

PURSUING THE UNKNOWNABLE THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE SPACES

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Fig 1. no caption

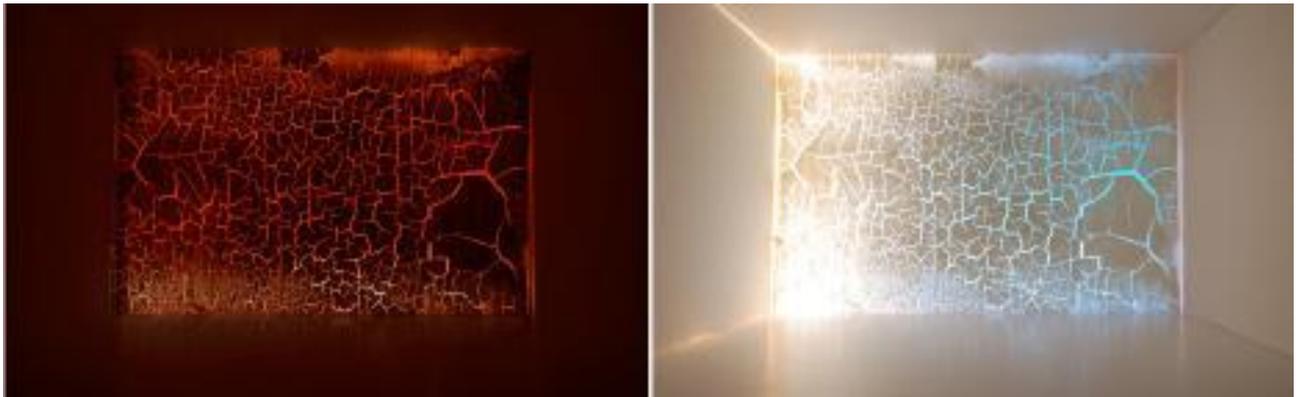


Fig 2. "As It Is Cracking". Maja Petric, 2010, Light installation for a room, Seattle, WA, US © 2010 Maja Petric



Fig 3. "The Snow Storm—Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and Going by the Lead". Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1842. Oil on canvas; 36 in x 48 in., Tate Britain, London, Turner Bequest

Historical Background of the Sublime

The core of my artistic research is the sublime. To illuminate my artistic engagement, I will elaborate on the history and theory of the sublime. While the term has had a long life full of passionate relationships with philosophers and artists who have attempted to reveal its essence, that has not led to a unified definition of its meaning. "What is the sublime? It does not appear to have been defined. Is it a figure of speech? Does it spring from figures, or at least from some figures of speech? Does the sublime enter into all kinds of writings, or are grand subjects only fit for it?" (La Bruyère).

The first mention of the sublime is found in writings of Longinus, the Greek rhetorician and philosopher of the Neoplatonic school. In "On the Sublime", which is thought to have been written between the third and first century AD, Longinus discussed the sublime as something great, elevated, or lofty that manifests itself in what is beautiful. In the seventeenth century, British philosopher John Dennis expanded Longinus' definition by introducing horror as an additional aesthetic quality that can create the sublime. After embarking on a journey across the Alps to Italy John Dennis described the term as "delight that is consistent with reason," and "pleasure to the eye as music is to the ear," but also "mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair" (Pack and Dennis).

Several years later, British philosopher Edmund Burke proclaimed that horror is not only another potential source of the sublime, but the most potent one. In 1756 he published "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful". Burke wrote: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about

terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling... Terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (Burke).

Prominent German philosopher Immanuel Kant followed Burke's enquiry in 1790 by writing a theory of aesthetics that was published in *Critique of Judgment*. In the chapter "Analytic of the Beautiful", Kant disassociated the beautiful from the sublime. While the beautiful is concrete, he explained "it is connected with the form of the object." And, the sublime is intangible, "it is to be found in a formless object" (Kant). Beauty can be reasoned, but to experience the sublime it is necessary to go beyond reason and employ sensibility and imagination. The ability to transcend reason by fusing it with the nature of senses is the vehicle of the sublime that Kant called a "supersensible substrate." He associated this ability with individuals who pose both superior mindfulness and superior sensibility of the body.

