

Undisciplined Knowledge

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This essay explores the possibility of art-writing occupying a space that is “undisciplined,” where it resists categorization and translation into the domain of art history. We propose that such a “space” is enabled not only through dialogue but also by recognizing the multi-sited character of art-making, and the consequences that its movement, politics, and social relations can have on writing about, and framing, contemporary art. Constructed through a series of exchanges between the two of us, the paper builds on the contingencies and temporal qualities of its own making; we tack back and forth, betraying and probing our own disciplinary biases in an effort to meet in the middle. The paper is defined by its process, which, with its mix of anecdotes, external references, and tentative offerings, is not an example of the “undisciplined” per se, but rather an exploration of its possibilities.

Getting Situated

Purpura: In February 2008, I attended a conference at Harvard University (“New Geographies of Contemporary African Art”) in which artist Allan deSouza was asked to present a paper on his work that was written by a scholar who, the audience was told, was unable to attend the conference...

Extract

moderator: Unfortunately, Dr. Tsien was not granted a visa into the U.S., and so the paper will instead be read by Allan deSouza, who is also its subject.

{Allan deSouza walks from within audience up to podium. Moderator visibly hands over folder with lecture notes}

deSouza: {Address audience directly} Thank you. I realize this is a little unusual, and believe me, this is really odd for me to do this. I haven’t had a chance to look at the paper, {scan up and down} and since it will be too confusing—not least for me—to give my own commentary on it, I’m just going to read it and you’ll have to imagine it’s Dr. Tsien presenting it.

{Begin reading}

Unless stated otherwise, all my quotes are from deSouza, {look up, shrug at the absurdity of it} from his writings, lectures, or recorded by informants while he was teaching or in conversation [Aside: that’s a little disconcerting].

Purpura:

With wit and ease, deSouza’s performance (of a scripted lecture) threw into relief the inherently unstable nature of artist interviews, the slippage between first and third person voices, and control over the terms of representation. This “unraveling” was so striking that I decided to write about it for a panel at a subsequent conference. However, what began as a conventional paper responding to deSouza’s intervention became—by way of ongoing conversations with the artist himself—an open-ended exploration of how art-writing might be engaged as ethnographic practice,

one that brings the social relations of producing knowledge about contemporary art into its scope of inquiry. How might art-writing enable its subject to flourish between, rather than languish within, the categories of art history? Is there a way to keep knowledge “undisciplined,” that is, free from the academic or ideological frames that define and promote it? What would it look like, what would it mean, and who would it benefit??¹

Part I: *Towards an Ethnography of Contemporary African Art*

Over twenty years ago, in *The New Museology* historian Ludmilla Jordanova argued, if we are to become more reflexive about our museum practices, we must treat politics, aesthetics and epistemology as necessarily intertwined (1989:40). Though a robust literature on critical museology and the politics of representation has emerged since then, the ways in which this tangle of knowledge, power and art affects the actual practice of *writing* about contemporary art (African or otherwise)—and of working with artists in that process—has remained relatively unexamined. I attempt to unravel this a bit, taking a closer look at the social relations through which knowledge about African contemporary art is produced. This task is potentially daunting in scope, as these “social relations” are nested within the wider, contemporary art world, a competitive market of identities and ideas whose terms of exclusion and inclusion can be highly politicized, especially for artists of the Global South. My focus is trained on local “sites of interpretation”—that is, on dialogue with artists, before it gets written into (or out of) “art history.” I’m writing as an anthropologist who has turned recently to working with contemporary artists, and whose discipline had a de-centering “coming of age” in the 1980s—the so-called “reflexive turn,” in which ethnographic writing lost its status as transparent, unmediated reporting of fact, and came to be refigured more as a literary genre in itself—one which discursively invents—in collaboration with informants—rather than represents, the cultures it writes about. This epistemological shift enabled us to read ethnographies differently, to expect different things from them, and to ask questions of their authors that would not have been asked by an earlier generation of anthropologists. Indeed, this once experimental moment has, for many, become ethnographic common sense, making us aware of the “relations of production” of the knowledge which forms the basis of our discipline.

