

The Joyful Unwisdom of Max Podstolski

Max Podstolski is a self-proclaimed ‘primitivist’ artist whose work, visually elegant, intellectually engaging, has received relatively little critical attention to date – even though his practice now spans more than three decades. In seeking to partially redress this state of affairs, this essay foregrounds Podstolski’s *My Art Instinct* exhibition, held at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, in April-May 2010. I devote particular attention to the show’s signature work: *The Art Instinct (Mine)* (2007-09), which takes its name from Denis Dutton’s *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (2009). The title of this painting, and the exhibition of which it was part, not only playfully resists the primary thesis of Dutton’s book, it immediately gives notice of various contradictions intrinsic to Podstolski’s creative process – if not creative acts in general. For, in speaking of an art instinct that is uniquely *his*, Podstolski recasts that which admits consideration as objective and universal within the space of his own subjectivity. Moreover, even in *conceiving* of his art instinct, Podstolski locates his creativity within a seemingly-paradoxical counterpoise between pre-conscious instinct or intuition, and self-conscious reflection. Clarifying this enigma is this study’s other major concern, with Podstolski’s work providing an opportunity to revisit broader philosophical issues raised by abstract and/or intuitive art. With these aims in mind, in the first part of the essay I show how *The Art Instinct (Mine)* manifests a simultaneity of, or reciprocity between, ostensible incommensurables: accident and intention, intuition and reflection, nature and culture. In section two of the paper, I respond to Podstolski’s penchant for situating his recent work within the Nietzschean frame of the Apollonian and Dionysian, and propose that the antimonies present in a painting like *The Art Instinct (Mine)* might be re-stated in terms of the Nietzschean idea of ‘willed forgetfulness’ or ‘joyful unwisdom.’ Here, my intention is to demonstrate that intuitive and reflective moments in Podstolski’s work, far from being mutually exclusive, exist in a

coincidence that is, perhaps, both necessary and inevitable. Finally, in the third part of this study, I attempt a possible resolution of the contradictions thus far discussed by reconsidering the conceptual framework within which terms like ‘intuition’ and ‘reflection’ are defined. To this end, I discuss the notion of ‘willed’ (or ‘wilful’) forgetfulness in light of Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence and his conception of the trace.

1.

The primordial movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion... A line comes into being... It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk. Paul Klee¹

When seeking to understand the process by which Max Podstolski creates a painting like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, Klee’s famous maxim, a well-worn touchstone for artists who embrace intuition and accident, would appear to provide the perfect starting point. Not only does Podstolski readily acknowledge Klee (along with the likes of Wassily Kandinsky or the postwar CoBrA group) as a source of inspiration, but on any number of occasions Podstolski has characterized himself as a latter day ‘primitivist,’ chasing the flame of spontaneity and insistently seeking, in his painting, to channel the elusive wellspring of artistic creativity.² *The Art Instinct (Mine)* illustrates these sentiments in an exemplary fashion. Over a foundation of earthen hue, Podstolski’s brush arcs across the canvas in broad, dizzying gyrations of red, orange, yellow and blue-grey. These animated swirls of colour are themselves partially obscured beneath a riot of vigorously scribbled strokes, shapes and linear striations rendered in semi-transparent, white pigment. A motley collection of more clearly delineated motifs, outlined in black and occasionally filled in with pure white paint, occupies the uppermost layer of the work. The result is a dense assemblage of wandering, curvilinear concatenations – an intricate, multi-layered scrawl that, from start to finish,

seems unpremeditated and chaotic. Podstolski's painting takes Klee's formula to the limit.

Or does it? Although, at first glance, *The Art Instinct (Mine)* seems to unfold in a series of happy accidents, the very fact that the painting resolves into several discrete planes suggests that random, automatist gestures are situated within a structuring framework. Moreover, it is apparent that, in common with many of Podstolski's paintings, *The Art Instinct (Mine)* is neither purely abstract nor non-objective in nature, but rather bustles with a multitude of figures, forms and faces. Many of these sport the stylized beaks and doubled-up Picasso-eyes of Podstolski's trademark bird creatures, as well as the surreal totems and hieroglyphs that inhabit many a work by the likes of Klee, or indeed another of Podstolski's favoured artists: Len Lye.

Comparisons with Lye are especially apposite when one considers that *The Art Instinct (Mine)* was originally exhibited as part of an exhibition entitled *Free Madicals*, after Lye's animated film *Free Radicals* (1958-79). In the online notes to this exhibition, Podstolski identifies the 'Free Madicals' with the figurative motifs in his work and suggests that the term implies 'freedom through craziness or eccentricity' – this freedom referring, above all, to the creative freedom of expression of the artist individual.³

