

# Affect and Inarticulacy: The Silent Voice of the Artist

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This paper is based on a practice-led research project I conducted into the artist's 'voice' as part of my PhD. The artist's 'voice' is, I argued, comprised of a dual motivation—'articulate' representation and 'inarticulate' affect—two things which do not necessarily derive from the artist; two things that are in effect, trans-subjective. I have previously written about 'articulate representation' in a paper from 2009 entitled 'Theoretical critique of the work of art : co-producers in research'. Within this paper however I will explore in some detail the 'inarticulate' in order to show just how this unknown can be mapped and understood as generative of discourse. I will do this through an exploration of the later Lyotard's affect-phrase, in conjunction with the example of my own painting and digital arts practice. I will then very briefly touch on the ramifications of this for practice-led research.

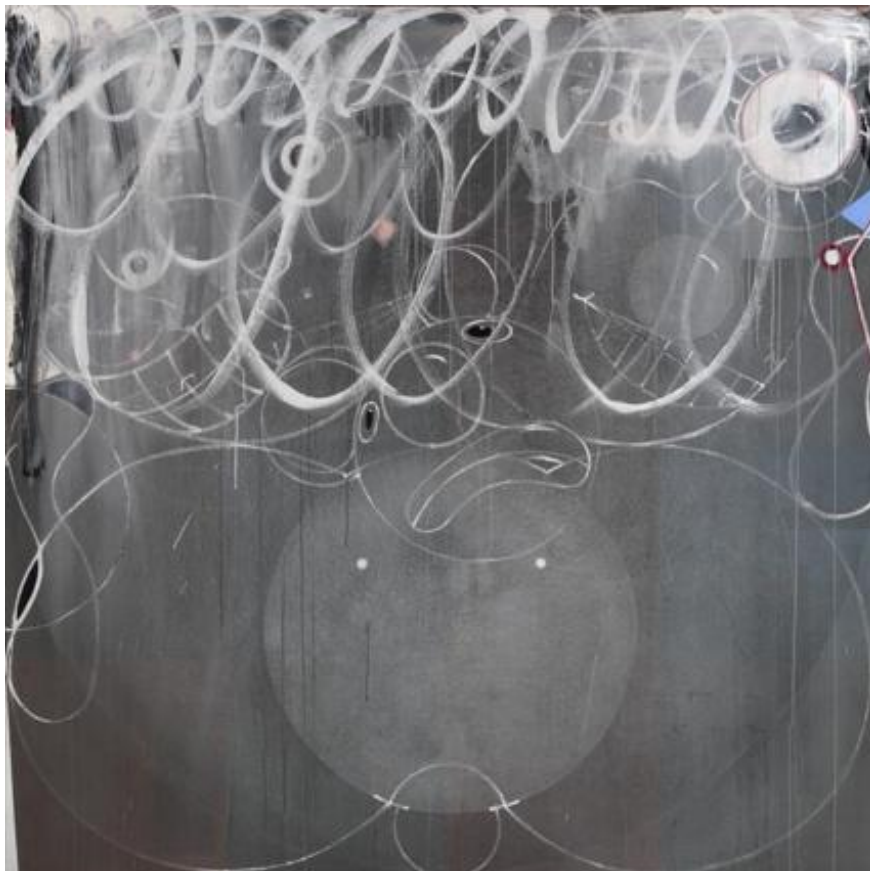
As a visual artist my primary interest is in abstraction; I am curious about the emergence of pictorial significance and content from affect's seemingly unknowable space. My studio practice occasions a sense of borderlessness, and uncertainty where each work or body of work 'leaks' into the next, exploring the unfamiliar through the powerful and restless discursive silence of affect. It is within this silence that is performed the disturbing yet generative disconnect that is the affect-phrase. This I contend is apparent in art's manifest materiality that is, its degree of abstraction and muteness. For the later Lyotard, affect disrupts articulation by injuring or violating the rules of the genres of discourse. For this to be evident one needs to attend to the subtleties of how affect may 'animate' discourse. In other words how affect's discursive disruption activates art's resistance to definitive interpretation generating, even demanding diverse 'meaning' creation for art, the abstract, and critical discourse.

