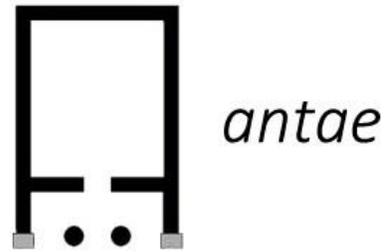


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Exploring Means of Transgender Agency through Aesthetic Theory and Practice

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Though often overlooked, the intersection of gender and aesthetics is not only a relevant area of discussion, but one of particular relevance today, notably in relation to the field of trans* studies and the transgender movement.¹ When discussing aesthetics in this context, one could state that regardless of how a form of expression inundates our senses, there is most often a complex matrix of affects—sometimes subtle, sometimes reactionary—which are collectively relevant of exploration. While Martin Heidegger talks of ‘the origin of an artwork—of, that is, creators and preservers’, from which he concludes that ‘the historical essence of a people is art’, Monique Roelofs contends that aesthetics saturate virtually every aspect of being.²

The aesthetic is a pervasive phenomenon. It is found not only in the arts, but also in our endeavors as everyday actors who eat, drink, touch, move, see, hear, read, or not, who address or don’t address one another, occupy some and not other places [...]. Such pledges and menaces are among the multimodal [...]. They help to shape social and material affiliations and disconnections we inhabit. They suffuse the desirability of aesthetic experience, as well as the turmoil it provokes in the ethical, ecological, epistemic, and political planes.³

Utilising a broad framework of intersecting theories of aesthetics, this essay will demonstrate how such theories can be utilised to not only examine images, but additionally as a form of resistance toward hegemonic constructions of gender, an avenue which has the ability to not only dismantle enforced binarisms but also reveal an aesthetic spectrum of embodiment and expression possible through revisiting the work of several thinkers. As such, this essay will follow the trajectory of Kant and the sublime to the work of gender theorist Benjamin T. Singer, while examining connections with the work of Jacques Rancière and Gianni Vattimo. The discussion will then engage the concept of aesthetic emergencies through these theorists, and explore how such a conception can be incorporated into the notion of the transgender sublime.

If we are to begin our discussion through the context of the transgender movement, it is important to first examine the related aesthetic history. This is relevant due to the fact that, historically, much of the dominant discourse associated with transgender and/or gender non-conforming identities

¹ In this context, I use ‘trans* studies’ to describe the work of the field’s related scholars. When referring to the transgender movement, I am referencing the broader sphere of activity which may include the work of trans* studies, but additionally the work of activists and advocates both within and beyond academia.

² Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. by Julian Young and Kenneth Hynes (New York: Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1-56 (p. 40).

³ Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 1.

throughout the twentieth century can be traced back to origins of a both clinical and pathological nature. The term “transsexuality”, in fact, was first introduced in a 1949 essay titled ‘Psychopathia Transsexualis’, written by David O. Cauldwell, an early American sexologist who believed that gender was a plastic phenomenon.⁴ Cauldwell applied the term to individuals who identified as opposite to their birth-assigned sex, exhibited cross-gender behaviours, and expressed desires for hormonal and surgical interventions.⁵ While Cauldwell advocated for public acceptance for homosexuality and transvestism, he harboured particularly hostile inclinations toward any contemporary medical interventions for transsexuality, arguing that it was a mental disorder, and condemned medical professionals who operated on such individuals for engaging in what he described as medical mutilation.⁶ While the associated historical trajectory of such pathologisation may not always be readily apparent, it is difficult for many to disassociate the pathological imagery and residual associations with Caldwell’s legacy which has continued for generations.

In the present context, the term “transgender” has become very much commonplace as both a unifier for those resisting past pathologisation, medicalisation, and criminalisation of transsexuals and transvestites.⁷ However, many have recently opted to use the term “trans*”, sometimes exclusively, sometimes concurrently, which has acted as a tool that certain scholars have engaged with due to its potentially more expansive capacity as a term embodying a complex circuitry of connections across a spectrum which Dan Irving describes.