At this point it is apparent that Podstolski's *modus operandi* involves a contradiction. On the one hand, the broad, colourful under-painting and the more abstract, linear scribbles in a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)* seem consonant with Klee's postulated 'primordial movement.' It is not difficult to conceive of these features as products of a creative force or agency that, like automatic writing, animates the hand of the artist, but which does so, ostensibly, without requiring the presence of a self-conscious artistic ego or artist 'I.' On the other hand, Podstolski's 'madicals,' often carefully outlined, and existing in the upper (i.e., *later*) layers of his painting, seem to be the result of a more deliberate, intentional activity that involves finding and/or

making sense of pre-existing patterns, exploiting certain opportunities to make figures, and in the process bringing the work into a kind of focus, or to a natural, even inevitable, endpoint. This degree of *finishing* is particularly evident in paintings chosen for Podstolski's last major exhibition, *Internal Necessity is the Mother...* (2005). In works like *The Farm* (2005) or *Totemic Figures* (2005), wandering linear relief structures, created by squeezing PVA glue from a tube, are securely contained within sharply defined blocks of colour – and then often over-painted in black or white pigment to enhance their definition. The *Free Madicals* and *My Art Instinct* paintings are noticeably more freely executed. Nevertheless, even a work as vibrantly spontaneous as *The Re-Creation of the World* (2007-09) clearly discloses the distinctly layered stages of its execution and echoes *The Art Instinct (Mine)*'s progression from broad washes of colour to figurative doodles, monochromatic and finely detailed.

Evidently, then, whilst Klee's dictum provides a useful starting point from which to consider Podstolski's creative process, it does not tell the whole story. In a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, Podstolski's vigorous, painterly gestures, and playful courting of accident and disorder coexist with other features that are judged, reflected on, *composed*. One might go even further and suggest that, if *The Art Instinct (Mine)* epitomizes the intuitive and instinctive free-play towards which Podstolski strives in his art-making, then this activity, as much as it might proceed from a 'primordial movement,' is also, to some degree, learned or cultivated. Indeed, one might very well expect *The Art Instinct (Mine)* to exude a sense of cultivation given that it is the product of over thirty years art practice. Put another way, the tension or balance, in Podstolski's work, between forces of order and disorder, composition and accident, demonstrates to what extent its intuitive free-play occurs within the cultured practice that is *painting*.⁴ For Podstolski isn't simply splashing paint on a wall: he is seeking to create a work of art. In the process, a paradox arises insofar as the artist seeks to access, conjure up or

unleash unconscious or instinctive forces, and by the same token, to *harness* these forces so that what is produced in the end is an *objet d'art* rather than a *bona fide* expression of nature in the raw.

2.

Forgetfulness is a property of all action... Friedrich Nietzsche⁵

In philosophy, a paradox is both a caution and an opportunity. A seeming antinomy often signals a problem framed too simplistically, and by the same token invites a more rigorous re-examination of premises and preconceptions. What *The Art Instinct (Mine)* places in question is the notion that pre-conscious or intuitive creative work is incommensurable with that emerging from self-conscious reflection. If, indeed, this presupposition is false, then other possibilities arise. For example, dialectically speaking, intuition and reflection might be regarded as faculties operating within the embrace of a larger system of cognition. Viewed in this light, intuitive and reflective modes, far from being mutually exclusive, might reveal themselves to be engaged in a reciprocal relationship – perhaps one both necessary and inevitable. If a reconciliation of this sort is tenable, then a questioning of the conceptual prejudices and/or metaphysical worldview from which such cognitive definitions proceed would seem indicated. I will pursue this idea further in section three. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, I suggest, merely, that a closer examination of what Podstolski has to say about his creative process implies that, in a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, intuitive and reflective moments exist in a coincidence verging on the complicit.

In the first place, describing the earlier, more spontaneous stages of his paintings, Podstolski stresses the importance of creating a ‘clearing free of distraction’ so that his work can ‘flow’ with the requisite momentum.⁶ This

admonition is precisely that of the automatist or intuitive artist, for whom artistic creation necessitates a suspension of conscious activity in order that forces, to some degree unconscious, be accessed or channelled. However, addressing the later stages of his work, Podstolski prioritizes the role played by judgement and reflection. Indeed, as if to emphasize to what extent his paintings proceed from the realm of instinctive *nature* into the domain of *cultural* self-reflexivity, Podstolski employs Nietzschean terminology: ‘I think of my instinct as primarily, fundamentally Dionysian... Only secondarily and reflectively does the Apollonian aspect come into play.’⁷ Here, Podstolski alludes to those modes of being Nietzsche defines, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), as *Dionysian* (pre-conscious, intuitive) and *Apollonian* (conscious, rational).⁸

Podstolski thus characterizes his paintings as emerging in two movements, proceeding from instinct to reflection, so that a finished work harmoniously synthesises Dionysian and Apollonian currents. Here, it might be noted that Nietzsche defines Dionysian and Apollonian modes of being as complements that exist in a necessary counterpoise. Hence, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as ‘the... original artistic, force which... calls into existence the entire world of phenomena,’ but asserts, also, that coherent human experience requires the ‘glorious illusion [of] Apollonian transfiguring power.’⁹ Whilst it seems reasonable to accept Nietzsche’s claim that pre-conscious creative impulses are given form and meaning through reflection, a deeper examination of the genesis of a work like Podstolski’s *The Art Instinct (Mine)* suggests that what obtains is more subtle and complex than a simple *progression* from pre-conscious to reflective states. Consider, for example, Podstolski’s comment about ‘creating a clearing’ as a preliminary to his work. What this implies is that, however much the intuitive or instinctive moment in his creative process proceeds from an originating creative drive, it is also, to some degree, a frame of mind intentionally engineered. Yet again, one is reminded that art emerges within the context of

culture: like many artists, Podstolski creates his work in a studio space set aside for that *purpose*; however much instinctive or pre-conscious forces are unleashed in his painting, at the outset, Podstolski's *intention* is to create a work of art. From this perspective, to regard artistic creation as an evolutionary progression from nature to culture is to forget that art-making is, already, a cultured activity. At the same time, however, I would concede that a willed (perhaps even wilful) amnesia is precisely what enables an artist like Podstolski to conjure up (or remember, return to) a 'primordial' self.

