



Continental Drift

the other side of neoliberal globalization

« AT LAST!

Marcelo Expósito's "Entre Sueños" »

Book

By Brian Holmes

ESCAPE THE OVERCODE



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This entry was posted on January 19, 2009 at 11:54 pm and is filed under [1](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

17 Responses to “Book”

francesca Says:

February 23, 2008 at 2:56 am | [Reply](#)

Dear Brian Holmes,

I was the body at the Continental Drift conference who questioned your interpretation of “overcoding”. It’s gotten me thinking, and I wanted to present my argument again, that you might tell me if there’s something I’m missing:

D&G on overcoding:

“Following the Marxist description: a State apparatus is erected upon the primitive agricultural communities, which already have lineal-territorial codes; but it overcodes them, submitting them to the power of a despotic emperor, the sole and transcendent public-property owner, the master of the surplus or the stock, the organizer of large-scale works (surplus labor), the source of public functions and bureaucracy. This is the paradigm of the bond, the knot. Such is the regime of signs of the State: overcoding, or the Signifier. It is a system of machinic enslavement: the first ‘megamachine’ in the strict sense, to use Mumford’s term.” (Milles Plateaus, 427-428)

Capitalism, on the other hand, “marks a mutation in worldwide or ecumenical organizations, which now take on a consistency of their own: the worldwide axiomatic, instead of resulting from heterogeneous social formations and their relations, for the most part distributes these formations, determines their relations, while organizing an international division of labor... If it is true that we are not using the word axiomatic as a simple metaphor, we must review what distinguishes an axiomatic from all manner of codes, overcodings, and recodings: the axiomatic deals directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously; codes, on the other hand, are relative to those domains

and express specific relations between qualified elements that cannot be subsumed by a higher formal unity (overcoding) except by transcendence and in an indirect fashion. The immanent axiomatic finds in the domains it moves through so many models, termed models of realization." (454)

This seems pertinent to your argument in your discussion of overcoding because, while overcoding indeed seems to be presented as something that one might "throw off" or "escape" relatively successfully, ("The overcoding of the archaic State itself makes possible and gives rise to new flows that escape from it." (449)), the axiomatic involves a different sort of struggle, with different sorts of obstacles and successes, but importantly, something that is not so easily extricable from that-which-is-not the axiomatic ("Capitalism is indeed an axiomatic, because it has no laws but immanent ones." (463)) whereas codes seem to be distinguishable from overcodes.

If your interpretation diverges from this reading of overcoding/axiomatic, I'd be interested to hear it.

All the best,
francesca

===>>> Hello Francesca!

Thanks for writing back, this is really interesting. Also it's better to write for this kind of debate, I personally cannot do it orally with the precision that it really needs. So, sorry for the lousy answer from the body in NYC!

In my understanding of *A Thousand Plateaus* the axiomatic is something like "capitalism itself," a system of flows arising from a pure decoding, whose complete set of functions can never be exhaustively described (analogous in that to Gödel's incompleteness proof). Capitalism always appears in a specific configuration of functions – a specific regulation or dynamic of forces, a striated social relation of humans and machines, forming a stratum. Each stratum is composed of working models that are only realized and only knowable in its concrete pattern of operation. If you look at pp. 141-44 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, there they describe the diagrammatic functioning of the abstract machine as that which "escapes" the axiomatic of capital. Something like a free coding, producing rhizomatic forms just like Deleuze and Guattari did in their book. That might be what really interests you. But I didn't get to that in my presentation, which was about overcoding. For this, the most relevant chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus* is definitely the one you quote, "The Apparatus of Capture," although you also have to look at the way it unfolds on the semiotic level.

What's at stake in overcoding is basically the state. Not just the archaic state, but the whole progression that Lewis Mumford describes as the "myth of the machine": from the Pharaonic state of ancient Egypt, to the Sun-King of 17th century France, to Hitler and Stalin and finally to the postwar American computerized state, all versions of what Mumford calls the "megamachine." In the linguistic sense, overcoding sets up the binary opposition between signifier and signified. But above all, it is the name for "phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization" (41). In short, we are talking about structuralization. This interests me urgently because that's what I see the American imperial society doing with such great success since WWII. In particular, cybernetics very clearly corresponds to this definition of overcoding.

Now, this brings us to the site of one of the complex arguments you always find in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They relate overcoding specifically to the archaic state, and then to describe the social order in modern times they distinguish between "machinic enslavement" and "social subjection." Here's the definition of the two concepts: "There is enslavement when human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine that they compose among themselves and with other things (animals, tools), under the control and direction of a higher unity. But there is subjection when the higher unity constitutes the human as a subject linked to a now-exterior object, which can be an animal, a tool, or even a machine" (456-

57). Cybernetics, and the concomittant automation of factories, seems to mark the point where the process of subjection to a machine returns to a full-fledged condition of machinic enslavement ("it could be said that a small amount of subjectification took us away from machinic enslavement, but a large amount brings us back to it," 458). Similarly, the modern, decoded states of the capitalist axiomatic "have a kind of transspatiotemporal unity with the archaic state." "The modern states of the third age do indeed restore the most absolute of empires, a new 'megamachine' "... (459-60).

OK, in all that, the concept of "overcoding" does not come back. Instead they discuss the present social condition as a complex relation of machinic enslavement and subjection to the exterior machine. But in Guattari's work, which is really what interests me here, the word "overcoding" does come back, constantly. Check out the book that Suely Rolnik just published, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, which has the advantage of giving you an impression of how Guattari actually talked, during the very years when he was writing the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*. For him, overcoding and modeling are roughly synonymous or at least linked together as two sides of a single operation. And I think that the more imperial the situation gets, the more you have an overcoding with transcendant signifiers that bring a set of symbolic coordinates into play. It's the consumer side of the paradigm, the socialization and reterritorialization of capitalism. As you might recall, Raymond Williams in an excellent essay called advertising "The Magic System." The archaic element is there. But it is also there in presidential speech. What has happened since WWII, as cybernetics increasingly became a complex language-machine, is the attempt to extend this overcoding to the entire world invested by the decoded flows of capital. Bush's administration marks a new high-point of this attempt. Guattari's "meta-modelization," in the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, is about escaping the overcoding, subjection and machinic enslavement that we encounter under the contemporary cybernetic system of transnational state capital, with its always-incipient form of reterritorialization and capture of flows, namely, empire.

That's roughly the way I understand it. Now that it may be clearer, feel free to toss back and forth some more ideas, ask more questions, propose a completely different understanding, whatever you like.

best, Brian

PUBLISERT « litterært supplement Says:

[August 14, 2008 at 9:45 pm | Reply](#)

[...] Holmes pågående bokprosjekt *Continental Drift*, som kan leses på brianholmes.wordpress.com, inneholder flere kapitler om kartlegging. Holmes har [...]

Recapturing Subversion « Continental Drift Says:

[November 21, 2008 at 6:35 pm | Reply](#)

[...] table of contents here [...]

99, our 68 » Om du är intresserad av denna blogg... Says:

[March 19, 2009 at 7:14 pm | Reply](#)

[...] boken *Escape the Overcode: Activist art in the control society*. Om man surfar runt lite utifrån innehållsförteckningen ser man att de teman som avhandlas här (och på panspectrocism.org) även finns med i boken – [...]

Jorge Says:

[March 23, 2009 at 7:55 pm | Reply](#)

Hi

I live in Chile and want to obtain the book how?

-When it is printed I will include a link!!! Till then you can read it all right here, this is the full book...

all the best, BH

Nieuw boek van Brian Holmes « DATAPANIK Says:

March 31, 2009 at 10:08 pm | Reply

[...] Criticus en activist Brian Holmes werkt momenteel aan zijn nieuwe boek *Escape the overcode*. [...]

Online Publication: *Escape the Overcode* « Maakbaarheid in de Grote Stad Says:

June 5, 2009 at 9:06 am | Reply

[...] *Escape the Overcode: Activist art in the Control Society* is part of the open-ended research project conducted by Brian Holmes. The book comprises four major sections. The articles range from the underlying technoscientific principles of cybernetics, to cognitive psychology and complexity theory. [...]

This book could be yours: « Continental Drift Says:

July 16, 2010 at 10:21 pm | Reply

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/01/19/book-materials> [...]

This book could be yours: - machine quotidienne Says:

July 17, 2010 at 11:55 am | Reply

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/01/19/book-materials> [...]

Cartografías de la emancipación « Continental Drift Says:

November 1, 2010 at 7:33 pm | Reply

[...] unas conclusiones del proyecto se han reunido en un libro de ensayos, disponible gratuitamente en mi página web. Lo que quiero hacer ahora es describir el proyecto, indicar sus cuadros de cuestionamiento, y [...]

Society of Contemporary Art Historians | The Artistic Device Says:

November 16, 2010 at 9:06 am | Reply

[...] and 27th in Eindhoven, "The Artistic Device," a seminar with Brian Holmes, author of *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* (Van Abbemuseum, Half Letter [...])

Symposium 'The Artistic Device' Says:

December 13, 2010 at 10:14 am | Reply

[...] heeft ook een blog waar interessant tekstmateriaal te lezen [...]

Brian Holmes: *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* (2009) at Monoskop/log Says:

December 24, 2010 at 2:46 pm | Reply

[...] View online (HTML articles) Comment (0) [...]

[□□□ HomeShop](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Happy Friends reading club](#) **Says:**

[January 2, 2011 at 1:52 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] a text by "The Affectivist Manifesto", by American-born theorist, writer and translator Brian Holmes. As it is quite brief, the text is simply included in the message body below. The meeting will take [...]

[Sniffing Squid 00](#) « [«HOW TO PLAY BIG SCIENCE»](#) **Says:**

[January 2, 2011 at 2:08 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] the space of signs that leave behind a frozen neon blaze, igniting the midnight superhighway of drifting codes and signifiers, dead languages and hard sentient machine [...]

[Sniffing Squid 00-01](#) « [«HOW TO PLAY BIG SCIENCE»](#) **Says:**

[January 2, 2011 at 4:46 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] the space of signs that leave behind a frozen neon blaze, igniting the midnight superhighway of drifting codes and signifiers, dead languages and hard sentient machine [...]

[Organized Networks / In Praise of Concept Production: Formats, Schools and Non-Representational Media Studies](#) **Says:**

[June 20, 2011 at 12:20 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] the formation of neoliberal governance, see Brian Holmes, 'Adam Curtis: Alarm Clock Films', in *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*, Eindhoven and Zagreb: Van Abbemuseum Public Research / WHW, 2009, pp. 284-303. [...]



Continental Drift

the other side of neoliberal globalization

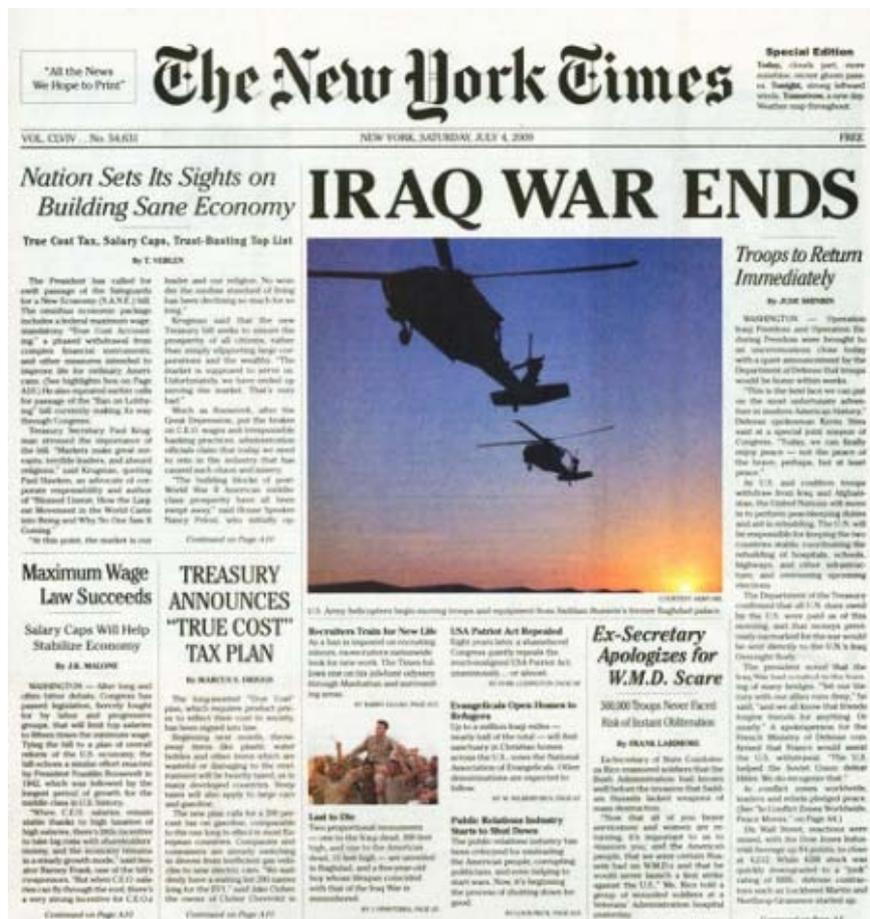
« THE INTERSCALE

ZAGREB DRIFT »

THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO

By Brian Holmes

Artistic Critique in the 21st Century



New York Times Special Edition courtesy of Yes Men and friends!

website [here](#), PDF [here](#)

[texto castellano aquí](#)

In the twentieth century, art was judged with respect to the existing state of the medium. What mattered was the kind of rupture it made, the unexpected formal elements it brought into play, the way it displaced the conventions of the genre or the tradition. The prize at the end of the evaluative process was a different sense of what art could be, a new realm of possibility for

the aesthetic. Today all that has changed, definitively.

The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular state of society. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark a possible or real shift with respect to the laws, the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence.

How does that chance come to be? Expression unleashes affect, and affect is what touches. Presence, gesture and speech transform the quality of contact between people, they create both breaks and junctions; and the expressive techniques of art are able to multiply those immediate changes along a thousand pathways of the mind and the senses. An artistic event does not need an objective judge. You know it has happened when you can bring something else into existence in its wake. Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens up expanding territories. These territories are occupied by the sharing of a double difference: a split from the private self in which each person was formerly enclosed, and from the social order which imposed that particular type of privacy or privation.

When a territory of possibility emerges it changes the social map, like a landslide, a flood or a volcano do in nature. The easiest way for society to protect its existing form is simple denial, pretending the change never happened: and that actually works in the landscape of mentalities. An affective territory disappears if it isn't elaborated, constructed, modulated, differentiated, prolonged by new breakthroughs and conjunctions. There is no use defending such territories, and even believing in them is only the barest beginning. What they urgently need is to be developed, with forms, rhythms, inventions, discourses, practices, styles, technologies – in short, with cultural codes. An emergent territory is only as good as the codes that sustain it. Every social movement, every shift in the geography of the heart and revolution in the balance of the senses needs its aesthetics, its grammar, its science and its legalisms. Which means that every new territory needs artists, technicians, intellectuals, universities. But the problem is, the expert bodies that already exist are fortresses defending themselves against other fortresses.

Activism has to confront real obstacles: war, poverty, class and racial oppression, creeping fascism, venomous neoliberalism. But what we face is not so much soldiers with guns as cognitive capital: the knowledge society, an excruciatingly complex order. The striking thing from the affective point of view is the zombie-like character of this society, its fallback to automatic pilot, its cybernetic governance. Neoliberal society is densely regulated, heavily overcoded. Since the control systems are all made by disciplines with strictly calibrated access to other disciplines, the origin of any struggle in the fields of knowledge has to be extradisciplinary. It starts outside the hierarchy of disciplines and moves through them transversally, gaining style, content, competence and discursive force along the way. Extradisciplinary critique is the process whereby affectively charged ideas – or conceptual arts – become essential to social change. But it's vital to maintain the link between the infinitely communicable idea and the singularly embodied performance.

World society is the theater of affectivist art, the stage on which it appears and the circuit in which it produces transformations. But how can we define this society in existential terms? First, it is clear that a global society now exists, with global communications, transport networks, benchmarked educational systems, standardized technologies, franchised consumption facilities, global

finance, commercial law and media fashion. That layer of experience is extensive, but it is thin; it can only claim part of the lifeworld. To engage with affectivist art, to critique it and recreate it, you have to know not only where new territories of sensibility emerge – in which locale, in which historical geography – but also at which scale. Existence in world society is experienced, or becomes aesthetic, as an interplay of scales.

In addition to the global, there is a regional or continental scale, based on the aggregation of populations into economic blocs. You can see it clearly in Europe, but also in North and South America, in the Middle East and in the East Asian network. Make no mistake, there are already affects at this scale, and social movements, and new ways of using both gesture and language, with much more to come in the future. Then there is the national scale, seemingly familiar, the scale with the richest sets of institutions and the deepest historical legacies, where the theaters of mass representation are overwhelmingly established and sunk into phantasmatic inertia. But the national scale in the twenty-first century is also in a febrile state of continuous red alert, hotwired to excess and sometimes even capable of resonating with the radically new. After this comes the territorial scale, long considered the most human: the scale of daily mobilities, the city, the rural landscape, which are the archetypal dimensions of sensibility. This is the abode of popular expression, of the traditional plastic arts, of public space and of nature as a presence coequal with humanity: the scale where subjectivity first expands to meet the unknown.

And so finally we reach the scale of intimacy, of skin, of shared heartbeats and feelings, the scale that goes from families and lovers to people together on a street corner, in a sauna, a living room or a cafe. It would seem that intimacy is irretrievably weighted down in our time, burdened with data and surveillance and seduction, crushed with the determining influence of all the other scales. But intimacy is still an unpredictable force, a space of gestation and therefore a wellspring of gesture, the biological spring from which affect drinks. Only we can traverse all the scales, becoming other along the way. From the lovers' bed to the wild embrace of the crowd to the alien touch of networks, it may be that intimacy and its artistic expressions are what will astonish the twenty-first century.



Vincent Bethell: website [here](#), film [here](#)

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18 Responses to "THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO"

[Book Materials](#) [« Continental Drift](#) Says:

November 21, 2008 at 5:49 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] -The Affectivist Manifesto: Artistic Critique for the 21st Century [...]

[rebel:art](#) [» Blog Archive](#) [» Brian Holmes: Affectivist Manifesto](#) Says:

November 23, 2008 at 6:55 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Theorie-Brocken am Wochenende: Brian Holmes und das "Affectivist Manifesto". "World society is the theater of affectivist art, the stage on which it appears and [...]"

Cultural Codes : mediaspace_09 Says:

December 7, 2008 at 10:21 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes blog an excerpt from THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO / Artistic Critique in the 21st Century: "... Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens [...]"

insightarts Says:

December 8, 2008 at 4:41 pm | [Reply](#)

would love to publish this on the Insight Arts blog. we recently hosted a social movement information session and it would be great to provide this as an example on how art is used for progressive social change.

beth jacobs Says:

April 10, 2009 at 2:25 pm | [Reply](#)

i am writing to you before my heart stops racing from the thrill of reading this piece. i have tried to educate myself and construct myself on the last scale of intimacy that you describe, feeling that the concrete scale of being a human organism was all that i could handle. life in these times has demanded a broadening that i find a little painful and creaky, but i'm working on it.

this includes developing an on-line life, studying some ancient Buddhist psychology and trying harder to listen to the people who i meet in my world. i will read some more and let this sink in more, but i wanted to send out my thanks and burst of enthusiasm for your effort. Beth J.

Online Publication: Escape the Overcode « Maakbaarheid in de Grote Stad Says:

June 5, 2009 at 9:06 am | [Reply](#)

[...] book opens with the Affectivist Manifesto: Artistic Critique in the 21st [...]"

world cities Says:

June 7, 2009 at 9:09 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes blog an excerpt from THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO / Artistic Critique in the 21st Century: "... Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens [...]"

Book - machine quotidienne Says:

July 27, 2009 at 8:46 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] -The Affectivist Manifesto: [...]"

radionica: Tekst i kontekst by Klaudio Štefančić | CroHr.com Says:

August 14, 2009 at 3:07 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://www.wdw.nl/project.php?id=183>• Za čitanje: <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/>• <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808>• ...jedan primjer 'novinske kritike': [...]"

Art Sheffield » » Art Sheffield 2010 - Life: A User's

Manual Says:

January 13, 2010 at 4:11 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes, the Affectivist Manifesto Andrea Fraser (on wikipedia) Professor Sara Ahmed (Goldsmiths staff profile) Brian Massumi (on wikipedia) Okwui Enwezor (on wikipedia) [...]

hito Says:

January 27, 2010 at 2:17 pm | [Reply](#)

hey brian, what a brilliant piece!

h.

<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> <<

Status_Quote Says:

January 4, 2011 at 6:39 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

The Shifting Boundaries of Art | aslaboratory Says:

January 5, 2011 at 8:07 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] The Affectivist Manifesto This entry was posted in Uncategorized. Bookmark the permalink. LikeBe the first to like this post. [...]

How Does Collective Practice Function Within Contemporary Art Practice? < joannelaws Says:

April 4, 2011 at 10:31 am | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

Maya Says:

June 24, 2011 at 9:08 am | [Reply](#)

A technical note (before I plunge into reading, having just finished Unleashing the Collective Phantoms and already smiling..): the pdf link above is the same as the NYTimes link just next to it.

This site ist wunderbar!!!!!!!!!!

Happy Summer

Maya Says:

June 24, 2011 at 10:40 am | [Reply](#)

First and foremost: yes! And furthermore (after at least another yes per sentence): the arts are necessary for social transformation also to work against violence, which is not a categorical call for non-violence but a call like a beginning to which one knows as yet no reply.

Would love to link up on our blog! (This blog is already listed in our info. section, but would be fantastic to also have a link to the book and this first section.)

Brian Holmes Says:

June 24, 2011 at 2:32 pm | [Reply](#)

Anyone is welcome to link to this site and use the materials, I am glad you like it!

the affectivist manifesto by Brian Holmes | 13/10/11 Says:

July 20, 2011 at 12:43 am | [Reply](#)

Marcelo Expósito's "Entre Sueños"

By Brian Holmes

Towards the New Body



art students in Athens, December 2008

Upon opening my laptop to write this article I found an email text with the latest news from Greece, where night after night demonstrators had been facing off with the police, expressing their rage at the murder of the young Alexandros Grigoropoulos. Immense social issues, as pervasive as they are everywhere invisible, were thrust into the burning actuality of the streets by the bullet that pierced the boy's heart. The text says this:

The youth is revolting because they want to live. With every last one of the meanings of the word "life." They want to live freely, they want space to create, to emancipate themselves, to play. They don't want to spend their adolescence in 12 hour days of school and extra courses, their first adult years in the pointless chase of a university degree, the passport to a glorious 800 euro/48 hours a week job in a boring office.... We crave to construct our own, autonomous future... When you really want to live, a spark is enough to make you instinctively attack anything that you think stands in your way.¹

The corrupt politics and stagnant economy of Greece are unique, say the security officials. But in Europe and across the developed world, the neoliberal revolution has brought precarious working and living conditions to an entire generation. Meanwhile, city centers became glittering spectacles and skyrocketing levels of

inequality were seen only from the viewpoint of the elites. The failure of the transnational financial system now guarantees that the "unique" conditions of Greece will be duplicated in country after country. Like life itself, like art at its best, the spark from the south of Europe is something you can feel in your own body.

