

The Art of Transitioning

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Transitioning our thinking about transsexuality from a category of identity to a problem of aesthetics requires us to consider the experience of conceptual breakdown as the grounds for transformation and a new education. Britzman (2011) asks us to conceptualize education as an “unresolved problem” (p. 23) that inevitably calls forth defenses but also “permits new learning dispositions” (p. 23). She reminds us that psychoanalysis invites us to resist closure and to consider the inherent impasse between body and language. At its best, psychoanalytic thought is always unfinished, uncertain of itself, and open to its own collapse. Can we understand, then, the collapse in psychoanalytic discourse around the topic of transsexuality as a problem of education that also belongs to the trauma of learning gender? I suggest that we can treat transsexuality as an enigmatic signifier, an unconscious representation of a structural deadlock, which cannot be reduced to the historical and contingent conditions that define our current hegemonic regime of sexual difference. This approach would require us to empty the construct of transsexuality from its “known” biological, social, and medical meanings in order to suspend it as an object of phantasy; that is, as an object through which the void of selfhood and desire materializes itself. To understand this transformation, I turn to the art of Anish Kapoor and to return to Meltzer’s notion of aesthetic conflict.

“Memory” is an egg-shaped construction that is both heavy and hollow. It fills a room in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, yet it also gives the observer the impression that the underside of the capsule can be accessed through the narrow gaps on

its sides. Art historian Henri Lustiger-Thaler (2010) observes how the viewer is struck by the “purposeful inaccessibility” of the piece, because the viewer cannot access the whole (p. 17) Kapoor’s giant capsule is simultaneously solid and hollow, certain in its concreteness and steadiness, yet deceptively empty. It is as certain as a vivid memory, a flashy, forceful screen that conceals its hollowness and the parts that are absent or cannot be accessed. The enigma and confusion evoked by memory brings me to Meltzer.

Meltzer poses the beauty of the mother’s body as the first enigmatic object for the infant and names this encounter an “aesthetic conflict”. Here is where the conflict begins: something cannot be seen and it is with the invisible that the baby is preoccupied. The baby’s interest in what is inside the (m)other’s body leaves a trace, in the form of a problem of origin and a demand to understand. Meltzer posits the encounter of the baby with the infinite enigma of the maternal body as both satisfying and violent because satisfaction is also experienced as violating the limits of the infant’s body. Hence, our first position in relation to beauty is ambivalent in the sense that such beauty stands before the child, it is not a creation of the child. The baby feels he is the creator of the breast, yet experiences the breast as otherness through its unavailability. In this sense, the beauty and enigmatic character of the mother’s otherness disrupts the infant’s primary narcissism and inaugurates a conflict between sensual apprehension and creative imagination, “inside and outside, essence and appearance, and between presence and absence” (Britzman, *Aesthetic* 13). The notion of aesthetic conflict allows us to conceptualize the subject’s gradual capacity to register otherness, before and beyond words. The enigmatic presence of the other arouses curiosity and allows questions and doubt, thus calling forth a search for meaning that constitutes the grounds for connection

and intimacy. But doubt also brings forth anxiety and pain that often stirs a violent wish to see the other's insides. It is in between this search for knowledge and truth, on the one hand, and fantasies of intrusive projective identification, on the other, that the subject walks the narrow path of imagination.

As a gradually developing capacity to create psychic space, a transitional area of both impasse and connection, thinking involves the possibility of holding things in one's mind, where emotional experience is stored as memory rather than acted out. The creation of internal transitional space is linked with the process of apprehension of beauty. What is apprehended is the affect evoked through the experience of aesthetic conflict that becomes tolerable through its links with an internalized object of care. In this sense, the apprehension of beauty is a necessary condition for the creation of internal transitional space where the tension between the registration of the parental other as an object of care that, nevertheless, remains enigmatic, can be sustained. To tolerate the experience of transitionality means, therefore, to sustain the inner tension of the differentiating encounter with the other through one's curiosity and the ability to embody the psychic conflict.