To understand how an 'intentional amnesia' could play a necessary role in the creation of a painting like *The Art Instinct (Mine)* – and especially given Podstolski's evident fondness for Nietzsche¹⁰ – it seems entirely appropriate, at this point, to examine Nietzsche's advocacy of forgetfulness in his essay 'The Use and Abuse of History' (1874), from which the opening quote of this section is taken. Nietzsche argues that an awareness of history is useful insofar as it helps people orient themselves in relation to the world and thus find their way forward. However, Nietzsche cautions, the remembrance of things past can become a burdensome liability if it is attended to overzealously: 'We do need history... [but] for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action...'¹¹ In order to avoid being enraptured by all that has gone before, Nietzsche admonishes his readers to live 'un-historically,' that is, without conscious reflection, as beings existing entirely in the *present* – like beasts in the field.¹² The means by which one might achieve this state is, in Nietzsche's opinion, to cultivate forgetfulness. Indeed, Nietzsche asserts that '...life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without forgetfulness... there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of "historical sense," that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture.'¹³ Nietzsche identifies a standpoint that he calls 'super-historical' – a position of knowledge and awareness from which one understands history as, essentially, an expression of unchanging human nature, and thus doomed to repeat itself. Whilst the

‘super-historical’ position rejects naïve notions of cultural evolution or progress, it is, also, a position of paralysis and defeat: ‘...the “super-historical” man sees no salvation in evolution... the world is complete and fulfils its aim in every single moment.’¹⁴ Therefore, in order to construct a life worth living, Nietzsche proposes to ‘leave the super-historical men to their loathings and wisdom: we wish rather to-day to be joyful in our unwisdom and have a pleasant life as active men who go forward.’¹⁵

At first glance, Nietzsche’s conception of joyful unwisdom or willed/wilful forgetfulness may appear unhelpful in understanding Podstolski’s creative process. Nietzsche advocates a return to an instinctive state of nature that is, at the same time, *cultivated* – an idea that simply seems to reiterate, rather than resolve, the seemingly-paradoxical coincidence of pre-conscious intuition and conscious reflection already observed in Podstolski’s work. Given that *forgetfulness*, as it is usually understood, implies a *loss* occurring beyond the reach of consciousness – whether this is of the clarity of memory, or indeed the complete disappearance of memory – one might well ask how forgetting could be *willed* (i.e., made a function of consciousness). At the same time, it is apparent that the activity of conscious reflection is precisely the means by which lapses in memory are *recognized*: it is by reflecting on the past that we become aware that certain experiences have lost focus or become discontinuous. Significantly, such deficits in the clarity or wholeness of memory can only be identified insofar as they relate to a body of memory that remains more or less intact. Indeed, the patterned and relational nature of memory becomes evident when one considers how fragments of experience, momentarily lost, may be recalled by reflecting on a sequence of events, or through consideration of an entire tapestry of related experiences of which the elusive recollection is a missing component. To be sure, memory recall need not necessarily require conscious intervention (consider phenomena such as flashbacks – or repressed experiences

resurfacing in dreams) – but the idea that remembrance might be amenable to consciousness and reflection seems uncontroversial.

I would argue that the *conscious* dimension of memory recall invites closer scrutiny of the phenomenon of memory loss. One might ask: is a memory truly ‘lost’ if it is later recalled? Would it be more accurate to regard a memory recalled to have been merely ‘out of sight’ of consciousness for a time – obscured by more immediate concerns, pushed, as it were, into the cognitive background, or otherwise ‘misplaced?’ If this is so, then the Nietzschean concept of joyful un wisdom, in conjunction with Podstolski’s use of expressions like ‘creating a clearing,’ encourages a broader consideration of forgetfulness. Rather than signifying only negative, passive and/or autonomic processes of loss and decay, might not *forgetting* also designate the effects of more positive, active and intentional processes of cognitive relaxation, withdrawal, selectivity or displacement? From this perspective, one might apply the term ‘forgetting’ to the deliberate dropping of the reins of consciousness or the defocusing/refocusing of consciousness in order that things existing in the realm of intuition, instinct or the unconscious, might be encouraged to enter the ‘field of view’ of consciousness – or simply given expression free of conscious intervention. Indeed, whilst intuitive or unconscious impulses operate, by definition, beyond conscious control, it seems reasonable to suggest that, in order for such forces to be *thought about*, to become objects of reflection (that is, *consciousness*), processes of conscious suspension, withdrawal or *forgetfulness* are, to some degree, *necessary*. In colloquial terms, one often speaks of ‘stepping back’ from a problem, in order to avoid, for example, ‘not being able to see the wood for the trees.’ This expression implicitly disposes objects of close reflection (the ‘trees’) within an enveloping cognitive field (the ‘wood’) that is neither immediately present to consciousness, nor entirely absent. Considered in this light, remembrance and forgetfulness, reflection and intuition, begin to seem

less incommensurable opposites than interrelated and reciprocating aspects of cognition in general.

