

TALKING ABOUT IAN WILSON



A 'voice': we have to understand what sounds from a human throat without being language, which emerges from an animal gullet or from any kind of instrument, even from the wind in the branches: the rustling toward which we strain or lend an ear.

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*

With respect to presentation, we must imagine the time of an occurrence as – and only as – present.

This present cannot be grasped as such, it is absolute.

— Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*

Philosophy, like language itself, comes from an aural tradition. For the Greeks, thinking was a social practice, where knowledge became inflected by place, proximity, and presence. Such congress made for physical and epistemic common ground. Doing philosophy—in a Socratic sense, for instance—was a very localized practice of questioning and reasoning, drawing upon situated experience, and mining a knowledge that was already, to some extent, held in common. Rendered through Plato's dramatic form, Socrates' itinerant pedagogy unfolds on the scene of the arcade, the portico, the gymnasium, or party. We see the what and the how of knowledge emerge from the where and the who of each dialogue or colloquy. But inasmuch as philosophy might be something like the doing of friendship, acquaintance becomes a form of provenance in a political economy of ideas.¹ Socrates capitalized artfully on an always present differential of knowledge, drawing out the particularities of individual difference to inform shared understanding, while at the same time preserving a pedagogical hierarchy of his (or was it Plato's?) own making. Indeed, the aural practice of Western philosophy relies on the displacement of knowledge by and through the other in order that it may become consolidated.

¹ Jacques Derrida writes extensively of a political economy of friendship, through love and enmity, in *The Politics of Friendship*.

Yet the tremulous materiality of speech—the way sound is muted by matter, the natural attenuation of tone, the plasticity of memory—ensures that knowledge as such can never be grasped. When we speak together, where is knowledge located? In the vibration of my vocal cords? In the sound waves between us? In the absorption of sound by our bodies? In, perhaps, a lingering resonance...In other words, how do the material qualities of speech and bodily dispositions of listening contribute to the social practice of thinking? In his short volume, *Listening*, in which he entertains the question of whether philosophy might be capable of listening at all, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin...”² He parses a series of cognitive faculties that include hearing, listening, understanding, and philosophizing to consider the affective, spatialized, and sonorous practice of sense-making. Nancy’s meditation on listening tunes us in to an interior relationality already implicit within the self, much as with others, and the alliance between how listening happens and what it can offer to a practice of philosophy and its attendant problems in epistemology and phenomenology. This line of questioning leads us to consider what the physiology of listening, (no longer sublimated to the dominance of sight) might capacitate in a sustained engagement with metaphysics.

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It is within the context of these philosophical genealogies that, for me, the artistic practice of Ian Wilson resonates. Wilson, though a comparatively little-known artist, is perhaps best known for his series of “discussions”—a medium he made his own. These discussions have taken place sporadically over the past forty years or so, in homes and restaurants, galleries or museums, and are led by Wilson, who engages interlocutors in thinking around a central philosophical question. For the better part of his career, Wilson has dedicated himself to exploring the discussion as a format for art, a forum of exchange, and a form of pedagogy. More than this, though, for Wilson the themes of these discussions are not merely conceptual, they are consequential. Thinking with others about fundamental philosophical problems of time, known/unknown, presence/absence, and the absolute merges spiritual, epistemological, and social practice—becoming, for Wilson, a way of life, much in the style of the ancient Greeks³. That this work is also considered art perhaps reveals the categorical drifting and shifting between art and philosophy over time, and the sometime alliance of these two fields of inquiry.

² Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 7.

³ See Pierre Hadot’s essay “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

Talking about Wilson's work in the context of art, though, is difficult: there is no *thing* to talk about. Where is the work? In the spoken word? In the memories of participants? Can the work only really be accounted for in the long arc of Wilson's career? If description, the essential technique of an art writer, gets close to an object or event, traces its contours in what is at once a redoubling of the thing and performance of critique—here there is nothing to get close to, nothing that persists in its presence, or can be said to have even consolidated in an event. I can really only talk *about* Wilson's work, in a prepositional sense, in an effort to circumscribe it. Throughout this essay I trace several broad circles about Ian Wilson and his work, and remain particularly attendant to the theme of Wilson's most recent realm of inquiry: the absolute. I recount the experience of participating in a Discussion with Wilson last year at Dia:Beacon, where we contemplated how it might be possible to cultivate "The Pure Awareness of the Absolute". I consider how Wilson's ideas of the absolute may be inflected by consistent thematics running through the work of he and his colleagues during the 1960s and 70s, the social and political eventfulness of those decades, and philosophical worlds among which notions of the absolute have circulated. I endeavor to think with Wilson and a motley crew of others *about* the affective experience of the absolute, the pedagogical work of *thinking* the absolute, and the ways in which speaking and thinking come to participate in that which is perhaps immanently unspeakable and unthinkable.

WORKS

Ian Wilson is underexposed by today's standards. His name circulates sporadically in art contexts. His works have not been widely publicized and the few images that float around the Internet are much older. There is no artist website, no Wikipedia page. There are no photographs of his discussions. In addition to a sparse catalogue of folios and notecards Wilson produced in the eighties, two monographs have been published (one in English). The extent of Wilson's biographical information available in the public domain is roughly as follows: "b. 1940 (South Africa)"—thanks to the standard art industry byline that appears on curriculum vitae and didactic panels.

