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Sublime Acts: Desire in the Studio

Marissa Lindquist¹ and Jill Franz¹

¹*School of Design, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia,
m.lindquist@qut.edu.au, j.franz@qut.edu.au*

Introduction

When we design, we desire. An accumulation of literature focusing upon desire and creativity in recent years underscores an inherent need to question normalised processes of design production and reconsider the body and its affects as agents of change. McWilliam (1996), Pignatelli (1999), O'Loughlin et al. (1998), support Michalino Zembylas' (2007) call to develop "the sort of curriculum which would foster [a] pedagogy of desire...enhancing opportunities for emotional and bodily expression, helping students to develop sensory intimacy with their world, and counteracting the tendency to de-sensualise and commodify the human relation to reality." (O'Loughlin, in Zembylas 2007:342). Whilst Deleuze and Guattari's notions of 'immanent force' and 'continuous becoming' often form the centre of their call, it is the disruptive forces of irregularity, obscurity and uncertainty that they point to as a means of transgressing territories and finding new ways to corporeally engage with otherness.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in positing their ideas of bodies as 'productive machines' of desire ask: What sort of desires do modes of production require? What kind of resistances does this production come up against? Finally, what are the conditions for new ways of living and desiring? (Burke, 2003). Similarly, Zembylas queries how desire can be pedagogically useful as that which produces and seduces imaginations instead of being associated simply with repression and coercion? (Zembylas 2007:331). In sum, what mobilises desire? It can be argued that what lies beneath Deleuze and Guattari's 'immanent force', is the 'irresistible force' fundamental to Edmund Burkes (1757) Romantic notions of the 'sublime'. While it appears that the former views desire as the immanent force that produces creativity, novelty and change, it is an initial 'blockage' or disruption in experiencing the romantic sublime that mobilises forces of desire. How can we thus posit the short-circuit, power-surge or even perhaps 'virus' within the 'productive machine' to interrupt, challenge and precipitate production? A postmodern interpretation of the sublime, such as Patricia Yaeger's (1989) 'feminine sublime' engages with the disruptive and irresistible forces [desire] found within the traditional romantic sublime. Rather than transcending corporeal humanity through existential acts, the feminine sublime monopolises this disruption to foster a horizontal sublime, which reaches towards humanity, spreading itself out into multiplicity, transposing and appropriating (Yaeger, 1989; Wawrzinek, 2008) through inter-corporeal experiences and explorations.

Acknowledging the role of 'disruption/blockage' as a key agent in the mobilisation of distinct modes of desire, this paper takes Burke and Yaegers 'sublime' as a critical lens to review a first year interior program posited around the body. The paper highlights how the students' desires, including the desire to learn in and/or about interior design, together with the teachers' desires, and finally the embodiment of 'desirous processes' within the program represent an overarching pedagogical 'hinge' (Ellsworth 2005). Rather than a point of beginning, the start of first year is thus seen and experienced as a threshold informing a new rhythm to an already underway process of becoming.

Distance and Nearness

In the recent publication *Creativity, Design and Education*, Williams, Ostwald + Askland (2010) question what makes a person's actions or the products of their actions creative? Surveying leading academics within the design and creative fields, a number of key positions are revealed which turn away from many traditional and current pedagogical models that aim at regularity, certainty and which produce 'a risk-minimising student protection environment' (McWilliam & Haukka 2008:19-20). Joanne Cys suggests that creativity is 'not a neat, sunny attribute like enthusiasm. It is often awkward, oppositional, disruptive and antagonistic.' (Williams et al. 2010:51). Peter Downtown pinpoints creativity as 'playing at, and with boundaries' (p.68), he suggests:

'creativity entails extending the domains of ideas and practices by surprisingly moving the game onto an adjacent playing field...that which is produced is understood as novel...fresh in the context...offering unusual emphases compared to the conventional. New patterns are observed.' (Williams et al. 2010:67).

Williams et al. (2010) grant that creativity is emotional; 'it suggests an affecting response or a transcendent reaction to something – whether or not this something is singularly connected to the self or can be experienced with others.' (Williams et al. 2010:2). Whilst erring on the side of rationalist processes they acknowledge the significance of Sternberg's 'Investment Theory' with particular concern for creativity and the concept of 'propulsion', whereby '[a] creative contribution represents an attempt to propel a field from wherever it is to wherever the creator believes the field should go.' (Sternberg in Williams et al. 2010:12). Here, 'field' can be extended to bodily 'states' or 'conditions', particularly so when considering affect and emotion within design pedagogy and the design program. Rather than maintaining boundaries and deferring tensions and confrontations through somewhat rationalist, risk adverse processes and assessment, the alternative view is that 'the pride and shame of emotional life are central to the process of a sustaining self-identity and is explicitly located within the body and the body's ability to experience bodily cues' (Scheff,1990,1997,2000, authors addition).