If the notion of ‘willed forgetfulness’ is not a logical absurdity, how, then, is Podstolski ‘joyfully unwise’ when it comes to the creation of a painting like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*? In the first place, it is telling that the artist feels the need, occasionally, to apologize for what might be described as retrograde tendencies in his painting: ‘I see myself as a throwback to an earlier, more primitive and innocent time, which may exist only in my imagination.’¹⁶ Nevertheless, given the quantity of work he has produced over the last three decades, it is obvious that Podstolski has been able to overcome such doubts and anxieties – to repeatedly *forget* the weight of modernist art history, setting aside the legacy of Klee, Kandinsky, Karel Appel and others in order to act *in the present*, applying his brush to canvas with excitement and enthusiasm, as if for the first time. Moreover, it is also evident that Podstolski is able to assume a position of wilful amnesia when it comes to contemporary art practice – particularly the postmodern forms and theories that have tended to undermine traditional notions of artistic agency and authenticity. Here, the term ‘wilful’ is indicated precisely because Podstolski’s determined advocacy of individual artistic expression is not naïve, but is made with a sophisticated awareness of the postmodern skepticism directed at such positions. This is apparent from his observation: ‘To claim to be an outsider in the postmodern art world is supposedly a contradiction in terms, an impossibility, because it smacks of inverse elitism I suspect, i.e., self-privileging authenticity.’¹⁷

Whilst, to some degree, Podstolski’s joyful unwisdom signifies a kind of art historical amnesia, I would also argue that willed forgetfulness applies to the actual execution of his work. Relevant, in this regard, is Podstolski’s insistence, in his essay, ‘My Art Instinct’ (2010), that: ‘When I go into my studio to paint, I am only concerned with getting my mind out of the way to allow instinctual self-expression to flow freely.’¹⁸ In email correspondence with this writer, Podstolski further qualifies his position, asserting that artistic

expression is ‘a matter of continually testing the boundaries of “yourself” – how far can you go *away* from “yourself,” from the idea of “yourself” as expressed developmentally in your own art history, while still retaining enough of your identity not to throw the baby out altogether?’¹⁹ In light of these remarks, it is tempting to see the artist’s paintings emerging out of a space of equivocation within which he is, paradoxically, self-conscious about his activity as an artist and constantly seeking to ‘forget himself.’ To call this creative attitude ‘joyfully unwise,’ is to suggest, yet again, that the shaping of a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)* involves a strange simultaneity of intuition and reflection, remembrance and forgetting. If this is the case, then it would, indeed, appear to be an oversimplification to regard Podstolski’s work as proceeding, straightforwardly, from intuition to reflection – as if from one creative pole to its opposite. Rather, one must understand the condition of willed (or wilful) amnesia, out of which *The Art Instinct (Mine)* emerges, to obtain throughout its creation, from beginning to end.

How might this be so? In relation to the early, more overtly gestured stages of Podstolski’s mark-making, the automatist impulse that drives a brush laden with pigment across a broad swathe of *The Art Instinct (Mine)* has, in one respect, no identity, no history, nor any sense of where it is going. At the same time, however, this impulse is subject to certain limits. Certain of these are *formal*: at some point, the brush stroke stops – halted by a depletion of paint or the edge of the canvas. However, other conditioning factors arise from Podstolski’s not-quite-fully-conscious judgement that the arc has gone far enough; that a swift scribble or curlicue of colour has adequately transferred its energy of gesture to the painting surface, and that to continue would be, in some sense, wrong or excessive. Whilst, formally speaking, subsequent brushstrokes will be partially determined by the disposition of those preceding them, in some fashion Podstolski asserts himself in *choosing* different hues, marking unoccupied areas of the canvas. These ‘micro-judgements’ are made in quickstep, on the spur of the moment – and just as

quickly as they are made, they are cast out of consciousness, submerged within, or overwhelmed by, the artist's next gestured exuberance.

This willed forgetfulness exerts its influence no less in the later, more deliberate phases of a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*. For, in seeking opportunities to make figures, to find appropriate expression for his 'madicals,' Podstolski must, necessarily, strive to see his painting from a fresh perspective. Indeed, one might argue that, in order to allow figurative possibilities to coalesce, it is necessary that the artist *forget* what has just been done – even though this prior activity will still, to some degree, haunt, inflect or otherwise resonate through the work that follows. In this way, one may conceive of Podstolski's paintings as a densely stratified series of forgettings and remembrances where the automatist gesture and the intended mark equivocate in the interval *between* successive brushstrokes – and even, perhaps, are folded together *within* the interval *of* a brushstroke. From this perspective, Podstolski's 'madicals' are neither purely accidental nor absolutely predetermined, but rather seem to be engendered within the providential interstices of decision-making and chance, emerging out of a coincidence of intuitive gestures made almost (but, perhaps, not quite) apart from forethought, and more deliberate marks that, nevertheless, like automatic writing, seem to *mean* by accident rather than by intention.

