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Moves Towards the Incomprehensible Wild

Emma Cocker

The trees are dense now with singing birds, whitethroats, titlark, yellowhammer and the cooing of wood pigeons [...] In the centre of the wood there exists a natural clearing, perfectly level and smooth with glassy lichen, a dark emerald covering [...] A wild deer walks out of the trees, crosses the clearance, and stops to snuff the ground. Large bright eyes search. [...] I watched its glittering brown eyes watching me. The deer's presence announced a far deeper and stranger reality than any classification of plants and animals [...] The deer momentarily awoke my own *wild-side*, itself a startled animal ...¹

In this semi-fictionalized account, artists Dutton + Swindells describe an encounter with a deer in a woodland, where the unexpected meeting with the wild operates as a moment of rupture or breach capable of



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Fig.3. Dutton + Swindells, *Studio Production with Plants*, YASS Studio, Sheffield, March 2010. Image courtesy of the artists.

For Dutton + Swindells, collage is used as a strategy for bringing things into proximity, to create moments of unexpected collision where two wholly unrelated things meet and acknowledge their difference, their unlikeness [Figure 3]. For Dutton + Swindells, 'the notion of collage is something that is in the throws of possible conflation while simultaneously maintaining a suspended and frozen position of indelible difference'.¹⁵ Collage is a mode of contiguity rather than continuity; touching surfaces inevitably create a line that in turn reinforces the conditions of their separation. This line of separation is one of differentiation, marking the

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awakening a different kind of subject status. Though allegorical, the description itself is based on an actual event, where both artists attest to a separately but similarly experienced encounter with the woodland creature. For Dutton + Swindells, the encounter with the deer was characterized by a sense of the unfathomable or incomprehensible, where in that moment of incommunicable proximity they were rendered instantly and unexpectedly dumbstruck, as existing language and knowledge no longer sufficed. Re-contextualized within their collaborative art practice, this shared experience has come to stand as a form of shorthand for articulating the aspirations for their activity as artists. Moreover, it was the recognition and naming of this shared encounter that enabled the artists to newly conceive of their practice in such a way. Within their practice, Dutton + Swindells attempt to create the conditions for an encounter not dissimilar to unexpectedly coming across a deer whilst walking off the path in a wood or forest. Their activity is shaped by their hope of producing the conditions of an *event*, which they conceive as an encounter with a particular manifestation of *wildness*. Within their work they attempt to prepare the ground or set up situations wherein the event of an encounter with wildness might occur, which in turn, might have the capacity to breach or rupture habitual ways of being and thinking. The artists' practice is motivated by the question of whether it is possible to every truly encounter or indeed produce something *wild*, something that has not been already captured and classified, already tamed.²

What follows is an attempt to critically interrogate whether – or indeed *how* – the event of an encounter with wildness might be encouraged or provoked through a form of critical (artistic) practice. In order to do so, Dutton + Swindells' practice is brought into the proximity of Alain Badiou's philosophical conceptualization of the event (as detailed in *Being and Event*); whilst

limits of one thing from the beginnings of another—the boundary that separates 'me' from 'you', from everything else, *ad infinitum*. One entity bumps into another, simultaneously attracted and repelled by the experience of contact. Meetings occur but there is no dialogue to be had, no common ground to be reached. Seams form points at which differences can be only registered, unable to be reconciled or resolved. In these terms, collage is considered analogous to the artists' mute encounter with the deer in the woodland. Two things come face to face and are rendered dumbstruck, impotent. Each remains unable to voice itself in any coherent manner, for its own language is inadequate for initiating the necessary conversation. What exists between is *nothing*—except perhaps the immeasurable void of dissimilitude, a wordless vacuum. Through collage, Dutton + Swindells create conditions analogous to this suspended mode of incommunicable proximity. They set up encounters between things in order to render them mute [Figure 4]. However, this deadlock is not one of resignation or despair, but rather it is from the experience of stalemate that the artists hope to force something *else*, some other way. Stalemate can be broken if one side of the struggle is prepared to give or yield, however by disabling the efficacy of existing power relations, Dutton + Swindells attempt to provoke or call an alternative logic (or ethics) into play.



Fig.4. Dutton + Swindells, *Dept. of Celestial Mechanics 2 Wall-Installation* (in-progress), YASS Studio, Sheffield, July 2010. Image courtesy of the artists.

Badiou's theory of the event is simultaneously re-considered through the specific prism afforded by their collaborative work. What motivates this enquiry is the seemingly contradictory assertion that the event – which in Badiou's terms cannot be predetermined or planned for – can be conceived within or as part of a pragmatic model through which we can attempt to provoke it into being or become its *cause*. With reference to the work of Dutton + Swindells, my intent is to explore whether – and indeed how – the event of an unexpected encounter with something wild can ever truly be reproduced or whether it must remain a force whose capricious logic we can only ever hope for. The article asks whether it is possible that through an art practice, something unexpected can also be anticipated, the unplanned for simultaneously brought about. Art and philosophy are thus brought together in dialogue in order to investigate art's potential for producing eventual conditions – of breach or rupture – wherein the possibility of a different (potentially radical or dissenting) model of subjectivity might arise. However, before turning to Badiou's writing, I want to discuss how the event is conceptualized within Dutton + Swindells' art practice, since it is through the specific prism of (art) practice that my own enquiry takes its initial direction.³ As such, art sets up the conditions into which further thinking is then invited, called.

