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Introduction//The Contemporary Sublime

The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement. – Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976)¹

The Sublime Now

Today we are constantly learning of new realities too vertiginously complex, it seems, for us ever fully to encompass them in our mind. Astronomers now believe, for example, that the visible universe contains an estimated 100 billion galaxies and that each galaxy also consists of billions of stars emitting rays in myriad variations of colour from glimmering cool reds to radiant hot blues and whites. ‘Wow’ often tends to be our initial lost-for-words response to such intimations of otherness or infinity. Under the aegis of the sublime – a concept in evolution since the classical era – this anthology explores the range of recent artistic theory and practice that attempts to articulate such moments of mute encounter with all that exceeds our comprehension. It investigates what a contemporary sublime might be and what it might mean in today’s world.

The texts selected here seek to describe or analyse what takes hold of us when reason falters and certainties begin to crumble. They are about being taken to the limits. The sublime experience is fundamentally transformative, about the relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space. Something rushes in and we are profoundly altered. And so, in looking at the relevance of the concept to contemporary art, we are also addressing an experience with implications that go far beyond aesthetics.

The concept of the sublime became important in the eighteenth century when it was applied in relation to the arts to describe aspects of nature that instil awe and wonder, such as mountains, avalanches, waterfalls, stormy seas or the infinite vault of the starry sky. Today, however, rather than nature the incredible power of technology is more likely to supply the raw material for what can be termed a characteristically contemporary sublime. Moreover, the experience of modern life itself has been viewed by such thinkers as Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson in terms of the sublime, as the extreme space-time compressions produced by globalized communication technologies give rise to a perception of the everyday as fundamentally destabilizing and excessive. Awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution and the ‘daemonic’.

The works of contemporary artists as diverse as Anish Kapoor, Mike Kelley, Doris Salcedo, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Fred Tomaselli can all usefully be considered within a conceptual framework provided by the concept of the sublime. But the roots of such preoccupations lie in the period after World War II, when the desire to evoke sublime feelings of transcendence and exaltation took on particular importance for the Abstract Expressionist generation of artists in North America as well as artists such as Yves Klein in Europe. Then, after a period when the concept slipped largely from view, in the 1980s a new wave of postmodernist sublimity swept over the art world, largely provoked by a general dissatisfaction with the potential trivialization of art in the Pop aesthetic, on one hand, and on the other, its over-intellectualization in Minimal art and conceptualism. In the installations of American artist James Turrell, for example, the intensification of sublime experience through the evocation of spatial immensity, as formulated by Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, took a new direction through investigating the more fully immersive effects of space and light. Also in North America, Bill Viola was pushing the new medium of video towards powerful evocations of extreme states of mind, while Mike Kelley was exploring, in both disturbing and witty multi-media installations, the darker side of the sublime. Elsewhere, artists such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and, later, Doris Salcedo, have addressed the sublime’s connection to traumatic historical events, while more recently from beyond the West artists such as Hiroshi Sugimoto and Zhang Huan have brought new perspectives to the underlying issues at stake in discussions of sublimity.

The theoretical underpinnings for such discussions were provided by Jean-François Lyotard’s

influential essays 'The Sublime and the Avant-garde' (1981) and 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime' (1982) which first appeared in *Artforum*. They announced the centrality to the theory of postmodernism of Kant's concept of the sublime. Lyotard's texts subsequently spawned a voluminous debate, and in 1985 'Les Immatériaux', an exhibition curated by Lyotard at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, brought these ideas to a wider public. *Du Sublime*, an important collection of texts edited by Jean-Francois Courtine, appeared in 1988, adding to the contemporary philosophical context, and in 1993 this was translated into English. In 1999 the painter/writer Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfé published *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, addressing what he called a 'technological sublime', and in 2002 a series of essays edited by Bill Beckley titled *Sticky Sublime* endeavoured to catch something of the rich diversity of approaches to the subject. The continuing interest in the sublime is evident in the Tate's research project devoted to the sublime which has brought together artists, writers, poets, composers, art historians, philosophers, scientists, theologians and curators in a series of events, for example a symposium in 2007 at Tate Britain, London, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Edmund Burke's classic text on the subject. There have also been several major exhibitions addressing the subject directly or indirectly during the last two decades. For example, in 1993 'The Sublime Void (on Memory of the Imagination)', featuring over twenty artists, took place at the Musée des Beaux Arts, Brussels. 2004 saw 'The Big Nothing' at the ICA Philadelphia, which, to quote its press statement, investigated 'the void, the ineffable, the sublime, refusal, nihilism, zero'. In 2007 'On the Sublime', featuring the work of Rothko, Klein and Turrell, was hosted by the Guggenheim Museum in Berlin, while in 2009 'Various Voids: A Retrospective' at the Centre Pompidou assembled a host of international artists in a survey covering the last fifty years and, like the ICA Philadelphia show, placed the sublime within the context of broader cultural debates concerning the limits of representation.