As the tension mounts and the demonstrations break out, how many museums and educational programs will have the courage to explore the work of activist-artists who have dealt directly with the affects, the aspirations and the self-organization of this precarious generation? Those willing to erase the divide between politics and art will find great interest in the production of the Spanish videomaker Marcelo Expósito, who over the last five years has been carrying out a multi-part evocation of the new social struggles under the name *Entre Sueños* (Between Waking and Dreams). Unlike conventional documentaries establishing the historical facts, this videography records the nascent movements of history in the gestures and the stories, or indeed the imaginations, of those who attempt to make their own history in the streets.

The series opens with *First of May (The City-Factory)*, 2004, a far-reaching video essay on the transformation of laboring and organizing conditions in northern Italy, culminating with the appearance of the Chainworkers collective and the EuroMayday parade in Milano. Following this rather complex overture is *Radical Imagination (Carnivals of Resistance)*, also 2004, as well as a third piece, co-authored with Nuria Vila (the editor of all three works) and entitled *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007.² In the videos, a shift in the philosophical conception of the capital/labor relation is articulated with the emergent forms of militant organization and with historical practices of audiovisual editing. But as these discursive and formal agendas are pursued, something unutterable is going on beneath the surface: the search for an unknown kind of life that can work a mind-numbing shift, dance in the face of the cops, click through computerized labyrinths and care for a child in one continuous rhythm. The search for a new body.

City-Factory

The ambition of these videos is to be activist in their message, while actualizing the intricate histories of artistic expression. Thus *First of May* is all about organizing chain-store employees and freelance workers; but it begins with lines from the literary writer W.G. Sebald, a sequence from the silent-film classic *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and a black-and-white clip of Glenn Gould at the piano, also strangely mute. Only a few moments later do we hear Gould's elegantly phrased performance, which seems to orchestrate the movements of a temp worker watching over kids in an Italian mall. The central question is posed in these first few seconds. If the cinematic montage of the 1920s sought to develop a harmonious musical score for the clashing social relations of the industrial city, then what kind of link could we hope for today between the virtuoso performances of artists and the highly scripted routines of workers caught in the production systems of the post-industrial metropolis?

The video shows documentary clips of the Fiat automobile plant of Lingotto, in Turin, with its spectacular racetrack on the roof where buyers could test drive a car rolling directly off the assembly line. Next come scenes of that same building transformed into a conference center and leisure complex, a symbol of the transition to communicative labor. The collective discipline of the factory has been vaporized into the omnipresent warp and weft of hyper-individualized economic relations. It is here that the temp girl rushes to keep up with the activities of the corporate playground,

chasing toddlers on plastic cars imported from China. Consumerism appears as a debilitating game where even the guardians don't know the rules. Yet a dream is gathering amidst the toys and balloons: the old leftist dream that artistic expression could become directly active in the struggle for emancipation.



The philosopher Paolo Virno gives fresh voice to that dream in excerpts from a lecture where he describes the resemblance between virtuoso performance and communicational labor. Neither of them produces a finished object or work; both depend on improvisational sequences carried out before a public. Yet the same is true of politics. For Virno, the linguistic and performative turn of the economy tends to dissolve the boundaries between labor, inner contemplation and political action. The situation is confusing, but it brings new powers into everyone's reach. He speaks enigmatically of an invisible notation, a hidden score: the sharable potential of a "general intellect" that informs or even orchestrates the multifarious activity of today's economy.

Is that sheer mysticism? Waking life in the metropolis appears to be guided not by political virtuosity but by fine-grained processes of control: combinations of motivational research, on-the-job surveillance, individualized seduction and credit assessment by the bankers. Managers and advertisers pull the strings. Activists have to occupy and undermine that terrain. Fascinating sequences of the film show the founders of the Chainworkers group in Milano mounting an unheard-of campaign: a mobilization of the shit-job workers who staff your supermarket, sort your mail, deliver your pizza – and play your music, host your party, cuddle your kids, probably write your advertising too.

Chiara Birattari clicks through a corporate image-bank, looking to pirate the perfect photo of a tattooed rocker from the squatted social centers. She finds one sorting boxes at a depot in the exurban sprawl. "Autonomous, or precarious?" asks the flier she's designing. Alex Foti recounts the desire to organize people who never dreamed of a union: the kids in the uniforms, the chain-store workers, who grew up on comics and fast-food and American culture. The interview breaks up into scenes from a surprise action he coordinated in a giant mall – an environment strictly without freedom of speech or association, the archetype of what Virno calls "infinite publicity without a public sphere."

Banners suddenly unfold on an upper floor; leaflets sail through the kingdom of the commodity. A portable sound system cuts through the muzak with strong rock and political talk, while

activists hold off the burly security guards to open up a window of possibility. Amazingly, the action lasts an hour. The video ends on the city streets, with the wild antics of the precarious Mayday demonstration in Milano, gathering casual workers to protest for better conditions. "Rights or riots" is the slogan on a demonstrator's bright pink shirt. He smiles self-consciously under the camera's eye, then looks frankly at us, tapping the words on his chest.

With the launching of the EuroMayday parades in 2003 and 2004, the new social movements began raising the issues of life and labor on the urban territory. In a bewildering neoliberal environment where workers are dispatched through the urban sprawl by computerized orders, activists use communication skills to change the score, to disrupt the orchestration of daily life and make a positive move in the perpetually losing game that the corporations have imposed on the populace. This is the challenge of emancipation in our time: popular autonomy and "riots for rights" depend on the communicational capacities of precarious expression within the fractured tissue of the metropolis.

Swirling Rhythms

What the next two videos show is that emancipation really is a waking dream, relayed across the generations. "Changes happen first in the imagination," reads the opening caption of *Tactical Frivolity*. A faraway chant resounds in the air, then an extravagant creature appears on the screen, dressed in silver and pink with enormous wings, a feather duster in her upraised hand and a gas mask dangling at her side, twirling in front of the police. Cut to black-and-white scenes of suffragette marches, with early feminists speaking to the crowd; then another cut to the eyepiece of a turn-of-the-century kinoscope, through which we see the flickering image of a woman performing a modernist butterfly-dance on stage. Her flowing white dress swirls in the air, tracing arabesques in three dimensions, while a samba drummer cuts into your rapt attention. One... two... three: the thunderous beat prepares the break into the present, into the streets.



Using simpler discursive structures than *First of May*, the next two works of *Entre Sueños* plunge into specific events: the "Carnival against Capital" of June 18, 1999, and the invention of the "pink bloc" protest aesthetic during the demonstration against the IMF/World Bank in Prague on September 26, 2000. *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, on which I'll briefly focus, combines video footage of the Prague events and retrospective interviews with the participants. What they reveal is how much

consciously articulated desire goes into the collective gestures that can succeed in transmitting a political message to today's polarized societies.



Evolving under particularly repressive conditions, British social movements invented the most effective forms of resistance against neoliberal control. Yet as activist Kate Evans explains, they did not depend on violence but on feminine provocation. At the Mayday demonstration held by London Reclaim the Streets in 2000, widely expected to mark the first application of the new Terrorism Act, "Rosie was there, and she was wearing this ridiculous costume, with this tiny pink bikini and this headdress and these big pink tails, and she had a feather duster and she was tickling the police." As Rosie herself continues: "I thought, well, if I'm gonna be legislated into being a terrorist, then I might as well be the most ridiculous kind of terrorist there is."

Kate recounts the journey to Prague in two travelers' vehicles, filled with eleven women, two men and vast quantities of silver and pink materials. Scenes at the convergence center give a taste of the preparations with a larger group (mostly from the Peoples' Global Action) who formed the "pink line," one of three distinct approaches used to shut down the World Bank/IMF meetings. Samba echoes in your ears, and at this point another series of interviews begins, recounting the origins of the subversive music from black Brazilian carnival bands in the 1970s. "The rhythms that we play originate from *candomblé*, so they're actually used to call down deities of nature," explains Nicky. "The moment a break happens, the crowd goes mad. So I think there is really something powerful about those moments, and about those changes in rhythm." The Prague demonstrations as a whole formed such a break; and members of the pink bloc used the disarming force of surprise to enter the conference center, closing the meetings and launching a new cycle of popular protest in Europe.

Kate Evans, breast-feeding her baby during the interview, is quite lucid about the potential ambiguities of her tactics: "I have a bit of a problem with the idea that girls wear very small costumes and dance and men don't," she explains, "because I don't know exactly how liberating that is for people who don't realize it's meant to be ironic." This feminist look at the precarious protest aesthetic combines a grounded, direct -action approach with a rich exploration of the ways that popular mobilization sparks changes in lived experience.

The videos are directly inspiring for people who want to put their bodies on the line, producing a new orchestration of urban gesture

without falling into the traps laid by the authorities and the media. At the same time, they trace perspectives across a century. Those who are curious about vanguard art might remember Peter Wollen's question in *Raiding the Icebox*: "What form of bodily movement would correspond to a process of production that displayed a different, transformed rationality – and, of course, a transformed gender division and sexuality?"³ Marcelo Expósito and Nuria Vila have given one answer. It is as though marginal artistic and activist experiments of the past had reawakened in the present, but with a much broader and deeper embodiment, among people aware of the staggering opposition that any emancipatory movement faces. Now the relay will be passed to a younger generation. The film ends with samba rhythms and an eye-piece-view of costumed protesters, cutting to another antiquated butterfly-dance on stage. This time the swirling veils are tinted in electric pink.



Notes

¹ Anonymous, "The Revenge of Life," Dec. 14, 2008, at <http://indy.gr/analysis/the-revenge-of-life>.

² For screening and exhibition of the videos see <http://www.hamacaonline.net/autor.php?id=69>; for free download see <http://www.archive.org/details/tacticalfrivolity>.

³ Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1953), p. 56; download the chapter [here](#).

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5 Responses to "Marcelo Expósito's "Entre Sueños""

[HAMACA Blog](#) » "Entre sueños" según Brian Holmes Says:
January 22, 2009 at 9:41 am | Reply

[...] aquí un excelente artículo de Brian Holmes acerca de la serie "Entre Sueños" de Marcelo [...]

mectruy Says:

February 8, 2009 at 4:12 pm | [Reply](#)

pink electirck 😊 nice..

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Very interesting article, I especially appreciate the Greek Student Art Show lead-in. Cheers, Cerena

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January 18, 2010 at 7:00 pm | [Reply](#)

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Recapturing Subversion

By Brian Holmes

Twenty Twisted Rules of the Culture Game



Introduction to the book: **ESCAPE THE OVERCODE**

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Let's go straight to the point. How does art become subversive of the social order? How does it undermine normal, legitimate, accepted patterns of behavior, and how does it open up possibilities for the transformation of everyday life? What can subversive art accomplish in the political arena? And what are its limits, how can it exceed them in the future?

Thanks to Deleuze and Guattari, and perhaps even more, to the Autonomia philosophers, we have a good idea of what subversion can mean today. ¹ It's not about resisting the continual mutations of capitalism from a retrenched identity position, a class status, a locally instituted cultural tradition (a "whole way of life" as cultural studies founder Richard Hoggart said, or even a "whole way of conflict" as E.P. Thompson riposted). It's about allowing the inherited forms of solidarity and struggle to morph, hybridize or even completely dissolve in the process of encountering and appropriating the new toolkits, conceptual frames and spatial

imaginaries of the present. Power flows through the individuals and groups who constitute a social network. It's generated by their productive activity, so it can always be twisted away from functional paths and channeled in different directions, to meet existential needs or to explore wild and unpredictable desires.

You can see this subversive potential at work – or liberated from work – in computer hacking, when someone takes the central productive techniques of contemporary society and diverts them for non-profitable or illegal uses, which involve sharing, free cooperation, collective action. Similar things are done by artists: commercial images and corporate organizational forms are taken apart, altered in detail or even at their functional core, then repurposed in a process very much like reverse engineering. Since the 1960s, the massive distribution and sharing of subversive practices has been the basis for a playful, astonishing and literally disarming style of conflict, displacing the fields and stakes of struggle and opening up new lifeworlds even while pursuing directly political goals. That's what happened at the counter-summits, on the global days of action, and in the networked campaigns, hoaxes and media interventions during the cycle of alterglobalization struggles running from 1999 to 2003.

At the time I collaborated with the French information-mapping group, Bureau d'Etudes. Their graphic charts are populated by state and corporate entities whose operations and interconnections can be precisely described and documented. But when all the informational elements have been stripped away, what these network maps reveal are naked, indeterminate patterns of energy, of constituent power, the kind you feel coursing through your body in the process of social change. The network map becomes an energy diagram. That's what you can use for subversion. Free cooperation on the basis of subversive energies became something like a "principle of hope" for anti-systemic movements in the late 1990s and the early years of the new millennium. These are the kinds of practices I described in my last book, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering*.² Building on those experiences I have developed a theory of the generative diagram, presented here under the heading of "Potentials."

Once we had understood that individuals and groups can become mobile and active within the maps of constituted power, then we were able to intervene in the social and political arenas. Through inspired collaboration, one could help to invoke networked demonstrations and occupations, and then participate as a "free radical" in an emergent multitude. This is the moment of the mask, the bacchanalia of resistance: the "carnival against capital" that activist-artists like John Jordan and Alex Foti have helped to unleash in city after city, in forms and with political demands that have continued evolving up to the present. One of the things that creates this possibility is the open identity of the collective name, something that the Luther Blissett project made into one of the primary vectors of subversion in media culture.³ What happened around the turn of the century was the emergence of collective phantoms on a transnational scale: movements that take a determinate name, like Reclaim the Streets or the Tute Bianche or No Border or EuroMayday, and then refuse to have leaders or structures, turning the category-trap of mediated politics into the open field of their own self-transformation.

Art can transmit the pleasure of the collective name, so that it becomes a model, a possibility for others. It can show you how to don the mask of power and appear within the constituted circuits, but speaking in a different tongue, twisting the functional language of networked capitalism into different meanings, satires, denunciations, voicing calls for action ranging from policy change to sabotage to exodus. The Yes Men have been a great inspiration.

They speak the truth of power, they lay bare its lies, hypocrisies, brutalities. But their way of working is open, cooperative and playful, inviting anyone who can lend a hand to subvert all the communication skills they have developed in their working lives – as I did most recently in 2007, when an entire TV studio in Paris helped us pretend to be a Washington news channel interviewing representatives of political parties in the course of the French elections. In fact, we were broadcasting live from the second floor, while another team was connecting us with the politicians right downstairs!

Subversion is the takeover of urban space and the alteration of capitalist media for experimental ends, allowing you to break out of the normalized patterns and engage in vital contact with the social world and with yourself, with your own potentials. Another example is *Nikeground – Rethinking Space*, by the group 0100101110101101.org in collaboration with Public Netbase in Vienna.⁴ This was a paradigmatic case of reverse imagineering. It not only involved the proposal of a thirty-meter “swoosh” as public art for Vienna’s historic Karlsplatz, but also the physical installation of a several-ton infobox on the square itself. The infobox was used to fictively advertise what the Nike corporation does in real life: namely, to transform urban space in its own image and to create the existential parameters within which that space will be experienced. Slogans announced the renaming of Karlsplatz as Nikeplatz, while explaining that the corporation was branding streets and neighborhoods around the world. At the center of the hoax was the product, a pair of brand-new red sneakers displayed in the infobox for the consuming public to desire: the very shoes that connect you to the ground and offer you a new mobility. The work responded to the real transformation of urban space with an aggressive, distorted mirror, both in order to show it for what it is and to suggest that you can change the rules of the game, by taking the right to intervene subversively in the city.

While a scandal arose in the press, with concerned citizens protesting this fake expropriation, another urban myth was reawakened: the trashing of the Niketown in Seattle during the 1999 WTO summit. As the group explained: “We wanted to use the entire city as a stage for a huge urban performance, a sort of theater show for an unaware audience/cast. We wanted to produce a collective hallucination capable of altering people’s perception of the city in this total, immersive way.”

Nikeground offers a striking image of the artistic practices that flourished around the turn of the century. At its best such a hoax can be a provocative transgression and a symbolic echo of broader social movements. But anything transgressive or symbolic can easily fall into the category of the prank, oiling the wheels of commerce with self-reflexive humor. Today we need to ask about the limits of this subversive alteration of perception. How to transform the underlying circuits of power that continue to function massively all around us? How to respond to the real intensification of all forms of exploitation and oppression? What else can be done with the subversive potentials of art in the control society?

Capture and Overcode

Since 2004 I have been less involved with direct action and more with unclassifiable projects that function as mobile laboratories and experimental theaters of social and cultural change, where movements of the imagination unfold at territorial, national, continental and global scales. Such projects are explored in this book under the heading of “Experimentalism.” Often they border on the recognizable limits of art, using sophisticated formal means

to develop some relative autonomy from the norms of everyday aesthetic experience in the commercialized societies. But what's being sought here is the autonomy of an investigative and transformative process that upsets the codes of the constituted fields and undercuts any kind of institutional control.

The surface reasons for this shift are obvious. The increasing repression of the last big cycle of struggles, the consolidation of the post-9/11 security panic and the failure of the antiwar marches of February 15, 2003, all contributed to a momentary decline in street protest in many countries, and a partial retreat of activism into merely symbolic and therefore melancholic forms. Make no mistake: concrete social movements continue to exist, as important, as surprising as ever. But there were theoretical problems to face, which have to do with damning insufficiencies in a number of key ideas in the autonomist toolkit adopted by so many activists and politically engaged artists since the turn of the century. These are practical ideas, dealing with the status of freelance labor in contemporary capitalist societies. Yet practice is inseparable from both aesthetics and discourse. The problems coalesce around the abstract concepts of *overcoding* and *the apparatus of capture*, both of which refer to parasitic social constructs that are understood to contain, normalize and channel the diagrammatic energies of free cooperation. Most of the essays in this book, even when they extend to geopolitics, are attempts to understand and to go beyond these key ideas.

Deleuze and Guattari's text on "The Apparatus of Capture" is a geophilosophy of power, pitting the territorial deployments of the state against the subversions of the nomadic war machine.⁵ At its heart is the notion of overcoding, developed out of studies of ancient imperial mythology by the historian Georges Dumézil. Overcoding is the institution of a social tie, a quasi-magical bond, imposed as a language of power. It's the organizing grammar of a transcendent symbolic hierarchy that casts its unifying net over the proliferation of primitive tongues that had initially named and encoded their disparate patchworks of territory. This overcoding of experience appears everywhere there is a symbolic hierarchy, mapping out a realm of transcendent figures that serve as idealized measures of rank and value, to organize the chaotic tangle of social relations on the ground. The overcode is the ultimate apparatus of capture: the law of the gods, the language of the stars, given voice and effective reality by the emperor. Capitalism, with its extension of the world market, came to decode these transcendent structures, releasing dynamic, mobile flows on a plane of pure immanence; and world populations then entered the endless strategic game of encoding, decoding and recoding the possible forms of existence. This game is played out in the smooth space of the market, whose image for Deleuze and Guattari is not the hierarchical chessboard, but the undifferentiated grid of the Japanese game of Go.

The ideas of capture and overcoding laid the foundation for the first really challenging political interpretation of globalized capitalism, Hardt and Negri's *Empire*.⁶ The book uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to explain the difference between the classical forms of late nineteenth-century imperialism and the smooth, networked space of today's global market. The apparatus of capture now designates all the devices for the modulation of experience and the channeling of behavior that serve to organize the productive energies of the multitude. Thus for Hardt and Negri, the immediate world of direct social relations – and the direct violence of exploitation – does not so much dissolve the ancient operations of overcoding, as transmute them. Along the same lines, Deleuze and Guattari themselves insisted that in the modern period, the quasi-magical powers of the ancient emperors continually return under new modalities. This is exactly why one can speak of a networked empire, exerting coercive powers

distinct from those of classical imperialism. Negri and Hardt follow the insights of Deleuze and Guattari into the society of control, and they relate the specific procedures for the capture and modulation of attention under networked capitalism to the regulatory effects exerted by the monetary regime of floating exchange rates, with all its consequences in the financial sphere. What they have done in this way, along with other theorists of postmodern power, is to open up one of the most important fields of research for any practice that wants to gain autonomy from the reigning system of values and measures. In my work since 2004 I have tried to carry out that kind of research in a deliberately destabilizing interplay with artistic inventions, according to a meta-theory of critique that I call "extradisciplinary investigation." The idea is both to understand a complex world and to change it.

The relation between fluctuating electronic signals and human attention has become a central component of social experience, from Wall Street and Times Square to the great Asian cityscapes, or from the flatscreen TV at the local bar to the cellphone in your ear and the laptop in your bed on Sunday morning. What's at stake is a sound-and-pixel environment where informational objects unfold in time, exciting human desire and channeling it into mathematically ordered patterns and figures. This relationship with screen environments can be better understood by exploring the underlying technoscientific principles of cybernetics, cognitive psychology and complexity theory. A clearer grasp of how these principles have been applied over the course of the last half-century is fundamental to autonomous practices, since it is ourselves, as cultural producers, who are called upon to fill these screens with content. And beyond these proliferating screens there is a constantly expanding universe of computerized recording, analysis and surveillance, gathering behavioral data in order to more effectively pattern the movements of populations and to produce effects of governance. So we'd better know how these processes work, and how they can be undermined – because experience shows that there is nothing easier to instrumentalize than yesterday's subversion. The studies devoted to cybernetics, in the final section of this book, are transversal to the essays on art and social movements. The visual metaphors of those texts are drawn chiefly from cinema, giving further scope to the extradisciplinary investigations.

But overcoding in the global market society does not only involve the directive signals of computers and screens. Throughout his later writing, Guattari uses the word overcoding to talk about the imposition of models of interaction, whether in the workplace, in institutions, in aesthetics and entertainment, through professional relations or via the architecture and programming of collective facilities. Like Foucault, Guattari was particularly interested in the subjective dimensions of governmental procedures and technologies; but he always laid more stress on resistance, invention, deviance – in a word, subversion. The clash between politically engaged artistic practices and the management of the creative industries marks one of the characteristic intersections of governmentality and subversion, the site of what I once called "a contested bridge between the psyche and the objective structures of society."⁷ One way to prolong the discussion of works like *Nikeground* is to look at the role of global brands in soliciting and structuring our most intimate desires for creative expression. And here one sees the limits of the autonomist discourses on overcoding and capture.

