

Minus Signs

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This paper was delivered on the occasion of the inaugural Ian White Lecture, a new annual lecture series celebrating the provocative and enquiring spirit of Ian White (1971-2013), on Friday 2 December 2016, 7:30pm at The Showroom, London and organised in collaboration with LUX.

The lecture marked the launch of 'HERE IS INFORMATION. MOBILISE. Selected Writings by Ian White' edited by Mike Sperlinger and published by LUX.

Writing about art requires a subtraction—suspending my own assumptions about a work of art in advance of the encounter. How do I avoid attributing veracity to preset interpretative assumptions? Not-knowing, or unknowing— how does one dwell in language to arrive at surprising formulations? How do I surprise myself? This talk will approach the task of being an artist-writer. How do I recognize the status of words as objects—use subtraction as a counter-intuitive method of producing novel emotions? Am I describing subtraction at all? The previous question is both a negation and additive. This talk is an engagement with Ian White's idea of **Removing the Minus**.

In **Removing the Minus** Ian develops brilliant formulations that assert negation as a form of addition. He rejects subtraction in the ways that the very best mystical formulations are necessarily tautological, as they refer to, rather than describe orders of magnitude beyond reason's comprehension. The mathematical schemas he presents perform the very operation he resists—removal. He subtracts subtraction. The formulas he devises proceed through induction by first rejecting a seemingly logical statement, "life plus cancer equals minus life." According to Ian, cancer is not "minus life" even considering the diminishment that disease and its treatment produce. Symptoms and

side-effects produce pain and discomfort. Ian recognizes that these diminishments are actual, substantial, material, conditions. This is the charge of the artist-writer, to accept the material conditions of existence, agreeable or disagreeable, as facts of the moment, not auguries of the future. Ian states “‘minus life’ is no more ‘death’ than life without the minus is ‘liberation.’”

The writer asserts a fundamental principle of the critic. There is something always there before the viewer, even when that something appears to be nothing. There is nothing that is not something, to somebody. It can be said that all is nothing, but to say that is to concede that there is an all, a category of everything present to everyone, to each and all.

Ian rejects any such negation as “minus life.” Experience, as long as one is living and breathing, is a proliferation. One may not like, enjoy, approve of the proliferating qualities of an aesthetic exposure, nonetheless the qualities we often call “negative” demand recognition. Writing is an activity, or a frame, a stage, a window—all devices Ian counts among the spaces of creation. Surprisingly, the spaces of aesthetic proliferation are not amoral spaces. Though the consequences of constantly changing conditions wreak disorder, even catastrophe, the job of the observer is to record the unfolding event as an ethical account.

Considering the autumnal hues of fallen leaves, Ian rejects another default assertion of the mind. This movement of the mind requires seasonal effort. The mind dumbly assumes that a “leaf minus life is not a colour.” Testifying to the considerable effort it takes to examine and undo, unlearn entrenched assumptions Ian exhorts, “Look at the leaf. It is not dead as in nothing. It is yellow. Or red. Or even if it is brown it is still not no-colour. Look at the colour. The colour is real, it is something to do and it can be done. *War is over IF YOU WANT IT. WANT IT. These are acts.*”

The observation of colour, is an imperative to look and look again, to open oneself to the feeling of novelty and astonishment. Novelty is a feeling. Through effort the writer /artist /critic can see the color as if noticing it for the first time. Observation here is something like what Freud called deferred action. The color is a scene to which one returns with the destabilizing shock of a first encounter. Destabilization is a terminal condition. It is an extremity where one can both exit or alternately arrive. It occasions a return. “*War is over IF YOU WANT IT. WANT IT.* These are acts.” Ian exhorts the reader to a condition of dissent. The color of the leaf occasions a return to a first principle no less consequential than the imperative to oppose war. Aesthetic observations carry ethical consequences and require something of all of us.

