

Productive Disciplines and Systems of Restraint in the Works of Matthew Barney,
Keith Tyson, and Natalie Jeremijenko

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Art is not commonly perceived as systematic, and art-making is not thought to be disciplined within the confines of systematic approaches. The three artists discussed in this paper, Keith Tyson, Matthew Barney, and Natalie Jeremijenko each engages with a resistive framework, producing art out of the struggle with the system. Tyson has created and consequently put himself at the disposal of an automated linguistic art project proposal system to interrogate his own creative limits, in turn making the pieces from the proposals which strongly relate to traditions of painting and sculpture, with issues of autobiography and attribution of intent complicated by the interposition of the randomizing system. Barney is involved in issues of athleticism, gender, and fantasy, and has struggled against literal physical restraints in numerous pieces. Finally, Jermeijenko, who's work is a didactic science and has more in common with the tradition of scientific research than fine art craft, adopts many strategies of systematic investigation and knowledge production from those research methodologies, towards her projects interrogating the unrealized potential of information systems and empowering active lay interpretation. We see aspects of systematic art and systems in art evident in the work of each of these artists and the systems they have chosen to tangle with. Each challenges traditional notions of art-making and authorship, and as a group they have elected to filter their artistic production through rigid, self-imposed structures of production.

Keith Tyson's *Artmachine* (1992-2000) is a pseudo-random system for generating linguistic proposals for artworks, issuing a particular specifications in terms of size, medium, duration, title, etc., which Tyson would then implement, challenging his artistic ingenuity to see how he could implement the proposal. According to Tyson, this project

was born out of “two...theoretical concerns...(i) death of the author, and (ii) chaos theory.” (Beech 1998) He considers the pieces to be “manifestations as opposed to representations. It’s about what brought them into being. It’s usually about all the complex things that occur before the work exists” but “the work’s final manifestation is the object which is readable.” Rather than illustrating theoretical concerns, he “wanted to embody them.” (Beech 1998). This strategy of manifestation of a concept is different, for instance, from the representational strategies in Jermeijenko’s work, where there is more of an information display focus, or Barney’s work, where the representational imagery is more symbolic. How dumb is the Artmachine? As Beech describes it, “the Artmachine’s representations have no fluency because it doesn’t have any understanding of what it is doing. So... its meanings are always fortuitous, and its use of signs never takes account of their significance.” (Beech 1997)

Examples of some particularly successful individual pieces from his eight year run with the *Artmachine* project are: *AMCHII CCCXIV – Give Us a Day in the Life*, 366 circular breadboards which he painted on, one a day, for an entire year; *AMCHII - Country Fair with Prize Tent*, a 26 ft long painting of a pastoral landscape done on a structure with an array of dowels protruding 18 inches and a mess of hardened silicone between the spikes; *AMCHII - Dual Workstations, 30 Seconds Late and Early* - two identical work desks are proven, by close observation of the numerous images and graphs pinned to the wall above, to be existing exactly sixty seconds apart. The clock in the photograph, the digital readout on the NASA weather chart, even the seeding of the plants, have been obsessively accomplished within exactly sixty seconds of each other;

AMCHII LXIII - Swept away by an unusual destiny in the blue sea of August. (1975), a hackney black cab is placed in the middle of the exhibition space, two holes are drilled into the roof, and then using a high pressure hydraulic pump, the cab is to be filled with as many gallons of acrylic paint (black) as needed to explode the windscreens, glass or sides, the pump is then switched off but not disconnected. The piece consists of the cab, paint and pump in the state they remain after the process is completed; and possibly his most recognized piece from this project, *AMCHII XX - The KFC Notebooks and the UCT. (Untitled Conspiracy Theory)* - a small installation that sustains a series of multiples and prints, consisting of a platform, computer terminal running a viral animation, notepapers, a soundpiece, a set of 12 prints, several correspondences, two bubble jet prints (one encased in leaded glass) and the complete Kentucky Fried Chicken Menu cast in lead (ie. all the burgers, dippers, fries, family buckets, etc.) The whole piece is based around a conspiracy theory with Colonel Sanders and the KFC at its centre.