Branded

Analysts of the brand see it as a common semiotic ground for uprooted urban consciousness, a kind of psychic crossroads for post-traditional subjects with no fixed identity. This comes close to

the autonomist idea that the productive cooperation of living labor can only be captured by coercive strategies, which are fundamentally weak, exerting only a containing, channeling effect. As Adam Arvidsson explains in his book on the subject: "Nike's efforts to make its logo condense a complex web of meanings and intensities have the effect that *with a swoosh* certain actions come to assume distinct and particular meanings." And he continues: "What brand owners *own* is a particular pre-determined frame of action, a particular relation between 'action and semiosis'; between what consumers do and what their actions mean to them."⁸ What consumers do, he suggests, is to buy products and put them to their own uses; and what their actions mean to them is that they are creatively individual and connected to others. If corporations control this creative interaction, it is only to the extent that they can make it unfold in more or less programmed directions. For Arvidsson, the brand-relation is exactly this two-way street, which he sees as highly ambiguous and full of untapped possibilities.

Arvidsson claims that the trademark image only succeeds in capturing the attention and loyalty of consumers when it allows them to fill its empty signifier with personal meanings, thus mobilizing "the ability of human communication to produce a surplus sociality." The key thing for the brand is to become a vector of this surplus, aggregating it into a desirable pole of attraction while still encouraging continually renewed spin-offs of creative divergence. This is how people are supposed to become individuals in our societies. Like the particular clothing, hairstyles and accouterments of the Mods and the Rockers back in the early days of subcultural style, a plethora of global brands now offers the entire consuming class a chance to develop their fantasied self-image, to raise their prestige in the eyes of others, and above all, to reach out to fellow members of their branded community, signaling the vibrancy of their own existence by specific uses of the global product. Information-gathering techniques ranging from personalized ethnographic interviews to automated data-mining can then record and synthesize the unique contributions that consumers make to brand content, permitting an extension and transformation of the trademark image, and therefore, greater use-value for the creative consumer.

Reading Arvidsson, it seems that the "communism of capital" evoked by autonomist theorists is amazingly close. For Paolo Virno, the communism of capital would mean the unrealized possibilities of the flexible work regime: the abolition of wage labor, the end of state coercion, and above all, "the valorization of all that which renders the life of an individual unique." But watch out: in Virno's eyes these were unrealized possibilities, cruelly distorted by actual developments in the post-Fordist economy, which had gone in a fundamentally opposite direction since the 1980s.⁹ For Arvidsson, who deals with contemporary forms of communication, the advent of this "communism of capital" means that the normative character of advertising in the highly regimented era of the 1950s, with its basic injunction to conform to one's class status by accepting broadly standardized forms of consumption, has now entirely dissolved into a relational paradigm where all the initiative is left up to the consumer. It is she who ultimately sets the terms on which both consumption and communication will take place. In artistic practice, the soft utopias of relational aesthetics offer a perfect image of this communicational universe.¹⁰ To be sure, as Arvidsson explains, brand management still functions as a form of Foucaultian governmentality, channeling and orchestrating the diverse expressions of power-potentials that arise from below:

The brand works as a kind of 'platform for action' that is inserted into the social and works to 'program' the freedom of consumers to evolve in particular directions.... The task of brand

management is to create a number of resistances that make it difficult or unlikely for consumers to experience their freedom, or indeed their goals, in ways different from those prescribed by the particular ambiance.¹¹

The most powerful of these “brand-management resistances” is against resistance itself. It is banished by simply denying its existence, as is so often the case in our societies. In a fascinating passage, Arvidsson recounts how consultants define the “cool” or resistant individual in ways that exclude any potential threat to profitability, but instead identify this type of person as a prime source of information about the future pathways of social desire. “Capturing cool,” he writes, “is a matter of incorporating and profiting from the resistance that consumers spontaneously produce.” Yet still he claims that capitalist command over the informational economy is in crisis. Any constraint on the user’s freedom becomes, in his analysis, a powerful contradiction in a system that has had to legitimate itself with an ideology of autonomy. Each time the brand contradicts its own ideology, he says, consumers react with sharp rejections. “The forces of production are becoming too advanced to be contained within the capitalist relations of production,” we read on the final page of his book. So, according to the most precise autonomist analysis of brands, the apparatus of capture has been perfected. And it is now in the process of setting us free.

Decoders

The analysis flows perfectly from its postulates. Why then is it so strangely mistaken? On the one hand it is the result of a deliberately idealizing strategy, an attempt to cut through the usual gloom and doom to focus on what has really been achieved through decades of collective struggle against advertising and social control. But on the other hand it partakes of a creeping denial of reality, characteristic of postmodern schizophrenia. What we’ve seen since the turn of the century, after a major outpouring of subversive art, a concerted attack on intellectual property regimes and a world-spanning protest movement unfolding under the slogan “No Logo,” is not an implosion of the brand-relation but a veritable explosion of commodity fetishism, at the scale of global markets and the speed of fiber-optic networks. The coexistence of overcoding and resistance is everywhere, sure, but to explain it as a dialectic of freedom or a teleological movement toward capitalism’s self-overcoming is to obscure the real issues.

Travel across the world network: nowhere do you encounter any generalized disaffection from the signifiers of participation in the capitalist economy, despite the deviant minorities in every port. Only a deep financial crisis shakes the faith of the middle classes, as happened during the closure of the banks in Argentina in 2001-2002. But that shaken faith has an odd way of returning. What you do see on such travels is that the rise of the relational commodity has been accompanied by a resurgence of both confessionalism and racism – not only in the underdeveloped lands, but also in the overdeveloped regions of North America and Europe. Here lay the undeniable heart of the problem after 2004. As the world slid deeper into war after Bush’s reelection, all the fundamental issues of power and emancipation seemed to return as unanswered questions. And from my perspective, the most important among them was the role that we could play: we who work with communication, in the so-called creative industries.

To understand where we are, we have to look back into the genealogy of some crucial subversive ideas. Back in the mid-1960s, Mario Tronti described how the organizational and technological structures of capitalism could only appropriate the

inventions of workers in their resistance and their freedom.¹² Toni Negri developed a similar theme in philosophy, with his vitalist ontology of living labor.¹³ Foucault and Deleuze also echoed Tronti's insights, with their paradoxical notion that resistance is primary.¹⁴ Over the course of decades, such ideas seeped into broader currents of political philosophy and activism, in and beyond Western Europe, resulting in far more liberating views of grassroots struggle. Yet from here there also arose the willfully optimistic belief that the openness of the relational commodity – in the form of Web 2.0, for example – or the extraordinary proliferation of the creative industries could somehow represent a “great transformation” of capitalist society, a decisive change in its structures that only needed to be taken up in its full promise and stabilized in new institutional forms.¹⁵ These ideas were supported by economic developments in America, ranging from the more utopian side of Jeremy Rifkin's pronouncements on the end of work to the early successes of the Internet-based “new economy,” or the great entrepreneurial infatuation with “crowdsourcing” and the enthusiasm over free software and open-source content licenses, brought to a pinnacle by Yochai Benkler in his book *The Wealth of Networks*. The key ideas were that innovation and creativity are fundamentally uncontrollable by any labor discipline and that the recording and distribution functions of the Internet offer new possibilities to organize these capacities into a productive synthesis.¹⁶ Some even saw the erratic swings of the stock market as an imperfect but promising representation of the collaborative potentials of the multitude.¹⁷ Overcoding and the apparatus of capture now began to look like obscure leftist myths dissolving in the sunlight of cooperative agency – exactly as they had always appeared to the liberal theorists of civil society. What disappeared in all this were the ideas of Tronti himself, his passionate conviction that workers must throw off the organizational structures that transform their labor and life energy into the driving force of capital.

Writing in 1971 in a postscript to the second edition of *Workers and Capital*, Tronti evoked the industrial strategies of Taylorism as “the birth of a new scientific discipline: that theory of technological reality which is the science of labor and the enemy of the worker.”¹⁸ In our era, when knowledge management and the endless quest to identify and channel innovation represent the dominant strategies for exploiting the educated postindustrial labor force, how could one see crowdsourcing, corporate networking technologies or the codification of the creative industries as anything but the enemy of the multitudes? If something is to be done with “creativity” today, it must first of all *escape* from the protocols of capitalist control. Tronti, in his time, was remarkably clear. For him, the working class is “at one and the same time, the *articulation* of capital, and its *dissolution*. Capitalist power seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor of its own development. The workerist party must take this same real mediation by the workers of capital's interests and organize it in an antagonistic form, as the tactical terrain of struggle and as a strategic potential for destruction.”¹⁹ In our time, this translated into a struggle against the definition of a “creative class” by capitalist sociology, and above all, against its functionalization for strategies of corporate, urban and financial profit.²⁰ Artists, writers, actors, painters, audio -visual producers, designers, musicians, philosophers, architects, all have had to find ways to refuse to let their subjectivity become the mere medium of capital flows, a stepping-stone between money and more money. Anyone who feels the inordinate pressure that direct management now exerts on the intelligence and expressivity that it demands and continually solicits, and anyone who can see those same pressures reiterated in the tight stylistic, financial and temporal constraints of the freelance markets of creativity, will find in Tronti's writing both an incitement to resistance and exodus, and a keen analysis

of the governing structures of capitalist society, of its dynamic equilibrium. Yet this analysis needs to be updated, where both the objective structures of contemporary society and the subjective dimensions of creative labor are concerned.

What becomes visible in my own studies of the productive or “prosumer” ethos of the creative industries around the world is the tremendous effectiveness of the new motivational paradigm and the particular power of conviction it seems to hold for those involved in culturalized production. The reason for this is that even with hyperflexible markets giving all the advantages to the state or corporate buyer, everything connected to the arts still offers a chance for self-expression and a veritable economy of self-development – which is no small attraction. So far, cultural producers have generally been diffident about politics and favorable to free-market conditions, because at least they have themselves to sell at cut-rate prices. In terms of sheer narcissistic pleasure, the comparative advantage to the sale of one’s raw physical labor or disciplined professional expertise is obvious. To theorize an inevitable sublation or even an impending breakdown of the cultural system under the pressure of its inherent contradictions is to repeat an historical error of antiquated Marxism (and the second time around is definitely farce).

Yet something has been going on here nonetheless. What’s happening in the thick of the creative industries is best described as an intensely vital Nietzschean struggle over the transvaluation of values. This struggle unfolds between those who have been won over to the most innovative strategies of overcoding, that is, of concentrating power, prestige and control capacity in salable signs; and those who, on the contrary, seek constantly to decode the frameworks of their experience, to escape the imposition of calculated models of behavior and to discover forms of interaction where the problematic gap between an ethics of collective conduct and an aesthetics of singular desire is the significant question, the central focus of value. At this point, the privileged status of art within the creative city and creative economy discourse obviously has to be left behind; and even more, it has to be actively resisted, deliberately subverted, so that something new can arise in its place. The enigma for us is why this second option has only been taken, so far at least, by a relatively small minority. What creates a contemporary leftist culture? How is a subversive subjectivity forged? And what blocks its formation?

Tectonic Shifts

One thing every new struggle shows is that experiences of cooperation across the divides of class, geographical origins, gender, educational backgrounds and ethnicity is part of the crucible from which dissenting subjectivities emerge. The radical cultural differences of those who cooperate in social movements, and the potential of that cooperation to transform lives, bear witness to a subversive potential that extends far beyond the moments of convergence and action. The type of mobile, dynamic, protean individual shaped by participation in the networked world market (what I call the “flexible personaiity”) clearly has a better chance of eluding capture when he or she is exposed to confrontations of values with people from very different horizons. What’s compelling is not just the diversity of backgrounds, traditions and identities, but above all the multiplicity of efforts to overcome a frozen heritage and reconnect the past with the future. But we need to work much more on the ways of articulating multiplicities.

It’s clear from the resurgence of racisms and nationalisms – and from their calculated imposition through governmental rhetorics – that the interactions of the global market are not the only vector

for the formation of the self. In fact, it seems that layers or strata of subjectivity are formed quite differently at different scales, from the urban to the national, the continental and the global. Concretions of sovereignty – that is, mechanisms of capture and overcoding – are found at each of these scales, contradicting or at least vastly complicating the notion of a single, quasi-structural opposition between networked empire and multitude. All these formative processes come to bear on the intimate scale, which in turn has its own potentials of invention, expression and contagion. Here is the complex theater where the real is reimagined and reconfigured. What we need at this point is maybe less intoxication with quick and dirty attacks on the brands (irresistible though they may be) and more attention to an anthropology of self-fashioning. And since many thousands of active people who have reshaped their convictions in recent social movements are now beginning to play around with cultural self-management, it may be possible in a time of crisis to launch broader and more significant experiments in decoding and recoding – that is, in collective metamorphosis. Yet to achieve this would in turn require a deeper knowledge of persistent sovereignties and control techniques, along with an ability to map their restructuring with each new round of systemic crisis.

One of the things I've tried to do in this book, particularly with respect to art and the creative industries, is to explore the political-economic frames in which collective metamorphosis takes place (or all too often, is blocked and stymied). But rather than analyzing these enabling and constraining frames in their exclusively national dimensions, where most of the information and interpretation is still confined, I've shifted the focus both to the globe-girding scale of empire and even more importantly, to the continental blocs, which for many reasons seem destined to emerge as compromises between capital's demands for ever-increasing mobility and humanity's need for some kind of political and territorial stability, and ultimately, some kind of ecological balance. To make that more precise, I would say that situating the lived dynamics of a particular city within the necessarily abstracted patterns of national, continental and global circulation is the best way to move toward "Geocritique," which is the necessary reformulation of cultural critique in the present. Essays in this book deal with Latin America, the European Union and the continental and imperial dimensions of both the United States and China. As we have discovered through collective work in the Continental Drift seminar,²¹ the five scales of intimate, territorial, national, continental and global experience all tend constantly to interrelate, making the lifeworld into an interplay of scales. The pressures on the self become considerable under the multiple rule-sets of this spatialized game; but so does the vital interest of the players. Tremendous questions of translation arise, of course, even before one moves beyond one's areas of linguistic competence (English and the Romance languages, in my case). But these questions of translation are among the most urgent and rewarding issues of our time, if one is not afraid of getting lost among the tongues and stories.

That the book should end with detailed studies of the remote-control systems born of the military science of cybernetics is a token of the times, which have witnessed one last desperate and ill-fated resurgence of the old Anglo-American drive to imperial hegemony. Cybernetics is the original model of today's globally scaled interaction routines. Its early forms are the "Dark Crystals" of a still-expanding control society. The wartime science has developed along two basic paths. One follows the original command-and-control imperatives of the military communication engineers, giving us a global architecture of surveillance; while the other, thrust ahead by the reflexivity of so-called "second-order cybernetics," has opened up proliferating realms of semiotic

experience, worlds of simulacra and simulation which are devoted chiefly to the pursuit of consumerism by immaterial means. The command-and-control apparatus reinforces certain disciplinary paradigms, verging on authoritarianism; while second-order cybernetics tends to reinforce the channeled and guided transformations of the flexible personality. The aspiration to democracy is stretched to its limit along these two paths, as we have seen in the post-9/11 wars and security panic, then in the credit bubble leading to the great meltdown of the computerized financial markets. The wreckage of these developments is still extremely dangerous ("toxic" was the word in vogue at the date of writing). Fortunately, a decade of net-critique has shown that all these artificial worlds can be entered on the sly, hacked, repurposed or just exposed in their sheer arid worthlessness, as the case may be. Reverse engineering is still the great subversive paradigm.

Crucial to any experience of the digitized worlds is the question of modeling, which abstracts from one context of interaction the parameters, rules and protocols that will make it possible to formulate another one. Of course, this is the technique that has given us control environments such as airports, malls, entertainment palaces and other "scripted spaces," where carefully constructed scenarios of experience are modulated in real time according to data gathered from the people moving through them.²² But a long tradition of dissent and subversion within the sciences of complexity means that cybernetics cannot entirely be reduced to the procedures of control. At their best, cybernetic reflections have offered an introduction to the act of creating a model and inhabiting its unexpected transformations, which are never solely restricted to informatic spaces. The most compelling thing of all is to engage in full-fledged experiments with the grounds, the dreams, the philosophies and the concrete social machines through which people become other, leaving their initial territories behind and embracing the culture of self-transformation that remains the most fertile potential of post-68 experimentalism. Félix Guattari has given one of the most useful indications of how to do this, with his fourfold map of the schizoanalytic cartographies, to which I have devoted the culminating essay.

What's initially at stake is the relation between mute existential territories and constellations of poetic, lyrical or artistic refrains, which make up what Guattari calls "universes of reference or of value."²³ The philosopher-therapist wants to introduce us to the territories where subjectivity gains the desire to speak and act through a contact with the deterritorializing rhythms of art. He describes art, not as it hangs on the wall in a museum, but as it returns in your memory and your senses, as a refrain or ritornello of insistent presence cut off from anything you could precisely define or own. But rather than stopping there, and specializing in a fleeting and inchoate domain of aesthetics, he goes on to describe how people are inspired to leave behind their initial grounds of existence in order to participate in the temporal flows of concrete social projects which are themselves deterritorialized by rhizomes of abstract ideas. The four zones of the map – existential territories, energetic flows, rhizomatic ideas and constellations of aesthetic universes – thus become a matrix of relations between different domains of action and experience. Art, or philosophy for that matter, is no longer approached as a strictly specialized zone, but as a mobile element in an existential mix. Which means that art, like philosophy or the other disciplines, is no longer a stable or identifiable category, no longer a trap for subversive potentials. What you're looking at with Guattari's meta-models are not determinate maps, but suggestions of the kinds of interactions that people can try to orchestrate with each other, in full awareness that there will always be thresholds of unexpected chaos before any kind of world comes together.

Every subversive project, whether artistic, theoretical or activist, attempts this risky passage between worlds. What we need in autonomous cultural production is to try such experiments in more focused, intense, complex and perhaps grander or more chaotic ways. The incessant overcoding of invention and experience by capital is a spur to sweeter and wilder emancipations at all the different scales. There is no reason to be afraid: a movement toward autonomy is the only way to fully reengage with the social and political dimensions of existence. To speak of "capture" in these contexts is only to indicate a momentary grasp, an encounter, an embrace. Maurizio Lazzarato, whose work is a great inspiration, describes speech itself as a pulsating magnet for the attention of other speakers, a "capture of captures" that interjects its transient rules into the fluctuating realms of expression.²⁴ The texts that follow offer twenty twisted rules for the games of art, knowledge, geopolitics, technology and intimate desire. Put them all together and the aim is clear: escaping the overcode, recapturing subversion.

Notes

1 For introductions to the political philosophy of Italian Autonomia, see Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007/1st ed. 1980). References to Deleuze and Guattari follow below.

2 Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007).

3 Archive at <http://www.lutherblissett.net>.

4

<http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/nikeground/website/index.html>.

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 424-73.

6 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7 Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique," in *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Art and Politics in a Networked Era* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 2002); online at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>.

8 Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 8.

9 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 110-11.

10 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002/French 1998); the similarity with Arvidsson's theories is yet more pronounced in Bourriaud's *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay, How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

11 Arvidsson, *Brands*, op. cit., p. 74.

12 Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (Workers and Capital; Turin: Einaudi, 1966/2nd Italian ed. 1971); partial translations in English noted below.

13 Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991/Italian, 1979).

14 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

15 The chief exponent of this idea is one of Tronti's French translators, Yann Moulier-Boutang, in *Le capitalisme cognitif: La nouvelle grande transformation* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2007).

16 For these perspectives, see the work of the P2P Foundation run by Michael Bauwens (<http://p2pfoundation.net>).

17 Cf. the concluding paragraph of Yann Moulier-Boutang, "Finance, instabilité et gouvernabilité des externalités," in *Multitudes* 31 (Winter 2007). The article provoked a deepening split on the editorial board, especially after the crash of Summer/Fall 2008 made it painfully obvious that credit-money lay at the basis of the control mechanisms of neoliberal society.

18 Mario Tronti, "Workers and Capital" (postscript to the 1966 book) in *Telos* 14 (Winter 1972); available at http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/tronti_workers_capital.html.

19 Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal" (1966), in S. Lotringer and C. Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, op. cit.; available at http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/tronti_refusal.html.

20 Here I am obviously thinking of the academic work and consulting services of the American sociologist, Richard Florida, and of his many European counterparts. See Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London: Earthscan, 2000); John Howkins, *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas* (London: Penguin, 2001).

21 <http://www.16beavergroup.org/drift>.

22 On "scripted spaces," see Norman Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

23 Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989).

24 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les Révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004), p. 177. It is significant that the French title was imposed by the publisher; the Italian title is *La politica dell'evento* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2005).

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3 Responses to “Recapturing Subversion”

Todd Fraser Says:

[September 29, 2008 at 7:54 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Hello,

I am an artists doing some research on cultural subversion through consumption and am looking for as many examples of this possible...are there any you can think of?

brianholmes Says:

[September 30, 2008 at 8:30 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Well, the celebration of subversion through consumption is not something I really care much about. Notice that here, there is no consumption : there is production. A deliberatiely subversive device like Nikeground is created, not consumed. The blog you are reading is created, and it is read with the strict minimum of commodified relations intervening, to the extent that there is no advertising, you don't pay for anything except the electricity and the tool you use (I consider a computer a tool), what's more the talk was delivered at a self-organized, not paid-for event, etc. There is no reason to think of yourself as “consuming” either the blog or the event, the whole point is to clear out some semi-autonomous space within all that pervasive and invasive consumption, which of course is very real and affects us all. There has been a tremendous amount written about “Culture Jamming” (title of a book), Adbusters has year by year accumulated huge amounts of stuff on subversion through consumption, and according to an entire academic discipline called cultural studies, that's the very definition of culture itself! Of course they have some interesting points to make, but I don't find this so-called “subversion” very interesting in those forms, and the point of this text is to look beyond that. What you are doing as an artist may be different, may be fantastic, I have no clue and more power to ya if you are on to something new! But subversion-through-consumption is a very old idea, going back to Pop art I guess, and it now has thousands of accolytes among the Madison Avenue types. One could also argue that Nikeground draws on that old tradition even if it gives a slightly different twist; yes, for sure, I would agree, and it is the twist that I find valuable and also limited.

best, Brian

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

[November 21, 2008 at 5:53 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] -Recapturing Subversion: Twenty Twisted Rules of the Game [...]