As a mode of being and doing, “trans*” is the ontological and political term currently favoured by trans scholars, non-profit organizers, and grassroots activists [...]. Drawing on computing language where an asterisk following a term broadens search results, “trans*” was popularized around 2010. [...] This symbolic modifier also creates a porous border around trans networks to enable the future inclusion of other gender-nonconforming individuals. [...]. As with “queer” and “crip,” there is a tension between the fluidity that “trans*” permits and the fixity of identity required to be intelligible within the human rights framework established by liberal democracy.⁸

While scholars such as Irving note the complexity and variance afforded to gender identity and expression through the trans* moniker, public policy and media depictions have often exhibited a considerable conceptual lag—from policies that still enforce strict binarisms to nearly all major film and television productions casting cisgender actors to play the roles of transgender characters. With this stated, it is true that conceptions of gender variance such as androgyny have indeed appeared throughout history, with even a number of writers of the Romantic Period—such as

⁴ See David O. Cauldwell, ‘Psychopathia Transsexualis’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 40-44.

⁵ See Dan Irving, ‘TRANS*/-’, in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, ed. by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O’Connor, and AK Thompson (Chico: AK Press, 2015), pp. 423-31 (p. 427).

⁶ See Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 42.

⁷ See Irving, (p. 427).

⁸ *Ibid.*, (p. 424).

Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, most notably, Franz von Baader—exploring the concept as a means of achieving a form of unity.⁹ Still, despite such writings, the work of these Romantic authors tended to be rooted in a predominantly theological or mythological conception which lacked means of political engagement during its own time. Indeed, in his extensive book-length study of Wagner and androgyny, Jean-Jacques Nattiez notes that despite all of this interest in androgyny during the Romantic period, we were still a ‘long way from an androgynous view of humanity’.¹⁰ Such a claim is notably relevant with the impending notions of normativity emerging during the nineteenth century, ones which would evoke gender as culturally intertwined with localised conceptions of “normal” along with its related counterparts, “normalcy” and even “normality”. Though such concepts are relatively commonplace in modern language, such terminology is actually perhaps more historically recent than many would assume, as noted in ‘Queer-Crippling Anarchism’:

Normalcy is a relatively new concept, which arose as part of the modernity project in 1800-1850 in Western Europe and its North American colonized spaces. The word ‘normal’ did not enter the English language until around 1840. Prior to the concept of normalcy there was the concept of the ideal (and its corollary – the grotesque) [...]. Normalcy began with the creation of measurements and statistics. Statistics were created as state tools [...]. This new form of governance is what Foucault characterized as biopolitics, the newfound ability to measure performances of individuals and groups that makes them governable.¹¹

Additionally, one should also note that the term “normality” differs from “normalcy”. According to Lennard Davis, the former correlates to an actual state of being regarded as normal, while the latter is the structural realm that controls and normalises bodies. These norms are not only rooted within the bourgeois, white, heterosexual male norms (with the middle class as the mean), but also exercise an ideology, which, for Davis, develops a science of justifying such notions of the norm that is additionally centered around the body and its performance.¹² In virtually any configuration, transgender identities and expressions reside outside, at the extremities of whatever a society or state defines as such norms. Liat Ben-Moshe, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and A.J. Withers further elaborate upon this notion from Davis, stating that ‘[e]veryone has to work hard to conform to norms but people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, are scapegoated for not being

⁹ See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne*, trans. by Stewart Spencer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹ Liat Ben-Moshe, Anthony J. Nocella, II., and A.J. Withers, ‘Queer-Crippling Anarchism: Intersections and Reflections on Anarchism, Queerness, and Dis-ability’, in *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, ed. by C.B. Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), pp. 207-20 (p. 211).

