LOOKING FORWARDS AND BACKWARDS

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Preface
This text was generated via a series of email exchanges between Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever over fifteen days leading up to the exhibition Looking Forwards and Backwards at Blue Oyster Project Space in May 2017. Each artist began an email ‘chain’ simultaneously based loosely on the idea that a writing exchange could produce fruitful points of departure in the making and thinking behind the work. This idea was adopted from an earlier iteration of this project (Working Together, 2015) in which a series of letters were written between the artists to pass the time on long train journeys. In writing sitting opposite each other in the train compartments, one of us was always looking forwards and the other was always looking backwards out the window. The writing is by nature fragmentary, and as such should be read for the moments where thought flows, digresses, and fizzes. In a sense this writing documents ideas in practise, looking for words.
Timelines. There is a general sense that the movement of time is linear and perhaps horizontal. This can be imagined by an arrow of time shot from a place of the past, past the present moment, and forward into the planes of the future. It is easy and perhaps necessary to think of time like this because we have a social responsibility to the continuity of events. Time spans out as an unbroken field marked and measured by the sun, the moon, the rain, and the hours. This is the forward movement of time from birth to death as articulated by our clocks, relative to our position on Earth.

In the interstellar space unbounded by the mass of nearby stars, gravitational waves undulate the very fabric of spacetime. Predicted by Einstein in the 1920s, gravitational waves were discovered on Earth for the first time in February 2016 by the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (Advanced LIGO). Two laser beams co-ordinate to shoot down identical mile long tunnels, reflect in a mirror and bounce back to be measured.

Because gravitational waves distort space and time the experiment shifts with the laser, and so two sites are needed to observe the wave without background noise via minuscule changes in the duration of each bounce. The gravitational waves recorded by LIGO are the result of diffraction between neighbouring black holes, and as they spin around each other gravity push-pulls the black holes at increasing velocity until they eventually merged. On the left is a mesmerising illustration of the way a gravitational wave distorts space and time both vertically and horizontally.

Vertical timespaces. Gravitational waves interFred in a common sense understanding of space and time as linear, although the fact of nonlinear time was always true in experience. Duration is the experience of time, accounting for our propensity to feel the pressures of time. What does the movement of the sun, the moon, the rain, and the hours feel like? In the present, we feel we can relate to the past through
memory, however memory is made anew with every recall as some aspects are reinforced over others.

In the process of remembering the past it is made subjective in the ever present-future. Light traveling from distant stars is similarly distorted by the effects of gravity, yet it still may be that the closest we can get to looking into the past is to look up at the night sky.

Death of the observer. In art theory after Roland Barthes’ Death of the Author (1968) the authority of the artist over their work, and even the autonomy of the artwork is challenged by the subjectivities of the viewer and everything that is not ‘the work’.

One way that artists have related to this idea since then is through the creation of expanded installation practices that absorb and appropriate everything around them into the experience of the work. This idea is often relayed as an immersive, or site specific way of working. In science, and especially in quantum mechanics, the observer and the equipment must be considered part of the experiment. This was perhaps the death of the observer as made clear by the infamous quantum particle wave experiments of Niels Bohr in which observation seemed to change the data. Another way we might know this is when cooking, from the old maxim: a watched pot never boils. What subjectivities are made in the wake of these deaths?

That image reminds me of seamless socks or seamless garments, you know the ones where each warp (or weft?) thread is somehow circular. When I see them I’m like “how?? where does it join??”. Being ignorant of weaving techniques and all that probably helps keep the mystery alive for me I guess. Issey Miyake pioneered a technique for that, calling it A-POC, or A Piece of Cloth. It requires no sewing, the garments come off the machines ready to wear with only a few cuts. My interest isn’t in the idea of seamless-ness, but of this idea that there is no front, back, or sides to a garment. Cut-and-sew techniques make room for a body by guessing at...
I think that time contracts in instances of shock or stress. This is when you if often hear people saying that they cannot keep up with time. I often feel this way. I think what you are getting at by 'making room' in your description of the expandable garment is actually about making the teaches of spacetime. To me its fitting that spacetime is a fabric in the other structure because of the way fabrics are used and reused into different forms like curtains or clothing or upholstery. Perhaps the field of fabric that we are testing on the floor as a nod to spacetime.
and cosmology is a way to re-make or re-shape or return to an embodied experience of temporality in the exhibition format.

