



Betwixt and between

Description

Architecture is not a polite discipline. According to architectural theorist Bernard Tschumi, “the most forbidden parts of the architectural act; where limits are blurred. The starting point of architecture is distortion” (91).



Rem Koolhaas asserts something similar. Design is not

“meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids” (969).

Art has this aspect as well. French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud describes the contemporary exhibition in terms of “the interstice,” as creating “free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life” (16).

Historically, designers and artists position themselves and their work outside of the mainstream. The Bohemian artist of the nineteenth century was able to move in and out of polite society, sometimes treated as an oddity, indulged, kept at bay, respected for her genius, and who in turn drew on the bourgeoisie for subject matter, and as inspiration. The rebel is never entirely in or out, accepted or

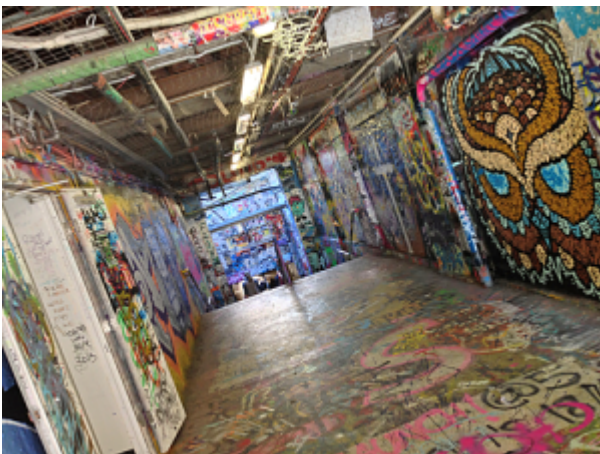
rejected.

The boundary is a creative place to be in any case: e.g. the boundary between countries, where culture, language, and cuisine mingle, producing rich hybrids, or exaggerations of difference. The boundary condition receives ample attention in literary studies, linguistics, philosophy, and cultural theory.

In design this identification of the edge serves a useful purpose. Focussing on the boundary sets people thinking, and designing, even when the boundary is between two diametrically opposed positions: the high country and the low country, the sea farers and the land bound, the creative and the dull, the economic and the altruistic, the efficient and the wasteful, in the light and in the shadows, the bored and the excited, the relaxed and frustrated.

The sublime

Boundaries are lines. They are also [thresholds](#). The Latin for threshold is *limen*. Everyone knows about *subliminal* advertising, which involves messages below the threshold of consciousness. To *sublimate* is to push into unconsciousness. It also has a meaning derived from alchemy, still used in chemistry, in which a solid substance turns into a vapour without melting, or a vapour condenses into a solid without passing through the liquid phase.



Sublimation is also a purification process. According to some commentators this is the derivation of the word *sublime*. We think of the sublime as an elevated condition above the line, and yet its formation suggests a condition beneath (sub) the line. According to this reading the sublime is a condition that undercuts the threshold (between solid, liquid and gas).

To the category of the sublime is attributed not only the uplifting and the pure, but the inexpressible. For philosopher Francois Lyotard the sublime motivates the avant garde painter in enabling us to see
"only by making it impossible to see," or to "please only by causing pain" (78).

In this the sublime is a transgression, a boundary crossing, and an ambiguous and indeterminate condition. It's therefore a *liminal* condition.

The liminal

Anthropologist Victor Turner made a study of *rites of passage* in which an individual in a community momentarily transitions to a *liminal* condition, and emerges renewed and transformed. There's a biological and life affirming aspect to the liminal condition. He notes how "certain liminal processes are regarded as analogous to those of gestation, parturition, and suckling." He also identifies how "Undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns." But Turner points to the ambiguity in such liminal conditions:

"logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example, by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), by bear symbolism (for the bear "dies" in autumn and is "reborn" in spring), by nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial), and by innumerable other symbolic formations and actions" (99).

He adds that the liminal is an indeterminate and even a contradictory condition, "This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (99). He invokes the concept of being *betwixt and between* to represent this condition.

Emotional transitions

Turner references the significance people attach to the transition from one *state* to another, where "state" applies to "ecological conditions, or to the physical mental or *emotional* condition in which a group or individual may be found at a particular time" (94). There's a clue here to the importance in emotional life and experience not just in how you are feeling at the current moment, but what went before, and what follows after. There's a crucial transitional element to emotions and moods.

In an informal way, along with some students, Dorothea Kalogianni and I are currently exploring the representation of transitions from one brute emotional condition (bored, frustrated, excited, meditative) to another for someone listening to intermittent sounds in an art space as recorded by an EEG device "about which more later.



References

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Notes

- I examine the theme of liminality in relation to digital media in Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 284 pages.
- Also see [Transilience](#), [Turning the corner](#), [Unearthing the trickster function in Icelandic myth](#), [The one and the many](#), and blogs tagged [EEG](#) and [mood](#).
- According to the OED: **3. betwixt and between** *n.* (*colloq.* and *dial.*) in an intermediate or middling position; neither one thing nor the other. Also as *adj.*: Middling, indifferent, so-so.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

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2. EEG
3. emotion
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