Wilson emerged on the art scene in New York City in the late 1960s, attending the Art Student's League as a painter. He experimented briefly with abstract expressionist techniques before refining the Minimalist approach that would come to define his sparse catalogue of early artworks. Around 1966 he produced a number of monochromatic paintings using layers of acrylic wash on canvas, resulting (apparently) in a stark, yet sensuous, pronouncement of visual tone. He soon moved from canvas to

fiberglass as a base medium, which enabled experimentation with the sculptural potential of an otherwise two-dimensional form. For *Red Square*, (in dialogue with Russian avant-garde painter Kasimir Malevich's 1915 painting of the same name), Wilson created a radiant red-orange surface with imperceptibly chamfered edges, affecting a shadow-less color plane in slight relief from the wall. Continuing to explore perceptual effects through the relation of object and environment (in a similar genus with Robert Irwin, who eventually also abandoned objects in favor of immersive light environments), Wilson made a series of *Discs* from unpainted fiberglass that, when hung, gave the illusion of a slight round protuberance in relief from the taut surface of the wall.

Wilson's next few works, *Chalk Circle on the Floor* and *Circle on the Wall* (both 1968) can be understood as a critical hinge between his early object works and later language pieces. Drawn with chalk and graphite, respectively, the circles became legible through the building up of calcium and carbon dust. Wilson enjoined gallerists to create and then preserve these circles, asking that the line be retraced if its form were to be compromised, for instance, by the footsteps of visitors. Wilson first showed *Chalk Circle...* at the Bykert Gallery in New York in 1968. Subsequent (unlimited) editions of this and *Circle...Wall* are installed in galleries according to specific instructions that Wilson sends, along with signed certificates of purchase (amount unknown). The instructions for *Chalk Circle* are as follows:

Attach a white china chalk pencil to one end of a 3-foot long thin wire (the actual chalk center of the pencil would be $\frac{3}{8}$ th of an inch before sharpening). At the other end of the wire attach a nail. After hammering the nail into the floor, draw the circle around the nail, keeping the wire taut. Using the enclosed photo of the density of the white chalk, gradually build up the line until it is $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch thick. When the circle is drawn, remove the nail from the floor. From time to time using the above described method, redraw any portions of the circle that have been smudged, keeping the circle as clean and as well defined as possible.⁴

These circles were not discrete objects but the result of a process—they could be reproduced exactly, anywhere, ad infinitum, through the labor of tracing a continuous radial arc. They could be as easily effaced too. Wilson's instructions are particular and worth noting: drawing a circle from a central point using a radius is very different from an alternative, where one might trace around a circumference. In the latter instance, the hand starts from a fixed point and ventures away before coming close to the body again. But to prepare the circle as Wilson designs, the whole body is implicated: arm fixed as radius, my whole self turns in the process of its own inscription.

Wilson's practice was from the outset embedded with an originary sensibility that was also its ethic: inherent in the impulse to create was the impulse to reduce, to express an idea using the most

⁴ Rorimer, Anne. "Ian Wilson — The Object of Thought" from *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 7.

minimal means. His work has maintained this signature tension between conceptual and formalist concerns, even—or perhaps especially—when its minimal means became spoken words. Wilson’s tendency to continually reduce form toward greater levels of abstraction is an effort to work ever more closely with concepts, and with that which does not rely on a metaphysics of presence. His work invites participants to consider: what is the form of thought?

The same year Wilson produced *Chalk Circle*... his work turned exclusively toward language as a means by which to “grasp the non-visual world.”⁵ In an interview with Oscar van den Boogaard at the Jan Mot Gallery in Brussels in 2002, Wilson described this transition from circle to spoken word: “I discovered that thinking and talking about that circle had a greater abstraction than reproducing that circle on the floor or the wall. The circle could be represented by using the word 'circle'. The circle could be brought to mind by the signifier... A following step in the dematerialization of my art was to use the word 'Time'... The years after that I wouldn't say that I was preoccupied with 'time' but with 'oral communication'. This way the conversations became oriented more specifically to speaking itself and spoken art.”⁶ Foregoing physical materiality for a linguistic engagement with semiotics, Wilson’s interests were free to move toward greater abstraction.

But I have concealed several significant moves in this sequence of ellipses. Wilson’s conceptual shift from circles to “time” is not by way of any formal syllogism of hands working round circular planes; instead, he says, “the word time contained everything I tried to do in the white circle”⁷. Talking about “time” better allowed him to evoke something, bring something particular into existence while resisting (its) objectification. I want to linger for a moment on Wilson’s account of his work with “time,” as told to curator and art historian Ann Rorimer:

I would be at a gallery opening and someone would ask me: ‘so what are you doing these days?’ I would reply, ‘I am interested in the word time.’ Later, someone would ask: ‘But how can time be your art?’ And I might have replied: ‘As it is spoken, “time.”’ ‘Another day, someone might have asked, having heard I was using ‘time’ as my art: ‘So what are you working with these days’ and I would reply: ‘ “time.” I am interested in the idea.’ ... I like the word when it is spoken: ‘time.’ And so the word was used over and over again.⁸

This word, “time”, gets worked, manipulated like a daub of red paint or block of clay or pas de bourrée, in varied combinations and to differing effect. But it is not merely the phonetic materiality of the word that is exercised here. Wilson is aiming to do real philosophical work on the concept of time. How to work on that

⁵ Wilson, Ian. “Conceptual Art” from *Artforum*, vol. 22, February 1984, no. 6, p. 60. Quote appears in Rorimer, Anne. “Ian Wilson — The Object of Thought” from *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 17.