Network Maps, Energy Diagrams

By Brian Holmes

Structure and Agency in the Global System



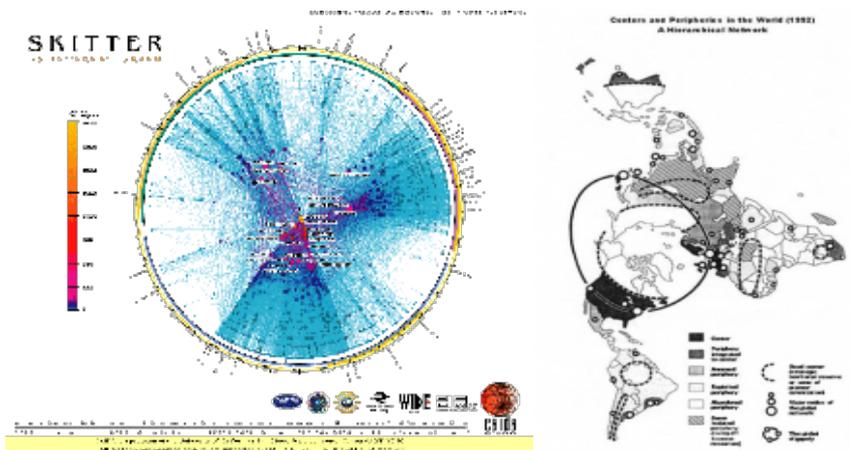
Untitled (choreographic sketch by Trisha Brown, 1980)

The Internet is the vector of a new geography – not only because it conjures up virtual realities, but because it shapes our lives in society, and shifts our perceptions along with the ground beneath our feet. Networks have become the dominant structures of cultural, economic and military power. Yet that power remains largely invisible. How can the networked society be represented? And how can it be navigated, appropriated, reshaped in its turn?

Reflecting in the early 1980s on the spatial chaos that technological and financial developments had impressed upon contemporary cities, Fredric Jameson pointed to the need for “an aesthetics of cognitive mapping” to resolve “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.” He conceived this cartographic aesthetics as a collective pedagogy, whose challenge would be to correlate the abstract knowledge of global realities with the imaginary figures that orient our daily experience. Epistemological shifts, pushed forward by the use of sophisticated technical instruments, would need to be paralleled by the deployment of radically new visual vocabularies, in order to produce a clearer understanding of contemporary symbolic relations (social roles, class divides, hierarchies) and a fresh

capacity for political intervention in the postmodern world. Only by inventing “some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing” could we “again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.”¹

Twenty years later, what has become of the mapping impulse? What new forms of cartography have arisen to chart the virtual/real spaces of the present? What kinds of agency do they permit? What modes of social organization do they foster? Can critical and dissenting maps be distinguished among the established and dominant ones?



Skitter Graph / Centers & Peripheries (click for enlargements)

Let's start by looking at an impressive technical and aesthetic feat: the "Skitter Graph" by the Cooperative Association for Internet Data Analysis (Caida) – an academic offshoot of the military-industrial complex, based in the city of San Diego. This map shows a record of peering sessions between some 12,500 "autonomous systems" (basically equivalent to Internet Service Providers, or ISPs).² To produce it, twenty-five different monitoring points run a "traceroute" program known as Skitter over a period of two weeks, following packets from over 1,100,000 IP addresses. The researchers analyze the path of the packet stream, which is only considered significant when it goes outside its autonomous system of origin. Information from the Border Gateway Protocol database is used to track each message back to a localized ISP. The graph displays the major link lines between the autonomous systems, and represents the quantity of outgoing connections per ISP, placing the lower values on the edges, in light blue, with higher intensities as you move toward the center, in dark blue, violet, orange and finally yellow. But to give all this data the form of a world map, it is also organized by the geographical location of the ISPs – or at least, their head offices – which are distributed around the circle according to longitude.

The autonomous systems fall into three major groups. At the bottom are those in North America – from San Jose and Vancouver to the Eastern seaboard – clearly dominating the Western hemisphere. Slightly further east are two exceptions: Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo/Rio, indicating the only significant connectivity in South America. Next comes Europe, with a great arc of ISPs stretching from London to Moscow; Pretoria falls in the middle, the one African city to be mentioned. On the upper left is Asia, with peak intensities in Tokyo, Seoul and Hong Kong, and lower values in Singapore, Perth and Sydney. Only in the 2005 version of this map does the immensely productive population of mainland China even begin to make a significant showing on this map of outgoing connections.

The Skitter Graph presents the raw facts of location and

transmission: a geography of unqualified information flow. But what does it tell us about social relations? It can be compared to the map of "Centers and Peripheries," elaborated by the geographer Denis Retaille in 1992 and published in a 1994 volume on the "globalization of capital" by the economist François Chesnais.³ This map shows three things. First, a circuit linking the United States, Western Europe and Japan, the so-called "Triad" regions, which form a "global oligopoly" accounting for the majority of industrial and financial exchanges. Second, the major nodes of the world network, represented by densely outlined circles. And third, the hierarchical relations between the regions, as described with these categories: *center*; *periphery integrated to the center*; *annexed periphery*; *exploited periphery*; *abandoned periphery*. Chesnais performs a Marxist analysis, showing how globally fragmented production lines are coordinated through the computerized circuits of the financial sphere. His map describes the hierarchy of social relations in a post-national era, when no political formation can erect any substantial barrier to the dictates of capital. And it reveals the near-perfect correlation between the graph of virtual flows and the geography of human exploitation.

Having identified a dominant map, I now want to ask the political question. Where do the forces of resistance come from, and how do they gain agency in an era of planetary management and control?

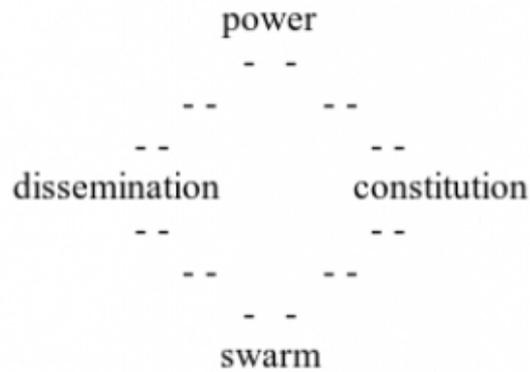
To get an idea, you can log back onto the Caida site and look at an animated version of exactly the same information used in the Skitter Graph. Each frame of this movie-map is a snapshot of Internet usage across the world during a few hours time; five different images were compiled every two days, over a period of some eighteen months. The result is an extraordinary visual experience. The ISPs turn green and advance toward the center as their connectivity increases; the link lines shift as the routing structure reconfigures to meet the moment's demands. We watch the diurnal flux of the Internet, and feel the complex, disjunctive rhythm of the global information machine. It's like the pulsing of a hive, a planetary brain: the cognitive and imaginary activity of untold millions of individuals, establishing far-flung connections. What the activation of the Skitter Graph reveals – as though despite itself – is the micro-political dimension of the global production system: not a stratified representation, but a generative diagram.

The visual spectacle of this animated map can help us to sense the presence of an underlying diagram, in the sense described by

Gilles Deleuze: "a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field."⁴ The notion of the diagram, derived from Michel Foucault's work on the microphysics of power, does not designate a static grid, a preconceived template for the application of a unified force. Rather it describes a productive matrix: a dynamic field where tensions culminate at an almost infinite number of heterogeneous points. Each of these 'points' – human beings, but also their material objects and inventions – is entwined in singular and evolving relations to others, relations of power that involve both constraint and freedom. From the interplay of such relations, functional patterns and statistical averages emerge. These can be codified as stratified 'laws' within the social sciences. They can be charted in a synoptic table, by representations like the Skitter Graph or the map of centers and peripheries. But beyond the stratified structures, the vital dynamics of each period arise from what Deleuze calls *strategies*, which can be understood as the generative moves of social experimentation.

Thus we can distinguish between a determinate *network map* – a geographical representation of structures of networked power, which attempts to identify and measure the forces at play – and an undetermined *energy diagram*, which opens up a field of possible agency. Deleuze describes the diagram of power as "highly unstable or fluid... constituting hundreds of points of emergence or creativity." His aim is to indicate the openness, the possibility for intervention that inheres to every social relation, because of the limited but real power that flows through each of the participants. Thus at its point of application, where individual behavior is molded into functional patterns by the convergence of mutually reinforcing constraints, power can also fold in upon itself, producing resistance and alterity through its own redoubling in the subject, then its subsequent dispersal. This understanding of the way that social hierarchies can be altered or dissolved by a deliberate twisting or counter-application of the very forces that make them cohere was the fundamental breakthrough of French critical thinking in the late 1970s and early 1980s, going beyond the deterministic schemas of traditional Marxism (even that of Louis Althusser), but without abandoning the description of dominant structures. At stake here is a fundamental concept of resistance and exodus. Two decades later, that epistemological breakthrough has lent momentum to an aesthetics of critical and dissident cartography, capable of twisting the techniques and visual languages of network maps away from their normalized uses, and thereby pointing to a place for autonomous agents within the global information grid.

Jameson saw the correlation of abstract knowledge and imaginary figures as key to understanding contemporary symbolic structures, and regaining the capacity to act within them. A range of recent mapping projects, all dealing with the forms of social organization, will serve as exemplars of this process. They can be arrayed within a circle marked by four cardinal points and traversed by two major oppositions.



At the top of the compass, an initial group of maps offers critical depictions of hierarchically concentrated cultural, economic and military power. At its polar opposite, another group invokes swarms of self-organizing singularities. In the right-hand quadrant are diagrams of social networks in the process of constitution, represented either in their tendency toward the concentration of power, or in their moment of dispersion into all-channel meshworks. And in the left-hand quadrant, opposite these constitutive diagrams, we find the cartography of dissemination, which traces and effaces the footfalls of wanderers in the global labyrinth.

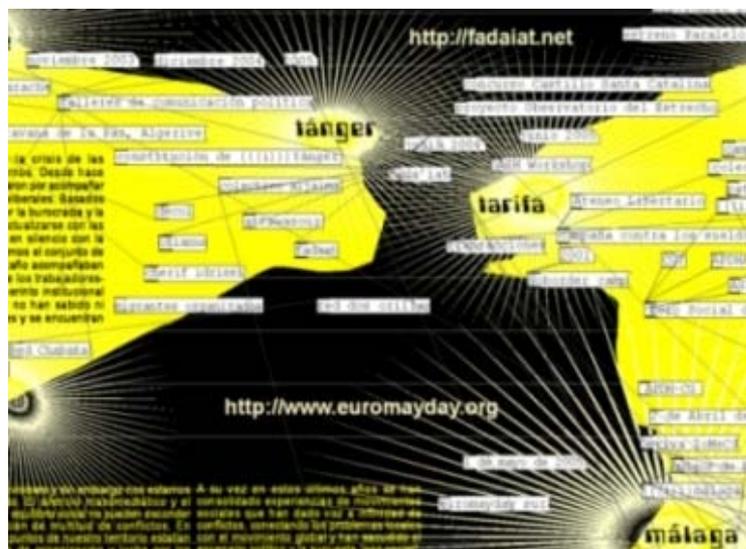
The cardinal examples of the first group are the flowcharts by Bureau d'Etudes, such as "The World Government" (2003), which can be seen as a culmination of the critical analysis of globalization carried out scholars and social movements since the early 1990s. This information map uses pictograms to represent over [forty different categories of actors](#), linked into a continuous and contradictory network. At the center is a financial core, populated by transnational investment groups. Around these groups, in a structure of nested rings, are the most powerful nation-states, themselves subsumed under regional or strategic ensembles. Major industries, service providers and transnational organizations appear in direct or ambiguous relations to these blocs. The effect is one of arresting detail, compelling the eye to a seemingly endless iteration of links. But if you draw back, this extraordinarily complex map reveals rounded, almost cosmological forms, small enough to be seen in a single gaze.



"To understand a real thing in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it," writes the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. He compares this analytic process to the effect of artistic miniatures: "Reduction

in scale reverses this situation. Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. More exactly, this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance. A child's doll is no longer an enemy, a rival or even an interlocutor. In and through it a person is made into a subject."⁵ Through miniaturization, the aesthetics of cognitive mapping becomes a way for an individual subject to grasp the complexity of the networked world.

The shift from object to subject propels us from one pole of the compass to its opposite, from hierarchies of power to self-organizing swarms. Howard Rheingold has described this new organizational form, showing how "smart mobs" use mobile devices to coordinate actions in real time.⁶ But the momentary convergence of mobile, self-organized groups goes back at least to the Zapatista uprising, and was used extensively by the counterglobalization movements. The best examples of what might be called "swarm cartography" have come from activist groups in Spain. "Transacciones/Fadaiat" is a "geography of the geopolitical territory of the Straits of Gibraltar," compiled in 2004 by independent media producers of the group "Hackitectura," with collaborations from Tangiers and the Canary Islands. [One side](#) is a map of power: on a Mercator projection turned upside-down, it shows sea-going migration routes, refugee camps, destination zones, electronic surveillance systems, military installations, internment centers, etc. But the other side traces a complex meshwork of activist groups on both sides of the Straits, showing their interrelations, their meetings, their evolution over time. The aim is not only to represent, but above all to catalyze a future range of possible interventions by autonomous agents, from direct action protests to immigrant support networks, legal cases, satire, subversion and the production of dissident knowledge. A comparable project was completed in 2004 by activist groups in Barcelona, who created a sophisticated [city map](#) to help spark protests against the Universal Forum of Cultures, widely perceived as a mere prop for real-estate speculation along the waterfront.

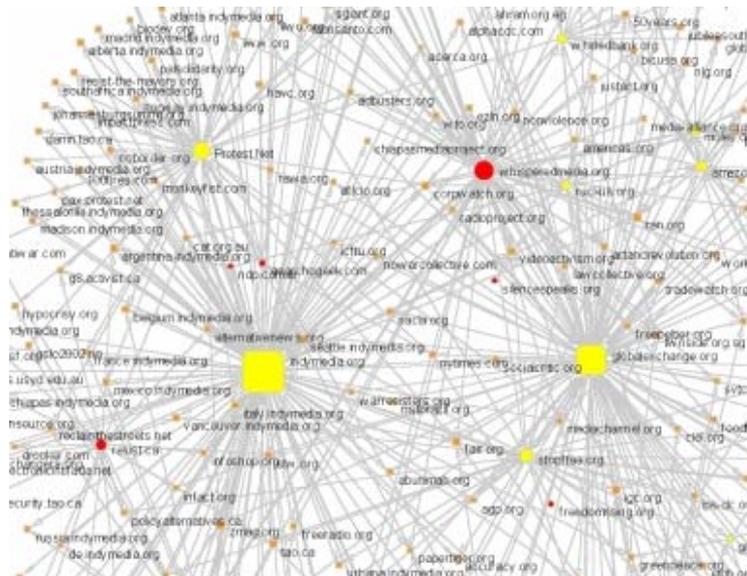


click detail for whole map

This strategy of diverse, punctual, recurrent interventions was defined by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt in their study of *Zapatista Social Netwar*: "Swarming occurs when the dispersed nodes of a network of small (and perhaps some large) forces can converge on a target from multiple directions. The overall aim is *sustainable pulsing* – swarm networks must be able to coalesce rapidly and stealthily on a target, then disperse and re-disperse, immediately ready to recombine for a new pulse."⁷ Arquilla and Ronfeldt's formulation has been highly influential – first among activists, but then for the U.S. government, after the attacks of

September 11. The glaring contradiction of a direct-democratic strategy defined by military experts and utilized by terrorists might encourage us to ask how networked organizations actually emerge in contemporary society, and how in the best of cases they also dissolve entirely, avoiding the destinies of instrumentalization or hierarchical stratification.

The first question shifts us to the right-hand quadrant of our hypothetical map of maps, to explore the constitutive processes that midway lie between swarm phenomena and hierarchical structures. Social network analysis yields insights here, especially when combined with computerized visualization techniques. The maps by Govcom.org use an "Issue Crawler" to analyze a group of websites, discovering common outgoing links (eg. two included sites both linking to a third one, outside the initial group). Thus they identify a larger network of issues. For example, "Ruckus Camp" starts with the websites of forty-nine organizations, whose common links reveal a remarkably consistent set of almost three hundred activist groups. A more complex document entitled "Climate Change" ([pdf](#)) displays a densely interlinked cluster of major international organizations at upper right, relatively isolated from a broader meshwork of NGOs, businesses and domestic governmental agencies. The map illustrates the difficulty for bureaucratic hierarchies to interface with ad hoc civil-society initiatives. But can social network analysis be used to portray the full dynamics of network formation?



Ruckus Camp (detail)

An intriguing sequence of diagrams entitled "The case of Sklyarov versus Adobe on the Web" ([pdf](#)) shows how a constellation of ephemeral allies comes together to defend a Russian programmer's hack of a proprietary software application. We see the timeline of a small-scale swarm phenomenon, from constitution to final dispersal. Unfortunately, few network analyses deal with such dynamics. More characteristic is Josh On's ingenious database project, [They Rule](#), which uses a "friend of a friend" algorithm to generate charts of overlapping membership on the boards of America's Fortune 100 companies, revealing what are arguably the most robust networks of power in the contemporary world. "They Rule" clearly moves toward the hierarchical maps of contemporary capitalist power compiled by Bureau d'Études. But the weakness of all such studies is precisely to focus on what sociologists call "strong ties" – eliminating the play of chance encounters and the insurgency of events that continually reshape social existence.

When power structures coalesce and harden, the specific opposite of network constitution becomes an issue. The last quadrant of our

metamap deals with the cartography of dissemination. The idea of a dispersed, subjective cartography is inspired by Michel de Certeau's opposition between the representational grid of the modern map and the "spatial practices" of walkers in the city, their "opaque and blind mobility," narrated through word and footstep. "One can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy."⁸ That phrase can perfectly introduce the "Geograffiti" proposal on www.gpster.net, which involves spontaneously recording waypoints with a GPS device and associating them with impressions about what's on that particular spot – all to be inscribed on a website accessible to the mobile devices of other passers-by. The dream is to retell the story of the world with your ideas and emotions, even while moving through it.

Christian Nold gives that dream another twist, with his [Biomapping](#) project. A galvanic sensor is wrapped around a person's finger, to register the so-called "startle response" that provokes a drop in the electrical resistance of the skin. That information, coupled with continuous waypoint recording by a GPS device, produces a map of the participant's route through the city in cool green dots, punctuated by bursts of stress or excitement marked in red. Psychogeography goes automatic. But Nold foresees critical applications too: the Biomapping unit could be connected to additional sensors correlating stress response with pollution, radiation, noise levels and so forth.



The most beautiful example of cartography in motion is Esther Polak's "Amsterdam RealTime: Diary in Traces," where GPS-equipped pedestrians sketch out the city plan of Amsterdam as a record of their everyday itineraries. Their paths appear as lines of light on a black ground, only to be gradually effaced, giving way to the traces of other walkers. But the work is a fragile gesture, fraught with ambiguity: the individual's wavering life-line appears at once as testimony of human singularity in time, and proof of infallible performance by the satellite mapping system.

The increasing use of Geographic Information Systems to profile the habits and desires of consuming populations makes clear the ways that corporate networks can now reach in to seize the very flux of subjective difference. A company like [iMapData](#) sorts such consumer profiles into precise geographic "envelopes" on a

digitized city plan (a political jurisdiction, an infrastructure service zone, an area impacted by a major sports facility, a tourist attraction, a natural disaster, etc.). Web access to these maps is sold to businessmen who want to make strategic marketing decisions on the go. Even more impressive is the integration of such private-sector archives to government databases, themselves keyed to the new biometric passports with which security forces seek to track entire populations caught up in the frenetic mobility of the present. An [International Campaign Against Mass Surveillance](#) has been mounted to warn the public of the dangers that may lie ahead.

Critical and dissident cartographies arise against the background of these dominant mapping technologies. They appear as counter-behaviors in Michel Foucault's sense: deliberately denormalized refusals of the reason of state – that is, of transnational state capitalism – elaborated with and against the very tools that consolidate the control society.⁹

Notes

1 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* no. 146 (July-August 1984).

2 See the graph and an explanation of the discovery process at www.caida.org/analysis/topology/as_core_network. I used the 2003 version. The animated map, discussed below, is accessed on the same page (download the flipbook version).

3 François Chesnais, *La mondialisation du capital* (Paris: Syros, 1994), p. 26; adapted from M. F. Durand, J. Levy and D. Retallé, *Le Monde: espaces et systèmes* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation des sciences politiques, 1992).

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 34.

5 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 23.

6 Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2003).

7 D. Ronfeldt, J. Arquilla, et alii, *The Zapatista "Social Netwar" in Mexico* (Rand Corporation, 1998), chapter 2, available at www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR994.

8 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984), pp. 91-96.

9 See Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), pp. 195-219 and 362-365.

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Mapping The World

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Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

February 2, 2008 at 1:39 pm | Reply

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Book - machine quotidienne Says:

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[...] 01-Network Maps, Energy Diagrams: [...]

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ **« Land of Illusion □□□□ Says:**

October 25, 2009 at 4:08 am | Reply

[...] [31] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/network-maps-energy-diagrams/>. [...]

DO-IT-YOURSELF GEOPOLITICS

By Brian Holmes

Global Protest and Artistic Process



by Lothar Blissant

What interests us in the image is not its function as a representation of reality, but its dynamic potential, its capacity to elicit and construct projections, interactions, narrative frames... devices for constructing reality.

Franco Berardi "Bifo," *L'immagine dispositivo*

Vanguard art in the twentieth century began with the problem of its own overcoming – whether in the destructive, dadaist mode, which sought to tear apart the entire repertory of inherited forms and dissolve the very structures of the bourgeois ego, or in the expansive, constructivist mode, which sought to infuse architecture, design and the nascent mass media with a new dynamics of social purpose and a multiperspectival intelligence of political dialogue. Though both positions were committed to an irrepressible excess over the traditional genres of painting and sculpture, still they appeared as polar opposites, and they continued at ideological odds with each other throughout the first half of the century, despite zones of enigmatic or secret transaction (Schwitters, Van Doesburg...). But after the war, the

extraordinarily wide network of revolutionary artists that coalesced around 1960 into the Situationist International (SI) brought a decisive new twist to the dada/constructivist opposition. With their technique of "hijacking" commercial images (*détournement*), with their cartographies of urban drifting (*dérive*) and above all, with their aspiration to create the "higher games" of "constructed situations," the SI sought to project a subversive practice of art into the field of potentially active reception constituted by daily life in the consumer societies.

The firebrand career of the group was overshadowed by the political analysis of the *Society of the Spectacle*, a work that deliberately attempted to maximize the antagonism between the radical aesthetics of everyday life and the delusions purveyed every day by the professionalized, capital-intensive communications of the mass media. The SI foundered over this antagonistic logic, which led to the successive exclusion of most of its members. But with the notion of subversive cartography and the practice of "constructed situations," it was as though something new had been released into the world. Without having to ascribe exclusive origins or draw up faked genealogies, it's easy to see that since the late 1960s, the old drive to art's self-overcoming has found a new field of possibility in the conflicted and ambiguous relation between the educated sons and daughters of the former working classes and the proliferating products of the consciousness industry. The statistical fact that such a large number of people trained as artists are inducted into the service of this industry, combined with the ready availability of a "fluid language" of *détournement* which allows them to exit from it whenever they choose, has been at the root of successive waves of social -and-aesthetic agitation that tend simultaneously to dissolve the very notion of a "vanguard" and to reopen the ambition to construct a real democracy. And so the question on everyone's lips is, how can I participate?

