

VACANT, OBSCURE AND RUDE:
THE ARTIFICIAL SUBLIME IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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Introduction: The Sublime: Working the Medium

Section I: The Sublime

The sublime is a rich, but complicated, theoretical concept in the philosophy of aesthetics. It has been analyzed as the border of the Unpresentable, the limit of Representation, the abyss of Imagination, the triumph of Reason, the end of Art and a path to Freedom. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Slavoj Zizek each claim that contemporary art and art production can be viewed in terms of its relation to a contemporary sublime that they respectively analyze in terms of a felt indeterminacy and a staging of the Void. I think this claim needs serious scope restriction because the multiplicity of contemporary artmaking practices and the products of that production cannot be reduced to a single defining relation. In my view, only particular contemporary artworks are sublime, not the entire class. However, I think an analysis in terms of sublimity is illuminating only if the contemporary sublime is understood as artificial, that is, manipulated, inhabited and produced by human intent, not as some transcendent collision with nature.

I will argue that contemporary art's relation to the sublime is 'working the medium' and is never straightforward, i.e. first-order: contemporary artworks are not simply vehicles for 'expressing' sublimity, for displaying the facticity or thereness of paint, graphite,

sulfur, corn, or artist, for displaying the Void or for revealing the non-sensuous nature of aesthetic judgment. Such reductions simplify the multiplicity and complexity of both contemporary art practice and aesthetic appreciation as constructions.

My project is to create a new critical category, 'the artificial sublime'. The empiricist Edmund Burke is the godfather of my project since he was aware that sublimity could be deliberately produced; indeed, he was the first to articulate the concept of the 'artificial infinite'.¹ Contemporary artworks are intelligible structures, that is, experimental mechanisms that intentionally engage rich coils of thinking and feeling. The operative concept of the artificial sublime marks the function of certain contemporary artworks that are strategically constructed as multiplicities to both entice and thwart aesthetic analysis. Such works exhibit a temporal mechanics: a shifting, changeable, ruptured state that is under constant construction and revision. On my analysis, the experience of artificial sublimity is the regress of the aesthetic imagination in active, but tormented, play – analyzing a continuous multiplicity in the attempt to stabilize the experiential field for sensemaking. When the aesthetic imagination works on a multiplicity or continuum that is composed of degrees of intensity, with each degree itself

¹ Edmund Burke, **A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful**, ed. J.T. Boulton (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Columbia University Press, 1958): 75. Originally published in 1759.

containing a series of degrees, the imagination's play at finding a form becomes desperate play. Because the frustrating multiplicity is manipulated, the imagination cannot generate stable temporal schemata, but instead spins out a torrent of unstable, partial temporal schemata that the understanding describes with its own torrent of monstrous indeterminate representations. But the hallmark of the desperate 'play' of the artificial sublime is its dissonance. In fact, it is doubly dissonant since the flood of partial representations runs in parallel with a series of conflicting subjective states -- sensations, memories, pains and pleasures, each with their spiraling series. This is no harmonic 'free play' of the beautiful where the imagination could endlessly play at forming and the understanding could endlessly play at describing. In the artificial sublime, the imagination is stretched to the limit until it experiences its limit, driving the temporalizing presenting faculty (*Einbildung*) into reverse – the moment of the sublime. This is the atemporality of the imaginative regress: when the imagination is pushed to its limit and has an instantaneous intuition of a felt multiplicity, an intuited, but unanalyzable, multiplicity. This is also the moment of the difficult pleasure of the artificial sublime when pleasure and pain are experienced simultaneously.

I will argue that there are at least three distinct modes of the contemporary artificial sublime that I identify as 'the vacant sublime', 'the obscure sublime' and 'the rude sublime'. I will establish both their separateness from, and their historical grounding in, the eighteenth-century, pre-Romantic sublime of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. These three modes of the contemporary artificial sublime share critical connections with three modes Kant identified in his pre-critical work as 'the lofty sublime' grounded in terror, 'the splendid sublime' grounded in magnificence and 'the awful sublime' grounded in horror. It is important to note that Kant's analysis of the sublime, in both his critical and pre-critical work, is specifically restricted to the natural sublime since he claimed only "nature-in-itself", not nature as experienced phenomenon, could occasion the experience of limitlessness, formlessness and danger necessary for sublimity.²

In developing my project, I have discovered theoretical reinforcement in the writings of Gilles Deleuze. I read Deleuze's 'rising ground' as Burke's terrible sublime and so take his **Difference and Repetition** to be a schema for contemporary art production. I also draw from Henri Bergson's theoretical work on the continuous multiplicity of pure duration, Jacques Rancière's emplotments of

² Immanuel Kant, **The Critique of Judgment**, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928): 92, 110, 119-21. Originally published in 1790.

autonomy and heteronomy and Edmund Husserl's analysis of the non-sensible, intelligible horizon that frames the sensuous.

