**WHAT DOES AESTHETICS WANT FROM US AND IR?**

**BISA Art & Politics Working Group; Warwick Performance and Politics network: 1-2 September 2014**

**Dr Lola Frost. Artist in Residence, War Studies, Kings College London.**

**Abstract:**

**Whose sublime? Aesthetics and the International**

Insofar as the aesthetic contains a variety of categories ranging for example, from the poetic to the sublime, it has commonly, although not exclusively, been delivered via a variety of artistic practices, events and objects which mobilise the gaps between representation and that which is represented, or between what can be said and what remains unspeakable but available to sense experience. In the first instance and with reference to the visual arts, this paper will briefly explore how aesthetic practices activate that risky, heterogeneous and unknowable boundary, or gap, that disrupts rational cognition as well as those subject/object distinctions often associated with the western and hegemonic positivist order. In the interests of illuminating some of the predicaments of this general field we call ‘the aesthetic’, this paper will explore how sublime aesthetic events might be both political (as a disruption of positivist values and practices and as a site of cultural contestation) and ethical (insofar as they are constituted by a set of norms that are embedded in our phenomenological, embodied and relational being in the world). It is via these distinctions that this paper approaches the question, not of what the aesthetic wants from us and IR, but to whom does the aesthetic category of sublime belong? Is it a category that belongs to a particular western sensibility, or is it an international and cosmopolitan aesthetic category that is open to everyone? What light does this distinction throw on the role of aesthetics in a globalized international order?

**Exhibition Abstract:**

***South*:**

Figured as an informal exhibition of 4 to 5 of my small paintings, this event will be an opportunity for participants in the workshop to encounter a risky and sublime art practice. Components of a larger project, titled *South*, these paintings both extend and disrupt the tradition of North/ Western sublime painting by referencing and articulating a feminist southerliness. An exhibition of this partial body of work will be an opportunity for viewers to consider what might be at stake when contemplating sublime paintings. Are such aesthetic events the articulation of a western sensibility? Or are these opportunities in which viewers, irrespective of their cultural orientations, remain at risk, simultaneously open to the heterogeneity of affect and displaced cognition? For examples of this practice, please reference my website at [www.lolafrost.net](http://www.lolafrost.net)

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**Whose Sublime? Aesthetics and the International**

**Dr Lola Frost: Artist in Residence, War Studies, Kings College London.**

The questions that this paper addresses are: to whom does the sublime belong? Does it belong to a particular western sensibility, or is it an aesthetic category that is available to international and cosmopolitan artists and audiences irrespective of their class, race or gender? In this paper I will make the case that although the sublime is sometimes framed by certain theoretical or political interests, that it is not reducible to such supplementarity because it remains a provocative, unspeakable, and peculiarly aesthetic or experiential event. It is this distinction between the riskiness of aesthetic experience and the concepts we use to understand it that I will try to keep alive in this paper.

A key component of my discussion here is what some scholars have called the aesthetic ‘gap’ in art. I suggest that this signifying and experiential event might be understood as a performative nexus, or a heterogeneous and unstable boundary in which concepts, perceptions, affects, emotion, cultural expectation and aesthetic provocation collide or intersect. Such heightened aesthetic events are complex, risky and unpredictable opportunities which interrupt our more usual cognitive, perceptual and emotional compartmentalisation, hence the idea that the aesthetic event is experienced as an unspeakable ‘gap’, or a rupture. This paper will briefly explore some of the political and ethical ‘interests’ of this aesthetic ‘gap’, in relation to both some philosophical thoughts on the sublime, and its’ mobilisation in two selected artworks.

To begin, we might say that the aesthetic ‘gap’ in viewers of art is produced at that risky or indeterminate moment when nothing is settled, when concepts bump up against affects, or when it is impossible to reduce what has been sensed to what might be said. For Jaques Ranciere that aesthetic ‘gap’ is the condition for a politics and ethics of aesthetics and belongs to what he calls the aesthetic regime. Indeed I understand the aesthetic ‘gap’, sketched above, is a privileged subjectifying technique of this regime. Participants in this regime adhere to “a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is in habited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself” (Ranciere 2004, 23). Furthermore according to Ranciere the aesthetic regime “establishes the autonomy of art “(ibid) and aesthetic experience is the “moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity” (ibid 24). The production of this humanity is of course also interested and political, for it is a humanity that is informed by the conditions of modernity, which stretch back into the Western Enlightenment and forward into an era of cosmopolitan globalisation.