George Marcus and James Clifford argued that ethnographies (and I would add, art-writing), are “hierarchical arrangements of discourses”—though they rely on ‘informants’ voices, those voices are deployed in support of a broader (the author’s) narrative. “But as ethnography’s complex, plural poesis becomes more apparent—and politically charged—conventions begin to slip...Once ‘informants’ begin to be seen as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of all ethnographies....” (1986:17) In this spirit of “slipping conventions,” I turn now to Allan deSouza, whose performance threw into relief the “plural poetics” of art-writing, and the social relations through which it is constituted.

deSouza’s lecture/performance, ostensibly, was on his photographic works that speak to liminality and transience—the *Threshold* series depicts airport corridors, gates and

waiting rooms eerily empty of people—and to the idea that things are not always what they seem—in the *Divine* series aerial landscape photos are paired with mirror images of themselves to become beautiful abstract canvases of “almost- familiar” things. So what we were about to hear was deSouza on deSouza, mediated through an absent, other voice, an invisible interlocutor. The audience laughed along and shifted in their seats--some realizing what was about to begin, others (including myself) a bit bewildered. Though the entire performance was scripted, it took me a while to realize what was happening. Months later, deSouza mentioned he was surprised so many people in the audience had that same response, since the conference program itself contained a rather absurd description of the absent colleague—Moi Tsien, the Ad Minister for the Ministry of Round Holes!

deSouza’s approach to the podium was the first “intervention” to note. Moving from passive to participating observer, he was positioned to have a choice—to read obediently, or as subject of the narrative, to talk back. As he read, he made more and more extemporaneous remarks (in fact, all scripted): “I don’t remember saying that!” Or, “Now, I don’t mind interpretations of my work, but this is just wrong!” Wrong or not, such remarks called into question the reliability of the author, and the perils of trying to fix meaning on a page. At one point in the reading deSouza wondered, this time rather crossly, how the author had got hold of an unpublished image. With this our attention shifts again to the phantom author, raising the question of rights and the ethical use of artist images and words.

During the course of the reading, deSouza’s demeanor moved from bemused, to exasperated, to acquiescence—a kind of letting go, or perhaps dismissal of academic authority? Towards the end of the performance, the artist’s focus turned more to the artwork. But just as I was getting into the art, it all ended abruptly; the last page to the presentation was missing. deSouza looked up at the audience, shrugged his shoulders, and stepped down from the podium. Art interrupted? Does no one have the last word? Art is never complete; it keeps going, has an “afterlife.” Indeed, one of the residual effects of his performance is this very paper.

What was so instructive about this performance was how deSouza “re-purposed” his art (the photographs) in the service of a broader commentary on the instability of art-writing as interpretive, authoritative practice. Using humor to disarm his audience and to implicate us in the counter-narrative, he blurred conventional boundaries between artist, writer, and audience--we were *all* a little of *each* in that moment. Ironically, the artwork was probably the most stable feature of all. No longer the subject per se, it became the medium through which we experienced these shifts; and by addressing issues of transience, vulnerability, uncertainty, the photographs became a metaphor for the performance itself.

Meanwhile, deSouza viewed the performance “more as an artist’s talk ... I was doing it as a joke, much like other works of mine, but a joke that I expect the audience will “get” early on, so that we can laugh and together participate in the joke. And that’s how I think of my photographs, that the audience will quickly realize that the image is something

other than what it might at first appear to be, and in getting the joke will be lead elsewhere to questions about authenticity, truth...² I'm reminded here of a much-cited quote by Mikhail Bakhtin: "Laughter alone remain[s] uninfected by lies" (Bakhtin 1982:236).

deSouza: *The opposite might also apply; laughter as a conveyance—perhaps not quite for lying—for getting us to a point that might otherwise be unreached. But it is a ploy, and not an innocent one. I wanted to highlight the presence of fiction and performativity within certain processing frames of art history—the artist's voice, the scholarly lecture, the conference, the peer review—so that they could become subject to discussion. I hadn't counted on them remaining so intact, even after playing out the joke as far as I thought it could go.*