Here, thinking about the transsexual body as a place of emotional meaning, and hence as a psychic position, opens the question of how gender elicits an aesthetic conflict. If gender functions as a veil for the constitutive instability of the subject split by her unconscious, it can be argued that every gender disposition carries a kernel of helplessness, anxiety and guilt, and therefore it is vulnerable to dissociation, splitting, and idealization. The interpellation of gender is both a conscious and an unconscious hailing of the child that positions her in a symbolic system of sexual difference from birth, or

even before. It is sustained by the unconscious maternal environment which includes not only the mother's unconscious desire but the totality of her history, an environment that is continually reinforced by a social discourse that is all encompassing and whose boundaries —its own self-difference— are impossible to identify.

I therefore find in art a metaphor for narrating a set of preoccupations that concern the dispersal of desire and its polymorphous nature, along with an embodied response to this dispersal. In examining Kapoor's art, in particular his installation "Memory", I want to understand how the creation of such intermediate space produces a form of aesthetic crisis for the viewer. Thinking of the image of the transsexual body through the enigmatic, pleasurable, erotic, and destabilizing effects of such art objects, and thinking of art, conversely, as a metaphor for the unpredictable course of embodiment, moves us closer to the enigmatic nature of desire which does not know its object but finds truth in its beauty. Through its enigmatic indecipherability, art confronts us once again with the murkiness of childhood experience, that is, with its conflation of subject and object, reality and fantasy, perception and imagination. Through this approach that focuses on the imagination, we may also soften our hold on gender certainty. Meltzer's conceptualization of the apprehension of beauty captures the paradox of grasping and simultaneously being unsettled by the other's enigmatic body. In other words, the encounter with the transsexual body and with the object of art constitutes an opportunity to apprehend and be apprehended by the difference registered through embodied experiences of transitionality. Both the insufficiency of gender categorizations in signifying the ambiguous body and the inadequacy of our sensibility and imagination in

making sense of the enigmatic object of art hold the potential and risks that Meltzer identifies at the core of the aesthetic conflict.

Turning briefly to Kapoor's installation, opens the concept of gender to its oscillations. I find Kapoor's work captivating in its capacity to invoke terror and awe, fullness and emptiness, tenderness and violence. His work seems to capture the conflation of body and psyche, the "extimate" zone imagined by Lacan (...) where the body and its surroundings, inside and outside are conflated. The tubular, concave, slippery objects turn us on, stimulating our sexuality into being, inviting compulsion (and repulsion) associated with bodily orifices. We want to grab, touch, caress, or turn away in disgust. In turn we feel watched and grabbed, teased and laughed at by its seeming resistance to meaning and accessibility. Art bring us closer to the traces of the fluttering states of our beginning where passivity and activity, inside and outside were murky. Through Kapoor's work, I want to show the inherent tensions in approaching the enigmatic object of the transsexual body. Like the aesthetic crisis produced by Kapoor's spectacular installations, the encounter with transsexuality can interrupt our imaginary certainty of gender. I propose then, that transsexuality can be thought of a placeholder for the incommensurability between gender and sexual difference. To the extent that the transsexual's peculiar response to the symbolic demand to situate ourselves in gender makes apparent this irresolvable tension, I argue that the encounter with the transsexual body may bring forth an aesthetic crisis that destabilizes our gender certitude, thus inviting us to confront anew the enigma of our sexual identifications.

Confronting the obscurity of enigmatic objects returns us to our natality where the enigma of pleasure-pain, presence-absence sets our sexuality in transit and pushes for

representation. The elusive temporality created by this strange and estranging encounter gives rise to conflicts with knowledge, love and truth. As we get closer to Kapoor's works of art we may wonder what is behind the object? Can we get inside it? What will I make from what I don't understand?

