

Cavity Filler: The Queer Interstice

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the topic of queer space as an interstitial space. Throughout the paper there is an emphasis on the fluctuations that can exist between normative and non-normative ‘readings’ of space. The notion of space I centralize in this paper is the everyday tangible space of lived reality with its physical and geographical structures that we as embodied beings move through and dwell in. Added to this is another notion of space; the knowledge space of interpretation – the abstract space that is occupied by our senses and our meaning making tools. The paper seeks to complexify the notion of ‘queer being’ not simply in relation to heteronormative, putatively ‘sexually-neutral’ public space but also by drawing attention to ‘queer being’ as an interstitial experience - necessarily an occupation of both physical and knowledge space that ‘upsets’ discrete, normative spatial categories. The example of ‘lived reality space’ in this paper is taken from a public festival performance at Federation Square, Melbourne, Australia and it acts as a case study from which an understanding of queer interstitiality is presented.

This paper is drawn from a much larger body of work that uses several examples of ‘real-life’ experience to highlight queer being from a phenomenological point of view. As such, it offers just one fragmented account of a broader idea about the relationship between queer being and queer knowledge.

The paper focuses on a scenario: an outline of lived-in space that serves as a starting point, into which are woven two theoretical threads. One of these threads is an abstract notion of what I call the queer interstice; the other is a concrete interpretation of how we might queer the everydayness of putatively non-sexual space. As a further aim, it shall be through the notion of queer interstitiality that queer ideas, habitations, and penetrations of everyday space are illustrated.

The scenario relates to a Melbourne International Arts Festival performance which took place underground, in passageways directly underneath Federation Square¹.

I shall look at this scenario from a queer penetrative viewpoint which asks, “In what ways can we understand this space differ-

ently from how it is presented to us through what some people term ‘the mainstream’?” I prefer not to overly utilise the notion of ‘the mainstream’ for two principle reasons. The idea of ‘a mainstream’ invokes the other idea of ‘a margin’ and this binary fixes two nebulous categories against each other, in theory, in a way that does not necessarily exist (at least not all the time) in every day lived experience. In other words it is hard to pin point a generic ‘mainstream’ in specific terms, this in turn can skew our meanings of what ‘the margin’ is and how it (and the mainstream) may be mutable entities. A deconstruction of the mainstream/margin problematic would take more room than this paper allows. Having said this, the normative/non-normative binary (while also being vague) does allude to a particular specificity that the ‘mainstream/margin’ does not – what we might call ‘ethical duty’. Normativity requires the ‘right’ things of social subjects – heterosexual, monogamous, law abiding, nucleated families; proud Australian citizens upholding conservative or traditional values. Non-normativity runs against the conservative grain, immanent to it is political activism, a will to question, the display of diverse socio-cultural forms of indi-

viduality and community, liberty, social critique, sexual freedom and so on. My other reason for side-stepping the mainstream/margin binary is because the notion of relational positionality (margin *to* mainstream or indeed periphery *to* centre) is very easy to account for, or be conceived in terms of: 'the masses' and 'the minorities', dominance, subordination and opposition. In this paper I am more concerned with the 'qualities' of queer positions that do not always refer back to an overarching 'mainstream'. The quality of hybridity or interstitiality for example, allows some room for a more subtle theorisation of queer experience and queer knowledge-making processes. Interstitiality is the quality of being between 'things' which (whilst unspecified – which things?) cannot operate with a mainstream/margin or oppositional default. This is not to say that heteronormativity is not a dominant factor of our Australian social fabric; it also to say that a queer sense of being (when conceived in interstitial terms) has no necessary, starting, default position. This allows 'particularity' of queer being to be articulated according to specific context, rather than popular opinion.