⁶ Interview with Ian Wilson and Oscar van den Boogaard, *Jan Mot Gallery Newspaper* 32, May-June 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rorimer, Anne. “Ian Wilson — The Object of Thought” from *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 9.

which is unyielding? How to *think* time? He resorts to word play: how can time be art? As it is spoken, of course. And though this plays wryly, (he uses humor to flip a cognitive switch like Duchamp or Broodthaers might have done), it is also, exactly true. He renders time, *like* language and *through* language, not as an object, but a medium. “Time” becomes a performative speech act, or perhaps, “time” becomes demonstrative of time as a tree becomes demonstrative of wind.

If the utterance became demonstrative (and analytic) of time, its meaning and function came to reverberate socially. Consistent with his reductive tendency, Wilson worked with language in such a way that grounded art production and exhibition in a common denominator of the social. The “work” is not discrete, but happens over time; each Discussion is a singular instantiation of collective thoughts. The Time Discussions spanned a year (1968-69), at which point Wilson segued into a series of Oral Communication Discussions that ran from 1969-72. These discussions functioned as a meta-reflection of oral communication itself and as a ‘work’ of art. Yet as the subject matter of these discussions evolved over decades, Wilson seemed to build upon the work he had done with each preceding theme; oral communication, for instance, offered a different way for Wilson to position himself with respect to temporality. Artist Robert Barry, a friend and contemporary of Wilson’s, said of the discussions: “I thought of it in terms of what I knew about art, about materials that artists use. I myself was using radio carrier waves which dissolve when I first heard about oral communication. I thought of it in those terms, or like the [inert] gas I was releasing in the atmosphere then, something that was gone, and you didn’t have a chance to do anything with it.”⁹ Wilson and Barry were among many artists working at the time for whom questions of temporality and ontology, presence and knowledge became entwined. I circle back to this trend later.

Wilson turned directly to questions of epistemology in his third series, The Known and Unknown Discussions, which ran from roughly 1972-86. A write-up in a 1974 issue of *Flash Art* documents the premise of some of these early discussions: “The artist suggested to precisely discuss the problems and methods of knowledge, starting from Plato’s proposition according to which there is no middle course between knowledge and ignorance and people are not able to say what is known and what is not. Such a proposition should have prohibited all discursive thought since it affirms the impossibility of expressing in

⁹ Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*... (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 182

general terms either a true or false judgment.”¹⁰ In other words, the premise of the discussion about knowledge was to consider the futility of discourse with respect to the adjudication of knowledge. Here is Wilson’s wry sensibility again. According to this proposition, speech is not only implicated in the moral and political consequence of knowledge, but becomes the very threshold of that which can be known. If to articulate the “unknown” is to enfold it within what is known, does speech, therefore, preclude *thinking* that which is truly unspeakable or unknowable?

During this time Wilson also experimented with printed matter as an extension of these discussions, exploiting the formal and material qualities of the folio, and the graphic weight of space against text as another way of thinking the epistemological dualism of known/unknown. Here is one example¹¹:

**that which
is both
known and
unknown
is what
is known**

**that which
is both
known and
unknown
is not
known
as both
known
and unknown
whatever
is known
is just
known**

This text is manifold. Part poetry, part kōan, part graphic art—it has its own style and analytics for mobilizing thought around, between, and through the knowledge binary. The long-vowel root rhythms structure the piece, while a sparse few modifiers hang around to positively or negatively mark difference. We see the flitting play of this division (known/unknown) run along ragged lines, but the real distinction is parsed by the clean edge, the apparent horizon that marks the space of the unknown. And there is something colloquial, almost flippant, about the last phrase—“whatever is known is just known.” It breaks from the formal decree-quality of the two preceding statements, and invites indiscernibility against the

¹⁰ Translated from the French in *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 77.

¹¹ Rorimer, Anne. “Ian Wilson — The Object of Thought” from *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 12.

precision suggested by the “that which”. Wilson seems to be playing in the interstices between the laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle.

In 1986, Wilson’s *Known/Unknown Discussions* came to a close. He took up residency in an ashram in upstate New York, where he lived, studied, and practiced yoga for eight years. During this time, (as far as we know) Wilson did not hold any Discussions.

CONTEXT

I want to take this opportune pause in Wilson’s (public) biography to discuss the social and cultural context surrounding his work. Writer, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard illuminates the conditions from which conceptual art and life-art emerged in the 1960s: “The era of Conceptual Art—which was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Woman’s Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture—was a real free-for-all, and the democratic implications of that phrase are fully appropriate, if never realized...The power of the imagination was at the core of even the stodgiest attempts to escape from ‘cultural confinements,’ as Robert Smithson put it, from the sacrosanct ivory walls and heroic, patriarchal mythologies with which the 1960s opened.”¹² Institutional dissolution was happening all around, from schools, gender, and family to government, science, and knowledge itself. Heightened political awareness and activism took the form of disestablishment and social unrest as well as communalism and the back-to-the-land movement, in various permutations of the unmaking and remaking of social life. Art making followed suit, with new forms including institutional critique, land art, video, performance, and life-art.

And as art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has pointed to, many of these “formal strategies” were also means of institutional and systemic critique.¹³ Earlier, I mentioned Wilson’s resonance with artist Robert Barry, for whom problems of language, ineffability, and expanded conceptions of the object are foregrounded in his practice. Among Wilson and Barry, we can also distinguish Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, the collective Art + Language, and Lee Lozano as contemporaries who shared a deep concern for the metaphysical work of language.¹⁴ Lozano, in particular, also worked in a discussion format, which she called “Dialogue Piece”. For her, there was perhaps more investment in producing herself in a social

¹² Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. vii.

¹³ In “Feminist Time: A Conversation” with Aruna D’Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Muller, Mignon Nixon, and Senam Okudze, Deutsche discusses the convergence of genealogies of feminism and contemporary art history. She credits the emergence of feminist praxis as having influenced critical forms of site-specificity, video installation, performance, and conceptual art, particularly as these work to challenge consolidated subjecthood and the “fixed viewpoint, totalizing vision, the abstract body, and the monological voice that silences others.” From *Grey Room* 31. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 62.