Whilst Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells have been collaborating since 1998, it was from 2005 that the motif of the deer in the woodland became adopted purposefully to indicate the intentions for their practice. This conceptualization became more fully formed during a three-month long residency undertaken as part of an International Residency Program at Ssamzie Art Space in Seoul, South Korea, 2008, where Dutton + Swindells founded the *Institute of Beasts*. The residency enabled the artists to move beyond an understanding of their work as a representation of the animal

In recent work, separation is used tactically in order to create a notional limit or edge, which can then be interrogated or put into question. Limits are drawn attention to such that they might then be transgressed, disrupted or rendered porous, where something unexpected might be drawn from the fissures occurring between the lines, between existing demarcations. Dutton + Swindells have explored the potential of using separation as a device through which to create and then interrogate the limits of a particular structure of categorization or classification. Theirs is a gesture of tilting, a process of pushing something until it no longer appears to behave according to the terms of its designated name or definition. Within their work, words are pressured towards painting and beyond the realm of language; paintings become perches upon which chickens roost; roosting livestock assume their positions—as the unwitting initiates—within undeclared ritual performances where they are subjected to the endless loop of power-point lectures. At times, the animals that inhabit the architectures of the work appear haunted by human subjectivity—bored, melancholic, lost, disappointed—whilst culture in turn is rendered bestial—degraded, brutish. It tries relentlessly to inculcate the animal with its logic, its values, but the animal stands indocile, indifferent or immune to its intended indoctrination, for its priorities are based on more immediate—bodily—concerns [Figures 5 and 6]. Cultural products—including art and also the artists—function as little more than props or objects or the background upon which other activities occur. Again, what is at stake in these categorical shifts and transformations is the question of what defines and constitutes particular forms of being, specifically perhaps what it might mean to be human. Singular subjecthood deliquesces into the rapturous state of dissolution. Categories quiver at the point of collapse.

encounter, towards conceiving of it as an attempt to *become* one. Since this residency, Dutton + Swindells have continued to develop the framework of the *Institute of Beasts* as a way of 'housing' or 'managing' a range of tactical— if somewhat unruly— methods. It is through the testing of these tactical methods that the artists attempt to set up the conditions whereby the event of an encounter with something wild might be unexpectedly produced within their practice (as the woodland or forest sets up the conditions for a possible encounter with a deer), or such that the work itself might begin to approach a state of wildness, become animal. Conceptually, the *Institute of Beasts* does not differentiate hierarchically between the activity of the studio and the site of exhibition, but rather conceives of practice as a critical and nomadic operation that perpetually moves between these spaces. The artists describe the 'pathology of "setting-up" studio' as 'a metaphorical forest or animal habitat in which the animal-object might

exist.⁴ The studio – whatever or wherever that might be – functions as the situation against which certain tactics, approaches and materials are tested. As such, this article focuses on Dutton + Swindells' practice as it is *practiced* broadly under the auspices of the *Institute of Beasts*, rather than as it is specifically materialized as singular artworks that are resolved within the context of a discrete exhibition. Similarly, my aim is not to focus on those moments when something approaching an animal encounter is actually produced within Dutton + Swindells' work, but rather to excavate a sense of the recurrent tactics used by the artists as part of their attempt to produce or cause the conditions wherein the event of an encounter with wildness might occur.

For Dutton + Swindells, the event corresponds to an encounter with the wild – something unlike, unfamiliar or incomprehensible – which in turn has the capacity to breach or rupture habitual ways of being and thinking. The phrase 'beyond comprehension' is often used pejoratively, as an



Fig.5. Dutton + Swindells, *Studio Production with Dog, Rabbit and Duck*, S1 Artspace Studios, Sheffield, July 2004. Image courtesy of the artists.



Fig.6. Dutton + Swindells, *Studio Production with Ducks*, Psalter Lane Studios, Sheffield, July 2005. Image courtesy of the artists.

Dutton + Swindells insist that the categories which demarcate one thing from something else are often arbitrary and easily transgressed. However, rather than wanting to abolish such systems of classification—which are perhaps inescapable—they propose that these insidious modes of capture in fact might inadvertently produce the very conditions for an unexpected encounter with something incomprehensible or wild. Working within the logic of classification, their quest becomes one of pushing at the edges of one meaning whilst holding back the terms of another. They try to locate the fulcrum point where it is possible for something to appear momentarily unnamable or unclassified, no longer *and* not yet knowable. The challenge for the artists, however, is one of preventing these nascent assemblages or generic sets from being identified or

expression of disbelief or frustration when something cannot be made sense of or appears to lack meaning or rationale. However, there is also an archaic meaning for the term where it describes the condition of limitlessness or the state of being boundless or unrestrained; of something existing beyond one's grasp, beyond capture. The incomprehensible is thus that which fails to communicate or be clearly understood at the same time as that which resists or exceeds existing definition. It is marked then by the dual possibilities of deficit and excess, refusal and promise. Dutton + Swindells play with these dual possibilities, attempting to harness the affects of the former in the hope of conjuring the latter. They make work that is *tactically* incomprehensible in the attempt to summon or create the conditions for an encounter with that which is beyond the terms of what is already known. They attempt to turn the incomprehensible (opaque) into the incomprehensible (beyond capture) – to perform a classificatory shift. However, the artists' pursuit of the incomprehensible should not be confused with the fetishistic fascination with all that is strange, irrational or eccentric, nor the signaling of art as conduit or communicating vessel for some form of transcendental power or privileged subconscious imaginary. Rather, for the artists, the possibility of an unfamiliar or incomprehensible wildness becomes located at the heart of an ongoing material investigation of ethical and epistemological import, where ideas pertaining to the formation of both subjectivity and knowledge are put into question or challenged. Dutton + Swindells' search for the incomprehensible wild – that which remains beyond capture or measure – is marked by a desire to rupture or destabilize the familiar, habitual or homogenized; to bring it into doubt or crisis. The artists' labour is one of attempting to bring about the event of something unexpected or unrecognizable – which might in turn be constitutive of something else or other – whilst simultaneously blocking or thwarting the path of (re)cognition, the gesture of taming

