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## Ways of Unworlding: Against Aesthetic Inferentialism

**Bionote:** David Roden's research has addressed the relationship between deconstruction and analytic philosophy, philosophical naturalism, the metaphysics of sound and posthumanism. His monograph *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (New York, 2014) explores the ethical and epistemological ramifications of Speculative Posthumanism: the thesis that there could be agents originating in human social-technical systems that become posthuman as a result of some technological alteration of their powers. His current work considers posthumanist theories of agency and their implications for aesthetics and philosophical method. Roden also writes experimental fiction and concept horror works. His experimental novella *SnuffMemories* is published by Schism Press (2021).

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**Abstract:** I consider and support two claims about aesthetic experience: 1) that it involves encounters with a reality that is not conceptualized via such encounters; 2) that it can generate ruptures in established norms or in the production of shared worlds. This thesis is developed in the teeth of contemporary rationalist inhumanisms that draw on Nelson Goodman's cognitivist aesthetics and his irrealist account of 'worldmaking' to translate the logical insights of inferentialism (or conceptual role semantics) into an aesthetics oriented towards concept-laden practices and their revision through the techniques of experimental art. I employ Derida's iterability argument to show that inferentialism presupposes a realist metaphysics that treats repetition and event individuation as independent of constitutive rules, conceptual schemes or 'world versions'; indicating one way in which aesthetic material remains outside of, even recalcitrant to, the conceptual order. The aesthetic implications of this metaphysics of undecidable events

are further explored by considering Jean-Pierre Caron's recent discussion of Henry Flynt's idea of 'constitutive dissociations' and, finally, the concept as, ambivalently, victim or suicide in the experimental horror of Gary Shipley's novel *Warewolfff!* and my own *Snuff Memories*.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, semantics, Nelson Goodman, world-making, conceptual art, concept horror

### Introduction: Revisiting the Aesthetics of the Encounter

In this paper I want to explore two related claims about the conceptual recalcitrance of the aesthetic and its ontological import.

The first is that aesthetic experience is composed of encounters with qualities, things, events, or processes that are not thereby conceived. Thus, while the Aesthetics of the Encounter may involve and prompt concept use, as here, the encounter as such is non-conceptual. Aesthetic experience accordingly opens the subject onto a refractory field of forces that disturbs conceptualisation and may be violently resistant to it.

The second, clearly related, claim is that the aesthetic produces ruptures in the fabric of social practices and norms, or the production of shared worlds and experiences.

Thus, while the encounter may supervene on such norms and rules — much as it depends on our conceptual capacities — *what is encountered is not constituted by them*. Aesthetic encounters may 'symbolise' shared experiences, prompting flares of recognition across the voids between and within us; but in so doing, they involve a fundamental impasse in conception.

There is thus a radical opacity in the aesthetic as well an unbounded iterative or generative potentiality presupposed by the very production of worlds. Both impede and threaten the construction of a commons.

Admittedly, neither of these claims is new. The idea that aesthetic judgement depends on a non-conceptual or 'non-subsumptive' relationship to the world is common to Romantic, Modernist and Poststructuralist Aesthetics. Deleuze captures this when he writes that that which prompts us to think is not an object of recognition.<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, likewise, when he writes of the timbral singularity of music events as something incomparable, not given over the recognition or repetition.<sup>2</sup> The beautiful object of Kantian aesthetics, as Steven Shaviro writes, is not cognized as beautiful, rather "the object lures the subject while remaining indifferent to it; and the subject feels the object, without knowing it or possessing it or even caring about it."<sup>3</sup>

However, recent neorationalist thinkers have been heavily critical of poststructuralist materialisms and other ontologies which deem the aesthetic to be recalcitrant to cognition in this way. I think the thesis of aesthetic opacity or recalcitrance needs to be posed in the light of the claims about the social character of meaning which informs neonationalism: particularly the pragmatist and inferentialist accounts of logic and semantics on which they largely rest.

This idea has recently been given aesthetic relevance by the incorporation of Nelson Goodman's cognitivist theory of art and science as allied forms of worldmaking. For example, Reza Negarestani has proposed that such worlds are correlated with the forms of life of creatures whose social practices constitute their symbolic schemes.<sup>4</sup>

If all worlds are woven from actual forms of life, this account imposes a 'manifestation condition' on speculative thinking. Thus, it is claimed, even an account of an imaginary posthuman world must draw on extant symbols in some way. We cannot invent a world, according to Negarestani, without being prepared to say how *our* concepts slice it up. Speculative approaches, like mine on posthumanism, which theorize agency in a manner unbounded by any conception of how that agent's subjectivity or thought is manifested, are ruled out by the manifestation condition.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 155.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Boston: MIT press, 2012), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Reza Negarestani, "The Human Re-cognized, the Life-form Re-Made," *Zones: Parasol*, 5 (2021), 45-55.