For Kant sublime is not an object—it is a state of mind we must enter that enables us the experience. We experience the sublime when our imagination fails to conceive the greatness of events solely by means of reason but compensates for this failure with pleasurable sensations that can be manifested through synthesis of senses with virtue of reason. Sublime as an experience is independent of any conceptualization or perception by the human mind. It is a thing-in-itself that Kant called the noumenon, postulated by practical reason but existing in a condition which is in principle unknowable.

Kant's theory prompted even more vivid discussion about the nature of the sublime, which created new possible frameworks for the subject. None of these were accepted as a unique model of the concept through which they demonstrated the impossibility to frame the sublime. This only confirmed Kant's definition of it as the unknowable. So essentially if what we experience is unknowable, the question is how do we experience the unknowable. All the previous theories depicted it as a dichotomic experience that is both wonderful and terrible.

Getting to Know Unknowable as Both Wonderful and Terrible

Multiplicity of that experience, the dichotomy between bliss and horror, beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain, comfort and torment, divine and hell as distinct instances of the single sublime that can be experienced through integration of cognitive and sensory ability is the most persistent in religious mythology. Religions that promote transcendence through light and darkness have illustrated the sublime as the crossing point towards the numinous, the presence of a divinity.

According to the German theologian Rudolf Otto, crossing the bridge of the sublime is encouraged both by *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ("fearful and fascinating mystery"), the pains and terrors overwhelming those who have arrived affront of God, and "nostalgia for paradise" (Otto), aching desire to reach the abode of perfection. In Christianity, the God is light, but the God is also darkness. "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5).

Contradictions of the sublime have been depicted in art since the beginning of art history. These works differ in a degree of simulating and emulating the experience of the sublime. For example, Dante's "The Divine Comedy" uses the narrative to create a representation of soul's journey through Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. It simulates, projects the idea, of experiencing Dante the Pilgrim's journey. To a de-

gree, it also emulates the actual feeling of being on a path from hell to heaven. It can make a reader experience the poem as if they were the first person of the poem. But it is predominantly a representational narrative of the sublime simulated in an afterlife of any everyday sinner.

Myths of heaven and hell have functioned to interpret the world and its counterparts, but also to entice the audience into experiencing its parts. The enticement into the fearful and blissful mystery is where the art comes in. Postmodern French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard recognized avant-garde art as a novel opportunity for accessing the sublime. He argued that the nature of avant-garde modern art has the unique potential to manipulate the balance of senses, reason, and emotion in a manner that results in a sensation of pleasurable pain. My further investigation is in practice of art that carefully entices senses, reason, and emotion in a way that results in an experience of the unknowable.

Works of art that predominantly emulate the experience of the sublime are aligned with twentieth century French philosophy in the domain of post-structuralism that views the structural relationship between the signifier and signified as inseparable but not united. In the artistic discourse the structure creates nonlinear meaning, and the audience replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry. These ideas extend to the philosophical concept of phenomenology that focus on the "first person" viewpoint, which can then be examined as phenomena that not only appears to "my" consciousness, but to all consciousnesses. According to German philosopher Edmund Husserl, "the synthesized experience is what constitutes total human knowledge."

One of the first artists exploring the phenomenological experience of the sublime was English Romantic landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner. His most notable painting, "The Snowstorm: Steamboat Off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water" (1842) portrays a ship in distress off the English coast with a high degree abstraction, asymmetrical composition, and monochromatic palette. The painting documents the ship caught in the storm by depicting the experience of witnessing the ship in the storm, instead of merely realistically reproducing the look of the scene. The painting not only informs us about what happened to the steamboat at the Harbour's Mouth during the snowstorm, but it also physically immerses us in the event. It is a beautiful and terrifying visceral experience, creating an example of the sublime in painting.

Several centuries after Turner, vision as the highest in the historical hierarchy of senses was slowly making space for other senses—and a fuller sensory experience. The industrial revelations of the twentieth century made an impact on art and how it is experienced. Artists including Anish Kapoor, Mark Rothko, Bill Viola, and James Turrell marked the twentieth century as an age of expanding our sensing apparatus to experience the sublime. Through their abstract but integrated use of materials, space, color, light, and image, they excite our senses and intrigue our minds to the point of reaching the essence of the unknowable.

The technological age is allowing for more multisensory engagement. My interest is in exploiting those technological advancements that can fuse perception of senses and add to the phenomenological experience of my artistic intention of presenting the presence of the unrepresentable. "My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once (Merleau-Ponty).