assimilated all too quickly back into *meaning*, from becoming classified or (re)claimed swiftly by the existing encyclopedia of what is known and already named. In their work, Dutton + Swindells attempt to resist the territorializing tendency of language or rather they stymie its associative chains of relations, its forms of grammatical and classificatory bondage. Speechlessness is recuperated as a critical position, for whilst that which has no language arguably has no power, certain forms of muteness can equally be understood as an articulation of protest, as the refusal to communicate or play according to the terms of existing power—or linguistic—relations. Without dialogue there can be no negotiation, no compromise, no breach of promise made. Even the smallest child grasps the unfathomable potency of wordless refusal, a silent resistance that cannot be bargained with nor eroded by the logic of rational coercion. Wordless encounters remain wholly at the level of aura or affect—in the realm of the corporeal, a touch ... animal.

Speechlessness is the impotent state of not being able to make oneself understood, of being stripped of one's capacity to communicate. However, to be 'lost for words' simultaneously describes both the limitations of language and the limitlessness of that which it attempts—and fails—to name. Here again, Dutton + Swindells harness the possibilities of one form of incomprehensibility in their pursuit of its more elusive other. They channel the dissident potential of various speech pathologies, whose bucks and stammers become devices through which to remain stubbornly incomprehensible, or for preventing emergent languages becoming reconciled within existing systems. Dutton and Swindells attempt to create 'inconsumable languages' whose words lodge in the throat of reason and remain guttural, or else they appear more like shapes or structures, stumbling blocks against which cognition slips or crashes. For Badiou:

[T]he meaning of a

and naming the unknown. In these terms, the incomprehensible wild functions as an obstacle or blockage in the smooth flow of what is already known or recognizable, whilst creating germinal conditions for the possibility of something new or *different*.

In one sense, the production of difference or heterogeneity can be thought of as art's promise, its potential to produce the elusive simultaneity of the 'that's it' with the 'what's that'. For artist, Ben Judd this experience (or art encounter) can be described as a 'blind-spot', where:

There is this thing that you are experiencing but you can't quite see it or it is slightly out of your vision ... there is a set of experiences that are coming together to form one experience, and I have never had that combination of experiences before, so I don't know how to describe it ... It is almost so new that I can't quite see it.⁵

In turn, this capacity of art to produce heterogeneity or the *new* reveals the limits of existing systems of classification, jeopardizing the authority and proposed omnipotence of these nominal modes of capture by creating an anomaly that momentarily exists outside or beyond their territorializing grasp. The rare encounter with something heterogeneous means to come face to face with what is wholly 'unlike' *you*; to experience a wild thing that has *yet* to be broken in, broken down or assimilated. Dutton + Swindells' search is for a curious kind of wild however. Theirs is not the romantic longing for some uninhabited wilderness beyond the limits of human reach, but rather for a form of wild that emerges unannounced from within the very terms of cultivation or control. It is an occurrence that Dutton + Swindells liken to their shared – yet separately experienced – encounter with a deer in a urban

subject-language is *under condition*. Constrained to refer solely to what the situation presents, and yet bound to the future anterior of the existence of an indiscernible, a statement made up of the names of the subject-language has merely a hypothetical signification.¹⁶

For the *faithless*, such speech acts are wholly empty, akin to the 'infantile foolishness' of a 'lovers' babble'.¹⁷ In Dutton + Swindells' 'subject-language' syllables of spoken sentences clutter and overlap, their distinctions blurred as each utterance is accelerated to abnormal rapidity (or rabidity), the feverish twittering of undecipherable phonemes and vowels. Recorded spoken language is often digitally sped up; for example, during the Ssamzie Art Space residency the artists worked the spoken script from *The Exorcist* until it sounded like twittering birdsong. The textual fragments from word association games are presented as isolated words that appear randomly with no apparent meaning or relationship attached: lost, road, emergency, spunk, Fleetwood, wet, setting sun, bored, classical music, holes. Excerpts from spam emails pushing Viagra are enlarged into throbbing neon signs or assembled into incoherent narratives. Single words often appear as large-scale wall drawings, whose font appears liquid or unreadable, or alternatively the drawing is cut up and reassembled as form rather than sign [Figures 7 and 8]. Polemical or political texts operate covertly within the work, where the specificity of their content remains undercover, often disguised, only ever glimpsed. The artists' textual tactics present like a litany of *schizo-aphasic* symptoms: excessive use of personal neologisms; errors in pronunciation; inability to name objects; agrammatism; *dysprosody*; incomplete sentences; failure to speak spontaneously; persistent repetition of phrases. Words are wrestled from signification, catachrestically