In the case study, the questioning of what problematic issues there may be, or what new knowledges can be articulated through queer 'readings' of festival performance, aims to acknowledge yet cast aside the binarising filter of dominant heteronormativity. This dispensation of normativity penetrates and rearranges heterosexual and naturalising norms to make a rightful space for queer inhabitants who may read performance space in innovative and curious ways. These ways utilise in-between, 'sexgender' knowledges and I translate this in-between-ness conceptually as 'the queer interstice' – a location for 'queer sensibility' and queer occupation of space. The scope of this paper allows room only for a brief description of these terms. The term 'queer' without a qualifier should be taken in this paper to indicate the non-normative. Unless expressly stated, it does not constitute an umbrella term for a gay lesbian bisexual transgender transsexual community nor does it constitute a synonym for the word homosexual. The term 'sexgender' is intentionally compounded to indicate an amalgam of both sex and gender different from sex/gender which still conveys a particular distinction. The term 'interstitial space' is especially conceptually laden; fundamental to it are complex and subtle notions of the spaces between ideas, actions and locations.

The following is a brief description of the festival performance scenario.

SUB-SPACE

Over six days in October 2006 members of the public could purchase a ticket to attend an event called Schallmachine 06. This particular event incorporated a very specific combination of architecture and sound with regulated space and very small audiences. The performance of this event was put together by a threefold collaboration: two Melbourne based companiesⁱⁱ worked in conjunction with the Swiss two man partnership of percussion specialist Fritz Hauser, and Boa Baumann an architect. The space for this cross-media project was negotiated with particular architectural aims and the performances took place directly underneath Federation Square.

Three percussion artists sequestered in three separate underground locations named trench, labyrinth, and blue room, performed solo for 25 minutes to an audience of only three people at a time. Every 45 minutes a new audience of nine people would be divided up at random into three groups and ushered to their designated locations.

The performance space integrated (amongst other phenomena) music, art, theatre, unfamiliar building structures, and underground-ness with the audience experience. At the entrance to the passageways underneath Fed Square, a portal-like door acted as a conduit from the familiar to the unknown world and a new set of ushers acting as gatekeepers (each costumed in 'out of the ordinary' attire) received their three audience members and escorted them to the inner performance chamber.

The audience members were subtly moulded into passivity, being led by a series of controllers (ticket collectors, group assigners and different sets of ushers) along an unknown route which took them eventually to the performance space in which the usual use of the underground tunnels (which remains mysterious to most of us) had been displaced temporarily and converted into small, boxed-in theatrical sites where the percussionists performed.

DISCUSSION OF THE SCENARIO

The scenario involved semi-private underground space, and was experienced with varying degrees of regulation. Already there is a problem in articulating how this scenario has operated; before discussing how it works in terms of an interstitial and penetrative opportunity I wish to make it clear that I am not about to deconstruct a public space / private space dichotomy.

A notable critique of 'public' in the sense of a public sphere (especially in relation to ambiguous and/or fictional cultural formation which is challenged by a queer socio/cultural environment) that I mention in passing is Michael Warner's essay, 'Publics and Counterpublics'. Warner rigorously analyses what a public is, how it is constructed and what constitutes it.ⁱⁱⁱ Warner offers a notion of 'public' as a site for different circulatory discourses in which interpretations of 'public' space, as readable text, can be (amongst other readings) poetically expressive. This can be thought of as another salient feature of the queer interstice.

The distinctions between what constitutes private spaces and public spaces are not deconstructed here. In this paper the distinction remains blurry and it is within that blurriness that a queer sensitivity from and of the interstice emerges, and other distinctions can be made between: the sexual, political, aesthetic and functional aspects of space. The theme of centres and peripheries (which we may or may not situate as oppositional) is addressed through the interstices of these positions. Similarly, (to extrapolate from the earlier point about the putative mutability of the mainstream/margin binary) neither 'centre' nor 'periphery' in themselves, as *fixed dualistic categories*, is privileged here.

