

## Some Notes on Reinis Lismanis' *Thrifty*

### Tom Laver

The artist Reinis Lismanis' installation *Thrifty* is displayed at Brockley Gardens, a project space in a garage in South East London run by artists Billy Crosby and Thomas Greig.<sup>1</sup> The work is, amongst other things, an assemblage of pre-existing elements, both material and conceptual. It comprises a recently decommissioned studio filing cabinet decorated with offcuts from Lismanis' earlier *Archival Pigment Prints* series. This is set against a wall painted to look like a studio green screen using the contents of 'a pot that was just gathering dust in a friend's studio.'<sup>2</sup> There is a looping audio accompaniment playing out-of-broadcast-hours TV test card music and, outside, photographs of graffitied writing are displayed on the garage door. Those familiar with Lismanis' 2019 book *Trial and Error*<sup>3</sup> will recognise the aestheticisation of photographic production mechanisms. *Thrifty*, as a composition of recycled elements, also continues the earlier work's discourse on means and process. In this essay, I will identify and examine what I think is distinctive about *Thrifty* and suggest a way to situate it in Lismanis' practice.

My analysis of *Thrifty* relies on two sets of assumptions. Firstly, I think about the work as a cluster of constituent parts creating a whole. The filing cabinet is a part, as are the offcuts. The green screen is a part both as evocation of an idea and as a recycled thing, in effect two separate parts. I understand each part to refer in the way a sign does. Secondly, I distinguish between the realm of these referring constituents and the work's formal character. This formal character is supervenient on my perception of the sensory properties of the work; the filing cabinet as focal point, the green screen background, the musical accompaniment, the garish utilitarian colour scheme, maybe also my 'organising understanding' as a viewer with certain expectations of the situation I am in. This formal character has primacy in the sense that it unifies the referring elements. The notion of form as primary and unifying is part of my own working (compelling, if not perfectly successful) understanding of what an art object is.

Despite having suggested a kind of primacy to this formal character, I am particularly interested in how the referring constituents in *Thrifty* function. These elements each allude to Lismanis' practice but do not resolve into a narrative or message. They are distinct ideas in the orbit of a common subject. What most importantly unites them qua constituents of an artwork is how they look and sound rather than what they mean. Whilst they coincide, there is not harmony. The result is that *Thrifty* has a tone rather than a meaning. In this sense, you could say that I understand the work as a kind of collage.

A work with an unclear relationship between referring constituents gives the viewer a specific kind of experience which is different to the situation one might find oneself in looking at a piece of narrative work. Should a viewer choose to engage with *Thrifty* on the level of meaning, they are endowed with a markedly liberated creative role. The filing cabinet may be monolithic, the green screen may be about to provide a contextualising image. The role of the soundtrack is to be decided by you in either case. Interpretation is especially available.

Though not essential to it, *Thrifty*'s humour is complementary to this kind of experience. The test card music is familiar to anyone who, like me, used to get up at 5am on a Saturday morning to watch kids' TV. I hear it and am primed with a kind of embarrassed nostalgia.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://brockleygardens.com/reinis-lismanis>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Reinis Lismanis, *Trial and Error*, 2019, Skinnerbook, Italy

There are photographs of funny graffiti and the mock rigour of the artist's statement is irony straight from the mouth of the source: 'a tower of Bisley AOC Filing Cabinets (Foolscap, 470 x 1321 x 622 mm and 470 x 1016 x 620 mm) in Goose Grey).' In an unresolved cluster of references, humour, particularly with ironic self-effacement, makes sense; it says, 'this is an unauthoritative thing and I am no authority'.

Deposing an ultimate interpreter could also mean completely abandoning the attempt to make sense of the relationship of referring constituents. Embracing this possibility means embracing *Thrifty's* dissonance, a quality which not only makes the work funny in a different, slightly absurd way but also makes it loose and playful. The aspect of the concept of dissonance which I am employing is that of an unhappy combination. In musical dissonance such a combination may be the clash of two notes a semi note apart. In poetry, a break of rhythm and syllable structure, the jarring of one type of sound against the introduction of another, can be dissonant. The dissonance of *Thrifty's* referring constituents comes from their lack of resolution, from it not being clear why they are together like this. In the realm of meaning, unhappy combinations can amount to comic absurdity. This is partially true of *Thrifty* yet the constituents shared subject matter, of Lismanis' practice, mediates this. However, the dissonance succeeds in giving the work an aesthetic of looseness. The inbuilt potential for relationships that work less well makes for a playful quality of experimentation which, coupled with the work's irony, makes *Thrifty* feel light and nimble.

That the unclear relationship of reference results in a positive aesthetic quality rather than a failure in *Thrifty* is a testament to how the aesthetics of dissonance commonly and effectively functions across borders of form, content and history in individual works. By identifying *Thrifty* as loose and playful, I am partially endowing the work's own operations with aesthetic qualities. Examples like the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger<sup>4</sup> represents an extreme case where dissonances in a work's ontology have the result of undermining the tradition in which it partakes. However, more stable instances are illustrative.