woodland or which in turn might equate to the inexplicable fluttering of an unbidden love.⁶ The emergence of the wild *within* is also ultimately a sign of hope, for it reveals the possibility of rupture or opening within situations or states that appear already fixed or determined (including that of being human). In one sense, the wild or unrecognizable is that which has not been tamed or domesticated, a state of *being* that cannot be wholly determined – or discerned – by the terms of existing actuality (of a given situation). Dutton + Swindells' work functions as a demonstration of their endeavour to remain faithful to the radically constitutive potential of a particular singular event (their encounter with something incomprehensible, like the deer in the woodland), at the same time producing the possibility of further *evental-sites* to which as yet unknown others – an audience 'to-come' – might become witness and declare their faith. Dutton + Swindells' practice is a demonstration of fidelity to or belief in the promise of art to produce the *event* of an unexpected encounter with the unlike. And yet theirs is an ambivalent form of faith that perpetually hovers at the threshold between hope and doubt; it is born of an irrefutable conviction that nonetheless still needs to be further convinced. As Steve Dutton asserts, 'I don't think I am trying to remain faithful to the event itself, but to remain faithful to having faith in the event ... I suppose it is more like I need to be convinced about that encounter again'.⁷ It is about having faith in – but also needing to be convinced of – the possibility of an encounter with something wild or unrecognizable, and – perhaps paradoxically – of being able to find an *adequate* way of recognizing this (or 'naming' it), without rendering it under control.

Dutton + Swindells' practice is thus underpinned by the seemingly contradictory endeavour of being able to recognize something that is unrecognizable – or indeed name something that is unnamable – that is already within the terms of, but which

recalibrated into strained arrangements or misapplied within complex malapropisms that resist easy translation or decoding. Words are no longer organized according to linguistic conventions (forming the smooth flow of meaning), but rather become assembled through the practice of collage (as colliding singularities which refuse to become synthesized into language).

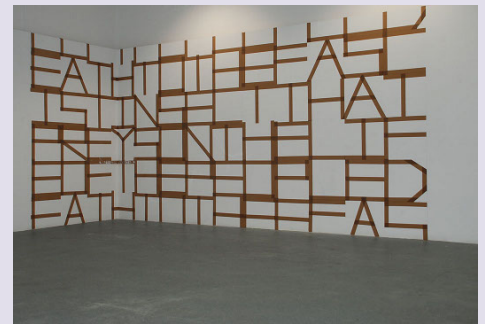


Fig.7. Dutton + Swindells, *Death to Fascist Text Wall-Drawing* (in-progress), Huddersfield University Studios, February 2009. Image courtesy of the artists.



Fig.8. Dutton + Swindells, *Emergency Text Wall-Drawing* (in-progress), Huddersfield University Studios, February 2009. Image courtesy of the artists.

In a manner similar to the way in which Badiou theorises the subject, Dutton + Swindells practice might be considered as a 'local configuration of a generic procedure'.¹⁸ Here, art itself might echo or *actually share* the terms of Badiou's definition of the subject, as 'the *local* status of a procedure, a configuration in excess of the situation'.¹⁹ The possibility of this shared definition (for both art + subject) perhaps implies an intrinsic

remains imperceptible to, the situation. In turn, these descriptions of an art practice resonate with certain philosophical theories of the event and its capacity for producing critical forms of subjectivity (of being and thinking). For Alain Badiou, the incomprehensible or indiscernible (and the promise of the new – critical subjectivity – therein) is already present within the existing ontology (for there can be no *outside* of it).⁸ He argues that the production of subjectivity – of a subject – emerges autonomously at the point where human life demonstrates that it is capable of supporting a new chain of action or of reality; which can only take place in response to a chance ‘event’ that opens up the possibility of ‘something new’. Badiou asserts that a critical practice – indeed the process of subjectivization – requires attending to those eventual moments when the incomprehensible or indiscernible momentarily ruptures the logic of what is already known, and in then sustaining the oblique trajectory of investigation which is set in flight by such a breach. It is a matter of learning how to tune in to the *virtual* wavelength of being that is inaudible or imperceptible to the logic of reason or knowledge and its ubiquitous modes of capture. For Badiou, the practice of *naming* (or even *autopoiesis*) – at an event-site – is the primary act performed within a critical process of subjectivization. The event is the encounter with something unpredictable, which cannot be comprehended by the terms of the existing ‘situation’.

In Badiou’s terms, ‘situation’ is used to describe the experience of a given or presented ‘reality’; the illusionary unity created by the operation of ‘count-as-one’. A situation consists of ‘multiple multiplicities’ (or elements) that have been counted as somehow ‘belonging’ to or within its structure (as counting-as-one). Once, organized (or captured) through the operation of count-as-one, the multiple multiplicities gathered within its terms are deemed to be a ‘unified presented’ or ‘consistent’ multiplicity. However, for Badiou there is also the

relationship between a creative practice and the process of subjectivization, where a practice does not produce a subject as such, rather it is *through* one that the subject is.²⁰ The relationship of practice to an emergent subjectivity is co-existence, the mode of production one of *reciprocity* – they produce one another simultaneously. These local configurations (of both subject and art) present as the faithful but perhaps futile evidence of a generic procedure underway. The futility of the endeavour relates to what Badiou describes as the *aporetic* dilemma at the heart of the truth procedure. The subject and its enquiry are only ever a partial (finite) or local configuration of the infinite trajectory of a truth-procedure – the quest is performed in fidelity to a truth that they will never know (for it is infinite and they are inescapably finite). The truth will always remain indiscernible, always out of reach, an ‘unfinishable condition’.²¹ For Badiou,

([E]very finite presentation falls under an encyclopedic determinant. In this sense, every *local* state of a procedure – thus every subject – being realized as a finite series of finite enquiries, is an object of knowledge [...] If the subject is purely local, it is finite, and even if its matter is aleatoric, it is dominated by a knowledge. This is a classic aporia: that of the finitude of human enterprises. A truth alone is infinite, yet the subject is not coextensive with it.²²