The experience of the aesthetic ‘gap’ is I suggest, the foundational moment of the aesthetic regime. Yet I would also suggest that its seemingly infinite artistic possibilities and its ethical and political effects are contained within a boundary and a set of interests, those which makes distinctions between those who participate in agonistically or playfully reflexive, egalitarian and individualising practices and those who do not. Furthermore, even within the boundaries of an ever expanding and internationalising modernity, the aesthetic regime with its agonistic, individualising, critical, playful, reflexive and egalitarian commitments, not to mention its subversive and anti-positivist performativity, is feared and contested on the one hand, by those interested in positivist and rational accounts of how we negotiate the world, i.e. by those who also have commitments to a liberal and democratic order, and on the other, by those who are not entirely sure of the value of individual autonomy, reflexive criticality and equality, or who sustain commitments to representational practices and values.

The political stakes then are high with regard to this regime, but it remains one which has an ‘allure’ even to those who fear or misunderstand it. This ‘allure’ might be measured by the immense expansion of public participation in, and the heightened value of, the arts, which extends to the proliferation of art museums in the US and Europe, and also increasingly in the Middle East, Africa, South America, Australia and Asia. Such value is also attached to the music, film, theatre and dance industries, international visual art shows and the art market. I understand that this ‘allure’ marks the successful enactment of what Ranciere calls the politics of aesthetics, however unevenly distributed or co-opted it might become.

There are also of course contested political arguments within the aesthetic regime, which is a general field which contains any number of aesthetic categories, strategies and artistic interests, genres, mediums and supplements, all jostling for attention. It is in this regard that I turn my attention to the question of the politics of the sublime and to whom it belongs. The aesthetic category of the sublime has a privileged place in the aesthetic regime, especially since the end of the 18th century in Europe. For Kant, perhaps the key 18th century theorist of the sublime, encounters with immense natural phenomena, like the sea or huge mountains become an aesthetic and sublime experience when our normal perceptual and cognitive capacities fail, because “no standard of sense apprehension is adequate to the idea of the infinite” (Gaut and Lopes 2013, 51). We are again in the familiar territory of the aesthetic ’gap’, on the edge of formlessness, between sense and cognition and hovering between pain and pleasure. For Kant in this process the pain of the failure of cognition is displaced by the pleasure we feel when the power of our understanding returns. Here Kant identifies the sublime as an opportunity to perform human self awareness, one achieved through a provocative and uncomfortable process, but one in which we might ultimately be able perform ourselves as autonomous, reflexive, sensible and rational subjects.

This version of the sublime has been contested by philosophers like Lyotard and Christine Battersby. For Lyotard, the author of what is called the post-modern sublime, sublime experience does not secure a re-unified, rational and autonomous subject. Instead for Lyotard the sublime is an unknowable and unspeakable subjectifying condition figured in art, also constituted by pain and pleasure, but one that does not succeed in sublimating sense into reason. Instead those aesthetic events we experience as sublime are only identifyable through the question ‘Is it happening?’. For Lyotard “the feeling of pleasure comes from welcoming the unknown, whilst the feeling of pain results from the negativity of waiting, or of nothing happening” (Fry 2005, 5), hence the pain or melancholy of the question ‘Is it happening?’. Lyotard’s post-modern version of the sublime is thus not concerned with the production of the rational autonomous subject, but with an ethical opening up of subjects to the possibility of difference, which “involves a surrender, or displacement of the ego” (Battersby 2007, 1).

Christine Battersby is critical of the Kantian version of the sublime which according to her, privileges the rational and autonomous ego, one which she argues is often reserved for men. But she is enthusiastic about Lyotard’s version which mobilises heterogeneity and difference. Battersby’s interest lies in developing an interpretation of the sublime that would include registers of difference, and in particular female difference, but which extends to all subjects of modernity irrespective of their race, gender or class.

I would endorse this view, but add that the politics of the sublime are regulated by that peculiar condition we are here calling the aesthetic ‘gap’, one predicated on the incommensurability of intersecting vectors and of the unknowability of aesthetic experience. This incommensurable and unspeakable logic, one which is self-interested, rather that dis-interested, and which guarantees the autonomy of art, applies to all aesthetic categories, even as we struggle, like Kant or Lyotard, to interpret or understand it. As such the sublime, like all aesthetic categories, is never captured by any one set of interests, or any particular single interpretation, yet it does belong to the aesthetic regime and to all those who participate in the practices of the aesthetic ‘gap’.