Indeed, deSouza's performance contains a cautionary message. It calls attention to (the hazards of) what Edward Said called the "citationary" nature of knowledge production—a term he used to describe how knowledge of the so-called Orient created its subject (and thereby constituted itself) not by actually *visiting* it "in the flesh," but by floating above it—that is, by citing from a lineage of authoritative texts. Similarly, if we don't talk about *how* we create knowledge about [contemporary African] art, if we don't bring it back to its "sites of interpretation," it too runs the risk of becoming "disciplined"—autonomous, and self-referential—which stifles alternative readings, sources, and *alliances* for producing new knowledge. As deSouza remarks, "I'm interested in works that *don't* fit into an artist's canon. My own practice, and I know that's the case with many artists, is not as linearly ordered as art history or as the 'artist talk' might contrive it to be. My performance was an attempt to get the audience to see that this is a *constructed* narrative"—and I would add, his performance a parody of it.

Because deSouza is an avid writer himself, I asked him how he viewed his own writing.

I think of my own writing, including that about my artwork, as part of my studio practice, and also as "ethnographical" in that I'm trying to understand or describe a cultural location (if I imagine location—as well as my artwork and the act of writing—as gathering points). My intention in writing, then, is to participate in a dialogue, not to create a definitive account. As you say, it is a "site of interpretation," but as a studio practice that might find itself in a gallery as much as in a book or on a screen, it also functions outside of any immediate discipline. As a medium and as a practice, I find writing most useful in examining the spaces between disciplines, between the visual and the textual, between fiction and biography, between art history and ethnography. Thinking of writing this way has also "contaminated" my other studio practices, steering them in similar directions.

In 1995, anthropologists Fred Myers and Clifford Marcus advocated for a "critical ethnography of the contemporary art world," which viewed art-writing as "quintessentially part of art's own constitutive narrative(s) and signifying practices, particularly enabling art to *have* a history (1997:27, emphasis added)." As participants in

the production of that history, we have to remain mindful of the consequences of our practice—art-writing *is* the site where politics, aesthetics and epistemology intertwine, and artists and writer-curators alike have to be held accountable to their work. I’m certainly not saying that means artists have to explain or justify their work. But if *art* is not “autonomous” from the conditions of its production, nor are the *interpretations* we bring to bear on it. It also means recognizing one’s own agency (artists and writer-curators alike) in that production. So as participants in the production of “art history”—indeed as “critical” ethnographers of contemporary African art—it behooves us to “let conventions slip,” and to forge more co-authorships and collaborations with artists that enable art-writing—like art itself—to be the *undisciplined*, even political practice, it has the potential to be.

While you direct your concluding challenge towards your immediate professional colleagues, as an artist I find it a necessary one for my own practice. So I want to consider further what it might mean to be undisciplined. Towards that end, I’ve listed some directions/meanings of undisciplined: uncontrolled; defiant; fractious; unskilled; unpunished.

“Undisciplined” knowledge conveys a few things all at once: a) knowledge that is not bound by a single academic discipline, that moves between the histories that led to the segregation and professionalization of such knowledge in the first place. In that sense, maybe it resembles pre-Enlightenment epistemologies, where fiction, journaling, and science-writing were not mutually exclusive ways of producing knowledge; b) it refers to a certain rogueishness, a certain refusal to comply or conform to the rules of category; and c) to be undisciplined also implies being untrained, raw, out of control. But it does not have to mean lack of rigor. How might all of these things bear on a project about artists, language and writing about art? We were thinking that writing about art might best be accomplished if subjected to the same scrutiny as ethnographic writing was in the past; a critique which in a sense liberated the act of writing from the expectations of science, or better from literalist readings of culture.

