

Our Research: A Fragment on Fragments

- *So here again is the peculiarity of that turning toward... which is detour. Whoever would advance must turn aside. This makes for a curious kind of crab's progress. Would it also be the movement of seeking?*
- *All research is crisis. What is sought is nothing other than the turn of seeking, of research that occasions this crisis: the critical turn.*
- *This is hopelessly abstract.*³

*Since meaning is given by such a plying in common (the continuity of a series of always discontinuous and even divergent texts, of essentially different forms and genres) [...] they belong already to the fragmentary or, more simply, to fragments, sentences, paragraphs, which, taken put into relation with others, can take on a new meaning or further our research.*⁴

The occasion of this. An introduction arising in part from a conversation. A verbal correspondence between Edward Dorrain, Marc Hulson and Francis Summers.

In the darkness of The Hare's wet concrete garden. A pub on Cambridge Heath Road. It was about, in some ways, a notion of collection, a notion of participation. As artists involved in the Five Years collection of practices – a loose collection, but a collection or a collective body nonetheless – we talked about the participation of Five Years within an event, *ITPO*.⁵ Then forming the basis of a response to the invitation from *Autonomous Organization*.⁶ And now the occasion of this. An introduction to *Fragments*.

This past triadic conversation skirted loosely around what defined the collection of artists that comprises what is known as the collective enterprise Five Years. This conversation strayed into how this collection of practices might involve itself in a project that ran parallel to Frieze and Zoo, that displayed an 'artist-run' response to the display of expertly managed identities and free market of commodities that is an Art Fair.

The conversation could easily have strayed thus:

How this collection of practices might involve itself into a project that runs parallel to an idea of research. An 'artist-run' response to the display of expertly managed identities and free market of commodities that is Knowledge Transfer Partnership. That is Academic Research?

The participation? The end result (not of that conversation but of the action of those in Five Years) is what we now sit in. A marginal space. An extra-institutional DIY classroom promising programmes of discussion and debate. Developing through 'critical reflection' the requisite documentary evidence (archive, publication, research, etc) Disseminating the research. *Our* research.

The Salon de Refusé of 2009 was put forward albeit briefly – a space reminiscent of nineteenth century art-politics, a space that exists alongside the time of the crushed communes. The salon we find here is of those (perhaps) refused to the inclusive-exclusive bordered space of Zoo and Frieze. And the University?

So what kind of refusal might be counter-staged, what kind of marginal activity might there productively be? The critical turn. A dubious proposition. Dissemination through publication. Our research as a salon of refused, a salon of refusal. If the members of Five Years were to engage in this salon (with and against this act and institution of refusal) what kind of engagement could there be?

Collaboration and resistance. A problem, then. How might an artist-run organisation, a collection, a collective, a communal project, participate in an event linked, however tangentially, to this notion of an Art Fair, of partnership. Of being outside the fair. Apart. But displaying on its margins, temporarily if not spatially. Dissensually.

Such a problem became one of identification. How do we, participants in Five Years, define ourselves in relation to this display, to this mode of displaying. How do we identify ourselves to be seen in relation to the expert discourse. The market? The Lesson. [The Great Refusal] To participate in the mode of the fair. Research Group. Research Associate. One must display within its protocol, to submit to being named and identified in this process, to submit (even if marginally) to its form of management.

To digress further. A term used repeatedly in this conversation of three was that of the Romantic movement. A movement identified from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. A proposition emerged: Five Years is conceived as a Romantic project. This is *intire*.⁹ A consequence of this was the putting into play of another term: the fragment. As a proposition this has been followed through. Five Years: Fragments. The mode of participation has been explicitly that of the fragment, or of the fragmentary.

Five Years' participation of display has been by way of the fragment. To identify Five Years has been to identify a string of fragments arranged around an empty centre not a coherent synthesis bound by a proper name. In a more general way, as a collective body, Five Years, we might say, is a collection of fragments. A body of practices that sometimes converge, at other times, do not. To make an analogy, one might draw upon readings of the discourse of Romanticism. Such a discourse is littered with fragments, from incomplete projects, to ruins, to definitions.