¹⁴ Ann Rorimer goes into greater depth about how Wilson’s work can be understood in the context of works by Barry, Weiner, Kosuth, and Art & Language in her essay “Ian Wilson — The Object of Thought” in *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008).

context removed from (but always in dialogue with) the art world¹⁵, yet both “Discussions” and “Dialogue” exploit properties of ephemerality, chance, indeterminacy, and non-reproducibility. As with Barry’s inert gas piece and the pursuits of many other conceptual and life-artists of the 1960s and 70s, these works called into question the object/ive of art. This is to say—with the dissolution of the art object, art as a form of social engagement could assume broader programmatic capacities; the one is integral to the other. Since these works were free or inexpensive to produce, and in many cases did not require investments in spatial or material resources, artists could manage to make work even amidst widespread conditions of job insecurity and without formal patronage. Rejecting the commercialization of art and allied exclusivity, artists bypassed institutions altogether, or used them as part of the work itself to produce new socio-affective experiences. They could elect whether or not their work would fall under the rubric of art, or to whom it might remain legible as such. Geographically untethered, artists were endowed with greater mobility to exist semi-autonomously within extant art contexts, and to expand into uncharted domains. A piece might not just be sited in other contexts like a desert or a city street, an intimate conversation or the basal rhythms of one’s own body, but might actually only be made possible by these places and the types of social and aesthetic engagement they elicited. Here we see an integrated, three-fold effect characteristic of each wave of the avant-garde: the rejection of dominant orders, the emergence of new aesthetic forms, and the manifestation of new types of social engagement.

Conceptual art and life-art created both an expansion and contraction of the art-engaged public—outward, to include a so-called general public, and inward, to eclipse meaning and address from all but a few, or to obscure the work entirely. For many conceptual artists, including Lee Lozano and her colleague Stephen Kaltenbach, such newfound mobility projected them in and then through the realm of art back into life, leaving the art world, (unlike Wilson, or Duchamp), never to return. Kaltenbach describes his own exodus from the world of art as “a love of secrecy and the desire to commit oneself to a gesture so expansive in time that its overall form becomes imperceptible from any given point.”¹⁶ And as Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer writes of Lozano’s own withdrawal from the art world: “Persistent holes in our knowledge

¹⁵ As Lozano writes in her notebook: “The Dialogue Piece comes the closest so far to an ideal I have of a kind of art that would never cease returning feedback to me or to others, which continually refreshes itself with new information, which approaches an ideal merger of form and content, which can never be ‘finished’, which can never run out of material, which doesn’t involve ‘the artist & observer’ but makes both participants artist & observer simultaneously, which is not for sale, which is not difficult to make, which is inexpensive to make, which can never be completely understood, parts of which will always remain mysterious & unknown, which is unpredictable & predictable at the same time, in fact, this piece approaches having everything I enjoy or seek abt art, and it cannot be put in a gallery...what if I stopped doing different pieces & just did the dialogue piece for the rest of my life as my ‘work’? I could move to an exotic place & do it there; it has no space or time boundaries.” From Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer’s monograph *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 55.

¹⁶ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 33.

of underground, post-*Dropout* Lozano signify the importance of not knowing and not seeing as a vital extension of the privacy and incommunicability built into ‘Life-Art’.”¹⁷ For some, (including Wilson, for a time), the last frontier of de-objectification was the category of art itself. Kaltenbach and Lehrer-Graiwer’s comments also shed light on how the social affordances of conceptual and life-art, both expansive and delimiting, are part and parcel of Wilson’s particular proclivities and philosophical pursuits. In life as in knowledge, some things are just off limits.

That such barely discernible work might be considered art, and might eventually come to be revered within art institutions meant that curators, institutions, and financiers were flexing too. Curators like Lucy Lippard and Seth Siegelaub were instrumental in coalescing notions of conceptual and life-art; their shows and writings in alternative venues central to the possibility of something like conceptual art being recognized at all. Lippard curated important exhibitions such as the 1969 benefit show for the Art Workers Coalition in the Paula Cooper Gallery, featuring non-object works in the large gallery by Wilson, Barry, Kaltenbach, Weiner, Carl Andre and Hans Haacke, among others, and a small side gallery filled with pamphlets, photos, Xeroxes, and other ephemera. Siegelaub, after running his own gallery for two years, was famous for his nomadic curatorial projects, including guest editing/occupying an issue of a British art journal, and producing Andre’s “Joint” (“183 units of uncovered common bailed hay end-to-end from woods into a field”¹⁸) at Windham College in Vermont. Moreover, Siegelaub, as publisher, and Lippard, later as a founder of the artist bookstore Printed Matter, both explored the format of books and pamphlet publications as potential venues for the expression of conceptual work. This was yet another expansion of art in the public realm, a way of subverting the demands of the art market, and a medium that would let a new form of art live. Though the art object may have dematerialized, it did not disappear; it came to instantiate itself through more dispersed forms of information and experience. Lippard noted in 1969, “the new dematerialized art...provides a way of getting the power structure out of New York and spreading it around to wherever an artist feels like being at the time. Much art now is transported by the artist, or in the artist himself [sic], rather than by watered-down, belated circulating exhibitions or by existing information networks.”¹⁹ No longer shuttling between material and social production, the artist just could be present. Eventually, of course, some of this work made its way back into institutions. This double involution—of artists breaking out, and museums letting in—meant an institutional absorption of dissensus, and the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸ Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*... (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 46.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. xvii.