3.

Differance is therefore the formation of form. But it is on the other hand the being-imprinted of the imprint. Jacques Derrida²⁰

In seeking a deeper understanding (and possible resolution) of the paradoxes raised by *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, it will be useful, at this point, to shift the philosophical locus on Podstolski's work from Nietzsche to Derrida. Readers of Derrida will, I hope, forgive the following exegesis I attempt for the benefit of those less familiar with Derrida's terminology. What I am

proposing here is that, in order to further illuminate Podstolski's creative process, one might consider the Nietzschean notion of 'willed' (or 'wilful') forgetfulness in light of what Derrida calls the trace or *differance*.²¹ There are at least two reasons why Podstolski's work invites a discussion of this kind. Firstly, the artist's creative process involves a *movement towards meaning* (what Derrida would call *signification*) – a movement, moreover, emerging out of a strange simultaneity between paired signifying terms that, on initial inspection, might be considered mutually exclusive opposites: accident and intention, forgetfulness and remembrance, nature and culture, intuition and reflection. Consideration of these opposed binaries in light of the trace facilitates what Derrida would term their *deconstruction* – i.e., a pulling apart and subsequent reconstitution of the preconceived worldview in which such terms are construed as opposing poles to reveal, perhaps, their intimate and possibly necessary co-dependence. Secondly, the movement towards meaning manifest in Podstolski's work involves mark-making that is almost *calligraphic*. Given that, in key texts like *Of Grammatology* (1967), the semiotics of *writing* is Derrida's basic preoccupation, this seems a reasonable perspective from which to consider Podstolski's work.

Before considering how the trace relates to the potential movement towards meaning manifest in writing/painting, it may be useful to establish some working definitions. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asserts that the trace is '... the *pure* movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is differance*.'²² These terms are defined more accessibly in 'Differance' (1968) where Derrida writes: '*Differance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept*'²³ but a 'systematic play of differences,' such a play being 'no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general.'²⁴ Discussing the trace, Derrida insists that it is 'not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself.'²⁵ In other words, neither the trace nor the movement of *differance* are *things* – either in a material sense or as objects of cognition.

Rather, these terms refer to the movement and differential play of elements in a conceptual system, at the same time enabling or constituting this movement and play, as well as the system or space in which such movement and play takes place. Hence, in the opening quote of this section, when Derrida writes: ‘Differance... is the formation of form,’ he relates the trace to *how* things are rather than *what* they are. This way of thinking existence is something Derrida inherits from Martin Heidegger in order to question what, in Western metaphysics, Heidegger terms ‘determinations of Being [as]... presence’ or the notion that ‘“Being” fundamentally means presence’ – a presupposition that understands Being to be grounded in determinable origins and essences upon which (at least, in principle) absolute judgements of truth and value may be made.²⁶ One might still wonder, however, what Derrida means when he describes *differance* as the ‘being-imprinted of the imprint.’ In this regard, the following passage from ‘Differance’ may be illuminating: ‘Differance... makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be “present”... is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element.’²⁷

Here, Derrida makes two key points. In the first place, he suggests that elements in a conceptual system *mean* only in relation to *other* elements, i.e., *differentially*. Secondly, Derrida insists that the elements in a conceptual system should not, strictly speaking, be considered as immutable presences, but rather as expressions of a *process of becoming* whereby the ‘elements’ in the system, the ‘subjects’ tracing the meaning of these elements, and the ‘trace’ ‘itself’ (bearing in mind that the trace is not a ‘thing’ as such, but rather what enables this process of becoming) exist in a state of unending transmutation or re-inscription. To paraphrase Derrida, one might locate the activity of the trace in a space and time (Derrida uses the word ‘interval’) that cannot be adequately encompassed by the notion of a fixed ‘present’ insofar as what we might define as the ‘ground’ of the present is forever

shifting. As Derrida expresses it, the ‘interval’ in which the trace is manifest is continuously ‘Constituting itself, dynamically dividing itself’ and thus it ‘must also... divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present, everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is every being – in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject.’²⁸ What this implies, therefore, is that the elements in a conceptual system, as well as the subjects seeking to determine what these elements mean, exist in a condition of unremitting metamorphosis whereby each ‘thing’ ‘present’ (object or subject) ‘exists’ only as a transformation of an earlier existence and is, at the same time, already being transformed into a future existence.

Let us return, momentarily, to the first point raised above – namely, that elements in a conceptual system *mean* only in relation to *other* elements. In considering the movement of signification, the system with which Derrida is inevitably concerned is that expressed by language and its elements are *signs*. The sign, in what Derrida refers to as ‘classical semiology,’ can be considered, in a first approximation, as a double entity comprising an aural or visual *image* (the sound of the spoken word or the visual inscription of the written word) and a *concept*.²⁹ In the jargon of linguistics, one normally refers to the ‘image’ as a *signifier* and the ‘concept’ as a *signified*. Straightforwardly, one expects a sign to stand *in place of* or *represent* an object or *referent*. However, appropriating a highly influential idea originally posited by Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida suggests that this condition of direct, positive reference or identity does not, in fact, obtain. Saussure expresses the problem thus: ‘in language there are only differences *without positive terms*... language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.’³⁰