Following Robert Smithson, Ian accepted that “all systems spiral degeneratively into sameness, all of life, all of production is an incremental inertia, even the act of looking and for sure making art. But we can *do* something about this. Move closer. Get really close.” Rather, than accept appearances, Ian advises to recalibrate the point of view, to exercise the muscle of the mind (quoting Yvonne Rainer’s **The Mind Is a Muscle.**) By moving closer to any phenomenon, and looking really looking at what is seen, more than that, feeling, really feeling what it is to observe something, allowing yourself to return to some unintended but not unfamiliar destination, one finds. One finds, simply one finds. Ian’s imperative is to return to a “regularity.” Something recognizable but not visible without effort. To move and to go on. In the end, Ian tells us “That I am reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go on: Into/of time and space and/as the function of something done. Love and time. It is basic.”

The acts of looking, writing, moving, all are mobilized by a desire to project oneself into the space of a regularity that does not repeat. A holding pattern rather than a holding pen. Perhaps, what D.W. Winnicott termed the holding environment, a space of creativity, play, transition that is provided to the pre-linguistic developing infant by its caretaker(s). Love, care and sustenance provide the ground for that development in

which the regularity of holding, feeding, touch, return play crucial roles. “Love and time. It is basic,” Ian writes.

The holding environment is actually a space of conflict. Desire, attraction, care and love are bound up with bad feelings like repulsion, resentment, jealousy, and neglect. (I’m referring here to the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.) There’s a great story in Ian’s **“In. Adequate. Time. (Prisons 1)”**

This is a teaching hospital. I like that, being a teacher sometimes. The doctor takes me into a side room to ask if I am willing to take part in a scheme where they pair a student doctor with a patient undergoing treatment. I feeling like a thinking, living person so I get a bit haughty... I tell the doctor that I’m a teacher and that I believe in education but that as such really if they want me to be paired with one of these students then really that’s what’s going to happen – education. That I’ll not hold back, can’t guarantee I won’t be awful, that the main problem most times is that these kids in this discipline have no critical relationship to their own methodology, don’t imagine that a patient has any intelligence whatsoever, etc. etc. No doubt parts of this description at least are ‘yeh-yeh’ familiar to some of you reading this, but what’s a boy to do. So, anyway, all this declamation accomplished, caveats issued, the doctor understands, I acquiesce and say that it’s fine, I’ll be paired.

We walk back into the doctor’s room to meet the student with whom I am to be paired. And what do you know. Out flies my position from under me. Ha-ha-professional. Serves me right, or I’m served right... He’s only the prettiest, blondest, most sparky-spunky bright-eyed little Bambi thing you ever saw. A slim fitted, slept-in white shirt and bright turquoise tie like the one Jimmy bought me because it was hard to find. He’s bobbling up and down where he’s standing and still bobbling around when he sits down. He’s blushing, almost and I’m not even

going to say that he had a handshake like damp bread. We can't look at each other for a kind of giggling that's too close to the surface. At the end of the meeting he passes me a form to read, and asks if he can come to my next chemo session and ask me questions about my private life. Any bloody time. I only half-turn my head, Marschallin-like and nod, to say he can and then I say that I'll try not to get snappy (he says he doesn't mind) and that if I do get snappy then this is something that we will just have to negotiate between ourselves and the doctor by this time is also in on the game and he says that's fine so long as it's not in his office. I miss Harry.

Ian could be a romantic, in the casual sense and in the art historical sense, with a capital "R".

In **Palace Calls Crisis Summit**, a dispatch written from Oberhausen:

This is where I began writing, from a position of rethinking. A modification of experience, a movement inside precipitated by all the things outside. A hunch about Coleridge defining the romantic as the willing suspension of disbelief, that space, for Coleridge the theatre, modifies experience but that it's more complicated now than just theatre, sitting in rows, in silence, in darkness, for the prescribed time. That if change is to occur, Coleridge commenting on theatre provoking a leap of faith is as binary as the auditorium, while the process is in fact as nebulous as personal choice, as an extension of being alive. Choosing in fact to enter a space marked 'x' for crossroads.