*A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine.*⁹

*A dialogue is a chain of fragments. [...]*⁹

Lister! Another Romantic, Novalis: the literary seed of the fragment is that which might lead to a plural writing, a writing done in common: *The art of writing jointly is a curious symptom that makes us sense a great progress in literature. One day, perhaps, we will write, think and act collectively. (His example? the newspaper as a piece of collective writing – Newspapers are already books made in common).*¹⁰

Or let's turn our ears towards Maurice Blandot who has gathered together these quotations on the fragment by Schlegel and Novalis. He remarks –

this time thinking on the aphoristic mode of René Char – that with the arrangement of a fragmentary speech we encounter a new kind of arrangement not emitting harmony, concordance or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center from out of which, through speech, relation is to be created: an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is to say leaves each of the terms that come into relation outside one another, respecting and preserving this exteriority and this distance as the principle [...]. Juxtaposition and interruption here assume an extraordinary form of justice.¹²

As a collection of fragments, then, Five Years approaches its own arrangement as a collection that foregrounds the justice of exteriority, a refusal of synthesis through selection. *An arrangement at the level of disunity.*¹²

An organisation in pieces (a collection of pieces, a collective based on the fragment). Fragments shows not one distilled collective concern, but a concern for collective equivocty. Such a term does not call towards ambivalence or ambiguity. Instead it points towards equal voices, towards the struggle that equally demands. To place voices in equal is to experience not harmonic synthesis (achieved through the sublime violence of sublation) but the constancy of struggle, of the discordance of discourse among equals. The collective whole or work of Five Years, then, is the work of the empty place around which a garland of fragments operate. As fragments (each practice a fragment) each practice is that of the 'complete' individual – the hedgong or porcupine principle whereby the fragment individuates completely – but these complete parts converge as on a garland. The string upon which these fragments are strung. Five Years, encircles an 'empty place' as the site of incomplection, of the refusal of completion through synthesis. Here the possible activity of dissensus rather than consensus can take place, if one is brave enough.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, in their analysis of the Romantic fragment,¹³ point to this – their understanding of the fragment is that it points to both completion and incomplection, undermining both paradigms, pointing towards a notion of the dialectical as “it covers the thinking of identity through the mediation of non-identity”. As both part and whole, as thoroughly complete (as a hedgong) and incomplete the fragment and the empty space it provokes troubles a logic of identity that logic which in part underwrites an organisation, principally a named participation in an Art Fair / Academic Research. In a move of covering identity with non-identity, one might say that the refusal of identity that is Five Years points towards the status of antagonism defining the social field, a site where the struggle for identity is never assured.

Such a notion is undoubtedly Romantic if one was to return to proper names. If one were to return to Friedrich Schlegel's notions of the fragment, one could look at his Critical Fragment no.103 to find a parallel, and find an analogy for the working principle of Five Years. Reinsuing the work of harmony – *those works of beautiful coherence* – Schlegel sings the praises of the piece in pieces: *The motley heap of sudden ideas*¹⁴ from which some kind of unity emanates, not from any synthetic principle, but from the *free and equal fellowship* that corresponds to its particular form of disarray. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point to the inherent ideal and organic politics that resides in this heap of fragments. Without unity but united by a politics of freedom and equality, one might make a correspondence with the *motley heap of sudden ideas* that is, for better or worse, the organisational principle named Five Years.

A series of fragments are put in play. Not a continuous writing, but a discontinuous one – not a theory of the fragment, but a practice of the fragment – a number of practices that constitute the fragmentary nature of Five Years.

So far so meta-textual. We have talked about a shared idea of how a romantic fragmentary project might be thought of. We have talked about what Five Years might be. We talked, that night, about a notion of bureaucracy – or how a Romantic project finds itself organised. We talked that night about recent returns to notions of the Terror, of how the actions of Robespierre and Saint-Just might be seen as a form of instrumentalised Romanticism; fragmentation literally put into action, romanticism and order being put into a bureaucratic formalisation. What might a Romantic Party of the Fragment look like? How might it identify itself?