Part II: *An Archive of the Undisciplined*

In the spirit of the “archive”—a repository of related and “keepable” things—the following discussion is comprised of exchanges that flowed from and moved beyond both performance script and conference paper.³ But what we are approaching here is not an archive in the sense of a catalogued or comprehensive, ordered collection. Rather, we’re drawn to the inherent paradox of the archive—it’s a disciplining practice that is also a repository for things un- or yet-to-be-disciplined. It is a kind of “gathering point.”

My relationship to the archive is similar to my ambivalence towards photography as a documentary or archiving practice, encompassing its archival role and the photograph’s

indexical relationship to the “real;” both are incomplete, unrealizable endeavors that nevertheless form an attempt to frame experience. They require us as viewers to suspend disbelief. Also pertinent to our discussion is a parallel to the “undisciplinarity” of diaspora; how does one chart, let alone contain those convergences, leakages and overflows between places, memories, encounters...? These are also questions behind art-making, and art-writing. At most, what we can attempt are notes towards the conceptualizing of such an expansive archive, or notes towards a methodology of the uncontainable.

It is this very ambivalence towards photography (as archival and indexical practice) that animates your subtle subversions of it, and that allows us, as viewers of your photoworks, to encounter the “convergences, leakages and overflows” that threaten to destabilize any claim to certainty. In art, this has always been permissible; less so in writings about it. This is due in part to expectations of art-writing’s readership, but also to the internal politics of institutions through which art (or any) scholarship and criticism are produced and made available to others. As Edward Said writes, “[T]o be involved internally in the formation of a canon...usually turns out to be a blocking device for methodological and disciplinary self-questioning” (1982:16 cited in Berecz 2008:19).

As sites where information is gathered but not yet fully “converted” into knowledge, or consigned to text, an undisciplined archive is more expansively egalitarian than a canon, which is organized hierarchically (and based on inclusions and exclusions), authoritative (due to its reception as knowledge/truth) and is thus resistant to change. A canon, is, as Chris Steiner pointed out (1996), the epitome of the fetishization of knowledge. Perhaps, then, it is more productive to talk in terms of a contemporary art archive, rather than a canon, and ask, how can we ensure that such a repository always be “in the making”—or remain, as Johanna Burton put it, a “still-mobile, fully contingent field” (2008:58) of knowledge? In a way, the undisciplined—as archive, as gathering point—may reconcile the oxymoron implied in the phrase “contemporary art history!”

There is much of value in the idea of the undisciplined (as in fractious, defiant, uncategorizable, trans-media and anti-bureaucratic). Too often, however, that can take the form of an adolescent rebellion that is based on envy of the marginalized without having to live through the social stigma of marginality. It’s a cultural appropriation that is also highly parochial in its Eurocentrism. The art administrator Roberto Bedoya, who is Latino, mentioned that he is not interested in “interventionist” art because every time he walks into a museum, he already feels like he is making an intervention.

I think of disciplined knowledge, then, as a frame, one that might be necessary in order to isolate something, name it and study it. (And it’s a question I often ask students, especially with installation or performance: how do you know where or when the work begins and ends?) In that sense, the frame is a convenience (or contrivance), telling us where, when or how to look. But there remain questions of what lies beyond the frame, why is it any less interesting than what is within?

It's not that "the beyond" is less interesting than "what is within;" it's that frames generally discourage us from looking at the relationship between the two. But your *Terrain* series does just that: pairing images with densely evocative and seemingly unrelated captions re-sites our gaze, and allows "the beyond" to slip into the work. [fig. 1.] More broadly speaking, frames—or, as you mention, the proprietary act of naming—also move us from perceiving difference (a cognitive process) to constructing distinctions (a cultural, or ideological one.) Maybe the undisciplined is another way of talking about (the possibility of) non-ideological knowledge.

I don't think knowledge can be exempt from ideology, but the undisciplined may help bring knowledge's ideological leanings into visibility.