Subjectivization is the quest of the faithful who strive to gain access to the infinite and indiscernible truth of being, whilst also comprehending the impossibility or fallibility of such an endeavour. The subject (and art practice) is ‘both the *real* of the procedure (the enquiring of the

possibility of a situation existing *without* the count-for-one operation, which is understood as a ‘non-unified’ or ‘inconsistent multiplicity’, a state of being ‘something’ that remains ‘undecidable’ (perhaps even wild). The thought of this inconsistent multiplicity cannot be articulated in any direct way because to do so would mean to bring it (tamed) within the terms of an existing situation (to begin to count it as part of the situation – as part of the *one*). ‘Inconsistent multiplicity’ describes the state of *being* stripped bare of its identity, presenting as unrecognizable within the terms of any single count-as-one structure. The event however reveals the ‘truth’ of the existing situation—the ‘truth’ of the imperceptible inconsistent multiplicity—and in turn becomes a germinal site or opening for the production of ‘new multiples’. The ‘new multiple’ or situation—if it is developed through fidelity to the truth of the event – would remain indiscernible within the terms of the existing situation (or language); it would emerge Badiou asserts (borrowing from mathematical set theory) as a ‘generic set’ or as ‘indiscernibility’.

The challenge then is one of recognizing the event *as* an event, and of deciding how to act (differently) in accordance. The event must be recognized as an event and named, which Badiou describes as an ‘intervention’, the first act of a ‘generic truth procedure’ performed by ‘militants’ or the faithful – the ‘operator of faithful connection’ – who act in fidelity to the ‘truths’ revealed by the event.⁹ Dutton + Swindells’ work has the properties of a ‘generic truth procedure’ in that it is a form of praxis based on fidelity to an event, which they describe – partially allegorically – as an encounter with the deer in the woodland, but which in turn might equate to an encounter with and faith in art’s capacity to produce the new. In one sense, the work can be understood as the endeavour to produce new multiples or ‘generic sets’ (art-forms) which remain indiscernible or

enquiries) and the *hypothesis* that its unfinishable result will introduce some newness into presentation’.²³ Without any certainty of ever producing the sought after ‘truth-event’, the artists’ project is a mode of conviction where the work is performed blindly in the hope of or belief in the presence of some indiscernible truth therein. The commitment to the ‘generic set’ or truth procedure is based on confidence in a ‘future’ or ‘anterior’ moment (*to-come*) where the eruption of a truth-event or the new will retroactively ‘prove’ the ‘veridity’ of the those actions (performed) by the ‘faithful’, the indiscernible truths present within ‘the enquiring of the enquiry’. Articulated through the terms of an art practice however, a truth procedure also produces the possibility of surpluses or *residues* that whilst visible to the ‘situation’ still do not necessary fit easily within (or remain wild to) the order of knowledge [Figure 8]. Here, art presents as a fragment that (in Badiou’s terms) ‘materially declares the to-come – because even though it is discernible by knowledge, it is a fragment of an indiscernible trajectory’.²⁴ Whilst the objects or encounters produced within an art practice are ultimately finite assemblages that will inevitably become absorbed by the encyclopedia of what is known (become part of the counted-as-one of the situation), if they are ‘veridical’—truly part of a generic truth procedure—they will also contain ‘something’ indiscernible, something in excess which cannot be wholly described by the language of the situation. This perhaps is the blind-spot or even wildness, which might not function as an event in Badiou’s terms as such, but might rather exist as a form of shimmering iridescence—or ‘perceptual flickering’ for Dutton + Swindells—where it becomes possible to recognize momentarily the presence of something indiscernible.

Art presents the contradictory conditions where it is possible fleetingly to ‘see’ something that is imperceptible or indiscernible, to

incomprehensible within existing modes of representation and signification (that operate like an encounter with wildness). The 'generic set' operates then like a blind-spot. The production of a 'generic set' or a wholly *new* assemblage – true heterogeneity or the blind-spot – is an act necessarily performed *blindly*, for, as Badiou asserts, the generic set is indiscernible and can only be produced through an enquiry which is 'entirely aleatory in its trajectory. The only empirical evidence in the matter is that the trajectory begins at the borders of the evental site. The rest is lawless'.¹⁰ The task then is one of trying to produce or *force* something that cannot yet be known.¹¹ Dutton + Swindells describe the process of trying to locate the generic set as one of 'testing out combinations of things to explore entirely different affects. Then the question becomes one of which of these things is the thing we find ... most *truthful* [...] that is the most unknown, or the least familiar'.¹² The generic set – a new multiple of an art practice – is the thing *most truthful*, a new situation that cannot be described by the terms of what is already known. In these terms then, not only does art present the possibility of the rupturing force of the 'incomprehensible' and the promise of the new, but also the (artists') endeavour (*of autopoiesis* and naming) can in itself be understood as productive of a radically different or augmented form of critical being. Here then, the labour of studio practice is recuperated as having autonomous critical value, where it is no longer considered as part of a teleological process leading to the completion of resolved and named work, but rather is in itself a constitutive act.

