FCJ-058 Contact Aesthetics and Digital Arts: At the Threshold of the Earth

Warwick Mules, Central Queensland University, Australia.

> 'Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immovable'. (Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', 1863)

Aesthesis

Modern aesthetics has always been concerned with the human senses in apprehension of art objects.[1] In modern aesthetic experience something is discovered, perhaps an inner sense of harmony or proportion, or some essential function of the human mind in relation to the sensory experience itself. But, in a paradoxical way, modern aesthetics denies sensory experience as foundational for human creativity, setting up a distance between inner reflection and outward sensory perception whereby an art object might be judged.[2] The senses are treated as suspect, misleading humans away from truth and into error. As Hans Robert Jauss has argued with respect to the emergence of aesthetics in early European modernity, aesthetic experience is:

> a new kind of seeing which functions as discovery. From the point of view of religious authority, aesthetic experience is always and necessarily suspect of refractoriness: where it is employed to bring to mind a suprasensible significance, it also perfects the sensuous appearance and creates the pleasure of a fulfilled present. (Jauss, 1982: 4)

Thus modern aesthetics has always treated the senses merely as a starting point for reflection on the beautiful, the true and the good, but never as aesthesis, as the stuff of aesthetic experience itself.

Alan Singer points out that in the British philosophical tradition, aesthetics has lost its initial meaning of aesthesis, as sense 'immanent to formal or perceptual complexity' first proposed by Baumgarten in the eighteenth century (Singer, 2003: 14). Instead aesthetics has become concerned with the response to art objects in terms of 'the aesthetic subject' (15). Aesthetics has thus steered a course away from the creative exploration of the senses, and towards the rational formation of subjective aesthetic states. It is clear then, that philosophy and critical theory have driven a wedge between themselves and the art forms and practices to which they are addressed. To become more fully engaged, critical theory needs to re-address art works in terms of aesthesis: as immanent sense.

Aesthetics denies the senses by way of a "metaphysics of presence" in which human subjectivity is elevated into 'suprasensible significance' (Jauss, 1982: 4) through contemplation of art objects, or indeed, through contemplation of the world as if it were an art object. In this case, aesthetics retains an interest in the intrinsic beauty of the art object as an idealised appearance made present to a perceptive viewer. The senses are subjected to a conditioning process that makes them sensitive to form and to the intrinsic merit of harmony and proportion within the closure of the art object. In other words, aesthetics depends on a model in which sensory experience is reduced to that of a subject in relation to a privileged object, thereby setting up procedures whereby this relationship might be governed and maintained in the interests of producing appropriately disciplined aesthetic responses.[3]

In recent times, however, modern aesthetics as the contemplation of art objects has given way to an identification of aesthetic affects distributed through all forms of technical objects and experiences. For instance, Jacques Rancière proposes an aesthetics of distributed sense connected to the 'mode of being' of the art object (Rancière 2004: 22). Here aesthetics has shifted from a reflection on the subjective experience of humans to an objectification of experience in the art objects themselves as part of a distribution of sense within capitalist modes of production and consumption. Simon O'Sullivan, following Deleuze and Guattari, has proposed a machinic concept of aesthetics as 'aesthetic effect'[4] : 'here we begin to modify the notion of the aesthetic, to pull away from the metaphysics of presence, away from a transcendental horizon, towards a field of immanence' (O'Sullivan, 2006: 22).[5] The subject no longer transcends experience in contemplative self-reflection but is formed in the immanence of sense.[6] In this case, aesthetics is not based on a conjunction of the senses in some preordained subject responding to the art object, but quite the reverse, on a break with subjectivity, and a release of the senses into

experience itself considered as an immanent sensory field. Here we need to think of aesthetics in terms of experiential disjuncture: as the openness of aesthesis to an immanent field of sense.

9 A new found interest in aesthetics as disjuncture can be found in the contemporary digital arts, reflecting on the capacity of computer generated art works to dislocate and relocate sensory experience within virtualised interactive environments.[7] For instance, digital art theorist Anna Munster proposes that there is something specific about digital art that warrants special aesthetic consideration in terms of what she calls approximate aesthetics (Munster, 2001). For Munster, digital art produces a sense of uncomfortable proximity in the viewer by 'creating zones through which the organic and the machinic become approximate to each other' (Munster, 2001). Munster uses the work of British artist Graham Harwood as an example. Harwood's 'Uncomfortable Proximity' is an internet site parasitic on the Tate Gallery's official website, which exhibits 'mongrel' images of British art masterpieces mixed with his own and his family's images as well as waste matter drawn from the local Thames River by which the gallery is situated. The aim is to deconstruct the authority of the canonical art work by making it come in contact with the 'lost materialities' of its immediate surroundings (Munster, 2001) . The image is thus opened to its affective history as a situated artefact within a localised environment that includes non-artistic elements and aspects that would otherwise be excluded in official commentaries and critiques. Munster identifies in Harwood's artwork a mode of operating with digital images that shows how the disjunctive connection between the organic and the technological can be appropriated and reworked in terms of an ethics of historical repossession. Carefully avoiding the modernist imperative to identify an aesthetic principle in the medium itself, Munster proposes that the digital introduces a 'particular kind of mediation…[that effects] the emergence of a spatiality and duration in which relative speeds and differential relations are foregrounded in embodied experience' (Munster, 2001) . We might say that Harwood's digital art involves a knowing entanglement in the material milieu in which it is embedded.[8] Rejecting an aesthetics based on the transcendence of the subject to experience, Munster proposes instead an aesthetics of disjuncture where the experiencing body becomes part of a digital aesthesis: an immanence of sense in relation to its own mediated becoming.

