David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*

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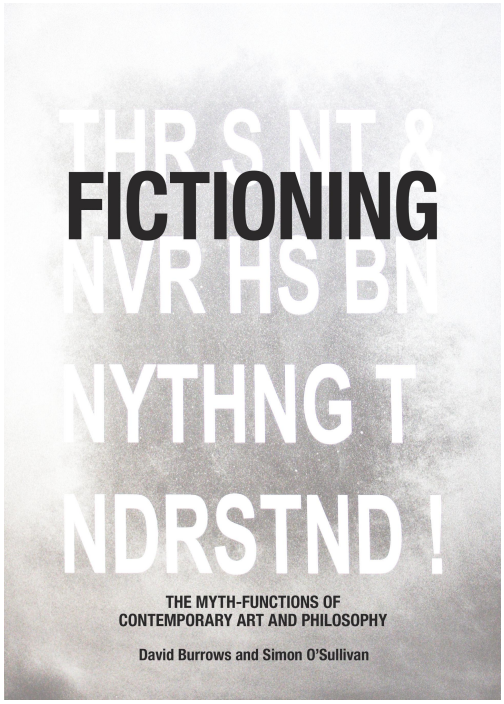

John Cussans

The deadpan cover of David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan's *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the authors' parallel lives as the creators of Plastique Fantastique, the performance art group whose multi-sensory, neo-pagan, anarcho-sci-fi performance-rituals have been warping art audience sensoria since 2004. The emphatically no-frills design gives the impression of an editors' proof waiting to be signed off. However, lurking beneath the black sans serif title that floats on a sea of grey, there is an obscure sequence of white letters fading into a smudgy evocation of an under-exposed film negative: 'thr s nt & nvr hs bn nythng t ndrstnd!' This disemvowelled sentence, the title of a group show Plastique Fantastique curated in 2012, reminds us that, beyond the sobriety of academic appearances and scholarly convention, there exists a mutating plasmate of unknown origin, whose creative unfolding we may never fully grasp or comprehend.

The semi-visible unsentence is a coded reference to the esoteric leanings of the two authors and their shared admiration for the art of Austin Osman Spare, the English artist-magician to whom they dedicate an early section of the book. Spare was famously a proponent of sigil magic, an ancient occult practice rooted in medieval hermeticism and updated by Spare in the early twentieth century, through which one's secret wishes can be made to have real world effects. The presence of this sigilic mantra is a subtle allusion to the magical intention of *Fictioning*. Although it may appear to be a work of high-academic scholarship, it is also a kind of reality transforming spell. And like all effective magic it is constructed with the utmost care and steadfast attention to protocol. It is a *deceptively* scholarly tome, like a Health and Safety-tested psychedelic trip conducted in a university lab with funding from the AHRC.

'Fictioning' is the word Burrows and O'Sullivan use to describe a mode of making, writing and thinking that operates, like their own, between multiple fields of creative practice and philosophy. 'Fiction', the noun, is conventionally used to describe a specific kind of literary production representing imaginary people, events and things. Associated with artifice, invention

and made-up stories, it is ordinarily understood as antithetical to factual, objective and true accounts of events, before their entanglement in the fickle inconstancy of human thought and invention. This conventional sense of fiction is something that the authors accept and endorse. But they also insist that 'reality', 'objectivity' and 'the factual' are also human constructions and as such inevitably share with fiction the quality of being fabricated.

Fictioning makes a strong and sustained case for the pragmatic intimacy of the technological and aesthetic dimensions, and by extension the scholarly and the performative. They build their case upon a kaleidoscopic range of artists, philosophers and writers who have challenged normative understandings of human subjectivity, individuality and our co-dependency on technical, material and non-human systems and entities. The novelty of their approach is to transform 'fiction' the noun into 'fiction' the verb, emphasising the *act* of *fictioning*. Of course, all fictions are created. But what Burrows and O'Sullivan emphasise, in both their writing and performance works, is that fictioning is intentionally orientated to challenge, subvert and transform our experience and understanding of social, technical and natural reality. The authors bring this practical commitment to the reality-transforming effects of mythico-magical fictioning into complex alignment with several branches of contemporary philosophy and techno-scientific discourse, troubling conventional framings of art and science as methodologically distinct sets of practices. For them, science is as much a form of esoteric sorcery as art is a practical science of the sensory.

