

Affect Theory as a Methodology for Design

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In *Ordinary Affects* (2010), Katherine Stewart, writes,

Affect is the commonplace, labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being. It hums with the background noise of obstinacies and promises, ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points. It stretches across real and imaginary social fields and sediments, linking some kind of everything (p. 340).

'Linking some kind of everything', affects are intensities, resonances, force fields that exist and travel in between bodies and spaces. Affect shines a light on what happens in that unknowable space that is the gap between an event and its cognitive signification. These embodied intensities occur through the automatic functions of our bodies--the membrane of the skin, the beating of the heart, and the rhythm of the breath (Massumi, 2002, p. 26).

Imaginative Interlude:

Imagine if you will an experience of awe or wonder—such as the much clichéd sunset on the beach.

The salty smell in the air.

The changing temperature of the skin as the sun's warmth dissipates

The ever so gradual color changes in the sky

The liquid melding of sky and sea at the horizon line

The rhythmic sounds of moving water

There is gap, fractions of second, between the body's experience of this event and the application of language to label that experience.

Thinking about this gap- between experience itself and representation of that experience is the space of inquiry that is explored by Affect Theory.

Following the linguistic turn in the humanities, the turn to Affect has been embraced by a range of cultural theorists, scientists, biologists, philosophers, feminists, queer theorists, disability activists, and many other scholars working across a range of disciplines who use Theories of Affect as a way of both accessing and disseminating multiple ways of being in and knowing the world (Gregg & Seigworth,

2010; O'Sullivan, 2013; Clough & Halley, 2007). While this turn to Affect has occurred primarily in the written form in the wider humanities, we believe the lens of Affect Theory offers a particularly lucrative opportunity for design education. Gregg & Seigworth (2010) editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* cite Spinoza's famous phrase, 'no one has yet determined what the body can do' (p.3); outlining the very contours of what designers seek to explore—what can the body do in conjunction with objects, with contexts, with environments?

Tracing a genealogy of Affect Theory in art and design education we introduce notions of aesthetic experience expressed by educational philosophers John Dewey and Maxine Greene¹. American educator and philosopher John Dewey (1934/2005) describes experience as, 'a rhythm of intakings and outgivings. Their succession is punctuated and made a rhythm by the existence of intervals, periods in which one phase is ceasing and the other is inchoate and preparing' (p. 58). This sensitivity to time, movement, and rest may be compared to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of, 'affect as becomings' (p. 256). Aesthetic Education philosopher Maxine Greene reminds us of Virginia Woolf's, 'yearning for shocks of awareness, for the 'moments of being' that depended on disentangling herself from the life of habit, 'the cotton wool of daily life'' (2001a, p. 178). In Dewey's 1931 Lectures at Harvard University, compiled in *Art as Experience*, he articulates fine grains of affective experience; describing beginnings (thresholds), flows within (events), consummations, and essential pauses that afford distinction of a part. Both expand aesthetic experience beyond the merely visual, to include the experience of objects, everyday experiences, and events themselves as aesthetic experiences. Dewey's and Greene's thoughts align with Affect Theory's focus on attending to the embodied feeling of aesthetic experiences.

What might be of value to us here is to think of how aesthetic experiences are affective in order to expand Western, modernist concepts of linearity and subject/object separations. Affective aesthetic experiences are entangled with the rhythms of everyday life. Rather than untangling and dissecting forms of experience --affect requires us to have a 'critically entangled contact with affective experience' (Highmore, p. 119). An affective aesthetic experience could be a softly, barely noticed repeating refrain in which transformation is nonexistent or barely perceptible. Affective aesthetic experiences could be entangled with the rhythms of everyday life, noticed only in their eventual accretions. Affective aesthetic experiences could be envisioned as temporary assemblages of bodies, objects, and environments (contexts) in movement through time. These ideas would not be foreign to Dewey and Greene but a welcome murmur emerging from their theories of the aesthetic and devotion to its significance for education.

¹It is significant to note that both Dewey's *Art as Experience* and Greene's *Variations on a Blue Guitar* are compilations of lectures given to audiences, originating with temporally and spatially grounded communication between people, producing, I imagine, affective resonances. Thinking through this idea offers an example of how affect is always on the move, travelling across multiple strata at variable speeds, blooming into spaces as the open up, in the form of lectures, texts, composed assemblages of words, and thus continue to impact scholars across time.