10 Munster's identification of disjuncture within digital arts indicates a key aesthetic affect within contemporary art and culture, and resonates with Simon O'Sullivan's recent call for ethico-aesthetics as 'the organization of productive encounters "through" art' (O'Sullivan, 2006: 42). Her idea of approximate aesthetics leads away from the contemplation of fixed art objects and towards a critical reflection on the material practices and processes of computer based art as aesthesis, or embodied sense. However, Munster's proposal has some limitations. Disjuncture within digital technology should be understood not simply in terms of the specific technology in which it takes place, but in terms of technological mediation more generally, where what is at stake is the presence of one body to another. Although Munster's argument situates aesthetics in aesthesis, it nevertheless confines aesthesis to the experience of digital art, and ultimately to some special capacity of computer based experience to produce sensory disjuncture. Insofar as digital art concerns embodied experience, then it necessarily becomes an extension of modern forms of technological mediation, as the mediation of presence through images.

11 Mediation does not resolve disjuncture into a seamless, homogeneous experience of full presence; rather it produces false or pseudo-presence in the form of images spread through communicative fields in which bodies come into mediate contact with one another in an ongoing proliferation of sense.[9] An aesthetics of disjuncture should thus begin not with the localised affects of disjuncture within specific technologies, but with a critique of the metaphysics of presence embedded in mediated image environments. To do this I will draw on Kant's scheme for a sublime aesthetics outlined in the Critique of Judgement.

Openness

12 In this section I examine Kant's sublime aesthetics as a site for the exploration of sensory openness within technologically mediated environments.[10] My aim is to show how the sublime can be understood as harbouring sense as aesthesis, or openness. Sense returns aesthetics to experience, not in terms of the experiencing subject, but as the potential for a subject to "be" within mediated yet opened environments.

13

In part 1 of the Critique of Judgement, Kant identifies two kinds of aesthetic judgement: first as a reflection on the beautiful, and second as a response to the sublime, or the experience of a subject when faced with formlessness, or the immensity of a power beyond imagining (Kant, 1952: 90-91).[11] The first type of aesthetics is well-known to us today as a mode of judging well formed objects predicated on the disinterestedness of the one who judges. The second type of aesthetics, in which the subject consolidates itself in the face of its imminent dissolution in experience, is also well known. It's worth recalling what Kant has to say about this experience. Kant writes of someone wandering into St. Peters in Rome, overwhelmed by its immensity. The visitor is beset by a certain feeling:

14 > a feeling comes home to [the spectator] of the inadequacy of his imagination for presentation of the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and its fruitless efforts to extend this limits, recoils upon itself. (Kant, 1952: 100; emphasis added)

15 Faced with the 'formlessness' of what confronts her, the visitor's imagination 'recoils upon itself', leading to a negative pleasure in self-realisation. Through confrontation with formlessness, the mind feels itself empowered to contemplate the 'absolutely great' by making it reach the limits of its own powers of reason (94).[12]

16 Kant's sublime is predicated on the priority of the subject already in place and readied for experience. Experience simply becomes that which the mind transcends as it recoils back on itself in pursuit of rational coherence.[13] But this leads us into a predicament. As Jean-François Lyotard has demonstrated, in Kant's argument sense is simultaneously inherent in, yet extraneous to reason (Lyotard, 1994: 8).[14] Sense exceeds and overflows the rational formation of subjectivity while being necessary for its inner coherence (its capacity to orient itself within the intuited world of space and time). Sense is the immanence that makes rational thought and subjective experience meaningful, but which cannot be resolved to that thought or that experience alone. Consequently, we can say that the sublime contains the possibility of a further aesthetics in which sense is taken to be immanent – as openness to experience itself. In this case, formlessness, far from being something from which the mind recoils, becomes the potential site for an exploration of what a subject might be. The formation of the subject is not in an act of self-transcendence, but all in the doing and making within the terrain of sense understood as immanence, or the perpetually open terrain of the informe as the yet-to-come.[15] Here, sense ceases to be the preliminary feeling left behind in the mind's transcendent contemplation of the absolute, and instead becomes aesthesis or the gathering of the senses in contact with the absolute as an open-whole (i.e. the immanence of sense to itself within an open field). Later in this article, I will identify aesthesis as contact with earth: the incessant re-materialisation of signification within technologically entangled milieu.