¹² Lennard Davis, ‘The Rule of Normalcy: Politics and Disability in the U.S.A. [United States of Disability]’, in *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 102-18 (p. 102).

able to fit these standards. [...]. There is a need for people at the margin, but they are punished for being placed there'.¹³

If we are to attempt to examine the trans* movement through the field of aesthetics, the concept of the sublime begins to emerge as a relevant lens to examine a complexity that has the ability to transcend such described normalising discourses of Western civilisation. Through the sublime, we can begin to engage the vast spectrum of trans* identities and expressions beyond the strictures of modernity. While trans* bodies, on a base-level, resist normalising structures in a multiplicity of pathways, the limited forms of mainstream acceptance often still subject them to similar binarisms that cisgender bodies are, whether through notions of “passing”, “stealth”, or conformity with traditional gender roles and expressions. Such a notion often brings into focus the problems of these hegemonic gender constructions that society attempts to place on genderqueer, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals. This problematic discourse illuminates a rationale for re-visiting the Kantian sublime through such notions of an inherent ‘boundlessness’, and the dynamically sublime which can also be engaged with in order to create a fearfulness ‘without being afraid of it’, interrogating the mind to surpass ‘every standard of Sense’.¹⁴ While such terminology is hardly new, it has a particular relevance when applied to a spectrum of trans* bodies only beginning to emerge from the shackles of normativity so rigidly enforced with little chance of deviation until recent decades. Trans* bodies that challenge such engrained constructions of normativity often evoke such Kantian notions of fearfulness in manners that most often surpass the dominant modes of sense articulation. For Kant, one’s inability to grasp the magnitude of a sublime event demonstrates an inadequacy of one’s sensibility and imagination. Simultaneously, one’s ability to subsequently identify an event as singular and whole indicates the superiority of one’s cognitive, supersensible powers. Ultimately, it is this supersensible substrate, underlying both nature and thought, on which true sublimity is located.

While numerous philosophers have examined this concept, this particular discussion will focus upon its manifestations originating primarily through Kant. With this stated, one could argue without much opposition that Kant’s writings on gender—such as his 1798 publication *Anthropologie*—have not stood up to modern scrutiny, but in this situation we can still utilise certain aspects from other works, such as the *Critique of Judgement*, that evoke a conception of the sublime to create a framework to articulate that which ‘is to be found in a formless object’, represented by a ‘boundlessness’.¹⁵ This formlessness and boundlessness elicits a reaction toward the unknown that can be utilised in this context. For Kant, the sublime of a mathematical ‘aesthetical comprehension’ is not a consciousness of a mere greater unit, but the notion of absolute greatness not inhibited with ideas of limitations.¹⁶ If we are to codify such a notion of the sublime

¹³ Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers, (p. 212).

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951), §§ 23, 28, 25, pp. 102-04, 123-29, 106-09.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, § 23, p. 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, § 27, p. 123.

in line with transgender individuals, the complexity of bodily form, configuration, and expression suddenly shifts the aesthetic gaze into a void of boundlessness.

Such use of the Kantian sublime has definite possibilities, but one is still tasked with the problem of political engagement and practicality. Taking on such considerations, a more comprehensive conception of the sublime has been proposed by Singer, who utilises a framework he refers to as the rhizomatic model of the transgender sublime. As a gender theorist and public health advocate, Singer has been inspired from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which he believes can foster a more comprehensive inclusion of the unexpected nature of transgender complexity that induces disorienting encounters with the sublime. To attempt this, Singer combines the post-structuralist theory of Deleuze and Guattari, along with disability rights discourse and queer theories of visibility, to provide a more comprehensive health care framework for those of non-standard, transsexual, and intersex body configurations.¹⁷ For Singer, transgender phenomena often sprout up seemingly from nowhere, and shoot off into wild and inexplicable directions. He states that '[t]his rootless, non-hierarchical, unpredictable, and circuitous variability is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari call "rhizomatic"'.¹⁸ Drawing inspiration from this conception of the rhizome, Singer thus articulates a conception of transgender sublimity, exploring how a 'rhizomatic view of gender moves us closer to a more profound understanding of the qualitative aspect of gendered embodiment and subjectivity, and better explains the radically transformative effect an encounter with the transgender sublime can precipitate'.¹⁹ Through such a concept of limitless possible bodies, Singer hopes for a radical altering engagement with the aesthetically disorienting, particularly in his field of health care.