<sup>5</sup> Negarestani, "The Human Re-cognized, the Life-form Re-Made," 50.

In what follows, I want to show how thinking of meaning and logic in terms of rule governed practices leaves an ontological surplus that can be understood aesthetically, that is to say, at those points where it disrupts or untethers recognition. I hope to show that the ahuman or posthuman 'outside' persists as an occlusive nonpresence in thought, art and social imagination.

This argument against the constitutive efficacy of words, worlds and social practices, will proceed via a discussion of inferentialist semantics, Goodman's aesthetics and then move on to consider Jean-Pierre Caron's recent discussion of Henry Flynt's idea of 'constitutive dissociations' in the theory of avant-garde art. Finally, I will consider how this ontological surplus is put to work in recent works of 'concept horror' by Gary J Shipley and myself.

## 1. Inferentialism

Inferentialism is a theory of meaning and a philosophy of logic. It is an alternative to 'referentialist' conceptions of meaning.<sup>6</sup> Referentialist accounts explain the meaning of utterances by starting with relations of reference between bits of language and bits of the world and build meanings of sentences as functions of these parts. In formal semantics this approach is called 'model theory.'<sup>7</sup>

The broadest criticism levelled by inferentialism at referentialism is that referentialism violates the *manifestation requirement*: the principle that meaning is determined by publicly assessable rules and performances. If so, *word-world* relations fall out of *word-word* relations, out of use. Thus consideration of use, or pragmatics, must

<sup>6</sup> P. J. Graham, "Brandom on singular terms," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 93:3 (1999), 247-264.

<sup>7</sup> The model theoretic approach understands the semantics of formal languages in terms of interpretation function  $I$  that map primitive symbols like names of predicates onto the domain  $D$  of the model. Names refer to individuals. Predicates or open formulae like '...is a cat' refer to the objects in  $D$  that satisfy the predicate. Logical operators like '&' or 'not' are understood as truth functions mapping the truth values 'T' or 'F' (at least in two-value logic) into truth values. Quantifiers like '∀x' then can be understood in terms of the satisfaction of the open formulae composing them, etc. The 'truth' of closed formula, built up by the recursive syntax of the language, with no free variables is the just the limit of satisfaction – satisfaction by all sequences of the models. Model theory takes for granted a formal relation of reference (or satisfaction) by which word-world relations are established. This leads to a number of problems, according to its critics. For example, Paul Boghossian objects that model theorist takes certain patterns of inference like Modus Ponens (MP) to be valid because they are truth preserving. But, as Boghossian points out, many truth preserving inferences are not obviously justifying in the way that MP is meant to be. Paul Boghossian, "Blind reasoning," in *Aristotelian Society supplementary volume*, 77:1 (2003), 227.

precede any formal semantics based on notions of truth and reference.

Inferentialism is the proposal that we unpack the pre-theoretical concept of use as 'inferential role'. According to Wilfrid Sellars — one of the originators of inferentialism — these roles conform to three types of rules or regularities which determine how competent speakers should move from one position in the language-game to another, enter the language game, or leave it.

In the case of assertions, transition rules correspond to materially correct inferences such as the inference that *x is coloured* from *x is red*. Language-entry rules are not really rules at all but non-inferential causal propensities - reliable dispositions to perceive the world in inferentially articulated ways. Finally, "language exit rules" correspond to practical commitments disposing to non-linguistic action.<sup>8</sup>

The leading inferentialist thinker, Robert Brandom, agrees with other post-Wittgensteinian pragmatists that linguistic practices are governed by public norms + differential responsive dispositions (RDRD's). However, he follows Donald Davidson in rejecting a communal (or I/We) concept of social structure in favour of an I/Thou conception.<sup>9</sup> If meanings are inferential roles, the content attributable to expressions will dance in line with the doxastic commitments of individual speakers.

Suppose one observes a masked figure in a red costume clambering up a skyscraper. The language entry rules may entitle you to claim that Spiderman is climbing the building. However, you are unaware that Spiderman is Peter Parker. The inferential role of 'Spiderman' here will differ from the case of a speaker who knows that Spiderman and Peter Parker are the same.

*This simple example shows that the inferential roles of expressions like "Spiderman" are not fixed communally but vary with auxiliary assumptions, sensitivities, and dispositions of individual speakers.*

<sup>8</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, "Meaning as Functional Classification (A Perspective on the Relation of Syntax to Semantics)," *Synthese*, 3:4 (1974), 417.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Brandom, *Making it explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994), 39; David Roden, "On Reason and Spectral Machines: Robert Brandom and Bounded Posthumanism," in *Philosophy After Nature*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn (New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 99-119.