What appears to be called for then, is a nearness to the body and bodily emotions in developing creative or design programs. By employing proto-scientific, rationalized processes, as pedagogical programs have done and are doing, in a sense there is an enframing of the design process and learning context, thus affording a distancing, a detachment from the more intimate primal truth forged through experiential bodily knowing of the creative act. Michelinos Zembylas (2007) in writing upon education and pedagogy posits a curriculum that has the 'body at the centre of teaching and learning' and with it consideration of affect and desire. He promotes a pedagogy of desire '...as that which produces and seduces imaginations instead of being associated simply with repression and coercion' (p. 332). Drawing on the work of Pignatelli (1999), Zembylas (2007) describes how a pedagogy of desire is not tied to any set of 'best teaching practices' or 'appropriate learning skills'. In this context, teachers are not on a mission to emancipate students; but rather to mobilise the desire to teach/learn in a pedagogic space where eros, passion and knowledge converge (hooks 1994, McWilliam 1996 in Zembylas: 342). These notions offer compelling implications for not only the relational interplay between teaching and learning of the actants within design studio but indeed the design program itself. Further they posit learning squarely in the trope of becoming and the affects of desire inherent within.

continuous Becoming

In proposing pedagogies of desire Zembylas (2007) turns to Deleuze and Guattari's 'continuous becoming' as reflected in *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (1987). Zembylas' remarkable account transposes and enfolds Deleuze and Guattari's 'productive force of desire' to the pedagogical scene, where desire is seen as a flow that is continuous and is always becoming. Subjectivity and experience is seen to be produced out of the encounter with desire, where desire is a force influencing differing modes of existence. Zembylas notes, 'Thus, the body for Grosz, just like Deleuze & Guattari, is a site of free-flowing desire and creativity, a plane of continuous becoming....Desire, then, is not outside of our relations between one another and artefacts of the world, but is rather what produces us as agents of transformations through our practices and actions (Styhre, 2001 in Zembylas 2007:37). It is this productive force which sets forth an interplay of affective bodies, intensities, seduction, transgression and multiplicity, and which Zembylas believes forms a basis from which:

'a pedagogy of desire can be theorised in ways that mobilise creative, transgressive and pleasurable forces within teaching and learning environments. It also enables a new view on affect in education as a landscape of becoming in which forces, surfaces and flows of teachers/students are caught up in a desiring ontology.'(Zembylas, 2007:331)

Zembylas directs emphasis upon Deleuze and Guattari's notion of bodies without organs (BwO). Bodies without organs are disfigured from a holistic humanly sense to that of 'desiring machines' where the point of the machine is to produce and control flows. These bodies or machines become entities of affective transmission, where gesture and emotion transmitted by desire put into play a flow of mutable exchange (Brennan, 2004). With the affective transmission of desire within the classroom or studio, Zembylas (2007: 332) suggests that teachers and students turn themselves into subjects who subvert normalised representations and significations.

One question that emerges from this position, begs how does this 'plane of continuous becoming', this flow of productive force come into being, and indeed how is it constant? Zembylas similarly questions 'what is the nature of this seduction, when does it take place and under what circumstances does desire become a productive force?' (Zembylas, 2007:331) Deleuze & Guattari are more direct, not just in enquiring 'how to produce the corresponding intensities' or how to reach 'the plane of continuous becoming', but ultimately within the chapter title itself 'How do you make yourself a body without organs (BwO)?' (1987:149-166).

In rereading Deleuze and Guattari's chapter addressing BwO, one is dramatically confronted or charged by a masochist program-fantasy from M'uzan's (1972) *La Sexualité Perverse*. Reminiscent of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Grotesque Image* (1984), a disturbing account of sewing and binding of both sexual and nonsexual components of the body is recounted:

'Mistress, 1) You may tie me down on the table, ropes drawn tight, for ten to fifteen minutes, time enough to prepare the instruments; 2) One hundred lashes at least, a pause of several minutes; 3) You begin sewing, you sew up the hole in the glans; you sew the skin around the glans to the glans itself, preventing the top from tearing; you sew the scrotum to the skin of the thighs. You sew the breasts, securely attaching a button with four holes to each nipple. You may connect them with an elastic band with buttonholes... You sew my buttocks together, all the way up and down the crack of my ass. Tightly, with a doubled thread, each stitch knotted. If I am on the table, now tie me to the post; 7) You give me fifty thrashes on the buttocks...' (M'uzan 1972, cited in Deleuze & Guattari, 1984)