"This is a chord. This is another. Now form a band."¹ The punk invitation to do-it-yourself music gives instant insight into the cultural revolution that swept through late-1970s Britain. The unpredictable mix of hilarity, transgression and class violence in punk performance comes very close to the SI's definition of a situation: "A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a play of events." The relation between punk and situationism was widely perceived at the time. But there was also something else at stake, which was new by comparison to the disruptive tactics of the 1960s. Because the D.I.Y. invitation had another side, which said: "Now start a label." The proliferation of garage bands would be matched with an outpouring of indie records, made and distributed autonomously. In this way, the punk movement marked a widespread attempt at *appropriating the media*, which in a society dominated by the consciousness industry is tantamount to *appropriating the means of production*.² There is a constructive drive at work here: a desire to respond, with technical means, to the recording companies' techniques for the programming of desire. In other words, this was a societal attempt to construct subversive situations on the scales permitted by modern communications.

Something fundamental changes when artistic concepts begin to be used against a backdrop of potentially massive appropriation, with a blurring of class distinctions. A territory of art appears within widening "underground" circles, where the aesthetics of everyday practice is considered a political issue. It is precisely this transformation that must be understood, and theorized for the sake of a post-vanguard practice. It could be tracked through the radical fringe of the techno movement in the 1980s, with its white-label records produced under different names every time, its

increasing recourse to sophisticated computer technology, its nomadic sound systems used for mounting concerts at any desired location. It could be explored in the offshoots of mail art, with the development of fanzines, the Art Strike and Plagiarist movements, the Luther Blissett project, the invention of radio- or telephone-assisted urban drifting.³ It could be grasped in community-oriented video art, alternative TV projects and the initial theories of "tactical media." But rather than engaging in an archaeology of these developments, let's leap directly to their latest period of fruition, in the late 1990s, when a rekindled sense of antagonism once again pushed aesthetic producers along with many other groups into an overtly political confrontation with social norms and authorities.

This time, the full range of media available for appropriation could be hooked into a world -spanning distribution machine: the Internet. The specific practices of computer hacking and the general model they proposed of amateur intervention into complex systems gave confidence to a generation which had not personally experienced the defeats and dead-ends of the 1960s. Building on this constructive possibility, an ambition arose to map out the repressive and coercive order of the transnational corporations and institutions. Its corollary would be an attempt to disrupt that order through the construction of subversive carnivals on a global scale. Collective aesthetic practices, proliferating in social networks outside the institutional spheres of art, would be one the major vectors for this double desire to grasp and transform the new world map. A radically democratic desire that could be summed up in a seemingly impossible phrase: do-it-yourself geopolitics.

J18, or the Financial Center Nearest You

Does anyone know how it was done?⁴ The essence of cooperatively created events is to defy single narratives. But it can be said that on June 18, 1999, around noon, somewhere around ten thousand people flooded out of the tube lines at Liverpool Street station in the City of London. Most found themselves holding a carnival mask, in the colors red, green, black or gold – or maybe a few dozen masks, to pass along to others. Amid the chaos of echoing voices and pounding drums, it might have been possible to read these texts on the back of the mask:

Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloging: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival needs masks, thousands of masks... Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together... During the last years the power of money has presented a new mask over its criminal face. Disregarding borders, with no importance given to race or colors, the power of money humiliates dignities, insults honesties and assassinates hopes.

On the signal follow your color / Let the Carnival begin...⁵

The music was supposed to come from speakers carried in backpacks. But no one could hear it above the roar. Four groups divided anyway, not exactly according to color; one went off track and ended up at London Bridge, to hold a party of its own. The others took separate paths through the medieval labyrinth of Europe's largest financial district, converging toward a point which had been announced only by word of mouth and kept secret from all but a few: the London International Financial Futures & Options Exchange, or LIFFE building, the largest derivatives market in Europe – the pulsing, computerized, hyper-competitive brain of the beast. The trick was to parade anarchically through the winding streets, swaying to the samba bands, inviting passing

traders and bank employees to take off their ties or heels and join the party, while a few smaller groups rushed ahead, to dodge tremblingly into alleyways and await that precise moment when a number of cars would inexplicably stop and begin blocking a stretch of Lower Thames Street. The sound system, of course, was already there. As protesters shooed straggling motorists out of the area, larger groups began weaving in, hoisting puppets to the rhythm of the music and waving red, black, and green Reclaim the Streets flags in the air. The Carnival had begun, inside the "Square Mile" of London's prestigious financial district – and the police, taken entirely by surprise, could do nothing about it.

Banners went up: "our resistance is as global as capital," "the earth is a common treasury for all," "revolution is the only option." Posters by the French graphic arts group Ne Pas Plier were glued directly onto the walls of banks, denouncing "money world," proclaiming "resistance-existence," or portraying the earth as a giant hamburger waiting to be consumed. The site had also been chosen for its underground ecology: a long-buried stream runs below Dowgate Hill Street and Cousin Lane, right in front of the LIFFE building. A wall of cement and breeze blocks was built in front of the entrance to the exchange, while a fire hydrant was opened out in the street, projecting a spout of water thirty feet into the air and symbolically releasing the buried river from the sedimentations of capital. In a historical center of bourgeois discipline, inhibitions became very hard to find. This was a new kind of political *party*: a riotous event, in the Dionysian sense of the word.

The quality of such urban uprisings is spontaneous, unpredictable, because everything depends on the cooperative expression of a multitude of groups and individuals. Still these events can be nourished, charged in advance with logical and imaginary resources. The six months preceding J18 overflowed with an infinitely careful and endlessly chaotic process of face-to-face meetings, grapevine communication, cut-and-paste production and early activist adventures in electronic networking. An information booklet on the financial operations of the City was prepared under the title "Squaring Up to the Square Mile." It included a map showing all the different categories of banking and trading institutions, as well as careful explanations of what financiers actually do. Posters, stickers, tracts and articles were distributed locally and internationally, including 50,000 metallic gold fliers with a quote from the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem saying "to work for delight and authentic festivity is barely distinguishable from preparing for general insurrection." A spoof newspaper was distributed massively, for free, under the title *Evading Standards*; the cover showed a dazed trader amidst piles of shredded paper, with a headline reading "global market meltdown." But most importantly, a call had been sent around the world, urging people to intervene in their local financial centers on June 18th, the opening day of the G8 summit, held that year in Cologne. A movie trailer had even been spliced together, with footage from previous worldwide protests and a cavernous, horror-flick voice at the end pronouncing "June 18th: Coming to a financial center near you."

This event was imbued with the history of the British social movement Reclaim the Streets (RTS), along with other groups such as London Greenpeace (a local eco-anarchist organization). RTS is a "dis -organization." It came out of the anti-roads movement of the early 1990s, struggling against the freeway programs of the Thatcherite government. Its members employed direct action techniques, tunneling under construction sites, attaching themselves to machinery, putting their bodies on the line. 1994 had seen a summer-long campaign against the M11 highway link, which involved squatting the condemned residential district of Claremont Road and literally inhabiting the streets, building scaffolding, aerial netting and rooftop outposts to prolong

the final resistance against the wrecking balls and the police. But it was also the year of the Criminal Justice Act, which gave the authorities severe repressive powers against techno parties in the open countryside, and politicized young music-lovers by force. After that, the ravers and the anti-roads protestors decided they would no longer wait for the state to take the initiative. Drawing inspiration from a 1973 text by the French philosopher André Gorz, "The Social Ideology of the Motor-Car,"⁶ they decided to reclaim the streets in the middle of London, and party at the heart of the motorcar's dominion.

The first RTS protest was held in the spring of 1995 in Camden Town, where hundreds of protestors surged out of a tube station at the moment of a staged fight between two colliding motorists. Astonished onlookers watched as the two drivers each took out sledgehammers and began destroying their *own* vehicles. Meanwhile the street was occupied and the festivities began. Techniques were subsequently invented to make "tripods" out of common scaffolding poles: traffic could be easily blocked by a single protestor perched above the street, whom police could not bring down without risk of serious injury. News of the inventions spread contagiously around Britain, and a new form of popular protest was born. Later events saw the occupation of an entire stretch of highway, or a street party where sand was spread out atop the tarmac for the children to play in, reversing the famous slogan of May '68 in France, *sous les pavés, la plage* ("beneath the paving-stones, the beach"). The work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin on the political potential of the carnival found a new home outside of literary theory. From here, it was just another leap of the imagination to the concept of the global street party – first realized in 1998 in some thirty countries, within the wider context of the "global days of action" against neoliberalism.

London RTS was part of the PGA, People's Global Action, a grassroots alterglobalization network that emerged in 1997. Behind it lay the poetic politics of the Zapatistas and the charismatic figure of Subcommandante Marcos. But ahead of it lay the invention of a worldwide social movement, cutting across the global division of labor and piercing the opaque screens of the corporate media. Building on the success of the Zapatista Encuentros and the first global protest in 1998, activists tried to spread their message "by any media necessary." For June 18 in London, video-makers collaborated with an early autonomous production lab called Backspace, right across the River Thames from the LIFFE building. Tapes were delivered to the space during the event, roughly edited for streaming on the web, then sent directly away through the post to avoid any possible seizure.⁷ Even more importantly, a group of hackers in Sydney, Australia, had written a special piece of software for live updating of the webpage devoted to their local J18 event. Six months later, this "Active Software" would be used in the American city of Seattle, as the foundation of the Indymedia project – a multiperspectival instrument of political information and dialogue for the twenty-first century.⁸

As in Seattle, confrontations occurred with the police. While the crowd retreated down Thames Street toward Trafalgar Square, a plume of smoke rose above St. Paul's cathedral, as if to signify that this carnival was serious. The next day the Financial Times bore the headline: "Anti-capitalists lay siege to the City of London." The words marked a rupture in the triumphant language of the press in the 1990s, which had eliminated the very notion of anti-capitalism from its vocabulary. But the real media event unfolded on the Internet. The RTS website showed a map of the earth, with links reporting actions in forty-four different countries and regions. The concept of the global street party had been fulfilled, at previously unknown levels of political analysis and tactical sophistication. A new cartography of ethical-aesthetic

practice had been invented, embodied and expressed all across the world.⁹

Circuits of Biopolitical Production

J18 was not an artwork. It was an event, a collectively constructed situation. It opened up a territory of experience for its participants – a “temporary autonomous zone,” in the words of the immensely popular anarchist writer Hakim Bey. With respect to the virtual worlds of art and literature, but also of political theory, such events can be conceived as *actualizations*: what they offer is a space-time for the effectuation of latent possibilities. This is their message: “another world is possible,” the slogan of the World Social Forum. But what’s also a relief to see is how the recent political mobilizations help make another world possible for artistic process, outside the constituted circuits of production and distribution.

One place to start is the Internet. Email lists and websites have opened up a new kind of transnational public sphere, where artistic activities can be discussed as part of a larger, freewheeling conversation on the evolution of society.¹⁰ Such discussions provide a critical arena for the evaluation of artistic proposals, outside the gallery-magazine-museum system. Classic examples are the transnational listserv Nettime, the New York-based website called The Thing, the former Public Netbase in Vienna, Ljudmila in Ljubljana, etc. Their emergence, in the mid-1990s, gave intellectual focus and a heightened sense of agency to the meeting of artistic practice and political activism, under the name of “tactical media.”

The concept of tactical media was worked out at the Next 5 Minutes conferences, which took place in Amsterdam from 1993 to 2002, at three-year intervals.¹¹ David Garcia and Geert Lovink summed it up in 1997: “Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the Internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture.”¹² The key notion comes from Michel de Certeau, who described consumption as “a set of tactics by which the weak make use of the strong.”¹³ At stake is the possibility of autonomous image and information production in an era dominated by huge, capital intensive structures and tightly disciplined networks. But De Certeau spoke of oral, premodern cultures, whose intimate, unrecorded practices could appear as an escape route from hyper-rationalized capitalism; whereas the tactics in question are those of knowledge workers in the postindustrial economy, much closer to what Toni Negri and his fellow-travelers would call the “multitudes.” With their DVcams, websites and streaming media techniques, the new activists practice an “aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring... the hunter’s cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.” This was the spirit of Next 5 Minutes 3, in the spring of 1999, just as the alterglobalization movement was about to break into full public view.

The confidence of tactical media activism represents a turnabout from the extreme media pessimism of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, which describes the colonization of all social relations, and indeed of the human mind itself, by the productions of the advertising industry. Negri’s theory of the “real subsumption” of labor, or in other words, the total penetration of everyday life by the logic and processes of capital, appears at first to echo that pessimism – but in fact, it reverses it. The book *Empire* develops

the theory of the real subsumption through a reflection on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which it defines as "a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it." Biopower is "an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord." But this internalization of the control function has the effect of offering the master's tools to all the social subjects, and thus it makes possible the reversal of biopower into biopolitics:

Civil society is absorbed in the [capitalist] state, but the consequence of this is an explosion of the elements that were previously coordinated and mediated in civil society. Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus. What Foucault constructed implicitly (and Deleuze and Guattari made explicit) is therefore the paradox of a power that, while it unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life (thus losing its capacity effectively to mediate different social forces), at that very moment reveals a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization – a milieu of the event.¹⁴

The emergence of tactical media marks the threshold where contemporary society's highly individualized mechanisms of incitement and control begin to crumble before the mere possibility of making one's own images, with all the sophisticated techniques offered by one's own integration into the contemporary hi-tech economy. That possibility becomes urgent under the effect of capitalism's colonization of everything – from the natural environments of faraway peoples to the inside of one's own psyche. This is the juncture where the "immaterial laborers" of the prosperous North begin to feel a commonality with more drastically exploited and dominated people of the South, despite all the evident differences in their situations. "When self-exploitation acquires a central function in the process of valorization, the production of subjectivity becomes a terrain of central conflict," remarks André Gorz in an issue of the journal *Multitudes*:

Social relations that have been withdrawn from the grip of value, from competitive individualism and market exchange, make the latter appear by contrast in their political dimension, as extensions of the power of capital. A front of total resistance opens up. It necessarily overflows the domain of knowledge production toward new ways of living, of consuming, of collectively appropriating public space and everyday culture. Reclaim the Streets is one of its most successful expressions.¹⁵

The reversal of biopower into biopolitics brings tactical media – and all the forms of post-vanguard art – into a larger circulation of struggles, where what is distributed are the means of empowerment, i.e. the means of self-creation. The subversive carnivals of the turn of the century embodied this production of a new political subjectivity, at grips with political power but also able to temporarily turn away from it, to celebrate a prefigured social transformation in the here-and-now of the occupied streets.

With the cycle of struggles that unfolded from 1999 to 2003, a new territory of experience gained consistency. Densely interwoven with political analyses, but also with aesthetic images and affects, this mobile territory shifted its ground from city to city, in a round-the-world tour culminating with the massive protests of February 15, 2003, which reached planetary scale but did not stop

the war. Capitalizing on the feelings of sadness and depression that followed this immense cry for peace, politicians and sociologists quickly proclaimed the death of the movement, because their deepest desire is to control everything alive. But the street is no longer the same, struggles always come back from their periods of latency and what we call "art" is now freer, more protean, more resistant in the wake of those tumultuous years. When you think back on it today, June 18th and all that followed looks like an irreverent but amazingly constructive way to usher in the arrival of the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 From a cover of the early punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* (1976-77), reissued in the anthology edited by Mark Perry, *Sniffin' Glue: The Essential Punk Accessory* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2000).
- 2 On punk appropriation politics, see Dan Graham, "Punk as Propaganda," in *Rock My Religion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
- 3 For the Art Strike and Plagiarist movements, see the books and sites by Stewart Home, particularly *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995) and *Mind Invaders* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997). For the Luther Blissett Project, see <http://www.lutherblissett.net>, or a collectively written novel like *Q* (Arrow, 2004).
- 4 What's written here is mainly based on participation in the event, retrospective conversations (especially with John Jordan), the websites <http://rts.gn.apc.org> and <http://www.agp.org>, photos by Alan Lodge at <http://tash.gn.apc.org>, and a superb text entitled "Friday June 18th 1999" in the eco-anarchist journal *Do or Die* 8 (London, 1999), available at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/index.html>.
- 5 The full mask text can be found in *Do or Die*, op. cit.; it is partly plagiarized from Subcomandante Marcos, "First Declaration of La Realidad," available at <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/firstrealidad.html>.
- 6 The Gorz text can be found on the RTS website, available at <http://rts.gn.apc.org/socid.htm>.
- 7 At least one video is distributed, *J18 (First Global Protest against Capitalism)*, available at <http://www.cultureshop.org>. Increasing numbers of documents can now be found on the Internet.
- 8 See <http://www.active.org.au> and the diagram where one of the programmers sketched a chain of cooperation in the invention and use of the software, available at <http://www.active.org.au/doc/roots.pdf>.
- 9 For much more on the direct-action side of the alterglobalization movement, see the illustrated book *We Are Everywhere* (London: Verso, 2003).
- 10 See <http://www.nettime.org> and the book *ReadMe: Ascii Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999).
- 11 See <http://www.next5minutes.org>.
- 12 David Garcia and Geert Lovink, "The ABC of Tactical Media," quoted from <http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet/Geert/ABC.txt>.
- 13 Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1988).
- 14 This and the preceding two quotes are from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), pp. 23-25; available at <http://www.angelfire.com/cantina/negri>.
- 15 Interview with André Gorz by Yann Moulier Boutang and Carlo Vercellone, "Economie de la connaissance, exploitation des savoirs," in *Multitudes* 15 (Winter 2004), pp. 208-9.

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The Potential Personality

By Brian Holmes

Trans-Subjectivity in the Society of Control



Thought envelops things – between them there is the atmosphere, with Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbonic Gas, Sulfur, Lead, Aluminum, but also particles of thought. These particles break loose from our brain-bodies, in fluxes beyond our control, adhering to objects or other thoughts. They possess powerful magnetic and gravitational fields, which distort and alter images – all the images of things. Thought is essentially charged with plastic potential.

Ricardo Basbaum [1]

Self-choreography: what could be the meaning of such a word? You can easily imagine the improvisations of a single dancer, twisting, gliding, feinting, twirling, tracing an intricate pattern of the self in space. And you can also imagine the gradual mastery of this pattern, its repetition or retracing as a work, which can then be identified, situated within the larger parameters of a style, authorized by a signature. But what happens if I give the word *choreography* the wider signification of a group interaction, an orchestration of bodies in their movement through space; and if I conceive the action of the *self* as a more complex reflexivity, exercised by a plurality of actors on each other? What kind of self could participate in the creation of a choreography which is at once my own, and that of a larger articulation? What would be the style of such a work, how could it be sketched, retraced, identified? What would become of the distinction between subject and object, between me and you? And how would intentionality – the projection of possible action into future time and unfamiliar space – come to operate under such conditions?

The Device

These questions traverse you, impinge on me, within the ambit or overflow of certain physical/discursive environments whose constitution is signed – but seemingly not authorized – by Ricardo Basbaum. In a recent series of proposals [2] they take the form of specialized gallery or museum installations where your passage is modulated by the presence of what look like miniature iron fences, complete with gridded wire mesh but rising only to about ankle height, marking off but not dividing the volume. These fence-like structures serve as obstacles (“obs.”), obliging you to perform the simplest of choreographies: flexing your knee, lifting your foot somewhat higher than normally, stepping over an obstruction too low to be considered a barrier, almost too low to be noticed. My visit to the gallery is punctuated by the rhythm of these almost insignificant movements.



Meanwhile, your attention comes to linger over words that have been written on the wall: *listen to, look at, turn bodily toward, smile at, speak to, express wishes, make bodily contact, ask personal questions, show off*, etc.[3] These words describe actions that bring myself into relation with others. Thus the physical space of movement, punctuated by obstacles (and reminiscent, in this, of certain minimalist proposals by Robert Morris in his collaborations with the Judson Dance Theater), is redoubled and echoed by discursive indicators which point to the interactive possibilities of a shared environment – as though coaxing perception into affect, through a linguistic consciousness of the other.

At the same time it becomes possible, from certain positions within the space, to watch images of my activity and yours, transmitted live from a number of unobtrusive micro-cameras which have been connected to a sequencer, so as to present a cycle of roving viewpoints. This is what the artist calls “system-cinema”: a real-time, closed-circuit television that enhances my perception of the space while also recording images, furnishing material for future proposals and adding a further set of references – technological this time – for the comprehension of the environment you are temporarily inhabiting.

The elements listed above constitute a spatial device that links constrained motion to augmented perception, and surveilled gestures to increased sensibility and heightened reflection, all inviting *me* to consciously refashion my own physical-discursive-affective posture, even while observing and interacting with *you*. And this device, in its turn, is the departure point for an experience where “me” and “you” will simultaneously be objectified and brought into relation, through the changes in identity and position effected by the rules of a game.

The game-experience is a series of choreographic workshops, what I would propose to call self-choreographies, which begin in the museum and move outward to urban space. The participants wear red and yellow tee-shirts imprinted with the shifting pronouns "me" and "you." But these are detached from the usual play address, the usual subject-object relation, and redistributed in a moving space of relations. Each person is thereby confronted with the relativity of identity-positions – for instance, when clusters of animated "me" spiral around a self-consciousness designated as "you." The artist, also wearing a "me" or "you" shirt, occupies an ostensible threshold, directing and informing the activity from outside, participating and undergoing transformation from within; but this collapsing distinction of inside and outside is in fact the underlying rule of the self-choreographies. They unfold beneath the name of "superpronoun": a kind of composite shifter, which can be written *youme* or *meyou*.^[4]



The "superpronoun" choreographies are very loosely based on a series of generative diagrams, providing patterns that are not so much retraced as extended, altered, and ultimately dissolved in a process of experimentation. These diagrams, presented on the walls of the gallery, are themselves extensions, alterations, dissolutions of earlier diagrams and earlier games, all leading back to a more basic form: a rectangle with truncated corners and a circle in the center. This a-signifying form is the immediately recognizable and memorable logo of the entire permutational process that Ricardo Basbaum has been proposing, in constantly changing guises, for over a decade. The logo also exists as an acronym: NBP, which in turn unfolds as "New Bases for Personality." It is a constructive program for an expanding territory of existence. Exactly the territory that *youme* are now exploring.

Channeling Flows

One of the traditional problems of vanguard art has been the frame. The frame is what defines and limits the specialized activity of transformation that our culture designates as "artistic." It is considered necessary to overcome, undermine, transgress, or explode whatever material, conceptual, moral or political boundary that may limit the activity of the artist within a particular definition of art, separating it from the life-world. When the choreographic experiences of "superpronoun" uncoil into the urban space, it might seem as if a normative frame has been surpassed, a new outside conquered, in an historical victory over the spatio-temporal limit of the white cube (just as the white cube itself, the void of Yves Klein and the phenomenological space of minimalism, had been an historical victory over the boundaries of modernist painting). Yet this dialectical progress in the conquest of space

would be an impoverished understanding of what is at stake in the *meyou* transformations. The containing and limiting frame that Ricardo Basbaum invites us to explore, and to transform into a territory of experience, is no less present in the urban space than it is in the gallery. It is the all-pervasive mesh of the control society, encompassing and permeating the flows of the life-world; and it does not offer any tangible limit that can be exploded, transgressed, undermined or overcome. The framing problems of contemporary art differ fundamentally from those conceived by the twentieth-century vanguards.