17 How is it possible, then, to describe sense without a subject? In Kant's terms sense ('feelings') are always for a subject, inevitably associated with subjective or inner experience. However sense is also prior to the formation of the subject: a necessary condition for subjective experience but one which exceeds any limit that subjective experience might want to place on it (hence Kant's construal of the sublime as "formlessness" – unassimilable experience). Sense without a subject is the body in its immanent relation with the world.[16] The body, as Jean-Luc Nancy explains, 'is the absolute of sense' (Nancy, 1993c: 204); a reserve of virtual material outside any interiority that the body might be said to have. In Merleau-Ponty's terms sense is 'flesh', or the exteriorising of the body in its radical openness to the world reduced to pure phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 127ff.).[17]

18 The body-as-sense is not closed in on itself in its own self-reflection, but always outside itself the moment thought tries to capture it within the scope of a definition or system. In their immanent relation with the world, bodies no longer retain an inner integrity, but "dissolve" into ecstatic sensory flows interconnected to other flows within complex environments of sensory experience. Considered in this way, aesthetic experience is neither the contemplation of the formal properties of the art object nor the mind's recoil from formlessness, but an overflowing of sense within the experience itself. An aesthetics based on immanence invokes the opening of sense to experience as an open-whole, as a potential to make new sensory connections and modes of embodiment through experimentation and creativity. The problem posed for a critical aesthetics, then is not one of unity (how does the body remain unified) but one of contact: how does a body touch?[18]

To account for this problem, one cannot appeal to a subject. One cannot think from the point of view of subjective experience because the subject has not yet formed. One must try to think of a pre-subjective, singular existence: a singularity formed at the very edge of the body's contact with the world.

The Unary Body

19 In this section, I develop the idea of contact aesthetics through a critical reading of new media theorist Mark Hansen's proposal for embodiment as the site of creativity in digital media environments (Hansen, 2004). My aim here is to show how an appeal to individuated embodied experience is insufficient for a critical engagement with new media arts and mediated environments more generally, because it presupposes the very thing that it sets out to establish: the internal coherence of the experiencing body. Rather, as I have indicated in the previous section, a critical aesthetics needs to begin not with the presumption of the internal coherence of the experiencing body, but with sense as the body's immanence in relation to the world.

20 In New Philosophy for New Media, Mark Hansen calls for an aesthetics of new media that has as its aim 'the redemption of embodied experience: a renewed investment in the body as a kind of converter of the general form of framing into a rich, singular experience' (Hansen, 2004: 3).[19] At the heart of Hansen's project is a re-theorising of the interface between the human body and the digitised image, inspired by recent works of digital art. In a key chapter of the book, Hansen analyses what he terms the 'digital-facial image' (DFI) or the digitally produced avatar of a human face capable of interacting with a living human being (127-159). We are all familiar with this. A face appears on a screen. The viewer-participant speaks to it. It speaks back. It may even alter its facial expression in what seems to be a direct reaction to the viewer-participant's presence.

21 Unlike close-up faces seen in film, the digital-facial image has the capacity to engage with its human interlocutor in demand for contact which is urgent: 'what becomes urgent in these cases is the forging of contact' (137). Hansen describes a number of his own engagements with a digital-facial image, and one in particular, a computer art work entitled Dream of Beauty 2.0 by Kirsten Geisler – an image of a young female face which seems to flirt with him as he attempts to make contact. However, no matter how much he tries, the face remains distant and aloof. Hanson cannot make contact. He only experiences a sense of thwarted desire:

22 > The bizarre feeling of inefficacy and irrelevance with which this interaction left me…attests to the affective intensity of the DFI. The longer the interaction endured, the more I was confronted with the self-sufficiency of this image; and the more I experienced my own failure to make any real contact with it, the more intense the experience became, until a point when I simply could take it no longer. (142-143)

23 In an echo of the Kantian sublime, Hansen is overwhelmed by the encounter, forced back on himself, even to the point where he can 'take it no longer'. But far from dissolving his subjectivity, the experience for Hansen provides a 'rich source for the production of new individuations beyond our contracted perceptual habits' (143). In other words, a bodily negation produces a kind of self-individuation, which, 'carried over to the domain of the aesthetic…opens a recursive interaction between body and artwork: by actualising the virtual dimensions of the artwork, the viewer-participant simultaneously triggers a virtualisation of her body, an opening onto her own "virtual dimension"' (144).

