

Postscript 74

BRYNN CATHERINE McNAB
on “Semi-precious: The Faceting of a Gemstone
Only Appears Complete and Critical”

“Abstract notions always hide a sensory figure”
—Jacques Derrida

“C’est la dissymétrie qui crée le phénomène.”
—Pierre Curie

“‘Me.’ He extends a hand and lays it over the pile of rocks with curious delicacy. ‘Crystalline structures are an efficient storage medium.’ The words make no sense. Then Hoa repeats, clearly, ‘This is me.’”
—N K Jemisin

During *Semi-precious: The Faceting of a Gemstone Only Appears Complete and Critical*, Justine A. Chambers utilized Artspeak’s gallery space as an open rehearsal studio. Herself and a rotating contingent of collaborators, including Alexa Mardon, Alison Denham, Billy Marchenski, Aryo Khakpour, Kate Franklin, Lisa Gelley, Josh Martin, Rianne Svelnis, Erika Mitsunashi, Elissa Hanson, Ileana Cheladyn, Kaia Shukin, Layla Marcelle Mrozowski, and many others who stopped in to contribute and together shape and to revisit a dance score written by Chambers. Each artist was invited to share and work through their own scores for rehearsal based off of their experiences moving through Chambers’ previous scores in other iterations of *Semi-precious*. An emphasis on the abnegation of the traditional categories of ‘Artist’ and ‘Exhibition’ was insistent in the structure, with Chambers refusing to be a single author, present a finished product, or allow a viewing of the piece as a consistent whole. Rather, she encouraged working towards the emergence of alternative structures of value, ones that are not ‘givens’ in the presentation of a work.

The movements were inclined towards an attentiveness to intimate tendential gestures, with acknowledgement that these are always both learned and unique, structured by external forces and embodied through the medium of the self. These movements were then refracted through various ways

of languaging the body, reflected through forms of repetition and iteration, and focussed through the taking and giving of space between bodies. Cast upon by the sunlight through Natalie Purschwitz's *Rock Garden*, a translucent collection of coloured shards opening the front window to the street outside, they worked on growing an isomorphic crystal form with gazes, metaphors, the floor, their relations, and an oscillation of dissensus and consensus.

Repetition always involves a cut. Repetition in the round produces the illusion of symmetry. Each cut removes a little bit of symmetry, as it reduces and regulates the possible options for transformation. The familiar notion of symmetry usually includes two transformations, one on a vertical axis, like a butterfly, and if a form is ultra symmetrical, a second transformation along the horizontal axis as well, like a reflection in the water. The mathematical definition of symmetry is compellingly much broader. The symmetry of a form becomes higher if it can undergo greater amounts of transformations. Just because a path of transformation is suggested, carved out, indicated, doesn't mean that there are not infinitely more, different transformations possible. The most symmetrical form is no form whatsoever. It is infinitely transformable; it has no cuts. It is unaffected by change.

The problem with life, the world, the complex real, is that it is difficult to read. We seem to need to break

it into pieces in order to compare the internal similarities of form, reduce it to abstraction, to comprehend and theorize about it. The way in which we think about symmetry is one of many ways in which habits of thought mistakenly value the world. Symmetry, when we find it as meaningful, appears like a mirror. But at its utmost, symmetry is devoid of meaning, form, and structure. At its nadir, it is the most complex, it requires the most information to understand.

The extraction from a performance work of an invariance, a concept, one that resembles a rule, that binds the whole, is the tendency a viewer has towards any confrontation with a situation that they are unable to read. However, the practice of this extraction belies the processual activity of the work, the work of the work, how it is working, its uncomfortable magic. In gemstone cutting, a flaw is a cut outside of the form of symmetry, something off centre, out of line. It reduces the symmetry of the gemstone. But this ignores the process of the cut in favour of a determined form. Each cut always breaks the symmetry that came before it. Just as a crystal is on the teetering edge of life, wherein an explanation of its growth and auto-determination leaves something somewhat inexplicable, the process of making a work that exceeds a conceptual statement requires a milieu of complexity and continuous variation. It remains a step off from the inscribed category of the art work, to make the working alive, and autopoietic.

The scores of the dances were made known in the gallery. They sat handwritten in notebooks, passed around on looseleaf paper. This did not make the meaning, the structure or the production of the work clear. It does, however, make the process of scoring a part of the work. There is a defocusing of the direct relation between what the performers are doing and their directions and prompts pulled from the initial score. These prompts actively call into question the relation of the structure to the material, the abstract to the sensory. The score arrives not as definition, but each as a paddle stroke, a vector to move along. The relations between the definition and the movement not strictly laid out, but coaxing something out of an accumulative field. This disclosure, its gesture and structure, is associated with a revealing, a revelation, but it discloses no meaning. There is a line of movement from inside to outside and outside to inside, a moving towards both. We open the door to enter only to find that we are once again outside.

A sparkle draws you in like a lure. It is light reflected and concentrated in a critical point, bounced again out of the object. A gaze directed towards you, at you, onto you, that beckons you in. We are all magpies for meaning. Our eyes get stuck on the lure, the sparkle, the call. We are looking for this meaning in self, in life, and most transparently in art. The arrival at a sparkling secret of any of these is meant to be something distilled, pressed into a source of

light. This sparkle is assumed to be simplified, pure substance, and pure structure.

