’s ‘schema’ are not. A remove from habitual, representational logic is a rejection of received signs for a contingently invented language. The innately subjective nature of the process is essential to its facilitating a leap from solipsistic experiment to the confirmation of a viewer’s recognition. Hodgkin abandons the ‘measure’ of representation and asks accumulations of semi-abstract mark-making to correspond to a specific experience of his own and, by extension, to reproduce that experience in a viewer’s experience of a painting. He may forgo representation, but not the intention of transferring a ‘record’ to the viewer. His broad framing strokes tunnel in towards a central, chromatic revelation, implying the inaccessibility – due as much to the tenuousness of memory as the artifice of abstract painting – of the events for which he is intent on finding a pictorial equivalent.

Locke’s famous image of ‘white paper’ – a metaphor for the *tabula rasa* of a child’s mind onto which sensory experience is progressively inscribed – invokes the process by which light or sound is recorded on magnetic audio tape or celluloid film reel, or projected onto a cinema’s canvas. In a recent interview, the artist-filmmaker John Smith said, ‘I set out to make true stories seem improbable.’ His filmic scrutiny of his east London environment exposes not the familiar *per se*, but the familiar as strange, unpredictable and resistant to representation in proportion to a viewer’s awareness of the medium which reveals it. The trope recalls the action-movie conceit in which some implausibly powerful software enlarges a low-resolution image, and the threat of the revealed fugitive is relative to the emphasis placed on the technology that enables the exposure of their image.

Artist-filmmakers such as Smith, Hilary Lloyd, Jordan Baseman and Sofia Hultén adopt realist narrative conventions, such as the first-person voice-over, and combine them with occultish, transcendental, formalistic or overtly fictional elements, using artifice to question conventional distinctions between objective and subjective reality. As the late American novelist David Foster Wallace wrote, ‘Realism made the strange



Hilary Lloyd
Moon 2011 installation view
at Artists' Space, New York

familiar ... today's most ambitious realist fiction is going about trying to *make the familiar strange*. Lloyd's filmic collages treat brief real-time clips – of a patch of pavement, a tower block, the moon – as mysterious found objects. The subjectivity of hand-held footage is subverted by the formalising structures into which its images are fed. Tiled on a flat screen among variously staggered copies of the same clip, they perform a jerky dance alongside their replicated counterparts, while the screen is surrounded by signs of digital-image projection in fetishistic excess of its function: floor-to-ceiling struts of gleaming chrome, like lap-dancer poles, supporting aggressive-looking ranks of robotic digital projectors. The realist seed is treated not as a standby normality we may take for granted, but as an exoticism as contingent upon the artifice which reveals it as it is unassimilable by that artifice.

Baseman casts interview footage, which declares its documentary status through the identification of its speakers, into contexts – firstly, that of an art gallery – which grant them a licence to stray from anchored record into fantasy. *The Last Walk*, 2011, consists of the British conceptual artist Stuart Brisley's narrated account of an evening walk on which he encounters a man who has set himself on fire (Reviews AM368). In conjunction with this soundtrack, projected images of blurred, glowing, forked forms encourage and highlight the assumption of image/sound connectivity. But these are not images of flames, but of fairy lights pulsing in the trees of a Christmas market. The clips have been manually developed to erode image definition. A structuralistic trope is given the paradoxical task not of frustrating our suspension of disbelief in filmic illusion, but of disabling illusion

in order to indicate its inability to represent horror, and thereby to aid the work's invocation of an unrepresentable reality that lies beyond its formal parameters.

Providing an empirical representation with a self-reflexive or formalistic vehicle may hold subjective perception at a distance which stresses its otherness from the medium conveying it. This distance forms a morally charged axis between the subject and its given form which might do justice to the connection or falsify it. The singularity of experience is preserved, while its being figured in an equally specific but autonomous form allows it to be appropriated by the viewer. The artist has it both ways, as it seems the philosopher cannot. Locke's rejection of objective knowledge suggests the isolation of individual perception even as it intimates the condition of relativism: an infinite spectrum of subjects and subjectivities, separate but coexisting.

Hultén's art is predicated on negotiating the imaginative expansion, in the mind of a viewer, of her recorded actions and the objects they involve. These actions, typically of a quotidian mundanity, splinter into relativistic spectra of potential others. A realist conceit slides into a multiplicity of imaginary, or irrational alternatives. The sequentiality of narrative realism is parodied, then baffled, through its reshuffling. In *Nonsequences*, 2013, Hultén polishes an apple, munches on it, wraps it in a paper bag and throws it into a dusty bucket. But as the film develops, alternative narrative sequences are proposed, entailing both comedy and disgust. The apple is thrown into the dust, and she bites into its dirty skin; or she bites into the bag containing it and chews on the plastic. Significantly, the film is not restructured through editing: the narrative it describes is reordered through reshooting. The translation of experience into film engenders a contradictory reality. Hultén's self-scrutiny makes play of the impossibility of its transformation into self-recording.

Altered States, 2013, resembles a film of an early Conceptual Art performance. Hultén ransacks a skip for a series of junk objects which she modifies in some inconsequential way before returning them to the skip. The film might be satirising the plodding sequentiality of linear process, but it is also ineffably Romantic, suggesting the unknown pasts and futures of the altered objects by intruding, however insignificantly, on their 'fates'. The arbitrariness of her alterations intimates all the other possible ways she could have modified the objects but didn't, and the myriad alternative narratives which would have been their consequence. Film's record both fixes the actual version of events and, through the fictional connotations of the medium (she could be acting), intimates all the others. It evokes the fictional dimensions into which the objects are consigned when they leave Hultén's hands and recede into the unknown and undocumented, which is synonymous with the imagined. To speak of the modified objects' fates points to their role as metaphors for subjectivity. They posit the forking of one documented reality into a potential multiplicity of others, which is indeed what an artwork attempts as it makes a pitch to transfer one viewpoint – that of the artist – to the many of its prospective viewers.

Relativism, of course, is just what the artists I have been discussing – with their striving to redefine the artwork as a categorical representation of subjective perception – seem to refute, but the relativist philosopher Richard Rorty's rejection of 'intrinsic human nature' can be seen as analogous to Locke's debunking of 'innate' rationality. For Rorty, subjectivity is realised in 'self-description', in other words in the language (or the art medium) of expression. Postmodern relativism dilutes subjectivity by positing language as floating, sourceless, randomly appropriatable, issuing from nobody and belonging to everybody. By figuring primary experience in an ostensibly objective form rather than substituting it with received signs of experience, recent realist art redefines the relativistic artwork as representative of the irreducibly autonomous subjectivities of both artist and viewer. Art declares itself as the transferable 'self-description' which negotiates the divide. Perhaps only by risking the exposure of subjectivity can its solipsism be breached. ■

MARK PRINCE is an artist and writer based in Berlin.