Fictioning is a slab of a book. Such a weighty and floppy paperback tome will be reminiscent of two other books, dusted off the shelves during the essay marking season in establishments of higher (art) education: Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and Harrison and Woods *Art in Theory 1900–2000*. Like the latter, *Fictioning* is a book written primarily for philosophically-minded art students, contemporary artists and arts educators by highly-experienced professionals in these fields (O'Sullivan is a professor of art theory and practice in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Burrows is a reader in fine art at the Slade School of Art, University College London). Unlike *Art in Theory*, however, it has no pretentions to be a comprehensive compendium of historical sources for a general readership. Written very much against the grain of canonical art history and theory – at least in its conservative, patriarchal and traditionalist modes – *Fictioning* functions more like a critical sourcebook for a visionary arts education yet-to-come.

In style and structure, *Fictioning* is closer to the non-linear, rhizomatic model of *A Thousand Plateaus*, dissolving traditional disciplinary boundaries, fusing theoretical reflection with experimental writing and affirming its status as a work of art on its own terms. The multi-dimensional, trans-disciplinary practice of fictioning, whose geneology and peerage the authors chart over five hundred pages, has important precedents in the work of Gilles Deleuze and his predecessors Bergson, Nietzsche and Spinoza, a philosophical tradition that O'Sullivan is very close to, having published several earlier works on it. In this sense, *Fictioning* operates very much in the post-1968 intellectual milieu broadly associated with continental philosophy and critical

postmodernism. Like Deleuze and Guattari – a philosopher and a militant psychoanalyst who wilfully lost their individuality in the act of writing – Burrows and O'Sullivan have co-created an anti-conventional textbook in the spirit of sorcerous artist-activists. *Fictioning*, they insist, is not merely a theory book *about* myth-fictions, but is itself a concrete instantiation of *fictioning in practice*.

It is, mercifully, a much easier read than *A Thousand Plateaus,* and is written with the calmness and lucidity of the best educators. Evidently gestated in art school seminars and university conferences, its tone is explanatory, considered and generous. In this sense, it is a distinctly academic work, even if the academy it imagines does not yet exist in reality (as commonly understood). *Fictioning* covers a vast amount of cultural and intellectual ground and digs deeply into the ideas encountered there. The selection and range of authors, artists and artworks used to illuminate their thesis is impressive and compelling, and despite the necessary brevity with which some of the references are treated, it is rarely to the detriment of the core ideas and values contained within them. At times the selection of material seems fragmentary and partial, the authors choosing those concepts and artworks which best illuminate their thesis. For specialists in the fields traversed this may be frustrating and *Fictioning* is unlikely to satisfy those hoping to deepen their knowledge of the philosophers it addresses. Clearly crafted within the ubiquitous constraints of the artistic research culture, *Fictioning* is a valuable demonstration of speculative practice-based arts research at the highest levels of pedagogical professionalism. The book's real value will be for eager postgraduate students seeking a tangible grasp on some of the most vital and current ideas in contemporary philosophy, techno-science and future-oriented, practice-led artistic research; for arts researchers writing about methods of practice as research and those wanting to know more about the philosophies guiding Plastique Fantastique.

Fictioning is richly complemented by diagrams, some created by the authors, others by the artists and writers they discuss. Diagrams are traditionally used to present non-visible structures, ordering systems and relational dynamics to others, usually for didactic purposes. The authors use them this way too. But diagramming is also an integral aspect of fictioning, an active making process through which the theoretical and performative, thinking and doing, are brought into productive alignment. This practico-philosophical engagement with diagrams informs the work of Plastique Fantastique, whose ritualistic performances and installations are conceived as diagrams designed to call forth a 'people to come'. In this way, philosophies of subjective transformation that tend towards the diagrammatic are tested in practice through art. Diagramming and fictioning are mutually supportive, interdisciplinary bridging processes that connect the authors' chosen modes of production. 'Our intention', they write in the introduction, 'has been to produce a diagram – syncretic in character – of an expanded field of fictioning practices that embraces both the rhapsodic and the scientifically inflected.'[1]

