

Aesthetic Subjectivity: Conduit between Subject-Object and Creativity-Knowledge

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Introduction

In 2009 I commenced my visual arts honours research titled *Reconnecting Internal and External Reality through Aesthetic Experience* (Deakin University). This creative practice examined the dichotomy between internal, subjective self-consciousness and external, material and social reality. The heightened flux of these boundaries during maternity led me to use the experiences of the pregnancy, birth and motherhood as the site of this inquiry. During this process the notion of an aesthetic subjectivity emerged. I suggest that this notion can move us beyond dualistic models of subjectivity and offers a way to understand the knowledge producing functions of creative practice as research. To develop this idea I first examine how dualism permeates contemporary understanding. I contend that an evolutionary perspective can reveal a conception of subjectivity that pre-exists this binarisation. In the second section I draw on materialist philosophies and neuroscience to elaborate my notion of aesthetic subjectivity. The third section examines the processes of creative practice as research in order to posit aesthetic subjectivity as a site and producer of knowledge. This model of aesthetic subjectivity may provide a means to understand the interdisciplinary value of creative practice whilst re-planting these practices in the everyday.

Section One: Underlying Binaries

Examining the problem of reconnecting interiority and exteriority led me toward critiques of the subject-object dichotomy, and the correlating collection of oppositional binaries in traditional philosophy. I argue that this system of binarisation still permeates life through the underlying assumptions that construe our understanding and organisation of the world. To contextualise my argument I draw on Elizabeth Grosz's (1988, 1994) elucidation of the relationship between the traditional system of binarisation, subjectivity and knowledge production. I then call on Barbara Bolt's (2004) critique of representation and the subject object binary. I attempt to show how arts separation from the everyday and the division between Western academic systems are also functions of this binarised system. I suggest that these preconceptions can be transgressed by imagining a mode of subjectivity that pre-exists dualism. An interdisciplinary notion of creative practice grounded in evolutionary theory may assist in formulating this aesthetic mode of subjectivity.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994) describes dualism as the assumption that the substances of the mind and body are formed of mutually exclusive and incompatible characteristics. She explains that Cartesian dualism elevated consciousness above corporeality to produce the notion of universal subjectivity.

Grosz (1988) asserts that universal subjectivity is derived through a tradition of binarisation that has prioritised, fixed and sexed certain qualities. This hierarchical and oppositional grid elevates qualities including mind, reason and logic, which are presumed masculine, against the, (presumed feminine), body, emotion and madness (Grosz, 1988). The qualities of the former are construed to construct the notion of the universal subject. Universal subjectivity is assumed to provide knowledge production with objective observation and disinterested reason and logic. Underwritten by a formula that divides mind from matter, universal subjectivity actively maintains the gap between subject and object.

Contemporary thought, argues Barbara Bolt (2004) is dominated by a Cartesian representational mode. Bolt defines representationalism as 'a system of thought that fixes the world as an object and resource for human subjects' (Bolt, 2004: 13). Drawing on Martin Heidegger, she explains how the practice of representation centres man-as-subject, enabling whatever *is* to be figured as object. Bolt argues that Cartesian representation is the mechanism through which representationalism fixes what *is* as an object and resource available for the subject who beholds it. She also draws on Bruno Latour to explain how it is through this mechanism that the representation is seen to stand in for an absent object, 'there is an assumption of a gap between the thing or referent and its representation' (Bolt, 2004:16). This critique poses an important challenge for artists. In western culture art is traditionally understood as a representational practice and as Bolt argues, this makes it difficult to think about art without assuming that a gap exists between it and its object. Reimagining subjectivity, however, may reveal an alternate mechanism operating in creative process. I will return to Bolt when I explore this idea in a later section.

By drawing on Grosz I have shown how the perceived division of mind and body construes knowledge production; Bolt's critique demonstrates how a fixed distinction between subject and object becomes a key mechanism in this process. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey (1958) illuminates how this same divisive system is implied in the separation of art from the everyday. He explains how the "spiritual" and "ideal" were cast in separation and opposition to "matter", the privileging of the former above the latter 'glorified fine art by setting it upon a far off pedestal' (Dewey, 1958: 6). The perception of art objects as distinctly different from the objects of the everyday also speaks to us of the segregation of artistic or creative thought from the everyday. From one aspect we have the elevation of fine art within the institution and in contrast we have the perceived irrelevance of art to ordinary people.