The society of control was first defined in a well-known text by Gilles Deleuze, published in French in 1990.[5] Deleuze foresaw the end of the disciplinary regime that had been exercised over bodies in the enclosed spaces of the school, the barracks, the hospital, the asylum and the factory, and its replacement by ubiquitous procedures of computerized tracking and information gathering, administered by the volatilized hierarchies of the corporation. Moreover, he associated these miniaturized, mobile processes of surveillance with their seeming opposite: the voluntary energy of personal motivation, elicited and channeled by the psychological function of marketing. The escape of formerly subordinated populations from their disciplinary molds, and the corresponding abandonment of generic limits as the symbolic frames of social power, would be matched by the deployment of systems that modulate the flow of experience, "like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point." The control society can be conceived as the punctual, yet quasi-inescapable application of coercive or seductive stimuli that serve to channel the individual's expression at a molecular level, before any ethical posture can be struck, before any intentional decision can be reached. What traditionally philosophy had conceived as the subject of will, or traditional ethics, as the integrity of the whole person, is reduced to "the code of a 'dividual' material to be controlled."

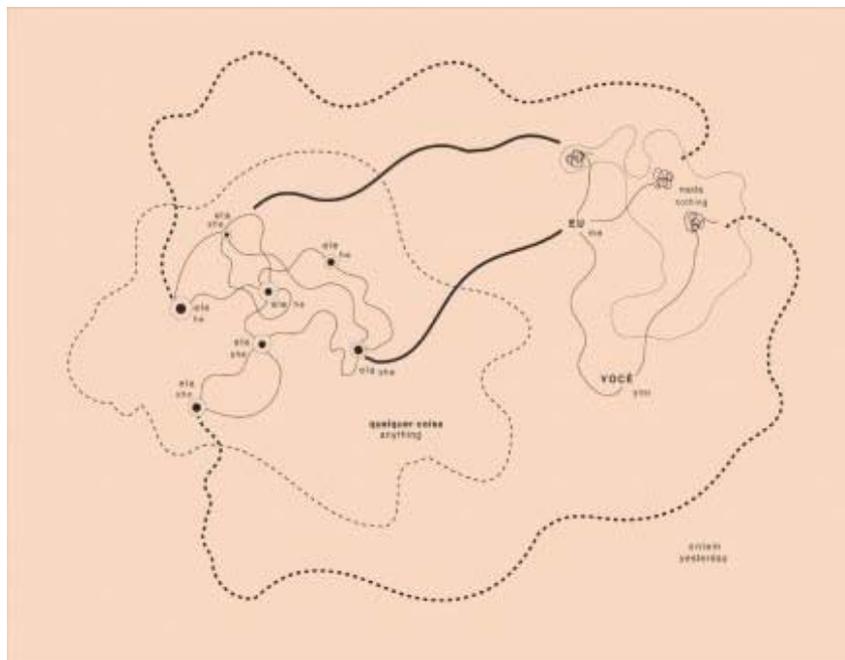
The vanguard gesture of breaking through the frame could no longer produce a liberating effect, if authoritarian limits to behavior were to be replaced by the elastic fluctuation of continuously monitored environments. What would be required is a counter-fluctuation that twists away from normative dynamics. As Basbaum wrote in 1992: "Long ago vanished the illusory possibility of constructing models that do not incorporate, in their structure, the capacity and necessity of continuous movements, as the very precondition for their existence and perpetuation – models which in this way become veritable strategic constructions, systems that conjugate action and thinking." [6] At stake here is a strategy of resistance.

In the same text, Basbaum indicated four characteristics of artistic practices in the face of the new control procedures:

1. An autopoietic or self-renewing machinic environment, whose autonomy develops at variance with its surroundings;
2. An intervention that consists not in the rupture of generic or disciplinary boundaries, but instead in a deliberately localizing confrontation with diffuse, all-embracing cultural forms;
3. An impersonal status of the artist, who becomes a vector for the theatricalization of a lived environment, through the propagation of an "individual mythology";
4. A new reception of the artistic work, whereby an actively participating spectator adopts an ethical-aesthetic-creative position.

What's surprising is the degree of coherency that these four fundamental presuppositions have retained, some thirteen years later. Today, Basbaum's spatial devices refer with increasing precision to the problematics of control: both illustratively, through the miniaturized wire mesh of the restraining, fence-like structures, placed at an infra-coercive level below any direct confrontation with the visitor's will; and functionally, through the closed-circuit surveillance cameras, with their punctual but continuous monitoring of the visitor's displacement in the space. Yet the devices do not simply mimic or replicate a control apparatus and its modulations of the existential flow; instead they provide the basis or framework for an autopoietic environment of techno-human interaction and cooperation, stimulating, intensifying and ultimately dissipating the very processes of perception, intellection and affection that control procedures would typically seek to channel into predetermined behaviors. The artist sets the initial parameters of this environment, but he cannot be considered its author: instead he conditions its development in a discreet and impersonal way, no longer through the production of an theatricalizing mythology, but instead by introducing modifiable diagrams into organizational processes, and revocable rules into self-reflective games. The result is neither a tangible work, nor an abstract model, but a dynamic condition of variance that it is unrepeatable, strictly local and intensive, consisting in singular relations, generating affective qualities that can only partially be captured in images, shapes, diagrams or words.

Indeed, these irreducibly singular intensities – appearing as a-signifying graphic forms in the numerous relational maps that Basbaum sketches of heterogeneous situations – might themselves be considered the “new basis for personality.” Qualitative processes that dissipate the circularity of feedback loops and render impossible any modelization of behavior: here are the initial characteristics of an artistic resistance to the control society.



But two important questions remain, with respect to the theoretical program sketched out in 1992. First, what sort of “confrontation” is achieved with the diffuse, all-pervasive forms of contemporary culture? And second, what can now be said of the “ethical-aesthetic-creative position” – that is, of the position of the former spectator?

Towards a Diagram of the Swarm

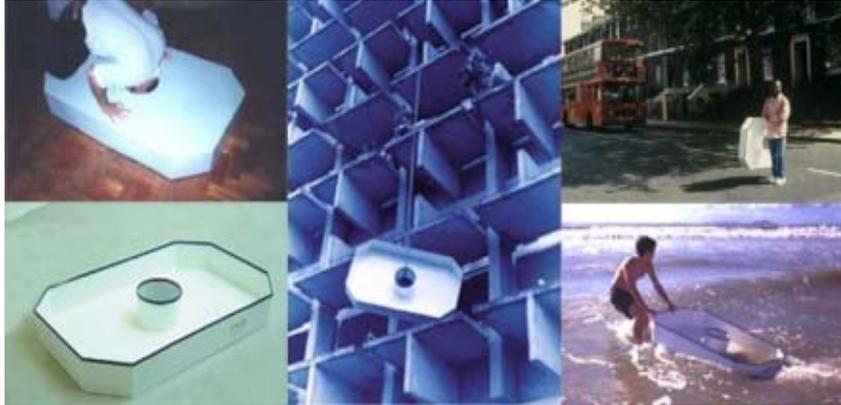
In his 1990 text, Deleuze remarked that “we are at the beginning of something.” Consider the recent developments of the control

society. Shortly after the events of September 11, major American data-collecting corporations such as Seisint, ChoicePoint and Aximetric were approached by federal intelligence services, in a drive to integrate public and private sources of information on the movement of individuals through the United States.[7] From this emerged a machine which was known, inevitably, as "the Matrix": a network of interlinked databases and search protocols, capable not only of pinpointing individuals from just a few scraps of information – "hair color, a digit or two from a license plate, maybe a history of flying to a certain foreign country" – but also of assembling profiles of their habits, relational maps of their friends and acquaintances, predictive charts of their possible future behaviors. Fortunately, the Matrix program was halted by the US Congress, as was its immediate ancestor, a broader program named "Total Information Awareness," which had been conceived for surveillance at the global level. But there can be little doubt that such techniques are in use by intelligence agencies, and perhaps not only those of the United States.

The effect of such private-public integration is twofold. On the one hand, immense Orwellian bureaucracies (such as the Schengen Information System in Europe) have increasingly seamless access to information on the personal movements, civil records, consumption habits, vital statistics and intimate communications of the millions of citizens who use automated tellers, cell phones, computer networks, private ticketing systems, national health services, etc. On the other, the private corporations that have developed these surveillance systems have acquired a vastly augmented capacity to statistically model and predict the behavior of populations, and therefore to more effectively shape not only the seductive figures of advertising (which is adapted with increasing precision to individual drives and tastes), but also the built form and imaginary content of cultural-informational environments (public spaces, computer interfaces, commercial/entertainment zones, transport systems). The urban environment itself, like an immense TV set in three dimensions, can be continuously reprogrammed to channel the behavior of the citizen-consumer. What results from this double development of the control society is an all-embracing system of identification/incitation, bypassing the cumbersome ideologies and displays of force that were characteristic of former authoritarian societies. Accompanying this trend is the diffuse consciousness that if we are all being watched, then unbridled opportunism – or a chance to be at the controls of the new system – is a far better outcome for *me*. The result is a pliant, continuously available individualism, a willingness to find one's personal advantage through constant adaptation to arbitrarily changing rules. The pathology of domination/submission that I have analyzed as "the flexible personality" is now fully installed in the Western societies.[8]

The role of technology in the new behavioral regime has led recent explorations of subjectivity to insist on the form of the network. Basbaum himself has carefully followed the far-flung circuits of artistic experimentation with the Internet, collaborating, among others, with Jordan Crandall, who since the mid-1990s has produced one of the most consistently insightful bodies of work devoted to subjectivation processes at the interface between man and machine.[9] But where the American artist has primarily sought to bring the normative forms of this relation to the light of knowledge, using the tools of cultural studies and philosophical critique, the Brazilian has tried to develop its non-dialectical other: dynamic patterns of self-organizing relations, which do not chart the trajectories of identifiable bodies and establish the profiles of predictable desires, but attempt instead to redistribute the rhythms of collective intensifications and dispersions generated through the intermingling of perceptual experience, intellectual

discourse and affective exchange. The evolution toward what I would call *trans-subjectivity* is at the heart of the NBP project, which functions as “that field of meaning which considers it impossible to develop a singular subject without the other’s intensive presence.”[10] In the face of the new identification/incitation regime, with its pliantly opportunistic individualism, the confrontational principle of NBP might then be described as “collective heterogenesis.”



Trans-subjectivity has been developed from the outset, for instance in the proposal of 1994, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* [Você gostaria de participar de uma experiência artística?] For a month at a time, participants borrow a large, enameled steel object corresponding to the NBP diagram, creating and documenting what may as well be called “usage-works,” whose authorship is divided, doubled, multiplied, to the point where it can no longer be precisely attributed. Trans-subjectivity can also be experienced in a museum, in the form of the *Capsules*, initially presented at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 2000: four different wire-mesh “containers,” each conceived for two reclining individuals, with personal spaces that can be strictly divided, partially communicating, or entirely open to each other, depending on the configuration of object – and above all, on what you do with it. This kind of proposal is highly referential: the variations on the forms of individual containment and coupling can easily evoke the work of Foucault; the relational diagram presented on the wall can appear as a prolongation of Guattari’s complexity -mapping project in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*. But the same vocabulary can be developed in intuitively popular terms, within a space of everyday experience. The installation *Transcrossing* [Transatravessamento], presented at the São Paulo Biennial in 2002, consisted of three wire-mesh structures: an entry module, a system-cinema viewing room and an L-shaped soccer space, furnished with multiple balls, uncertain rules and a large-scale relational diagram. The cacophony of rebounding balls, videotaped dribbles and feints, intersecting cultural levels and conflicting opinions about the proper decorum within a museum offered expanded opportunities for self-reflection processes within a concrete, predictable institutional frame.



This principle of spiraling variations around a structural framework is presented explicitly in a proposal like *Nós Nós* (2002), an “affirmative all-inclusive manifesto” which associates the Portuguese word for “we” (*nós*) with its homonym meaning “nodes” or “knots.” What it suggests is a networked form of social tie that expands not through the simple aggregation of identities, but instead through the scalar redistribution of relational forms. Each person is a singular node, but also a knot in a human mesh; and each group in turn becomes a node-knot in a wider mesh and circuit. As Basbaum remarks: “If the group is conceived of as circuit, each node is not a single individual, but another group in itself – the fractal structure is evident.”[11] Trans-subjectivity acquires such a fractal structure, constituting relations not through the coercive analysis of the individual into individual elements (the typical procedure of the control society), but rather through the dispersion and reconfiguration of preindividual particles of signification and affect, at scales ranging from the micro to the macro. “The interesting thing is to assume that survival techniques completely depend on the process of joining successively more nodes and knots,” continues the artist. The spectator then becomes both the substance and the vector of a self-organizing process, a networked choreography. But the knots of power have not been forgotten here.

It’s no accident that the *Nós Nós* proposal also refers to “coletivo formigueiro,” a group of Brazilian artists and cultural workers dedicated to media activism. The desire to transform the field of everyday culture into a space of politics is perhaps the broadest response to the onset of the control society. In the late eighties and early nineties, not just in Brazil but around the world, a generation of artists sought the conceptual and affective potentials of new collective practices, able to fold the highly individualizing power structures of the control society back upon themselves, giving rise to trans-subjective territories of resistance. This path has involved innumerable experiments with the dissolution of the classical subject-object relation, or more precisely, with the multiplication of self-reflexive processes through the fractally organized nodes – the *meyou* particles – of an expanded relational field. The experiments are neither conclusive, nor exclusive. Yet it is clear that in recent years they have contributed to a new kind of social formation, a new intentionality, increasingly capable of self-organization through transindividual processes that cannot be easily identified or targeted, that have found a constitutive principle in dispersion. Here is a choreography of the multiple self, a contemporary territory of existence.

When I look up from a cultural landscape traversed by thousands of singular, locally intensive, restlessly crisscrossing projects and adventures, at times I see a new figure hanging in the air,

multitudinous, diaphanous, evanescent, continually coalescing and dispersing into the wind. You have helped me to perceive its movements, to sense its potential. We might call it a diagram of the swarm.



Notes

1 R. Basbaum, "What is NBP?," manifesto, 1990.

2 The description that follows is based on an installation at A Gentil Carioca Gallery in Rio, in November 2004.

3 Basbaum borrows this list of descriptive terms from the behavioral psychologist Kurt Lewin, "Survey of experimental investigations," chapter VIII of *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1935), pp. 261-64, text available at <http://gestalttheory.net/archive/lewin1935.html>; Lewin discusses the relational "field" of the child's encounter with a stranger.

4 For documentation of a "superpronoun" workshop, see *re-projetando + sistema-cinema + superpronome*, the catalogue of the exhibition at the Cândido Portinari Gallery of the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, August 19 to October 10, 2003.

5 G. Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," October 59 (Winter 1992), pp. 3-7. The text is available at various websites and in a number of different anthologies.

6 R. Basbaum, "Quatro características da arte nas sociedades de controle," manuscript of the paper presented in the *Curso de Mestrado em Comunicação e Cultura*, ECO-UFRJ, 1992.

7 Cf. the radio reportage "No Place to Hide" (2005), by John Biewen and Robert O'Harrow Jr., a production of American RadioWorks and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Transcript at <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/noplacetohide>. For information on MATRIX, see: www.aclu.org/Privacy/Privacy.cfm?ID=14240&c=130 (American Civil Liberties Union).

8 B. Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique," in *Hieroglyphs of the Future* (Zagreb: Arkzin/WHW, 2002), text available at www.u-tangente.org.

9 For Jordan Crandall's work, see the extensive documentation at www.jordancrandall.com.

10 R. Basbaum, "Differences between us and them," www.static-ops.org/archive_october/essay_12.htm.

11 Ibid.

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2 Responses to “The Potential Personality”

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CODED UTOPIA

By Brian Holmes

Makrolab, or the art of transition



Makrolab, Rottneest Island Australia, 2000

“Khlebnikov built a very complex system.... On the one hand it is based on historical research, and on the other on the research of language, that is, its material quality and composition. We may safely say that Khlebnikov changed the language; he changed the basic unit of thought and used it in accordance with the system he had invented. This is one of the paths I find extremely important, and one which, as such, may serve as a code, as a matrix for all the activity at the end of this century, when we are again facing a fundamental tectonic movement in the social spheres.”

Marko Peljhan [1]

Moving away from the creation of recognizable works, art becomes an experimental territory for producing subjectivities – according to the “ethico-aesthetic paradigm” of Felix Guattari. [2] But what does that paradigm entail? How do forms of contemporary artistic practice lead their participants outside the dominant modes of subjectivation? How do they lend a different structure to cooperation? How do they take up threads from the past, displacing them onto the terrain of experience?

Makrolab is a collaborative project that emerges from the vision of the Slovene artist Marko Peljhan. It offers some answers to these questions – singular answers. To make them useful in any general way, one would first have to approach the project in its multiple dimensions, to discover its stakes and challenges, to locate its contexts and learn to read its codes. Is it sculpture or

architecture? A concept or a performance piece? A nomadic war machine, or a theater to replay history? The difficulty, when you want to perceive a project like this, is to let yourself enter the horizon of its possibilities, even while analyzing its specific features.

Living Laboratory

What strikes you first is the object's technical aspect, its glistening, futuristic exterior, bristling with sensors and aials. Makrolab has been designed on a modular principle, for easy disassembly and transport by container. It comes together as an extruded octagon with a flattened base, outfitted with wooden floorboards, sheathed in translucent plastic panels, lined with silvery insulation and raised off the ground by tubular legs. Inside, it is divided into four functional zones: kitchen, workspace, dormitory (8 bunks), shower and toilets. In front, a metal staircase leads up to a narrow airlock, which rises vertically at the push of a button. On the other side, a larger hatch opens up like an awning over a gridworked terrace. Solar panels and a windmill furnish electricity, with backup from a generator; a waste-treatment system allows for minimal water consumption; communication is assured across the electromagnetic spectrum, notably by satellite links. Mounted in desolate environments, it looks a meteorological research center, or even more, like a stranded space station.

The project dates back to December 1994, when Peljhan made a trip to the island of Krk, off the Croatian coast. The landscape was strange, almost lunar; warplanes shot through the sky above. Eyewitness to the destruction of Yugoslav society, he read the poem "Ladomir" (1920) by the Russian futurist Khlebnikov. The title of this violent revolutionary epic combines the Russian words for harmony and peace. [3] Between two radically different kinds of vision, optical and poetic, Peljhan imagined the form of the theater to come: "A stage appears on the horizon and walks slowly forth. On it the sailors of Ladomir work the spinnaker of thought. Large sails propel it forward, a complex mechanism allows its legs to lift and twist. There are no metal noises. The materials are new and unknown. It does have legs and looks like an insect. It has the functionality and energy balance of a bee and the armor of an Armageddon cockroach." [4]

1994 is the year when the Internet boom began, on the transnational markets but also in our imaginations. Peljhan had already entered the art scene with a series of performances; now he moved toward the world of media activism, as a cofounder of Ljudmila, a group devoted to autonomous uses of the new communications technologies. Inspired by the Russian aesthetic of *faktura*, which calls for a mix of sensory qualities and abstract ideas, he worked on the design of the laboratory with two architects, Bostjan Hvala and Jurij Krpan, and with Luka Frelj for the communications systems. A prototype, Makrolab Mark I, was included in the program of Documenta X and installed for the summer of 1997 on Lutterberg Hill, several miles away from the city of Kassel.



That is where the choreographer Johannes Birringer discovered the mobile laboratory, and wrote the first significant text about it. Birringer is a stage performer, known for his digital dances; but paradoxically, he seemed only to perceive the technical and activist sides of the project: "Launching an artistic process that yields knowledge and insight into the evolution of the electronic 'public sphere,' Makrolab intervenes into the radio and telecommunications circuits to test the conditions under which transmission technologies operate and under which the relations between communicating individuals can be empowered," he wrote. [5] The empowerment came through the reception and decoding of civil and military transmissions, carried out in collaboration with the American artist Brian Springer. The early experiments of "tactical media" were in full swing: it was a rush to appropriate and transform the functionalities of the new computerized media tools, before they disappeared beneath the surface of commodified forms that would permit no further improvisation. Birringer locates Peljhan and Springer's practice on the borderline between the new technologies and the techniques of the historical vanguards (collage, readymade, cut-up, drift). The specific difference of the contemporary mixes, in his view, was the framework within which they were exchanged: no longer did the artists address the classical institutions (magazines, galleries, museums) but instead the new public spheres of the NGOs, and above all, the "gift economies" of the net activists.

Five years later, the writer Kodwo Eshun also noted this change of address. But he sensed something more elusive as well. His text describes the atmosphere of the laboratory during its installation on the hunting grounds of Blair Atholl in Scotland. In June and July of 2002, Makrolab hosted five different crews – artists, writers, scientists, hackers – for research into its three broad fields of investigation: climate, telecommunications, human and animal migration. The work would be carried out under conditions of insulation/isolation which, for Peljhan, define the essential parameters of the project. What Eshun recounts is the production of a "very particular subjectivity": "If Makrolab's public imperative is to conduct experiments in a post-media environment, then its private, not-quite secret imperative is to offer the participant the chance to become the experiment. To become the guinea pig. To experiment on the self as she or he adapts to the interpersonal dynamic of microcommunal life." In Eshun's view, the public or "epic" work of environmental and informational mapping – exemplified by the French conceptual art group Bureau d'Études – becomes subtly secondary to the "confessional mode" of the researcher's logbook or intimate journal, recording the "intricately funky daily routine of the Makronaut." [6]

Eshun understands the experience of the participants as a micropolitical transformation of the data yielded by the technical capacities of the laboratory, by the natural and cultural environment where it is installed, and by the informational sphere that it continuously probes. But what he concludes is that the artistic aims of the Makrolab find their most concentrated fulfillment, not in a work or a performance, but in the lives of its inhabitants. The artifacts they produce, the diaries, the photos, the maps, the streams of remixed information – in short, everything that could be displayed in a traditional museum – make up a flux of constantly evolving material, a “dataesthetic” that seeks to “immerse the insensitive and impervious viewer in the information networks that provide the operating systems of the planet.” What distinguishes artist from viewer appears to be the degree of immersion. The change of address thereby comes to signify a mutation in the concept of art, which no longer exists to be contemplated from the outside, to be appreciated as bounded whole (in its form, its complexity, its internal harmonies or disjunctions), but only appears as a by-product, a kind of secondary trace – raw material pointing back toward the immanence of lived experience.