Not only its "ideological leanings," but also its grounding in the social. This takes us back to Thomas Kuhn's (now canonical!) theory that the production of new knowledge—that is, shifts in scientific world views or paradigms—is a matter, ultimately, of communal negotiation and agreement, and not solely the cumulative outcome of unmediated, empirically-based "discoveries" about the natural world. This helps us to see that both science *and* art-writing communities are themselves constituted through, and thus susceptible to, the social, political, and linguistic forces that determine, or confer, "membership" or belonging.

These kinds of contingencies also relate to the role that technology plays in promoting or making certain kinds of communication (ours, for example) possible—writing in cyberspace is fascinating—multi-sited, simultaneous "multilogues" unfolding every which way.

It's true; there's a method of exchange, of writing together (on Google Docs) that wouldn't have been possible before. An update of the surrealist notion of automatic writing! Seriously, while their method was used to produce or access forms of knowledge that were "undisciplined" by the rational mind, I think they were based on a romanticized distrust of the intellect, celebrating instead the primitive, the insane, the criminal, the childlike, the feminine; in other words, based on a desire for escape from bourgeois society. I'm interested in the opposite movement, to come from one of those "de-centered" positions and use the very tool denied to those positions—the intellect—to produce counter-narratives. Having said that, I'm less interested in the position of being an outsider and of placing myself in any kind of polar opposition, and more interested in the idea of being already implicated. To me, that's a more complex, productive site from which to proceed.

Thus a politics of art-writing (that you suggest above) has to begin from who is speaking/translating and to what purposes (if that can be known). As an artist, I'm implicated by wanting to create visibility for my work by increasing the dialogue around it. This is not as straightforward as it may sound, since only certain types of discourse

might aid the "right" kinds of visibility in terms of the market. And any link to ethnography or "over-intellectualizing" (in a culture where the intellect is suspect) is counter-productive to its marketing. Very little art-writing is neutral in relation to the market. Reviewers mostly encounter work in spaces that are linked to the market, and most reviews and essays can be tied directly to the commodity value of the work. Since, in this sense, the market mutes or mutates art writing, it is a form that is necessarily suspect.

But an artwork also generates discourse and meaning that doesn't necessarily stem from or come back to its maker. This is not to say the artwork is "autonomous" from the time, place and conditions of its making, but rather that it can engage those very things in ways that the maker cannot (nor wants to, I imagine), necessarily control. I'm reminded here of T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art-writing* (2006) in which Clark writes, after Paul Valéry, that "a work of art is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself," that "art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response" (Clark 2006:115 in Prettejohn 2007:774). But even more to the point, the "experiment" in Clark's book is that it is written in diary form, slipping easily between description and analysis, moving, as reviewer Prettejohn notes, "from the smallest details to the largest implications, as if to test the justice of their inferences...never quite bringing the train of thought to a close" (776). Though strongly contextual in his approach to art, Clark calls for a "return to the object," to a close, contemplative *looking* that resists reducing art to the service of ideology, but that still allows the work to speak the moment. Is there something about the meandering and recursive nature of the diary—or "proto-data" as Stephan Hirschauer (2006) called it—that might lend itself to writing about contemporary art?

If I can give an example of the sort of "diaristic" experience that informs my work and one that is deliberately "dis-orienting" in relation to your earlier explanation of Orientalism as a "citationary" knowledge drawn not from visiting "in the flesh" but by "floating above." In this "situational" example, on a flight from London two years ago, the plane flies low over the Thames estuary and the east Kent coastline. I recognize the curves and landmarks, and even know the towns below. I've never flown over this part before, but I've studied it extensively in high school, and what I'm remembering is not the landscape itself, but maps of it that I drew over twenty five years ago. It's a prior knowledge but one that I feel I'm experiencing for the first time. There's nostalgia here, partly for the times I've ridden my bicycle through the lanes below and partly for the times I've been on holiday to some of the seaside towns. Partly it's nostalgia for the knowledge itself, and for the time when I acquired that knowledge. Mostly, I experience desire in this aerial overview that sees unhindered, and that also melds past and present.

While this is an increasingly familiar experience, it offers opportunities to re-assess the conjunctions and discrepancies between the knowledges we hold on to and those newly produced. This is where art and art-writing as undisciplined practices—ones that mine the gaps between knowledges—can intervene.

