

The Ethico-aesthetics of Affect and a Sensational Pedagogy

STEPHANIE SPRINGGAY

OISE, University of Toronto

Introduction

This essay's main purpose is to sketch the relations between affect, politics, and everyday life in order to think sensationally about pedagogy. Thinking affectively about politics differs from approaches that are a direct analysis of signs and discourses, morals and rationales. It is, as Simon O'Sullivan (2006) writes, a way of thinking "beyond the 'horizon of the signifier', beyond textuality...towards matter and to its expressive potentialities" (p. 4). As opposed to an understanding of affect as something to be captured, controlled, rationalized, and suppressed, I attempt to reclaim the affective in order to consider the body's intensities and compositions in knowledge production. Using a performance/interventionist artwork "The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar" as a site from which to think about an affective, and thus an aesthetic approach to politics, I emphasize the importance of sensation in knowledge production.

I begin the paper by considering three different aspects of affect: as transitive, as emotion or feeling, and as the power to affect and be affected, which I read through "The Lactation Station". Following this, I turn to Guattari's "ethico-aesthetic paradigm" in order to characterize

affect as an ethical turn inasmuch as it involves exploring our potential for becoming and our capacity to act in the world. The affective turn in rethinking pedagogy (and the maternal body for that matter) is important for three reasons. First, it challenges and offers an alternative to the Cartesian traditions, which reify cognition, reason, and distance with a more proximal, contingent, and bodily form of thought. Second, affect theory attends to the materialities of normative power emphasizing movement and force in realizing a world that exceeds the boundaries of the norm. Affect increases the body's capacity to act. Likewise, the affective is an attempt to shift from the "linguistic turn" and an emphasis on discourse towards the senses and ethico-aesthetic spaces. Moving across these three orientations is pedagogy. Thus, a sensational pedagogy takes into consideration the materiality of the body's becoming—the body as a sensing and moving interface—and reshapes an ethics "as a creative responsibility for modes of living as they come into being" (Bertelsen & Murphie, 2010, p. 141).

Understanding affect

Affects are forces and intensities. While force is often used to describe affect, affect does not necessarily have to be "forceful", but in fact often exists in the subtlest of intensities.

Affect then can be understood then as gradient bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to compartments of matter virtually any and every sort. (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2)

Affect then is not something that is given but experienced in time and as

duration. Deleuze and Spinoza both suggest that affects increase or diminish, aid or restrain, the body's power to act. Thus, affect is about what the body can *do*. Affects are the productive organization of encounters increasing our capacity to act and be in the world. There are three aspects of affect worthy of being underscored in order to think about affects' relationship to knowledge, ethics, and pedagogy. It is important to note however, that these aspects, although separated in this paper in order to work through them, are in fact multiple and interrelated. These are: affect as transitive, as emotion and feeling, and as power. In order to move through these three aspects of affect, I will turn to a performance/interventionist artwork by a Toronto-based artist Jess Dobkin.

Jess Dobkin's "The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar" which was presented at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) Presentation Gallery in 2006, offered audience participants the chance to taste samples of pasteurized human breast milk by six new mothers (a short video documentary of the work can be viewed at <http://www.jessdobkin.com/videos/9>). In the spirit of wine tasting, participants could sidle -up to the bar and drink shot glass sized samples of breast milk. The artist, from her position as bar tender, talked casually about the 'bouquet' of each donor's milk: "When I interviewed this donor she talked about how much chocolate she ate during her pregnancy". Over 300 people attended the event and more than 100 sampled the milk. In a video recording of the event, we witness one participant claim that the milk tasted sweet, another that her sample "is a lot creamier than the first one", and two men discuss the coconut flavor of their milk-shot.

This paper does not warrant space or time to fully consider the renewed interest in public, participatory, community and interventionist art that has taken on a politicized character against Neoliberalism and economic globalization (see Springgay, in press). Suffice it to say, that

work like “The Lactation Station” fits within this paradigmatic shift. Such work is characterized as collaborative. Concerned with issues of public and social space as well as the movement of knowledge, it is materialized through a diversity of forms and sites. Often referred to as the “pedagogical turn” these practices focus on experimentation rather than representation and on activities that bring into proximity the why and the how of coming together. Artistic modalities like “The Lactation Station” creatively produce new organizational forms and might also be characterized by what Guattari (1995) calls transversality, “a dimension that strives to overcome two impasses... [and] tends to be realized when maximum communication is brought about between different levels and above all in terms of different directions” (p. 80). In transversality, particular knowledges may not be at the forefront of the actions and events taking place at this moment, but they are occurring and emerging from a middle or in-between. In this sense affect is transitive; it is about movement and force. Affects are not specific states but the ongoing “passage of one state to another” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 49) whereby new passages and combinations are developed, that are as yet unknown.