Singer elaborates this when comparing the aesthetic affects of early impersonal, pathologised images, ones which have been edited to black out or mask the eyes of individuals with non-normative bodies in clinical settings to more contemporary, empowering images from photographers such as Loren Cameron and Del LaGrace Volcano. Through such imagery, Singer demonstrates how even the most subtle aesthetic elements can either demean or empower the depicted subject, and notes the ability of Volcano's work to evoke the sublime mutation to challenge normative expectations of the viewer and stare back in a manner which no longer allows them to hide behind the privilege of their assumed normalcy.²⁰ For Singer, then, the experience of such images is a relevant example of sublime agency, arguing that in this sublime moment of rupture, bodies literally and metaphorically exceed two-dimensional medical images and step into a new social context to make new ethical claims.²¹

¹⁷ See Benjamin T. Singer, 'From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-Normative Images', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 601-20 (p. 601).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, (p. 613).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, (p. 617).

²⁰ See *Ibid.*, (p. 613).

²¹ See *Ibid.*, (p. 616).

While Singer's framework holds great potential within the realm of public health, one is inclined to question if the sublimity of images can also be extended into additional contexts. One such potential avenue would be through some of the work of Rancière. In relation to the context of such images, there appear to be in this case certain parallels, and even potential overlaps, with the rhizomatic model of the sublime as described earlier. If we are to engage with dissensus through Rancière's lens, there is an ability to open up such political dimensions that were otherwise not intelligible to others. Such a possibility is perhaps best articulated when Rancière claims that '[t]he essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself'.²² With this stated, for Rancière, such a demonstration additionally makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it essentially 'places one world in another'.²³ If we are to apply Rancière's articulation of dissensus to the themes addressed so far, we can begin to understand not only how the complexity of trans* bodies is thematic of such a gap in the sensible, but also the manner in which such visibility has no reason for visibility within the repressive structures maintaining normative Western states of capitalism.

If we are to bring the level of engagement that Singer's model articulates, it can be contended that this is a step towards bridging the gap between the art (image) and the spectator; a distance which Rancière describes as creating or sustaining 'embodied allegories of inequality'.²⁴ For Rancière, emancipation begins by challenging the opposition between viewing and acting—thus, when we understand (that) the self-evident facts that structure the relations (between saying, seeing and doing) themselves belong to the overarching structure of domination and subjection. With the matrix of multiplicity inherent in the sublime and trans* bodies, individuals encountering such body images from entrenched stances of normativity would not only be forced to confront such complexity of the unknown, but additionally, in Rancière's words, also be forced to plot a path through a 'forest of things, acts, and signs that confront or surround them'.²⁵ For Rancière, then, an emancipated community is one of both narrators and translators that achieves social emancipation by the dismantling of the old distribution of what could be seen, thought, and done. By this logic, even those dismissed in such a discussion are still capable of redemption in such situations. As Rancière goes on to say, 'there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored'; ultimately, 'what there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing at any place and at any time'.²⁶

Such a trajectory opens a matrix of new possibilities to be enabled if we avoid totalising discourses and allow for a new multi-dimensionality. Such pathways are made possible through the conflict and tension of differing sensory worlds; a phenomenon through which Rancière states any situation can be cracked open from the inside. Thus, to engage in a collective understanding of emancipation

²² Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus* (Brooklyn: Continuum, 2003), p. 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection, but rather ‘a collectivisation of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus’.²⁷ In this frame of thought, Rancière appears to speak of a change in the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible in a manner of political agency that could very much connect the sublime and transgender aesthetics under the right conditions. In particular, he advocates for:

A multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the ways in which they are equipped to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation.²⁸