My overt bias in this paper is to suggest that hybridity or peripherality as an aspect of queer being orients itself not so much in relation to the overarching omnipresence of a notional 'centre' but in direct relation to the infinitely differential micro

events which criss-cross and take place in everyday life as interstitial moments. This brings to mind Foucault's discussion of places - 'spaces' of particular oddity that he calls heterotopias:

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. ^{iv}

We can relate this side-by-side-ness to another theory; Merleau-Ponty's discussion of touching-touched reversibility which I shall turn to in a moment. Foucault's 'side-by-side-ness' is not stressed in corporeal, but rather in spatial, temporal, particularised terms. He goes on to say

We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein... In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, (sic) i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women. The elderly, etc. But these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons, and one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation. ^v

I want to posit the interstitial (rather than *purely* peripheral or marginal) queer space as both a heterotopia of crisis and one of deviation. Foucault speaks of borderlines between crisis and deviant heterotopias. I read this border 'line' as an interstitial 'space' and additionally suggest it exists (especially in relation to the festival performance) as a threshold space. 'Threshold' in the sense I use it here means a quality of interstitial space that refers to potential for something to occur, for example a knowledge shift or a new way of being. The unfamiliar, 'dis'- and 're'-orienting underground and performance space provide elements of that threshold. The threshold moment and experience in this scenario can also be described as heterochronistic^{vi} in which time is experienced fleetingly and compacted; abolishing or suspending for a while, our usual registers of traditional time. In the festival performance scenario, contradictory notions of place, and slices of time are juxtaposed.

The way to illustrate the interstitiality of this festival performance is very simple to begin with; it is to ask in broad terms, "What informs our understanding of this scenario"? We might acknowledge and assume that the dominant understandings are heterosexual, non-sexualised and uni-functional. It is assumed that within this space we will behave in a certain way, by default we 'know' that an access tunnel is to move from a to b, and a festival art performance is to be attended by an observant audience with performance as object of focus. Further assumptions about 'an audience' itself can also be made but it is also interesting if we challenge any normative assumption and ask what else can actually occur in this space, and what can those occurrences (human senses, actions, thoughts) together with the

space itself mean, especially in a queer context. At this point we can begin to speak specifically about interstitiality, penetration and queer sensibility.

THE INNER PASSAGE

In terms of everyday, physical reality entwining with abstract knowledge processes, the festival performance in Melbourne provided a space for the 'free' (read prior to the performance space) body to become confined, consenting (perhaps hesitatingly or nervously), and almost trapped within the structures of the performance and the performance space. This form of heterochronistic spatiality combines in one place, as Foucault suggests, "several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible". ^{vii}

This notion of combinations of contradictory and changeable sites is close to the notion of queer interstitial space that I employ in relation to a queer sensibility. An important addition is the development of that heterotopic space as one in which queers dwell, not only in moments of crisis (although one could argue that there is a perpetual crisis of worldwide queer phobia) but in 'the everyday' which also houses the easinesses as well as the challenges of being.

As a tightly controlled space with authorised access, it is only open to an exclusive group of people. The limitation of access means that an awareness of infiltration of what then also becomes a partially forbidden zone invites a creative and/or hyperrealised reading. Elizabeth Grosz discusses hyper-reality in terms of the way in which bodies and their environments always already produce each other as hyper-real simulations, she says,

The body and its environment, ... produce each other as forms of the hyper-real, as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have had into the image of the other: ... ^{viii}

We can translate this in terms of the festival performance, where the space becomes constructed by the experiencing body (interpreting and sensing it) and vice versa; the body being especially affected by the performance and the performance space. The experience of its staggered borders (the portal-like entry from above- to under-ground, the second entry point – the hand-over to a different usher, the emergence into the artist's tiny performance area, the final exit from 'festival space' back to quotidian reality) as thresholds beckons a queer subjective interpretation of the delineations (temporally fractured) of institutional Australian, 'secret' space^{ix}.

The penetration of regulated or secret space is not necessarily remarkable but what makes it *queerable* in the sense of an interstitial sensitivity, is the idea that even though we all at times venture into semi-secret places, and although they often border, quite closely, our everyday space, a queer interpretation (as a form of knowledge penetration of the normative realm) of this nearness of the everyday – to its own limits – does not privilege that normative realm. Put differently; the penetration into semi-public space – such as attending a 25 minute festival performance in the middle of your lunch break or even just turning off a busy thoroughfare into a suddenly quiet offshoot (emergency exits from shopping malls, back exits from cinema complexes to

car parking lots, hidden stairwells on uni campuses, are all examples) – is so close to the everyday (the hustle and bustle of shopping and working and travelling) that the contrast is sharp enough to elicit senses which do not ‘fit’ the normative quotidian role. This is the territory of queer, perhaps we could say eccentric, or other-worldly interpretation.