Practically I will explore the generative significance of silence embedded within my studio practice because it there that I explore through an unruly, affecting silence the journey towards the unfamiliar. In this intense space of making each artwork or body of work 'leaks' into the next, occasioning a sense of borderlessness, or of uncertainty throughout the practice as a whole. This interpenetration and co-mingling of conceptual and material terrains combines to present temporal and spatial slippages evident within the works themselves and their making, but it is also evident in bodies of work against the chronological grain of their making. This "silence" in the practice of making is important for a deep reading of the content and significance for creative practice. While critical engagement is significant for meaning generation, so is this 'silence'.

An important key to its exploration is affect and I propose to look at affect's impact and mechanism through the late work of Lyotard and his notion of the affect-phrase. This is I believe an under-rated aspect of Lyotard. The affect-phrase demarcates an extremely valuable way to look at the origins, impact and ramifications of affect for art. My broader aim then is to describe the action of the "charged emptiness" of affect within the creative act and to explore and explain its significance in relation to silence and its subsequent animation of what we call critical discourse.

### **DESCRIPTION OF STUDIO PRACTICE: SITES OF ABSTRACTION, DIAGRAMS OF NEED**

My work in abstraction generates complex visual experiences centered around time, painterly gesture and abstract visual fields. There is always an intense feeling-tone or mood to the work, which though ambiguous and hard to define is insistent and impossible to ignore. It is generated in the first instance through the exploration of a range of complex visual experiences built upon disruption or interference. These disruptions complicate the visual experience and generate odd or misplaced feeling-tones, which are hard to identify. This affect begins to define the broader concern of the work as a whole.



**Figure 1:** Daniel Mafé, *Over and over and over...* 210x210cm acrylic on canvas, 2006.

As my work has been actively concerned with abstraction as a practice - that is, as praxis - it has necessarily explored what abstraction is as a historical image. To paint abstractly now, is necessarily to engage with abstraction as a historical genre. The use of a prior image of abstraction can provide painting possibilities that can either be adopted, quoted or flirted with. It can therefore be considered a key visual system that can be subjected to disruption, in which the image of abstraction can be reworked and remade. Additionally, my works record the actual making experience as traces which reveal themselves slowly to the viewer. They are optically constructed in such a way that the eye cannot take in all that is represented in one viewing. This means memory is called into play and the painting or work is remembered by the viewer as much as it is seen. In the digital animation works, this temporal revealing is mapped and explored more explicitly through looping. I should also add that some of the animations of sock monkey heads are constructed through the repeated real time renderings of a tiny jpeg image which give the illusion of movement. All of the works, both digital and painterly, compress visual experience into a contradictory and ambiguously shifting space, flirting with the viewer's perception and memory by challenging and then deconstructing recognition.