[1] See p 8. Diagrams and the diagrammatic are shared concerns of the authors independently of their collaboration on *Fictioning*. Burrows is the co-founder of two groups exploring the artistic, pedagogical and political use of diagrams across different disciplines: DRUGG (Diagram Research Use and Generation Group) and SMRU (Social Morphologies Research Unit). O'Sullivan's book *On The Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) is constructed upon series of diagrams drawn from philosophy and psychoanalysis.

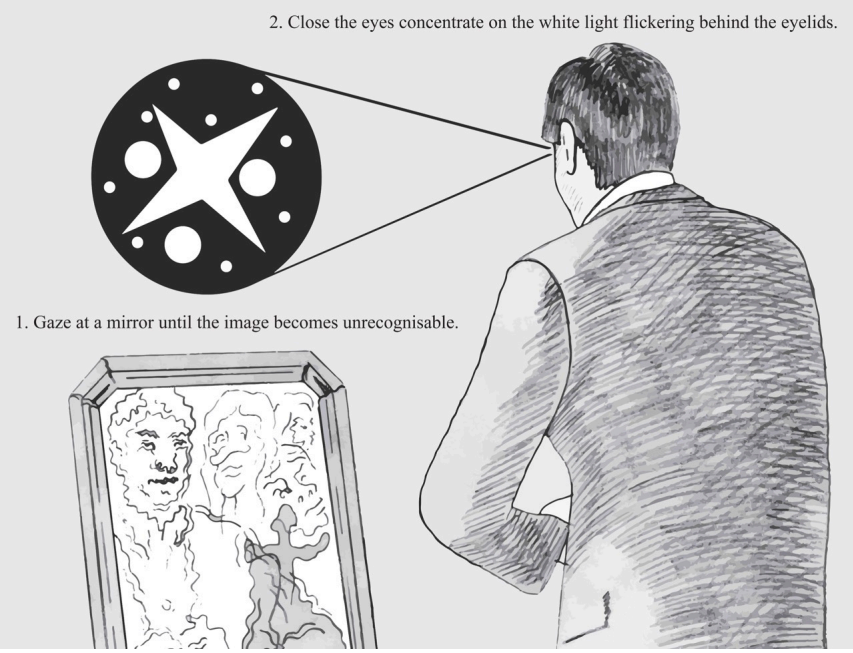

Diagram of Austin Osman Spare's use of a mirror to see a small form whose limit cannot be reached

Following a broadly historical arc, *Fictioning* is organised into three overlapping sections, each subdivided into paired variations on the theme. Section I, 'Mythopoesis to Performance Fictioning', focuses on a range of methods associated with reconfigurations of avant-garde art in Europe and the US during the 1960s and '70s. In the experimental writing of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs, the New Wave science fiction of J G Ballard and Philip K Dick, the neo-shamanism of Carlos Castaneda and the art of Yayoi Kusama and Robert Smithson, the authors find examples of performance fictions that expose and subvert the 'fiction of the self' and the 'reality pictures' that support it. Reflecting upon these early experiments, they lay out a theoretical framework for accessing the deeper layers of mythopoesis, guided by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon and his notion of a 'magical mode of technical existence'. Correlating this idea to Raymond Williams's idea of 'residual culture', active leftovers from the dominant historical picture of a particular culture with the potential to create new affects, the authors present a series of historical and contemporary case studies of artists, collectives and cultural theorists whose work exemplifies the transhistorical rupturing of linear time and geographical space.