A Short History of the Sublime

The word 'sublime' may seem rather outmoded – etymologically it comes from the Latin *sublimis* (elevated; lofty; sublime) derived from the preposition *sub*, here meaning 'up to', and, some sources state, *limen*, the threshold, surround or lintel of a doorway, while others refer to *limes*, a boundary or limit. In the Middle Ages *sublimis* was modified into a verb, *sublimare* (to elevate), commonly used by alchemists to describe the purifying process by which substances turn into a gas on being subjected to heat, then cool and become a newly transformed solid. Modern chemistry still refers to the 'sublimation' of substances but of course without its mystical alchemical connotation, whereby purification also entailed transmutation into a higher state of spiritual existence.

'Sublime' begins to acquire its modern resonances in the seventeenth century when it appears in the translation of a fragmentary Greek text on rhetoric by the anonymous Roman-era author known as Longinus. The first translation of this work, *Du Sublime* (1674), by Nicolas Boileau, signalled a new interest in the investigation of powerful emotional effects in art. Longinus had declared that true nobility in art and life was to be discovered through a confrontation with the threatening and unknown, and drew attention to anything in art that challenges our capacity to understand and fills us with wonder. The sublime artist was, according to Longinus, a kind of superhuman figure capable of rising above arduous and ominous events and experiences in order to produce a nobler and more refined style.

From the mid eighteenth century, however, the word began to be used in a different context that reflected a new cultural awareness of the profoundly limited nature of the self, and which led artists, writers, composers and philosophers to draw attention to intense experiences which lay beyond conscious control and threatened individual autonomy. Closely associated with the Romantic movement, the concept of the sublime began to be employed by those who wished to challenge traditional systems of thought that were couched in the old language of religion, a rhetoric that now seemed founded on outdated conceptions of human experience. They hoped, as the contemporary philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has characterized it, to explore 'the incommensurability of the sensible with the metaphysical (the Idea, God)'.²

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) the Irish political theorist and philosopher Edmund Burke noted that there were certain experiences which supply a kind of thrill or shudder of perverse pleasure, mixing fear and delight. He shifted the emphasis in discussions of the sublime towards experiences provoked by aspects of nature which due to their vastness or obscurity could not be considered beautiful, and indeed were likely to fill us with a degree of horror:

*The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror ... No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear, being an apprehension of pain or death, operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too ... Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.*³

Burke was interested in what happens to the self when assailed by that which seems to endanger its survival. He also moved the analysis away from the sublime object and towards the experience of the beholder, thus making his enquiry a psychological one. The sublime, declared Burke, was 'the strongest passion', and he belittled the importance of the beautiful, claiming that it was merely an instance of prettiness. The sublime experience, on the other hand, had the power to transform the self, and Burke, like Longinus, saw something ennobling in this terror-tinged thrill, as if the challenge posed by some threat served to strengthen the self.

Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Judgement (1790), also set out to explore what happens at the borderline where reason finds its limits. He characterized three types of sublimity: the awful, the lofty and the splendid, and continued and deepened the shift of focus initiated by Burke, by asserting that the sublime was not so much a formal quality of some natural phenomenon as a subjective conception – something that happens in the mind. He thereby shifted the analysis towards the impact and consequence of the sublime experience upon consciousness, and argued that the sublime was essentially about a negative experience of limits. It was a way of talking about what happens when we are faced with something we do not have the capacity to understand or control – something excessive. Behind Kant's discussion lay a keen sense of the independence of nature, whose sheer complexity and grandeur continuously exceeds any human ability to control or understand it. This sense of the sublime may be initiated by the terrifying aspects of nature such as Burke describes, or be provoked by an experience so complex that our inability to form a clear mental conception of it leads to a sense of the inadequacy of our imagination and of the vast gulf between that experience and the thoughts we have about it. We are made aware, Kant observed, that sometimes we cannot present to ourselves an account of an experience that is in any way coherent. We cannot encompass it by thinking, and so it remains indiscernible or unnameable, undecidable, indeterminate and unrepresentable.

'The feeling of the sublime', wrote Kant, 'is at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason, and a simultaneous awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of sense of being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law.'⁴ Thus because the sublime addresses what cannot be commanded or controlled, it is grounded in an awareness of lack. And as a consequence of this awareness of an inaccessible form of excess, argued Kant, we come to a recognition of our limitations, and so transform a sense of negative insufficiency into a positive gain: such experiences serve to establish our reasoning powers more firmly within their rightful, although diminished, domain.

Several other important nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers also contributed to the evolution of modern concepts of the sublime. Friedrich Schiller claimed in *On the Sublime* (1801) that while the beautiful is valuable only with reference to the human being, the sublime is the way the 'daemon' within man reveals itself.⁵ Friedrich Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1827) also contested Kant's essentially negative interpretation. He saw the sublime not so much as a voiding of the power of reason but as a moment of fusion with the Absolute in which the beautiful is fulfilled, and declared that sublimity was the way by which the divine manifested itself in the natural world.⁶ In a similar vein, Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), explored the fissure that lies at the heart of being, and envisaged a self that can in certain situations observe itself in the very act of confronting a fearful inner abyss, and by so doing attain a certain dark grandeur.⁷

Friedrich Nietzsche extended these arguments to a point where he urged the abandonment of reason altogether. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he cast the truly sublime individual as someone willing to abandon the safe dream of 'Apollonian' rationality, where all is light and sanity, in order to embrace instead 'Dionysian' intoxication – the frenzy of the God of wine and madness.⁸

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud deepened these varied perspectives in two

important ways, although without directly addressing the philosophical context. In his concept of 'sublimation' Freud argued that in order to find psychic stability the 'normal' ego necessarily bases itself upon the suppression of undesirable urges and traumatic memories, and these are transformed into 'purer' and more morally and socially acceptable forms. Freud also identified the continuing encounters of the ego with such destabilizing, only partially repressed, psychological forces as generating what he called the 'uncanny', which he characterized as a feeling of unsettling ambivalence, a kind of fear originating in what is known of old and long familiar things.⁹ Indeed, to many thinkers of the early and mid twentieth century the conditions of daily life within modern technological society could seem one continuous and disturbingly uncanny or sublime experience, causing what the German writer Walter Benjamin termed a disorienting psychic condition of traumatic 'shock', with hugely destabilizing consequences not only for the individual but also for society.¹⁰

Meanwhile from his different psychoanalytical perspective Carl Jung explored through his study of mystical and alchemical texts the connotations of sublimity in its earlier sense. From the procedures of such proto-scientific works he drew analogies with the progress of the psyche towards greater self-awareness, or as he termed it, 'individuation'.¹¹ The 'dissident surrealist' Georges Bataille also sought a way to express in modern terms the experiences described in traditional mystical texts. Drawing on Nietzsche, he declared that in such documents we witness the recording of moments when the self is forced to 'remain in intolerable non- knowledge, which has no other way out than ecstasy'.¹²

The Sublime and Contemporary Culture

The dominant assumption behind contemporary thought, grounded in the Marxist, psychoanalytic and feminist theory that came to dominate discussions of contemporary art during the 1970s and 1980s, is that culture and cultural values are socially constructed rather than deriving from some timeless essence. In other words, cultural signs, codes and representations are understood as producing our life-world and making it meaningful. In this context the importance of the concept of the sublime for contemporary discussions on art is that it addresses an unresolved problem within this social constructionist argument. For while we may no longer believe in eternal essences or values, we still often sense that our lives are fashioned by forces beyond our control, which underpin and drive acts of thinking or representation.