In an interview posted on her website, Dobkin speaks about the impetus behind the work; her own inability to breastfeed her daughter, and the public discourses of being a single, queer mother. Wrestling with the social and political implications of what it means to be a good mother, Dobkin’s performance explores the ambivalent and controversial relationship women in the West have with breastfeeding. At the time of the performance, the *Globe and Mail* published an article stating that fewer than 15 percent of new mothers in Canada meet the minimum standard of breastfeeding for six months (Picard, 2006). In North America the medical community pushes the advantages of breast milk and assumes that mothers who do not breast feed do so because they are unaware of breast milk’s health benefits. However, it is the public vilification of breastfeeding and the discomfort many women have

(either physically or socially) that often prevents women from breastfeeding (Hausman, 2003; Kukla, 2006). “This paradox—women who don’t breast-feed often know they should—springs from a collision between the encoding of the breast as a maternal organ and of breast milk as an infant nutrient, on the one hand, and the competing interpretations of the breast as sexual fetish and of breast milk as abject bodily fluid” (Reeve, 2009, p. 65), on the other..

In addition to the performance staged at the OCAD gallery, the work was advertised by way of a poster that featured Dobkin naked from the waist up shooting streams of breast milk from her naked breasts into two wine goblets. Unlike traditional historical art images of the Madonna and Child, there is no child, the milk is being expressed into what are clearly vehicles for adult consumption, and the nakedness and gesture of the body suggest a hyper sexuality where the artist grabs her own breasts in an act of self-pleasure that provides an entirely different aesthetic. The poster’s temporal texture impinges on our affective registers as a force of emergence and its power resides in a creative, self-organizing transversality. Massumi (2002) explains that what Guattari calls transversality is “the transmission of an impulse of virtuality from one actualization to another and across them all” (p. 42). This force of potential is affective; it is felt, “simultaneously doubling, enabling, and ultimately counteracting the limitative selections of apparatuses of actualization and implantation” (pp. 42-43).

As transitions between other transitions, affects have actual and virtual sides. They are actual in sensations or emotions as a becoming that itself is always in transition (Massumi, 2002). They are virtual in that they carry “unactualized capacities to affect and be affected” (Delanda, 2002, p. 62). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) often reference the “outside”, a site through which bodies form rhizomes with something else. This transitive becoming moves at variable speeds between points so as to continually refigure those points—“a transversal movement that sweeps

one *and* the other away" (p. 25).

It is important to note that Massumi (2002) distinguishes between affect and emotion in that they follow different logics. If affect is unqualified intensity, emotions are qualified intensities. There is no natural or necessary progression from affect to emotion or feeling. Yet emotions and feelings bring us forces, moving us to act and reorganize sensations and instincts. This brings me to the second aspect of affect, emotions and feelings. In "The Lactation Station" it is the coming together of bodies that generates the affect disgust which is then registered, perceived, and qualified as a series of emotions and feelings

The breast, Iris Young (2005) reminds us, is sexual and thus "the feeding function of the breasts must be suppressed, and when the breasts are nursing they are desexualized" (p. 88). Probyn's thinking about disgust and shame provides us with a more complex and untidy understanding of tasting breast milk—or quite frankly of "eating the other" (hooks, 1992). She writes, "In shame, in disgust, the body displays knowledges that may yet surprise us, that point to new corporeal connections" (p. 128).

Analyzing the "The Lactation Station" through affective responses, I argue, disrupts a culture of blame and demands that we examine why and what we feel is disgusting. Probyn argues that in many instances the response to a feeling of disgust is to work through it and reclaim it with pride. For example, the disgust one might have for the extremely obese female body is replaced with an image of 'love your curves'. Or in lactation culture, breastfeeding is a moral choice to provide the best healthy food for your child (Kukla, 2006) despite the fact that both the public imaginary and lactating mothers experience disgust in relation to breastfeeding. Not to denigrate such models of affirmation, Probyn contends that in such moves disgust is repressed, disavowed, and erased. This stifles any potential reflection on the production of disgust and "the power of our bodies to react" (p. 129). In the case of "The

Lactation Station” disgust is registered as the mouth takes in the human milk evoking a visceral, affective response, which then expels it and spits it out. And despite the fact that the milk was ingested via clean and sanitized wine goblets, one cannot help but imagine the taking in of the breast in order to consume the milk. Disgust becomes scandalous because breasts “shatter the border between motherhood and sexuality (Young, 2005, p. 88).