Section II: The Medium

I am indebted to the pre-modernist theorist Gotthold Lessing's concept of the medium since I take contemporary artmaking practices to be intelligibly viewed as 'working the medium'. Lessing developed the following formalist thesis: artists can properly operate only within the domain prescribed by their artistic medium since the aesthetic content of an artwork is essentially dependent on the work's formal properties. In other words, for Lessing, the limits of an individual art form are identical to the limits of its signs or medium. The art historian, Michael Fried, counts Lessing as having invented the modern concept of an artistic medium.

I take this to mean that Lessing prefigured modernism. According to theorists like Clement Greenberg and Thierry de Duve, the modernist period in painting is a sustained and rigorous testing of the conventions of painting as they exist at a particular art historical moment. Conventions are necessarily linked to theory and practice, to what is counted as aesthetically important in a particular art historical context.

I think it is helpful to picture the contemporary artmaking situation as 'working the medium' even though contemporary

artistic conventions are no longer classical conventions that rigorously define whether something is an artwork at all, or whether it is an artwork of one particular sort rather than another. Artworks in this art historical period are counted to be more than sensible aggregates since they are also considered to possess intelligible relations to other objects, artworks, media, techniques and ideas. Constructing such artworks necessarily requires that artists deploy a strategy that both makes the work possible and characterizes the functioning of the artwork.

I take contemporary artmaking to operate according to a contextualist logic of distantiation, which I call 'a logic of strategy', where meanings are established serially by the concatenation of elements torn, borrowed, referenced, circulating adrift within a deliberately decentered frame. The partial engagement and re-engagement of intelligible and sensible elements that individually possess complex historical relations is a general strategy that can yield an infinite number of possible works. Contemporary artworks operate in a complex, shifting, what I call 'strategic' manner -- sometimes mimicking, sometimes parodying, sometimes ironizing, sometimes eulogizing, sometimes corrupting and always complicating whatever has ever counted as art.

The artificial sublime is a state of the current theoretical dimension of art where anything imagined can potentially be an artwork. I hold that there are two ways contemporary artworks can strategically engage the artificial sublime: methodologically, as if from a formula or blueprint and productively. The methodological use of the artificial sublime is marked by the utilization of baroque contextualist practices.

Here I am using Jorge Luis Borges's definition of baroque:

that style that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its own possibilities, and that borders on self-caricature. ... I would venture to say that the baroque is the final stage in all art, when art flaunts and squanders its resources. The baroque is intellectual, and Bernard Shaw has said that all intellectual labor is inherently humorous.³

The productive use of the artificial sublime involves the construction of intelligible structures that are neither transgressive nor nostalgically romantic. An example of such work would be works structured like Leibnizian folds – “a folding together, or complication, which does not reduce to relations among distinct elements in a space-time parameter but which rather supposes a strange invisible groundless depth from which irrupts something that creates its own space and time”.⁴ These works time travel, not in the impossible sense of being structures disconnected from prior art

³ Jorge Luis Borges, **Collected Fictions**. In the Preface to the 1954 edition

⁴ John Rajchman, **Constructions** (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998): 15.

historical practices or conventions, but in the sense of being structures that are themselves temporal experiments, installations simultaneously unstable and originary. I argue, furthermore, that each mode of the contemporary artificial sublime can be used strategically either methodologically or productively.

After elaborating the theoretical category of the artificial sublime,

I will use it to develop a detailed analysis of the sublime strategies of contemporary artmaking that are unique to each of the three modes of artificial sublimity that I have isolated: the vacant, the obscure and the rude. I consider this application to be the test of the theory.

Chapter I: **The Sublime as a Theoretical Category:**

From Pre-Modernism to the Present

Section I: The Void & Presence

The theoretical category of the sublime is a crucial interpretative tool for understanding the modernist turn in artmaking. Slavoj Žižek is a contemporary theorist who has developed an analysis in terms of the exhibited sublime. Žižek's analysis focuses on Gustave Courbet's **L'Origine du Monde** (1866), a realistic, almost photographic, depiction of the torso and exposed genitalia of an unseen woman. Žižek claims that Courbet, in this work, collapsed the mechanism of sublimation that had previously sustained the sublimity of pictorial art. Žižek concludes that artists working after Courbet can sustain the sublimity of art only by resisting a realist centering on the art object and instead exhibiting the Void itself as art object. Žižek writes:

With Courbet, we learn there is no thing behind its sublime appearance, that if we force our way through the sublime appearance to the Thing itself, all we get is the suffocating nausea of the abject – so **the only way to reestablish the minimal structure of sublimation is to directly stage the Void itself, the Thing as the Void-Place-Frame, without the illusion that this Void is sustained by some hidden incestuous Object.** ... The “abstraction” of the modernist painting is thus to be conceived as the reaction to the over-presence of the Ultimate “concrete” Object, the incestuous Thing ... that turns the sublime into an excremental excess.⁵

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “On the Sublime”, Parkett No. 45: Matthew Barney, Sarah Lucas, Roman Signer ((Zurich: Parkett-Verlag AG, 1996): 8-9. Emphasis added.

