General

how the minor moves us: across thresholds, socialities, and techniques

a conversation with Erin Manning

Halbe Kuipers

Interview – February 20, 2019

Halbe Kuipers converses with Erin Manning, philosopher and director of the SenseLab, an international network based in Montreal, of artists and academics, writers and makers, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism. From a thinking that is beyond the unique individual, the conversation focuses on the concept of minor sociality, the perspective of the treshold and techniques to challenge Whiteness.



An early fall afternoon in a café by a fountain.

Halbe Kuipers: Some time ago you gave a talk in Amsterdam during the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie 2018, after which we had a public conversation. That conversation seems to be one that in a way is always already underway for, as you said back then, this work is continuous – there is no end to it so the conversation keeps going. For me that immediately foregrounds the necessity of the work, the ethics, how what calls us tends to the minor – the minor gestures, to use your concept, that always elude us yet move us. [1] The minor seems to move across, as your talk in Amsterdam did in moving with John Lee Clark's work and deafblindness alongside autism and neurodiversity, on which you've written extensively. This moving across, the tending to the minor, could this be a start, the start of that conversation that keeps going?

Erin Manning: I like that you begin right in the middle, in a conversation that we had months ago. Working through the minor requires a sensitivity or attunement to what

moves through thought. This is an ethos I try to bring to my writing. The piece I presented at the Rietveld is an example. When I began to write about John Lee Clark's poems (in my piece 'Not at a distance' from my forthcoming book *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*), I wasn't thinking 'now I'm going to write about deafblindness'. It really came from middle – I read a poem called 'Clamor' that deeply moved me and had me thinking about synaesthesia. This led to finding out about the author and finding out he was deafblind, which in turn led me to wonder about the relationship between synaesthesia and deafblindness. [2] What is moving the thinking in such an instance is not, in the first instance, the figure of John Lee Clark or mirror-touch synaesthesia per se, but the transversality the writing calls forth and the ways this transversally brings the contours of a question into the foreground – in this case a question about perception and lived experience. [3] My practice is to follow the intuitive edge of a problem and to see how it leads me into an engagement with the constellation it calls forth. In the end of course I do end up doing extensive research on deafblindness and on mirror-touch synaesthesia, but it comes, as you say, from the middle.

Does it begin – to speak with Alfred North Whitehead – from appetite?[4] The appetite that makes a beginning, that creates an opening for things to unfold? You read something, and that generates an appetite which carries you onto a field? And that field perhaps resonates with the minor?

Yes, especially if we consider appetite as what moves (through) us (not only as that which is moved by us). Appetite as what Whitehead calls 'the lure for feeling', the call, in experience, for what has the capacity to reorient the field.

What is the appetite for this continuing conversation today, I wonder? How does the first conversation in Amsterdam on touch and #metoo eight months ago fold into this early fall afternoon in a café by a fountain?

I might begin with an image. It comes from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and it's been on my mind a lot lately. Rankine writes about an instance where she is at the post office and there is a tall black woman who is standing first in line and a shorter white man waiting behind her. When the clerk asks who is next the white man says 'me'. The black woman then says something like 'oh, you must not have seen me'. The white man responds, 'you're right, I didn't see you'.

What I take from this exchange is the necessity for me, as a white woman, to think about what remains unseeable in a culture of privilege. I think in this example the stakes involve both invisibility and hyper-visibility, in the sense that the black woman is unseeable in the context of that exchange where the white man expects his role to be central but at the same time hyper-visible in her difference. She is hyper-visible in the sense that her presence is ripe for the unseen. [5]

In the context of the minor, this image of thought emphasizes the need to begin from the crease of hyper-in/visibility. What practices can be set into place to problematize that hinge?

There are two phrases that move with this example and the way it unfolds. One is a beautiful phrase by Paul Celan that is shot through with solitude as well as a sort of wonder on a possible impossibility: 'who is invisible enough to see you?' Then there is here in the Netherlands professor Gloria Wekker, who is doing important work in the field of black, queer and gender studies. [6] She in a way says against the white man: 'I know your world all too well, I've always had to live in it, but you've never seen mine.' Both of these phrases relate to what you just said, to the invisibility and hyper-visibility. These phrases seem to open up to questions concerning knowledge, to what one can know as well as can see. How does this relate to your thinking on neurodiversity as well

as to the philosophy you work with concerning perception and the fields of perception?