24 Threaded throughout Hansen's discussion is a dialogue with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. For Hansen, Deleuze's theory of virtuality leads to 'a liberation of affect from the body' (134), whereas what he seeks is something else: a virtualisation of the body 'that reveals the origin of all affectivity in embodied life' (136). In Deleuze's terms, affect is independent of any particular body that might contain it, whereas for Hansen, affect is a creation of what might be called the unary body, that is, a body that touches itself first before it can touch anything else.[20] Hansen thus reverses Deleuze's account of affect by retaining the priority of the unified body as the site of an originary activity: self-affection as the source of meaning.[21]

25 The problem with Hansen's approach to aesthetics is that it cannot get around the subject/object relation implied through the invocation of a unary body confronted by the face of an other. The unary body can only react through negation, thereby affirming its autonomy in terms of auto-affection. This is a problem because it presupposes the coherence of embodied experience,

thereby short-circuiting critical discussion of the body's engagement with the external world in favour of what Munster, in another context, has described as the 'sediment[ed]…power of a coherent self' (Munster, 2000: 9/15). This problem is manifest throughout Hansen's book. It leads him to argue that the body creates its own images through an internal process of enframing (Hansen, 2004: 11) – a short step from affirming the cogito as the true site of image formation thereby invoking the mind/body split and the presumption of a universal order of reason as the ultimate arbiter of sensory experience. Indeed, the cogito makes its appearance later in Hansen's book in terms of neurobiologist Francisco Varela's Husserlian theory of time consciousness in which embodied experience is replaced by the neural-perceptual dimensions of consciousness as an internalised self-affective mechanism (248-254).[22] Nor is the problem solved through any intrinsic characteristic of digital technology. There is no special quality of the digital-facial image that circumvents the representational logic of subject/object formation.[23] Rather, if anything, it binds the body more closely to the parameters of technologically mediated encounters, subjecting it to an increasingly complex set of abstracted sensory experiences that intertwine ever more illusively with the real.

26 What is needed, then, is a way of understanding embodied experience, not as a function of the unary body closed in on itself, but as embodiment in general: as the embodying of the world through mediation. In this case, the unary body does not disappear. Rather it is produced, not in terms of its own auto-affection, but as an effect of the encounter; a false unity that dissolves on contact with the outside.[24] Here, the encounter needs to be understood as an eventuating; as a way of proliferating embodied experience in general. Events are not closed circuits of calculated rationality for already constituted bodies, but experiences opened out to the world. Events always contain within them elements of surprise. The surprise of the event is its eventuality, or that which 'brings contingency, unpredictability, and chance into the world' (Dastur, 2000: 179). Events plunge bodies into life and its finitude in death. They make the body come in contact with an absolute limit, a real-world immanence of its own potential to "be". In Hansen's terms events are closed off by the circumspection of embodied being, whereas, what is needed is to open them out to an entanglement in being-in-general. In the rest of this article, I examine the possibility of accessing mediated events, not in terms of how they contribute to embodied being, but as technological gestures entangled in temporal becoming and fading away; to their "eventuating" as technologically mediated experience.

Singularity

27 To invoke experience without a subject is to invoke the absolute: the whole being of which any given experience is part.[25] All at once, at this time, on this occasion and no other – as singular experience.[26] In Kant's Critique of Judgement, the absolute is experienced as a sense of the sublime; an overwhelming feeling of "too much" when faced with the formlessness of immense experience. Kant offers the sublime as a way of showing how the subject-in-formation is forced back on itself : 'the imagination…recoils upon itself' (Kant, 1952: 100) in a self-transcendence towards the universal. Experience is put in its place, assigned a rationality, in short – obliterated. Here we see the beginnings of a long line of thought that denies singular experience in favour of subjectivity as the foundation of life. Life is reduced to self-consciousness or emotional innerness, as if it existed independently of the outside environment in which it is immersed.

28 What then is the absolute of experience in terms of life itself, in its singular being? One must begin from experience itself and work out from that, from the contingent, singular occurrence of an event: an eventuating that makes something happen in just the way that it does and no more. One must begin from a moment of divergence, when something goes another way, when a thing or body moves away from itself. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard provides a way of thinking through this problem:

29 > To be, aesthetically, is to be-there, here and now, exposed in space-time, and to the space-time of something that touches before any concept or even any representation. This before is not known, obviously, because it is there before we are.…When the law comes to me, with the ego and language, it is too late. Things will have already taken a turn. And the turn of the law will not manage to efface the first turn, this first touch. (Lyotard, 1993: 179)

30 The body always has a first touch: an exposure to the world at the very moment it withdraws into itself as a unary being subject to the law of reason and discourse. In an illuminating article, Neil

Curtis refers to Lyotard's first touch in terms of aesthesis (Curtis, 1999: 254).[27] Aesthesis is the openness of the body to the outside, the gesture that makes contact with the world:

31 > When I lie under the sky, my space is that which discourses of materiality and spatial organization delimit, this is the voluminous body. When I lie under the sky I do it at certain times dictated by discourses of work and leisure, and the amount of my skin exposed is determined by class, gender, history and ecology. The presentation of my body, how I lie there, to what extent and in what style it is clothed, are discursive practices. My body is completely inscribed and textualized – and yet my hand touches the grass and the sun touches my face. (260-61)

32 The touch of the hand on the grass, the touch of the sun on the face is the exposure of the body to world as an absolute outside, but an outside that is right at the surface of things.[28] The hand and the face are attached to the world first as surface affects, singular exposures to the world. An aesthetics based on a 'first touch' remains an attractive proposition for the kind of thing I am proposing in this article. It bypasses the subject/object relation by situating contact at the interface between the body and the world. It invokes sense as gesture: a primary factum in the constitution of experience. It should be enough for a contact aesthetics.

33 However, a problem persists. In its primacy, a first touch remains within an experience that it does not create. A milieu must first be there for contact to happen. I propose to define this milieu as the residual material of events that surge forth through time, as an experience of being earthed. The experience that Curtis describes is an experience of being earthed, that is, situated between the earth and the sky in such a way that the body senses a kind of involuntary freedom: 'and yet my hand touches the grass'.[29] To be earthed in today's telecommunication and computer graphic culture is to be bound to the unboundedness of materiality in its interconnection with the skies; to live life at the interface between the earth and the skies as an experience of the delayed/deferred effect of technologically mediated presence, as life lived elsewhere by being also here at this place at this time.[30] To be earthed is to be simultaneously unearthed by affects that come from somewhere else, from some other time. All experience is earthed in the sense that it is never free of an entanglement in technology and its power to produce falsity: the false sense of unary being, or the auto-affective body. In this case, the origin of affect is not in the body considered as a discrete unary form, but in the very potential for a body to "be" right at the interface between the earth and the sky; an interface mediated by technological presence. Contact aesthetics is situated at the site of this entanglement of residual technical material and potential being, as a point of disjuncture opening to the outside.[31]

Conclusion

34 We are now in a position to make some final comments on Anna Munster's proposal for an approximate aesthetics. For Munster, approximate aesthetics is specific to digital art in its capacity to create 'zones of proximity' (11/15) in which different objects can be brought together to produce a disjunctive experience of bodily disturbance. This leads to 'an aesthetics that connects to life as a process of composing/compositing the self' (3/15). Munster's argument relocates digital aesthetics away from a concern for experience as disembodiment and the abstractions of cyberspace, and places it directly into the specific locales of embodiment in which the art work makes contact with, and draws from, the experience of the world. But in so doing, she can no longer make any specific argument for digital art, since all art in modernity is, in one way or another, concerned with precisely the same thing.[32]

35 In their book entitled Formless: a User's Guide, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have undertaken a revision of the modernist art project in order to 'brush modernism against the grain' (Bois and Krauss, 1997: 16). Employing Bataille's notion of the informe (formlessness as movement or slippage) they undertake readings of various modernist art works in which they detect a zone of indeterminate materiality between the purely visible and the carnal that leads them to conclude that 'the formless is an operation' (18). By following the movement of the informe within the art works, a certain materiality is exposed, and along with it, an entirely new space is opened up for commentary and critical analysis. Bois and Krauss's work suggests the presence of a will-to-art in modernity which counters technological abstraction by dissolving it into its material base. This is certainly the case in Graham Harwood's digital art works on the Tate Gallery's web site, discussed by Munster as an example of approximate aesthetics, in which canonical British works of art by Turner and others are intermixed with waste materials found on nearby sites. However, a case

could also be made for Turner's work itself to be considered as an example of this kind of aesthetics. Turner's art works are in fact a response to the overly formal art of the Academy; he wanted to dissolve form, to make the art work materially present to the viewer.[33] Turner employed various novel techniques to create texture to his canvasses that made them stand out as visual experiences rather than formal views. My point here is that an aesthetics based on the proximity of disjunctive affects on the body cannot be isolated to any one medium or art form, but should be proposed in terms of a general will-to-art in modernity.

36 What I am calling for then, is an expansion of Munster's approximate aesthetics into a general critique of embodied experience as technologically mediated presence. The disjuncture between the organic and the machinic in digital arts that leads to an uncanny sense of distant proximity is symptomatic of all forms of modern technological mediation in which presence is delivered in the mode of its absence – as mediated imagery. Contact aesthetics engages with the image-sites of technological mediation by exposing them to their own material base, thereby releasing sense in direct contact with the outside as aesthesis. The outside is not the formless exterior of an otherwise integrated sensory interiority, but an open field of immanence that is 'right at' sense. Aesthesis runs through bodies in their exposure to the outside as immanent sense. As aesthesis, sense becomes available as 'material to work with', to create new forms or objective modalities for conditions and situations that have not yet been experienced, that are yet to come.