To see how this idea might apply to the *visual* language of painting, consider, for example, the upper right quadrant of *The Art Instinct (Mine)* where there exists a large-footed ‘madical’ with a blocky torso and a

seemingly-masked, broadly smiling, oval-shaped head. This motif is a sign insofar as it consists of a visual mark (or signifier) that can be interpreted as (i.e., stands for the concept or signified) ‘human figure.’ The question that concerns us is: how does this object mean? How does one come to associate it with the idea of a human figure – moreover, one wearing a friendly grin? For, on reflection, it is evident that there is no solitary, fixed concept of ‘human figure’ to which Podstolski’s ‘madical’ refers. Whilst the equation ‘four limbs and a head’ may inform the great majority of our ideas of ‘human figure,’ every spectator who draws such a connection will still, no doubt, have their own peculiar notion of what ‘human figure’ means. Indeed, given the semi-abstracted nature of Podstolski’s totem, it is quite possible that many spectators may not interpret it as a human figure at all. Therefore, the association of Podstolski’s ‘madical’ with ‘human figure’ is arbitrary. From a Saussurean perspective, it signifies ‘human figure’ only by virtue of its differential relationships with an entire constellation of other possible significations which it is *not* – i.e., it is a ‘human figure’ because it is not, for example, a ‘cat,’ a ‘square’ or a ‘bicycle.’

Derrida’s radicalizing of Saussure is evident from his assertion that, insofar as ‘the signified... is *always already in the position of the signifier,*’ the *passage* from signifier to signified is never actually completed.³¹ To understand what Derrida means, consider what happens when one interprets Podstolski’s ‘madical.’ Whether one has in mind a mental picture of a human being or whether one hears in one’s head a voice intoning ‘this shape looks like a human figure,’ one engages not with any *present* object or concept, but only other *images* (whether visual or aural), that is, other *signifiers*. Moreover, in seeking to define ‘human figure’ more precisely, one immediately falls into the game of looking up synonyms in a dictionary. One never finds the essence of meaning, but only proceeds from one word to another, from signifier to signifier, in a movement that is inevitably circular (i.e., endless). Given that there is no universal concept (or, as Derrida would have it, ‘transcendental

signified'³²) by which the meaning of Podstolski's character is secured or grounded as 'human figure,' the 'meaning' of the motifs in *The Art Instinct (Mine)* 'exists' only in the endless differential movement from signifier to signifier, as an unrealizable ideal. This brings us to the second key point raised above. Namely, that the passage from signifier to signifier is not a matter of transitioning from one fixed existence to another, but rather ineluctably subjects the elements engaged in a movement of signification to a continuous process of division, reconstitution or re-inscription. This implies that the trace has a very peculiar property. On the one hand, it enables or *originates* the conceptual system and the movement towards meaning. On the other hand, however, the trace is discernable only by virtue of the shifts and changes it inculcates. As Derrida puts it, 'The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace... constitutes it as a trace... makes it disappear in its appearing, makes it issue forth from itself in its very position.'³³

A significant consequence of this is that one can never isolate the trace in its operation, nor may one recover the original state of the elements continually being re-written – indeed, the very attempt would simply constitute another re-writing. Derrida makes this explicit in *Positions* (1981), where he characterizes *differance* as an 'interweaving' whereby an element in a system is 'constituted on the basis of the trace within it of other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving... is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system is... ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.'³⁴ Hence, in a reality considered to have the structure of a trace (rather than a collection of present and determinable elements, causes and effects) one never encounters the 'thing-in-itself,' only the perennially elusive 'thing-in-becoming.' That Podstolski wrestles with precisely such ontological distinctions is readily apparent from

the titles of some of his recent paintings: *Facing the Thing-in-Itself* (2010) and *States of Becoming (Nietzsche's Moustache)* (2009).

If one thinks about it, *painting* provides a ready visual metaphor for the activity of the trace. For, in a way analogous to the 'self-effacement' of the trace in fomenting a movement towards meaning, whatever a painting represents, expresses or *reveals* occurs through a process of covering up a surface, i.e., *concealment*. Nevertheless, just as footnotes in a text hint at avenues of enquiry taken by an author, and thus infer earlier drafts of a text, and its relation to a literary cosmos of other texts by which its significance is secured, so the methods and motifs employed in the creation of a painting may divulge earlier states in the process of its making, and the world of other images, signs and paintings against which its meaning emerges. In this way, painting also provides a metaphor for the corollary of the self-effacement of the trace – namely, that the elements in a system engendered by such an activity exist in a continuous state of re-inscription. Applying these observations to Podstolski's *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, it is obvious that the painting proceeds like a palimpsest – each successive layer overwriting (but not utterly obliterating) the one before. Indeed, it seems necessary that earlier iterations remain visible in order to provide the ground against which the uppermost layer of 'madicals' can operate. The crucial point here (which may, perhaps, be intrinsic to painting, but which Podstolski's work cogently illustrates), is that (to use Derrida's parlance) the *differance* between figure and ground implies a simultaneity of, or reciprocity between, effacement and re-inscription. Alternatively, one might say: there is no writing without rubbing something out and, conversely, erasure is a form of writing.