It is evident from these descriptions how busy Tyson can keep just building the proposals. He is incredibly prolific. This device to propose linguistic content and others he has created since accelerate the materialization of ideas, and facilitate an all out focus on facture and industry, which is an important part of things for him.¹ He says “I made 5,000 equations, 1,000 iteration sheets, published and made maybe 300-400 works, from a pistachio nut to a massive, 50-foot wide video installations. And I was prolific, I worked every day, and I made it all myself.” (Herbert 2001) The emphasis on quantity of production in this quote is related to this tradition of male art stars, either making really

¹ “Being prolific is a very important part of what I do” says Tyson, quoted in Darwent, C. (2001). *Life, the universe & everything: a hitchhiker's guide to Keith Tyson. Modern Painters. 14: 26-9.*

big work, or being incredibly prolific—leading back to Picasso—one of the original models for this type.² Or more positively, Tyson has brought a mass of “analytic energy that allows his thought processes to venture into a multiplicity of worlds... His *Artmachine* (1992-2000) is a...motivated process to operationalize questions to the world.” (Reust 2004)

There is also an aspect of physical challenge to the projects, similar to Matthew Barney’s self-imposed physical challenges. As Tyson says: “My art is about seeing how far we can challenge the hand we are dealt.” (Darwent 2001) The works he made emerge from this three-way negotiation between the description and concepts dictated by the *Artmachine*, his own ideas and abilities, and the materials. “This is...to do with how far a single subject, using a non-subjective methodology, can be expanded.” “It’s a research project on myself, I’m seeing what are my limits.” “It’s a tool in an empirical practice.” (Beech 1998) “The whole show at South London Gallery... is basically me smashing things into each other or just experimenting in the hope that I might learn something about myself and that It has a benefit to the public.” The randomness of this experimentation would not pass for a scientific pursuit, but the concept of “research” here is a contrast to concepts of research in Natalie Jeremijenko’s work.

One gets a sense for the random nature of the proposals, and how that works against attempts to attribute intention or content, though it is clear that Tyson himself has done the work here, so he can not so easily detach himself from claims of subjective

² This is funny, because in the same article as the above quote, “Being prolific...”, Keith Tyson is quoted on Picasso: distancing himself from intentionality in the artmachine products “was incredibly liberating. Tit got me away from the whole Picasso’s-vibrant-sexuality-was-pushing-the-paint-around kind of thing.” If anything, this strategy of working on artmachine projects liberates his persona from some claims of ‘intellectual’ authorship of the projects, leaving only the ‘pushing-the-paint-around’ kind of incredibly prolific virility. Ibid.

influence on the pieces. Which leads to the problem with trying to be anti-intentional. The *Artmachine* does shift the “locus of artistic responsibility” away from responsibility for “how” the piece gets made or the “what”, and towards authorship of the system that proposed the project. set up to make the “what” decisions. There is a tradition of this anti-intentionality, “Other artists have claimed indifference (notably Duchamp and Warhol) but none, that I am aware of, have elaborated a process which apparently eliminates the artist’s own involvement in the work. The Artmachine takes responsibility not for the choices surrounding an individual artwork, but by choosing how to choose.” (Beech 1997) This undermining of intention does in some sense sabotage normal avenues of access to the piece. As Tyson says, “How do you read something when the claim made for it is that it doesn’t have an aesthetic or psychological reason for being there?” (Herbert 2001)

Another strategy to undermine readings of the artists intent is to leave things incomplete. Tyson is, in his own words “a great believer in incompleteness... so that when you look at the work you don’t ask, ‘what is the artist trying to say.’” (Beech 1998) As Mark Beasley puts it: “it is possible to position the work... as a form of Dadaist anti-art, a nod towards non-sense reveling in the possibility of enforced relations.” (Beasley 2002) At the same time as trying to divest himself of responsibility for the project, Tyson claims that it works as portraiture. “So that idea of a Romantic hero – I do think, ‘yeah, I’m going to express my world vision’. Like van Gogh did, or anyone else.” (Beech 1998)