It is in proximity that disgust is generated. Engendered through the fear of contact—the coming together of bodies—disgust operates on an affective level by forcing us to turn away. According to Sarah Ahmed (2004) the association of what is bad is “bound up with questions of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 83). Food—or breast milk—is significant “because disgust is a matter of taste as well as touch—as senses that require proximity to that which is sensed—but also because food is ‘taken into’ the body” (p.83). Ahmed notes the contradiction inherent in food. It is the stuff of survival, but in taking it in we open up our body to that which is not us, to the other. Breast milk is food and a nutrient for infants, but outside of that dyad it is the abject, the excess that is repelled, repressed, and discarded. Thus, breast milk is not inherently unpleasant but when it is brought into contact with our body through the mouth, then this proximity is felt as offensive. Ahmed suggests, however, that disgust, although felt in and on the surface of the body, is not just a gut feeling or reaction. Rather, it is “mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the ways those impressions surface as bodies” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 83). So while many audience participants could critically articulate the social and political ideologies behind finding public tasting of breast milk so disgusting, they found themselves still squeamish about tasting the milk themselves. Their distaste for, or refusal to drink the milk emphasizes the affective fear of contamination and the boundaries between subjects coming undone. Coco Fusco (1995) suggests that the flipside of repulsion is the

fetishistic fascination with the exotic in which the performance of identity of an Other for a 'white' audience is consumed by a rhetoric of multiculturalism. She writes, "the threatening reminder of difference is that the original body, or the physical and visual presence of the cultural Other, must be fetishized, silenced, subjugated, or otherwise controlled to be "appreciated" (p. 45). The attempt at neutralizing the public fear of breast milk by pasteurizing it and serving it in a bourgeois bar-type setting amplified the violent erasure of the Other and the colonization of 'indigenous foodstuff,' by turning it into something exotic and consuming it in a bar-type setting, which implied 'good taste' and a refined social class. The sensory politics of tasting art call into question the maintenance of economic and racial stratification, where "food" marks a body as distinctively other.

In offering an affective reading of "The Lactation Station" I want to argue that Dobkin's work, intended as a intervention into the West's self-consciousness of the (lactating) breast, politicized the exoticness of eating something foreign. In much the same way that Torontonians can eat and appreciate food from all over the world, tasting breast milk gestures, as Probyn (2000) states, "to the pleasure of control, the desire revealed in constraint" (p. 18) that threaten to colonize the body. To the right of the milk bar was a large video projection of Dobkin's interviews with the six mothers who had donated the milk. While this video enabled a more phenomenological and intimate narrative of the breastfeeding mother's diverse experiences, the audience-participants' actions—ingesting the milk, noting its various flavors, and feeling repelled and/or fascinated with tasting—forced the spectacle of Otherness out into the open. While the pervasiveness of food in art and culture can create spaces of "affiliation by merging difference under the rubric of congeniality, food can also underscore and exacerbate difference by framing otherness in culinary terms" (Drobnick, 1999, pp. 77-78). Writing about her own performance, "The Couple in the Cage" Fusco (1995) notes that "even

those who saw our performance as art rather than artifact appeared to take great pleasure in engaging in the fiction[. B]y paying money to see us enact completely nonsensical or humiliating tasks...audiences invariably revealed their familiarity with the scenario to which we alluded" (p. 50). Commodified by an art institution, audiences were all too happy to sit comfortably at the bar as a gesture that breast milk wasn't all that threatening, and thereby consume difference palatably.

Miriam Simun's "The Human Cheese Shop" (see <http://www.miriamsimun.com/>) is another example of the commodification and consumption of breast milk as art. In Simun's performance "The Lady Cheese Shop", which bears a striking resemblance to Dobkin's work, participants could sample three different types of cheese made from three different women's breastmilk. Offered in the form of cheese, her work plays within the affective realm but makes it all the more palatable. Moreover, the poster for her exhibition rendered an image of her in her bra and pants sternly facing front and centre, with her breast pump perched on a table to her left. The affective registers transverse across cyborgs, human/animal farming, and matters of taste similar to Dobkin's gesture. Simun's image/performance provokes ethical questions about the laboring body and the global market.