Here the 'shocking' disturbs states of psychological and bodily normalcy both in the reader and M'uzan's characters that transitions the known into strangeness, and reconfigures the body into what Deleuze & Guattari (1984) refer as surface zones; a plane of intensity. It is the confrontation of this disturbance (both

in the manner of the text and the event itself) that affects the transformation into other, whether strange surface of Deleuze & Guattari's assemblage of heterogeneous elements (1984:157) or the affected perception of the reader, where the unsettling language forces a reconsideration of the familiar. It is this altered state which precipitates the flow of productive forces, instilling a field of immanence. In recognising this moment, what is perhaps critical and of significance here is the role of the discordant, the disturbance of the normal, which triggers a shift to mobilise the desirous force, rather than the immanent force of desire which provides momentum to disturb the normality.

Zembylas avoids prescription of how a pedagogy of desire might be enacted but offers somewhat socratic practices that might evolve from such pedagogy; 'that teachers with their students learn to love critical questions (Martusewicz,1997), that teachers and students are motivated by the creative energy of desire to share the force of wondering in learning and the potential consequences of alternative assemblages of subjectivities..., and that the pedagogy problematises the role of the body in teaching and learning' (Zembylas 2007:343). These practises are indeed aspirational outcomes, yet the disruptive or the discordant as entertained through Deleuze & Guattari's work appear absent. Turning toward the strange, toward difference and the disruptive inherent to both romantic and postmodern sublime, proffers ways to engage and mobilise the irresistible force of another yet familiar desire.

The Sublime Lens

While it might seem outmoded to turn to 'the Romantic sublime' to re-conceive the design experience, recent calls to renew discourses of the romantic paradigm within education appears congruous when educating change within design pedagogy. In writing upon the sublime and education, Carson (2006) notes that 'although it has historically been associated with art and literature, when applied to education it can enhance the aesthetic conceptual understanding of all subjects while fostering the aesthetic sensibility of the student' (2006:79). Resituating the concept of the 'sublime' within the design field provides for opportunities to overlay its specific stages of experience and ultimate transformation to that of the design process. Whilst there are numerous interpretations of the sublime, they are generally underpinned by basic motivations of a significant force (uncannily akin to Deleuze and Guattari's immanent force), which transports participants to an intensified level of being whether it be through intellectual or bodily affect.

The notion of the sublime is couched within the theory of aesthetics, historically championed by philosophers Longinus, Kant and Burke. The sublime affect is seen as a leading, an overpowering of self to a state of intense self-presence, often leading to self-transcendence or state of otherness. To experience the sublime is to experience affect. All philosophers entertained distinct interpretations of the sublime, Longinus through writing and discourse. Kant and Burke centred on the experience of perception. Whilst Kant's sublime in *The Critique of Pure Judgment* (1790) is mediated by the mind of the judging subject, it is Burke's contemplations on physiological affect found in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1729-97) that afford significance here.

Burke states at the introduction to his treatise, 'and my point in this inquiry is, to find whether there are any principles, on which the imagination is affected'(1729-97). Through surveying the property of objects, Burke examines how these properties are capable of affecting the body and exciting our passions (desires). It represents the power of bodies to affect other bodies, both animate and inanimate. Throughout his enquiry Burke directly opposes the sublime to what is subservient, safe and useful, constantly mediating between pleasure and pain. Burke recounts the physiological and emotive affects of self-aggrandisement of the viewer or soul following specific stages of confrontation, blockage and transport (overcoming + emergence) through intensities of astonishment, terror, obscurity, magnificence, and reverence in the face of that which evokes the sublime, and the sublime moment. Burke states:

'The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence of reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, anticipates our reasoning's and hurries us on by an irresistible force.' (Burke, 1753 cited in Wawzinek, 2008)

Here, the irresistible force arouses the passions, ushering in desirous forces. It is these critical stages; confrontation, blockage and transport which Burke sublime that is taken up in high romantic literature and arts, which resonate with the experience of M'uzan's text as entertained by Deleuze and Guattari and which find correlation with the actions, processes and extension of self and domains in the creative act of designing as put forward by Williams (2010), Downtown (2010) and Cys (2005). The sublime transcends the normative to usher in the 'empowering' novel.