Rather than conceiving of their practice as being realized through discrete exhibitions or pieces of work, Dutton + Swindells consider their activity holistically, as a singular critical operation that remains perpetually unfinished and consists of many interlocking parts. They name such an operation the *Institute of*

actually encounter that which is also beyond the spectrum of one's cognition. The presence of this latent indiscernibility within the tangible form of art objects perhaps allows for a form of rupture which—whilst not of the order of Badiou's event—might produce its own form of 'interventions' and 'faithful operators', the emergence of a nascent subject prompted by their *aporetic* encounter with a work of art (of simultaneously seeing/not seeing). Dutton + Swindells' practice appears to be motivated by the conviction or belief that art has the capacity to produce the conditions of such encounters (even a form of 'truth'), equivalent to or *approaching* the speechless mode of incommunicable proximity experienced in their encounter with the deer in the woodland, which they describe in terms of *aura*. In a sense, *aura* is the 'name' that they assign to the 'wordless authenticity' of the originary event, which again might equate perhaps to Badiou's concept of inconsistent multiplicity or 'truth'. In Dutton + Swindells' practice, the attempt to produce a 'generic set' or new multiple seems simultaneous to the desire to (re)produce the experience of the originary event or encounter. Badiou suggests that there is a future anterior moment to the truth procedure where the indiscernible 'is finally presented as the truth of the first situation'.²⁵ The question perhaps remains whether this presentation of the truth (of the first situation) is in turn an event in its own right. The possibility of this future event produced through the generic truth procedure does suggest that an event can actually be *prepared for*. In these terms, the generic truth procedure operates as the pragmatic project of making a life, an endeavour that both emerges from and prepares the ground for the possibility of something new. Within Dutton + Swindells' art practice, staying faithful to the originary event a 'generic truth procedure' also has the capacity to *produce* further events, the momentary – flickering – recognition of a truly 'generic set' (experienced as the 'blind-spot' of an art encounter). *This* event describes those moments

Beasts. The *Institute of Beasts* is not the name of an edifice designed and defined in advance of use, but rather an unfolding structure (in the process of being) produced by the activities of its inhabitants. It is a structure that houses – or is inhabited by – an expanding menagerie of divergent strategies and impulses. Consisting of a number of small departments – Folk Art, Animals and Art, Free association, Modern art, Music and Drawing, Monkey Nuts, Sign Paintings and Sentiments – the *Institute of Beasts* is a conceptual framework that Dutton + Swindells liken to an amalgam of the academy and a zoo. The crossing of these two structures is a deliberate act of collage, where neither can retain nor remember the logic of its originary context, the guiding principles of its epistemological framework. All that remains is a suspicion that some underpinning organizational principles must exist, the same as for games played when the rulebook has long since been lost or abandoned. The Institute's departments fail to maintain stability or assert control, for they are resolutely porous and unstable divides that cannot fully describe or contain the nature of the research activity taking place within their borders. Work produced under the auspices of one department is brought into the proximity of the activities of another, forcing the possibility of cross-departmental collaborations. The *Institute of Beasts* does not operate according to any singular disciplinary logic, but neither it is a wholly interdisciplinary endeavour. Rather than trying to produce a hybrid practice which has inherited the properties of *bothormany*, Dutton + Swindells investigate the point that something begins to shift between one category and another; they test the limits of a system of classification until it is almost breached and cannot hold. The artists refuse to remain faithful to singular disciplinary or departmental tactics but rather it is through their unexpected combination that they hope to create a sense of inconsistency and contradiction, producing the germinal conditions wherein something indiscernible or

of perceptual flickering when it becomes possible (for both artists and audience) to see what cannot be seen, when it is possible to 'know' that something indiscernible is being encountered. The production of the blind-spot re-convinces the faithful (artists), at the same time as being a new form of event for prospective disciples, in turn producing the possibility of a faithful *community*. Here then, perhaps, within the terms of a truth procedure (taking the form of an art practice) the revelation of the generic set also has the capacity to be eventual.



Fig.9. *Dept. of Celestial Mechanics Wall-Installation* (in-progress), YASS Studios, Sheffield, July 2010, Dutton + Swindells.

There is a sense of this double possibility of event in Dutton + Swindells' practice: the signature of an originary moment of rupture and then the endeavour to produce further ruptures (or *event-ripples*). The first event produces the incentive to act – or believe – whilst the endeavour of trying to produce subsequent events is born of a desire to be further convinced (and to convince others). Here, Dutton + Swindells face their ultimate challenge, for the work requires its disciples, its own operators of the faithful connection who are willing to open themselves to the possibility of the indiscernible truth – the possibility of the event – present within an art practice. The audience (to-come) must have faith in art's capacity to produce the unexpected, the possibility of something unknown or truly wild. We – as the potential audience – are called to bear witness to the artists' attempts at conjuring something new,

unrecognizable might arise.



Fig.1. Dutton + Swindells, *Studio Production*, Ssamzie Art Space Studios, Seoul, February 2008. Courtesy of the artists.

Dutton + Swindells' practice takes the form of a series of lengthy and indefinite stages or processes, which are forever changing and mercurial. Resulting *works* are the residue of such an endeavour, however, it is the tactics themselves that constitute the *work*, the artists' faithful operation. For Dutton + Swindells, the space of the studio – which is in turn extended to the space of the residency – is the site of practice wherein a 'generic truth procedure' is played out. The habitually unseen activity of artistic practice operates analogously to Badiou's 'generic truth procedure' or 'the enquiring of the enquiry', where what is subsequently made visible through exhibition is perhaps that which is deemed most 'truthful' by the artists. This relationship between the 'enquiry' and its residue can be witnessed in the documentation of Dutton + Swindells' residency at Ssamzie Art Space [Figure 1]. The operational phases of activity are marked by their formlessness as the artists assemble, reassemble, combine and recombine innumerable elements in the hope of somehow rupturing the count-as-one coherence of the situation, of producing the unexpected anomaly of something 'indiscernible'. Familiar forms are worried until they begin to break down and recombine differently. Incongruent components are slowly reduced to exquisite distillations, unruly half-forms. Half-finished assemblages, strewn floors and walls, the scattered debris of past

something unlike. In return, we are asked to believe, to hold back our desire to measure or tame that experience by the terms of what we already know, but rather to conceive of new names, new languages through which to speak of our collective encounters. In these terms, art presents as the provocation for new enquiries, new truth procedures operated by the new faithful. Here, the opening of the *new* or wild is not so much the perceptible breach or puncture of the habitual or already known (of virtuality *rupturing* actuality) but rather it describes an oblique trajectory of an indiscernible – and perhaps collective – operation perpetually performed at the cusp of a given situation (along the shimmering margins where virtuality and actuality intersect); imperceptible moves towards the incomprehensible wild.