For those who assert that our lives cannot be accounted for within a paradigm which states that we exist within a life-world produced wholly from cultural signs and systems, the sublime defines the moment when thought comes to an end and we encounter that which is 'other'. As a consequence, discourses on the sublime pose more questions than they answer. What, for example, is happening psychologically within the force-field of the sublime experience when formal and objectively ordered social time is destabilized by some unstructured, informal and subjective 'moment' of heightened experience, a heightened time during which the self is radically altered by something that presses on us from beyond our normal reality, challenging the assumptions upon which such a reality is based. And what might the social and political consequences of this experience be? If this experience is enacted within the dialectics set up between 'nature' on the one side, and 'culture' on the other – with the sublime signifying the unconstrained and unconditional power of nature (desire, void, loss of self) – then to what extent is succumbing to its allure also a way of accepting our domination by and subjection to nature? Or to put it another way, to what extent is the sublime ultimately about embracing the death drive?

One way of understanding what is at stake behind the varied discussions of the sublime contained in this collection, therefore, is to see them as attempts to find ways of expressing or discussing experiences of self-transcendence which are not dependent on a pre-modern concept of essences – notions of a higher and essential reality – nor on scientifically verifiable criteria. Despite the fact that we are increasingly caught within an electronically implemented global system of control and consumption, the concept of the sublime aspires to the possibility of some kind of authentic experience of self-transcendence.

Not surprisingly, discussions of the sublime in contemporary art can be covert or camouflaged ways of talking about experiences that were once addressed by religious discourses and that remain pertinent within an otherwise religiously sceptical and secularized contemporary world. But contemporary thinkers and artists largely reject traditional conceptions of a self or soul or spirit that moves upwards towards some ineffable and essential thing or power. Instead, the selected texts tend to follow downward or deflationary curves, and the contemporary sublime is mostly about immanent

transcendence, about a transformative experience that is understood as occurring within the here and now.

These downward curves go in two different directions, however. One strives to re-envisage the contemporary self as existing in the light of some unnameable revelation that arises in the gap between a socially-constructed and alienating reality on the one hand and unmediated life on the other. In contrast, the other direction is more motivated by a resigned sense of inadequacy, and addresses our failure when faced with all that so blatantly exceeds us. It invites a kind of stoic resignation.

But one of the major problems with trying to produce an anthology of texts on the sublime is that contemporary artists as a rule shy away from describing their work in such terms. The reasons for this are not hard to find. During the twentieth century the heady rhetoric of the sublime was often employed by totalitarian regimes in order to seduce the masses – think, for example, of Albert Speer’s ‘cathedrals of light’ choreography designed for the Nazis’ Nuremberg rallies, a paradigmatic employment of sublime effects. Furthermore, the vulgar and debased coinage of advertising and the mass media nowadays often profits from the characteristic tropes of sublime transcendence, and in advertising ‘subliminal’ messages or ideas exploit Freud’s insight into the way the ego can only ever superficially shield itself from more primal needs and urges. Trivialized and knowingly kitsch devices trading on the ersatz experience of the sublime are thus pervasive in contemporary society, and are designed to stimulate an increasingly jaded consumer. The discourse of the sublime is therefore tainted by association with both malevolent politics and inauthentic mass culture. Not surprisingly, contemporary artists are often wary of attributing to their practices lofty or grandiose intentions that may seem polluted by such associations. Instead, they prefer to focus on more tangible aspects of what they do, leaving the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions.

Critics, art historians and curators, on the other hand, are often less cautious, as are editors of anthologies. As a consequence of this situation you will find a number of texts that do not use the word ‘sublime’ at all, but which, in the editor’s estimation at least, can fruitfully be understood within the field of ideas that the concept of the sublime generates.