37 Contact aesthetics is both a critical intervention into the closure of formal objects and a practice of making new objects for life that has not yet arrived. It is both creative and experimental in the sense that it brings new things into life by undoing and reconfiguring the material of already constituted objects and formal arrangements. The aim is to release singularity, to make it go elsewhere, or alternatively to show how, in the historical case, singularity exceeds and undoes the objects in which it dwells. Contact aesthetics is thus situated at the very heart of life itself, as a return to singular experience in contact with an outside still in the making; as the yet-to-come to be inhabited by a not-yet-ready subject (Mules, 2002).

Author's biography

Warwick Mules teaches and reads in cultural theory in the School of Arts and Creative Enterprise, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education at Central Queensland University. He is the co-author of Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: a semiotic approach, and is currently writing on contact aesthetics. Warwick can be contacted at w.mules at cqu.edu.au

Notes

[1] The modern term aesthetics derives from the eighteenth century art theorist Baumgarten's employment of the Greek word aesthesis to denote 'a sensible image of perfection' (Caygill, 1995: 53).

[back]

[2] Howard Caygill identifies a tendency in Western modernity to transform aesthesis (open sensible pleasure) into ascesis (rational closure) (Caygill, 2003: 99).

[back]

[3] See Stolnitz (1961) for an account of aesthetic disinterestedness in the eighteenth century through the ideas of Shaftsbury other others.

[back]

[4] In Deleuze and Guattari's terms a machinic assemblage is 'an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 88).

[back]

[5] The distinction between sense and affect needs some clarification at this point. Both concepts need to be understood by first subtracting the subject. Neither sense nor affect are "for" a subject, but both are the prerequisites for a subject to "be". Sense is immanent orientation: the disposition of a body towards or away from something. To sense something is to feel its presence close at hand, to locate it as one body to another. Sense is the virtualisation of the body in an immanent sensory field. Affects are material intensities that move bodies but are themselves independent of the bodies that they move. Affect is free-floating sense, whereas sense is the body floating in an

immanent field. But neither sense nor affect are free in any unconditioned sense. Rather, they always remain constrained by the assemblages and articulations through which power is expressed diagrammatically. Sense involves gesture and disposition, whereas affect involves capacity and tendency.

[back]

[6] In his essay 'Immanence: A Life' Gilles Deleuze describes a transcendental field of pure immanence in which subjectivity is not transcendent but inchoate (Deleuze, 2001: 25-33).

[back]

[7] Lev Manovich argues that new media art works have an 'aesthetic dimension' based on 'a particular configuration of space, time, and surface articulated in the work; a particular sequence of the user's activities over time in interacting with the work; a particular formal, material and phenomenological user experience' (Manovich, 2001: 66).

[back]

[8] A milieu is not the same as a context. A context provides a reason for the existence of any given element placed in it. Contexts are thus defined by causality and necessity. A milieu is a material rhizome made of global/local interconnections in which diverse elements exist side by side. The relation between elements in a milieu is affective, not causal. Milieux and contexts co-exist, the former as excessive to the latter.

[back]

[9] The idea of mediation as immanent sense has been developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in his reading of Hegel's concept of Aufhebung (Nancy, 2002: 50-51). Following Nancy, we might say that technological mediation entails the prior thought of mediation as immanent sense; as the 'restlessness' of being in its relation with otherness.

[back]

[10] Problems with Kant's concept of the sublime should not discount the seminal nature of his argument with respect to rationality and the formation of human subjectivity. Rather Kant's concept needs to be taken as a starting point for a double critique: a critique of the critique of reason itself (deconstruction) and its relation to experience. As Iain Mackenzie has pointed out, the issue concerns the assumption by Kant of a certain unexamined correctness in the view that reason is always in harmony with itself and hence exempt from the very critique which Kant launches against the application of reason in the pursuit of knowledge of experienced phenomenon (Mackenzie, 2004: 16-19). The issue, then, is one of conducting an immanent critique of Kant's own (problematic) critique, not to refute it, but to move through it in order to reveal a hitherto concealed plane of immanence (sense) in which reason operates but which resists reason's transcendental gesture towards unity (31-33). Mackenzie identifies the work of Deleuze and Guattari in What is Philosophy?, as an exemplary critique of this kind; as an immanent critique of both Kantian and Cartesian reason (28-29). But the work of Lyotard, Derrida and more recently Jean-Luc Nancy can also be mentioned as immanent critique (deconstruction) of Kantian critique.

[back]

[11] See Gasche (1991: xxv) for discussion of Kant's two aesthetics. For Kant, aesthetics serves as a bridging device to analyse the disjunctures between the different faculties in the operation of reason (Deleuze, 1984: 50).