Understanding the utterances and beliefs of others is a matter of 'deontic scorekeeping' — that is of keeping track of the way social statuses alter as speakers update inferential commitments. It follows that what a belief or claim "represents" or is "about" is fixed by the status it can be ascribed from the perspective of various deontic scorekeepers (including the believer or claimant).

Thus, the most plausible version of inferentialism implies that no symbol has a fixed role in the inferential network, but one that is constantly updated as claims are made, defended, and queried in the game of 'giving and asking for reasons'. The inferentialist thus echoes the provocative conclusion of Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed."<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Worldmaking, Irrealism and Forms of Life

From this brief account of inferentialist semantics, one might wonder how this might inform an aesthetics that must engage in non-linguistic media and non-verbal representation. Here, the work of Nelson Goodman seems to have provided a handy translation scheme.

Goodman's aesthetics falls out of a typology of symbol systems which accommodates non-linguistic symbols such as musical notation, figurative or abstract painting, cinematic images, sculpture, or dance.<sup>11</sup>

For example, Western musical notation exhibits the necessary features of notational systems: they are syntactically disjoint (no character stands for more than one symbol), finitely differentiated (it is possible to determine what symbol a character belongs to) and semantically differentiated (where two characters differ in meaning, it is possible to determine that).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in *Truth, language, and History* (Vol 5), (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), loc 1389.

<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Giovannelli, 'Goodman's Aesthetics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, (Fall 2017). See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/goodman-aesthetics>.

<sup>12</sup> Natural languages are finitely and semantically differentiated but not disjoint since there are orthographically identical types that differ in meaning ('bat', 'bank'). Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 41.

By contrast, paintings and non-digital images are 'syntactically dense' — every change in hue or shape constitutes a different character — and syntactically 'replete' insofar as there are multiple features (shape, hue, colour, brightness) constitutive of character differentiation.<sup>33</sup>

For Goodman, all forms of symbolization — linguistic or non-linguistic — afford 'ways of worldmaking.' More accurately, they are ways of generating distinct *versions* of the worlds that uniquely answer to them. Versions are the symbolic systems whose expressions determine the features of worlds by, for example, fixing which truths can be stated about them:

Let's begin by acknowledging that a right version and its world are different. A version saying that there is a star up there is not itself bright or far off, and the star is not made up of letters. On the other hand, saying that there is a star up there and saying that the statement "There is a star up there" is true amount, trivially, to much the same thing, even though the one seems to talk about a star and the other to talk about a statement. What is more important, we cannot find any world-feature independent of all versions. Whatever can be said truly of a world is dependent on the saying - not that whatever we say is true but that whatever we say truly (or otherwise present rightly) is nevertheless informed by and relative to the language or other symbol system we use.<sup>34</sup>

Since symbol systems fix what can be said truly of a world, they fix how the entities belonging to it are sorted, re-identified and differentiated: "Repetition as well as identification is relative to organization. A world may be unmanageably heterogeneous or unbearably monotonous according to how events are sorted into kinds."<sup>35</sup>

For the metaphysical realist, the ontological structure of the world is independent of our mental or discursive activities. But Goodman's 'irrealism' holds that every world version carves its correlative world differently.

<sup>33</sup> John P. Kulvicki, *On Images: Their Structure and Content* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-10.

<sup>34</sup> Nelson Goodman, "On Starmaking." *Synthese*, 5:2 (1980), 211-215.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 9.

I will illustrate this idea with an example from work on the metaphysics of sound. There are three main types of sound metaphysics: *proximal theories*, which identify sounds with features of auditory experience; *medial theories*, which treat sounds as the transmission of acoustic compression waves; and theories that treat sounds as *events located in 'sounding' objects*. Depending on which of these theories one holds, one will locate sounds in the mind/head, in the media through which compression waves travel, or in sounding objects.

If Goodman is right, there is no unique right way of achieving this mapping, though he insists that the selection is not arbitrary. Each will have to exhibit epistemic virtues such as truth, consistency and explanatory fruitfulness. For example, proximal theories account for the qualitative aspects of sounds directly and easily but are less easy to reconcile with spatial intuitions about sounds. Located event theories do justice to our intuitions about sounds being outside the head but they have more difficulty accounting for auditory qualities that do not reduce smoothly to physical properties of resonating objects, such as pitch or timbre.<sup>36</sup>

Now, if the realist insists that there must be some right way of parsing the sound world, Goodman's irrealist will answer that any such candidate for a true world will be just answer to another world version, another practice of describing, locating and sorting sounds. All of these versions have a claim on truth but will be true in different worlds.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. Iterating Behind the Schemes

In what follows, I want to show that there are reasons for thinking that Goodman's general account of the symbolic construction of life worlds cannot adequately comprehend cases of an encounter with an event or entity that is *unworlded* — characterized by not belonging to any given world.