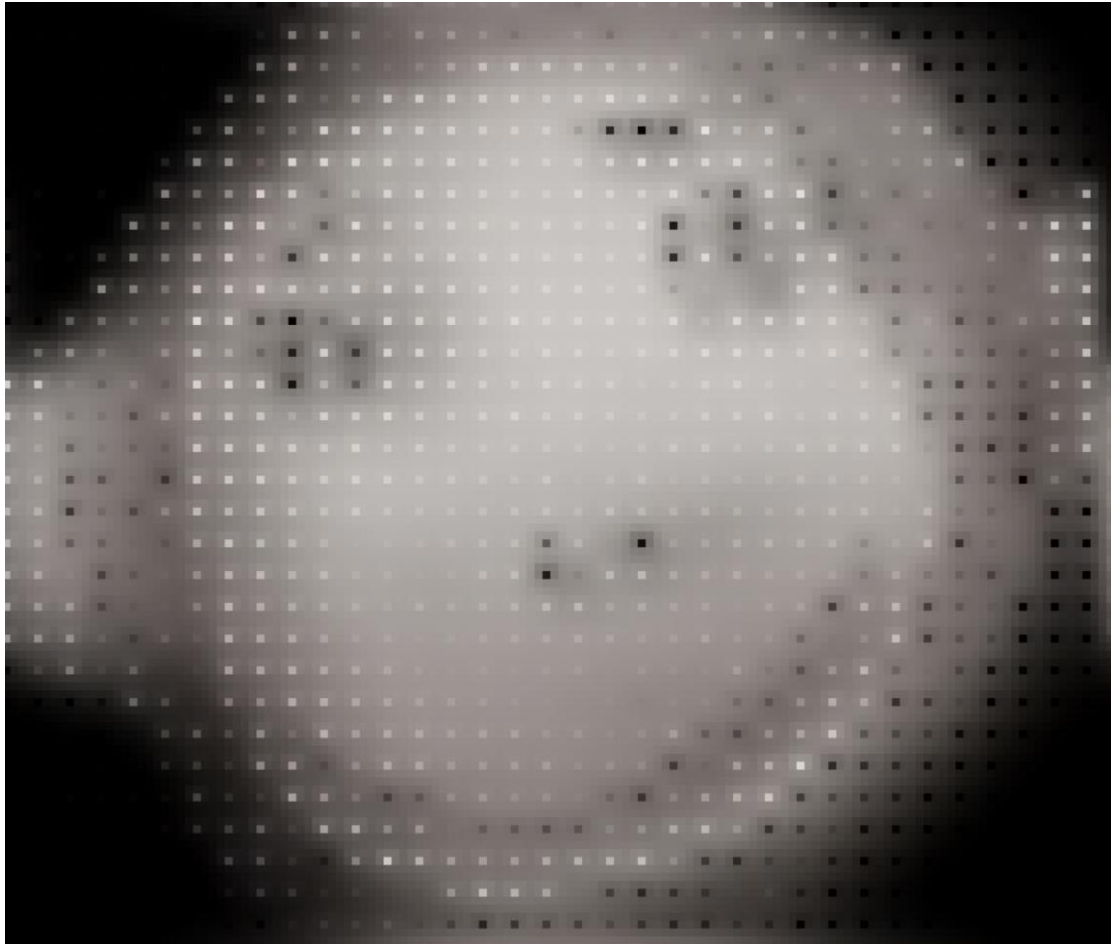
**Figure 2:** Daniel Mafé, *Rose of my Desire: Beginnings*, 200x420cm, mixed media on paper, 2009.



**Figure 3:** Daniel Mafé, detail, from *Rose of my Desire: Beginnings*.

That said these descriptions of the work don't go far enough. Something important is not being said or addressed here. For example, I am confronted by and confused by the gap between my experiences of making and then of viewing the work and also by the range of motifs across the separate bodies of work. All are in open flux. On reflection it emerges that both the motifs of my work and the evidences of their making all constitute motifs of origin and infancy, or rather the infancy of the event. This becomes clearer if I consider the work in relation to the event as described by Lyotard as the moment of happening. For Lyotard it is that moment of sublimity where one is confronted with the terrifying awareness that nothing is happening and yet something does happen – it is that moment of the about-to-occur that is the event. This of course was detailed extensively in his work on Barnett Newman, *Newman: The Instant*.

As a perspective, the infancy of event in my practice, exists on three levels. The first is at the level of the motif. The motifs of my work, which include fundamental geometric forms like the circle and the square, raw painterly gesture and smears or pours, as well as occasional images of children's toys and cartoon heads, are literally different kinds of pictorial representational gestures towards beginning or infancy.



**Figure 4:** Daniel Mafé, *Sockmonkey* from *Sites of Abstraction*, 2009 Digital Animation dimensions variable, programming Andrew Brown.

The second occurs within the visual dynamic of the work itself where movements of coming together and falling apart are orchestrated into a looping continuum. These movements are replicated or echoed within each work, each body of work and then again across bodies of work. What is being constructed is effectively that which performs as a continuum of starts, of beginnings.