Recalling, Ian's reference to Robert Smithson quoted before, he's referring to a hypothetical work proposed by Smithson, a thought experiment—

Picture in your mind's eye a sand box divided half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy. (Smithson)

Ian urges us to get close, look, look closer, get granular. The sand is not altered, it's just mixed. One can see the different grains of sand. Entropy, decomposition, disorder—they're not reversible. More importantly, they are not fixed states. Observation, requires changes of frame, shifts in magnitude, magnification, get in, get closer, move your proximity.

Writing about art requires a subtraction—suspending my own assumptions about a work of art in advance of the encounter. How do I avoid attributing veracity to preset interpretative assumptions? Not-knowing, or unknowing— how does one dwell in language to arrive at surprising formulations? How do I surprise myself? This talk will approach the task of being an artist-writer. How do I recognize the status of words as objects—use subtraction as a counter-intuitive method of producing novel emotions? Am I describing subtraction at all? The previous question is both a negation and additive. This talk is an engagement with Ian White's idea of "Removing the Minus."

In my own description of the talk, I made a shift in topic without at first noticing the discrepancy. I started by asking questions concerning writing about art, but I ended with questions about writing as an artist. The two are not mutually exclusive, in fact the two tasks, writing about art, and writing-art can require the same methodological approaches.

Ian views color as an act, as something that happens. Recall the colors of fall leaves. Elsewhere in his writings, he asserts that limit is a material. Constraints and limitations are not subtractions; they constitute generative qualities. Ian asks us to get granular in our analysis, to sift through the material and feel.

I'm going to read a bit from my own writing now. I'll be reading from a chapbook titled **Tenement** (2015). I am reading this example of my own writing as an offering. I would like to read this to Ian or have him read this chapbook. Perhaps, the section I am reading bears some relation to the ideas I've presented. The sentiments expressed in a statement written by Ian seem to have some consonance with ideas I've been discussing drawn from Ian's writings.

The following quotes are taken from Ian's **Statement** (published as part of the program for the seminar Appropriation and Dedication organized by If I Can't Dance, Amsterdam, January 2003).

...if I am speaking it is not to ask you to witness my feelings or what I am pretending to feel, which is nothing anyway. Here are no confessions. It is because the thing said is to be there, thrown from me, not of me. 'I'm not here' cannot be spoken, stupid. But it is one way of describing agency. And desire. (I'm trapped.)

If objects that ordinarily are removed from time can have time introduced to them (again) for their own erasure, and this is political, so might the opposite be: a thrown voice or subjects subjected to something like architecture, a split. As we are, that is, amongst material.

In the postscript to the chapbook **Tenement** I wrote about the ideas and constraints that generated the poems in **Tenement**:

The contents of this book are directly transcribed from a notebook, written daily in the sublet apartment kitchen. These are exercises mostly. Constraints were employed to generate a kind of writing informed by descriptions of various psychological states described in Thomas Ogden's book *The Matrix of the Mind: Object Relations and Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (Jason Aronson Inc., 1993) — the experience of the "self as object, not the self as creator" (page 48), and the person who "does not experience himself as an active personal agent but, rather as an object to whom life events occur" (page 49). It was a time when things were simply happening to me beyond my volition. Pronouns were avoided. Spatial relations among common objects constantly shifted. Objects possessed their own agencies...

Here's an excerpt from **Tenement**—

Knowledge informs taught body bent by
stimulating sensations thoughts feelings;
how they tickle and prick, stir mutations
among course organs, like radiators within
a household send heat to rooms unaware
of their own purposes; each single cell's
purpose assigned by, architects, scribblers,
mathematicians, designers—All high priests
of an evolving belief combine contradictory
doctrines into one mass.