To be fully present in the world, one needs to use all available senses and intimately interact with the environment using their eyes, nose, ears, and skin. Only through receptiveness of the entire sensing mechanism is it possible to have a profound sensation of the place that can then be emotionally and cognitively processed into a meaningful experience. In the context of art, maximized engagement of the senses can direct memory and imagination into a place where the sublime can be experienced.

Pursuing Both Wonderful And Terrible Through Transformative Spaces

I was born and raised in Croatia during the violent fragmentation of Yugoslavia. It is then that I became preoccupied with using art to transform the traumatized sense of the surroundings. My work is about changing the perception of space in function of art. Therefore, the subjects of my work are perception, space and, art. To change perception, I study sensation, experience, and phenomenology. To create spatial situations, I practice designing spaces, fabricating structures, manipulating materials, and integrating lighting and audiovisual systems. The core of my artistic research is the pursuit of the unknowable— the sublime.

My interest is not to define the sublime. Critical history has proven that the sublime cannot be precisely put into words, just as the meaning of life is inherently unknowable. Nineteenth century Danish philosopher, theologian, and psychologist Søren Kierkegaard argued that logic of the objective knowledge and rational belief is unimportant to existence. If the deity could rationally be argued, existence of the supernatural being would be unimportant to humans. It is because God cannot rationally be proven that his existence is essential.

The sublime, as an agnostic term, cannot be made into an object of knowledge through language, reasoning, logic, and concepts. But it can be experienced. Since it is unknowable but can be experienced, it is profoundly valuable to experience it. My interest is in the experience of the inherently unknowable sublime. This experience has been described both as awe and terror. My interest is in the division and range between two mutually exclusive, opposed, or contradictory sensations as distinct instances of the single sublime. Therein lies the opportunity for the multiplicity of an experience, which can than also be created in art.

My approach combines traditional and progressive principles of spatial design fabrication, lighting design, audiovisual systems, and multisensory devices. By utilizing technological advancement in traditional mediums and untraditional integration of those mediums I aim to discover, interpret, and develop novel body of knowledge for enhancing the multisensory spatial experience that provides access to the sublime in the purpose of art.

One of the first projects that clearly illustrate my fascination with transforming the poetic experience of the space is the “outSIDEin”. It is an interactive light installation that was created in year 2004 to transform the atmosphere of the shattered pedestrian tunnel at New York City Subway’s 191st Street station of the number 1 train. There, I use artificial light to simulate a striking natural effect of light emanating from the sky, which is projected through false cracks of the ceiling in the pedestrian tunnel. Lights are programmed to imitate the color and intensity of the daylight outside of the tunnel. When the weather outside is very sunny, the light projected inside through the cracks is bright and yellow. When the weather outside is foggy, the light is blue.

The “outSIDEin” project has been an inspiration for further investigation about the live transformation of the spatial experience. In light and video installation “As It Is Cracking”, the wall in the room cracks in real time. As the wall cracks, lights and video appear through the cracks to create an experience that ranges from frightful to pleasurable. Daunting cracking of the wall in real time happens over the course of eight hours. Light and moving images appearing through the cracks simulate slow and steady change of daylight. This change is interrupted by sudden and startling appearance of lightning.

In 2009, I have collaborated with a choreographer Jennifer Salk in a dance performance “The Eyes of The Skin”. We explored the often twisted and delicate nature of tenderness, which is defined as a tendency to express warm, compassionate, or affectionate feelings. But in medicine it stands for pain or discomfort when an affected area is touched. By definition, tenderness is both a pleasure and pain as a result of susceptibility that is being defined by juxtaposition of the two opposed characteristics. I focused on the dichotomy of tenderness that ranges between pleasure and pain and as such relates to her research of the sublime and the multiplicity of the sublime experience. My ideas were combined in a form of the deteriorated wall that covers the north wall of the stage and that cracks over the course of a performance. As the wall is cracking, the light appears through the cracks and changes color and intensity in response to dancer’s behavior and dance narrative.

In the mentioned projects, the crack is an instigator of the spatial transformation that becomes both wonderful and terrible. As such it is a symbol and emulation of the sublime that can be captured only through the personal sensing mechanism. Capturing the presence of the unknowable remains to be the goal of art.

References and Notes:

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