

What Remains?

*Introduction: In the midst of being*

I recently read a small book by the American cultural theorist, Eric Santner, titled *On the Psychtheology of Everyday Life*, clearly a purposeful slippage of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. It is a highly thoughtful reading of two Jewish thinkers of the early twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig and Sigmund Freud, via some of the work in particular of Giorgio Agamben and Emmanuel Levinas. It is profoundly a book on ethics, though I do admit there are aspects of Santner's thinking with which I do not entirely agree. I am mentioning this because, although I want to engage with some of the work of Michel Foucault in thinking about design ethics, I want also to incorporate some of the material I have recently encountered here as an extension that would not have been indicated in the published abstract for this paper.

Let me get the key notion from Santner out into the open from the beginning. Santner sets out with a crucial distinction between the 'global' and the 'universal.' Global consciousness, at whatever scale, is constituted on the externality of differences, hence on a secured understanding of identity while 'universality-in-becoming' is construed on an "agitation and turbulence immanent to any construction of identity," (p. 5), an uncanniness or not-at-homeness lodged within any sense of identity that calls up and traumatises that identity as an excess that cannot be assimilated. The import of this distinction is in the resolutions of difference. Hence for global consciousness, every difference can ultimately be returned to the same in the recognition of the predicates that constitute such difference: language, geography, culture and so on. Differences are assimilable to the same. For what Santner calls universality-in-becoming, or life-in-the-midst-of-being, my strangeness, even

to myself, is never reducible to the generality of a being-in-common, but rather remains an ethics of singularity. The pivotal question circulates precisely on what remains as the unassimilable and uncanny thing that is one's neighbour, even the neighbour that is also oneself. My question is how we understand design as a regard for this impossible possibility of being-in-common or how design is the comportment of an ethics of singular being.

### *Care of the Self*

Michel Foucault developed his work on the care of the self, or an aesthetics of existence, particularly in the response he made to Kant's "What is Enlightenment," in his own text by that same title. There is something Foucault emphasises with the Kantian text, its threshold moment in the discourse of philosophy in as much as Kant directly poses the question: what is our present? What is it to think today? Moreover, he poses this question, not as a philosophical tract or publication, but in a German newspaper, in the public space of debate. Crucially, his concern is with what is the public duty of one's singularity as a thinker. The motto that opens his text reads: *Sapere aude*, dare to know ... have the courage to use your own reason, in thinking for yourself orientate your own directions. This is to be done not in the private use of one's reason but rather in the freedom to make public use of reason. Hence, Kant distinguishes between civic duty, wherein one passively conducts or obeys for the whole community, and scholarly freedom wherein one may challenge the very justice of the duties prescribed in civil office or religious obligation. To think here, for Kant, is not a private or personal encounter of self with the self, but an encounter of self to the self in relation to its acting in the world, and the possibility of thinking this self-in-the-world otherwise.

Foucault takes Kant's injunction of enlightenment seriously though suggests that perhaps the task today is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. While committed to Kant's pragmatic anthropology and critique, Foucault transforms them in two directions, firstly, from anthropology to ontology, hence a question of existence, not from the viewpoint of universal reason, but from the permanent contingency of reasons; and secondly, from the viewpoint of critique as an analysing and reflecting on limits, to a practical critique in the form of transgressions: "Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the pursuit of formal structures with universal values, but rather as historical investigations into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and recognise ourselves as subjects of what we do, think, say." (Foucault, *What is Enlightenment* 45-46) Hence, Foucault reads the ethical imperative in Kant's "Dare to think" in terms of a separating out of one's civic responsibility as obedience to a normative rule and one's public responsibility as a freedom in contesting that rule as an art of existence.