The same binarised system is implied in the historical division of Western academic disciplines. The same dualism that produces universal subjectivity also underwrites divisions between the natural and social sciences and privileges mathematics and physics as the most ideal knowledge modes (Grosz, 1994). John Forgas (2001) explains how this binarised system construed progress in twentieth century psychological study. The prejudicing of emotion as opposed to reason ensured that it was awarded minimal, usually negative attention in the modern quest to understand the psyche. A lack of evolutionary perspective in the study of the brain is credited by Antonio Damasio (1999) as a prime contributor to this neglect. The marginalising of emotion in the study of the brain and psyche operated to reinforce the underlying assumptions of the binarised world view.

Beyond Dualism

I suggest that an evolutionary perspective can move us beyond the limitations of binarisation to reveal a subjectivity that pre-exists dualism. The view that creativity belongs only to the elite, contends Therese Schmid (2005) alienates it from everyday life, and everyday people from its benefits. Schmid asserts that human's innate capacity for creativity is grounded in evolution; it emerges in response to the environment and enables us to create adaptive strategies. In these terms, we can see creative practice as an embodied response to an environment. I suggest that this points to an aesthetic subjectivity that operates through an embodiment embedded in its environment. This aesthetic subjectivity is shaped by its own sexual, racial, cultural and lived specificities. Emphasis on this specificity illuminates the individualised nature of each engagement between subject and environment and credits the knowledge garnered as a response to experiences of the everyday. The increase of interdisciplinary academic research shows how we are now seeking knowledge produced through a more holistic engagement with our environments. This is concurrent with the reformulation of our understanding and application of creative practice. The notion of aesthetic subjectivity may be a useful device in how we think about knowledge and its production. It may also help to demystify art in order to re-embed it, and its processes, in the lives and worlds of ordinary people. In the next section I develop a fuller articulation of this notion of subjectivity. In the third section I discuss how it interacts with a creative practice as research framework.

Section Two: An Aesthetic Subjectivity

In October 2009 I attended the Arts in Therapy conference in Dunkeld, Western Victoria. A number of arts and health practitioners presented case studies linking positive health outcomes with involvement in creative processes. They outlined their arts based methods and presented their evidence of improved health and wellbeing yet nobody spoke directly to how this might require a redefinition of our understanding of the body. Many of these practitioners intersect with a contemporary medical practice that is still shadowed by mind body dualism. Medical discursive practices objectify and diagnose patients, reducing them to mechanical bodies through the prescription of pharmaceutical and medical treatments (Martin, 2011). On our lunch break I became quite aware of my own body; I felt the world touching me, as though the pores of my skin were breathing the world in and out. This experience was quietly profound and it pushed me to redefine my own understanding of the body.

My use of the term aesthetic draws from art theorist Estelle Barrett. She describes aesthetic experience as a process initiated by sensory response to an encounter, which is then qualified with emotion after which thought emerges, inscribing the experience with meaning (Barrett, 2007(a): 117). The aesthetic subject is the site and being of this experience.

Aesthetic subjectivity draws on the idea that the senses, feelings, thoughts, memory, imagination and behaviour operate in reciprocity and are overlaid and interwoven in multiplicity and transient unity to create the fullness of embodied consciousness. Sensory experience and social interaction extend this

subjectivity beyond embodiment and into the material-psycho-socio-environment that it is both embedded in and emergent from. This notion of subjectivity endeavours to transgress the legacy of substance dualism. It attempts to recognise and formulate the manner in which the body *is* a dynamic consciousness that co-emerges from a dynamic relationship with the world. It is therefore also an argument that techniques of consciousness operate upon the body and that techniques of the body operate upon consciousness. To contextualise this theory of subjectivity I draw on the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault, as well as ideas from neuroscience.

Materialist Perspectives

The notion of an aesthetic subjectivity, and its potential to produce knowledge, is supported by a correlation between the work of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. Foucault argues that the soul 'is produced permanently around, on and within the body by the functioning of power' (Foucault, 1977: 177). Merleau-Ponty argues that 'interiority no more precedes the material arrangement of the body than results from it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 125). He contends that embodiment is organised through a "corporeal schema" that is informed by, and informs synaesthetic integration: 'in lived experience the senses interact, form a union and yield access to a singular world' (Grosz, 1994: 99). The "corporeal schema" is a key structure that facilitates the interweaving multiplicity and transient unity of embodiment.

Foucault (1977) illuminated the manner in which the application of knowledge and power through social discourse shapes our subjectivities. In this way subjectivity is embedded and emergent from the psycho-social environment. His notion of aesthetics of self however, posits a mode of self-authorship through which the subject can critique and reinscribe the operation of these biopolitics (MacLaren, 2002). Through self-reflective creative practice, the artist, as aesthetic subject, can engage, handle, critique and re-inscribe the discursive formations that shape the "corporeal schema". This process posits aesthetic subjectivity as both a site and producer of knowledge.