What of the other antinomies generated by Podstolski's *The Art Instinct (Mine)*? Earlier, I observed how Podstolski's creative process involves a strange simultaneity of seeming irreconcilables: accident and intention, forgetfulness and remembrance, nature and culture, intuition and reflection.

In seeking to resolve this conundrum, I appealed to Nietzsche, reading Podstolski's *modus operandi* as an expression of joyful unwisdom/willed forgetfulness. Whilst, acknowledging that, on initial inspection, the notion of willed forgetting seems incoherent, I showed how one might understand it as an expression of an *active* consciousness if one considered forgetfulness in terms of intentional processes of cognitive relaxation, withdrawal, selectivity or displacement. Moreover, on the basis of Podstolski's testimony, I proposed that his paintings emerge out of a space of equivocation within which he is, paradoxically, self-conscious about his activity as an artist and constantly seeking to 'forget himself' – this contradiction providing further encouragement for my characterization of his creative attitude as 'joyfully unwise.'

The question now arises: is the notion of a consciousness that wilfully forgets compatible with Derrida's conception of the trace? I would argue such an accommodation *is* possible – with the proviso that certain commonsensical assumptions about the nature or ground of consciousness be relinquished. By way of clarification, consider that, from Derrida's perspective, to suggest Podstolski is, simultaneously, *self*-conscious about his activity as an artist and constantly seeking to forget himself is problematic insofar as consciousness is equated with 'self-presence' or 'self-perception of presence' and thus remains ensnared within the matrix of the metaphysics of presence. In Derrida's view, one should think of consciousness not as an *essence of being*, but as an *expression of being* – as an *effect of differance* (where, Derrida acknowledges, even the term 'effect,' for all its strategic necessity in this context, remains part of the vocabulary of presence).³⁵

Consciousness, then, does not flow on from, or secure the presence of, an authentic, original self, but is rather a consequence of the effacing/re-writing of selfhood. If one accepts this idea – that consciousness is a continuous movement of effacement and re-inscription (i.e., consciousness as trace), then

it is no longer tenable to understand consciousness as an expression of a cognitive centre or origin – a ‘seat of consciousness,’ the ‘ego’ or ‘I.’ How difficult it is to avoid this way of thinking is evident from my own discussion in the previous section. There, I sought to characterize ‘forgetfulness’ as the momentary dropping ‘out of sight’ from the ‘field of view’ of consciousness of objects of cognition. In other words, I presented consciousness as a tool by which one observes objects of thought. Yet, in suggesting that consciousness is an ‘apparatus’ wielded by an ‘observer’ – or to speak of ‘objects’ of cognition – is precisely to remain within the horizon of the metaphysics of presence.

In Derrida’s view, then, the ‘I’ that Podstolski is concerned to ‘get out of the way’ in order to free his ‘instinctual self-expression’ is, in a sense, already out of the way/has already left/is forever in the process of leaving. Indeed, the implication of Derrida’s conception of the trace/*differance* is that the ‘I’ is never truly ‘here’ or ‘there’ – never really exists, nor ever can exist other than as a phantom conjured up in a movement of ‘self-reflection.’ In creating a work like *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, therefore, it is not that Podstolski, the self-sufficient, fully present, artist ‘I’ decides to ‘forget himself,’ but rather that, through the process of willed forgetfulness (which is, to some degree, an equivalent expression for the activity of the trace), his chimerical, self-present ego emerges. Equivalently, one might regard Podstolski’s painting as a visual metaphor for that process by which, moment by moment, ‘he’ continually forgets ‘himself,’ and in the same movement of forgetting, simultaneously recalls and re-makes ‘himself.’

From this standpoint, one may now understand how terms like ‘reflection’ and ‘intention’ are misconstrued as functions of a self-present consciousness. Similarly, it is apparent how ‘pre-conscious instinct,’ ‘automatism’ and ‘intuition’ signify an absence of self-consciousness. Contradictions arise insofar as the metaphysics of presence sets up these categories as either/or

binary opposites. Yet, even when the metaphysics of presence ostensibly defines an absence, this is often, in fact, *another* presence – but one which exists at an earlier stage in an evolutionary sequence or occupies a lower position in a hierarchy of value. Consider, for example, what terms like ‘pre-conscious’ or ‘instinctive’ often imply. Whilst these words refer to an absence of self-consciousness, they are also used to designate the primeval ground or origin of so-called ‘higher’ or ‘more evolved’ states of cognition.

The paradoxes associated with Podstolski’s creative process may, therefore, be understood as artefacts of the conceptual inadequacy of Being conceived as presence rather than as trace. This is not to imply, however, that Podstolski’s *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, the process of its making, or Podstolski himself are ontological will-o-wisps. It is important to realize that, despite undermining conventional notions of ‘origin,’ ‘essence,’ ‘identity’ and ‘authenticity,’ Derrida’s conception of the trace does not necessarily eliminate *origination* or *agency*. Podstolski’s paintings still come into being as intended creations, but from *where* and by *whom* are questions that elude precise determination. In the previous section, I suggested that necessary to Podstolski’s creative process (a necessity the artist recognizes) is a wilful forgetting of the objects and personalities of art history or the ‘present’ epoch – even the idea of his ‘authentic’ or ‘essential’ self. It is, perhaps, now evident to what degree this wilful forgetting might be restated as a rejection of the metaphysics of presence with its fixation on *what is*, origins and essences. By the same token, it is also apparent that thinking existence in terms of *how* things are, as trace and becoming, suggests a way to resolve the seeming-contradiction ‘wilful forgetfulness’ and thus permits us, without any reservation, to join Podstolski in being joyfully unwise.