Mapping the Contemporary Sublime

Broadly speaking, four approaches to the sublime can be identified within contemporary art and theory. These derive from Longinus, Burke, Kant and Schiller. From Longinus comes an emphasis on the transcendence of reality through the heroic act; from Burke, the idea of the sublime as an experience of shock and awe and as a destabilizing force; from Kant, the notion of the sublime as revealing a reality that is fundamentally indeterminate, undecidable and unrepresentable; and from Schiller, a reading of the sublime as ecstatic experience.

The texts comprising the seven sections deal with the sublime according to the following categories: The Unrepresentable, Transcendence, Nature, Technology, Terror, The Uncanny and Altered States. The Unrepresentable features the theory that underpins debates about a specifically ‘postmodern’ sublime. Here the reader will encounter some of the most influential thinkers in cultural theory. In Transcendence, on the other hand, a more traditional version of the sublime often persists. Whether from an overtly spiritual perspective, as in the essays by David Morgan or Lynn Herbert, or from a more broadly metaphysical or psychological one, such as discussed by Jean Fisher, this section reveals a sublime that is about finding a higher, more exalted and ‘real’ level of being. Nature turns us back to the roots of much contemporary art in notions of romantic sublimity, identifying the natural world as a primary source of such experiences, while Technology looks at how to a large extent it is now the man-made world of machines that produces in us many of the kinds of emotional states once associated with nature. Terror turns to the darker side of the sublime, looking at how we are within its grasp ‘turned upside down and torn apart’, as Thomas McEvelley puts it, and how the sublime is dangerously implicated in our violent recent history and contemporary society. The Uncanny picks up on aspects of the terror-sublime, emphasizing the conditions whereby in addressing the experience we are also confronting a strange and often unsettling otherness. In Altered States the full power of the sublime to thrust us into a condition in which we are no longer ourselves but radically transformed, even to the point of entering a new kind of reality, shows how contemporary artists and thinkers are increasingly interested in exploring the outer limits of what it means to be human.

Within each of these sections are recorded three levels of encounter with the sublime. The first attempts to evoke the actual experience of the sublime through the medium itself. The second consists

of discourses through which the sublime experience is described or delineated. The third presents theories about the meaning of the sublime. Several recurring points of reference and methodological approaches run through the texts, forming a kind of counterpoint to the main structure. For example, a leitmotif threading through many of the texts is a reference to the American artist Barnett Newman's seminal text from 1948, 'The Sublime is Now', which has had a remarkable critical afterlife, and in particular informs Jean-François Lyotard's influential discussion of the postmodern sublime. Methodologically, the sublime may be invoked performatively in some texts, while at the other extreme it will be analysed through the abstract and detached lens of philosophy. Several texts can clearly be located within a residually religious, mystical or spiritual discourse, while others take a more sociological and even Marxist perspective in exploring the centrality of the concept of the sublime to postmodern culture as a whole. Some texts approach recent history as itself a sublime experience, while others address problems posed by science and technology. All these perspectives are deepened by the application of psychoanalytic theories, and by revisions of received knowledge and belief arising from feminist, ethnic and non-western critique. Ultimately, the sublime is an experience looking for a context. In the pre-modern period, this context was mostly provided by religion. From around the Romantic era onwards, some forms of art took on this role. And more recently, spectacle and mass media have given the sublime a new if not unproblematic home. The sublime is an experience that can serve many interests; it is now for us to decide what it holds for the future.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 3.
- 2 Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Sublime Truth (Part 1)', *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1991) 26; reprinted in Jean-François Courtine, ed., *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
- 3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Part II, Sections I–II; ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 53–4.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790); trans. J.J. Meredith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 106.
- 5 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Sublime* (1801); trans. Julius Elias (New York: Ungar, 1966).
- 6 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (c. 1818–26; transcripts by one of his students, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, published posthumously in 1835 and 1842); trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- 7 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) vol. III; trans. Jill Berman (London: Everyman, 1995).
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872); trans. Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).
- 9 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930); trans David McLintock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002) chapter 4.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936); in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 217–51.
- 11 Carl Jung, in *Jung on Alchemy*, ed. Nathan Schwartz-Salant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 12 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (1954); trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 12.