especially odd accommodation of non-objects into an object-based art economy. Although conceptual art could not entirely resist the rapacious advance of capital, this might say less about artists selling out and more about the weird conditions under which something like “nothing” can become commodified.²⁰ Yet even within the museum or gallery, Wilson’s Discussion format still has legs in the way Lippard describes above. It becomes its own hyper-local niche, contingent, singular, each meeting full with its specific potentiality. As art writer René Denizot says of Wilson’s work, “It was the possibility of an art of which nothing would remain, an art for the present, making an event of a singular existence appear and disappear, always other than itself.”²¹

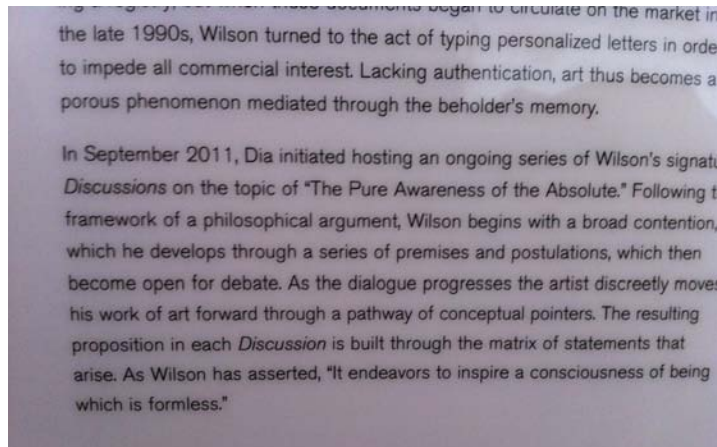
THE PURE AWARENESS OF THE ABSOLUTE

Wilson resumed Discussions again in 1994, meeting only with individuals for another five years until 1999, when he had a public Discussion on the idea of the Absolute at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. For the last 15 years, he has held Discussions sporadically on this same theme, mainly at the Jan Mot Gallery in Brussels and the Dia:Beacon Museum in upstate New York. It was at Dia:Beacon (known for its collection of minimalist and conceptual art) last winter that I first became aware of Ian Wilson.

I sat in front of Michael Heizer’s *North, East, South, West* for a long time, drawn to the geometrical voids. I was sitting on a bench that ran along the wall in front of them (the voids were very much *there*), and from this perspective noticed that the top of the glass partition (preventing anyone from falling in) ran contiguously at the same height as the base of the windowsills on the opposite wall. Eventually I wandered to other parts of the museum, and walked by a room with a number of very Platonic-looking wooden chairs arranged in an oval. The room was reserved, a stage set for a series of discussions that had once taken place and would take place intermittently in the years to come. The didactic on the wall outside of the room described Wilson’s practice:

²⁰ Though specifics are scarce, it is documented that Wilson’s individual Discussions were regularly acquired by those with whom he conversed; proof of ownership exists in the form of a certificate detailing the date, location, and names of participants. However, Wilson seems to have had some ambivalence to the monetization of his work throughout his career.

²¹ Rorimer, Anne, ed. *Ian Wilson: The Discussions*. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2008), p. 78.



My interest was piqued—I snapped this photo discreetly. Pressing on, past the Sandback and Beuys, I lingered with Richter’s vast, reflective gray panels, and hung out with Nauman’s videos in the basement. I walked slowly and often stopped in place. Before I left the museum, I had a coffee in the café and read Annie Dillard; she said that writing hangs out over an abyss:

*Each sentence hung over an abyssal ocean or sky which held all possibilities, as well as the possibility of nothing.*²²

About a year later I received an email from the Dia:Beacon list serve that Ian Wilson would hold a discussion on “The Pure Awareness of the Absolute”. I registered with the administrator and received a letter via email: “Dear Melissa Constantine, This is to confirm your registration for Ian Wilson’s *The Pure Awareness of the Absolute/Discussions* at Dia:Beacon on Saturday, March 15, 2014 at 12pm. For each discussion taking place, Wilson will engage with a small group of people at a time. The discussions will begin promptly on the hour, so please arrive early.” I took the 9:43 am Metro North train to Beacon a few weeks later. It was a beautiful day, just breaking into milder weather. Having arrived early, I took a coffee in the café and did some writing while waiting for the Discussion to begin. Just before noon the museum staff ushered a small group of participants into the room with the wooden chairs arranged in an oval, and we each took a seat. When we were settled, the curators brought Wilson into the room. He was tall and slight, donning a vibrant, high-texture wool sweater, earth-toned checked suit coat, and corduroy pants (what another participant called the “elegance and straightforwardness”²³ of his attire). He moved slowly, deliberately and warmly acknowledged everyone with a nod. One of the curators gave a brief introduction, after which—

²² Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), p. 70.

²³ Rainer Ganahl, January 25, 2008.

- SILENCE -

then,

WILSON: Today, I would like to talk about how we might be able to have an awareness of the absolute. I would like for us to first think about what it is to experience the absolute, and then how we might come to gain awareness of this. I will ask some questions that will guide the discussion, and we will try to come to a general agreement before moving on. How does this sound, does everyone agree with this premise?

GROUP: [Answers affirmatively or nods.]

WILSON: Alright. To begin, I would like for us to think about what kinds of experiences come to mind when I say 'the experience of the absolute.' Has anyone had an experience like this?

GROUP: [Some nods or affirmative answers.]

WILSON: Where or when do these experiences happen?

ME: In the forest.

MEDITATING MAN: While breathing.

GIRL with BLUE EYES: ---

LADY FROM BOSTON: In the bath.