[back]

[12] The absolutely great is 'what is beyond all comparison' (Kant, 1952: 94), which is not to be confused with something measurable but large. The absolute is a limit concept and not a quantity. In his essay 'The Sublime Offering', Jean-Luc Nancy calls this the 'unlimited' that is, that which limits limits yet is not itself a limit (Nancy, 1993a: 35). The absolute is always close at hand, yet far away in its close-at-handness; an openness engendered by "the infinity of a beginning" (35). The absolute is the thought of the open-whole. These ideas can be fruitfully compared with Walter Benjamin's concept of aura: the technologically mediated experience of distance in proximity within the scope of the absolute as originary access (Ursprung). See my article 'Creativity, Singularity and Techné' (Mules, 2006) for further development of this theme.

[back]

[13] In Kant's terms the sublime is 'a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense' (Kant, 1952: 98) and not the sensory experience itself. It is thus a recuperation of the coherence of the self-reflecting subject by rejecting outward sensory experience: 'the sublime consists merely in the relation by which the sensible in the representation of nature is judged available for a possible supersensible use' (133). Glossing Kant, Gilles Deleuze writes: 'the faculty of feeling [i.e. sense] has no domain (neither phenomena nor things themselves); it does not express the conditions to which a kind of objects [sic] must be subject, but solely the subjective conditions for the exercise of the faculties" (Deleuze, 1984: 48).

[back]

[14] Lyotard identifies 'the "other feeling" hidden in sublime feeling', (Lyotard, 1994: 232) a 'dynamic synthesis' of 'heterogeneous elements' placed in a 'necessary unity' (124). As heterogeneity, sense affirms experience through proliferation, as radical openness or exteriority without any inside.

[back]

[15] The informe is Bataille's concept. Bois and Krauss (1997) rework the informe as slippage within art technique, discussed in more detail later in this article. We might say then, that the informe is technical slippage: a kind of violent opening of closed, formal and technical systems. The informe as technical slippage replaces Kantian formlessness, as potential for new ways of being and doing.

[back]

[16] Only bodies have worlds. A world is an environment in which a body exists. Worlds involve orientation, disposition, directionality, in short an entire geo-phenomenality.

[back]

[17] Despite its exteriorising of sense, Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh is limited by an over-riding concern for the coherence of the body in self-touching, and thus remains committed to the transcendence of self-awareness (consciousness) to experience.

[back]

[18] Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that touch is the sense of senses; touch 'makes one sense what makes one sense (what it is to sense): the proximate of the distant, the approximation of the intimate....Touch forms one body with sensing, or it makes of the sensing faculties a body – it is but the corpus of the senses' (Nancy, 1996: 17).

[back]

[19] Hansen claims to be following the lead of Walter Benjamin in the 'Work of Art' essay on this point. But, a more careful reading of Benjamin's arguments here and in other essays suggests that Benjamin is not concerned so much with a 'redemption of embodied experience' as Hansen puts it, but with a critical intervention in the thought of redemption as it relates to embodied experience, and hence an opening of embodied experience onto the yet-to-come.

[back]

[20] The concept of a unary body has been suggested to me by Roland Barthes in his book Camera Lucida, where he writes of a 'unary photograph' characterised by its 'power of cohesion' (Barthes, 1993: 40-41).

[back]

[21] In an early essay ('Description of Woman'), Deleuze provides a phenomenological description of the confrontation between man and woman by reversing Sartre's intersubjective model in which the woman is understood in terms of an other projected by the man's desire (Deleuze, 2002). For Deleuze, the other is "first" in the sense that it has a pre-individual objective materiality at the very moment it can be thought as other, a materiality of its own (an 'essence' of woman). Hansen would thus be following Sartre's line in construing the DFI in terms of woman as man's other, instead of seeing man as a subtraction from the other that woman is.

[back]

[22] Hubert Dreyfus has alerted us to the problems associated with thinking of encounters with computer generated events based on Husserlian notions of internalised self-consciousness (Dreyfus, 1998). Invoking Heidegger at the expense of Husserl, Dreyfus proposes that we think of

the event in terms of 'the shared world…which makes communication possible' (283), the dwelling in the world of beings in their concernful relation with one another.

[back]

[23] See Roe (2004) for a discussion of the way computer interface experience continues to be defined by representation and the logic of print media interaction.

[back]

[24] In effect the body becomes an image or image event: an actualisation of virtual material in a singular occurrence of imaging.

[back]

[25] The absolute is univocity or being-in-general expressed in finite being(s). In this article I refer to this kind of thinking in a range of writings including those of Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy and Walter Benjamin, as the 'thought of the absolute' (Nancy, 2002: 23).

[back]

[26] Singular experience does not mean the experience of the individual or individual experience; rather it refers to experience bereft of subjectivity, in its existential connection to the outside at this or that point of contact. Singularity cannot be thought without its interconnectivity with plurality, in Nancy's terms 'being singular plural' (Nancy, 2000).

