

Artspeak Postscript 72
Alchemical Notes for Properties Without a Subject

SEBASTIAAN BOERSMA

on "Sensing Salon"

Over several weeks in the winter of 2018, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Valentina Desideri (along with Constantina Zavitsanos, Amalle Dublon, Stefano Harney, Byron Peters, Justine Chambers and Marianna Marcassa) hosted an iteration of the Sensing Salon at Artspeak. Alchemical Notes for Properties Without a Subject traces the different ideas, concepts and various epistemologies that were drawn upon to explore healing as an art form, a praxis of sensing and making sense. The series of events sketched out the engagement of methodologies and tools of study, thinking and reading that included Tarot, medicinal plants, Fake Therapy, Astrology, poetry and Reiki. Alchemical Notes for Properties Without a Subject notes suggest deeper lines of inquiry into how we might unlearn our habits, and further question other possibilities through which our subjectivity is formed. The following text is to be read as a series of endnotes that demonstrate the nature of our deeply entangled existence and possibilities to reach for other ways of knowing and living.

What does the Sensing Salon have to do with what Friedrich Schiller calls "The Aesthetic Education of Man"?



In Enlightenment philosophy, Bildung (education, formation, self-cultivation) is grounded not only in the image (Bild) and the imagination (Einbildungskraft), but in a self-constituting subjectivity that moulds itself through the process of giving form to life (Bildung).



What underlies the system of Bildung is what Schiller calls "the impulse of the formal," which he considers to be the proper disposition of Man.



By form, Schiller means bound by law, and hence governable. Without form, we are formless (one might add, baseless): merely sensuous, "nothing more than the world"; matter without (causal) form (Schiller X). Without form, Man cannot come into being. Rather, He is given back to the socius, those "other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living" (Marx 363).



For Schiller, it is through the aesthetic education of Man that we arrive at political freedom (iii). For him, freedom (negatively defined) entails the negation of the formless mass that is sensuous materiality.



For Schiller, life must “leave reality” and raise itself above bodily need and dependency (III). In other words, life must transcend its material conditions and become living-form. Schiller calls this living form, the Beautiful.

“In order to detain the fleeting apparition [of the senses], he [man] must enchain it in the fetter of rule, dissects its fair proportions into abstract notions” (Schiller ii).



It is Schiller who describes the (an)aesthetic act from which life is bound to form. Namely, by removing “the fleeting apparition” from the sphere of sense and “endeavoring to draw it towards the understanding” (I). This is what it means to give form to life.



But why, as Valentina Desideri once said, do the senses have to be colonized by “the Understanding”?



What if there was an aesthetic education where reason was not regarded as apart from the senses...



Along such lines of thought, the Sensing Salon hosts the informal, practices which are in keeping with what Spinoza called the “inadequate,” as they have yet to leave a relation of affectability and determine their final or efficient cause/form. However, in their “inadequacy” they pose a problem for form. And in being a problem for form, as more than the ‘absence’ of form, are exorbitant to it.



I tend to think of these practices as fabulations, historical personages and compartments (yes, I’m a Gemini). I call them the Lumpen, the Plumpen, and the Plenum. Those who, by their very nature, are said to lack (or exceed) an impulse to the formal. Yet, those whose “inadequacy” give rise to formal systems of meaning. What Amalle Dublon might call “partial figures.”



Here is the vernacular image which Schiller calls the “violence of sensuous forces,” and upon which he negatively defines the sumptuary law of his aesthetic education:

“The disordered, the adventurous and the strange, the

violent and the savage... fly from nothing so much as from calm and simplicity. It invents grotesque figures, it likes rapid transitions, luxurious forms, sharply marked changes, acute tones, a pathetic song"



Whereas "to submit man to form" is the task of Culture as Bildung (Letter XXIII).



It may come as no surprise, that Bildung was the basis and model for the modern university. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian philosopher, modelled his university in Berlin (which has been called "the mother of all universities") after his "Theory of Bildung" :

"Education [Bildung], truth and virtue' must be disseminated to such an extent that the 'concept of mankind' takes on a great and dignified form in each individual (GS, I, p. 284).