In the *Artmachine* project, the total piece is the physical AMCHII Iteration object, along with the understanding of the system that he worked with to produce it. Says Tyson: “I programme it, using language and making structures... And then it programmes me, ‘cos I make the work with my own hands...” (Beech 1998) ‘Making structures’ is one of the two activities to program the art machine. Using the generative system requires one to construct classifications. To make a decision between painting and sculpture that classification of those two options for output mode needs to be specified. “It’s... a research project which is fascinating to be involved in. And so, in that way, the whole state of the relationship between me and the machine is the work.” (Beech 1998) The artist performing with their system here is reminiscent of the early Matthew Barney *Drawing Restraint* pieces, where the activity of the artist and the system together make the work, and the viewer in some sense appreciates the dynamics of the whole as the work. Tyson’s hand as the author, while complicated through the distancing mechanism of the proposal generator, operates on multiple levels--as the creator of the Artmachine, the craftsman of the final pieces, and the person who orchestrated the system.

This strategy of having a “dumb” system propose the random projects was an attempt to remove any reading of his intent as the author, and to remove any elements of autobiography, although frankly it is not possible to ignore his role in orchestrating the entire system. He has continued this interest in the tension of his subjective free will operating within and scripted by self-imposed rigid external structures, in a kind of masochist self-challenge to test his own limits of effort and imagination through projects like the *Teleological Accelerator* (2003), and most recently the *Geno/Pheno Paintings*

(2004). The *Teleological Accelerator* is a set of two disks, five meters wide, with hundreds of terms from the encyclopedia, from the abstract at the center to the concrete at the edge arrayed across one disk, and a number of moveable pointers which are used to select out random combinations of words and concepts. Similar to the *Artmachine*, words here are used to describe the content of an artwork, and then he goes to build the piece that fits the description according to his personal preference.

He puts all of the source material into these ‘dumb’ systems, then uses the system as a mechanism to accelerate the production of ideas and to leverage his exploration of the limits of his own creativity. What is most interesting about this work is that ultimately after the use of this elaborate mechanism and relinquishing subjectivity, he is left to work on relatively traditional art objects. He is exploring the internal limits of his own creativity with this external system, all to make objects that are surprising, or push the edge of form. As Hans Reust puts it in his piece on Tyson’s new show, “For his exploration of unknown and possible worlds, and their pictures, Keith Tyson is constantly devising new equipment and experiments for the human mind.” (Reust 2004) “The... things that I was trying to emancipate myself from...[being stuck with a dominant formal style] mean that I need to expand the practice so that I can continually reinvent myself.” (Beech 1998)

In his performances for the *Drawing Restraint* series, Matthew Barney set up elaborate systems of physical restraint to restrict his body and undermine his facility with drawing, built from pieces of exercise equipment, surgical tubing, and other items, investigating the creation of form against resistance. This was the application of the

concept of hypertrophic muscle development and the paradigm of resistance training from sports to artmaking. He was interested in "how a form can grow productively under a self-imposed resistance, so [he] wore a restraining device to make drawings." (Goodeve 1995) He did a series of these drawings while an undergraduate. His studio setup for this project was described as some mixture of Marquis deSade type torture chamber, Golds Gym, and art studio. As he described them in his interview with Seward, the devices were built to be "facilities to defeat the facility of drawing." (Seward 1995) Even as he shifted from literal physical systems of resistance and moved into more abstract metaphor, he still uses physical athleticism and anatomical systems as metaphors for struggle and production in elaborating his cosmological system. "The Drawing Restraints propose that the strength of a work lies in proportion to the hardships overcome to create it. By this logic, van Gogh might have atrophied in the zero gravity of success; his work might have been able to increase in power only to the precise extent that it surmounted his asceticism, poverty, and insanity."³ (Seward 1995)

This trope from Barney's work of staging conflict between oppositional forces is an essential mechanism of creation, literally creating imagery in the *Drawing Restraint* pieces, and creating meaning in other pieces through his work. To counteract the force which is growing in physical power through all of these processes of resistance and the subsequent development, he introduces another which liquefies and melts as the sort of anti-strength. He has set up a "mad interplay of forces", which are really oppositions of

³ There is an interesting footnote here in the Seward article: "Incidentally, van Gogh often speaks of the need to grow stronger and harder. A doctor tells him he looks like a worker and he says, 'This is just what I have tried to change in myself; when I was younger, I looked like one who was intellectually overwrought, and now I look like a bargee or an ironworker.'" Keith Tyson also mentions van Gogh in his interview. Roskill, M., Ed. (1963). *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. New York, Atheneum.