Finally, for a long time I have stumbled through an experience of silence in the making phase of my creative practice. The same is often true for speaking about it. I need to emphasize that this is not just any silence. It is particular and it is intense. It eradicates any sense of "I", any sense of "place" for being. It has been, and remains, a humbling experience. It is as if the

artwork I make emerges from this silence, while at the same time the silence seems to arise from the making process itself. Known things flicker in and mostly out of existence and I am compelled to abandon them as irrelevant to the act at hand. My practice is now something I have to conjure an entrée into or invent anew. Goals, intentions and expectations may have no substance or credibility. I am unable to remember or re-inhabit the experience of making previous work. There is no map here; I feel abandoned, not in the making, but to it.

In this state I know only what my art practice might mean from moment to moment. The clarity of meaning or sense of discursive coherence disappears. The silence acts to return me to the profound sense of beginning once more. I want to point out here that the works are not expressive of me, nor are they a catharsis. In their profoundest sense the paintings are empty, and so am "I".

I have spent time mapping this silent experience or empty state because it is foundational to my practice, and seems to exist both within and separate to my practice. My practice continues to grow from this "cut" or "blank" in itself and meaning is generated from it. I am not though actively expressing or representing silence; it announces itself. It is important to stress that I am not discussing the agon of creative making in the sense of any "romantic specialness". I am not sentimental about this experience or state and it doesn't act to produce transcendental truth, rather the silence produces and announces its own happening. It is its own event, its own occurrence.

In this respect silence must be understood as not simply the opposite of speech, as speech's absence but as something more dynamic and positive, as something constitutive of discourse – in other words for one to be silent one must have something to say. (Zembylas and Michaelides 2004, 193) To better articulate this point I need to discuss the relation between silence and affect will now turn to Jean-Francois Lyotard's affect-phrase.

### **Lyotard, the Affect-Phrase and Art**

Lyotard's views and descriptions of affect not only describe affect's relationship to silence and but also begins the elucidation of why artists and other viewers feel the need to explain artwork and processes of making.

In "The Differend" Lyotard developed a theory of communication based on what he called phrases. It is important to understand that the phrase, while considered the fundamental unit of communication for Lyotard, is not only a linguistic construct. Anne Tomiche, explains:

The 'phrase' is what Lyotard ... offers as the elemental unit of analysis. ... Lyotard's phrase is not the linguist's sentence: it is not a minimal unit of signification or the expression of thought. A word as well as a sentence can be considered a phrase: nonlinguistic units such as gestures, silences, signals, notes of music also constitute phrases. (Tomiche 1994, 44)

Within this understanding feeling is also a phrase for Lyotard although he differentiates it from how a phrase typically functions.

Feeling is a phrase. I call it the affect-phrase. It is distinct in that it is unarticulated. ... A phrase is articulated to the extent that it presents a universe. (Lyotard 2006, 104)

To understand this differentiation we need to look further into the makeup of the phrase and so understand how a universe is presented. For Lyotard phrases are understood to set up links with one another. A phrase is therefore not defined in terms of meaning and signification rather it is a pragmatic entity that is defined by, yet also defines, the situating of its instances with regard to one another. (Tomiche, 44) Where this cannot happen, a silence occurs: this silence is called by Lyotard a differend. For Lyotard this silencing is the product of the inability of two phrases to form a link. (Lyotard 1988, xi)

The affect phrase therefore is unarticulated because it does not present a phrase universe. Indeed it only signals itself as meaning and a very limited meaning at that, one indicating only pleasure and/or pain. Lyotard goes on to list three significant consequences that follow from the fact that the affect-phrase is unarticulated: first, the affect-phrase doesn't appear to allow itself to be linked with, according to the rules governing any genre of discourse and consequently it is only able to suspend or interrupt linkages; second, the affect-phrase through this interruption creates a damage for the rules of discourse; and third, this damage is transformed into a wrong suffered by the affect-phrase. In other words, "the articulated phrase and the affect-phrase can only 'meet' in missing each other." (Lyotard 2006, 105)

This quality means that affect has the capacity to disturb articulated discourse, to damage it by injuring or violating the rules of the genres of discourse. It stops, albeit briefly, any discursive momentum. At some level, we can recognise affect, but we are forever destined to not articulate it adequately, and yet we cannot stop speaking of it. In "The Affect in the Work of Jean-François Lyotard," Ron Katwan says:

The affect is an experience without content. It indicates to the mind that something has happened, but not what has happened. It could be said that it bears witness to the event of a phrase, that is, the taking place of an experience, without being able to speak of its nature. (Katwan 1993, 14)

Despite its discursive silence, how does affect as an inarticulate phrase, communicate? Lyotard contends that articulate discourse appears to both demand articulation from the affect and supply it itself. (Lyotard 2006, 106) Articulacy seems unable to tolerate the loud silence of the affect. Affect occurs in silence, or as silenced, because it is pre-discourse. It can be said to disturb, interrupt or damage discursive explanation or movement and animate from “beneath” the sound, shape or forms of discourses.

In other words the affect-phrase haunts discourse. Clare Nouvet in “The Inarticulate Phrase” (2003) explains:

...affect is, according to Lyotard, 'irreducible to articulation.' ... It can inhabit articulated language, but as a squatter, a clandestine guest, an 'outside within,' the presence of which articulated language does not even suspect or hear. (Nouvet 2003, 239)

Affect haunts and disrupts the coherence of discourse but can never be heard in its own right. And yet, discourse serves the affect-phrase by revealing the event, it is the happening which points so clearly to the terrifying nothing from which it provides relief. For the disruption of discourse to be evident one needs to attend to the subtleties of how affect may be animating the discourse. In art this is apparent in how the silence of affect generates or animates the indeterminacy of art, that is its resistance to being interpreted definitively. Clare Nouvet comments on the power of, but equally the frustration for discourse (logos) in dealing with affect's indeterminacy:

Within logos, the testimony of the affect is therefore doomed to be judged both irrefutable (it is indubitable that there is an affect) and equivocal ...the affect is a witness which can neither be heard nor speak according to the rules of logos. (Nouvet 2003, 238)

And so, the painful/pleasurable silence that is affect, generates possible interpretations. Art is involved in this process as both a result of affect and affect's generator; this seems to be art's value. Yet clearly nothing can present the unrepresentable. All that can be done is to indicate that there is such a thing and to bear testimony to its existence.

Lyotard touches on this theme in “Soundproof Room”:

Painting is not for seeing; it demands this listening: the eye listens to something beyond the harmonious music of the visible. ... The outer form of the work, the artwork's facies, seems to doom it to mere simulation, dissimulation, lying. But its



empty inside allows the mask to pick up the truth – nothingness – in the form of strident apparitions. (Lyotard 2001, 102-104)

This silence constitutes that for which there can be no discursive equivalent. And yet it demands articulation. There is nothing to say and to say nothing it is difficult.

### **Ramifications and Consequences**

And so what might be the ramifications for this exploration into the inarticulate aspect of the 'artist's voice'? Given the constraints of space I can just touch on this briefly but I think one of the most relevant aspects pertains to the recognition, and the recognition of, the value of this voice as a voice for research, particularly within practice-led research. One of the demands made on the artist researcher is the repurposing of the methods of artistic practice to those of research. This necessarily means both using and incorporating this 'silence' and 'voice' to the world of research. Often within a creative practice there is a conscious attempt to undo mastery to enter unknowing. Silence is a consequence of entry to this space of unknowing.

On the surface these strategies feel in direct conflict with the world of academia and research and its aura of mastery, authority and knowledge. For example the discussion of this paper so far has developed directly from the trajectory of my practice as it intersected with the frames that determine the shape of the PhD within the University context. The unknown or rather unsayable aspects of my practice were challenged to move towards some form of academic articulacy. This forced me to confront questions around articulacy and inarticulacy as I necessarily re-purposed my artists' voice into a voice for research. As a consequence I had to redefine for myself in the first instance just what that artist's voice might be and how it might work within a research context.

My answer to that conundrum was that the value of this unknown lies in the creation and sustaining of openly emergent spaces for thought and critical (research) reflection through the tangible presence of the artwork in the research. Indeed it is only by maintaining the porosity of the borders between practice and theory, I believe that the dual nature of the artist's 'voice', one precariously poised between an inarticulacy and critical articulacy can continue to 'speak' and offer a clear space for a positive and creative unknowing.

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