Lustiger-Thaler describes Kapoor's abstract sculpture "Memory" in ways that illuminate the history of abstract art as an art form that attempt to represent the unrepresentable "Memory", he suggests, "offers us a glimpse into the subterranean other side, where memory is still largely latent and imaginary" (p. 17). "Memory" with its hinting gaps invites us to 'come in' only to be struck by an impossibility that remains hidden. There is a limit to the visible image, forcing the onlooker to confront the void. Meaninglessness emerges as one tries to get a full grasp of the object, to situate it in time or history, and to stabilize its meaning. As the onlooker gets closer to Kapoor's "Memory", the materiality of the art object is revealed as imaginary and fleeting. The solid capsule is empty and its striking exterior hides an inaccessible underside. The encounter with the enigmatic structure of "Memory", also calls upon the observer to search for the unattainable and stir both a desire for closeness in order to see, as well as frustration in the proscribed desire to access the structure's inside. Yet, in facing the enigma of "Memory", the onlooker may turn her anxiety over the obscurity of the object into a devaluation of its undecipherable mystery: "a child could do it", "It does not make sense". There is assimilation between the transference to these enigmatic situations and the aesthetic conflict that is evoked with the original parental figure. An aesthetic crisis unfolds as our passion for and our hatred of knowledge intersect. We attempt to both apprehend and repel the object that evokes a trace of inchoateness and estrangement.

Seen as an analytic object, Kapoor's sculptures allows us to think of the outside as the nucleus of our interiority and ponder the way in which memory unites and separates outside and inside, past and future. Memory is a suspended transitory space where "time and space have no real bearing" (ibid., p. 49). The "alien alterity" (Dean, 2000, p. 53) of the outside inhabits our innermost core. Can observation of enigmatic art and its impact on us help us to sketch a theory of sexuality? This question suggests that possible link between these objects and the transsexual body.

Analysis teaches us to look at objects diagonally, from the side, as if from a third eye, creating a space of emptiness, an enigma that linearity forecloses. A similar lesson is found in art. Kapoor's art, whose presence Bhaba describes as ubiquitous (Bhaba, p. 180) also places the spectator in transition, interrupting their ongoing history. Looking at gender from this diagonal space opens us up to its illusive qualities that allow us to make it our own creation. We are reminded through this fractured look, that identification is always partial, always conflictual, and so gender too, has this doubling effect. The nature of gender we may say, like the nature of the unconscious, presents only its tip. What emerges as presence or as day residue is a sort of a gathering point. Like memory, gender gives the appearance of wholeness but is made up of the material of phantasy that can never be stabilized in time.

The work of psychoanalysis performs an act that is akin to what is described as a feature of Kapoor's work: "a distinction between the didacticism of 'expression' and the divination of 'bringing to expression'. It is the reliance of the analytic act and the work of art to open its narrative to emptiness, timelessness through sexuality, which pushes it out of balance. Kapoor's void forces us to recognize that carving identity is not a process of

forming in relation to presence and absence but in the moments of contradictory states where absence and presence unite; where the eye is felt to absorb an image but also registers its blind spot. Analysis too relies on knowledge from the negative. Negation captures the said and the not said, the present and its inverse. Like gender, analysis does not reveal truth but reassembles and blurs surfaces, in this sense, permitting an act of “voiding” (Bhaba p. 183), emptying the ideality of history. The truth that is created in the process no longer takes the physical shape of the past but becomes other. I liken here the way in which materiality is described by Bhaba (p184) like “living tissue” that enables us “to make something else possible” by “its contingent and relational medium” to the gendered body that becomes a tenuous creation when it is treated as an aesthetic object. Bringing sexuality, which is outside time, to the pathos of the narrative, means, that gender too is always in flux, between imaginary and imagination. P.186

Thinking of the transsexual body as an analytic object allows for the extending of our field of vision with regard to sexuality and its embodiment in gender. Like the spectator’s eye in relation to art, our mind’s eye is pushed and pulled, back and forth “side by side”. The disjunctive temporal qualities of analysis, like the void disclosed through enigma of art and the narrative calls forth an otherness, a spectator’s gaze that holds, through a novel narrative, the diverse temporalities. Gender here, as a narrative that unites temporalities, that, like art work, displays “transition between the perceptual and conceptual” (p.186), becomes a sort of a ‘gathering place’. Like the artist’s stone is “not about the stone but about something else”...’is part of a circulatory exchange of difference and similitude, the repetition of the shape and the revision of the sign, that is peculiar to the object in transition”(p.186). The transsexual body is a reminder of

fullness and emptiness of embodiment, of the obliquity of the body's present: a trace of the primal past, yet also of the future, in transition.