diametric pairs: friction and slippage, expansion and contraction, opening and closing. Within the internal cosmology of the Cremaster movies, *Field Dressing*, and the *Drawing Restraint* pieces, meaning is produced through the juxtaposition and ensuing struggle between competing forces. However, as Barney's work has progressed, he has progressed from staged struggles in the literal physical sense to struggles between competing concepts. As Seward describes *Drawing Restraint 7*, in some ways the point of departure in this more metaphorical direction "In this final piece in the series, restraint no longer takes the form of a device brought to bear against the artist himself; it is now a struggle of force against force, acting and reacting in a state of perpetual motion—satyr contra satyr in the limo ride that never ends." (Seward 1995)

Barney's usage of his body in a physical athletic dynamic is a marked contrast to Tyson's linguistic and mental system. Tyson built equipment for use with the human mind, to test the limits of his own creative resourcefulness. Barney created equipment for use with the human body, to test the limits of his physical strength and resources. In *Mile High Threshold: Flight With The Anal Sadistic Warrior* (1991) "Barney's body becomes the instrument" (Wakefield 1994) which involves physical compromise that Tyson does not have to make. One thing that the two share is a sensuous materiality—Tyson's paintings and sculptures are heavily indulgent in material pleasures—the bright saturated colors and collage of materials in his enormous studio wall drawings or the physical presence of the stuff he has pulled together for his projects. Barney develops a more particular language of materials, establishing associations with each of the materials that he adopts into some role in his overarching narrative. Both Tyson's craft approach and

Barney's athletic approach push the artist to engage the world physically. Tyson spends a lot of time physically working with art materials, whereas Barney was climbing, struggling, developing, (sort of) in those early days..

Natalie Jeremijenko's work provides a good third point in this comparison. It shares more with traditions of scientific research and engineering design than fine art craft. In method more than subject matter she adopts many aspects of systematic research methodologies from the scientific world, bringing that type of rigor to her didactic art projects. Through her work she wrestles with the scientific and artistic establishments. The openness of her explorations and expansiveness of her thinking is not typical for scientific pursuits, and the scientific method is not usually used so expansively. Formal scientific method, especially as embodied in the research establishment, is very cautious.⁴ You can't prove things, only disprove things. She's challenging a lot of these typical usages and definitions of science, and wrestling with

⁴In *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig describes the colossal structure and slow pace of scientific method:

“Solution of problems too complicated for common sense to solve is achieved by long strings of mixed inductive and deductive inferences that weave back and forth between the observed machine and the mental hierarchy of the machine found in the manuals. The correct program for this interweaving is formalized as scientific method.

Actually I've never seen a cycle-maintenance problem complex enough really to require full-scale formal scientific method... When I think of formal scientific method an image sometimes comes to mind of an enormous juggernaut, a huge bulldozer...slow, tedious lumbering, laborious, but invincible. It takes twice as long, five times as long, maybe a dozen times as long as informal mechanic's techniques, but you know in the end you're going to get it. There's no fault isolation problem in motorcycle maintenance that can stand up to it. When you've hit a really tough one, tried everything, racked your brain and nothing works, and you know that this time Nature has really decided to be difficult, you say, 'Okay, Nature, that's the end of the nice guy,' and you crank up the formal scientific method.”

Pirsig, R. M. (2000). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance: an inquiry into values*. New York, N.Y., Perennial.

how to use the scientific systems to do rethink and impact public conceptions in very real ways, “Using familiar materials to encourage people to think about issues. That’s my strategy.” (Eldridge 2000) One prevalent strategy in her work is to turn the technoscientific systems onto themselves in acts of experimental design, creating self-critical, ironic, ‘Inverse’ technologies. In her words, “Social change is effected... by the transformations of everyday life effected with and through information technologies.” She is interested in interrogating the transformative potential of new technologies, addressing the politics of information, designing tangible and open ended systems, and applying socio-technical analysis to critique and explore alternative design paradigms. At the heart of it, her work is motivated by the desire to create social change, and the belief that “new technologies provide an opportunity for social change.” (Jeremijenko 2003)