In his transformation of Kantian anthropology to ontology, a project guided by Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Foucault, like Heidegger, places particular focus on Kant's faculty of imagination and Transcendental Schematism, where imagination is not that to which reality is to be opposed, but rather that by which the horizon of the real is disclosed. We recognise this, for example, in the introduction to Foucault's *The Uses of Pleasure*, constituting as well the introduction to *The Care of the Self*, written at the same time:

It was a matter of analysing, not behaviours or ideas, nor societies and their "ideologies," but the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought—and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed. The archaeological dimension of the analysis made

it possible to examine the forms themselves; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyse their formation out of the practices and the modifications undergone by the latter. (Uses of Pleasure 11-12)

### *Governmentality of design*

Within this context Foucault engaged his analyses with which we are by now familiar: those of disciplinary mechanisms associated with the asylum, the hospital and the prison. However, it would be a significant misreading of Foucault if we were to specifically focus on these institutions, their formal arrangements, codified practices and defined functions, as well as the specific objects of their practices. Rather, Foucault's concern is precisely with the externalities to these institutional sites, with what he terms the specific generalities and their conducts and counter-conducts which constitute the milieu in which institutions and the practices internal to them are defined and codified. Hence, Foucault was not so much concerned with the asylum as a place of confinement, but rather a general and diffuse psychiatric order, not the prison as space of punishment, but disciplinary regimes that gave the modern prison its specific logic and place within a more diffuse regime of disciplinary procedures. In his work on governmentality, it was not the state as institutional site uniting territory and population in an ideal order, but rather apparatuses of security in the conducts and counter-conducts or resistances of governmentality of the state.

In this sense, rather than begin with the institutional and professional sites of design and ask by what means do these cohere their principles and rationalities, circulate their modes of production, specific discourses and technologies of power, and constitute the responsibility for practices and

production of our lived world, we start with the specific generalities of conducts and the governmentality or conduct of these conducts with respect to the spacings and orderings of habitability. In this sense, one may parallel Foucault's comment on 'the political.'

The analysis of governmentality as singular generality implies that "everything is political." This expression is traditionally given two meanings: —Politics is defined by the whole sphere of state interventions ... the state is everywhere. —Politics is defined by the omnipresence of a struggle between two adversaries ... The theory of the comrade. In short, two formulations: everything is political by the nature of things; everything is political by the existence of adversaries. It is a question of saying rather: nothing is political, everything can be politicized, everything may become political. Politics is no more nor less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first uprising, the first confrontation. (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*: 390)

We would emphasise a parallel with design. Or rather, not a parallel but rather the possibility of engaging with design as essentially political in as much as it engages with what Foucault identifies as the crisis of governmentality. Hence, in one sense, there is no outside to design, everything is design precisely in the two possibilities offered for the omnipresence of the political. Design is constitutive of and fundamentally constituted by the egoist interests of liberalism which continually assail and are assailed by interventions of the state, liberalism defined in the freedom of a self's relation to a self, but equally in the self-interest this implies. Design is equally omnipresent precisely in the *socius* of a being-in-common and the constitution of community in the sovereignty of subjects of right that require

the interest of a disinterest, the recognition of a giving up of self-interest for the sake of a being-in-common. Though we would suggest that nothing is designed; rather, that anything may become designed, where we emphasise design from the viewpoint of counter-practices, counter-conducts, from resistances than from a universal rationality, and in this recognise the fundamental moves from anthropology to ontology and from critique to transgression.

In this sense, we understand design as a micro-physics and micro-politics of existence in its transformations, circulations and becomings before it is an institutional site of codified practices or a 'discipline.' In so understanding the micro-powers of a governmentality of design we come to recognise how certain discursive orders, particular technologies of power and a defined range of practices coalesce to become inscribed within the institutional borders of design. In this we take particular note not so much of the secured fixity of definitions, principles or exemplary practices that safely define the discipline or are safely housed within its borders, but rather those thresholds of transformation where the designed invents itself or reverts to its other, those margins of counter-conducts, refusals of design that inhabit and secrete design's own becomings.