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I love that bit in Monty Python! It is funny but also weirdly accurate. That something we recognise as being ‘dishonest’ (a.k.a., constructed) is closer to some sort of truth. I wanted to put so many scare quotes in that last sentence, but do you know what I mean? Like the saying ‘its funny because its true’, I often think is around the wrong way. Something that is proper funny is often relatively far from the truth. It is that distance, that difference, which can reflect something back onto the point. Even moving along from funny, the space of the exhibition does a lot to make things just dishonest enough that we can have a moment of insight or something. You’re right, thinking about space-time as fabric is such a normal way to think about it, it is an apt metaphor. But now the metaphor has reached this point of non-strangeness, it fails to add anything new to the conversation, right? Space as a field, space as a donut, the more familiar I am with those figurations the less moved I am by them. Maybe because I am always reading them or seeing them flat, rather than moving around them. I like that idea of some new ‘truth’ (scare quotes again) lurking within something strange or funny, something silly, like Monty Python.

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Perhaps the idea that spacetime is no longer strange has something to do with the way that it is diagrammed. I think time is much harder to visualise, especially if we are to accept current ideas around non-linearity, or anamnesis (the past present future due to return), or the immediacy of affect. Representing the flow of spatio-temporalities in the 3rd Dimension as a field is perhaps related to a particular relationship us humans have with the horizon. Looking at the horizon from the top of a mountain or looking out at sea I sometimes get the feeling my position in the world makes sense in its spatial context. From here, I can see to the edge of all that I can see, and anything beyond that sits outside
of relation to me and my body. The horizon marks the space between the possibility of what I can do, how I can act, and the potential of things to come. A donut shaped universe also makes sense to us in this way because we can think it in our hands like any other object. I think the less strange these representations of abstract ideas are, the easier it is for me to embody them. We need new questions to keep things strange, or we need to look closely at old ones. Sean Connery says in Highlander (1986), "Why does the sun come up? Are stars just holes in the curtain of night? Who knows?". Are stars just holes in the curtain of night? The fabric of the night sky perhaps started as a pretty simple way (but nonetheless moving) way to explain stars. Darkness was a threadbare curtain, and behind the curtain was the light of day. Maybe space is an ocean. After-all it is the new hostile and unknown. In science fiction language we have ships, waves, drowning, and even naval law in space. But space is not really like any ocean here on Earth. We need a new framework. Maybe this framework will come through humor as a tool to re-distribute some of the standard models. Maybe what you were referring to as the 'dishonesty' of jokes is about apprehending absurd aspects of real and imagined experiences of society and the world.

It is that blend of the absurd amongst the real experiences which is the thing which sets the metronome to a different beat isn’t it? Because you’re right, its about apprehending the absurd in the real or imagined - not just labelling the whole thing completely absurd, because with that you can sort of ignore it. In her book Nonsense (1980), Susan Stewart says: "all discourse bears reference to a commonly held world. The discourse of common sense refers to the ‘real world’. The discourse of nonsense refers to ‘nothing’. In other words, it refers to itself; even though it must manufacture this ‘nothing’ out of a system of differences from the everyday world.”

Fiction

The ocean of new materials in general for

10 led up in Felix Guattari’s philosophy and
They use an example within politics - "Isn't it exactly the day job of most politicians to manage reality and sense-making, deciding what other get to see as nonsense and what is legitimate?" Points of reference which have one foot in sense and nonsense I think are the most powerful, which is what jokes do incredibly well. Because could there be such a thing as an abstract joke? Is a line drawing funny on its own? There has to be something added - the line becomes a drunken worm, it becomes the trail of a snail working its way up a path. It is like that drawing of the elephant I showed you from the First Bible of Charles the Bald (great name). It is one of the first known drawings of an elephant, and it is obviously done by someone who only had the elephant described to them in vague terms - its got... this bendy nose, some horns but down near its mouth, short tail, large ears. Whoever drew it got those aspects onto the page but the sizing and arrangement is totally wrong in comparison to a real elephant. Is it where the identifiable and the unidentifiable get knotted together that there is this redistribution of understanding about what it is that we do and don't know?