One penetrates a ‘secret’ space and is then penetrated by it. This is a sensual mind-body relationship to spatiality and embodiment which can be resisted or embraced. To expand further, it is a mode of interpreting one’s place in space through a deeply inter-subjective process. It is at this point that Merleau-Ponty’s later work from his book, ‘The Visible and the Invisible’ which articulates two ontologically distinct realms as inter-twinable, is useful. Although not a queer text, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is one that I appropriate for a queer interpretation of penetration. This is a twofold penetration – of simultaneously penetrating and being penetrated – not as mutually exclusive experiences but as an oscillating, entangled, interconnection. It is this interconnectedness between self and space, between penetration of self into space and space into self (as with Grosz’s hyper-reality) that is part of the interstitial juncture. In a chapter entitled ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’ Merleau-Ponty discusses the “bond between the flesh and the idea” and in relation to a phenomenology of the horizon he states:

When Husserl spoke of the horizon of the things – of their exterior horizon, which everybody knows, and of their interior horizon that darkness stuffed with visibility of which their surface is but the limit – it is necessary to take the term seriously. No more than are the sky or the earth is the horizon a collection of things held together, or a class name, or a logical possibility of conception, or a system of potentiality of consciousness; it is a new type of being.⁸

In my reading this sense of ‘potential consciousness’ can be a precisely queer interstitial one and the horizon, cast in terms of the underground passageway, is not its far end or low ceiling but its limits of meaning. What we can call a queer ‘new type of being’ exists by challenging those limits through non-normative subjectivity and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that this new being is:

[A] being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being.⁹

The non-normative, new-being and everyday aspects of the Schallmaschine 06 performance that I want to convey are from the writing of a queer author, Lura Szudinska who experienced the performance. It is not about the performance *per se*, it is about queer sensibility and how queer readings of festival spaces can operate as knowledge heuristics; as points of departure from normatively filtered readings. Szudinska comments:

We walked past a door that had a sign that mentioned ‘panic bolts’... The headroom was low. The sound of trains was part of the performance. And distant human sounds (too remote to identify). There were cameras everywhere. The hidden spaces are kept secure. The banal was, down there, suddenly novel. The cyclone-

wire cages of bottled gases, the many-white-doored passages. The red metal pipes, or the blue. Primary-coloured things; everything bright until you go in to a room, which always has a lip, a watch-your-step. ...He was weird. Dour. grey. bald. thick-fingered. unsmiling (sic).^{xii}

Apart from observing the performance, there was another experiential moment in this example which relates to aesthetic expectation in which Szudinska spoke of ‘a couple’ who had come to see the performance:

I think of him still down there and the couple who refused to be separated. I said to the usher, “I wouldn’t choose to be with anyone” and they said “It’s the only half hour we’ll be able to spend together all day”.^{xiii}

Szudinska alludes to the tenacity of coupledness (read by her at the time as normatively heterosexual and monogamous) about how a couple of lovers were separated and placed into different groups of three; about how they complained at the separation insisting that they must watch the same performance and be together. Szudinska starkly observed this contrast to her preference for an experience of the self in which ‘being alone’ with strangers enhanced the uniqueness of the experience (perhaps we could think of this as ‘otherworldliness’) and the ‘individual’ yet intersubjective processes which arose through the challenges of being an audience member of this unusual event: of going into the unknown, into a space of intimacy, confined underground in close proximity to unknown people and surroundings, with an exclusive group of people (the other two audience members and the artist). To a queer reader (remembering that ‘non-normativity’ is constitutive of queerness, not necessarily ‘non-heterosexuality’) this space of tension, of charge, is a threshold space.

A form of aesthetic and intellectual solipsism – the expected function of a space or thing (‘we as a couple will go to see a show, keeping our togetherness impenetrable and our notions of comfort firmly intact’) can override the possibility to think more creatively about particular spaces and things; that mystery, curiosity, imagination and discomfort are in themselves as worthy of our attention as the perfunctory. This is a manifestation of everyday queer interstitiality.

