

EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED. NOTHING IS TRUE.*

An Encounter on Counter-Earth

The hypothesis for the existence of Counter-Earth was founded on absence. Having unbalanced the universe with a controversial non-geocentric view, Philolaus (c. 470–385) proposed a second celestial body in order to restore equilibrium. This flat world, spinning on its own axis around another fixed point in space, served as a cosmological anchor, stopping the inhabitants of our planet from being flung into outer-space. It was necessary for our survival.

Although we have long distinguished between science and philosophy, it is interesting to consider the arguments for and against the expediency of Philolaus' invention. It is not a question of refutation or confirmation, but of understanding by engagement as opposed to the abstract theorising that distracts from the richness of perceptual experience. Despite today's generally accepted understanding of the Solar System, allegorical versions of Counter-Earth persist in popular, cultural and artistic endeavours. A place where everything is identical but opposite.

Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* proposes imaginary counter-worlds, where gravity does not exist. At first the people tried to chain themselves to the ground, anchoring themselves to their foundations, both literally and metaphorically, to Western Thought and its presuppositions but eventually learned to float. Physics and metaphysics are used to imagine different-times, parallel universes and twelve dancing princesses who defy gravity.

Trash Metal Planet

There is an apparent dislocation between contemporary art and theory. It is argued that secondary manipulations of theories impoverish rather than enrich understanding and their recycling can be reductive to the point of irrelevance. A point of exhaustion has been reached where the blah blah blah of theory offers filosofugal readings to a narrower intellectual audience and the artwork exists merely in its orbit.¹

The legitimisation of artworks through the association with a writer's credentials has accelerated the commodification of theory and redundant yet cool-sounding terminology. Squeezing the cultural matrix into an agenda has sparked claims of authoritarian intimidation and the branding of uncommunicative metaphysical rubbish.

Considering the history of belief systems, perhaps we should note the best-before-date of any philosophy finding fault in the system of its predecessor. If theory responds to the continuously changing world, where does that leave contemporary art? Who said you can kick up a cloud of dust and complain you can't see? Perhaps this disjointed relationship is the perfect observation of the contemporary world.

Simplicity is not always easily achieved, and simplicity does not necessarily imply a lack of greatness or success. Current, mostly poststructuralist theory has been much bemoaned for its lack of accessibility to the masses; theorists would argue that in order to display the impenetrability of language, it must be so.

Does theory lead and restrict art, ironically claiming that art is that which makes us question and that which challenges presuppositions, all while unfortunately making the artist and the gallery gravitate around its own assumptions? Or is it the other way around?

I have tried to go along with what you're espousing here - it's hard though! I agree with the danger of artworks beginning to base themselves on theory but this could also be looked at less two-dimensionally: can't the two fields have a symbiotic relationship in some ways at least? Can art also challenge theory, whilst sticking with it in some ways?

The part I disagree with is the blah blah blah of theory - I think that it needs to be given a chance. I disagree with those who write off the theories of X and X as imperceptible and phallogocentric. Just try reading them, I say! But on the other hand, maybe the good parts of theory have been ruined by those who pretend to understand it; do you remember that article that was published in a reputable journal some years back? It was sent in as a joke, containing lots of poststructuralist

language - it made no sense whatsoever but got published because it ticked all the boxes.

Event Horizon

I will try to recall a story as faithfully as an adult can to her eight- year-old self. I'm not sure if I was eight but it seems a reasonable age to remember something of consequence. Neither am I sure if the memory is true or if I have inserted myself into the story over time. Elements of the plot are interchangeable; there is a visual memory but no recollection of other sensory experiences. I will redraft this story several times before you read it, and so many versions exist in my own mind.²

I befriended a girl in my neighbourhood. Her mother taught me at school and her father was a quantum physicist. He had made significant discoveries about the nature of black holes and was responsible, or so I imagined, for mapping the universe. Mapping has always been the imposition of a particular perception and a man-made set of measurements onto a space. Was he metaphorically colonizing the universe? Columbus breaking the egg?

A conference was organized. Leading researchers from around the globe would travel to Ireland to discuss their ideas. As a gesture of good will, a number of these colleagues were invited for supper. His wife planned an elaborate menu, but for some forgotten reason we were delayed at the school. When we arrived at the house, what struck me was not the bubble of energy that contained the guests, nor the strange language they used, but that they were eating beans on toast.

When I was a child, *Gulliver's Travels* set off one of two 'episodes' I experienced around the age of five or six. Something to do with the size of the people. I started to think about the lack of meaning behind existence. Floating upwards, picturing the earth from above, with people populating it like ants, going about their daily business; I struggled to find any connection between this image and the universe. With ring- ing ears, spinning sensations and a lack of balance set off by the thought, my feet felt like they were leaving the ground. I

struggled to regain my composure and knew that the answer was not to be found.

I had a similar experience in my twenties. When I was five, I wanted to be a hedgehog.

Stellar Parallax

But, say you, the Picture of the Man is inverted, and yet the Appearance is erect: I ask, what mean you by the Picture of the Man, or, which is the same thing, the visible Man's being inverted? You tell me it is inverted, because the Heels are uppermost, and the Head undermost? Explain me this. You say, that by the Head's being undermost, you mean that it is nearest to the Earth; and by the Heels being uppermost, that they are farthest from the Earth. I ask again, what Earth you mean? You cannot mean the Earth that is painted on the Eye, or the visible Earth: For the Picture of the Head is farthest from the Picture of the Earth, and the Picture of the Feet nearest to the Picture of the Earth; and accordingly the visible Head is farthest from the visible Earth, and the visible Feet nearest to it. (G. Berkeley, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, Fourth Edition, 1732)

The study of optics informs us that light traveling through the lens of the eye transmits an inverted image to the brain that is then processed and flipped. Since the late nineteenth century, many experiments have been conducted using 'upside down glasses' revealing that the brain, when presented with the re-inversion of an image, will 'correct' the orientation of the image after a period of time so we can continue to negotiate our way through the world.

Because of the position of two eyes in the human head, we see physically different views simultaneously. The usually dormant pineal gland tucked between the two hemispheres of the brain is often referred to as the mystical 'third eye' that triggers dreams and hallucinations, or sight beyond space-time. We speak of 'having an eye' for something, of seers and intuitions, daydreams and insight. Not all things can be pinned down. Having stepped out from behind the veil, we are in direct

and immediate contact with the stuff of the universe³,
yet the brightest light we perceive remains in the
periphery of our vision.

1. Simon Critchley, *Scenes from a Marriage: Have Art and Theory Drifted Apart?* speaking at Frieze Talks,
Fri- day 16 October 2009

2. The story continues above

3. Orla Slattery, *The Stuff of the Universe: Berkeley's metaphysical outlook and the case
for Immaterialisation*, speaking at Limerick Institute of Technology, Friday 20 November
2009

* (Jonny Glynn, *The Seven Days of Peter Crumb*, 2009)

(Email exchange between Mary Conlon and X, PhD
Cultural Theory)

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