¹ Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells, 'Writing Encounters: "Institute of Beasts" (2008)', in *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 2:1 July 2009, p. 124. This article has been developed following an extended interview process conducted with the artists (2007 – 2010). I would like to thank Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells for the provocation offered by their work and our conversations around it. I would also like to thank Simon O'Sullivan for his timely recommendations and critical advice.

² The article will explore the 'event' as an unexpected encounter with something 'wild', where the term 'wild' designates that which cannot be fully comprehended or recognized, through existing language.

³ Dutton + Swindells' conceptualization of the 'event' in the first instance does not *explicitly* reference Badiou's philosophical writing, rather, it is the *implicit* connections and resonances between these two accounts that this article takes as its basis.

experiments abandoned or paused part way through. Nascent activity cannot be differentiated from that which has already collapsed or become entropic; emergent forms remain indistinguishable from those already in ruins. Within this process, certain formulations stay or become refined whilst others are erased, swept away, forgotten. Badiou describes the various combinations submitted to enquiry by the 'subject' within a given moment of the generic procedure as the 'matter of the subject'.¹³ Dutton + Swindells identify their 'matter' through a form of endless experimentation, the perpetual creation of situations to which they add new or unruly elements in order to attempt to rupture its status as count-as-one. The task becomes one of trying to locate the 'generic set' that cannot be counted-as-one (or perhaps remains *wild*) within the terms of the existing situation.



Fig.2. Dutton + Swindells, *Installation with Lovebirds*, Ssamzie Art Space Studios, Seoul, March 2008, Image courtesy of the artists.

Eventually, what is left behind in the Ssamzie Art Space included a pair of inverted photographs of two lovebirds; a birdcage containing the same; a platform or mat cut from pink Perspex upon which the birdcage stood, based on a wall-drawing that in turn quoted the infamous Symbionese Liberation Army's revolutionary slogan, 'Death to the fascist insect that preys on the life of the people'. A flash animation in the corner offered a slowly revolving multi-faceted crystalline 'head' orbited by three spinning peanut-shaped satellites, against the backdrop of a changing spectrum of flat colour. The animation

⁴ Email correspondence with Steve Swindells (6 September 2010). For Dutton + Swindells, the studio is not seen as a stable base but rather a nomadic structure, where their practice develops in 'batches' determined by the specific context of each space.

⁵ See Emma Cocker, 'Beyond Belief - In Conversation with Ben Judd', in *Something and Nothing, so anyway*, Summer 2010, <http://www.soanyway.org.uk/benjudd.h>

Accessed 18 September 2010.

⁶ 'Singular love' is a specific example of event given by Alain Badiou in *Being and Event*, translated by O. Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 393.

⁷ Steve Dutton, in *At the Margins of Intelligibility - Emma Cocker in Conversation with Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells*, 2008-9, unpublished interview.

⁸ See also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁹ Badiou outlines this process in his section, 'Subjectivization: Intervention and Operator of Faithful Connection' in *Being and Event*, pp. 392-394.

¹⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 394.

¹¹ Badiou gives an account of the practice of *forcing* in the section, "Veracity and Truth from the Standpoint of the Faithful Procedure: Forcing", in *Being and Event*, p. 400.

¹² Steve Dutton, *At the Margins of Intelligibility - Emma Cocker in Conversation with Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells*, 2008-9, unpublished.

¹³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 394.

¹⁴ Dutton + Swindells' statement. <http://steve-dutton.co.uk> Accessed 18 September 2010.

was accompanied by a soundtrack that consisted of the script of *The Exorcist* read by a computerized voice and sped up 2000 times to the pitch of twittering birds [Figure 2]. A further animation brought together the textual results of free association exercises performed as part of the residency – a series of words, randomly appearing with no apparent means of connection. Elsewhere, a gathering of giant ceramic monkey nuts rested on a shallow plinth, whilst on a bed of straw on the floor two neon signs flashed on and off, *nolens/volens*. In one sense, it is impossible to describe any singular or individual piece of work by the artists, for their work is the event of various combinations of elements, the fleeting instant of momentary stillness within a never-ending permutational chain of possibilities. Description of the various elements of their work inevitably slips towards the characteristics of a list (of ingredients), spell-like: a pair of lovebirds bring the enigma of the singular-double bind; liquid language hovering at the limit of legibility; a bear mask (threadbare, worn); embarrassing revelations let slip; livestock (indifferent, beyond affection); a twittering sound; the slogans of revolution (failed, forgotten, misplaced); a baroque flourish; acrid pink and shiny polymer, the beat of a pulse.