These cases illustrate Tim Button's 'Behind the Schemes' argument against conceptual relativism.<sup>38</sup> He argues that any account which states that worlds are organized by our world-versions must exclude

<sup>36</sup> David Roden, "Sonic art and the Nature of Sonic Events," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1:1 (2010), 141-156.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 31.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Button, *The Limits of Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 210-207.

both the organizing and the organized from any of the worlds so made, for these must transcend any particular conceptual scheme for the concept of a conceptual scheme to have the unrestricted generality it needs.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as Goodman's conceptual relativism presupposes entities or processes that are not relativized to a version, it is incoherent.

At its most primitive, this idea of organizing depends on a 'cookie cutter' metaphor of the concept, and a conception of the world as a kind of neutral dough waiting to be shaped by our scheming. There are worlds only if there is worldmaking, but worldmaking cannot, according to the behind-the-schemes argument, belong to any world; a fatal ellipsis that, we will see, allows the chthonic reversal of humanism in avant-garde art.

I want to begin, though, with a special case of the argument for the claim that worldmaking must be conceived outside worlds. In the next section, I will extend this to cases where aesthetic creations enact the unmaking of worlds.

A simple argument for the unworlded can be derived from Derrida's iterability arguments — developed originally in his reading of J.L. Austin in 'Signature Event Context' and *Limited Inc.*<sup>20</sup> We begin with the commonplace idea that every sign must be repeatable if it is to signify at all. As Derrida puts it: "A sign which would take place but "once" would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign."<sup>21</sup> Its occurrence would have no systematic import and no systematic role in behaviour. Even in syntactically replete non-linguistic systems like painting there must be sufficient recurrence for a style to emerge. So, the repeatability qualifies as a minimal 'infrastructure' for symbols of any kind. Thus, whatever our ontological inclinations, we need to account for the repeatability of signs, whether linguistic or non-linguistic.

### 1.) Signs are repeatable marks, not one-off objects or events

<sup>19</sup> Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 192.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's theory of Signs*, trans. by David Allison (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 50.

What constitutes this repetition? Analytic philosophers routinely follow Charles Sanders Peirce by distinguishing between word-type and word-token. For example, one might say the previous sentence features two tokens' of the type 'word' but only one type.

Are types like Platonic essences or forms, transcending their particular instances? As a nominalist, Goodman rejects this, and, in fact, heaves close to Derrida by treating all signs as inscriptional events. Events can be grouped according to orthographic or phonetic similarity, syntactic role, or meaning.<sup>22</sup>

This suggests the initially plausible thesis that repetitions are wholly wrought by habits of use. An inscriptional event is a 'replica' of another inscriptional event if the rules they subtend are the same. For example, for the inferentialist, the rules fixing the meaning of a sentence are its *Introduction [I] rules* - the grounds for its assertion - and the *Elimination [E] rules* governing its inferential consequences. If true, this nominalist formula would comport nicely with Goodman's version/world distinction. The differentiation between signifiers would thus be as much a matter of world-making practices as any other ontological fact, as, in fact, they need to be.

However, even if resorting to rules or practices to individuate and label inscriptional events obviates a Platonistic type/token ontology it is not sufficient to avoid semantic essentialism. Suppose that subtending a given set of *I* and *E* rules determines whether any mark replicates a given inscription or utterance of the English phrase 'Snow is white'. Hence no mark is a replica of this 'Snow is white' event in English if its use does not conform to these rules. This implies that any inscription that is used in a sufficiently nonconforming way would replicate a different sentence or none.<sup>23</sup>

However, this doesn't seem able to account for the way future repetitions of a mark can undergo graduated shifts of sense from context to context — as with changes in the auxiliary beliefs of speakers or the insertion of a common term like *mass* into a new physical theory. Indeed, the dynamic inferentialist account discussed above absolutely requires such shifts. It must be possible for words and sentences to alter semantic value, even syntactic value. Whether a

<sup>22</sup> Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Dordrecht: D Reidel, 1973), 262-3.

<sup>23</sup> David Roden, "Radical Quotation and Real Repetition," *Ratio*, 17:2 (2004), 191-206.

symbol even qualifies as a sentence or a genuine syntactic unit may depend on whether it is semantically evaluable, and this status may be discursively open in some contexts.<sup>24</sup>

So, we come to the second assumption of the iterability argument:

l2) A mark would not be repeatable within a given scheme (e.g., language, interpretation, notation, world-version etc.) if it were not repeatable outside of that scheme (e.g., re-used, ironized, joked, quoted).