An excellent project exemplifying many of these issues is *The Suicide Box* (1996), installed for 100 days observing San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. (Jeremijenko 1996) The camera and computer system, sensitive to vertical motion, recorded video clips when it detected a falling object. In the video from this project screened at the 1997 Whitney Biennial, falling bodies are interspersed with false-starts triggered by seagulls flying by. “The attempt to correct this technical problem, to refine the parameters of documentation, becomes a metaphor for misplaced social effort.” Covering the previously undocumented suicide activity, “the work deliberately moves into a social blind spot.” (Allen 1998)

Jeremijenko puts it succinctly in her Project Database Statement: “There are no 'official' video cameras on the bridge, nor effective obstruction to jumpers. By contrast,

the number of video cameras that are trained in a place of commerce such as a shopping mall typically cover the entire square footage. By any measure, shoplifting get much more technological attention, although the scale of loss is incomparable.” (Jeremijenko 2003) In response to a question posed by her interviewer, “...You’re saying it recorded people leaping to their deaths. But it – you – didn’t intervene?”, she describes “it did intervene, by generating information about a tragic social phenomenon that is otherwise not seen.” (Eldridge 2000)

She has taken an antagonistic view towards the art establishment, based on the primacy of technology in contemporary society and public consciousness, as a route for change: “The art world is a very prissy little thing over in the corner, while the major cultural forces are being determined by technoscience. The whole way we imagine ourselves is being redefined, and the art world is still talking about gender politics or whatever... Technology is a language that is much less about privilege, it’s much less intimidating conceptually than art criticism.” (Eldridge 2000)

Throughout her oeuvre she attempts again and again to rethink systematic scientific thought or information theory. The Suicide Box was a particularly effective project because it is so chilling. It has an emotional saliency that neither of the other artists in this study have achieved. Tyson is interesting in his obsessive pursuit of interaction with this machine system, but even then he exists in his own fictional universe the same as Matthew Barney. Didactic work, like Natalie’s, is the struggle of form against resistance. However, for Natalie this struggle has been situated in the real world outside of the art establishment. Her projects exist as critiques of existing commercial

technologies, for instance with the chemical sniffing *Feral Robotic Dogs*, demonstrating alternate design paradigms that engineers could aim for. Or with the *OneTree(s)* project, spreading these biomonitoring discussion pieces into the real world, trying to generate thought and discourses on both cloning and pollution in the general public. Her intense focus on these inclusive structures of participation, and her desire to make work that functions in the real world is something that separates her efforts from Barney and Tyson, and from many other artists. Didactic work critical of real-world institutions is the struggle of form against a system of resistance, the form is the new thought or space that the artist is trying to open up, and the system of resistance is the real, complex system of real people, institutions, social momentum, rather than any fabricated system invented for metaphoric power. Neither of the other artists deal with real systems of resistance, though their work may still capture the public imagination in the tradition of other similar work before.

Is there a problem with being anti-autobiographical? Jeremijenko gives nothing obviously autobiographical in her work, aside from the personal agenda that she pursues zealously and from which it may be possible to make some autobiographical inferences. She doesn't even begin to approach issues of autobiography in her work, she they become non-issues which she isn't addressing one way or another. Around Keith Tyson's work, however, there is all sorts of rhetoric about negating his hand as the author, or distancing himself from the work through the mechanism of the art machine, but these strategies ultimately fail. As Darwent puts it so succinctly in his article, "The real logical flaw in making insistently anti-autobiographical art is that it unavoidably turns the viewer into a

biographer.” “Below this theoreticised story-telling, though, you sense a more visceral self-portraiture in Tyson’s explanations.” (Darwent 2001) In the case of Jermeijenko, there is nothing insistent about her avoidance of autobiography, it’s just not on the radar of issues she’s working near. As a third point of comparison, Barney has grown a cult of identity around himself. His public identity as young male art star is inseperable from his work.

How art it is made, how it is received, and what people get from it: you can look at all of these things in a very systems oriented way, especially for these artists. Even systems of metaphor. Typically, art is not seen as systematic, it is not being constrained within the discipline and confines of a specific method. Counter to traditional methodological approaches, here are artists that are each taking a particular system or approach, and struggling to channel their creativity and their big ideas through these rigid structures.

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