It can be argued that a novice designer or indeed accomplished designer is 'confronted' by a provocation, which, as with the sublime experience, elicits a 'blockage' or brings the designer to a standstill due to the foreignness or vastness of the call. Feelings of astonishment, difficulty, obscurity and indeed reverence and magnificence are often experienced, affecting a drawing-through by an 'irresistible force', a desire to overcome and answer the call through their own creative responses. Newness and difference frequently unfold as does the progression and development of their own creative acts. At times, confrontation with the sublime 'object' [the provocation] is too overwhelming, that the more negative experiences of terror and obscurity too near, thereby maintaining the blockage, and the designer fails to fulfil the task or fulfils the task by expelling the sublime and engaging with the normative.

Traditionally, however the Burkean sublime has been seen as a vertical male construct, an aggrandising of the masculine self over objects and others. The verticality of the sublime affect is of such impressive and absolute loftiness, it is commonly seen to be obtainable only by the few. Patricia Yaeger in valuing the significance of the sublime within her text, *Toward a Feminine Sublime* (1989) argues for an alternative horizontal sublime, a 'sublime of nearness'. She seeks to re-invent the sublime as 'a genre that includes the sociable, the convivial, as well as the grandiose and empowering' (Yaeger in Kaufmann, 1989:195). Yaeger contextualises the sublime as a mode of trespass and appropriation, a genre permitting the exploration of alternative modes of experience.

In framing the Feminine Sublime, Yaeger draws awareness to the underlying motivations of the traditional sublime which she views as suppression. She sees the traditional sublime as oedipal, and that the struggle between self and other is subterfuge... masking a primordial desire to merge with the mother', to have closeness (Yaeger in Kaufmann, 1989:204). The traditional sublime Yaeger sees as an attempt to defend male ego boundaries, and react to this suppression by an inundation of experiences promoting aggrandizement and control of the situation. In contrast Yaeger sees the feminine sublime as pre-oedipal, where these libidinal elements are not repressed, and which break into consciousness. It is a horizontal sublime, which expands towards others, spreading itself out into multiplicity, sharing, transposing and appropriating. As Yaeger notes,

'[T]he feminine sublime is neither old-fashioned, nor outmoded, but address our most pressing modern concerns. How do we move away from our Western allegiance to an imperial, Cartesian, Adamic self...toward a model of the self that permits both a saving maintenance of ego boundaries and an exploration of the pleasures of inter-subjectivity? As Fred Dallmayr suggests in the *Twilight of Subjectivity*, we have learned that the subject is 'infiltrated with the world' in such a way that 'otherness is carried to the very heart of selfhood'. (Yaeger in Kaufmann, 1989:205).

The encounter of sublime excess, similar in manner to Deleuze & Guattari's BwO, but which leads with disturbance, is an engagement and relation with other affective bodies. How then might this alternative model of the sublime be evoked within the design studio? The answer may be to test both the traditional and the feminine sublime programmatically, to shift attention from individual existential processes to an inter-subjective view which promotes the crossing of boundaries and bodies. The potential is the experiential shift from the familiar to strange fields, a process mobilised through disruptive beginnings to a mergence with otherness, to the potential space, as Jennifer Wawrzinek puts it, of hybridity (Wawrzinek 2008:53). The disruption and strangeness inherent in such a program permits the desires of the self to unfold and enfold with others and redirects anxiety or paranoia of the 'sublime confrontation' into the elicitation of desirous forces.

Desirous Acts in The Studio: The Familiar and Strange

'A pedagogy predicated upon mobilisation and release of desire...disrupts the given-ness of the way things are and nourishes acts of courage and compassion. ..A pedagogy which takes seriously the mobilisation and release of desire not only informs but inspires strong responses.' (Pignatelli, 1999:19).

As suggested throughout this paper, in experiencing the strange, we are confronted. It is through this disruption of what is habitual or preconceived through our mind and body that our perceptions shift from a form of stasis to a 'happening', an affect that opens us up to novel sensations and relations. Russian theorist Victor Shklovsky in his fundamental work 'Art as Technique' (1917) refers to the possibilities engendered by arts and design in regards to the unfamiliar. He states that:

'The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.'" (Shklovsky, 1917:12)

Heidegger (1954), as echoed through Downton (2010), describes 'a moment of ecstasis when something moves away from its standing as one thing to become another' (Halliburton in Cox, 1997:23), as a threshold occasion. As Martusewicz (1997) points out, part of the desire that pushes us to ask about this world is a desire to understand ourselves in this world – that is, 'the desire (and anxiety) to face the other that both is and is not "me"' (Zembylas 2007:334).