Transsexuality sows deep doubts about the way we conceive gender, the mastery over sexuality and the body and the way in which we think about the history of our gender. Transitioning opens up interesting questions regarding the oddity of the body, the newness of comfort in one's body and the question of how to live with our gender problems. The question of making meaning and assuming subjectivity is negotiated through the analytic narrative and therefore we must ask ourselves: what is the ethical stance that psychoanalytic practice depends upon? Do we listen with the attempt to help the patient adapt to larger social structures, which the analyst comes to represent, or do we participate in a creative construction of psychic space? How relevant is the clinic in terms of understanding social structures and political life? I have argued that psychoanalytic ethics requires us to only be interested in the question of how people live their lives or get caught in the imaginary. The more important questions to psychoanalysis therefore, are those that allow us to search and create. I argue that the question of transsexual surgery must shift in psychoanalysis from one of "reassignment" to one concerning "transitioning". Transitioning opens up a new discourse of agency and care that take time to develop.

Still, the question of re-assignment surgery is often invoked in some psychoanalytic narratives as an indication of foreclosure of the symbolic and hence of a psychotic organization of the transsexual (e.g. Chiland, 1994; Wolfe Bernstein (2011); Millot, 1990). The transsexual, it is often argued, wishes to change their sex but, in mistaking sex for genitalia, they fail to change their positioning in relation to jouissance.

Lacan's mirror stage, for example, has been used as a way to question the psychic stability of the transsexual with the disenchantment of the transsexual with his or her body assumed to relate to a failure of the transsexual to identify with their "his or her" image.

What is problematic about this position, however, is that there is a forgetfulness that what identity means in the mirror stage is a retroactive construct. It forgets that, ostensibly, the baby's reaction is that of jubilation and that what happens to the baby in front of the mirror is an adult construction. Such observation cannot be independent from the maternal anticipation of the baby's future. In the same way, the insistence on equating transexuality with psychotic "certainty" "forgets" that no one escapes the imaginary of gender and that each analysis concerns the question "what is the state of *this* imaginary", which is tied to the specificity of the unconscious.

The question of fetishism or symbolic equation exemplifies the very contradiction inherent to gender and to thinking: a fight with psychic difference through clutching on to certainty. It becomes evident then that holding on to the enigma of sexuality is difficult and that even psychoanalysis fails its own decentering of the phallus, by holding on to certainty, just as its discourse predicts. Psychoanalysis, as any discourse, cannot resist being affected by its own trauma. Psychoanalysis, as a discourse concerned with representation also takes heed of the fact that the pressure of presenting in the world is universal. We may therefore ask ourselves, is psychoanalysis (as opposed to psychiatry or psychology) not interested in the effort involved (the drive) and the capacity to live without falling apart (suicide or murder)? If so, why would we not consider the possibility of surgery as a radical intervention that is also an act of hope or an expression

of the transformative nature of the human? As a discourse concerned with the unconscious, however, there is also recognition in psychoanalysis that there cannot be control over the way our presentation is received. It is this catch that makes presentation hysterical. We must therefore ask ourselves: is psychoanalysis to be a watchdog for medical profession? Or, is it an experiment in meaning affected by technique? If we agree that psychological life is determined by a force that we don't know, how do we link those desires to our choice and how do we live creatively with the symptom?

An aesthetic approach to the question of transsexuality, allows us to consider the ways in which surgery opens the possibility of representing oneself comfortably in the world in a way that it signifies a shift in relation to internal objects. Like the encounter with an enigmatic object, surgery is new beginning - we do not know what will happen afterwards and what possibilities will be opened or foreclosed. In analysis our narrative becomes a novel through imagination; the ability to tolerate waiting that something will emerge that may outstrip the capacity for understanding and touch the unknown.

Bringing together strange objects like art, transsexuality and psychic space, we are left with a set of questions that also remind us that to question is to take distance and that in taking distance the seeming cacophony of odd objects may turn into interesting music. It is this distance from the authority of knowledge that is required of psychoanalysis, so that psychoanalysis can give up its captivation with its own mirror image, and continues to invent itself.

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¹ This paper includes excerpts from an upcoming book titled “Transsexuality and the Art of Transitioning: A Lacanian Perspective” (Routledge).