Pharoah Sanders' exuberant *You've Got to Have Freedom*<sup>5</sup> is an example. The piece's central motif is played by Sanders' emphatic, straining saxophone and the solos contain odd gaps and chromaticisms. These events are wrong by to the conventions of rhythm, tonality and performance. Nonetheless, they connote an energy at the level of meaning consistent with the song's emotional ecstasy. Dissonances can also engage the audience by provoking attempts to synthesise compositional decisions that seem problematic or audacious. This is evident in paintings like Mustafa Hulusi's *Seoul Paintings*<sup>6</sup> or Colin Crumplin's *Cake*<sup>7</sup>. In both sets of instances, the two halves of the canvas are starkly contrasting. Attempting a resolution of the sections, even if one ultimately fails, makes one more attentive to visual qualities of each.

These dissonances in Hulusi and Crumplin's work are similar to an instance found in Lismanis' *Trial and Error* where an attempt to synthesise a juxtaposition of forms can enrich the viewer's experience.<sup>8</sup> Towards the middle of the book one sees a group of photographic images across two pages. The first, square, shows an intensely lit, crumpled red sheet on a windowsill. This is butted up against a second across the gutter, a smaller square installation

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/metzger-recreation-of-first-public-demonstration-of-auto-destructive-art-t12156>

<sup>5</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Gxz7ON8RNY0i9N9t9veZR?si=oFmAwfg7Txe8GLmRm54fTA>

<sup>6</sup> <http://mustafahulusi.com/seoul.html>

<sup>7</sup> [https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/cake-17414/view\\_as/grid/search/makers:colin-crumplin-b1946-3018502/page/1](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/cake-17414/view_as/grid/search/makers:colin-crumplin-b1946-3018502/page/1)

<sup>8</sup> Reinis Lismanis, *Trial and Error*, 2019, Skinnerbook, Italy pp50-1

shot containing a vertical band of a similar red against a third of a projected screen of light dividing the top of a maroon chair. Lismanis' comparisons here are latent and imperfect, the textures and shades of the materials and the differing light conditions mean that each bright square and red looks different. Yet a persevering sense of balance draws the viewer into a closer study of these differences. The composition has a kind of earthy symmetry which is all the more satisfying for being hard won.

My interpretation of *Thrifty* explicates a further, thematic continuity with *Trial and Error* through a mutual concern with the everyday experience of artistic work. This claim hinges on an analogy between the clustered, fragmentary nature of the referring constituents of *Thrifty* and an understanding of experience espoused by, for example, Phenomenologist thinkers. Phenomenology attempts to investigate questions in Epistemology, Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science by analysing the qualities of first-hand subjectivity. Although a broad church, stretching beyond different philosophical commitments to varying academic disciplines, a major tenet of the tradition is the fundamentality of the pre-conscious. Phenomenologists have commonly observed that cognitive and psychological states during much daily activity do not comprise readily structured chains of thought, sensation and perception but are instead radically immediate and, as such, fleeting and incomplete. This, in turn, has served as a point of departure for their studies.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this observation predates much Phenomenological work and exists in other spheres. A famous literary example is James Joyce's *Ulysses* where the prose expands into a level playing field of narration, memory, and association interjected by the reception of real-world phenomena. A passage from the novel's fourth chapter *Calypso* in which main character Leopold Bloom is returning from the butcher exemplifies this:

'Arbutus place: Pleasants street: pleasant old times. Must be without a flaw, he said. Coming all the way: Spain, Gibraltar, Mediterranean, the Levant. Crates lined up on the quayside at Jaffa, chaps ticking them off in a book, navvies handling them in soiled dungarees. There's whatdoyoucallhim out of. How do you? Doesn't see. Chap you know just to salute bit of a bore. His back is like that Norwegian captain's. Wonder if I'll meet him today. Watering cart. To provoke the rain. On earth as it is in heaven.'<sup>10</sup>

That this is an instance of that observation taking on a life in literature can be demonstrated by a summary. Bloom turns on to a street approaching his home where he lives with his wife Molly. Earlier in the walk he has considered participating in a plantation scheme in Palestine which has set in motion a number of associations with his Jewish heritage. The line 'Must be without flaw' is a reference to a ritual forming part of the Feast of Tabernacles in which a untarnished citron is carried into the synagogue.<sup>11</sup> His envisioning of the loading of crates, recalls both the religiously significant fruit and importation, perhaps related to his potential business venture. This also represents Molly, who has Mediterranean ancestry and for whom Bloom will buy lemon soap in the next chapter. Against this flood of associations, Bloom recognises a member of his local community who reminds him of Blazes Boylan, the Dublin music promoter with whom he knows, although at a kind of psychological arm's length, Molly is having an affair: 'Wonder if I'll meet him today.' The sight of a watering cart

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<sup>9</sup> Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind, an introduction to philosophy of mind and cognitive science*, 2008, Routledge, London and New York, Chapter 3 Consciousness and Self Consciousness, pp. 45-68

<sup>10</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, p58

<sup>11</sup> Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated Notes for James Joyces' Ulysses*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1988, p74

focuses his mind back to agriculture the daily bread of Christian Lord's Prayer and the warm summer day on which the novel is set.