*Choosing to work within the “discipline” of photography, my approach to landscape is that it is a projection of collective experience; that geographical features are viewed through a prism of anxieties and desires, including the religious, the historical and the nationalistic. In depicting landscapes, I’m also interested in mapping our ideological and imaginative relationships to them, and I think this is pertinent to viewing and writing about art generally. It might be useful to adapt the Situationist idea of the *dérive*, a psychogeographical mapping produced by “drifting” through physical space, and akin to the psychoanalytic method of “drifting” through the brain to uncover and arrive at connections that wouldn’t otherwise be accessible. The *dérive* entails a purposeful wandering, undertaken by more than one person and directed not by physical structures of streets and buildings—or neurons—but by hidden or social forces such as population demographics and crime figures—or memory and trauma. And obviously these details applied to the viewers or participants are key to such mappings. While such practices, going back to the nineteenth century *flâneur* are constrained by issues of class, race and gender, they nevertheless offer useful examples of undisciplined inquiry.*

To use the metaphor of the “field” of study: any given field, even an “expanded” one is defined by its boundaries. An expandable field necessitates a mobile boundary. I think of the undisciplined as a network of those boundaries, that separate, and connect, and that are also spaces unto themselves. Imagine then, a network of these “boundaries” as connective tissue that allows us to move between fields; that allows us to link and re-link them in ways that respond to the continually changing conditions of the contemporary.

One practical example of this linking as a method, and one that is a predominant form of pedagogy in the art school, is the critique. There are different “fields” of knowledge necessary to conduct critiques. Some approaches involve, obviously, knowledge of art history and of contemporary art. Other interpretive tools include criticism developed through feminism, postcolonial studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, and so on. Rather than favor one method exclusively over another, each might allow us particular insights and their cross-referencing allows us to develop expanded models of interpretation that might otherwise not be available.

The critique therefore functions as an example of “undisciplined knowledge,” or knowledge that is let loose (within defined structures) to uncover meaning. It also forms a model for broader pedagogical methods, especially when linked to other forms of interdisciplinarity and cross-media. It can be understood as crossing disciplines, but also as knowledge that is akin to art-making itself, as a process of bringing into being that which might not have previously existed.

The critique links learning to discovery and invention, where students are taught not what to think, but are provided with tools to enable independent thinking. Similarly with viewing art, the artwork needn’t impose how or what to think or experience, but provides a space for directed experience that proposes an undisciplined response.

This recalls an interesting talk I heard recently by art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson⁴ who argued that teaching and writing about contemporary art today—given young peoples’ new technologically-steeped, multi-focused ways of learning, needs a new vocabulary, and should be infused with as much “chaos, rupture, and ambiguity” as the art that is its subject; and that we should think of the development of art scholarship as analogous to the ruptures that characterized the development of (Western) modern art. The only problem here is that the audacious modernism that he invokes was also steeped in colonialist and nostalgic (mis)understandings of the non-Western arts upon which (some of) its departures were based.

But I’m still not seeing how the critique operates differently from “inter-disciplinary” forms of teaching.

If interdisciplinarity works between disciplines to create new forms of knowledge, the critique model adds the element of the “encounter” between the viewer and the work (and there might be lessons here to be learned from the “encounter’s” colonialist history). The critique takes account of the work, the viewer, and the encounter between them, including a bodily engagement in relation to senses and affect, and the physical form/space of the work, and the form/space in which it is encountered. One responds, and simultaneously examines the response in a “multiply-conscious” way that I think extends beyond other forms of interdisciplinarity.