The studio projects developed for a first year interior design program discussed here, represents an attempt to embody much of the observations alluded to within this paper. At its core was the intention to consciously work away from the status quo of design pedagogy based on overly positivist, highly structured or risk minimizing curriculum. With a desire to seek the otherness of normalcy, divergent aspects of sublime 'disruption' (traditional and the feminine) were embedded into the program. Taking up Zembylas call, the body and bodies formed the centre of the program. Although the productive force or irresistible force of 'desire' were not always explicit, key aspects such as engaging with the familiar and the strange, disruption/blockage, the intensity or programmatic rhythm of the projects, and indeed intimate and affective bodies, both within the project and interplay between tutors and students were exploited. Whilst the first project dealt with the unfolding of the existential self and subjective corporeality, the second project engaged with disruption of the familiar; an explorative process involving trans-corporeality and hybridity.

Briefly, the first project 'Sukkah Project' involved the design of a Sukkah (impermanent structures of dwelling) as in the annual competition in New York commemorating the structures built by the Israelites during their exodus. The project ultimately became a device for students to reflect on their own being-in-the-world through childhood memories, experience and the development of spatial qualities which resonated with both being and body. For several students this posed degrees of personal and emotional

confrontation and while disruptive was also recognized as highly meaningful, profound and developmental, as indicated in interviews following implementation of the program:

‘A lot of emotion...very in-depth, lot of stuff underneath that you have to understand. Hard to relate some things...’

‘Some of the tasks, seemed a bit disconnected at first, had to delve a bit to see connection. I guess it was more to get you thinking and doing. Seemed really weird to draw your childhood.’

‘Creative process is both a mixture of pleasure and pain. Doing that with the group is a little more painful and hard, for you to get your head around it.’

(1st year design student responses, QUT, 2011)

Within the second project ‘Strange Spaces’ students worked in groups that focused on the body and its relationship with both intimate and public environments. The project incorporated Lois Weinthal’s (2010) notion of ‘layers’, which articulates some nine layers which surround the body, whether proximate or detached and distant, that can be pulled apart, interrogated and transgressed. It involved the exploration of the body, affective conditions, and incongruent contexts. Layer 5 for example, dealt with ‘body’ and ‘chamber’. Students were asked to design a small spa for the elderly demonstrating explicit attention to reflective or transparent material and concepts of gender/sexuality, eroticism and atmosphere. The aim with this later project was unashamedly to disrupt through ‘shock’ of explicit notions of intimacy, seduce imagination and ignite desire and passion. It also intentionally created a disruption of existing knowledge and experience, which shifted students’ attention to inter-subjective perspectives and promoted the crossing of boundaries and bodies. The project was engaged with openness to multiplicity and a mergence with otherness.

Whilst the ‘Sukkah Project’ started with confrontation of a personal yet familiar kind and progressed incrementally in intensity to the final outcome (as typical with the traditional sublime), ‘Strange Spaces’ was at the outset disruptive and abrupt in its engagement with otherness and discomfort, and in the calculated rhythm of intensive points across the program. The outcome was not a continuous flow of design outcomes or desirous machines, but peaking desires out of successive disruptions. Of note, was the affective resonance between teaching staff and students, and the mobilisation of ideas, expression and desires which ensued.

‘Its good to have a tutor that really gets you into your work. It really affects my work, if the tutor is there as their job, not their passion and their life. You actually want to go to class....I think it really, really affects everyone.’

‘Collaboration with tutors....they don’t have the right answer either...we ended up surprising ourselves with what we do (sic).’

(1st year design student responses, QUT, 2011)

Conclusion

In making a case for a ‘pedagogy of desire’ Zembylas (2007) draws us to Deleuze’s observation that by ‘composing the singular points of one’s own body or one’s own language with those of another share or element, which tears us apart but also propels us into a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems (Deleuze, 1994 in Zembylas, 2007:334), and suggests that the task of education ‘therefore, consists of nurturing the productive desire that allows these connections with other bodies....where

concepts and affects is endless.' (2007:334) The first year program presented here was an interruption to the current modes of pedagogical relations that appear to overlook the role of body and emotion in teaching and further considers the affective conditions that desire, both programmatically and relationally can activate. Where the position diverges however, from constant flows of this 'immanent force' is the acknowledgement of the initial disruption, and indeed subsequent rhythmic intensities that mobilises these affective relations into production. By re-engaging with the sublime be it traditional or feminine, within practice and pedagogy, new fields of difference will emerge.

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