Galerie Francesca Pia

Absolute Thresholds
Curated by John Miller, Elisa R. Linn and Lennart Wolff

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THRESHOLDS

A threshold constitutes a border between two states of being. The most common – and most obvious – thresholds are doorways and windows. These typically demarcate private and public space. But thresholds can be natural as well as social. For example, Fahrenheit 451 is the temperature that paper burns, as Ray Bradbury reminded us in his eponymous novel. Bradbury, of course, used this to allude to book burning, and by extension censorship and totalitarianism. Other kinds of natural thresholds are less laden with ideology. For example, in the central Rocky Mountains of the United States, at the height of 11,500 feet (or 3,500 meters) the air becomes too thin for vegetation to grow. This is the timberline. It can mark a surprisingly sharp border between a verdant landscape and barren rocks and dirt. Thresholds can take on a phenomenological cast, as is the case with absolute thresholds, which mark the lowest level of stimulus an organism can detect, or with difference thresholds, which mark the degree of difference necessary to differentiate one thing from another.

Social thresholds differ from natural thresholds in that their existence need not be empirical. Henri Lefebvre notably hypostatized spatial codes as a fundamental organizing principle of social space. These largely derive from convention, namely an ability to read the nature of a particular site and to recognize what kinds of activity may or may not be acceptable there. The recognition of these kinds of thresholds pertains to a tacit, generalized social competence. As such they are culturally, i.e., historically and geographically, specific rather than universal. As such, Lefebvre maintained that space is always socially produced.

Thresholds need not only apply to spatial locations. In psychoanalytic theory, bodily orifices function as determinant sites of subjectification, perhaps because these figure as passages between self and other. In his well-known diagram of restroom doors, labelled *Hommes* and *Dames*, Jacques Lacan postulated that the human subject inevitably faces an "ideological binarity" that positions people according to sexual difference.[1] Following the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, this supposed axiom has become ever more open to question with broader acknowledgment of gender-fluidity. In the United States, this emergent demographic has sparked ironically fierce debates over restroom access – namely who belongs in which room according to "nature." This highlights the socially constructed form of this particular threshold and how such a construction may be contested.

The primary dictionary meaning of threshold is narrowly defined: "a strip of wood, metal, or stone forming the bottom of a doorway and crossed in entering a house or room."[2] As such, it is both a

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1 "Urinary Segregation: Jacques Lacan on Sexual Difference," Particulations, a Psychogeography and Cultural Theory Blog (Febraury 2, 2019): http://particulations.blogspot.com/2015/09/urinary-segregation-jacques-lacan-on.html (accessed March 1, 2019). Oddly enough, the restroom doors in Lacan's diagram feature windows, which is rarely the case in most restrooms.

2 Google Dictionary, https://www.google.com/search?q=threshold％2C+definition&oq=threshold％2C+definition&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.4208j1j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (accessed March 1, 2019).

structural part of a door frame and a symbolic marker. The utopian ideal of late modernist architecture was to dissolve the border between public and private as well as inside and outside. The glass house emblematized this as a moralizing promise of total transparency. A blameless life would be a private life that could be lived in public, one that internalizes the adage, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." Jacques Tati parodied this aspiration in his 1967 film, "Playtime." Here, modern architecture was the central protagonist; the running gag was that of people walking into glass doors and walls. Lars von Trier's film "Dogville" (2003) works in almost the opposite manner. The set is a soundstage on which rooms, doorways and windows are demarcated with masking tape. At first, the behavior of the actors seems mannered, if not absurd — somewhat akin to the mime's "invisible wall."[3] But as one becomes drawn into the story of "Dogville," the diegetic function of the pretend architecture becomes real.

Just two years after Tati released "Playtime," Michael Asher, in one of his first works, created an "air curtain" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. For this he adjusted concealed blower units to their lowest setting so that this threshold was minimally perceptible, splitting the difference between what was there and what was not. As such, he proposed a nearly absolute threshold.

Artists such as Coco Fusco and Martha Rosler, have taken the opposite tact from Asher: to make invisible barriers apparent. In "Rights of Passage" (1997), in a site-specific performance for the Johannesburg Biennial, Fusco dressed as a border agent and issued identity cards as admission receipts. These were similar to those South Africa's apartheid regime once forced black people to carry. Although apartheid came to an end by 1994, this performance nonetheless anticipates current immigration crisis worldwide in which the movement of people of color especially is restricted at national borders. For her 2008 solo exhibition, "Great Power" at the gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Rosler installed an admission turnstile at the entrance. Although it cost only a quarter to get in, it made visitors acutely aware that they were entering an elite, commercial space that purports to be egalitarian.

In corporate America, the phrase "the glass ceiling" refers to the hierarchical barrier that typically excludes women and minorities. Here, hierarchical forces claim to be transparent when, in fact, this very claim conceals structural inequality. One example of a built glass ceiling is Paul Rudolph's residence at 23 Beekman Place in New York (1977-1995), which perversely features floors — and thus ceilings — partially comprised of glass.[4]

Dan Graham's "Alteration to a Suburban House" (1978) framed the issue of such social boundaries in a subtly dystopian manner. In an architectural model, Graham proposed to strip the front façade off a suburban tract house and to replace it with a glass wall and, further, to bisect the house with a mirrored wall running down the center. The living room, dining room and kitchen were thus open to public scrutiny while the bedrooms and bathrooms remained private. In so doing, Graham implied that the everyday life of the quintessential nuclear family constitutes a performance in its own right.

Through this notion of performativity, "Alteration to a Suburban House" anticipates the ascendancy of reality TV and social media, which muddy the divide between public and private. These media, by shaping popular attitudes toward personal privacy, voyeurism and collective discourse, accordingly helped lay the ideological foundation for what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism." This particular form

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3   Notably, Jacques Tati was himself a mime.
4   "23 Beekman Place," https://paulrudolph.org/project/23-beekman/ (accessed March 3, 2019).

of information-based capital uses digital technologies to monetize and to manipulate information gleaned from individuals' everyday lives, almost entirely without their knowledge or consent. It represents an extension of the so-called colonization of leisure through a significant erosion of conventional, social thresholds via a digital panopticon and information control. Zuboff notes that these problems do not necessarily arise from digital technology per se, but rather from its complete lack of commercial and political regulation.[5] Moreover, she maintains, now that individuals have internalized the ethos of surveillance capital, they conduct their personal lives as if they are "always onstage," losing their capacity for intimacy and unconstrained experience. It remains nonetheless open to question as to how absolute the internalization that Zuboff describes may be.

This account offers a somewhat cursory overview of thresholds. What makes them significant is that they serve as points of articulation. Rather than marking impregnable divisions, they are passages of exchange and interchange. In this way, the threshold suggests systemic modes of organization, namely both mental and material ecologies. As such, the ability to identify them promises a degree of insight into the otherwise indiscernible natural and social worlds that surround us.

John Miller

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5   See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019).