The eyes, for instance, have sparkle. So we pluck them out of the forest, the sky, each other. They address us, and mirror us. They hold both threat and recognition, passage elsewhere, and arrows away from themselves. They reflect and refract. Light and colour are structural and refractive as well as material. Thinking or moving magically, what does it mean to reverse the direction of a vectorial concept?

The bowerbird gathers things that sparkle from its environment. These are gathered without context for the bird, but for their particular shine. Often banal, the objects the bowerbird gathers are pedestrian to us, because we can see their context, a connotation of their use in the world, that the bird cannot. Tin foil, bottle caps, coloured glass, are all essentially refuse to us. The bowerbird, however, does not understand their specific connotation in the same way that we do. They collect them to build a process of individuation from others in their species. The objects are a material lure of the individual. But this connotation does not originate in the object. The object has a structure that reflects or concentrates the glare of a field that is ubiquitous.

The word praxinoscope comes from the roots 'praxis' and 'scopus,' a combination of vision and

practice. The praxinoscope was a pre-cinematic animation machine, which used an interior structure of faceted mirrors to create the illusion of motion. The faceting worked to produce motion in place of the slits in the previously invented zoetrope. Like the slits, they intermittently disrupt the reflected light from the image, the same way in which the shutter of a camera and projector does, to prevent the images from blurring together in the viewer's vision. The faceting from the mirrors creates a break in the reflected light as it moves around the facet, a brighter allowance for the phenomenon of movement to happen, which was able to be projected.

There is something secretive about the banal and minimally intimate gestures that Chambers is looking to facet and polish in this work. Because of its inherent lack of intention, its limited ability to be found by force, its subtlety and underrated value, the intimate gesture has the assumption of the storage of the self. It contains a critical relation between 'scopus' and 'praxis.' The relationship between the score and the dance, material and structure, experience and what is derived from it, is not a direct trajectory here. The disclosure of the secret of these gestures only exposes their indeterminability and complexity. There is a strategic and continual opening onto yet another opaque outside.

Language structures, such as sonnets and narrative arcs, have provided a so-called blank slate on

which to play out endless permutations, because they are commutable, commensurable with each other. Jewels and gold have assumed value historically for this same reason. They are exchangeable, they hold a certain value that can be ascertained and measured against a structure that they have and also one that is external to them, based off of their form. Their specificity has been subjugated to their form. The less specificity, the higher the valuation; so how do you cut the sparkle, the lure, into the specific and the sensuous? Chambers has posed the challenge of these interplays to her collaborators. They seem to work with the deftness of experience in the midst of the supposed ambivalence, hinting that perhaps this state is not so alien to us.

During the conversation periods, wherein both performers and spectators were invited to contribute, the difficulty to communicate with precision through language became and oft-discussed issue. Understanding the precise meaning or connotation of one word for another is always inaccessible, as each field, language, individual, always has their own glossary of terms, which are gleaned from the memory and forgetting of every time they have been used in relation to something of meaning to us. The exchange value of words lies only in the ways in which they are non-specific to us, the structure of them that is measurable against the specificities of the situation, of the other. And they gain value the more that

specificity is polished off, to allow for the affordances of travel in communication between people. Value of a thing comes from the transfer to a new specificity of the thing, a passage which necessitates a loss of materiality, wherein what cannot be transferred ceases to matter.

By building a faceted nest of these shards of specificities, vacated of their original contexts, held for the sparkle of their internal structure, the bowerbird creates a nest of beauty, but also of meaninglessness. It has an eye for a specific reflection. Is there some tie that we can make between the disparate material contexts of these objects and their refractive and reflective qualities, other than one in which they are voided of their material in the service of exchange? The bowerbird collects these objects to lure a mate with aesthetics, he is collecting things for the gaze of another, but also for the propagation of himself. The nest is a mess of the refuse of the world, used towards another purpose, and vacated of the contextual structure of its parts' original narrative meaning. The praxinoscope is a similar nest for the indexes of movement. The reuse of these glittering elements revalues them under an implicitly material structure, and replaces them under the heading of pure visuality.

How do you hold onto the material of the thing you brought into this exchange, which most likely

is your body? Justine A. Chambers' choreography elides the traditional expectations of language, of its perfect transferability, in favour of working it as material. Rather than assuming an emptiness in the language of a score, she uses its material specificities in each performer as a medium through which to create waves, to reflect, and refract. This approach is applied throughout the work to every aspect of supposedly empty valuation. We see that when forms of transparent clarity are treated like material, they are just as rife with material qualities as those they often attempt to frame. The exchange begins to lose its abstract dimension, and the need to extract invariance, concept, and rule from our bodies becomes less necessary.

The form of creating a work just outside of unison lends itself to creating a work also outside of a directed meaning—to have not all of its movements aiming towards the same point or direction. This atopia has a critical point, the point at which a function's outputs are non-reciprocal to its inputs. It is a break, a facet, in functional, temporal, intensificatory symmetry. These are the tensions of understanding, of being together and apart, of contribution and direction, of giving and taking space, which create an uncanny autopoietic shift in the vectors of a work. Perhaps this is the process of semi-preciousness, a being both rare and ubiquitous, sliding both ways along the production line of value, for the self and also for everyone.

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