The residency itself resulted less in a sense of resolved work (which might become portable commodities or touring works), but rather was used as a specific situational context wherein to pursue and test a number of possible tactical combinations, in the hope of producing the event of an encounter with something wild. The identification of specific tactics developed within the context of a singular residency or the space of the studio, fails to ever accumulate into a coherent sense of method, for within this endeavour there can be no retracing of steps. The unexpected or indiscernible is necessarily unpredictable and must be stumbled upon. New forms of operating are provoked into being through the encounter with a situation unlike what

[15](#) Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells, 'Writing Encounters: "Institute of Beasts" (2008)', in *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 2:1 July 2009, p. 120.

[16](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 400.

[17](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 398.

[18](#) For Badiou, the subject is 'any local configuration of a generic procedure from which a truth is supported', 2005, p. 391.

[19](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 392.

[20](#) For Badiou, 'the subject is "between" the terms that the procedure groups together', Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 396. In these terms, the subject is neither the product of an art practice, nor an art practice the product of a subject but rather both are intertwined.

[21](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.

[22](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 395.

[23](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.

[24](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 397.

[25](#) Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 398.

has come before. Each situation requires its own approach. The artists' enquiry thus remains willfully *errant*, a little blind. It requires a mode of playfulness, voluntary submission to the capricious rules of chance. However, for Dutton + Swindells, the operation of chance does not call for a random or arbitrary approach to the making of work. Indeed, it is possible to identify an arsenal of recurring strategies (the praxis or technologies of *forcing*) – including the tactics of inversion, rotation, free-association, doubling – and a particular repertory of rhetorical tropes and motifs that are intermittently brought into play. Particular attention is given over to the resurrection of emblems or signatures from within historical moments of failed revolution, resistance or even utopianism; doomed projects fueled by the desire to rewrite or re-conceptualize reality as something different to how things already are. Dutton + Swindells sift through the fallen ruins of modernist architecture or the faded and forgotten slogans of political radicalism, in search of unfulfilled proposals, inflammatory manifestoes, impossible visions of a future (now past). Such references exist at the level of the work's buried archaeology, a densely layered palimpsest whose intricate inscriptions are only half-legible but which remain present nonetheless. The artists' intent is not to resurrect the cause or specificity of the revolutionary's plight, rather to excavate a sense of the complex aporetic quality of the deflated revolutionary promise, the coexistence or simultaneity of conflicting residual affects therein. The failed moments and monuments of the past are ambivalent sites of contradiction and (im)potency; equally charged and depleted of power like the refusal suspended forever at the point where it begins to yield or acquiesce.

The presence of contradiction – of potency and impotency, for example – does not lead towards neutrality however, nor cause meaning to fluctuate only between the terms of either/or. Instead, it is used to create a kind of impasse or barricade against

which comprehension stumbles and cannot move beyond. Inconsistencies and contradictions are purposefully produced by the artists as a way of attempting to prevent a situation from presenting as a 'consistent' or 'unified' multiplicity, in order to thwart the operation of 'count-as-one'. The artists assert that, 'Contradictions are a means to an end; united by a sense of expectation and delay of resolution. In turn, this delay allows something to be understood differently, indeed, it allows the very concept of understanding to be understood differently'.¹⁴ Willful inconsistency becomes a way of resisting or rejecting consistency as the desirable paradigm. It reveals the inadequacy or fallacy of existing systems of classification or representation, whilst simultaneously attempting to rupture such systems in the pursuit of something new or indiscernible within its terms. Contradiction describes a mode of restlessness, of being critical of or frustrated with existing options; of relentlessly searching for or trying to produce *some other* way of adequately describing the experience of being, some other 'name'. It forces a stammering or flickering in the path of understanding's procedural flight, blocking the possibility of smooth assimilation into an existing categorical order. Contradictions render knowledge impotent, powerless and unable to perform. Impotency, in turn, makes things vulnerable, defenseless – a little tender. Meanings flail, become flaccid and unable to hold their shape or form. Impotency, then, has a double function: it renders things formless but also produces a molten state out of which new forms might arise – it breaks things down but also leaves them *open*.

Dutton + Swindells use impotency as a strategy of disempowerment, or rather as a way of discharging or exorcising forms of power that have developed through established hierarchies of value and existing systems of belief, in order to create space within which something else might emerge. Impotency, then, becomes the terrain upon which new

forces are called into being, for that which is impotent also possesses a tremendous latent charge. It wishes intensely for a potency that it is lacking, its absence fuels a desire, a powerful longing for. Here perhaps, it is possible to gain a glimpse of a now obsolete conception of impotency, where it is defined by its lack of self-restraint, even a kind of wildness. The impotent thus becomes curiously libidinal, ungovernable. Prevented from ever fully actualizing its desires and attaining visible power, impotency remains a form of desert – or wilderness – and yet also the ever-hopeful plane of possibility from within which fledgling forms are coaxed shimmering—like mirages—to the brink of being. However, by failing to perform, impotency falls beneath the radar of what is valued by a culture driven by goal-oriented productivity and outcome-based success. In turn, that which is perceived as powerless can become a blind-spot: invisible, exempted or ignored. Impotency thus emerges as a mode of stealth or clandestine operation; where it begins to approach a mode of indiscernibility perhaps not altogether unlike Badiou's 'inconsistent multiplicity'. Here, Dutton + Swindells' work can be seen as the attempt to make visible the 'inconsistent multiplicity' that is the impotent or imperceptible state of being without the operation of Badiou's 'count-as-one': being without a proper name. They attempt to strip the situations' elements of their specific identity (within the habitual order of things) in order that they are laid bare or rendered impotent. The artists attempt this through the constant reorganization (division or separation) of the situation through different frames of reference in order to produce different affects.

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