Furthermore, one must individually:

"absorb the great mass of material offered to him by the world around him and by his inner existence, using all the possibilities of his receptiveness; he must then reshape

that material with all the energies of his own activity and appropriate it to himself so as to create an interaction between his own personality and nature in a most general, active and harmonious form"



What I am highlighting is the subjectivity that develops through Bildung; that is, how an active relation (read: appropriation) of the world's materials culminates in a supposedly harmonious form (namely, Man), and how "the impulse of the formal" is really an imperative to appropriate 'Nature' in order to determine it.



Through Bildung, one learns the Form of modernism's violence: in other words, "to manifest all that is internal and give form to all that is external" (Schiller XII).



However, there's always also been the undercommons. It was W.E.B. du Bois who was already writing against the grain of "Spirit" in the Grimm Bibliothek of Humboldt University in the early 1890s; forever haunting the mists of German Consciousness-Raising.



Indeed, Humboldt's theory of Bildung relies on a concept of world (and life) that is sovereign. As Claire Colebrook might say, his conception of world submits the contingencies and limitations of the world to a stable, determinable form with(in) a horizon of sense and meaning. Colebrook traces this conception of the world back to Kant:

"For Kant, before one can doubt the world, before one can ask any question of knowledge or value, one must already be able to distinguish between one's self and what is being experienced, and between a before after through which the world presents itself as stable"



In 1961, Clement Greenberg famously argues: "the essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Furthermore, "because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as, the first real Modernist."



I have been sketching the Kantian (categorical) side of things. It is Hegel, however, who transforms the creative education of Man into a story of time and history. Hegel directs the formal in the orientation of the phenomenological other. For him,

Bildung is the formative process "whereby the individual gets objective validity and concrete actuality" (288).



Through the two axes of Kant and Hegel the formal logic of modern art becomes legible. Kant provides the vertical axis (normative/synchronic), and Hegel the horizontal axis (social/diachronic). For Hal Foster, the avant-garde's historicity occurs through advancing a "critical coordination" between these two axes (xix). Rather than constituting a "break with the past," Foster reads the avant-garde genealogically, that is, as a nonlinear history of modernist forms repurposed for the present conjuncture. But what of those who stray from the horizontal and vertical axes?



Rather than negate, the avant-garde must ultimately affirm the category of art (and "its area of competence") (Greenberg).



The impulse of the Formal underlies even the avant-garde's search for a revolutionary "form adequate to history."



Along the lines mapped by Foster, we might think of the Sensing Salon as sheer horizontality, or even kitsch — that is, if we maintain the axes and coordinates themselves. But what if there was another thing, other than Man, which grounded modernism? How could we sense this alterity? And how does it relate to value?



Here we come up against the limits of critique — what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “critique and something else.” For critique, save of the forms of capitalist socialization, is not enough as it risks only entrenching us further in the metaphysical Ground and Grund (reason) that realizes itself through Form. Conversely, “something else” is the surplus that appears as paucity; that which ‘lacks’ the hierarchic Form which separates thought from the (supposedly) formless mass of feeling.



I can’t help but think of Adrian Piper’s Food for the Spirit (1971) — her fasting on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason for days on end in her apartment in New York. Piper’s “critique” was always-already (footnote here: lest we forget that this is Kant’s adverb) “something else”: a ritual practice irreducible to modernist self-criticism. Her ritual of leaving ‘the body’ designates, to borrow the words of Hortense Spillers, “the crisis of inquiry that reveals where a kind of abandonment — we could call it a gap — has occurred.” As Piper disappears

into the exterior world, she blurs the separation between art and non-art, rationalism and mysticism, production and reproduction; in other words, she swerves from a metaphysics of autonomy and fades transparency back to Black.



In facing the before and beyond of “critique,” Piper and da Silva figure the excess (held in the category of Blackness) of that which is continually articulated only to be negated by European post-Enlightenment thought; the exteriority which opens onto another plane of existence.



Could we imagine exteriority as a praxis? To make (non)sense of/with things, rather than to determine, authenticate, or improve them, might be what it means to stay in a relation of exteriority (“modernity’s insurgent feel”).



We might think of this as the extimate: a relation to the world prior the determination of form, but in keeping with ‘the passions’, as they exceed and precede form, as they undo interiority and bring us in touch with what’s already going on.



Exteriority is not just another ontological illusion — it's para-ontological. Marx approached the extimate when describing abolition as "a real sensuous activity" without transcendental recourse.



To stay with the extimate/exterior might preclude self-actualization insofar as it not predicated on determination and separation. Without self-making (the myth of individuation), Bildung loses its horizon of sense and meaning; it becomes groundless.