Here Žižek applies Freud's fetish theory to contemporary artmaking: artists become repulsed by their desire when they encounter it directly and so must construct veils or determinate representations to protect their desire. An artwork can maintain and secure desire if it constructs the desired as a mesmerizing Void. Another theorist, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has investigated contemporary art practice in terms of a differential relationship of an androgynous sublime to the defamed feminine beautiful.⁶ Here Gilbert-Rolfe anesthetizes gender theory. He also claims that technology has replaced nature in grounding a new sublime of flawlessness and simultaneity instead of the old sublime of limitlessness and temporality.

⁶ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, **Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime**, (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).

Section II: Lyotard & Felt Indeterminacy

Jean-Francois Lyotard has described the sublime as “perhaps the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern”.⁷ Lyotard draws the modern and the avant-garde out of the eighteenth-century sublime in particular. During that era, individuals and theoreticians were enthralled with objects, both natural and artificial, that generated a difficult pleasure, what Lyotard terms “this contradictory feeling – pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression”.⁸ To analyze sublimity, whether figured as the response to sublime objects or as an experience of a particular kind, is to analyze a complex experiencing marked by a felt indeterminacy. Both Adorno and Lyotard focus on the alterity and unrepresentability of the sublime. Although Lyotard notes the ‘negative presentation’ involved in the sublime, he represents it as “that unrepresentable Beyond that gives the lie to the totalizing claims of rational cognition”.⁹ He suggests that “the imagination can signal” the presence of the absolute through a kind of “insane mirage” in the emptiness it discovers beyond its ability to comprehend.¹⁰ On this reading, the sublime is what is presented at the border of the unrepresentable. Lyotard positions Barnett Newman

⁷ Jean- Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-garde”, **Artforum**, **22**: April 1984, 93.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, **Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime**, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994): 150-153.

as the artist who liberated sublimity from its romantic trappings, what Newman calls “the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting”.¹¹ To quote Lyotard:

Newman is not unaware of the aesthetic and philosophical stakes with which the word sublime is involved. He read Edmund Burke’s *Inquiry*, and criticized what he saw as Burke’s over-‘surrealist’ description of the sublime work. Which is as much to say that, conversely, Newman judged surrealism to be over-reliant on a pre-romantic or romantic approach to indeterminacy. Thus, when he seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an over-there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the ‘it happens’ is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event is not expressible, and it is to this that it has to witness.¹²

References to the eighteenth century sublime in modern art theory are ubiquitous. Kirk Pillow has attributed interest in the Kantian sublime to tendencies in contemporary thought to “valorize indeterminacy, suspect conceptual unities, and bind all understanding to prediscursive felt contexts of intelligibility”.¹³ Pillow

¹¹ Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image” (1943-45), reprinted in **Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics**, ed. Clifford Ross (1990).

¹² *Ibid.*, 92-93.

¹³ Kirk Pillow, **Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel**, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000): 1-2.

represents the sublime in terms of a kind of understanding or interpretation that yields a positive value. He writes:

What I will call *sublime understanding* is that always partial, indeterminate grasping of contextual wholes through which we make sense of the uncanny particular.¹⁴

Yves-Alain Bois disconnects Barnett Newman from the eighteenth-century sublime on the grounds that Newman takes aesthetic experience to involve the raw pleasure of colliding with non-conceptualized presence. Bois recalls an interview between Newman and David Sylvester in 1965 where Sylvester referred to the 'zip' of Newman's **Onement** series as "a field between two fields"; Newman responded by dubbing the 'zip': "a field that brings life to other fields".¹⁵ Bois takes this to be evidence that Newman's art emerges from a fundamentally positive urge: "a single desire for a self-sustaining art that extends human experience".¹⁶

¹⁴ **Sublime Understanding**: 5.

¹⁵ Barnett Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester" (1965), **Selected Writings**: 256. Quoted in Yves-Alain Bois, "Barnett Newman's Sublime=Tragedy", **Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives** (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1996): 141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Since Bois understands the philosophical sublime of Burke and Kant to be “a universal category ... defined in terms of a temporary feeling of lack with regard to an idea of totality ... (he concludes that) the term ‘sublime’ appears to be a misnomer (applied to Newman)”.¹⁷

Section III: Rancière & Sheer Heteronomy

Jacques Rancière would agree with Bois that Newman’s sublime is not the Kantian sublime for the following pair of reasons. First, the Kantian sublime cannot be the *field* of the aesthetic since Kant does not take the sublime to be the *mark* of the aesthetic. Second, the Kantian sublime involves a felt disharmony of the faculties of reason and imagination that is resolved by the discovery of a higher harmony – “the self-perception of the subject as a member of the supersensible world of Reason and Freedom”.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Rancière would connect both Newman and Lyotard with the Romantic sublime since Newman claims that it is possible for the art spectator to collide with raw, non-conceptualized presence and Lyotard claims that the manifestation of the unrepresentable – “the loss of a steady relation between the sensible and the intelligible” – is the field of modern art.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy”, **New Left Review** 14, March-April, 2002: 149.