Very much like the complicated path towards trans* visibility, Rancière does not conceive of a direct road from witnessing a spectacle to understanding; thus, the pathway from intellectual awareness to political action is not necessarily direct.²⁹ While such a pathway is very much reflective of transgender agency, the situation is also complicated with additional obstacles to overcome. While such instances could be articulated in a number of ways, one must challenge literary prejudices against images that many attempt to dismiss with accusations of idolatry, ignorance, or passivity to overturn ‘the dominant logic that makes the visual the lot of multitudes and the verbal the privilege of the few’.³⁰ Perhaps Rancière best summarised such political engagement of images when he proclaimed that an image never stands alone, and that it ultimately belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit.³¹

We are led to question, then, what these systems of visibility are, and whether incorporating some conception or combination of the rhizomatic or the sublime ultimately ruptures such hegemonic statuses and formations of gendered attention. Rancière makes clear that he does not intend to counter-pose reality, instead calling to construct different realities and different forms of common sense, leading to different spatiotemporal systems and different communities of words and things, forms and meanings.³² It is also important his caution to not flatten differences, a potential pitfall for emancipation which appears very much similar to challenges of queer activism, particularly that of white noise—a problematic issue frequently occurring in media’s depictions of queer individuals, one which Jasmine Rault describes as ‘not unlike speaking for others, of distracting from and distorting the ostensible subject of feeling and of reproducing hegemonic whiteness as a

²⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁹ See *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³¹ See *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³² See *Ibid.*, p. 102.

series of generalized “nice feelings”, and this as ‘a seemingly unobtrusive filter by which differences are both incorporated and obscured [...]. White noise is the homogenizing filter’.³³

Through such a definition, it appears apparent that to be an effective measure of resistance of any relevant effect, emancipation must avoid the erasure of difference which is especially troublesome, particularly if any movement is to seriously challenge any notions of hegemony in a substantive way. Thus, the recognition and articulation of difference, notably with any other, must be explicit to the point of challenging such entrenched hegemonic discourses, otherwise such a concept will remain solely in theory and not in actual practice. As Dick Hebdige has noted, the sublime has the possibility to mix pleasure and pain, joy and terror, and ultimately confront us with the threat of the absolute Other.³⁴ It has been argued that, for Gianni Vattimo, conceptions of the Other/other are very much contingent on the manner in which he invokes his theory of weak thought.³⁵ It should be mentioned, however, that at times Vattimo appears somewhat vague on his articulations of the Other/other; an issue Matthew Harris has recently pointed out, asking: ‘What does Vattimo mean by ‘others like you’? [...]. Does Vattimo mean respect for other human subjects, with the term understood in its philosophical sense? As a Nietzschean, writing after the death of God and end of metaphysics, could Vattimo still believe in subjects?’³⁶

Vattimo still appears to have relevance in this discussion, though through a different framing than that of Rancière’s. For Vattimo, if the artwork is genuine, it does not install itself peacefully into the world, but rather reorganises it and puts it in question. With this stated, Vattimo’s emphasis on the transformative experience of truth can be connected to earlier points, notably in its ability to enact a change in perception, leading one to essentially undertake a voyage, involving the accumulation of new knowledge, and, most importantly, a modification of the physiognomy of the subject. Therefore, according to Vattimo, art is an experience of truth because it is truly experience; precisely an event in which something really happens.³⁷ In this frame of thought, Vattimo also proclaims a particular ability in the fortitude of ‘conservations’, or, in this instance, ‘dialogues’ that ultimately hold an innate ability to not only foster perceptible changes, but also act as a fusion of horizons in aesthetic experience—stating that, in dialogue, the function is never merely to transmit a viewpoint and passively receive from the other, but, rather, it is the birth of a novum, a common horizon where the two interlocutors recognise each other not as before but as discovered anew, enriched and deepened in their being.³⁸

³³ Jasmine Rault, ‘White noise, white affects: filtering the sameness of queer suffering’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(4) (2017), 583-99 (p. 586).