[...] to constitute collective or plural speech: a communion of writing.

2. Thus the texts will be fragmentary; precisely to make plurally possible (a nominatory plurality), to open a place for it and at the same time never to arrest the process itself – always already ruptured and as if destined to be ruptured, in order to find their meaning not in themselves but in their conjunction-disjunction, their being placed together and in common (mise en commun), their relations to difference.¹⁵

One might (perhaps) look here to Surrealist history of the shared terms, manifest formation, violent expulsions and virulent retorts that occur in the artistic collective that so fore-grounded the art of fragmentation. What kind of Part might there be to come?

No Terror here though. No heads are rolling. But perhaps a haunting notion of the Ideal, of Idealism, of the troublesome nature of putting the Idea into Action. To have fidelity to such a notion, to an equality-event of the fragment, is perhaps what is happening in this show right now.

To have done with instrumentalisation then. A fleeing proposition: Romantic Bureaucracy is put forward, is put on hold. (To think a bureaucracy in terms of Romanticism put forward by Blanchot would be to think about an instrumentalisation of a movement that necessarily composes and decomposes, that comes together to fall apart. What ways could this format enter the expert rule of the Art Fair? The expert rule of the University? Perhaps that a logic still haunting this project, these fleeting events).

So. Not Romantic Bureaucracy, then. That is happening already as an event form that persistently un-works itself, refuses coherence. To borrow again from Blanchot, we perhaps have here the work of un-working.

To end for now with a question: one might ask, paradoxically, what is lacking in the fragment. Both nothing and everything – it is both irresolutely complete and incomplete. Instead one might ask how one moves from the open field of the social to the abrupt violent gesture that fragments, that causes the fracture of the fragment.

Francis Summers, 2009, Edward Dorrian 2013

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Speaking Is Not Saying: The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1993 p22

² *The Possible Characteristics, Comic: The First Issue*, Bulletin Published by the Student-Worker Action Committee in Service of the Movement (October 1968) Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953-1993*, translated by Zack Paul (Fordham University Press, New York 2010) p85

³ IT Projects is an ongoing experimental survey of artist-led initiatives providing a platform for dialogue and new collaborations. IT709 look place in 2009 to coincide with Freuze and Zoo Art Fairs)

⁴ Project Space Survival Strategies is a research project by the artist Elysa Lozano for Autonomous Organization, produced in collaboration with Invisible Venue.

⁵ see introduction

⁶ Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) supports UK businesses wanting to improve their competitiveness, productivity and performance by accessing the knowledge and expertise available within UK Universities. The partnership recruits a recently qualified graduate (Associated) to facilitate the transfer of academic knowledge into the company. The Associate works within the company and is jointly supervised by company personnel and a senior academic (<http://www.vand.ac.uk/advances/support/ktp>)

⁷ *We all think, as if it went without saying, that politics passes through the literary (or the theoretical). Romanticism is our matrix.* Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy *The Invention of Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, Preface Translation by Philip Barraud and Cheryl Lester State University of New York Press, 1988 p17

⁸ Friedrich Schlegel *Athenaeum Fragments 206, Philosophical fragments*, translated by Peter Fenwick, University of Minnesota Press, 1991

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel (from) *Athenaeum Fragments 77, Philosophical fragments*, translated by Peter Fenwick, University of Minnesota Press, 1991

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot citing Novalis: *The Athonium, The Absence of the Book, The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1993 p388

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot *The Fragmentary Work: The Absence of the Book, The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1993 p388

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy *The Hierarchy Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism, The Fragmentary: The Fragmentary Exigency*, Translation by Philip Barraud and Cheryl Lester, State University of New York Press, 1988

¹⁴ Ibid p50

¹⁵ *The Possible Characteristics, Comic: The First Issue*, Bulletin Published by the Student-Worker Action Committee in Service of the Movement (October 1968) Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953-1993*, translated by Zack Paul (Fordham University Press, New York 2010) p85