I'd like to think this through via the question of white privilege. White privilege is the privilege to be on two sides of the same hinge. White privilege is an easy thresholding across uneasy hingings.

Considering white privilege from the perspective of the hinge, or the threshold, encourages a thinking beyond the unique individual. Whiteness as normative baseline (as neurotypicality) is not an individual experience. For Rankine's account of racism in a post office to really unsettle us, we have to see it as systemic, which it certainly is. That is to say: this is not an account of a single white man. This is a scene set and reset, experienced daily in a myriad of ways by folks who are at once unseen *and* hyperseen because of how they are systemically devalued.

When I think about thresholds, I think about real thresholds, like doorways. I think about the doorways we cross in the everyday, the ones into our own homes if we have one, the doorways in the restaurants and cafés we frequent, the doorways into universities or schools or hospitals. And of course, in addition to these very real thresholds, the thresholds of thought, of imagination, of valuation. What I know as a white middle-class person is that these for the most part are easy thresholds for me to cross. When I enter a grocery store, people don't follow me around. When I walk into the university they don't wonder what I am doing there. When I walk into my house the people in my neighbourhood don't think I am a burglar. But some thresholds will be more demanding: as a woman if I enter into certain cafés in the Italian quarter in Montreal, I feel uneasy. Or, as a woman philosopher, the threshold into philosophical knowledge can feel tenuous, and I certainly have felt that I have to work harder to be heard and be taken seriously than my male colleagues do. So there are of course differences in how those thresholds are lived. But overall, thresholds are mine to cross.

For many this is not the case: the crossing of the threshold takes a kind of energy I will never be able to fathom. A black student crossing the threshold into one of my classes at Concordia, a predominantly white space, has to move with the weight of their visibility. They have to carry the hyper-in/visibility I spoke of above. This is also true for the neurodiverse folks. And of indigenous students. And, to a lesser degree, of first generation scholars. Each threshold they cross comes with the feeling of carrying the crossing with them, a crossing that is completely unpalpable for most other students. So the student is already disadvantaged, their bodies accosted by what cannot easily be seen by those who don't have to bear the burden of hyper-in/visibility. The point is not to say that one person suffers the threshold more than another.

The point is to begin to develop an attunement to the weight of that crossing, and how that weight affects what can happen in that environment. What kind of learning happens when the body is weighted down by the anxiety of the crossing, by the self-consciousness of being constantly singled out, hyperseen and unseen at once? What are the consequences of living with the feeling of having no space while taking up too much space?

So it is not so much of knowing a world as such and such, but more of what moves with you, what world you carry with you? When Wekker speaks of a world that the other, the white man, does not know, could she in a way be speaking of what can be felt when crossing particular thresholds?

Yes, and what the moving takes for granted or what it carries with it. When I talk about neurotypicality I mean the systemic ease of crossing the threshold. This is what neurotypicality carries: a claim on the world. Neurotypicality in my work never refers to a person. Neurotypicality is the practising of an ease based on norms that underlie the valuation of existence. Neurotypicality claims space in very precise ways. It claims

bodyings too. It moves without a stim. It speaks without an accent. It enters without a stir. It does these things not because there is actually a baseline human that fits into its category, but because it has trained us (those of us who pass) to create and recreate that baseline, and we are practised at inhabiting it – those of us who have access to its parameters. When Fred Moten says that black life is always neurodiverse life, this is what I understand: that blackness has never had access to this baseline. When Sylvia Wynter speaks of black life as excluded from the category of the human, this is also what I understand, that the human is the figure par excellence of neurotypicality, which is to say, Whiteness. Whiteness is not simply an epidermal configuration. Whiteness is the privilege not to have had to take the baseline into consideration. It is the privilege not to have had to think about how to pass. Whiteness is never to have had to make an effort at appearing in the know. Whiteness is crossing and re-crossing without ever noticing the threshold in the first place. Whiteness is the effortlessness of finding your place in existence. Whiteness is the assumption that the world is yours to inhabit and yours to define.