Inspired by the art of Sun Ra, the American jazz musician and pioneer of intergalactic Afrofuturism, Section II, 'Myth-Science to Science Fictioning', turns to modes of myth-making that run counter to the conventional theories of myth and science taught in universities. A pivotal theoretical device here is the so-called 'ontological turn' within ethnographic theory, a move to expose, undo and transform the residual metaphysical frameworks of colonialism and Eurocentrism within the discipline. Drawing on the work of Alfred Gell, Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner and Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, the authors elucidate a wide range of philosophical concepts that augment their theory of *alienation as method*. Having outlined a distinctly

diagrammatic mode for charting the imaginary co-ordinates of the becoming social subject, the authors turn to the work and ideas of Ra, specifically his notion of myth-science. The authors deliver an audacious algebraic analysis of Sun Ra's theory that combines Levi-Strauss's structuralist analysis of myth with a semiotic square representing a human-alien-traitor-trickster complex.

Moving from Sun Ra to the Afrofuturist and sonic fictions of Kodwo Eshun, Black Audio Film Collective, Martine Syms and others, the authors unearth a self-alienating science fictional method connecting Afrofuturism to the Feminist world-building philosophies of Donna Haraway, Claire Colebrook, Isabelle Stengers, among others, making detours through the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the fictions of Mary Shelley, Ursula Le Guin, Peter Watts and Brian Catlin, the art of Carolee Schneeman, Orphan Drift and John Russell, and arriving finally at the non-philosophy of François Laruelle.

The third section, 'Mythotechnesis to Machine Fictioning', explores fictions about the interdependence and interpenetration of humans and machines and their collective techno-scientific 'assemblages'. Drawing on the work of transhumanist and neo-Promethean philosophers like Ray Brassier, N Katherine Hayles and Reza Negarestani, the chapter engages urgent debates about what it means to be human in an era of accelerated technological evolution. As in the previous chapters, the philosophical analysis is carefully woven into the discussion of a range of contemporary artists and works, notably the experimental music collective To Live and Shave in LA and the musician Rudolf Eb.er. They go on to discuss the financial fictions of the networked digital economy, artificial intelligence, accelerationist and decelerationist future fictions, and the techno-feminisms of VNS Matrix, Shulamith Firestone and Luciana Parisi.

In the final section of the book, 'Machine Fictioning: Analogue and Digital Life', the authors discuss the notion of a coming technological singularity or super-intelligence which may render redundant the need for human embodiment. Bringing N Katherine Hayles's conception of technogenesis to the ficto-criticism of Steve Goodman, the art of Ed Atkins and Jacolby Satterwhite and Greg Egan's science fiction novel *Permutation City*, the authors attempt to answer the question: Can subjectivity exist without a body? The question is unpacked in relation to speculative hypotheses about the future of consciousness in a post-biological world.

Burrows and O'Sullivan's exemplary commitment to a practice-based approach to art and knowledge, grounded in the sensory experiences of thinking bodies, reminds us of the deep semantic connection, now lost in common English usage, between *experience* and *experiment*. For Burrows and O'Sullivan, the importance of art has to do with the ways it engages a human bodily sensorium that is never completely separable from the environments it inhabits or the information it processes. As such, the seminar room, the gallery and the laboratory are theatres of inquiry into what it means to be a thinking, sensing being in a world of intertwined organic, synthetic and abstract machines. Given the inter-dependent entanglement of all things in multiple, intersecting networks of heterogenous agency, the fictions of a consciousness entirely

freed from the physical may seem untenable. But whatever position we take on this issue, it is obvious that such worlds exist as fictions, and, following the *Fictioning* thesis, have the potential to summon themselves as fact. Ultimately, the author's final questions remain unanswered, fitting a book that has sought to keep the doors of perception, knowledge and experience from definitively closing. *Fictioning*, like the vital range of philosophical and artistic practices it metamodels, is an *experiment in experience*: thr s nt & nvr hs bn nythng t ndrstnd!

John Cussans is an artist, arts educator and writer working across the fields of contemporary art, cultural history and critical art theory. His work explores the legacies of colonialism, psychoanalysis and surrealism in art, cinema and popular culture from ethnographic, science fictional and social psychology perspectives. His book *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex* (MIT/Strange Attractor, 2017) explores the uses of Haiti as a locus for Euro-American fears about African culture, spirituality and revolutionary excess in the Americas, and their sublimation into popular horror tropes. He is a member of SMRU (Social Morphologies Research Unit), a collaboration between artists and anthropologists based at University College London. www.johncussans.com