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‘Delicious turbulence’

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A position statement

I am not secure with a position statement. I am aware that there are times when a position, although perhaps shifting, needs to be assumed. Indeed one may argue that one always has a position on just about everything. Perhaps true, but, a categorical statement as to an ideological position is difficult to make – for me, anyway. I find the idea of a position statement rather curious and difficult.

When thinking of taking up a position I am reminded of the game that children play at the seaside where they take a position in the shallows, wait for waves and try to hold fast while the waves come in and then roll out again. As a child, I remember the wonderful sensation when wave and sand particles pulled back around my legs in a delicious turbulence. In the backwash (‘riptide’) one would feel the salt water and the grains of sand rush back around one’s legs, sometimes so forcefully that it stung. Over the course of the game one’s feet would sink further and further into the sand making fast one’s stance. But, the secure embrace of the sand only made one increasingly more vulnerable to the next wave and, as the game continued, one’s position became more and more precarious and one’s stance became harder to maintain; and, therein lay the joy. The waves rolled back with the sound of the matter of the shore – water, sand and pebbles would produce an inevitable and strangely amplified noise as returning wave dragged the sand particles and pebbles over each other. One would hear this as one was forced to yield, or, at least shift, one’s position.

And yet, a statement is a thesis, is about place¹. It is in effect about setting oneself fast in place, (staunch in defiance against the ineluctable force of waves – rather like King Canute). However where I place myself in making this position statement is in relation to somewhere that is already a place. I guess what I am in effect saying, is that in positioning myself, signaling interest(s), I am positioning myself in ‘relation to’ ‘material thinking’ which is itself setting up ‘place’ in a discursive field.

¹ Thesis is, for Serres, the ‘action of putting something in place’.

The term ‘material thinking’ is difficult and exciting for me – both in how it might be used and, in how it may mean.

I am concerned that the term may be used as a hard bracket, that not only claims but also holds in place, determinedly and unyieldingly, a set of practices and discourses; setting a hard measure for what may be included, and, segregating absolutely what is in the bracket from other practice and discourses that are not inside it. If it is to be a bracket (and at times it is necessary (sic)) it should be seen merely as a temporary measure that over time will be worked over by what is outside and all around it. But, ultimately, I am resistant to the neatness of the bracket/boundary and critical of the way some of us are using these definitional brackets as measures in the ‘disciplining’ of design.

Rather than enclosing brackets, or, boundaries, I would like to see the term ‘material thinking’ used as a focus, a point of congruence, through which, into and from which, different discourses may be brought together to gather and move, to connect and maybe release hold on each other in order to play a part in understanding, and producing new practices in an expanded field of design.

‘Material thinking’ welds together the abstract spaces of cognitive activity and the materiality of the world in the physical processes through which it is formed; both through an isomorphism where the patterns and processes of material/physical processes and thinking processes are recognized in each other, in a mirroring of each to each, but also in the very real collapse of distinctive boundaries between the physical world (considered as interactions of material and energy) and cognitive abstraction (reflective and speculative activity of the mind considered trans-corporeally) that occurs in practice – and particularly design practice, with its concern for the nitty-gritty of the everyday.

If I was to propose a first article for the journal – not necessarily a position statement but a declaration of a first interest - it would be on ‘perturbation and turbulence’. I am drawn to enquire into the ‘delicious turbulence’ I describe above; the tact-full engagement of body and thoughts with the movements of matter. In the description above ideological instability is represented by a physical event – an event where I as child am knocked down by the waves. I am interested in the way representation acts to connect and collapse the physical and the ideal in practice. But I am particularly interested in ‘turbulence’ as a technique in thinking, in representation and the act, that can be used to challenge the regularities of thought, in and about design. I am also eager to explore how design may be ‘turbulent’ in the way it enters the world; exploring the possibility for designing and the designed ‘object’ (service, system, text, product) to be used to dialectically engage with the regularities of social and cultural practices and the expectation for its objects and open them up to the possibility of being other.

Michel Serres provides a theoretical touchstone for any writing on ‘turbulence’ (Serres, M., *Genesis* 1995). The anecdote used as introduction in this ‘statement’ is foreshadowed by his ‘venus turbulente’. Serres’s Venus (interpreting Botticelli) is a beauty born in and from the ‘turbulent’ waves, who emerges fully formed, still dripping and therefore still attached to the ‘noise’ of the sea. She is order born from disorder carrying that disorder

as part of her make-up. Her form is exceptional, one probability in a sea of probabilities. In counterpoint he also introduces 'la belle noiseuse'. In the painting of 'la belle noiseuse', the artist covers the represented beauty in swathes of paint until only a foot remains visible in the chaotic swirls of colour and matter. Here multiplicity, the noise claims back the exceptional, the beauty.

Serres produces a model of thinking that moves beyond categories of unity and rational order; one where it is important to listen to the 'noise' – the sound and the fury – that subtends matter and thought. He asks that we consider the multiplicity that is the substrate of order in thinking matter and the matter of thinking. Order is the exceptional circumstance in a noise of whatever else may have been and may be (the noise of everything else - chaos).

Serres also appreciates that chaos has a double aspect, productive and destructive. He proposes that chaos is a necessary part of thinking:

'To attempt to think and produce supposes taking risks, supposes living precisely in a flux, that remains outside the classification process of encyclopaedias...All our classified reasoning, all our codices, habits and methods induce us to speak [of chaos] as an outsider or by negation, outside the law and non-meaningful. But I speak a positive chaos [Mais je dis le chaos positif]'

Quoted by Assad, M.L. in *Michel Serres: In search of a Tropography* in 'Chaos and Order' edited By Hayles, K.N., 1991.

In Serres's intelligent materialism 'turbulence' is the instrument of change in a given order. He uses the 'clinamen' (the turbulence around what is formed, as in the way air flows around the cutting edge of a plane's wing) as an index of the instrument of change.

I wish to move the notion of the 'clinamen' from where Serres uses it - exploring systemic change - to an intrinsic exploration of turbulence in design and its processes. There is similarity in that at either scale one is considering onto-generative process (bringing into being) but different because agency, and intention (design), becomes a factor when exploring changes in processes close in: that is, intrinsically rather than systemically.

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