Postscripts

A lot of our exchange has taken place while on the move—in Lisbon, the Algarve, Donegal, Copenhagen, London, the Maritimes—a “multi-sited fieldwork project” in reverse!—with the *writing* taking place in multiple locations and places in between. Our writing—to evoke this once again—has become a kind of “gathering point,” a place from which to take account. When I mentioned this to a colleague in Copenhagen, he remarked (taking a somewhat different tack) how interesting it was that some theories “travel well”—are readily “picked up” by other bodies of knowledge—while others just end up “turning in on themselves.”⁵ Maybe the idea that certain theories lend themselves to movement across borders is a kind of function of the undisciplined? It’s not that the undisciplined lacks rigor or accountability; it’s that it works as a cross-pollinator, and thus does not require permanent placement, or a “home;” the undisciplined as a journeying,” rather than journaling, practice.

A consistent question for me is how to develop visual and textual languages that are reflective of diaspora, with its emphases on and examination of transition and multiplicity rather than on fixity and single locations. Having said that, I do want to emphasize that I think of diaspora as a critical and evaluative tool rather than as a condition to be unconditionally celebrated. It’s helpful for me to rethink the following

extract in relation to undisciplined knowledges, and to art-writing as a form of “traveling theory.”

Where to begin? Anywhere. Since there is no beginning.

In the beginning was before the word. How then to tell the story of this beforeness? Of my story before it is spoken, before it descends from the convolutions of the mind onto the slippery slope of the tongue? Of the history that names me? And what of the history that misnames me?

How do I tell the story of what I believe to be my self--the differences and indifferences that I can't translate, so that whenever I open my mouth to speak it's always already of a middle with a missing beginning? All I can do is to keep returning in hindsight, to middles, to beginnings, to what comes before.

I want to tell a story, though I don't yet know what the story is. There's no beginning and no end. And the middles? Let's just say that there are only fragments, of many middles. No was, no will be, and a few disjointed is's. All I have is the possibility of the coming into being. A story that's not so much recitation, but re-siting. Having changed places, stopped and restarted, this story is of the becoming, not just of the places--the changed from and the changed to--but of the changing itself.

A beginning of sorts, though nothing ever truly begins, it simply re-plays from a different point. A story, then, not just of the leaving and arriving, but of the passage itself. [From Allan deSouza, Bombay: the City, the Man.]

Writing about art also requires a certain mobility in that—to reconfigure a cliché—one should be moved by the experience of engaging with art. I mean it in the sense that one should be moved out of one's self, literally relocating one's thoughts, emotions, prior conceptions, etc., so that looking at art is an encounter where both parties are reconfigured. And art-writing can be the assessment or description of that encounter.

It can also be part of and further that encounter, rather than isolate it as a subject of study. In retrospect, this essay took the encounter between us—which originated in and was mediated by your artwork—and “turned it loose” on itself. This created a more permissive space, one which allowed our travels, conversations, readings “beyond the frame” of this essay to spill in and redirect it along the way. But to what ends?

Since our conversations began from a talk whose intention was to indicate and discuss its mechanisms of fabrication, I expected our conversation to be similar; not so much transparent or explanatory, since I wanted the listener/reader to also choose their own routes of access rather than being directed in an immediately linear manner. A map, but an unreliable one, much like an unreliable informant. Similar also with my artwork, I don't wish to create a passive viewer by “explaining” the work, but to actively engage the viewer in processes of interpretation and engagement. That to me is also part of the undisciplined, that its outcomes and receptions are themselves not predictable. The undisciplined as a form of instigation.

So instigation, encounter, the critique—these can be understood as related conditions

or practices of undisciplined knowledge. They “work” between and against categories and frames, keeping them responsive to contingency and change. Bringing it back to the beginning, how might we “undiscipline” (the category) “African contemporary art?”

My personal interests are less in constructions of what “African” art might be and more in the questions they pose and the omissions they expose in the “architecture” of global contemporary art and its formation through Eurocentric discourses. These are some of the larger projects which the “undisciplined” needs to infiltrate, not to form new disciplines or reform existing ones of the “African,” but to un-discipline our understandings of the global contemporary; and not only to unmoor them from xenophobic and nationalist formations, but to reframe them as localized and translocal artistic practices.