In support of this argument, Eshun quotes an article by Boris Groys entitled “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation.” Groys remarks that the effectiveness of biopolitical technologies is to give form to life itself, conceived as “a pure activity that occurs in time”: “If life is no longer understood as a natural event, as fate, as Fortuna, but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned, then life is automatically

politicized, since the technical and artistic decisions with respect to the shaping of the lifespan are always political decisions as well.” [7] Art documentation is a record of these life-decisions, “the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in any other way.” Groys makes an important step for art criticism, by adopting Foucault’s understanding of the way that technical devices “artificially” configure human subjectivity; and he goes on to stress the uncanny side of that relation, through the extreme example of cloning procedures that make it impossible to distinguish the technological reproduction of genetic code from the unique destiny of living beings. Such procedures, he says, have become ubiquitous. His article concludes with a Benjaminian notion of the “documentary installation” as a way to relocalize our approach to experience, through “strategies of resiting and inscription based on situation and context, which make it possible to transform the artificial into something living and the repetitive into something unrepeatable.” The aim is to claim an authentic, living” status for the experience of documentary: “If reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies.... modernity enacts a complex play of removing from sites and placing in (new) sites, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of removing aura and restoring aura.”

There is certainly a connection between the immanence of life-experience and the operational mode of a project like Makrolab, which constantly creates a difficulty of approach, so as to offer an initiatory path from distant spectatorship to direct, intensive collaboration. At stake is a resingularization of the dominant semiotic codes, whose capacity to structure society has become so visible with the spread of computerized networks. Still the most interesting questions seem to disappear, when all the attention comes to focus on an ontological divide between the uniqueness of being and the threatening sterility of digitized repetition. What is eluded are the essential problems of the activity itself, its contents, its processes, its aims. If technological decisions shape our lifespans, don’t we need to know what they are and how they are taken? According to which priorities, which orientations? Isn’t it urgent to find out how can a critical distance or disjunction be achieved, without losing the immanence of lived experience? And for that, don’t we need to distinguish between the coercive forces of biopower and the reflexive practices of biopolitics?

Entropic Societies

“Insulation/isolation is understood as a vehicle to achieve independence from and reflection of the actual entropic social conditions.... The thesis is that individuals in a restricted, intensive isolation can produce more evolutionary code than large social movements.” [8] This is Makrolab’s ethico-aesthetic program: it is a generative matrix, a device for producing evolutionary code. But it is impossible to grasp the specific language of this device – its crisscrossing of scientific and artistic experiments within a retro-futurist architectural vehicle – without recalling the full political and cultural complexity of the crisis of the former Yugoslav state, then the “transition” to Western (i.e. capitalist) democracy. What’s missing from the earlier studies of Makrolab is an account of its departure points.

Marko Peljhan grew up in the Federal Republic of Slovenia in the 1980s, where he studied theater and radio. It was the heyday of the industrial rock band Laibach, then of the broader art movement known as NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) – a time when cultural revolt took place through what philosopher Slavoj Žižek called an “over-identification” with the most explicit symbols of authoritarian power. [9] In 1986, Peljhan saw the NSK theater spectacle “Baptism under Triglav,” staged by the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater, with music by Laibach and scenography by the painting collective Irwin. For an entire generation it was an initiation to the transgressive powers of art – but also to its

utopian potential: "The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater regards the utopian instinct as an innate, but not acquired, value which exists in man in the form of a desire for a unity with the Cosmic, Aesthetic and Moral elements. That is why the creation of the Style of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater cannot originate in the Actor, Space or Staging, but only in Culture and Civilization, renewed and recurrently traumatized..." [10] The paradox of Slovene art in the 1980s was to express its utopia through a merciless "retro -production" of the historical traumas of civilization.

The cultural ferment of the time included an explosion of social movements: punks, pacifists, feminists, homosexuals, ecologists, joined after 1986 by the official youth organization, with its dissident newspaper Mladina. Soon came the "Slovene Spring" of 1988. Democratic elections, followed by national independence in 1991, ushered an entire society to the other side of the authoritarian curtain – and into the dissolving embrace of postmodern capitalism.



The exit from communism would be marked by a double imaginary, of boundless space and the capsule. How to move from a relatively closed, tightly-knit provincial society – bound together in resistance against the central government – to the wide-open, dizzyingly expansive environment of globalization? In 1992, in a video accompanying the release of the album Kapital, the musicians of Laibach appear in the guise of cosmonauts, inside a rocket ship decorated with Suprematist crosses. [11] The year before, the members of Irwin had invented the NSK State in Time, and inaugurated the series of NSK Embassies. In the absence of the totalitarian foil that had given meaning to the transgressive gestures of over-identification, they attempted to establish their own limits as a social entity, tracing borders that were no longer spatial but temporal: "In Moscow this model of a voyage – as transposition of the entire group – was tested for the first time, and it confirmed our assumption that with such projects an autonomous NSK territory can be defined; a territory capable of moving, not confined by geographical, national and cultural borders; a territory realizing its own notional space." [12] But it was Dragan Zivadinov, the director of Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung (successor to the Scipion Nasice Theater) who went the furthest with the imaginary of the capsule, orchestrating in 1995

the first in a series of complex performances, carried out in a sculptural stage-set resembling a space vehicle. All this clearly resonates with the imaginary of Peljhan's work – and indeed, Peljhan would later collaborate with Zivadinov on the first-ever zero gravity theatrical performance, held in 1999 in an Ilyushin jet used by the Russians for cosmonaut training. [13] Yet a fundamental difference separates him from the generation of the 1980s, a difference involving the very conception of artistic practice, and of its role in society.

In an interview with Eda Cufer in 1999, Peljhan appealed at once to utopia and to the exercise of technologically assisted vision. Yet both of these were at a standstill: "My declarative position in creative work, the "isolation of isolation" strategy, or two-fold isolation, is a very utopian position, and every time I present it I find it has no interlocutors." [14] The absence of interlocutor also affected what he calls the "satellite perspective," which for the first time allows individuals to see everything, to become "chroniclers of the entire global system." "It seems to me that we live in a time when reflection is not only desirable but necessary," he remarked in the interview; "however, what is happening at the same time is that the interlocutor, the recipient, no longer exists. The entire theoretical apparatus is practically shut down, frozen – in Slovenia and elsewhere." Peljhan attributes this freeze of thinking to the overwhelming energy of the capitalist economy, victorious on a planetary scale. It was urgent to pursue the utopia of social evolution, while reactivating the theoretical apparatus by the creation of a vision machine. But that meant abandoning a purely theatrical approach: "There was one defining moment when I decided that this is not going to be a stage. This is going to be something different. It's not going to be a performance. It's going to be real." [15]

Being real means obtaining funding, logistical support and cultural prestige for an expensive sci-art project that originates from a small Eastern country and operates subversively on the fringes of the globalized exhibition system, drawing on the autonomous energies of the hacker ethic and the tactical media crowd to conduct "civilian counter-reconnaissance" with high-tech equipment.[16] This unusual position has led the Makrolab team towards a disarming critical pragmatism in negotiations with a wide range of partners, from the Documenta and the Venice Biennial to a British foundation (Arts Catalyst), a Slovene mobile phone company (Mobitel UMTS), or the Russian aerospace bureaucracy of Star City. Self-institutionalization under an ambiguous postnational status becomes a way to slip through the cracks of the world-spanning technological systems. The contrast could hardly be greater with the transition strategy of NSK's Irwin group, culminating in the recent [East Art Map](#). This vast and brilliant project aims to integrate little-known practices from the former Soviet bloc into expanded history of contemporary art – a history as yet unwritten, but henceforth plotted out as a network of names, dates and places, establishing a territory that can be slowly invested by complex institutional and historiographic processes of comparison, evaluation, legitimation. If the NSK project succeeds, the "notional spaces" documented by the map will slowly be reterritorialized, inscribed within a supporting framework of museums, galleries, critical discourses, publications and collections.[17] By contrast, Makrolab gathers its historical references and unrealized utopias into a semi-autonomous material structure that seeks to ride the deterritorializing wave of post-Cold War expansionism towards far-flung listening posts such as Rottneest Island, Australia (where the laboratory was installed in the year 2000), and ultimately, to the transnational space of Antarctica, where the conditions of insulation/isolation could be pushed to their limit. The vanguard ambition of "overcoming art" here combines with the "radical media pragmatism" of libertarian

net-culture in the late 1990s, with its acute awareness of "infowar" and its confrontational approach to all the established circuits of distribution.[18]

From the start, Peljhan seems to have relished the contradictions between activist subversion and institutional backing. To close his first series of performances at the Galerija Moderna in Ljubljana in 1993, amidst the turmoil and uncertainty of the transition to capitalism, he called for a public debate between artists and businessmen. Among the latter was the art patron Andrej Drpal, the producer of Peljhan's own series and an associate of the Slovene public-relations firm Pristop, which had already begun to exert a decisive influence on the development of culture and communication in the newly independent country. Two words were written on a reflecting glass pane hung behind the invited guests: Power/Religion (PR). Peljhan arrived in the room, opened a suitcase installed on a pedestal, took out a hammer and violently shattered the mirror, then sat down among the public to let the debate unfold between equals.

Horizons

Makrolab is a sophisticated attempt to pass through all the ideological screens that configure the religion of networked power. In this respect once again it is a Khlebnikovian utopia, asserting the rights of the "inventor-explorers" against the more assured claims of the "investor-exploiters." [19] The utopia is encoded through the abstract materiality of *faktura*, which in this case means: conceptual art, modular architecture, hi-tech engineering, computerized communication systems. But the project is also oriented by a reflection on the modulation of time, conceived as a control procedure: "We are constantly defined by time, timetables, dates, our lives are planned, the time stamp of our computer messages, our electronic identifications place us in the abstract and immaterial space of the networks... Space has in the first world lost its place in consciousness over time and with this loss, a loss of orientation senses occurred too. A loss that has never occurred to the centers of power." [20] Discovering how life-decisions are made at the scale of globalization means locating the men and machines who control the human flow – a pragmatic response to Groys' concern with "time artificially produced and fashioned." Even while shrinking the intimate space of groups of researchers living in microcommunity, Makrolab enlarges its cartographic explorations to all the sites and frequencies of power. In this way, it participates in the groundswell of geographic activism that has attempted to track the expansion of transnational capitalism.[21] Biopolitics – the consciously cooperative creation of life's artificial frameworks – defines itself in resistance to the coercive biopower that is exercised on human time.[22]



Considerable stakes underlie this kind of project, though they are rarely formulated in any explicit way. No one can work on the recurrently traumatic structure of technological civilization without realizing how deeply its military origins reach into the fabric of our daily lives. Indeed, the American military expansionism of the Second Cold War (1980-89) is what sparked the globalization process, culminating in the events of September 11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the very outset of the eighties, Deleuze and Guattari conceived the heteronomous model of the "nomadic war machine" as a strategy to undermine the military hierarchies of contemporary civilization. This is what Peljhan more pragmatically calls the conversion of military to civilian technologies. But to understand how this could even be attempted, is it really enough to say, as Eshun and Groys have done, that art becomes life, and artwork becomes documentation?

The language of Makrolab suggests something else: a generative matrix, close to the models of social evolution developed in Guattari's complexity theory.[23] Guattari tried to understand how people can leave behind their embodied routines, their existential territories, by transiting through a machinic assemblage capable of producing collective enunciations. Makrolab achieves this by bringing the deterritorializing force of scientific formulas and artistic images into play on the experiential level, the level of active engagement. What results for the participants is not any simple decoding of contents encrypted in an artistic form (or even less, in a "documentary installation"). Rather, within a device that encapsulates certain aspects of the Slovene experience, fragmented images from a wider variety of vanguard projects can knit together into complex sensorial refrains, interrupting the normalized modulation of time imposed by the commercial and military cultures of transnational capitalism, and loosening up subjectivity for original work with the most challenging scientific and symbolic material, at variance with the dominant patterns. Each of participants then adds something to the device, to its pool of references, tools, algorithms and images – to its horizon of evolutionary code.

The end -products of the "dataesthetic" can therefore be interpreted somewhat differently, outside the gap between raw documentation and the ineffable immanence of lived experience. For the vital activity of the researcher does not just produce data in the etymological sense: mere "givens" excerpted from the dominant flux. Instead these maps, images, films, diaries, programs, soundscapes, texts and streaming signals are artistic and scientific gifts – offered to other sites, other devices, other

receivers, other possible futures.



stratospheric camera launch, Campalto island, 2003

Notes

1 Eda Cufer, "An Interview with Marko Peljhan," in *Geopolitics and Art* (Ljubljana: SCCA, 1999); online under a different name (and without the opening paragraph quoted here) at www.manifesta.org/manifesta3/newsletter7.htm.

2 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An ethico -aesthetic paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

3 The poem is included in *Collected Works of Velmir Khlebnikov*, vol. III: *Selected Poems*, tr. Paul Schmidt (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), under the title "Lightland."

4 Marko Peljhan, "Krk," in *Makrolab (The Arts Catalyst/Projekt Atol, 2003)*; online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/vision/krk>.

5 Johannes Birringer, "Makrolab: A Heterotopia," in *Performing Arts Journal* n° 60 (1998); online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/birringer.html>.

6 Kodwo Eshun, "Makrolab's Twin Imperatives and their Children Too," in *Makrolab*, op. cit.

7 Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," in *Documenta 11*, cat. (Ostfildern: Cantz, 2002); online at www.ranadasgupta.com/notes.asp?note_id=34.

8 Marko Peljhan, "Isolation/ Insulation Proceedings," lecture at *Documenta X*, online at <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/peljhan1.html>.

9 On the theme of over-identification, see Laibach, "10 Items of the Covenant," online at www.ljudmila.org/embassy/3a/10.htm; Slavoj Žižek, "The Enlightenment in Laibach," in Inke Arns, ed., *Irwin: Retroprincip, 1983-2003* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien et al., 2003); and the film by Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire* (90", 1996).

10 Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater, "The Founding Act" (1983), online at www.ljudmila.org/embassy/4a/2.htm.

11 Laibach, "Wirtschaft ist Tod" (1992), in the DVD *Laibach - The Videos* (Caroline Distributio: 2004).

12 Remarks by Miran Mahar, from "The Symptom of the Vehicle," interview with Irwin by Eda Cufer, in Irwin: Retroprincip, op. cit.

13 For an account see Michael Benson, "Noordung Zero Gravity Biomechanical Theater" (1999), online at www.nskstate.com/noordung/noordung-benson.php.

14 Eda Cufer, "An Interview with Marko Peljhan," op. cit.

15 Remarks by Marko Peljhan, quoted in Kodwo Eshun, "Makrolab's Twin Imperatives and their Children Too," in Makrolab, op. cit.

16 For an example of "civilian counter -reconnaissance," see www.s-77ccr.org.

17 See New Moment #20, Ljubljana, 2002, special issue, "East Art Map"; introductory text online at www.nskstate.com/irwin/works-projects/eastartmap.php.

18 See Geert Lovink, "Radical Media Pragmatism," in Infowar (Linz: Ars Electronica, 1998); online at www.aec.at/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=8436.

19 These terms are from Marko Peljhan, "Insulation/Isolation Proceedings," op. cit.

20 Marko Peljhan, *ibid.* For a study of control as the temporal modulation of attention, see Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004).

21 For considerations on the role of mapping in the critique of capitalist globalization, see my text "Flowmaps: The Imaginaries of Global Integration," online at <https://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/pubsfolder/bhflowmaps>. Other references can be found at www.u-tangente.org.

22 See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Du biopouvoir à la biopolitique," in *Multitudes* 1, Paris, March 2000, online at http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=207. An English translation is available at www.generation-online.org/c/fcbiopolitics.htm.

23 See *Chaosmosis*, op. cit., and *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989). For an introduction to the way that complexity theory is deployed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, see Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy* (Edinburg University Press, 2004).

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[...] and productivist guise, which is the sculptural form and the operational agenda of the Makrolab, with its extensive capacities for grappling directly with the military and corporate technologies [...]



Extradisciplinary Investigations

By Brian Holmes

Towards a New Critique of Institutions



Gov't Office in Baku, (Ursula Biemann, Black Sea Files)

What is the logic, the need or the desire that pushes more and more artists to work outside the limits of their own discipline, defined by the notions of free reflexivity and pure aesthetics, incarnated by the gallery-magazine-museum-collection circuit, and haunted by the memory of the normative genres, painting and sculpture?

Pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video each marked a rupture of the disciplinary frame, already in the 1960-70s. But one could argue that these dramatized outbursts merely *imported* themes, media or expressive techniques back into what Yves Klein had termed the “specialized” ambiance of the gallery or the museum, qualified by the primacy of the aesthetic and managed by the functionaries of art. Exactly such arguments were launched by Robert Smithson in his text on cultural confinement in 1972, then restated by Brian O’Doherty in his theses on the ideology of the white cube.¹ They still have a lot of validity. Yet now we are confronted with a new series of outbursts, under such names as net.art, bio art, visual geography, space art and database art – to which one could add an archi-art, or art of architecture, which curiously enough has never been baptized as such, as well as a machine art that reaches all the way back to 1920s constructivism, or

even a “finance art” whose birth was announced in the Casa Encendida of Madrid just last summer.

The heterogeneous character of the list immediately suggests its application to all the domains where theory and practice meet. In the artistic forms that result, one will always find remains of the old modernist tropism whereby art designates itself first of all, drawing the attention back to its own operations of expression, representation, metaphorization or deconstruction. Independently of whatever “subject” it treats, art tends to make this self-reflexivity its distinctive or identifying trait, even its *raison d’être*, in a gesture whose philosophical legitimacy was established by Kant. But in the kind of work I want to discuss, there is something more at stake.

We can approach it through the word that the Nettime project used to define its collective ambitions. For the artists, theorists, media activists and programmers who inhabited that mailing list – one of the important vectors of net.art in the late 1990s – it was a matter of proposing an “immanent critique” of the Internet, that is, of the technoscientific infrastructure then in the course of construction. This critique was to be carried out inside the network itself, using its languages and its technical tools and focusing on its characteristic objects, with the goal of influencing or even of directly shaping its development – but without refusing the possibilities of distribution outside this circuit.² What’s sketched out is a two-way movement, which consists in occupying a field with a potential for shaking up society (telematics) and then radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change in the discipline of art (considered too formalist and narcissistic to escape its own charmed circle), in the discipline of cultural critique (considered too academic and historicist to confront the current transformations) and even in the “discipline” – if you can call it that – of leftist activism (considered too doctrinaire, too ideological to seize the occasions of the present).

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extradisciplinary investigations.

The concept was forged in an attempt to go beyond a kind of double aimlessness that affects contemporary signifying practices, even a double drift, but without the revolutionary qualities that the Situationists were looking for. I’m thinking first of the inflation of interdisciplinary discourses on the academic and cultural circuits: a virtuoso combinatory system that feeds the symbolic mill of cognitive capital, acting as a kind of supplement to the endless pinwheels of finance itself (the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a specialist of these combinatories). Second is the state of indiscipline that is an unsought effect of the anti-authoritarian revolts of the 1960s, where the subject simply gives into the aesthetic solicitations of the market (in the neopop vein, indiscipline means endlessly repeating and remixing the flux of prefabricated commercial images). Though they aren’t the same, interdisciplinarity and indiscipline have become the two most common excuses for the neutralization of significant inquiry.³ But there is no reason to accept them.

The extradisciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography, urbanism, psychiatry, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc., to bring

forth on those terrains the “free play of the faculties” and the intersubjective experimentation that are characteristic of modern art, but also to try to identify, inside those same domains, the spectacular or instrumental uses so often made of the subversive liberty of aesthetic play – as the architect Eyal Weizman does in exemplary fashion, when he investigates the appropriation by the Israeli and American military of what were initially conceived as subversive architectural strategies. Weizman challenges the military on its own terrain, with his maps of security infrastructures in Israel; but what he brings back are elements for a critical examination of what used to be his exclusive discipline.⁴ This complex movement, which never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either, can provide a new departure point for what used to be called *institutional critique*.

Histories of the Present

What has been established, retrospectively, as the “first generation” of institutional critique includes figures like Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. They examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of breaking out. They had a strong relation to the anti-institutional revolts of the 1960s and 70s, and to the accompanying philosophical critiques.⁵ The best way to take their specific focus on the museum is not as a self-assigned limit or a fetishization of the institution, but instead as part of a materialist praxis, lucidly aware of its context, but with wider transformatory intentions. To find out where their story leads, however, we have to look at the writing of Benjamin Buchloh and see how he framed the emergence of institutional critique.

In a text entitled “Conceptual Art 1962-1969,” Buchloh quotes two key propositions by Lawrence Weiner. The first is *A Square Removed from a Rug in Use*, and the second, *A 36”x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (both 1968). In each it is a matter of taking the most self-referential and tautological form possible – the square, whose sides each repeat and reiterate the others – and inserting it in an environment marked by the determinisms of the social world. As Buchloh writes: “*Both interventions – while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry... – inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institutions and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed.... On the one hand, it dissipates the expectation of encountering the work of art only in a ‘specialized’ or ‘qualified’ location.... On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from their institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings...*”⁶

Weiner’s propositions are clearly a version of immanent critique, operating flush with the discursive and material structures of the art institutions; but they are cast as a purely logical deduction from minimal and conceptual premises. They just as clearly prefigure the symbolic activism of Gordon Matta-Clark’s “anarchitecture” works, like *Splitting* (1973) or *Window Blow-Out* (1976), which confronted the gallery space with urban inequality and racial discrimination. From that departure point, a history of artistic critique could have led to contemporary forms of activism and technopolitical research, via the mobilization of artists around the AIDS epidemic in late 1980s. But the most widespread versions of 60s and 70s cultural history never took that turn. According to the subtitle of Buchloh’s famous text, the teleological movement of late-modernist art in the 1970s was heading “From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” This would mean a strictly Frankfurtian vision of the museum as an idealizing Enlightenment institution, damaged by both the bureaucratic state and the market spectacle.

Other histories could be written. At stake is the tense double-bind between the desire to transform the specialized “cell” (as Brian O’Doherty described the modernist gallery) into a mobile potential of living knowledge that can reach out into the world, and the counter-realization that everything about this specialized aesthetic space is a trap, that it has been instituted as a form of enclosure. That tension produced the incisive interventions of Michal Asher, the sledgehammer denunciations of Hans Haacke, the paradoxical displacements of Robert Rauschenberg, or the melancholic humor and poetic fantasy of Marcel Broodthaers, whose hidden mainspring was a youthful engagement with revolutionary surrealism. The first thing is never to reduce the diversity and complexity of artists who never voluntarily joined into a movement. Another reduction comes from the obsessive focus on a specific site of presentation, the museum, whether it is mourned as a fading relic of the “bourgeois public sphere,” or exalted with a fetishizing discourse of “site specificity.” These two pitfalls lay in wait for the discourse of institutional critique, when it took explicit form in the United States in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was the period of the so-called “second generation.” Among the names most often cited are Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser. They pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the Other like an object to be shown in a vitrine. But they added a subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography, which allowed them to recast external power hierarchies as ambivalences within the self, opening up a conflicted sensibility to the coexistence of multiple modes and vectors of representation. There is a compelling negotiation here, particularly in the work of Renee Green, between specialized discourse analysis and embodied experimentation with the human sensorium. Yet most of this work was also carried out in the form of meta-reflections on the limits of the artistic practices themselves (mock museum displays or scripted video performances), staged within institutions that were ever-more blatantly corporate – to the point where it became increasingly hard to shield the critical investigations from their own accusations, and their own often devastating conclusions.