[back]

[27] Aesthesis is of course the general term for the body's sensory orientation to the world in an originating sense.

[back]

[28] For the concept of 'right at' (à même) see Nancy (2000: 10).

[back]

[29] Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that freedom is precisely the gesture of a first touch that withdraws from the law (Nancy, 1993b: 30-31). In aesthesis, freedom is sensory openness.

[back]

[30] For a more extensive elaboration of the concept of the earth, see Mules (2005).

[back]

[31] Paul Carter's programme of 'material thinking' comes to mind as an example of the kind of aesthetic practice I am thinking of here (Carter, 2004).

[back]

[32] Simon O'Sullivan points out that the disjunctive aesthetic effect is not confined to new media art but can be found in any kind of art within modern settings (O'Sullivan, 2006: 47).

[back]

[33] Turner's art practice is discussed at length in Gage (1969). See Mules (2006: 78-79) for a discussion of Turner's art in terms of singularity, techne and openness.

[back]

References

Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (Lonon: Vintage Book, 1993; 1980).

Bois, Yve-Alain and Rosalind E. Krauss. Formless: a User's Guide (New York: Zone, 1997).

Carter, Paul. Material Thinking: the Theory and Practice of Creative Research (Carlton: The Melbourne University Press, 2004).

Caygill, Howard. 'The Alexandrian Aesthetic', in John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds) The New Aestheticism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 99-118.

Caygill, Howard. A Kant Dictionary (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

Curtis, Neal. 'The Body as Outlaw: Lyotard, Kafka and the Visible Human Project', Body & Society 5.2/3 (1999): 249-266.

Dastur, Françoise. 'Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise', Hypatia 15.4 (2000): 178-189.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; 1980).

Deleuze, Gilles. 'Description of Woman: For a Philosophy of the Sexed Other', trans. Keith W. Faulkner, Angelaki 7.3 (2002): 17-24.

Deleuze, Gilles. Kant's Critical Philosophy: the Doctrine of Faculties, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; 1963).

Deleuze, Gilles. Pure Immanence: Essays on Life, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

Dreyfus, Hubert. L. 'Why We Do Not Have to Worry About Speaking the Language of the Computer', Information, Technology & People 11.4 (1998): 281-289.

Gage, John. Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth (London: Studio Vista, 1969).

Gasché, Rodolphe. 'Foreword: Ideality in Fragments', foreword to Fredrich Schlegel, Philosophical Fragments, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): vii-xxii.

Hansen, Mark B.N. New Philosophy for New Media (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

Jauss, Hans Robert. Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; 1977).

Kant, Immanuel. The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

Lyotard, Jean-François. 'Prescription', trans. Christopher Fynsk, in Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (eds) Toward the Postmodern (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 176-191.

Lyotard, Jean-François. Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: California University Press, 1994; 1991).

Mackenzie, Iain. The Idea of Pure Critique (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Evanston; Northwest University Press, 1968; 1948).

Mules, Warwick. 'Creativity, Singularity and Techné: The Making and Unmaking of Visual Objects in Modernity', Angelaki 11.1 (2006): 75-86.

Mules, Warwick. 'The Edges of the Earth: Critical Regionalism as an Aesthetics of the Singular', Transformations 12 (Dec. 2005), https://transformations.cqu.edu.au/journal/issue_12/article_03.shtml.

Mules, Warwick. 'In the Absence of the Human', Continuum 16.3 (2002): 259-271.

Munster, Anna. 'Digitality: Approximate Aesthetics', ctheory (March, 2001), https://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=290.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 'Of Being Singular Plural', in Being Singular Plural, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; 1996), 1-99.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. The Muses, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; 1994).

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 'The Sublime Offering', in Of the Sublime: Presence in Question, trans. Jeffrey Librett (Albany: State University of New York, 1993a), 25-53.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002; 1997).

Nancy, Jean-Luc. The Experience of Freedom, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993b; 1988).

Nancy, Jean-Luc. The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993c).

O'Sullivan, Simon. Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Rancière, Jacques. The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004; 2000).

Roe, Philip. 'Textual Dreaming: Dis-Ease in the Interface', Fibreculture, 3 (2004. https:fibreculture.org/issue3_roe.html.

Singer, Alan. Aesthetic Reason: Artworks and the Deliberative Ethos (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

Stolnitz, Jerome. 'On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness', Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism 20 (1961): 131-143.

The Fibreculture Journal (ISSN 1449-1443) — Issue 9, 2006-12-06. This article is published under CC BY-NC-ND. The author retains copyright.

This PDF is an archival offprint generated from the journal's text archive on 2026-11-15. It is not the publisher's version of record; the published article is at https://nine.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-058-contact-aesthetics-and-digital-arts-at-the-threshold-of-the-earth/. Page numbers here are not the published pagination. Where paragraph numbers appear in the margin they are the journal's own and are the citable unit.