The third aspect of affect is the power to affect and be affected. In concert with the 'live' performance there was another affective modality that permeated the work. The media seemed to fixate on the moral indignation that her work was funded through the Canada Council for the Arts, yet this was merely a veil behind which hid the threat of the queer maternal body.¹ If, as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) contend, eating reveals "a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in the relations with one another" (p. 90), then the real

threat was the opening up—the penetration—of the heteronormative body to other bodies. As such, the affective power of “The Lactation Station” exposes and intervenes in the public imaginary about what is edible and what is in ‘good taste’.

Taste is a sense that signifies discrimination, whether in the Kantian sense of aesthetics, moral value or social decorum, or in relationship to the sensory experiences of the mouth. According to Kant (1951) the “faculty of taste” was the means by which one aesthetically judged beauty, which differed from “the culture of taste” or the sensory qualities of the mouth. Eating was assumed to be an individual act and expressed as either pleasant or unpleasant, while the faculty of taste was a transcendent point of view, equated with vision and reason. As Jennifer Fisher (1999) notes, “taste evolved as a term to describe the formal judgments of aesthetic value as well as the unspoken, but enacted, codes for conduct or “good taste”” (p. 31). In contrast to the contiguous experience of tasting something with our tongue, taste as a form of judgment was embedded in the notion of rational thought, and thus associated with distance and separation of the mind and body (Vasseleu, 1998). Michael Peters (2004) contends that in education this separation of mind and body “stands for a host of optional metaphors that serve to dualize or bifurcate reason and emotion. Metaphors in their application and formalisation, have become the substance of educational practice” (p. 14).

In relation to the maternal body, breastfeeding practices are affected by the values, attitudes, histories and knowledges we have of food and the breast. Here, “good taste” refers to moral symbolism and discretion. For instance, Alison Bartlett (2005) concludes that examples of scandalous public breastfeeding always have to do with white middle-class urban women. Public lactation by a white middle-class heteronormative and married mother represents a threat to particular social values, which are assumed to be “average” or “normative”. She

argues that women's use of public space to breastfeed challenges dominant understandings of public citizenry, which are implied in white middle class values. It is significant that indigenous, ethnic, and lower socioeconomic groups of women are less likely to be publically shunned from breastfeeding outside of the home, as the moral symbolism of "taste" would imply that such groups would always participate in public forms of breastfeeding and thus embody "poor taste". If whiteness becomes a marker for ideal motherhood and breastfeeding has often been linked to the project of nation-forming then it follows that mothers who deviate from such inscriptions would be deemed unfit and lacking "taste" (Bartlett, 2005).

In this sense then, "The Lactation Station" affectively converges the discriminatory practices of taste with the sensational experiences of tasting. For instance, Jennifer Fisher (1999) writes that "eating in the white cube of the gallery space disturbs the modernist paradigm of a purely visualist taste" (p. 29) and thus tasting art contradicts our obsession with scopic consumption. Likewise, taste, even defined as bad or disgusting, "shows us how the boundaries that allow the distinction between subjects and objects are undone in the moment of their making" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 83). Things we taste merge with our bodies and thus we become aware of our own body in space.

In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva (1982) suggests that the relationship between disgust and abjection is the border (like the skin that forms on milk). It is not that the abject has gotten inside of us but that it existed there all along turning inside out and outside in. Just as touch produces disgust, disgust turns us away; "it pulls away with an intense movement that registers in the pit of the stomach" (Ahmed, 2004, p.84). It is the movement, the vacillation between touching and repulsion that is disgust.

[T]o feel disgust is to be fully, indeed physically, conscious of being within the realm of uneasy categories: merely

saying that something disgusts me is to have placed myself beyond it; yet my embarrassment at being caught within this categorical play may entail some level of self-disgust. Simply put, one of the effects of experiencing shame and disgust is a sense that categories of right and wrong, agreeable and distasteful, desirous and abominable, are rendered pressing and tangible. (Probyn, 2000, p. 132)

Disgust is dependent on proximity. The object that we find disgusting must be close to us to register in intensity. It is through sensation that the object is “felt to be so ‘offensive’ that it sickens and over takes the body” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85). How can we think through disgust in a way that works with the complicated relations between bodies? How might we think about politics affectively and thus aesthetically? If affects do not organize bodies structurally but rather play on the surface of bodies and expose their movements, then politics becomes a rearticulation of movement and sensation (Manning, 2007). Likewise, we might think of pedagogy sensationally, rethinking the value of the aesthetic within the pedagogical encounter.