I wonder if this doesn't create an opening for an interesting encounter of concepts. Namely, one might think that easy thresholding, as a white person with privilege, would coincide with what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call 'smooth space' – the concept they use in regard to nomadic thought. [7] ***Some might say that this smooth space is foregrounded in the globalized, neoliberal world. Easy thresholding, that must be like smooth space right? In complete contrast to the striated where barriers are thrown up everywhere and that must be overcome. A simple example would be maybe something like how music from all over the world has been made available via online services, which seems to propagate that idea of smooth space. It is available everywhere, so if someone has access to the internet then all these barriers are gone with respect to that field and the passing goes with certain ease.***

I wonder, though. It seems to me that this kind of reading of smooth space takes it to be homogeneous, whereas nomadic thought is definitely heterogeneous, full of qualitative variation. So the question would be, it seems to me, what kind of qualitative variation is activated by the crossing of the threshold. If there is easy thresholding it may feel easy precisely because it is not full of variation, because the crossing precisely doesn't create space, because the passage is homogeneous. It may be easy because the movement happens through a choreography that is already designed for you.

I find the concept of black sociality very useful for thinking about qualitative variation. What I have learned from thinkers in the tradition of Black Studies – like Nahum Chandler, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Saidiya Hartman, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Rizvana Bradley, Ashon Crawley, Rachel Zellars, M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Angela Davis, Katherine McKittrick, Laura Harris and so many others – is to listen to how sociality is created in the movements of existence. Throughout this literature that explores the afterlife of slavery what is clear is that sociality exceeds the individual. Sociality moves across: it has tenor, it resonates, it sounds. Sociality is the force of existence that could not and cannot be captured. It dances in the capoeira, it sings in gospel music. Sociality is the very opposite of an existing choreography – it is an emergent force that shifts the conditions of existence from its middling. In this sense, it is minor through and through. The minor here should never be understood as less. It is the transversality that pulls out, from a complex set of conditions, a quality of experience. Sociality is a constant and committed engagement with emergent conditions.

The qualitative variation of smooth space makes a particular demand on existence. It calls it forth. This is what is backgrounded in easy thresholding and it is actually a real loss – so much is left unfelt! There is no need, when Whiteness crosses a threshold, for the social to be reinvented. Harney has been known to say that Whiteness has no sociality, and this is borne through this example, particularly if we understand sociality to be the emergent

quality of collective relationality. There is no emergent relationality when the passage is pre-scripted. So the ease of moving across, it turns out, has little to do with smoothness, or nomadism.

Understanding smooth and striated space as a continuum, what I would say is that when the threshold most emphatically appears, there is a construction of a world. Moving with the threshold – rather than easily thresholding – means moving with the ecologies as they come into existence. If I can move without sensing the coalescing ecologies it is not because the space is smooth but because I have been trained in the choreographies of Whiteness.

And you're stuck in them....

Yes, you're stuck indeed. You're fluidly performing a whole set of striated actions that have become backgrounded by the privilege that gives you access to unseeing them.

One image comes to mind, probably related to all of this. With the doors and thresholds you speak of, the image that comes to me is that of the revolving door. There is something so interesting about revolving doors in regards to thresholding. It seems to me that easy thresholding would be to pass from one space to another with a certain ease. Perhaps smooth space is not so much the passage from one space to another but rather making the passage play, or how it can do differently than just pass from one space to another. I'm thinking about the revolving door because it is so much fun to play with, in it, without ever 'passing'. It has in that sense little to do with going from here to there, or with either the easiness or hardship that comes with that. I guess what I am getting at is first of all the play, but then also how this opens up to techniques for the otherwise. How to make things move differently, like such passages and their thresholds?