"Something else" might be regarded as the ante-original displacement of both the subject and object of modern thought by the real movement of things (earth, water, air, fire). Something else indexes the raw materials that already pervade the Ground/Grund of modern thought, but threaten its formal ontology.



The life-world of Man cannot give way if we stay with sense-impressions. So long as the senses hold sway, Man cannot come into being, — i.e., form or materialize. Without form, the materiality of the world is sheer, immeasurable affectability.



In keeping with the world's contingency, the Sensing Salon hosts materials unconsumed by form — that is to say, an existence without formalization and worldly division.



If Kant's formal subject can be named the "Subject Without Properties," as David Lloyd has argued, then the Sensing Salon moves toward properties without a Subject; which ramifies upon, though is non-identical to, what Saidiya Hartman calls "property without a subject" (namely, the slave).



Affectable properties without a subject bears an uncanny relation to what Marx calls a "property-less sensorium" emerging in the abolition of property.



The Sensing Salon is the counter-actualization of the aesthetic education of Man. It hosts practices which render Man "beside himself," however not as death or disorder per se, but rather as modes that return us to the real movement of things (earth, air, water, fire). We might come to think of this, following da Silva, as a Black Feminist Abgrund (abyss), or perhaps as a molecularization of the world that refuses the ruse of autopoiesis; or perhaps as a kind of revenant (raw) materialism that denudes the Man.



Positionally we come to what anthropologists unwittingly refer to as 'magical thinking': a mode of thinking based on contiguity and similarity, rather than separability and identity — on what we might call, after Desideri, fake/political or nonce causality. The Sensing Salon allows participants to make a claim to knowledge without certainty, prediction, or control.



To sense, then, is to make a non-proprietary claim to knowledge which refuses the linearity that property relations presuppose.



From the para-ontological position of Blackness, it becomes possible to intuit an anterior/exterior position to modern thought and its self - 'reflection' and - criticism. From the (unthought) position of 'Nature' (i.e., raw materials), rather than from the Subject or the human-as-Man, there is a parallax order given prior to form — what Schiller calls "an unlimited capacity for being determined" (Schiller XIX). A yes that never affirms the world as it is.



The Sensing Salon rethinks subjectivity through the elements by asking, "what becomes of the human if expressed through the elements?" Paraphrasing We Can't Live Without Our

Lives, "it's an invitation to given humanness a different future."



Herein lies the black light that blurs the life-world (or form) of Man and traces something else, its exorbitance, at the extintual edge of modernism's metaphysics. In keeping with this edge, one finds a contrapuntal education that goes by the name of Study — irreducible to critique and negation because irreducible to the modern subject and its sovereign determinations. From this position, too, modernism loses both "substance and justification" (Greenberg).



If the world can be said to be a global horizon of sedimented sense and meaning, then the Sensing Salon hosts a radical praxis of desedimentation before the world. The refusal to submit materiality and feeling to Form — in other words, to speak rhythm and riot — is the anterior horizon from which this other aesthetic education announces itself as possibility. From du Bois's paleonymic translations to the Sensing Salon's poethical readings, there exists an aesthetic education without Bildung (i.e., the blurring of any discrete image, form, or culture; the end of raciality as such).



What if that touch, which released you, was more than a touch — something like a feel or field which gives or affords touch; a khôra of entangled choruses moving along and through what love theorist Constantina Zavitsanos might call “a hole in the dirac sea.”

REFERENCES

arturo abreu, manuel. “Against the Supremacy of Thought” Rhizome <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2018/jan/08/against-the-supremacy-of-thought/>

Chandler, Nahum D., X-- the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought. Fordham University Press, New York, 2014.

Clover, Joshua “‘A Form Adequate to History’: Toward a Renewed Marxist Poetics” *Paideuma* 37, 2010.

Colebrook, Claire. “Fragility, Globalism, and the End of the World” (unpublished manuscript), 2017.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. “To be Announced.” *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 1, 114, 2013, pp. 43-62.

Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1996.

Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1961

Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *Gesammelte Schriften: Ausgabe Der Preussischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften*

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.

Lloyd, David. *Under Representation: The racial regime of aesthetics*. Fordham University Press, New York, 2018.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, New York, 1981.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*. Routledge, London, 1954.

Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003