LADY FROM NY: While looking at art.

JOE SCANLAN: While making art.

PHILOSOPHY PROF. from MISSOURI: Sometimes while thinking.

WILSON'S WIFE: ---

These are not direct quotes, actually, but my imprecise recollection of the start of our discussion. I think this scene is close to how things transpired that day, although I have deliberately omitted the flutter of initial clarifying questions that were posed as our minds alighted on the subject at hand. We pressed on, and talked about the precision of aesthetic affect and the eventfulness of the absolute. If Duchamp had sought to capture the moment of an event, to pin it, under glass or in a diorama like some biological specimen upon which we might then fix our gaze, Wilson would invite us to inhabit that moment in the fullness of its withdrawal. As we rounded the half-hour, Wilson directed our attention to thinking about how we could sustain an awareness of the absolute, to maximize its durational capacity. Yes, why *are* these moments so fleeting, we wondered? And could they be infinitely explicated? But isn't our awareness of these moments made possible only because they are relieved from the unremarkable continuity of mere consciousness? And in that case, isn't this syncopation what makes it possible to know either? Wilson repeated, "But what could you do to try to make this awareness last?" MEDITATING MAN suggested breathing—(he was doing it right now!) I thought about how everything we do in the moments of unawareness also gives us a

specific predisposition to the event of awareness of the absolute. I said, “Maybe there is nothing to do, but be.” Wilson asked pointedly, “Could one say that the absolute is always present?” His voice was constrained, flat, but textured by a soft airy rasp; his South African accent attenuated. Our discussion continued, never resolving, but coming to close around the idea that the absolute might well be present in every word without ever being able to be named.

Although we never collectively defined the absolute as such, everyone seemed to know something about it. But what were we really talking about? Was it simply reverie? Or closer to Heidegger’s *alethia* or *Ereignis*? Was it *satori*? Or Kant’s sublime? Of course, everyone was eager to contribute his knowledge of Plato/Wittgenstein/Heidegger/Husserl/Hegel/Honen/____, but when this happened, Wilson quickly redirected us toward other considerations. Like a bowerbird diligently preserving the design of his grounds, Wilson never allowed the conversation to become polluted by specific terms or philosophies. He, (and eventually we) maintained a common ground. The insistence on generic language seems to have everything to do with the task of talking about something as ineffable as the absolute. As I have come to understand Wilson’s particular usage, the absolute describes both the undifferentiated substance of all things, *as well as* the affective, punctuating experience that is the awareness of this substance. Thus, within this notion we find the ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic complicated and coexistent.

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In a final turn, I want to situate Wilson’s concept of the absolute among other philosophical lineages without enclosing it entirely within them. I aim to tease apart the epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic consequences of Wilson’s absolute while remaining alert to the particular entailments of language and communication in pedagogical and artistic contexts. I briefly consider the notion of the absolute put forward by philosopher Hent de Vries, and linger with Immanuel Kant’s description of the sublime and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s rendering of the performative Buddhist pedagogy of “pointing at the moon”. Through this eclectic collection of materials, I offer a final perspective on Wilson’s practice.

In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett briefly discusses Dutch philosopher of religion Hent de Vries’ understanding of the absolute:

Though the absolute is often equated with God, especially in theologies emphasizing divine omnipotence or radical alterity, de Vries defines it more open-endedly as ‘that which tends to loosen its ties to existing contexts.’ This definition makes sense when we look at the etymology of *absolute*: *ab* (off) + *solver* (to loosen). The absolute is that which is *loosened off* and on the loose...When de Vries speaks of the absolute, he thus tries to point to what no speaker could possibly see, that is, a some-thing that is not an object of knowledge, that is detached or radically free from representation, and thus no-thing at all. Nothing but the force or effectivity of the detachment, that is. De Vries’s notion of the absolute...seeks to acknowledge that which

refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge...De Vries conceives this exteriority, this out-side, primarily as an epistemological limit: in the presence of the absolute, we cannot *know*. It is from human thinking that the absolute has detached; the absolute names the limits of *intelligibility*.²⁴

De Vries' understanding reveals historical meanings of the term, mining its etymological depth and reflecting its theological significance. The concept of the absolute, by this and many other names, has been used by a wide range of philosophical and religious traditions to express something like what de Vries is alluding to. Throughout its varied uses, the term remains amorphous, but consistently touches on three domains: the ontological and cosmological—rendered variously as the ground of being or the source of being—the epistemological—something that dissolves subject/object divisions, a paradox, the unknowable—and the aesthetic or affective—manifest as void, language, phenomena, noumena, power, energy, or force. De Vries' notion of the absolute accommodates these three aspects, stretching grammatical categories to think a verbal-nounal entity, although he foregrounds the ontological. In the heart of the passage, Bennett captures de Vries' idea poignantly, describing the absolute as, "...no-thing at all. Nothing but the force or effectivity of the detachment." She later quotes de Vries as he names the absolute that "elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence".²⁵ The ontology of the absolute is here characterized as that oscillation which in its unmaking marks a limit. But this limit is less like a boundary line and more like the absence of a certain capacity, less like a physical impasse and more like the impossibility of grasping water, or catching a catfish with a gourd. Neither a thing nor representable, in de Vries' conception, a human might only sense the absolute through its negative presentation—that is, sense it as a feeling of that which it cannot grasp.