Whilst *Ulysses* does contain the third person voice and references shared only between narrator and reader, this passage is successful in demonstrating its distinctive representation of the flux of a mind with multiple concerns in multiple situations. Association and perception are not only fragmented but also interact and morph. Whilst the novel contains representations of experience untamed by conscious ordering, some may also argue that reading the text directly replicates this fragmented character of working experience as one negotiates constituents which do not make immediate sense. Whilst this may be tenuous for *Ulysses*, it is more plausible in *Thrifty*. In Lismanis' work the referring constituents are similar to the flashes and blind alleys of pre-conscious experience in that they are intrinsically discrete and unordered.

*Thrifty's* invitation to the viewer into something like pre-conscious experience has lineage with Lismanis' earlier work in *Trial and Error*. The relationship is especially compelling given *Thrifty's* assemblage of elements from the artist's own working space. In his illuminating *Trial and Error* catalogue essay *The Creative Resistance of Everyday*<sup>12</sup>, Paulius Petraitis gives a political interpretation of Lismanis' work. Petraitis cites the writer Henri LeFebvre's account of a commonly held contemporary distaste for the quotidian, fostered by nineteenth century thought and exploited by a market for the extraordinary. Capitalist aspiration could be a tonic in the face of the boredom and frustration resulting from misplaced expectations. From this context, he argues that Lismanis' interest in and approach to the ordinary, exemplified in the walk recounted at the start of his introduction to *Trial and Error* is meaningfully unassimilated: 'These everyday walking rituals...are subversive because they break free from the confinements of urban planning and city vision...never fully subsumed into the strategies of organising bodies.'<sup>13</sup>

Lismanis' introduction was originally offered as an exhibition artist's statement which Petraitis observes commonly serves as an explanation of inspiration and motivation. The walk of the essay is tangential and stuttering: 'I went to the pub first as I was hoping to catch the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of a football match but I was told that they are "more of a rugby place". So I went to the park instead and the café was open...I was going to get the salted caramel ice cream as per usual but they didn't have that flavour or even the coconut one. So, all in all it was a fucked up walk so far.'<sup>14</sup>The account of the walk, read as a proxy explanation of the artistic process, is non-ideal. Yet Petraitis does not misread it by suggesting that it is in dialogue with a statement's usual purpose. Indeed, Lismanis refers to his cognizance of the 'well-trodden ground' of accounts attesting to walking as a catalyst to creativity: 'This was not a coincidence because I saw somebody posting that cliché quote by some famous artist or scientist or politician about how walks are extremely important for keeping his/her ideas flowing.'<sup>15</sup>

A later passage appears to support Petraitis' characterisation when Lismanis conjectures over the writing of a polemically functional press release. The gesture, he writes, would amount to taking 'well-oiled systems and kind of breaking them apart to draw attention to their structure and purpose.' This motivation, applied to the decision to present an ersatz walk-as-incubation, could therefore be read as an act of subversion entirely consistent with

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<sup>12</sup> Paulius Petraitis *The Creative Resistance of Everyday* from Reinis Lismanis, *Trial and Error*, 2019, Skinnerboox, Italy, pp60-7

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 65

<sup>14</sup> Reinis Lismanis *Trial and Error*, 2019, Skinnerboox, Italy, p1

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p2

Petratis' reading. In support of this, it is significant that despite stops at the pub and the park the *Trial and Error* walk is instrumental, leading to the studio. The artist walk paradigm is contaminated by detour and practical considerations: '...had never gone that way even though Google says it's supposed to take the same amount of time.'<sup>16</sup>

The notion of 'breaking apart a well-oiled system and drawing attention to its structure and purpose' represents the continuity between both examples of Lismanis' work. The activity of the studio also forms a part of *Thrifty* through the artist's appropriation of found objects. Read this way it seems apt that the particularly mundane filing cabinet takes a kind of centre stage. The work's collage-like, fragmented assemblage replicates the pre-conscious experience of realising a work in the viewer. As hinted at by the filing cabinet, this extends to related activities. Such a move is in the spirit of the *Trial and Error* walk where the artist's statement is only partially about art. In both instances, the well-oiled system is broken apart; a deliberately unclean break where the debris and frayed edges have weight and importance.

This essay has been a way of deploying my longstanding interest in the potential of fragmentary modes of representation. One reason for this interest is the intense concentration of extremes of expression, from the direct to the oblique, all together busily functioning in a single work. In describing Lismanis' *Thrifty* as 'light and nimble' I wished to convey the energy and the kind of easy skilfulness that I enjoy in many works of this type. A further step could be addressing the tension between a claim that *Thrifty* is fundamentally fragmentary and the comparison between it and the introduction of *Trial and Error* which seems to rely on a representative function for that fragmentation. My sense is that it's a matter of degree but anything generalisable coming out such a discussion would be interesting. Another development could be to see whether my analysis of the work stands up to the products of a more rigorous examination of pre-conscious experience which has been extensively debated in Phenomenology and beyond. As well as exposing shortcomings of my approach, it may also yield the happy accident of a different way of looking at the work.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.