In considering howartworks deliver sublime provocation I briefly consider two images and conclude with some thoughts on the role of the sublime in an international and globalising order. Nicholas Hlobo’s *Ingubo Yesizwe* exhibited at Tate Modern in 2009 initiates a sublime encounter by announcing the ‘thing-ness of this figure/ animal with its meticulously hand stitched surface, its’ smell of leather and rubber, dark force and extruded internal ‘organs’, and peculiarly animated ‘tail’, all of which code a field of experience that seems sacrificial and formless. For me this was both a compelling and repulsive encounter one which invited and frustrated both cognition and affect because it mobilised that incommensurable gap between sensing and knowing, delivering me neither to my senses and affects, nor to any cognitive resolution. I hovered between the pleasure of giving myself over to this sense of cognitive and affective dissonance and the fear, or pain, of losing myself as I entered into such excess.

My unease was not diminished by the supplementary information provided. Here we were informed about Hlobo’s South African identity, his commitments to ‘feminine’ stitching, his deployment of a tradition of African decoration and traditional African concerns with cattle. We were asked to consider this work as part of Hlobo’s attempt to engage the interface between traditional rural African values and the alienation and dangers of modern city life. However apt, this supplement may well increase our understanding of the role that this work plays in the world of contemporary art, but it does not define our aesthetic experience of it, which is always an address which includes both the provocative aesthetic object and our individual responses to it.

In recollection then, my encounter with this melee in Hlobo’s work, was to note that something had happened, a something that not only preserved a sense of sublime horror which cannot be spoken, but invited me to think, as a South African, about Hlobo’s and my shared, but incommensurable histories. In short, this aesthetic encounter provoked me to take the risk of engaging with the incommensurability of my own cognitive and affective responses and to mobilise my ethical commitments to difference.

With reference to this painting of mine, *Untitled* of 2010, I end with a brief account of how, as an artist, I pay attention to the risky ethics of the sublime. As with this one, each of my paintings invariably starts with an imaginative encounter between myself and features of the landscape, for example rocks, trees , water, light: all of which, in particular configurations, ‘call’ to me across a phenomenological ‘chiasm’, to use Merleau-Ponty’s term. This subject-object hiatus becomes the locus for a form of aesthetic ‘free play’ where through making particular kinds of marks on canvas, I pit my drive to produce coherent form against an energy driven, unconscious, formless and embodied field of play. Such an agonistic and ethically transformative process is perhaps reminiscent of Nietzche’s idea of ‘self-stylization’ which involves “recognising one’s own ugliness and transforming it or reinterpreting it”(Gaut and Lopes, 2013, 83). For Nietzche such interpretive processes offer two forms of self-stylization, those with life-affirming or those with life-denying effects. This painting is, I suggest, an articulation of the former. Recognisable perhaps as a gigantic ‘umbilical cord’ embedded in a monstrous pregnant body with no skin, this painting also registers a fluid energy, one whose life-affirming and energetic accumulations invite the viewer’s gaze to wander from motif to motif, producing a dilating and libidinal gaze that is unable to consume or control. I have come to understand that this sublime, feminist and performative process invites a risky ethics predicated on inter-subject/object reciprocity; the displacement of the will to mastery; and the giving over to difference.

In conclusion, I have argued that that the aesthetic experience of the sublime is available to all those who enter into its protocols, irrespective of where they come from, their gender, class or race. Such aesthetic possibilities, even if they were first formulated in western culture, they are now part of a global, but *not*universal practice, one whose products and participants are regulated by the peculiar political and ethical interests of the aesthetic regime. I have not dwelt on the way the sublime is positioned, or whose particular interests the sublime purportedly represents, for it would make no sense to do so in the light of my argument that the sublime is never fully captured by any supplementary interests, even if it remains, like other aesthetic categories, bound up with the political and ethical interests of the aesthetic regime[[1]](#footnote-1).

Furthermore, we might also understand that aesthetic regime is an anarchic, social and global practice. And as an anarchic global practice I understand it to have enormous political and ethical potential. I end with the observation that the aesthetic ‘gap’ may well operate as something of a Trojan’s horse for importing equality, agonistic or playful reflexivity, reciprocity and individualisation into those places which resist democratisation, even as its’ ‘negativity’ sustains a critique of the instrumental, risk averse and representational commitments of many positivist and liberal assumptions.

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1. The sublime is often variously championed, or reviled, by those who would find equivalences between it and various interests. For example the sublime in art has been reviled because of its supposed contribution to class hierarchies, (because of its difficulty) or as belonging to men (Kant makes this mistake and compounds it by associating category of the beautiful with ‘the fairer sex’)), or with colonial expansion (as an instance of Western imperialism). My argument here is that sublime experience cannot be reduced to such interests, for it is always an address of the incommensurability of being a knowing, sensing self in a social and phenomenal world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)