The ethico-aesthetic and a sensational pedagogy

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe the body as variously informed intensities and speeds, conceived of in relation to other bodies or entities. In this sense the body is dissolved from any formulaic interpretation based on biological terms. As Grosz (1994) indicates “it is the body before and in excess of the coalescence of its intensities and their sedimentation into meaningful, functional, organized, transcendent totalities...a point or process to which all bodies, through their stratifications, tend” (p. 201). Bodies or entities are thus assemblages constituting life through becomings.

Thinking about pedagogy from a Deleuzian/Guattarian agenda is thus a political and ethical framework; a thinking outside the boundaries of epistemological, Cartesian thought. An affective or sensational pedagogy is a pedagogy of encounters that engender movement, duration, force, and intensity, rather than a semiotic regime of signification and representation. Moreover, “the sign” in Deleuzian thought is aesthetic and not dependent on recognition. Rather it operates as force. Thus, the pedagogical encounter becomes an event of sensation, a “processural creativity” (Guattari, 1995, p. 13), and thus an alternative to universal reductionism.

Similarly, Guattari (2000) argues we must turn to aesthetic dimensions of politics, taking into account molecular domains of sensibility. This aesthetic dimension is taken up in Probyn’s (2000) writing: “If ‘ethics’ cannot be reified as an object, but always consists of practices that foreground how we relate to ourselves and to others, then the task of thinking ethics will necessarily be a doubled one” (p. 64). This doubling requires that we seek out an ethical practice that “disturbs, opens up and rearranges different parts of ourselves” (p. 70). Guattari (1996) states that to be ethical the transversal connections “must allow the acceptance of the other” (p. 216). The ethical dimensions of eating would mean that the body no longer passively accepts what goes into it; rather the body opens itself up to deterritorializations, a multitude of surfaces, “a call to creativity, a call to become actively involved in various strategies and practices that will allow us to produce/transform, and perhaps even go beyond, our habitual selves” (O’Sullivan, 2007).

Part of the goal here is to unsettle dominant features of reason and standardization that have become the plight of public schooling, education, and, in turn, our understanding of the maternal subject. Turning to the ethico-aesthetics of affect in order to form a new sense of pedagogy enables educators to “see in a positive light the very slippages, affects, and other “unruly” curricular experiences” (Roy, 2003, p. 85) of

pedagogical encounters. The proximity of bodies coming too close, of consuming the Other, opens up the possibility of thinking about pedagogy otherwise. Britzman (1998) suggests that “a more useful way to think about feelings requires attention to what it is that structures the ways in which feelings are imagined. [Therefore] pedagogy might provoke the strange study of where feelings break down...pedagogy might become curious about what conceptual orders have to do with affectivity” (p. 84). It is this breaking down, or to what Deleuze might refer as the leakages, that “acts to remove the organism from its normal habitat of sameness and identity to a becoming-other or a continually differentiating space where a degree of spontaneous generation can occur” (Roy, 2003, p. 163). These are the moments of transversality, which consist of “relations of movement and rest, capacities to affect and be affected” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 261). Because of the realization that affects link up with other affects—that affects are not benign or innate and given, but co-produced through proximal encounters—then, how we understand affect shifts from something passively bound to the body to an event that is becoming.

The sensational pedagogy of “The Lactation Station” negotiates between various registers of taste and embraces the complexities of lived, affective experience. The dilemma becomes how to speak of those difficulties and inco-measurable experiences of being in proximity without having those intensities and complex occurrences turned into easily packaged and fetishized objects of pleasure. In thinking sensationally, we think outside of the perfect ethical relation—the mother responding to her child over her own needs—and instead think about how that coupling relationship, the coming too close, engenders other ways of thinking and being in difference. An aesthetic approach to politics and to pedagogy acknowledges the importance of sensation and creation. In ethico-aesthetics, Guattari (1995) writes “to speak of creation is to speak of the responsibility of the creative instance with regard to the

thing created, inflection of the state of things, bifurcation beyond pre-established schemas, once again taking into account alterity in its extreme modalities (p. 107). Elaborating and extending our understanding of pedagogy to include affect, aesthetics, and the body is important in remembering that pedagogy is more than just “strategies” for teaching. Rather, a sensational pedagogy is open and undetermined; it is a sticky entanglement of affect and matter.

Notes

¹ See:

<http://www.jessdobkin.com/index.html/8-press/pages/5-articles>

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