Think of standard usage of 'If' within the English conditional construction. The grammatical rules of standard English require that an antecedent clause with an 'If' is related to a consequent clause, which states what it conditions. However, nothing in principle prevents the violation of this rule, as with the title of Lyndsay Anderson's 1968 movie about a revolution in an English public school: *If...*

One could argue that the movie itself supplies the consequent clause here. Maybe, but that is no less 'deviant' a use. A movie or a narrative is not a verbal entity subject to rules of grammar and, in any case, the phrase 'If' also lacks an antecedent clause.<sup>25</sup> Yet repeatability outside the bounded rules of English is crucial here. Anderson's novel usage works only because we are still able to recognize it as a repetition of 'If'.

But do standard iterations of 'If' really depend on the possibility of non-standard iterations? Well, yes - because a sign which could not sometimes be used in this nonconformist manner could not be used at all.

Hence:

l3) Symbols belonging to any scheme whatsoever must be repeatable outside of that scheme.

What Derrida refers to as the iterability of the mark does not, then, depend either on a relationship between tokens and abstract Platonic objects or on similarities of use or functional role, even where

these are cast in terms of nominalist ontologies such as Goodman's or Sellars'.<sup>26</sup> *Iterability is unbounded*. As Shekar Pradhan puts it, Derrida's account implies that no account of the meaning of a sign "can connect with all the possible uses of a sign".<sup>27</sup>

This means that Derrida, despite a reputation as a slippery linguistic idealist, is a realist regarding repetition itself. Iteration is not scheme-relative repetition but *real repetition*, since, as a condition for any kind of functional classification or semantics, it must operate transversally or scheme-independently. Each mark is at once immanent — its use shaped in the world-versions in which it occurs - while retaining the power to graft onto other versions.<sup>28</sup> This capacity to be co-opted into new uses cannot be determined by the anterior rules since they either correspond to different norms of use or, in innovative works of language art, constitute tangled exceptions to them (See my discussion of the aberrant logic of inclusion in Gary Shipley's *Warewolff!* in Section 5, below).

For this reason, I have argued that marks are best viewed as *repeatable particulars*. Each context of use somewhat informs the mark's signifying effects but no context (e.g., language-game, version or functional classification) constitutes its ideal nature. The metaphysics of iterability thus imposes a structural limit on the constitutive efficacy of any subject or subject-like scheme.

It follows that the statement by Goodman on repetition, iterated below, must be false if something akin to world-making is even possible: "Repetition as well as identification is relative to organization. A world may be unmanageably heterogeneous or unbearably monotonous according to how events are sorted into kinds."<sup>29</sup>

Derrida's real repetition consequently provides a plausible instance of Button's Behind-The-Schemes Argument against conceptual relativism. Repetition does not depend solely on how the world is sorted into kinds by symbol use. *It cannot*, if schematizing symbol use is even to be possible. There must, then, be *transversal events* and *trans-world entities*. There must be boundary crossings whose status is undecidable from within any given scheme.

<sup>26</sup> Sellars, "Meaning as Functional Classification."

<sup>27</sup> Shekar Pradhan, "Minimalist Semantics: Davidson and Derrida on Meaning, Use and Convention," *Diacritics*, 16:1 (1986), 66-77.

<sup>28</sup> Roden, "Radical Quotation."

<sup>29</sup> Goodman, "Ways of Worldmaking," 9.

<sup>24</sup> James Trafford, *Meaning in Dialogue* (Springer, 2016), 107.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Marika Zeimbekis for pointing this out.

A condition of there being worlds is that social abstraction lacks the *constitutive efficacy* — e.g., sorting entities into kinds — that Goodman attributes to it. Symbol use is just too open and indeterminate to be world-constitutive in Goodman's sense.

#### 4. Frames and Dissociations

There is a conceptual relationship between the Aesthetics of the Encounter, mooted in my introduction, and the Iterable. The iterable is a sufficient condition of such encounters for it entails repetition in the absence of rules for determining whether repetition has occurred. If an aesthetic event could exhibit non-scheme relative repetition, the event would not answer to stable or storable conditions of repetition. It follows that the encounter would not need to involve the recognition of the event under concept.

However, if there is an *aesthetics* of undecidable events, it must be possible to experience an event as unrecognized. Put somewhat less paradoxically, it must be possible to experience the failure to attribute a determinate conceptual status to an event. This becomes possible where the very structure of an event precludes a decision on the type of event that it is.

In the remainder of this section, I want to consider a case where the aesthetics of the undecidable emerges from practices that are often taken to exemplify Goodman-style 'world demarcations', namely the 'framing practices' that fix the criteria for the individuation and exhibition of art works in various genres. Although the disruption of framing practices figures extensively in the avant-garde and critical art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the procedure is formulated with admirable generality in the idea of 'Constitutive Dissociations' (C/D's) developed by the avant-garde theorist, musician and artist, Henry Flynt.

Flynt defines Constitutive Dissociations in the context of the work of the avant-garde conceptual or generative art works developed by Duchamp and Cage, La Monte Young, and Flynt himself.