The way that space and time and the universe is represented as a net could be another example of this technique of drawing like in Charles the Bald's elephant. Just like Charles, we have never actually seen the elephant, and because we are unable to observe it from some outside place we are modelling it on speculations and theories based on a micro-feedbacking and assumptions, like watching the stars and coming to the idea that the universe is expanding in every direction. The feedback from observations allow theories to divide up the universe into knowable facts, leading us to believe in its structure as a disc or a donut. I was thinking about the distribution of meaning and Rancière's idea of The Distribution of the Sensible when I stumbled across this Gary Larson cartoon:
Discourse practises are useful insofar as they help distribute ideas and methods of thinking the world into parts. When the metronome of discourse misses a beat, to use your phrase, time and meaning is redistributed on a new future axis. I think this is what humour can do. You asked me if there could be such a thing as an abstract joke. Maybe the joke always abstracts an aspect of the unfunny world through its re-distribution of the discourse. I have been thinking about an idea in Why Bother? by Angela Keefer that ‘abstraction is the foundation of politics’. Maybe the net-like models that propose a shape for time and for space and even for the universe are net-like because nets are a distribution of contiguous squares. What happens at the borders? The image below was taken from a study about laser physics exactly what the study was about I can no longer remember. Like Charles the Bald, I have not got enough information to come to a solid representation of meaning with what's going on in the study, I can only go from the image. There seems to be a box of some kind with a flashlight inside. The inside backing of the box is mirrored, and the light is reflected in it. Wiggly lines with arrows bounce around the inside of the box in all manner of directions. How is the light supported in the box? It seems to just float in space.

I don't know how to think the ideas here in this image but I can imagine making the diagram as an object and how I might do it. I am often excited by the potential in these incredibly specific and abstract scientific diagrams. What happens when they are re-imagined in different contexts? Is abstraction re-thinking and re-feeling what images can do?

Those diagrams are very specific, directed attempts at modelling or explaining something, but once you take away the caption or explanation we're left with this abstraction. Or maybe not quite abstraction? It is close but also not, I can see there is something there. It is like looking at a pixelated photo, there is information there, there is representation there, but what is it? where is it? I like what you said about abstraction as re-thinking or re-feeling. Moving in the bit between abstraction and hints of non-
abstraction is so exciting to me. That is what is so delightful about children’s drawings or artwork, its all blocks to me but NO it is jellyfish having a meeting or something.

There is a website which is just primary schools in the US posting these ‘studio’ photos of their class’ artworks. One of my favourite series are these coloured paper models of ‘dream playgrounds’. All of them are anchored by flat fields of green or grey or blue, then shapes of purple and pink loop up from the ground to make... slides? Some forms are obvious but there are a couple which are completely foreign landscapes - yellow mountains hold red paper fringing next to pink pools. In the realm of models, there is also a website where people upload their scale models of famous architecture. The models which I like best are where the author has taken photos like they are a tiny person walking through the house. Sometimes there is a strong sense of light or time of day. I know these are maquettes but they feel very real because of this shift between distance and point of view.

In trying to describe something through these models - the playground or the architectural maquettes there is this - what you said - this redistribution/rethinking/re-feeling of the thing itself. I don't even have to be completely abstracted, its more about that shift which happens between viewpoint to viewpoint, in the translation.

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I love the idea of a dream playground! There is a definite sense of space and scale in that image, I am enjoying putting myself into it. Perhaps we could think about the table in the back space in the same way that the children imagined a dream playground. So far we have been talking about turning the back space of the gallery into a kind of reading room with objects, and making objects based on some ideas...
around a diagrammatic representation/abstraction of the ideas in this text, so in a way thinking about the table as a model is no big stretch. I was watching a youtube video about topology yesterday. In the video a topologist had designed these clip-together models of klein bottles that he was using in teaching situations. At one point he said that he realised he could make endless new shapes by clipping multiple models together, and so he had all these variations made. There was a point in the video, when he was getting excited playing with the models, that I thought about the objects we have been testing as having this duel potential to be serious and funny at the same time. I also thought about this text as a kind of klipable material that we are playing with. Each email is like a segment attached to the last but still able to be detached in some way. Here is a topology video from 1994 titled How to Turn a Sphere Inside Out:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6u5VqGpOg

The proposition of the title, and the forced banter between the two presenters is kind of mesmerising, but the reason I am sharing it with you is for the way the video sets up the rules of the game before turning the sphere inside out. These rules seem kind of arbitrary, but when followed they lead to an amazing end! There is a similarly in tone and perhaps vintage with this other video about the Ludwig Schlafli and the 4th Dimension:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6u5VqGpOg

In the video the narrator (who sounds like a teenager from East London) takes on the character of Schlafli, and to a slightly disconcerting piano track states that to see 4D shapes 'what is important is to prepare yourself to forget about the world which is familiar to us, and to imagine a new world, that our eyes and our senses have no direct access to'. The video then goes on to show a series of shapes of increasing complexity and a cello ramps up the intensity.
3 May - 3 June 2017
Bluebells Ground Spear
Long Mere and Wing

Leaving for~he~nd~ back~row~s