In de Vries' description, the dynamics of the absolute are given primary consideration, and the human can be found somewhere at its margins. As Immanuel Kant elaborates his notion of the sublime, however, the experience of this delimitation is rendered in greater detail from a human perspective. I want to bring these two concepts together to try to get closer to Wilson's idea of the absolute, which seems to combine de Vries ontological force with an affective quality similar to Kant's sublime. Both of these notions grapple with a consequential delimitation of cognitive faculties, but whereas de Vries describes a more integrative milieu, Kant foregrounds the affective-aesthetic as both an access point to a "manifold unity" (which he *also* calls the Absolute) and an opportunity for man to consolidate his subjectivity in the face of a greatness that imposes a perceived (though not actual) threat to life.

²⁴ Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

In contrast to the beautiful, which is provoked and sustained in relation to an object or discrete, bounded form, the theater of the sublime is a vast metaphysical realm. One's experience with boundless objects and wild affects in nature produce *in the self* a sensation of infinite depth. There is no objective ground, so to speak, perhaps really no ground at all, as Kant's language alludes to: the sublime is rendered as dynamic, abysmal, non-sensuous, and incomparably great. While the beautiful instantiates a neat correspondence between the mind and the object, the sublime gives rise to a torqueing of the mind—between the failure of the Imagination and the recuperative agency of Reason; between aesthetic pleasure and the threat of annihilation. As Kant describes, “The mind feels itself *moved* in the representation of the Sublime in nature... This movement may (especially in its beginnings) be compared to a vibration, *i.e.*, to a quickly alternating attraction towards, and repulsion from, the same Object. The transcendent... is for the Imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself...”²⁶ And it does; this violent shuttling arrests the Imagination, signaling the delimitation of a certain cognitive capacity. As the Imagination is the faculty responsible for ‘forming’ data and presenting matter (according to Kant), its seizure ensures that we get an excess of no-thing in the sublime—an already object-less affect.

Yet the sublime *is* an aesthetic category, and a powerful one at that. In his essay “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” Jean- François Lyotard wrestles with this apparent contradiction: “With a view to resolving this paradox of an aesthetics without sensible or imaginative forms, Kant's thought looks towards the principle that an Idea of Reason is revealed at the same time as the imagination proves to be impotent in *forming* data. In the sublime ‘situation’, something like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power, is made quasi-perceptible (the word is Kant's) due to the very failing of the faculty of presentation. This Absolute is, in Kant's terminology, the object of an Idea of Reason.”²⁷ As Lyotard goes on to say, for Kant, aesthetics is sacrificed in the name of the mind reaching its ultimate destination of practical freedom. With the seizure of the Imagination, we cannot re-cognize the “infinite without contradiction”²⁸ as it is perceived in the sublime moment, nor can we communicate the manifold totality of the event, but Reason salvages the situation, asserts itself and enables the mind to perceive what is formless.

Carrying forward the etymological lineage that Longinus and Edmund Burke also trouble over, Kant says of the sublime (from Latin, *sub-* ‘up to’ *limen-* ‘threshold’): “We find our own limitation; although at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different, non-sensuous standard, which has that

²⁶ Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000; orig. publication 1790), p. 120.

²⁷ Lyotard, Jean-François. “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics” from *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

infinity itself under it as a unity...”²⁹ He continues later, “This effort,—and the feeling of the unattainability of the Idea by means of the Imagination,—is itself a presentation of the subjective purposiveness of our supersensible destination; and forces us, subjectively, to *think* nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible, without being able *objectively* to arrive at this presentation.”³⁰ Kant suggests that the failure of the Imagination actually makes it possible to reach a supersensible destiny, to *think* rather than know a purposiveness which does not belong to man, or nature, but perhaps belongs to the realm of the noumenal Absolute; in other words, the limit is also a point of access. Though the tectonics are different from de Vries conception above, here Kant also engages a negative presentation of matter. Thus, in the catastrophe of exceptional aesthetic moments, we move beyond cognition to a supersensual faculty, capable of a fleeting registration of the quasi-perceptible.

If de Vries highlights the ontological foundation of the absolute and Kant foregrounds the exceptional aesthetic moments that allow us access, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick underscores the pedagogical phenomenology of thinking the absolute. In her essay “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” she discusses one route Buddhism took to America, noting in particular the fervor of the Transcendentalists and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s 1844 first translation of the Lotus Sutra into English (from the French). Sedgwick writes, “Although (or because) self-evident, it may also be worth emphasizing that, like Plato’s dialogues, the vastly more voluminous Buddhist sutras in fact comprise nothing but a series of dramatized scenes of instruction...”³¹, yet, “The Transcendentalists were well aware that their exposure to Buddhism was scarcely virginal. They knew that the Ancient Greeks as well as the German Romantics, their two main points of identification in “Western” culture, wrote prolifically of Asia as a likely place of intellectual, linguistic, and spiritual origin.”³² In this earlier wave of anti-institutionalism in America, the Transcendentalists took to the practice of “viva voce pedagogy”³³ as a more egalitarian mode of critical thinking that could exist outside of religious or scholastic expertise, while following in familiar philosophical traditions that had also positioned the East within the West.

Although the Transcendentalists’ understanding of the sutras was filtered through European sources, they seemed to have an appreciation for the profoundly different ecology of knowledge that Buddhism propounded. Sedgwick notes the difference between Heidegger’s two-dimensional tautology

²⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

³¹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Pedagogy of Buddhism” from *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 161.

³² Ibid., p. 164.

³³ Ibid., p. 162.