A C/D occurs when an artist produces a work that alters the protocols governing a particular genre of art. For example, Cage's 4' 33" retains temporal boundaries of a Western art-music performance but introduces silence where there would normally be intention-

ally produced sound. Duchamp's ready-made altered the protocol whereby exhibited works had to be the result of the artist's technical skill, by selecting common industrial artifacts for exhibition. La Monte Young's text scores from his *Compositions 1960* includes instructions to performers that don't directly specify any conventional musical action at all, such as *Composition #2* which gives performers this instruction:

Build a fire in front of the audience. Preferably, use wood although other combustibles may be used as necessary for starting the fire or controlling the kind of smoke. The fire may be of any size, but it should not be the kind which is associated with another object, such as a candle or a cigarette lighter. The lights may be turned out.

After the fire is burning, the builder(s) may sit by and watch it for the duration of the composition; however, he (they) should not sit between the fire and the audience in order that its members will be able to see and enjoy the fire.

The performance may be of any duration.

In the event that the performance is broadcast, the microphone may be brought up close to the fire.<sup>30</sup>

Some C/D's seem to utilize the 'standard properties' of the artwork in a particular genre, often by deploying those frames but absencing 'variable' aesthetic properties that would normally characterize the performance or work.<sup>31</sup>

Others heighten the audience's reflection on the work by minimizing the variable properties or by making formerly standard properties variable — e.g., multiplying frames to produce vertiginous de-framings (as in Art & Language's *Incidents in a Museum*) or Daniel Buren's site-specific interventions.

<sup>30</sup> Or *Composition #4*:

Announce to the audience that the lights will be turned off for the duration of the composition (it may be any length) and tell them when the composition will begin and end.

Turn off all the lights for the announced duration.

When the lights are turned back on, the announcer may tell the audience that their activities have been the composition, although this is not at all necessary.

<sup>31</sup> Kendal Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review*, 79:3 (July 1970), 334-367.

In a recent paper for *e-Flux*, Jean-Pierre Caron explicitly weds C/D's to the inferentialist aesthetics of worldmaking understood as the 'conceptual revision' of normative practices constitutive of artistic genres.

The effect of these incidents, as Caron makes clear, is to Unmake Worlds, as he writes:

If we understand the ontological status of an artwork as the result of specific forms of doing *that are always conceptually laden*, then constitutive dissociations are a means of world-unmaking that dissolve the connections believed to be essential for certain practices, potentially yielding unheard of practices. The unmaking of worlds offers an occasion for the rewiring of the inferential links that form an anterior practice into a (still undetermined) posterior one.<sup>32</sup>

In line with the principle of the constitutive inefficacy of practices and world versions introduced in the last section, I want to demur somewhat from Caron's ontology while affirming his account of the effects of C/D's.

I think the problem with this diagnosis lies with its implication that art is woven wholly in the realm of the spirit, out of 'specific forms of doing' and, above all, that their results are always 'conceptually laden' in that they are recognizable as instances of a concept, practice or rule.

Firstly, just as not all events are behaviours and not all behaviours are actions, so not all actions exemplify practices. At a first approximation, a practice must be publicly scrutable. An action exemplifies a practice only if there is some procedure for deciding what type it is. C/D's are clearly designed to obviate such procedures.

Secondly, an artist's creative act is an efficient cause of C/D's but actions cause many other things than actions. It does not even follow that C/D's are actions.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> J-P Caron, "On Constitutive Dissociations as a Means of World-Unmaking: Henry Flynt and Generative Aesthetics Redefined," *e-flux*, #115 (2021). See: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/115/374421/on-constitutive-dissociations-as-a-means-of-world-unmaking-henry-flynt-and-generative-aesthetics-redefined/>

<sup>33</sup> Performative C/D's are partially composed of actions, but they are also composed of nonhu-

As Flynt puts it, a C/D *comes about* because its instigator substitutes an inscrutable protocol for a standard one. We can grant that the instigator intends to generate an inscrutable event. *But an inscrutable event cannot be an action unless there are actions such that there are no procedures for interpreting them.*

Flynt raises an analogous problem with respect to his piece, *Work Such that No One Knows What is Going On (WSTNOKWGO)*. It exists, has effects in virtue of appearing in a concert program together with the programmer's 'guess' as to what it is and how to perform it. This has the structure of a semantic paradox, since however one guesses what WSTNOKWGO is and how to perform it, one has failed to produce anything answering its description.<sup>34</sup>

Such 'incidents' appear to violate what Donald Davidson refers to as the 'Observability Assumption' for intentional agency, which states that 'an observer can, under favourable circumstances, tell what beliefs, desires, and intentions an agent has.'<sup>35</sup>

In other words, if X is an agent, X must be interpretable, given ideal conditions.

Should we infer from this that an event is only an action if it is interpretable under some set of ideal conditions?