¹⁹ Lyotard quoted by Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution”: 149.

Rancière believes that this positing of the sublime as unrepresentable or “sheer heteronomy” is grounded in the desire to link the aesthetic to the ethical. He writes:

The opposition of the aesthetic regime of art to the representational regime can be ascribed to the sheer opposition of the art of the unrepresentable to the art of representation ... The argument of the ‘unrepresentable’ does not fit the experience of artistic practice. Rather, it fulfils the desire that there be something unrepresentable, something unavailable, in order to inscribe in the practice of art the necessity of the ethical detour.²⁰

On Rancière's view, the framing of the sublime as a productive encounter, that is, as an infinite emerging in “a gap between the sensible and the supersensible”, is an entropic scenario of a Romantic poetics that frames the art object as “free appearance” that is as an encounter with heterogeneity. According to Rancière, the aesthetic regime of art always ‘aestheticizes’ art objects by always posing them as forms of life.²¹ This means that a sculpture of a goddess is viewed as the goddess herself, that is, the art object is taken to be “a heterogenous, unavailable sensible”.²² Rancière claims that this romantic construction of the heteronomy of the art object as a form of life, what he calls “the plot of the spirit of forms”, is in fact, the construction of a mode of experience that projects the properties of the aesthetic experience onto the art object yet

²⁰ “The Aesthetic Revolution”: 148 – 50.

²¹ Ibid., 137.

²² Ibid., 145.

paradoxically recognizes the art object as art only on the condition that it is non-art.²³ He writes:

The goddess and the spectator, the free play and the free appearance, are caught up together in a specific sensorium, canceling the oppositions of activity and passivity, will and resistance. ... The artwork participates in this sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is not a work of art. ... It is not the autonomy of free Reason, subduing the anarchy of sensation. It is the suspension of that kind of autonomy. It is an autonomy strictly related to a withdrawal of power.²⁴

According to Rancière, the current aesthetic regime of art operates via a Romantic poetics that regards art and life to be permeable. As a result, both formalism in art and normativity in art have been overthrown. No longer is artmaking “subject to a set of intrinsic norms: a hierarchy of genres, adequation of expression to subject matter, etc.” now it is possible for “everything to play the part of the heterogenous, unavailable sensible”.²⁵ But this means an artwork’s ‘life’ can be equated with its open-ended history. For Rancière, an art object is a ‘living form’ in the sense that it possesses “the independence of ‘free appearance’ and the vital spirit of a community”.²⁶ Rancière’s position is that a Romantic poetics of modernity leading to “a multiplication of the temporalities of art ... means complicating and ultimately dismissing the straightforward

²³ Ibid., 141, 135-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 135-6.

²⁵ Ibid., 135, 144-5.

²⁶ Ibid., 140-1.

scenarios of art becoming life or life becoming art, the 'end of art; and replacing them with scenarios of latency and re-actualization".

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I agree with Rancière that the historicity of art is the condition of modernist sensibility and so reject Lyotard's analysis that views the condition of modernist sensibility to be sublimity. The productive artificial sublime is a very specific experience engendered by a specific practice of artmaking. It is not the case that all contemporary artworks engage the artificial sublime. Nonetheless, I hold that the experience of artificial sublimity is sometimes the productive encounter with an unstable indeterminacy. However, I do not hold that this indeterminacy is a 'free appearance' or the encounter with a heterogeneity in the Romantic sense since it is always experienced as produced by human intervention and manipulation. Therefore, I take the artificial sublime to be both indeterminate and representable.

I take the contemporary artificial sublime involved in artmaking and art production to be a curious blending of both Burke's and Kant's accounts: it essentially involves both difficult pleasure as well as an object/subject dissonance. It

²⁷ Ibid., 143.

differs from Kant, however, in allowing for the possibility of an intelligible pleasure that is not just a pleasure in the mind's superiority over, and freedom from, the 'natural'. I will argue that all experiences of artificial sublimity are necessarily temporally structured and all involve both imaginative regress and the interplay of intense sensations. Consequently, I prefer to rework modes of sublimity rather than introduce a new term that falsely represents contemporary artmaking as somehow inventing *ex nihilo* the combinatorial possibilities in which it works.