³⁴ See Dick Hebdige, ‘The impossible object. Towards a sociology of the sublime’, *New Formations*, 1 (1987), 47-76 (p. 51).

³⁵ Matthew Harris, ‘Vattimo and otherness: hermeneutics, clarity, and, conversation’, *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, 4(1) (2013), 1-21 (p. 1).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, (p. 9).

³⁷ See Gianni Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*, trans. by Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), especially pp. 67, 133.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Invoking both Rancière and Vattimo in this discussion might seem somewhat unorthodox; however, both individuals arguably fit into this larger context foregrounded here if we are to examine their thought through the lens of emergency aesthetics; a concept taken from Vattimo's pupil Santiago Zabala. For Zabala, aesthetics has overcome metaphysics (objectivist-representational forms) and can now focus on existential claims of art, which has been engaged by those such as Rancière and Vattimo through their 'transfigurations of common places', 'dissensus from the sensible', and aesthetic theories with 'claims to truth', all of which Zabala articulates as attempts to enact the demands not only of art but also of politics.³⁹ Further, he calls into question our comfortable existence, associated with measurable representations and indifferent notions of beauty, stating that aesthetic emergencies do not simply aim to overcome such factors but rather enable us to engage the existential call of art in the twenty-first century to provide the possibility of saving ourselves, not by indicating where the danger is but rather by itself being the danger.⁴⁰ For Zabala, our relationship with such emergency does not engage us to experience or awaken us to it, but rather becomes the emergency—as he deems it impossible for us to observe, describe, and understand emergencies without becoming part of them, whether through dissensus or claims to truth. He also evokes a passage from Heidegger which states that:

[T]here is nothing violent about this multidirectional thrust, for the more purely is the work itself transported into the openness of beings it itself opens up, then the more simply does it carry us into this openness and, at the same time out of the realm of the usual.⁴¹

For Heidegger, then, to submit to this displacement means to transform all familiar relations to the world, restraining all usual relations in order to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work—ultimately allowing what is created to become, for the first time, the work that it is. Interestingly, while in Zabala's translation of the above Heidegger passage the German term "stoß" is translated as "shock", other translators such as Young and Haynes have opted for "thrust".⁴² Zabala notes that "stoß" is typically translated as "thrust", "shock" or "jolt" depending upon the context and can refer to the impact of a transformative event.⁴³ He continues to use this term alongside "thrust" in this particular context, depending on whether it refers to our confrontation with works of art or their internal conflict.⁴⁴ He states:

What produces the shock in art is not a specific mode of being of the work (such as its composition, beauty, or style) but the fact that it refuses to install itself within an already open horizon, in other words, that there is a work of art at all [...]. In sum, for Heidegger,

³⁹ Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 7.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴² See Heidegger, 'Off the Beaten Track, The Origin of the Work of Art', as translated in *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ One could hypothesise here that the term "shock" generates a different and/or more significant sense of imagery than that of the term "thrust". While such a difference is debatable, the nuances are not here crucial to this discussion.

the encounter with a work of art is always the inception of a general reconsideration of our way of standing in the world.⁴⁵

Though Zabala contends that we cannot control the emergence of emergencies, they ultimately have the ability to save us from Heidegger's infinite supply of enjoyable and beautiful things where indifference reigns over Being's remnants. By evoking a distress that calls our interpretations into question, what is required is not a different path, but an existential intervention, and, for Zabala, this is much like Heidegger's claim that emergency does not first need help, but must become help.⁴⁶ With this in mind, the essential emergency is not that something 'real is grasped', but rather 'an event of understanding'; one that concerns our existence.⁴⁷ Referring to the work of artists such as Alfredo Jaar (in particular his 1996 installation, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*), Zabala explains that indifference is a dominant theme at play, but, for Jaar, the call for intervention is not social, urban, or environmental in nature, but rather a reconsideration of ignored accounts from history through a project of assistance, reconciliation, and recognition.⁴⁸ Can such a discourse be applied to ignored and suppressed identities and experiences of trans* individuals? Whether such intervention and reconsideration can be applied to the themes of our present discussion remains to be seen; however, it appears evident that emergency aesthetics reveal a definite possibility for mobilisation in the state of the twenty-first century, particularly when discussing trans* aesthetics and agency.