In a way, some of your most recent photowork—the *Rdctns* series, based on iconic paintings by Gauguin and Rousseau—summon the omissions and erasures that ensue from such Eurocentric discourses. In doing so, they create the possibility of new knowledge; but we as viewers have to do the work of filling it in....[fig. 2]

We recently talked about the term “confabulation.” Its psychiatric definition denotes an almost pathological condition whereby the filling in of a memory gap by imagination or falsification is believed to be true. How might we apply that to the relationship between the artist and art history, where the artist resorts to imagination and fiction to—to misuse Bruce Nauman—reveal “mystic truths,” and where art history—as you mention earlier in relation to Thomas Kuhn—is a construction of collective memory that is, by definition, partial and therefore a naturalized fiction? Is one of our larger projects, then, to un-discipline such fictions?

I didn’t know how to ask Mother such questions, but I watched her face very closely to see if the answers might be there. She would glance at me then, noticing the shift in my scrutiny and cover my eyes with her hand.
--Too much looking, she would say. --That’s not always how you find things. With her hand over my eyes, she would continue her story so that later I thought I must have only dreamed her words. [Allan deSouza, from *Fly: An Autobiography of X*]

I think Mother’s cautionary note sums up well the mission, in a sense, of the undisciplined. Though both ethnography and art-writing begin with “close looking”—that is, after all, how we find things—maybe we need to focus less on what we are looking for, and more on the ways in which we come to frame, talk about, and value our findings. Indeed, the undisciplined shifts our scrutiny to the contingencies of art-writing’s own production. It mines the diaristic, provisional, proto-data of observation and encounter, and “uses” it to open up the categories, language, and regimes of value by which art-writing—and artists—have been “disciplined.” More than that, the undisciplined “asks” us as artists, writers, and interlocutors to recognize the implications of these processes in the work that we do.

As an always emergent “condition” (and one that tracks its own emergence), the undisciplined also unsettles our temporal frames, reminding us that contemporary art is not without history, but also that it cannot resist its own obsolescence. This helps to police what Stuart Hall once called the “cult of the new”—that is, the tendency to privilege something because it departs from current trends or expectation (and to this I would add, the cult of the “authentic”—the desire for singular and unique origins—of art, an artist, or culture.)

I’m not sure if “policies” is the right term; it’s less that the undisciplined regulates a “cult of the new,” but—like its potential to denaturalize fictions—it “tracks” the paths that create desire for the new. If we are suspicious of “departures,” we should also suspect “arrivals.”

At its broadest level, the undisciplined asks that the institutional framing and management of creative work learn to “listen” or become more responsive to the outcomes of that work—be it art-making, or art-writing. In the end, maybe there *are* truths to be discovered—not in the categories or narratives that we construct, but in the questions we ask that keep them relevant.

¹ The idea of “undisciplined” knowledge takes its cues from the work of Michel Foucault in that it falls between his “epistemes” or institutionalized arrangements of power/knowledge (1980.) We are not suggesting that knowledge and power can be decoupled, but rather that both artists and artworks (and we grant agency to artworks since they do “act” on the world through the meanings viewers make of them) participate in the production of knowledge about themselves. There is also a connection to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, which works through normalization of bodies in everyday behavior (cf Asad 1993).

² Conversation with Allan deSouza, November 15, 2008. All quotes from Allan in the conference paper were taken from this and other conversations we had between April and November, 2008.

³ The idea of the archive has attracted interest from many artists and scholars exploring the connections between knowledge, memory, history, and documentation. See for instance the work of artists David Bunn, Berry Bickle, and Willem Boshoff, among others; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008); Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy* (2008); and Mathias Danbolt, Jane Rowley and Louise Wolthers, *Lost and Found: Querying the Archive* (2009, Copenhagen: Nikolaji Contemporary Art Center.)

⁴ Matthew Jesse Jackson, assistant professor of art history and visual art at University of Chicago. “Modernism After Modern Art.” Paper presented at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Modern Art Colloquium, 2010.

⁵ Casper Bruun Jensen, associate professor, social studies of science, University of Copenhagen. Personal communication, 2009.