To teach and to write with no one in mind,
gather tickles and pricks, the sensations
of teachings. All disciplines are enlisted to
attend. Chores choreographed by habits
patterns. Breakfast tea diffusing in hot water.
You are bits dissolved in breath's solutions,
matter bits, stimulants, calming pills, bits of
bits enclosed in colored capsules. Living
kills and you are bits. You're alone, isolated
indifferently, like varicolored candies
randomly dispersed in bottles, multiple and
alone, isolates.

One puff at a time connected by what?—as
ectoplasm escapes from the nostrils
Bits of a body, bits of a mind, pill
tablets spilled all over the kitchen
floor.

Recalling the story of Moses coming
down the mountain bearing God's law, His
commandments destroyed over a golden
calf. Crushing disappointments in a teacup
Leaves contents dispersed in a
boiling water, a parting sea. Laugh!
Look! Pills! What exists is what's
perceived: A handful of pills,
cigarettes and tea. Bodies jogging
in colorful sports clothes. You have
fantasies of living another way, of
adopting disciplines that promote
life, but fail.

Snowfall expected in Amsterdam as you
pack all clothes mismatched to the self-edifice.
Not yet shaved, unpresentable,
you're in bits, you are bits observing bits.
Fantasies breaking for red traffic
light. Dogs hitched to coffee
shop construction poles. Arctic
ice breaking away in huge bits.
Billboard size trucks pass. Sheen
Brothers. Selby Transportation.
Stop! Let the pedestrians have their
way. Felt hat of a middle-aged man
hustling. You are a man pedestrian
teacup scanning pavement for
stories to tell. Arctic ectoplasm
escaping the whole. Bus exhaust
and whirring old motors. Things
don't won't cohere.
Anticipation. Messianic
promises unfulfilled. Belief
is the mortar holding up
bricks

Back to bits
and incredulity
wondering how
chunks trust
gravity; how light
suspends motes.
Thoughts never
ceasing, seize,
sneeze, cough.
Enough. Enough
is the measure of
discontent

Icebergs crack up scoffing at the city's rising
shores. Hurricanes hit unexpected places.
Tenement apartments go for too much. Ach,

tea's cold, breaths endlessly repeating. "I
am in pain" a declarative sentence. Nobody
to anybody passing

Human forms are bits perceived
by sunlight. No more belief but you
see the astral lights appending to
iceberg buses that no one awaits.

Perceived through unwashed windows
steam heat light patterns glint on granular
surfaces. Emergence-C lite, light breakfast,
bare bulbs, flower blooms. Lilies and light,
placed just so in a clay vase. Etch lead upon
the linen surface. This is a diary. This is a
plea. Laugh. Look. Decide. Take the pills or
not.

Ingest a manufactured life light lust

Used condoms like banana peels
on the bedside floor. Last night
trust eroded, icebergs cracked,
what will be? Faces return the look
guessing me.

Imperative, declarative,
subjective—making a list
of bits of glistening chunks

The title of this talk, **Minus Signs**, is a play on words. It refers to or was inspired by Ian's **Removing the Minus**. That prompted me further to explore the idea of subtracting signs themselves, moving toward an object-based set of procedures or protocols that does not limit observation to a method of interpretation. Minus signs can refer to the mathematical symbol that signifies subtraction. It can also refer to the removal of signs acknowledging objects, phenomena, or acts as sensations — how do they feel? rather than what do they mean? I do not advocate this mode of approach as some final conclusion. It's not intended or offered as a polemic against interpretation, or other analytic methods, or discursive modalities. Certainly, Ian does not abandon various methods of analysis informed by theory in his writings. He does remind us very powerfully of the graceful movement and choreography required of the writer— that the act of writing is itself the performance of a body.

Notes:

All citations attributed to Ian White come from **HERE IS INFORMATION. MOBILISE.**

Selected writings by Ian White, Edited by Mike Sperlinger, LUX, London, 2016.

In the instance that Robert Smithson is cited, the quote is transcribed from Ian White's citation.

All quotes from **Tenement** are excerpted from the chapbook by Gregg Bordowitz, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York, October 11, 2015–March 7, 2016.