Next, we highlight the connection between Affect Theory and thinkers who consider the philosophy of presence and embodiment within the context of experience. For philosopher Alva Noë (2012), 'the world shows up for us,' but only through constructive transaction (p. 2). This integrated view of self and world is also the theme of *The Embodied Mind* (1993), written by a team consisting of cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, philosopher Evan Thompson, and psychologist Eleanor Rosch. Varela, Thompson & Rosch (1993) expand on phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work to include discoveries in the cognitive sciences. For Noë, Valera, Thompson & Rosch, the permeability of self/selves and environment is the ground for nuanced study of experience. Experiencing is conceived of as an affective action, a movement, a passage, a tuning in, that may be developed and enhanced through affordances (Noë, 2012) and meditative practices of awareness (Valera, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993). To experience the world we intimately engage in a back and forth interaction with it.

Experience is not something that happens in us. It is something we do. Experience itself is a kind of dance—a dynamic involvement and engagement with the world around us. To study the experience, we must study the dance (Noë, 2012, p. 130).

How might thinking about experience in this way impact the structure of inquiry experiences, that is curriculum, projects, and critique? The questions that these lines of thought open up especially for educators of arts and design is:

- What affordances could help us both structure (create situations for the unfolding of) and negotiate (understand the resonances of) affective aesthetic experiences?
- What pedagogical strategies could be set in motion to develop dispositions of inquiry in our students that allow for generative and productive engagement with aesthetic experiences?
- What modes of signification beyond language and supplementing language could express those types of engagements with the world

Brian Massumi's (1987), translator of Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus* (a seminal text for many Affect Theorists), gives us a way to think about affect as method or un/method. Thinking methodology through the lens of Affect Theory provides toolbox,

...to pry open vacant spaces that would enable you to build your life and those of the people around you into a plateau of intensity that would leave afterimages of its dynamism that could be reinjected into still other lives, creating a fabric of heightened states between which any number, the greatest number, of connecting routes would exist (p. xv).

Think of Affect Theory as an orientation to engaging with the world rather than a template. What Affect Theory may be then is a theoretical attitude, a bundle of rhetorical strategies, a practice that demands context and acknowledges lack of closure.

What specific orientations should we suggest for design student who wish to pursue Affect Theory? How can these ideas or 'trajectories of affect' inform design education? We will now like to answer these questions by proposing five 'orientations' that can apply Affect Theory to design research methodologies.

Orientation 0. Define Affect Theory as 'Search' rather than 'Re-Search'

One could define research as a systematic investigation into an event or phenomena with the purpose of forming conclusions that can be communicated to others in order to form new knowledge. This mode of researching creates its findings most typically in writing, or, in an even broader sense, as 'signification.' Strategies of signification are about communicating meaning – or what something was. As a re-presentation within a sign system the event/phenomena is manifested in a system of knowledge that uses pre-ordained signs (like the English language) to describe the object of research as it was at the moment when the research was conducted.

In contrast to research defined in this way, affect theory tries to explore the world 'beyond signification' or as an experience as it *is*. As O'Sullivan states: 'If one does still ask what an affect 'means' then, the answer is not to be given in terms of signification (there is no rhetoric of affect), but on experience, and on the present moment as the product of a particular type of encounter (an analysis)' (O'Sullivan, pg. 44). What O'Sullivan is getting at here is that when one experiences an event, or phenomena within affect theory as a method, to re-present that moment (as research) will not do justice to its 'happening' as a sign/signification. We do not present it as it *is*, but as it *was*. In a sense affect theory as a method is about continued 'search' (becomings – a movement) instead of 're-search' (as it is – being – a stasis).

Orientation 1. Read A Thousand Plateaus

Deleuze and Guattari's book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (in French: *Mille Plateaux*)

'... is an attempt to reconfigure the way we think about the world in an affirmative and creative manner' (O'Sullivan, pg. 12). This text is mistakenly read for a 'logic' or 'understanding' within the framework scholarship and reason establish for the communication of knowledge as understood as something we can grasp or know factually. The book is trying to critique that type of thinking and knowledge making. In other words, the book is about making sense of the world beyond the senses. In fact, the senses in which we categories, sort or capture the world are systems that research frequently relies upon (especially empirical research) to create knowledge. What if these senses, or categories of making sense of the world were themselves created? This skews our ways of investigating events and phenomena. As Karl Marx stated: 'The forming of the five senses is a labor of humanized nature. The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present' (Marx, 1844/1988, pp. 108-9). Marx underlines the problem of the 'logic' of assuming the senses are unbiased vehicles with which to investigate the world, rather they are static categories that funnel and shape our reporting of representations of the world.

The *Thousand Plateaus* is a way to recover the world from representational systems (including signification). To make sense of the text is not the experience sought by the authors, but rather an affect of becoming in reading – a reading that emphasizes creativity over critique, complexity and chaos over reduction and simplicity. That is precisely why designers should read the text. It is an exemplar of an attempt to move away from writing as a default setting for research in which the goals are clarity, logical reason, re-presentation, etc. are over-determined; just like when only thinking in terms of five senses we over-determine our ability to investigate the world. Here the *Thousand Plateaus* splinters the notion that research results in 'reports', neat arguments, or logical algorithmic analysis. Instead we get adventure, trajectories, becomings, creative thoughts, funk and *poiësis*.