Assuming, for now, that there are no ideal conditions for interpreting a C/D such as WSTNOKWGO, this question presents the inferentialist aesthetician with a dilemma. Either C/D's are not actions, or it is possible for facts distinguishing actions to be evidence-transcendent.

The latter option implies the possibility of alien acts, uninterpretable by any human or sapient being - sundering our concept of action from any extant world-version or theory of conditions for agency. This would violate the manifestation requirement that forms one of the original motivations for inferentialism: namely, *that meaning is exhaustively determined by use.*

man materials too: sounds, fires, silences, ramifying parerga in a gallery system, etc. The inscription of this protocol in matter that tokens no type, that evades scrutability, is essential here.

<sup>34</sup> As Flynt writes: "But if there were a "game" so inscrutable that nobody knew anything about it, then how would the game be established as palpable?" Henry Flynt, "Studies in Constitutive Dissociation." See: [http://www.henryflynt.org/meta\\_tech/condissociate.html](http://www.henryflynt.org/meta_tech/condissociate.html)

<sup>35</sup> Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 99.



This would, again, licence speculative metaphysical claims about alien or posthuman agents which would be pragmatically inaccessible to us — to humans — and thus beyond our space of reasons. I take it neither Caron nor Negarestani wants to follow me there.

For my part, I have no reason to 'eliminate' this disjunction by inferring one or other disjunct.

Firstly, this very conundrum demonstrates that the C/D's are *limit encounters*, where discursive procedures disrupt discourse and produce events that are, to quote Deleuze, objects "not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter".<sup>36</sup> Events that, since they cannot be recognized, can only be felt or 'sensed'.

This might seem ironic, given that C/D's are supposedly *conceptual* artworks. But conceptual art was never about *making* concepts, so much as creatively abusing them to achieve nonconceptual effects. There is a sensation or affect associated with the Encounter that we cannot assign to stereotypical rules or concepts. There is a phenomenology, but it is dark and idiomatic with few (if any) explicit cues regarding the nature of what is felt.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, I think this puts C/D's on a continuum with the least regularized forms of aesthetic practice and perhaps suggests why conceptual artists such as Flynt and Young were also heavily involved in jazz. Improvisations are also composed of affects rather than stereotypic emotions or rules — even when these make up an incipient, embodied sociality.

Such affects encounter systems whose complexity exceeds our explicit powers of conceptualization, prediction or working memory — bodies, environments and technological systems — through the affordances they manifest for improvising bodies. Similarly, one may speculate that we encounter C/D's through their affordances, the possibilities for action they yield, or, more obviously, frustrate.

Action is required for the aesthetic encounter, even if what is encountered thereby is not an act. C/D's discursively produce encoun-

ters 'outside' of discourse, having no immediate intent beyond *the unmaking of worlds*.

The idea of artworks as pure 'unworldings', in this sense, might seem paradoxical given that the constitutive efficacy of worlds has been downgraded in the course of this argument.<sup>38</sup>

Since it is not my aim to salvage Goodman's account, I will be summary here. If a world-version has no constitutive efficacy perhaps it is better thought of as a passingly coherent or temporary 'nebula of habits', recipes, rules of thumb, reliable cliches, strategies, norms and expectations; tactics for surfing the affordances of the real.<sup>39</sup> As such, they may also produce or compose the real — as when a group of rock musicians chain together a song from riffs they have practiced together for days in their rehearsal room. In special cases, they become essential to the functioning of an institution such as the art gallery or the concert and acquire a normative status. We obey them because we expect others to, and, reflexively, to correct our behaviour if we do something surprising. But these simply come down to higher order expectations and habits and I take it that expectations and habits are just things in the world. They need not be granted world-constitutive status.

## 5. Transcendental Suicide

In the case of C/D's social powers, which formerly rendered reality locally tractable, also render it locally intractable. We no longer know how to go on. Perhaps, like Flynt or Young, we no longer want to know. Or, if we go on, it is by converting their power into what I term 'biomorphs'.

A biomorph is not a body but an intense aesthetic schematization of the undetermined potentialities of bodies. Bellmer's dolls, Ballard's Crash fetishism, Stelarc's suspensions implying mutations without ecologies, versions without worlds, living-dead subtractions without forms of life or ecologies are all examples.

Works in the genre of concept horror — such as Gary Shipley's *Ware-wolf!* or my own *Snuff Memories* — exhibit both this potential and this indeterminacy. Shipley's masterpiece is, as I've written else-

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> David Roden, "Nature's Dark Domain: An Argument for a Naturalised Phenomenology," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 72 (2013), 169-188.

<sup>38</sup> World versions do not, for example, fix standards for similarity and difference, since if they did, there could be no worlds at all.