(what we already know precedes what we learn), for instance, and the epic spaciousness that exists between knowing and knowing again, or knowing differently in Buddhist traditions. Peabody was said to have demonstrated this understanding by one day walking “smack into a tree. ‘I saw it,’ she became famous for replying, ‘but I did not *realize* it’.”³⁴ Sedgwick explicates:

Colloquially, though only colloquially, even English differentiates among, say, being exposed to a given idea or proposition, catching on to it, taking it seriously, having it sink in, and wrapping your mind around it... In Buddhist thought the space of such differences is central rather than epiphenomenal. To go from knowing something to realizing it, in Peabody’s formulation, is seen as a densely processual undertaking that can require years or lifetimes... And one’s developing understanding of form passes such distinct milestones as the seeing of form; the seeing of external form by one with the concept of internal formlessness; the physical realization of liberation from form and its successful consolidation; the full entrance into the infinity of space through transcending all conceptions of matter; the full entrance into the infinity of consciousness, having transcended the sphere of the infinity of space; the full entrance into the infinity of consciousness; and the full entrance into the sphere of neither consciousness nor unconsciousness, having transcended the sphere of nothingness... recognition itself is an end as well as a means in Buddhist knowing.³⁵

This *is* a vastly different epistemological framework than we saw with Kant or de Vries. The remarkable delimitations that come to define one’s relation to the absolute, that become pronounced at the scale of an individual life, are here dissipated in the imperceptible expanse of limitless lifetimes of being. The singular, heroic encounter with the absolute instead becomes dramatized as a series of teachable moments, gestures, jokes, or even bloopers.

In this vein, a central pedagogical meme in Buddhist philosophy is known as “pointing at the moon”. Sedgwick opens on a scene with her cat:

Whenever I want my cat to look at something instructive — a full moon, say, or a photograph of herself, — a predictable choreography ensues. I point at the thing I want her to look at, and she, roused to curiosity, fixes her attention on the tip of my extended index finger and begins to explore it with delicate sniffs. Every time this scene of failed pedagogy gets enacted (and it’s frequent, because I am no better at learning not to point than my cat is at learning not to sniff) the two of us are caught in a pedagogical problematic that has fascinated teachers of Buddhism since Sakyamuni. In fact, its technical name in Buddhist writing is ‘pointing at the moon’... The implication of the finger/moon image is that pointing may invite less misunderstanding than speech, but that even its nonlinguistic concreteness cannot shield it from the slippery problems that surround reference.³⁶

As a mode of performative instruction, this technique is intended to yield an ‘ah-ha’ moment—like Peabody’s tree in the face, or Kant hitting his head on the lintel of Imagination—yet Buddhist scholars concede that it might still grow understanding apperceptively and not only instantaneously. Although importance is placed on the gestural quality of such instruction, Sedgwick makes it clear that speech itself might also serve as a ‘finger pointing at the moon’ (rather than inhering truth value in the words themselves). Whatever the medium, its effect would produce a shivering, self-evident quality:

³⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 168-70.

Perhaps the most distinctive way Mahayana Buddhism has tried to negotiate the ‘finger pointing at the moon’ issue is through the ostensive language of thusness or suchness. As Kukai wrote, ‘The Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized.’...It alludes to the supposed self-evidence and immediacy of the phenomenon pointed at, but at the same time to its ineffability, ungraspability, and indeed emptiness of self-nature... Thusness seems, then, to compact into a single gesture — the baseline pedagogical recourse of pointing — the double movement of an apperceptive attraction to phenomena in all their immeasurable, inarticulable specificity, and at the same time an evacuation of the apparent ontological grounds of their specificity and, indeed, their being.³⁷

The ‘finger pointing at the moon’ might be thought of as an alternative affective-aesthetic category that gets us access to the absolute, but we end up shifting, like Wilson, from knowledge to awareness as an organizing principle of the mind. Both Kant and de Vries articulate the dynamic threshold of the unthinkable and unrepresentable at the scale of the individual, but as time becomes attenuated in Buddhist thought, ontology and epistemology are recast. Whether or not one *believes* in reincarnation, Sedgwick insists, it is still a productive thought experiment to consider the extensive morphology of being and knowing when death is relieved of its function as an abbreviating, final limit. Rather than consolidating the subject as it meets its limits, or rendering the insolubility of the absolute within human knowledge, the finger/moon gesture is itself alive in preserving a nondual understanding of the particularity of presence and force of absence that forms a tenuous ontological premise.

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De Vries, Kant, and Sedgwick’s concepts are intended to compatibly and comparatively help us discern various registers of the absolute. They are useful in demonstrating how the experience of the absolute, performative in its oscillations, is always at work transducing limits by which it is enabled. But I want to be careful with these renderings, as they invariably skew toward the visual domain. Avoiding a default return to the visual in an effort to *think listening* (or indeed, to actually listen) is precisely the challenge that Wilson’s work invites, and that Nancy earlier elucidated. Quoting again from *Listening*: “To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other. Listening thus forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion. ‘Here time becomes space’...”³⁸ Nancy describes listening as a full-bodied experience: one is within a sonorous environment, where in turn sonic waves and resoundings are absorbed by the body. Indeed for all the ephemerality of sound, listening becomes a consummately physical, corporeal endeavor. And as Nancy claims, for this reason it ought to be taken as

³⁷ Ibid., p. 170-71.

³⁸ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 14.

the epitome of sense perception itself. Yet whatever is sounded cannot be grasped as such. The distinct *physics* of sound—its permeating, spatializing, and temporal properties—condition a revised metaphysics of presence. Time, as Wilson demonstrates through phonetic and semantic aspects of the spoken word, is a function of difference over distance. This speaks to the format of the Discussion and the precise way it contributes to working art away from the primacy of the visual domain, even as it continually returns. Reiterating the work of listening that Wilson's Discussions demand, it is within these more resonant aspects that the task of thinking the absolute is served particularly well.

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