Something of the individual experience which might not have been experienced had she been accompanied by a lover is evident when Szudinska says:

I had a sense of him still under the ground, and the slide of the rough pads of his fingers, ... But the slide, ... was sensual, like he touched me. He, with plain face and grey dust jacket, ... he elevated the mundane to the level of echo, of spirit.... [W]hen he ceased to play, becoming fainter and fainter towards the moment of that caress on wood, which I saw up close like stroked flesh, it was extreme, sexual – but only to me. He was as implacable as placard... It was a moment of tension, at least.^{xiv}

In this ‘solitary’ moment, there was a potential for Szudinska to read any or all elements of the performance as sexual and erotic.

HABITATION

Three aspects of this *literal* festival heterotopia – a sense of interstitial subjectivity, aesthetic interpretation and sexual tension – are all consistent with a notion of queer being which is at once poetic, creative and innovative. The reversible interpenetration of a body into space and vice versa, the queer reading of what can constitute intimate sexy space in relation to the everyday, represent the subtle inroads which wrestle obscure meanings about the non-normative subject as an interstitial dweller.

It is by thinking of a mainstream/margin binary itself as a problematic construct of localising and universalising discourses that another way to articulate these ‘marginal spaces’ as interstices is contextualised: in this paper I have alluded to queer spaces as ideas and occupations between an array of structures of normativity. These spatial constitutions have material particularities, specificities, sophistications, and richnesses. For queers, occupying such places comes with the physical reality of having to carve out a right to inhabit them; this manifests as a phenomenological and political entanglement. The link in the festival performance which points to this entanglement, chiefly resides in the tension between complex/sophisticated and obvious/simple queer sexgender knowledges.

This paper gives only a glimpse of what I call queer sensibility; the narrative produced is partial but located. It is located in the questions we can always ask of normativity and in the interpretations of queer being-ness which have an intimate relationship with space and self-identity. Fundamentally and poignantly entangled within the queer interstices of physical and knowledge spatial occupation, is the idea that ‘being queer’ and ‘queer being’ always *also* occur within ‘sexually designated’ space. This is not to say that queer space unlike non-queer space has to be especially sexual space; but it is to say that *queer* designation of that space which adds, importantly, specific articulations of non-normative space, must be heard as valuable queer knowledge production.

i Fed Square as it is known colloquially, itself a prized ‘above ground’ architectural treasure of Victoria’s capital city, is managed by Federation Square Management Pty Ltd. See the Fed Square web site <http://www.fedsq.com/>.

ii See www.aphids.net and <http://www.speakpercussion.com/> which include reviews of the Schallmachine 06 event.

iii Michael Warner, *Publics And Counterpublics*, Cambridge, Mass. : Zone Books, 2002. See also Arendt’s discussion of public space in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.28 Warner also discusses Arendt in, Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. xxvii

iv Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics*, 16, 1 (Spring 1986):22-27.

v Foucault, ‘Of other Spaces,’ p.25 .

vi From the fourth principle of heterotopia in which Foucault’s idea of temporal heterotopia – part of a ‘set’ of six principles that he used to describe ‘other spaces’ – casts the museum as a place for the odd accumulation of ‘time’ against the ‘festival’ mode of a fairground or themed vacation village in which ‘time’ is at its most transitory.

vii Foucault, ‘Of other Spaces,’ p. 25.

viii Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Bodies-Cities,’ in Beatriz Colomina (ed), *Sexuality and Space*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, p. 242.

ix For a critique of Australian space in terms of a contemporary political and popular ‘threat discourse’ see, Barbara Baird, ‘Contexts for Lesbian Citizenships Across Australian Public Spheres,’ *Social Semiotics*, 14, 1 (April 2004): pp. 67-84. And Baden Offord, ‘The Queer(y)ing of Australian Public Culture Discourse: Activism Rights Discourse and Survival Strategies,’ *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 6, 3, (July 2001) : pp. 155-179.

x Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1992, pp.148 – 149.

xi Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.149.

xii Lura Szudinska, Unpublished manuscript, 2006, p. 2.

xiii Szudinska, p. 3.

xiv Szudinska, p. 3.