Orientation 2. Realize Affect 'Does'

Where does affect 'happen'? *'The Realm of Affect is all around us and there are as many different strategies for accessing it, as there are subjects'* (O'Sullivan, pg. 47). As O'Sullivan relates to us in this passage the 'realm' of affect is everyday life. All the moments in which we move through the world are potentially moments to access affects. As O'Sullivan states elsewhere: 'Affects are passages of intensity, a reaction in or on the body at the level of matter' (O'Sullivan, pg. 41). Affect does and is an immanent, meaning related to matter (things in the world) and experience. This immanent world has a movement that is beyond representation – its affects are literally beyond representation (and thus signification).

How do we to understand an Orange – or an iPhone if affects are *beyond meaning* (as found in discourse/language)? How do we communicate affect? The key here is to remember Deleuze & Guattari in suggesting Affect Theories are not after what *the meaning of something is*, but what something *does*. So its not a matter of asking 'what is the meaning' of this or that design, but what does this design 'do.'

Orientation 3. Identify Open Systems

For Affect Theory the concept of rhizome is important. A Rhizomatic system or anti-system is one without center of central organizing motif. For Rhizomatic thinking a principle of connectivity is evoked and becoming is sought, rather than 'being.' In other words, when research is conducted the search for stable definitions and knowledge is the fixing of signification to a phenomena or event. This creates the being of the event/phenomena and in essence 'dis-connects' it from the immanence of its moment. A researcher 'freezes in place' phenomena in order to know, rather than articulating in some way a becoming or experience of it as an affect.

This is also another telling of the age old tale of qualitative vs. quantitative methodologies. Quantitative Methods are measured and assessed, they are 'representable' data – they 'be' (being). Qualitative Methods on the other hand seek to go beyond the representational surface to retrieve 'rich' or 'thick' data. This is an attempt, in principle, to seek 'becomings' – to seek an articulation of an event or phenomena as an experience. Here the goal is not to close the system to 'name it,' but to open the system as a rhizome to experience it, not to capture it. One could think of the quantitative link to science – which root *sci* – also the root for 'schism' (old spelling *scism*), and 'scise' – 'to cut' etc. In other words *sci* means to divide, or reduce in order to order. Conversely, in qualitative methods (especially affect theory) one seeks to complicate, complex, to create an integrated (but porous) sys-tem. The root *sys* as in *systema*, which means 'to organize' or 'to join' serves as a contra to *sci* – divide. The Designer must identify these 'open systems' and seek rhizomatic moments in order to reveal them (affects) without closing them into re-presentation and signification. *Systemics* should be identified rather than *sci(ence)* or reductions.

Orientation 4. Create Machines

Affect Theory is about creating – creating what Deleuze and Guattari call 'Machines.' The 'Machine' assemblage is to be thought of as a 'conceptual tool' that enables a thinking through expanded connectivity (open systems, or systemics) – the evocation of rhizomatic 'open systems' as just explored. This relates to the ancient Greek definition of machine or *mechos*. For the Ancient Greeks *mechos*

(machine) was a *'remedy for a difficult situation'* (Schadewaldt, pg. 28). Thus a researcher creates 'machines' (Design Machines) for Affect Theory.

This reminds us of a line of inquiry that reveals historical machines that have created auto-critiques of many fields of knowledge. Marcel Duchamp asked: How to make a work of art this is not a work of art? (Duchamp, 1917 'Fountain' – his famous urinal signed R. Mutt). The Fountain (1917) is an art machine. Kristopher Holland asks: How can one do philosophy which is not philosophy? (Holland, 2011-2018, Rolling, pg. 88-93, 'The Habermas Machine"). Holland's work created a philosophy machine, more precisely a Habermas machine that creates the conditions for philosophy to be experiences without writing, which is the 'default setting' of philosophical inquiry. A Designer might ask: How to deploy design that is not design? They would embark on creating 'Design Machines' that would be conceptual tools that would make strange or queer the engine of design meaning making. In essence a machine is a conceptual tool for doing art, philosophy, design, etc., differently or *as* rather than *in* Affect Theory.