I think it is great to think of it that way and play is so important! I love the idea of 'making the passage play!' I think your image of the revolving door and the quality of passage it facilitates allows us also to think of the different qualities of thresholds beyond the actual ones. For example, how do modes of tactful encounter play out? What is presupposed when we speak of a 'lack of tact'. I wrote about this in my piece 'Fiery, Luminous, Scary' in *Always More Than One* (2012). I talk about the way in which DJ Savarese moves through the space of my studio in ways that might be considered untactful precisely because they are neurodiverse. Tact, it becomes clear, refers to a body that moves in the rhythm of the pre-scripted. A body that aches, that acts up, a body anguished, a body squirming or stimming – these are untactful bodies. This is particularly clear in the context of what are called meltdowns – those moments when bodies simply cannot take the strain of existence and fully fall apart. What are the stakes of a presupposition that a body should be contained, that a body should cohere? What is threatened by a body that leaks, that aches and screams and shudders and literally comes apart due to the pressure of the thresholds it has to cross? Thresholds cost a lot; every time you cross another threshold that isn't made for you, your body trembles with the ache of that crossing. I think what in those cases is called a meltdown is really a body making felt the shape of the world, making visible the cost of the imposed coherence – which is actually an incoherence.

Another example that is on my mind right now is Serena Williams since it's been on the news. You have this extraordinarily powerful black woman, who is called out by the referee for not performing according to the contained notion of performance. This while many people before have escaped that container by performing outside of it and have not been penalized for it...

And of course women performance in particular, right? As that is the sharp contrast here to men's tennis. The women's container seems to be far more restrictive, far more

tending to typicality than the men's; or typicality construes itself precisely between men and women in this manner.

Exactly. Her body displays the violence of that container. It simply refuses to be contained. This making visible of the violence of containment is so threatening that she must be stopped at all cost. It is really that body limit condition that I am thinking about. What it costs a body, and how a body can sustain year after year the violence of that imposed container.

Maybe we can think a bit about that, what it is to sustain. That seems to me one of the things the work revolves around: how to make life, a life sustainable.[8] All the crafting of techniques in respect to a life, they all tend to a sense of survival.[9] What about these techniques? How do techniques move with all of this? But I am also thinking about the concept of technicity that you mobilize. A simple example could be the morning Skype reading group we did at SenseLab where all of us called in from our beds, reading together at the threshold between sleep and wakefulness.[10] In that reading group, it was Moten's work that was thought with. I remember focusing on his account ofBBQing as a technique for the minor sociality you discuss above.[11] In what way are techniques necessary when we are thinking across thresholds and socialities at the same time?

Techniques are everything, it seems to me, as long as we understand them as having to be reinvented in the ecology of practices. If I am interested in developing the concept of minor sociality it is precisely because I am committed to techniques of existence that allow sociality to emerge from the middle. I am interested in the ways experience is crafted.

Techniques to challenge Whiteness will always involve an attunement to what has fallen out of sensation and perception. Those of us who cross easily will have to ask ourselves, again and again, where the easy thresholding happened and what that ease backgrounds. We will have to ask how else we might cross even as we develop a sensitivity to those who bear the burden of hyper-in/visibility. We must both make visible the barriers to the crossing and invent techniques for alleviating the weight of carrying the neurotypical thresholds. We must take the risk of no longer feeling carefree in the crossing. This work is not about being an ally in the sense of opening the door for someone else. The door has to be opened but this must be done through an awareness of how we who cross easily have assisted in sustaining the easy threshold's existing choreography. We must be allies to the process more than to the individual, seeing our own crossing as a symptom of how much is missed in experience. Those who bear the burden don't need Whiteness to support them. They need Whiteness to defeat itself. We all need a world capable of remaking itself with each crossing.

Thinking in terms of techniques moves the engagement with difference beyond the individual toward systemic change. Codes of passage need to be changed within our own communities. With each attunement to a different way of feeling the threshold will come the burgeoning of an emergent sociality. This minor sociality is collective, transindividual. It calls forth difference, reminding us that there is in fact only a field of difference.

Beginning with the threshold involves thinking (and acting) from the middle. This is a technique worth honing, I think. If we begin in the crossing we can learn to assess how worlds shift into each other and what those shifts carry with them. Here we can learn together what it means to bear the world collectively.

Living always means living with dissonance. If there is a true engagement with dissonance, there will be a stronger commitment to how the dissonance takes shape. The aim is not to give all crossings of the threshold the same shape. The aim is to multiply the ways in which a collective shaping of the world can occur. The aim is to develop sensitivities to shapes we have not yet encountered.