<sup>39</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 49.

where, about the horrors perpetrated on the concept, as in this passage from the section 'Nice Gumbo':

Over the bed, beside the crucifix, Kafka's prostate sealed in a freezer bag. The last of Brod's salvage so the legend goes. It looks like the Eraserhead baby shrunk in an oven. We love like mad from opposite corners of the room. K is that sweet gangrene in our celibacy in glass.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere I have written of this section:

If K is "sweet gangrene" what is it to be "in" celibacy. What is it for "sweet gangrene," in turn, to be in glass? Might K merit a prostate? Is inclusion, here, transitive? If K is in our celibacy—and celibacy is in glass—is K too in glass?

One recalls Badiou's claim that the notions of set and set inclusion cannot be explicitly defined outside of set-theoretical axioms. For example, those in Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory excluding self-membership. There can be an implicit [inferential] mastery of *set* without a concept of set.

But this is not possible here. Like Bellmer's anagrammatic doll, *Warewolff!* has no axioms or rules beyond the hazards of its dispersal. It is its own entirely misleading portrait. It has no people or worlds; only disjointed clones, plucky carcasses and scripts we mistook as our lives.<sup>41</sup>

Here we can see that iteration holds out the possibility of inscriptions that parasitize grammar in order to elude meaning - which accounts for the recalcitrant singularity of the passage. The point of Shipley's gangrenous biomorphs are not to improve our long-haul navigation of the space of reasons but to retard it to the point at which we can longer be assured that the spacing of the concept is reliably navigable or rational.

*Snuff Memories*, ostensibly an abstruse fantasy about a time-war fought by the vicious 'moral powers' of the universe, is also about

<sup>40</sup> Gary J Shipley, *Warewolff!* (London: Hexus Press, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> David Roden, "Posthumanism: Critical, Speculative, Biomorphic," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, ed. by Mads Thomsen and Jacob Wamburg (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 90.

what it is like for a body to cease to occupy a navigable conceptual space and thus to embrace its iterated suicide.

This passage comes from an early section entitled 'Meshes of the Afternoon.' 'Meshes' introduces the figure of Nessa Map, a hyper-rational anti-rationalist with an asphyxia kink. In some ways she resembles Flynt, trained as a mathematician, yet driven to use the protocols of reason against reason:

She ascends, follows the hooded figure with the poppy along the drive that winds towards the slender palms and their ablated sky; turns aside to see where the steps lead.

She sleeps through successive revolutions – a component newly introduced to this circuit.

She meant to break the torturer and free the code running in us; cutting or seeding her own flesh with silver chains and crosses etched with blood.

She came back briefly from the non-lieux she favoured and inscribed something for you, whether ruin or self-portrait. Perhaps it looked at a memory of itself and became blind or always existed as a memory, a lesion in her thigh. An art of love.<sup>42</sup>

But even to this author the female subject of this passage is unclear.

It might be figure played by Maya Deren in the classic experimental film from which the section takes its title, replicating differential circuits and dream rituals.<sup>43</sup>

Or there is no consistent subject here and thus no world for it to inhabit. Maybe 'Deren' names a routine that dissociates from her figure, freeing itself through the sorcery of asphyxia and ritual scarring.

And what remains of her is another biomorph — 'a lesion in her thigh. An art of love' - offered to the 'second person', a woman known as

<sup>42</sup> David Roden, *Snuff Memories* (Schism [2] Press, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (US: Publisher not Identified, 1943).

'the Cabalist' (later reborn in multitudes, later a sexless canine under a wounded star) committed to the death of worlds and to poisoning God, or the next worst thing to it.

This is strongly suggested later in this passage, when the narrator — a time travelling hermaphrodite — tells of the biomorph's eventual fate:

Her mechanical cravings resurface as by-blows from my graphein womb, wriggling under brittle polysaccharide plates.

Carapaces litter the hallway by her former library, my brothel. Some mornings, I find tiny human skulls crushed by the habitués.

This susceptibility to a death like no other confirms that nothing satisfies the grammatical conditions for being a person. It's still a dead planet or in the throes of one and not for the best.

There is nothing left of the person here beyond its insectoid biomorphs, stomped in a brothel that is also monument, mechanical womb, and tomb. The body and its world are ceded to transversals, rupturing caparisons of flesh or world. What remains, then, is an iterated death we register in deliquescent narratives, just as the C/D scars our aesthetic skin without healing it.

## Conclusion

If inferentialist semantics offers a model for aesthetics, then, it cannot be an idealism that programmatically weaves distinct worlds or life-forms. The ontological conditions for repetition and discourse — particularly non-scheme relative repetition — commit aesthetics to a reality which fractures attempts to apperceive these events under rules or concepts. It requires a fundamental encounter with a reality felt in terms of its final intractability to thought. It suicides the rule or the concept. Its agency is that of a snuff magnet, a transcendental auto-pile up.