Orientation 5. Make Design Affect

The ravages of capitalism have made design into a product, a consumable, a commodity, with its built in obsolescence part of its being. But design foremost is an experience; therefore, design should explore Affect. The research goals for design should be the organization of 'productive encounters' (rather than reports, data, 'scientific' provability, etc.) which will potentially pose affects. This is the truth of design over the proof of design. We would argue that ever since Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems were articulated (a mathematics machine) we now know 'truth-reality' is preferable to 'provability.' 'Anything you can draw a circle around cannot explain itself without referring to something outside the circle – something you have to assume but cannot prove' (Gödel, 1931). To put it simply: there is always more to truth than can be proven. There is always more to affect than can be experienced and especially articulated.

Affect Theory is a place where this 'beyond representation' or 'beyond experience' can be explored. In Affect Theory research is articulated as 'a bundle of affects, a bloc of sensations' or a 'relay' – of what art & design *does* – as a field that produces affects via objects, text, fashion, food, etc. As O'Sullivan (2013) states in reference to art, but here equally valid for design: 'Art (design) is less involved in knowledge and more involved with experience – in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experience' (pg. 52). Making 'design affect' is pushing the boundaries of how we articulate design, but also manifesting the experience of design. For emerging designers and design researchers we must now ask: How do we research 'affects' (of experience)? How do we articulate 'affect' (as research without 'reporting'). In a nutshell, perhaps instead of asking: What does research 'give' us as knowledge – we should ask: what does research produce? What does research generate? And ...*How do we experience it?*

Affect Theory as a Research Methodology

Dr. Krist Holland & Nnadita Baxi Sheth

0. What is Affect?

"If one does still ask what an affect 'means' then, the answer is not to be given in terms of signification (there is no rhetoric of affect), but on experience, and on the present moment as the product of a particular type of encounter (an analysis)." (O'Sullivan, pg. 44)

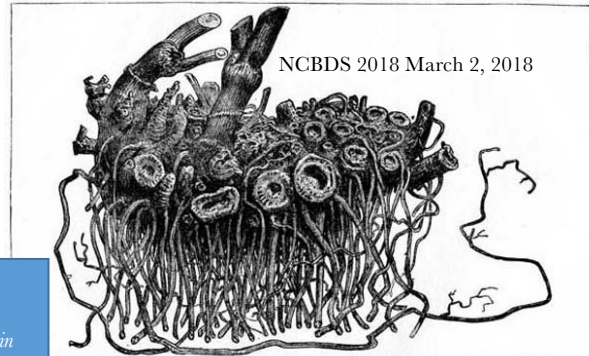
1. A THOUSAND PLATEAUS

by Deleuze & Guattari 1980

"[the book]... is an attempt to reconfigure the way we think about the world in an affirmative and creative manner." (O'Sullivan, pg. 12)

Q. Why Should Designers (or design students) read this book?

A move from critique to creativity...



2. AFFECT – Intensities beyond representation

The Realm of Affect is all around us and there are as many different strategies for accessing it, as there are subjects. "Affects are passages of intensity, a reaction in or on the body at the level of matter" (IMMANENT to matter/experience) **but** Beyond Representation –

If AFFECT is -Beyond Representation – or How do we to understand an Orange – or an iPhone?

If AFFECT is -Beyond Meaning (as found in discourse/language) – How do we communicate?

Remember – Deleuze & Guattari are not after what is the meaning of something, but what something does

So its not asking 'what is the meaning' of this or that design, but what does this design 'do'

3. RHIZOMATIC

A Rhizomatic system or anti-system is one without center of central organizing motif.

A principle of connectivity – is evoked –

Becoming is sought, rather than Being -

Q. How is Affect Theory a 'Method'?

Quantitative Methods - measured and assessed – 'representable' data vs.

Qualitative Methods – which seek to go beyond the surface and retrieve 'rich' or 'thick' data

4. Affect Theory is about creating – creating 'MACHINES'

The 'Machine' assemblage is to be thought as a kind of 'conceptual tool' that enables a thinking through expanded connectivity (rhizomatic).

Mechos (Machine) *Remedy for a difficult situation...*

A researcher creates 'machines' (Design Machines) for Affect Theory

Q. How to make a work of art this is not a work of art? –Duchamp (Art Machines)

Q. How to do philosophy which is not philosophy? - Holland (Habermas Machines)

Q. How to deploy design that is not design? (Design Machines)

5. ART& Design research goals: The organization of 'productive encounters' (rather than report)

research is articulated as 'A bundle of AFFECTS, a BLOC of SENSATIONS' AKA 'relay' - what Art & Design does – it produces affects...

"Art (Design) is less involved in knowledge and more involved with experience – in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experience." (O'Sullivan pg. 52)

Questions For Design Research (Qualitative Research in General):

Q. How do we research 'affects' (of experience)?

Q. How do we articulate 'affect' (as research 'reporting')

Perhaps instead of asking: What does research 'give' us as knowledge – We need to ask: how do we experience it?

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