Perhaps we came back to where we started with those questions, back in the middle. Thank you for making this conversation possible.

On August 24, SenseLab will faciliate a minor movement in Amsterdam together with Jacuzzi dance collective. As part of the larger, international minor movements, this iteration will revolve around the concept of the carrier and will experiment with the techniques of the schizz to try and create some openings in the strong rhythm of the city. Other iterations of the minor movements will take place in, amongst others, Sao Paulo, Berlin, Zurich, Paris, Cluj, Boedapest, Kopenhagen, Aarhus, Helsinki, Montreal, Sydney. For more information and contact see: www.senselab.ca.

Halbe Kuipers is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and working with SenseLab, experimental laboratory for research creation in Montreal. His research concerns itself with what can be called a radical pedagogy of the image, asking questions concerning learning and perception as well as morality in regards to visual culture through process philosophy. He has recently edited two issues for the Canadian journal Inflexions named *Diversity in Diversity* (2018) and *Modes of Exhaustion* (2017).

Biography: **Erin Manning** is a professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University, Montreal. She is also the founder of SenseLab, a laboratory that explores the intersections between art practice and philosophy through the matrix of the sensing body in movement. Current art projects are focused around the concept of minor gestures in relation to colour and movement. Art exhibitions have occurred at venues including: Sydney and Moscow biennials; Glasshouse, New York; Vancouver Art Museum; McCord Museum, Montreal; House of World Cultures, Berlin; and Galateca Gallery, Bucharest. Publications include*For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (forthcoming), *The Minor Gesture* (2016), *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (2013), *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (2009) and with Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (2014).

Footnotes

1. See Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
2. John Lee Clark, 'Metatactile Knowledge', *Notes from a DeafBlind Writer* (blog), 2 October 2015, johnleeclark.tumblr.com.
3. Further unfolding this proposition, Manning said in her talk: 'What if mirror-touch synaesthesia were not only misnamed, but fully misunderstood? What if, as Brian Massumi suggests, we were to begin by asking why the nomenclature for a synaesthesia that is said to move between touch and vision isn't called vision-touch synaesthesia like its sisters – sound-taste, colour- grapheme, shape-taste? What shifts in the vocabulary of synaesthesia, defined as that which occurs "when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically triggers a perception in a second modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation to this second modality," when we bring in the concept of mirror neurons, as occurs with mirror-touch synaesthesia? And what if, moving one step further, we were even to suggest that the vision-touch paradigm is the wrong place to begin? What if we were to consider vision-touch synaesthesia from the perspective of the DeafBlind? What kind of sensory experience would we be discussing then?'
4. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979).
5. Manning might be alluding here to the work of Nicole R. Fleetwood in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2010) on the hyper-visibility of the black body.
6. For Gloria Wekker's important work particularly concerning raciality and racism in the Netherlands, see among others *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
7. Deleuze and Guattari notably develop their concept of smooth space in the chapter '1440: The Smooth and the Striated', *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Nomadic thought is an aberrant line throughout the book, but it notably features in the chapter '1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine'.
8. 'A life' refers here to Deleuze's conception: 'We will say of pure immanence that it is A Life, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss.' Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).
9. Fred Moten gives a strong account of survival as mode of black life: 'what it is we have to survive within the context of a brutal anti-sociality or sociopathy which is invested in our death and in our living.' See Fred Moten, 'An Interview with Fred Moten, Pt. II: On Radical Indistinctness and Thought Flavor à la Derrida', *Literary Hub*, 6 August 2015, lithub.com. Or from another angle, Brian Massumi's conception of 'bare activity' seems to also foreground a generative account of survival in among others *The Principle of Unrest: Activist Philosophy in the Expanded Field* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017).
10. SenseLab is 'an international network of artists and academics, writers and makers, from a wide diversity of fields, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism. … Manning founded the SenseLab in 2004 out of a desire to build a supportive environment conducive to new modes of encounter and expression. Her premise was that concepts are never pre-programmed. Rather, they are experimental effects of an on-going process which emerge in the doing, and merge with making.' See www.senselab.ca.
11. See Moten, 'An Interview'.

Tags

Discrimination, Philosophy

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