Neuroscientific Perspectives

Antonio Damasio (2003) explains that mainstream science and philosophy now consider the mind body problem solved. He concedes however that the notion of substance dualism is still held by most people in the world today. He argues for a change in this perspective:

It requires an understanding that the mind arises from or in a brain situated within the body proper with which it interacts; that due to the mediation of the brain the mind is grounded in the body proper; that the mind has prevailed in evolution because it helps to maintain the body proper; and that the mind arises from or in biological tissue- nerve cells- that share the same characteristics that define other living tissues in the body proper. (Damasio, 2003: 191)

According to Damasio (1999) the body is the basis for consciousness. Interactions between the human organism and the objects it encounters are mapped by an integration of body, brain and mind. These chemical and neural body images are layered in evolutionary complexity from the biophysical

to the psycho-social. Damasio suggests that it is from the gradual overlapping of these maps that our consciousness evolved. There is a correlation between Damasio's embodied consciousness and Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema. Both provide a means to understand subjectivity as an aesthetic process that emerges from the sensory experiences and social interactions of embodiment.

To examine how our embodied sense of self extends through social relationships Eliot Smith (2008) analyses the "self-other overlap". Smith examines how communal sharing relationships correspond to this notion of the "self-other overlap". In communal sharing relationships people focus on common attributes, share resources and responsibilities (Smith, 2008: 150). Smith theorises that interpersonal synchrony and mimicry in these relationships generates the sense that the other is a part of the self. It appears that these processes enable a mapping of attributes of the other onto the self, subsuming the former, at least in part, into the identity of the later. Smith's analysis posits a way to understand the extension of the self across social relationships. I suggest that this also provides grounds for understanding how we extend not just through our social interactions but also through our sensory experiences into the material world itself. In this manner, I am suggesting that our sense of subjectivity concludes not with the surface of our skins but is implanted firmly in the material-psycho-social world in which we live.

Section Three: Creative Practice as Research

I am suggesting that the notion of aesthetic subjectivity provides a basis for understanding how the processes of creative practice yield knowledge. I argue that these processes are grounded in an evolutionary notion of an embodiment that is embedded in a material-psycho-social environment. The creative practice as research framework I examine here draws on ideas posited by Estelle Barrett. She argues studio processes serve a philosophical and knowledge producing function (Barrett, 2007(b)). Barrett contends that the alternate logic of studio practice results 'in the generation of new ways of modelling meaning, knowledge and social relations' (Barrett, 2007(b): 3). Knowledge derived through creative practice as research is grounded in the artist's own situated experiences. To contextualise this framework I will look at Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and visit the practices of other artists before discussing my own practice.

The knowledge produced through creative practice as research engages with a non-linear environment that is material, social and psychological. Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics speaks to this type of engagement. He defines relational aesthetics as 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context' (Bourriaud, 2002: 113). Jill Orr's performance *From the Sea*, (Warrnambool Art Gallery, 2004, see figures 1, 2, 3) operates as a relational aesthetics inquiry. She uses performative role play to examine the socio-historical lineage of Aboriginal and European encounters with a stretch of Victorian coastline. Drawing on this inquiry Orr articulates a transient relationship between subject and landscape, one that posits the later as an 'evolving, living and alive space' (Orr, 2004). In this way,

Orr's work can be understood as an embodied response to a lived environment. I suggest that relational aesthetics operates because creative practice enables artists, as aesthetic subjects, to engage with the systems of embodied mappings described in the previous section. Interaction with the lived environment leaves aesthetic traces upon us. Creative practice enables us to access these traces.



Fig 1
Sea 5, still frame
From the Sea
Jill Orr, 2004



Fig 2
Sea 1, still frame
From the Sea
Jill Orr, 2004



Fig 3
Sea 8, still frame
From the Sea
Jill Orr, 2004

Barbara Bolt (2004) argues that the representational mode in western thought makes it difficult to think of art without fixing a gap between subject and object. She articulates a model of practice that attempts to move beyond this representational paradigm. Bolt argues that through studio logic, the handling of materials, the world and ideas, the creative process takes on a productive performativity. Here, without a gap in between, the artist, materials and the world produce each other (Bolt, 2004). This notion can be seen in Carla van Laar's (2009) auto-ethnographic work *Bereaved Mothers Heart*, a self-reflective creative practice taken in response to the death of her young son. (See figures 4 and 5). The works produced in this process are collated into a single volume. It documents a journey of 'loss, creativity and transformation' (van Laar, 2008: 1). By handling this poignant aesthetic text one enters this realm of maternal grief, is swallowed by its journey and transformed into a state of empathy wherein the depth of grief reveals an eternal, pulsing love. The performative and productive power of this work can in part be understood by returning to the correlation of Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's ideas outlined previously. Lived experience imprints the subject's corporeal schema and informs the way the subject operates in the same manner as bio-politics. By re-visiting these experiences through aesthetic examination, artists enact a process that is akin to Foucault's self authorship. Self-reflective practice enables these experiences to be articulated, discursively described, re-arranged and re-inscribed. Not only does this transform the artist, its world and materials, but also the audience with who such works strike a resonance.