David Khan 08.08.10

David Khan completed an MA in Art History and Theory in 2007. Currently, he is pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Canterbury.

¹ Paul Klee, 'Contributions to a theory of pictorial form,' lecture notes, Bauhaus, Dessau, c.1921-2, reproduced in Jurg Spiller (ed), *Paul Klee: the thinking eye, the notebooks of Paul Klee*, trans Ralph Manheim (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd, 1964, originally published as *Das bildnerische Denken*, Basle: Benno Schwabe & Co, 1956), p.105.

² For the artist's accounts of his various influences see Podstolski, 'Steppin' Out, Insights of an Outsider Artist,' **spark-online.com*, i16.0 (January 2001), <<http://www.spark-online.com/january01/miscing/podstolski.html>> (22.02.10), 'A Bachelor Stripped Bare, Even, Grasping Desert(ed) Signs,' **spark-online.com*, i25.0 (October 2001), <<http://www.spark-online.com/issue25/podstolski.html>>, (22.02.10) and 'My Art Instinct.' *Primitive Bird Group* website (March 2010), <<http://www.primitivebirdgroup.co.nz/mxgal12.htm>> (08.03.10).

³ Podstolski, 'Free Madicals,' exh. notes, *Primitive Bird Group* website (c.2009), <<http://www.primitivebirdgroup.co.nz/mxgal11.htm>> (09.02.10).

⁴ Barbara Garrie, 'Necessary Illusion, Max Podstolski and the Primitive Bird Group,' *Art New Zealand*, n118, Autumn 2006 (pp.62-65), acknowledges this contradiction in Podstolski's work when she remarks that '[to] consciously position oneself as a "primitive" artist is, at the same time, to demonstrate an awareness of the civilized self.'

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History' in Oscar Levy (ed), *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in Eighteen Volumes*, v5, part II, *Thoughts Out Of Season*, trans Adrian Collins (New York: Russell & Russell Inc, 1964 (1909-11)), p.8.

⁶ Podstolski in conversation with the author, 29.01.10.

⁷ Ibid, email correspondence with the author, 23.12.09 and 07.01.10.

⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* in Levy, v1, p.27, p.40. Here, I should acknowledge that, in the context of New Zealand art history, Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian distinction has appeared before. See, for example, Alan Wright, 'The Alchemy of the Painted Surface: The Early Work of Milan Mrkusich, 1960-65,' *Art New Zealand*, n82, Autumn 1997, pp.44-48, pp.79-80.

⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.186.

¹⁰ Podstolski's easy familiarity with Nietzsche is evident from the titles that playfully adorn several of his recent paintings, for example: *Niche for a Dionysian* (2009) and *Will to Flower* (2010).

¹¹ Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History,' p.3.

¹² Ibid, pp.6-7.

¹³ Ibid, p.9.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.14.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.15.

¹⁶ Podstolski, email correspondence with the author, 01.10.09.

¹⁷ Ibid, 'A Bachelor Stripped Bare, Even, Grasping Desert(ed) Signs.'

¹⁸ Ibid, 'My Art Instinct.'

¹⁹ Ibid, email correspondence with the author, 17.01.10.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, originally published as *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), p.63.

²¹ Here, I acknowledge my debt to Spivak's discussion of 'joyful unwisdom' in relation to Derrida's thought. See Spivak, 'Translator's Preface' in *Of Grammatology* (pp.xxix-xxxiii).

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp.62-3.

²³ Ibid, 'Differance,' in *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, originally published as *La Voix et le Phenomene*, Presses Universitaires, France, 1967; 'Differance' originally appeared as 'La Differance' in *Bulletin de la Societe Francais de philosophie*, v67, n3, July – September 1968), p.130.

²⁴ Ibid, p.140.

²⁵ Ibid, p.156.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans Gregory Fried and Richard Holt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, originally published as *Ein Führung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max

Niemeyer Verlag, 1953)), p.64. For further clarification of how Derrida adapts Heidegger's critique of the manner by which Western metaphysics seeks to 'determine being as presence' see Spivak, 'Translator's Preface' in *Of Grammatology* (pp.xiii-xviii) and Derrida, 'Differance,' pp.138-9, pp.155-60.

²⁷ Derrida, 'Differance,' p.142.

²⁸ Ibid, p.143.

²⁹ Ibid, p.138.

³⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 3rd ed, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, trans Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, originally published as *Cours de linguistique generale*, Paris: Payot, 1916), p.120.

³¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.73.

³² For further clarification of the term 'transcendental signified' see Spivak in *ibid* (p.xvi) and Derrida, *ibid*, pp.20-23.

³³ Derrida, 'Differance,' p.156.

³⁴ Ibid, *Positions*, trans and annotated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.26.

³⁵ Ibid, 'Differance,' p.147.