In context, the relationship of gender and aesthetics is without a doubt a complex and multifaceted area of engagement; one very much inescapable. With this in mind, throughout this discussion, we can ascertain that, while overlooked, the relationship of aesthetics with transgender agency is still a relevant area of contemporary culture. In today's current socio-political climate, examining circuitry, pathways, and connections between aesthetics, trans* studies, and the transgender movement reveals a complex matrix of affects which is yet to be fully realised. While notions of progress have been very much effects of twenty-first century efforts, it is important to not only understand the historical underpinnings, but also to engage the work of theorists both past and present.

If we are to understand such a complex history, we have to bring into focus images of the trans* community which have evolved in public visibility over the past century, emerging from related images of pathologisation, medicalisation, and criminalisation. Through such a trajectory, we can begin to understand why such a re-thinking of aesthetics has been important, whether when re-examining related histories, or issues pertaining to contemporary states of being. With this stated, we must also recognise the repressive aesthetics shaping such a history, from the limited notions of androgyny during the Romantic Period to the emergence of repressive normalising discourses of Western civilisation exercised through notions of normalcy and normativity. It is by engaging

⁴⁵ Zabala, p. 121.

⁴⁶ See Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 123.

⁴⁸ See Ibid, p. 125.

aesthetic themes such as the sublime that we can begin to think about transcending such norms, especially in relation to frequently policed binarisms.

Such binarisms of cisgender hegemony illuminate the problematic strictures placed upon the broad spectrum of trans* identities and expressions, bringing into focus a renewed interest in the Kantian sublime and its notions of inherent boundlessness and formlessness. We can witness practical applications through Singer's applications of the rhizomatic model of a transgender sublime, which pushes complexity of bodily configurations into the medical profession. Such efforts may also be further augmented by applying the framework of Rancière's dissensus to expose such bodily complexity as a gap in the sensible in Western states of capitalism. While Rancière notes aesthetic possibilities, he warns against the flattening of differences, which is also very much a critical factor in any effort to deconstruct binarisms of gender. Such notions consequently become particularly illuminated when discussing Vattimo's articulations of the Other/other, and the transformative experience that he correlates to a modification in physiognomy. Through such a phenomenon, dialogues can engage a fusion of horizons and interlocutors discover each other anew.

Furthermore, through Zabala's recent work on aesthetic emergencies, we can locate common ground amongst Rancière and Vattimo in their transfigurations of common places, dissensus from the sensible, and claims to truth, collectively reflecting a shift towards a focus on an existential claim of art which provides a possibility for agency, not by indicating where the danger is but rather by itself being the danger. Such a stance draws parallels with Heidegger's claim that emergency does not first need help, but must become help. Through the connection of these strands of thought, we can challenge such embedded binarisms of hegemonic gender constructions and the norms which have gripped Western modernity and pushed transgender individuals towards the margins through normative aesthetic images. Whether looking back to Kant, or engaging the performative work of Jaar, the underlying goal is to utilise such possibilities to engage in a reshaping of aesthetic sensibility, understanding, and freedom, all of which engage a potential for unrealised transgender agency.

While this particular essay has explored the relationship of the transgender movement with theories of the sublime and connections to the work of figures such as Kant, Singer, Rancière, Vattimo, and Zabala, there are without a doubt many additional avenues still to examine. Such a task could easily lead into a multiplicity of new and unpredictable pathways in the future. While there are definitely challenges in the current socio-political climate for enacting progressive change, aesthetics may offer one possible pathway towards agency and a more comprehensive sensibility in this realm.

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