Fig 4
page 29, extract from
Bereaved Mother's Heart
Karla van Laar, 2008



Fig 5
page 7, extract from
Bereaved Mother's Heart
Karla van Laar, 2008

Aesthetic Formations

I suggest that a notion that I have termed aesthetic formations may provide a means for understanding the processes described in the two preceding paragraphs. This idea emerged in the post-studio reflection of my honour's installation *Maternal Interstice* (See figure 6, 7 and 8). This body of art queried the interiority–exteriority dichotomy by examining my experience of maternity. Each piece explored aspects of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. Through the process and upon reflection it became apparent that focusing my practice on particular feelings or thoughts enabled me to trace underlying aesthetic formations. This term requires definition:

Through remembered sensory input, particular experiences, or collections of experiences, imprint within subjectivity as “aesthetic formations”. These embodied structures exist within consciousness and help to shape the corporeal schema. In that they span through emotional, cognitive and behavioural patterning, these are multi-lateral formations that are formed by the various contexts of the initial experience, draw from and form memory and shape imagination. Aesthetic formations are encoded by sensory and sensual language. The effects on subjectivity are not always obvious, aesthetic practice or experience can be used to track these underlying formations.

I hypothesise that this notion of aesthetic formations correlates with the idea of embodied mapping described in the previous section. I also propose that it is aesthetic formations that enable artists to practice relational aesthetics and provides a mechanism for arts performative productivity. The arrangement of the aesthetic formation is interdependent on each of the embodied, psycho-social and material relational factors informing its initial impression; each of these factors therefore leaves residual markers within the formation. It is these markers that can be traced through aesthetic inquiry. In this manner aesthetic formations provide a conduit between an initial experience and a subsequent reflection or inquiry. Consequently, I argue, aesthetic formations provide a mechanism for arts productive performativity: engaging with the relational factors of which they are comprised transforms

the arrangement and quality of these factors and hence transforms the aesthetic formation and its effects within embodiment. This is a productive performativity.



Fig 6
Still from
Maternal Interstice
Becky Nevin Berger, 2010



Fig 7
Still from
Maternal Interstice
Becky Nevin Berger, 2010



Fig 8
Cervix, Oil On Board from
Maternal Interstice
Becky Nevin Berger, 2010

I have synaesthesia; through examining how this encodes my memories I became aware of a relationship between aesthetic formations and aesthetic language. Through aesthetic language we draw from sensory experience to inturn describe our lived experience (Needs, 2009). The colours and textures used in the creation of *Maternal Interstice* drew from a memory, feeling, thought or impression made on my embodiment by maternity. Using this as a language allowed me to engage with aesthetic formations made by this same maternity. In this manner continuity between my studio process, my subjectivity and the world emerged. I was able to connect with, inquire into and transform individual and collective effects of maternity on my subjectivity. This process revealed that rather than existing in a dichotomy of interiority and exteriority, my subjectivity extends through and emerges from a material-psycho-social embodiment. I drew on the aesthetic formations of maternity; van Laar on those of maternal grief; Orr on those of a stretch of Victorian coastline. Each case produced a productive performativity wherein artist, materials, knowledge and the world were transformed through creative practice.

Conclusion

The model of subjectivity that I have posited is an attempt to neither supersede nor compete with universal subjectivity; it is however an attempt to disrupt the dualistic assumptions in which it is implied. By formulating the model of subjectivity operating within the artist's practice I have sought to convey the knowledge producing value of this relationship. Artists draw from and respond to lived experience. Aesthetic subjectivity posits this practice within an embodied consciousness that extends through a material-psycho-social environment. This notion is compatible with evolutionary theory and allows us to understand the evolutionary basis and value of creative practice as research. Aesthetic subjectivity is predicated on embodied and cultural specificity making it an inclusive, flexible and

therefore truly universal mode of subjectivity. On these grounds aesthetic subjectivity is compatible with interdisciplinary research approaches. The sites of aesthetic research are not construed by disciplinary boundaries but rather, they are informed by the cross section of human relationships and interactions. These responses to the lived environment ground creative practices in the processes of the everyday. In this way, the notion of aesthetic subjectivity may become embedded in contemporary life, exposing and disrupting underlying, dualistic assumptions.

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