### *An ethics of singularity*

I want to return to Eric Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* to further explore how we would think an ethics of design in such a context of thinking design from the specific generality of everyday life. What would an ethics of design be for the posing of design as the construal of life-in-the-midst-of being? Our most common, everyday and perennial question is the question of quiddity, the question what is? As in what is X? What is this, or that? Our everyday response is to pose the being of X as a predicative being,

open to an infinite series of predicative determinations. The idea of a thing is this infinite series that, Santner suggests, is without limit: “an infinitely expanding field of metonymic displacements.” (Santner, p. 79-80) This thing, in its singularity of infinite predicates may be another person. Or, rather, in aligning with Freud, Santner inverts this reading. In the ethical relation, relation to another person, the elaboration of predicative-being functions according to the pleasure principle, with each metonymic displacement, each addition to the series, discharging some of the tension sustaining the effort to know this Other. That is to say, we know what this thing or person is by the categories or modalities by which we describe or define, by the series of predicates that give definition Santner goes on to complicate things. Beyond this sustenance of “whatever-being” there is the “sheer tautological” presence—his or her “ipseity”—beyond predicative being, beyond the “whatness” of essences, something other than whatness—that something is in as much as its “thatness” opens the very possibility of the question of its being. That something is, in its disclosure, is an excess, a surplus of being with which we do not know what to do. It is trauma. Freud’s term for this “tautological otherness” is *Thing (Ding)*: “And so the complex of the neighbour divides into two constituent parts the first of which *impresses* through the constancy of its composition, its persistence as a Thing, while the other is *understood* by means of memory-work ... .” (quoted in Santner p. 80)

For Santner, in his reading of Rosenzweig, it is the tautological and excessive impressing of insistence over existence, the surplus of being that cannot be assimilated to a series of predicates that constituted an opening to an ethics of the Other. Santner references Slavoj Žižek at this point:

When do I effectively encounter the Other “beyond the wall of language,” in the real of his or her being? Not when I am able to

describe her, not even when I learn her values, dreams, and so on, but only when I encounter the Other in her moment of *jouissance*: when I discern in her a tiny detail—a compulsive gesture, an excessive facial expression, a tic—that signals the intensity of the real of *jouissance*. This encounter of the real is always traumatic, there is something at least minimally obscene about it, I cannot simply integrate it into my universe, there is always a gap separating me from it. (quoted in Santner p. 81)

Trauma is understood here as an excess or surplus of being that essentially opens a self to its world. It is not to be thought of as a deficit in being, as a lack or something to be worked on and compensated-for. It seems to me that design in modernity has been primarily thought of as that which compensates for a deficit, for a lack in being, and that design constitutes in its essential thinking being as predicative, as a series of predicates that expresses the world of meaning. An ethics of design, I suggest, needs to start elsewhere, with trauma or excess of being, not in the sense that Elaine Scarry thinks trauma and design in her extraordinary book *The Body in Pain*, where designed things, in their function literally relieve the body of pain. This to my mind engages design precisely in terms of the determination of whatever-being as the defined or designed predicates, modalities, characteristics, function, and that construes design ethics in terms that remind me of Karsten Harries *Ethical Function of Architecture*, as if ethics might be thought of as an instrument, a *techne* or a regularity. We mistake ethics here for normativity, and design for the solace of making presentable what is essentially unrepresentable, in thinking back to a formulation by J.F. Lyotard.

If ethics happens in the essential relation of self to Other as the excess of being that cannot be enumerated by predicative descriptions or definitions of a



world, in what Santner calls “the midst of being,” does this suggest such an understanding of ethics marks the limits to design, that design ethics at best would be constituted essentially normatively? Or rather, in returning to Foucault, and the necessity to move from anthropology to ontology, from universal reason to the contingency of reason, design’s horizon of emergence is essentially in counter-conducts, threshold moments, trauma, in an excess of being, in the sheer thatness of existence outside of, or prior to the predicative logic of categorical being, in the “first uprising, first confrontation” that makes the ethical and the political together in design practices concerned not so much with knowing who we are but with refusing who we are. It would be only such practices that open a self to its existence with others that could conceivably be given the name design. All else constitutes more-or-less the production of repetitions of the same.