This situation of a critical process taking itself for its object recently led Andrea Fraser to consider the artistic institution as an unsurpassable, all-defining frame, sustained through its own inwardly directed critique.⁷ Bourdieu’s deterministic analysis of the closure of the socio-professional fields, mingled with a deep confusion between Weber’s iron cage and Foucault’s desire “to get free of oneself,” is internalized here in a governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation.⁸ Unfortunately, it all adds very little to Broodthaers’ lucid testament, formulated on a single page in 1975.⁹ For Broodthaers, the only alternative to a guilty conscience was self-imposed blindness – not exactly a solution! Yet Fraser accepts it, by posing her argument as an attempt to “defend the very institution for which the institution of the avant-garde’s ‘self-criticism’ had created the potential: the institution of critique.”

Without any antagonistic or even agonistic relation to the status quo, and above all, without any aim to change it, what’s defended becomes little more than a masochistic variation on the self-serving “institutional theory of art” promoted by Danto, Dickie and their followers (a theory of mutual and circular recognition among members of an object-oriented milieu, misleadingly called a “world”). The loop is looped, and what had been a largescale, complex, searching and transformational project of 60s and 70s art seems to reach a dead end, with institutional consequences of complacency, immobility, loss of autonomy, capitulation before

various forms of instrumentalization...

Phase Change

The end may be logical, but some desire to go much further. The first thing is to redefine the means, the media and the aims of a possible third phase of institutional critique. The notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorize the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere.¹⁰ These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. They are based instead on a circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions – social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities – which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution.

The projects tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks. Their inventors, who came of age in the universe of cognitive capitalism, are drawn toward complex social functions which they seize upon in all their technical detail, and in full awareness that the second nature of the world is now shaped by technology and organizational form. In almost every case it is a political engagement that gives them the desire to pursue their exacting investigations beyond the limits of an artistic or academic discipline. But their analytic processes are at the same time expressive, and for them, every complex machine is awash in affect and subjectivity. It is when these subjective and analytic sides mesh closely together, in the new productive and political contexts of communicational labor (and not just in meta-reflections staged uniquely for the museum), that one can speak of a "third phase" of institutional critique – or better, of a "phase change" in what was formerly known as the public sphere, a change which has extensively transformed the contexts and modes of cultural and intellectual production in the twenty-first century.

An issue of *Multitudes*, co-edited with the *Transform* web-journal, gives examples of this approach.¹¹ The aim is to sketch the problematic field of an exploratory practice that is not new, but is definitely rising in urgency. Rather than offering a curatorial recipe, we wanted to cast new light on the old problems of the closure of specialized disciplines, the intellectual and affective paralysis to which it gives rise, and the alienation of any capacity for democratic decision-making that inevitably follows, particularly in a highly complex technological society. The forms of expression, public intervention and critical reflexivity that have been developed in response to such conditions can be characterized as extradisciplinary – but without fetishizing the word at the expense of the horizon it seeks to indicate.

On considering the work, and particularly the articles dealing with technopolitical issues, some will probably wonder if it might not have been interesting to evoke the name of Bruno Latour. His ambition is that of "making things public," or more precisely, elucidating the specific encounters between complex technical objects and specific processes of decision-making (whether these are *de jure* or *de facto* political). For that, he says, one must proceed in the form of "proofs," established as rigorously as possible, but at the same time necessarily "messy," like the things of the world themselves.¹²

There is something interesting in Latour's proving machine (even if it does tend, unmistakably, toward the academic productivism of "interdisciplinarity"). A concern for how things are shaped in the present, and a desire for constructive interference in the processes and decisions that shape them, is characteristic of those who no longer dream of an absolute outside and a total, year-zero revolution. However, it's enough to consider the artists whom we invited to the

Multitudes issue, in order to see the differences. Hard as one may try, the 1750 km Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline cannot be reduced to the “proof” of anything, even if Ursula Biemann did compress it into the ten distinct sections of the *Black Sea Files*.¹³ Traversing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey before it debouches in the Mediterranean, the pipeline forms the object of political decisions even while it sprawls beyond reason and imagination, engaging the whole planet in the geopolitical and ecological uncertainty of the present.

Similarly, the Paneuropean transport and communication corridors running through the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, filmed by the participants of the Timescapes group initiated by Angela Melitopoulos, result from the one of the most complex infrastructure-planning processes of our epoch, carried out at the transnational and transcontinental levels. Yet these precisely designed economic projects are at once inextricable from the conflicted memories of their historical precedents, and immediately delivered over to the multiplicity of their uses, which include the staging of massive, self-organized protests in conscious resistance to the manipulation of daily life by the corridor-planning process. Human beings do not necessarily want to be the living “proof” of an economic thesis, carried out from above with powerful and sophisticated instruments – including media devices that distort their images and their most intimate affects. An anonymous protester’s insistent sign, brandished in the face of the TV cameras at the demonstrations surrounding the 2003 EU summit in Thessalonica, says it all: ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS UNINTENTIONAL.¹⁴

Art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets. But in the same movement, the streets have taken up their place in our critiques. In the philosophical essays that we included in the *Multitudes* project, *institution* and *constitution* always rhyme with *destitution*. The specific focus on extradisciplinary artistic practices does not mean radical politics has been forgotten, far from it. Today more than ever, any constructive investigation has to raise the standards of resistance.



EU Summit in Thessalonica (Angela Melitopoulos and Timescapes, *Corridor X*)

Thanks to Gerald Raunig and Stefan Nowotny for their collaboration on this text and on the larger project.

Notes

¹ Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement” (1972), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, U.C. Press, 1996; Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), Berkeley, U.C. Press, 1976/1986.

- 2 See the introduction to the anthology *ReadMe!*, New York, Autonomedia, 1999. One of the best examples of immanent critique is the project “Name Space” by Paul Garrin, which aimed to rework the domain name system (DNS) which constitutes the web as a navigable space; cf. pp. 224-29.
- 3 Cf. Brian Holmes, “L’extradisciplinaire,” in Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé (eds.), *Traversées*, cat. Musée ‘art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2001.
- 4 Eyal Weizman, “Walking through Walls,” at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.
- 5 Cf. Stefan Nowotny, “Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique,” http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/nowotny/en/#_ftn6.
- 6 Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990).
- 7 “Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc.... if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered world,’ or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.” Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique,” in John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After*, Zurich, JRP/Ringier, 2006.
- 8 Cf. Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,” <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en>.
- 9 Marcel Broodthaers, “To be bien pensant... or not to be. To be blind.” (1975), in *October* 42, “Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs” (Fall 1987).
- 10 Cf. Félix Guattari, *Psychanalyse et transversalité: Essais d’analyse institutionnelle* (1972), Paris, La Découverte, 2003.
- 11 See “Extradisciplinaire,” <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507>.
- 12 Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe, ZKM, 2005.
- 13 The video installation *Black Sea Files* by Ursula Biemann, done in the context of the Transcultural Geographies project, has been exhibited with the other works of that project at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Dec. 15, 2005 – Feb. 26, 2006, then at Tapies Foundation in Barcelona, March 9 – May 6, 2007; published in Anselm Frank (ed. and curator), *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, cat., Berlin, KW/Actar, 2005.
- 14 The video installation *Corridor X* by Angela Melitopoulos, with the work of the other members of Timescapes, has been exhibited and published in *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, op. cit.

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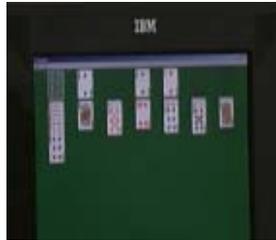


« The North American "Community" Facework and Embedded Fears »

DIFFERENTIAL GEOGRAPHY

By Brian Holmes

Research and Rhythm in Artistic Representation



The rhythm analyst will not be obliged to leap from the inside to the outside of the bodies he observes; he should be able to succeed in listening to them together and allying them, by taking his own rhythms as a reference: by integrating the inside to the outside and vice-versa.

Henri Lefebvre, "Previsionary Portrait of the Rhythm analyst"¹

In an astonishing sequence from the video installation *Corridor X*, the scene shifts abruptly from a Eurovision control monitor to a make-up session under the eye of the cameras, then to a room full of TV reporters, then to a computer screen where someone is playing solitaire. We are in the official media center of the

European Summit of Thessaloniki in June 2003. Outside, a huge demonstration has gathered in opposition to the European Union, to the war, to globalization. Inside, everything is ordered, ranked, segmented: politicians deliver speeches, translators pipe them into headphones, reporters clip out news bites for their stations. Security passes dangle from color-coded straps around each person's neck, distinguishing name, access level, function. The gaze returns insistently to the control monitor, connected to four video feeds transmitted directly by cameramen outside. Feed number 4, which is going live on the air, shows the police in pursuit of black-clad anarchists; but an instant later we ourselves are thrust into the surging crowd of demonstrators, we feel their movement in our bodies, we are carried off in their flight.

The sequence from *Corridor X* seems to echo or respond to another one toward the end of the *Black Sea Files*. This time we are in Turkey, at the site of the historical divide between Occident and Orient. On the left-hand screen, an immense oil-tanker navigates through the straits of the Bosphorous: suddenly it is caught in a viewfinder and keyed into a digital map. On the right, we see the control panel of a computerized system for maritime traffic surveillance, installed at enormous expense to guarantee security during the passage of the tankers through the straits. Over the soundtrack comes a crackle of radio transmissions against a barely audible background of oriental music. Then the view of the control panel flicks to a satellite image of Istanbul. As though the video-maker, once again, were inquiring into the nature and function of the technologies of vision, the condition of the world-on-a-screen.

The two installations, so different in editing and style, display the same desire for a confrontation with the control screen: a device that cuts out and redistributes the flow of time according to a strictly functional and hierarchical order. It is as though the works had to recognize within themselves the presence of a spatial order at once homogeneous and fragmented: the abstract space of the contemporary capitalist planning process, as it is sketched out and realized in some of the largest infrastructural programs of the present. It is this rigidly segmentary space of control that the artworks melt and dissolve into the affective rhythms of "a myriad of human trajectories on the ground." That last phrase is a quote from the *Black Sea Files*; but it applies perfectly to *Corridor X*. Both installations engage with a contradictory relationship of forces, bringing together the implacably unified logic of large-scale planning processes and the sensual and expressive diversity of speaking human beings. That relation lies at the heart of a project that was initially called "Transcultural Geographies," but was finally exhibited under a much more enigmatic name: "B Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond."

Searching for Motives

The B Zone is a complex project, with many different entries and exits. It was in 2002 that the Transcultural Geographies network began to take shape, on the initiative of Ursula Biemann who had already decided to document the construction and the human environment of the 1750-kilometer BTC oil pipeline running from the city of Baku in Azerbaijan, through Tbilissi in Georgia, to the port of Ceyhan in Turkey. To enlarge the scope of this investigation, she invited two other women into the project. One was Lisa Parks, a media researcher who would analyze the destruction of the former Yugoslav telephone system during the civil wars, then map out its replacement by a web of transnational satellite services. The other was Angela Melitopoulos, who wanted to make a road movie about the present realities and historical memories of the integrated system of highways, rails, ports and telecommunications cables stretching across Southeastern Europe,

from Salzburg and Budapest to Thessaloniki and Sofia. This multi-modal system is Corridor X, the tenth Pan-European Transport Corridor, running along a route that partially overlays the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity built by Tito's Yugoslavia, but also the Berlin-to-Baghdad railroad constructed with German capital in the early twentieth century. At stake here, as curator Anselm Franke noted in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, is the "silent language of infrastructure."²

Yet this is a project that speaks. To instill a dialogical character into the very production and editing of the investigation, Angela Melitopoulos constituted the group Timescapes, including the VideA collective from Ankara, Freddy Vianellis from Athens, Dragana Zarevac from Belgrade, and the German video-maker Hito Steyrl who filmed the European summit in Thessaloniki along with Melitopoulos herself. Another participant was the professor of media art and cultural studies, Ginette Verstraete, who accompanied the project of Transcultural Geographies from its inception, along with numerous other artists, theorists, inhabitants and experts who contributed their images, their voices and their texts, or who participated in one of the four project seminars held in Amsterdam, Ljubljana, Istanbul and Zurich. All this was documented in a book, and given spatial expression in the two exhibitions of the project mounted in Berlin in 2006 and in Barcelona in 2007.³ It was, to date, one of the most searching and insightful projects of what some people are calling visual geography.

These precisely conceived investigations of the southeastern periphery of Europe, and of its continual transformations since the end of the Cold War, take us far away from any purely aesthetic definition of art. The ambition is clearly to develop a new mode of inquiry and expression, yielding results that are qualitatively different from those obtained either by artists or by social scientists. As Ursula Biemann remarks: "In my understanding of the practice of art, images and text are inseparably interwoven in their common purpose to produce knowledge."⁴ But the question is, what kind of knowledge? All the works in the project are carefully researched, yielding a synthesis of existing disciplinary studies; and particular efforts have been made to integrate the precise distinctions of the social sciences into a broad and consistent narrative. Yet there is also a critical examination here, not so much of the "text/image relation" that formed the semiological stock-in-trade of concept art, but instead of the more pragmatic confrontation between analytic discourse and cultural performance. Analysis, in short, is brought up against the lifeworlds of Southeastern Europe. And while the discriminatory power of objectifying analysis reaches deeply into the existential singularity of the encounters – and into the warp and weft of the video editing – it also serves to bring out a fundamental heterogeneity. One could say, in the spirit of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, that the logic of capitalist rationality is inscribed into the sensuous material of art, and that the incongruity of the two points beyond the informational level of representation, toward other human realities whose promise is rarely voiced.

Let's focus for a moment on the heterogeneous nature of representation itself as it appears in these works. At the initial level – whose social importance can hardly be minimized – we are squarely within the classical paradigm where the verbal or visual sign not only stands in for the referent, but also serves as an ideal model or template for its transformation. Thus the "objects" that are treated (the pipeline, the transportation net) must be read as the material emanations of a highly abstract process of corridor planning, which extends the infrastructures of capitalist production from the fully saturated historical centers (the "A Zone," in the jargon of the technocrats) to the peripheries which can still bear heavy capital investment (the "B Zone"). It is in this sense, at

least from the planning perspective, that the southeastern periphery is gradually “becoming Europe,” as it is ever more deeply integrated to the infrastructural net that constitutes a full-fledged capitalist production circuit, from extraction all the way to processing, finance and markets. Corridor X, leading from southern Germany into Greece and Turkey, can offer a perfect example of this kind integrating infrastructure, with its central axis and its diverging branches, its 2,500 kilometers of roads and rails, its twelve airfields and four ports, most of which which already exist in scattered pieces and yet remain to be forged into a functional whole, via private-public partnerships of tremendous stealth and complexity.⁵ This kind of project seems calculated to dwarf the human being, and in that way, to vanquish in advance any imaginable resistance or possibility of democracy. Yet by a chance linguistic twist, the Roman numeral “X” that is supposed to represent this immense infrastructure is also a perfectly conventional designation of its fundamental lack of meaning, its absence of ontological density – at least when it is viewed through the mathematical lens of the planners. The segmented void of the corridor can only be transformed by the fluid diversity of its users, who alone will provide the project’s real motive forces.

The BTC pipeline presents a similar aspect. Today it is already buried beneath the ground, to secure it against terrorist attacks, but also to reduce its exposure to the media. It was only visible for a few short years, during the period of its construction; and even then, you had to find it on the terrain, since the British Petroleum corporation gave no information whatsoever as to its location. But one can ask if such a project could ever truly be “visible,” or if it does not rather consist in the informatic space of coordination and control that assigns it its real functions. Biemann raises this question throughout the film, for instance when she shows the image of the oil-tanker in the viewfinder; but she also turns her gaze elsewhere, along the full length of pipeline, to engage in conversations with the workers, the farmers, the experts, the prostitutes, the refugees, all those shape the space of this infrastructure, even as they are shaped by it. Ultimately, it is the human environment that forms the subject of the film. Thus a different level of representation becomes increasingly palpable. The other side of the pipeline – all that is “beyond” its abstract functionality – rises gradually into our field of knowledge through this questioning relationship with the people along the wayside, often migrants, displaced persons, who know what it means to have to recreate a world.

Now, to question the others and to make them into the living motifs of a buried and invisible landscape suggests the need for a certain research into one’s own motives. Through one of the unlikely coincidences brought on by the networked structure of cooperation in the project of Transcultural Geographies, Biemann found herself in the spring of 2004 in the city of Ankara, and in the workspace of the VideA collective, when an urgent phone call arrived from a community of Kurdish refugees. The municipality was in the process of expelling some one thousand persons from their dwelling place, a huge vacant lot where they were doing recycling for a living. At their request, Ursula went out to record the brutal intervention of the police, placing herself in situations of violence and political engagement that she had never planned into her investigation. On the finished two-screen video, she presents these dramatic scenes in parallel to a self-reflexive sequence where she asks about her own role in the events, while sitting in front of a portable computer and filming herself with a webcam:

What does it mean to take the camera into the field, to go into the trenches? How did it get to the point where she stands at the front, next to the journalists, at the very moment of the incident, without press pass or gas mask? ... Is an image

made under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives? Is better knowledge that which is produced at great risk? ... [*scene shifts to the pipeline*] Are these cognitive methods any different from the ones used by geologists, anthropologists or secret intelligence agents? They all probe different sorts of sediments and plots that give meaning to this space. What is the sediment I should be probing in my fieldwork? What role do I play in this plot?⁶

The critical examination of the relation between analytic discourse and cultural performance is now turned on the "I" behind the camera, that is, on the subjective position of the camerawoman herself. Her memory and its particular association to a place becomes the material that the artistic research probes. Reflecting on the same scene in her writing, she formulates one of the project's fundamental goals: "It is not so much the capturing of a spectacular human drama that is at work here but the relentless search for the uncontrollable shoots of buried histories."⁷ What the artist begins to add to the classical formats of geographical representation is an inquiry into the texture and temporal depth of the relations that produce the videographic flux itself – a dialogical texture, brimming over with contrasts and differences, yet always somehow uncertain or inconclusive, and partially opaque even to those who bring it concretely into being.

Multiplying Narratives

To move closer to the most important stakes of this research, one could begin by saying that what it represents – what it shows or explicates – is the *production of space*, in the sense that was given to that phrase by Henri Lefebvre. That is to say, the continuous production and reproduction of an existential milieu lived and fashioned by its inhabitants: a vital space open to the most unexpected becomings, and at the same time, inherently contradictory by dint of its own multiplicity – especially when it is submitted to regimes of transparency and totality, as illusory as they are oppressive. Beyond the abstractions of control, it is this qualitative dimension (embodied, sensuous and playful) that Lefebvre calls "differential space." As he wrote in 1974:

The enigma of the body – its secret, at once banal and profound – is its ability, beyond "subject" and "object" (and beyond the philosophical distinctions between them), to produce differences "unconsciously" out of repetitions – out of gestures (linear) or out of rhythms (cyclical). Just like the fleshy body of the living being, the spatial body of society and the social body of needs differ from an "abstract corpus" or "body" of signs (semantic or semiological – "textual") in the following way: they cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating *differences*.⁸

Lefebvre's philosophy, in *The Production of Space*, is turned entirely toward the conceptualization of this differential creativity, in its distinction from the sterile infinity of abstract serial production. Yet today one can go further than the sheer concept of differential space. Between Lefebvre's time and our own, there has been an immense flowering of feminist inquiries and postcolonial historiographies, which have brought particular attention to the interactions between the *positionality* of subjects and the forms of *situated knowledge* (including expressive knowledge).⁹ These interventions have awakened the desire for a new treatment of representation, a multiplication of its gestural and narrative textures: for it is these textural elements, with their transindividual dynamics, that are directly productive of human perception, and

thereby, of the very capacity for the creation of space. Extending the pathways opened up by feminist and postcolonial theory, certain artists working with contemporary media have sought a more active and affective intervention into the production of space, by means of the material and linguistic qualities of videographic editing itself. Instead of a pure analysis of abstract space or a pure aestheticization of the human landscape, artistic research can now give form to a *differential geography*, that is to say, to a mode of cognition – and of recognition, and of self-recognition – that allows subjects to inscribe their own positionality into the gestural texture of the narrative, exposing the socioeconomic determinants of their lives to the flux of intersubjective time, and to the electronic fluctuations of the video image. Through such a process the controlled and segmented spaces of the multimodal corridors can become a fluid realm of expression and exchange, a sensuous and dialogical field, able to convey the contradictory resonance of multiple threads of historical experience and unanchored desire. And through this differential representation, the perceptions and perspectives of the B Zone – which Melitopoulos describes as “a zone of transitions, processes of becoming, unstable political conditions, neocolonial strategies of cooptation and antithetical historiographies”¹⁰ – can start flowing back into the saturated imaginary space of the A Zone, and begin to create a field of coexistence. This is the active force of differential geography.

The Timescapes experiment is an attempt to provoke this movement of reflux, through a set of protocols, a technical device and a highly original practice of editing. The participants, who filmed along the routes of Corridor X and beyond, accept to place their results in common, constituting a stock of video images which each then receives back as a collective memory bank (around 25 hours of rushes). Each video-maker then works in an isolated studio; but a specially conceived Internet platform allows the editors to share the timecodes of their cuts with all the others, and to relay any additional material such as subtitles, image overlays, supplementary scenes, etc. In this way, the editing software can reconstruct every new sequence from the raw material stored in the memory bank, so that at any given point in the process, each one can see the video that the other is in the midst of creating. A billboard function allows everyone to post observations and commentaries on their reciprocal borrowings and contrasting narratives. What this amounts to is an invitation to experience the other’s construction of reality as it unfolds, and to integrate that experience as a troubling, inconclusive element within one’s own expression. As Melitopoulos wrote to one of the other participants, the Turkish video-maker Oktay Ince, “I tell you something about how I feel becoming a part of your editing: can you explain to me, how I as a person am going to be the material for a psycho-graphic line of yours? What of me becomes part of your movie ?”¹¹ In the space of exhibition, this reciprocal appropriation becomes an astonishing experience: from gallery to gallery, from monitor to screen, the images and soundtracks reappear, echo one another, diverge and recombine again. And yet this echoing, divergence and recombination is one of the best available translations or prolongations of the ways that cultural history is really made, on the grounds of a trans-subjective territory.

For Melitopoulos, non-linear editing means working with the *durée*, the time of our consciousness: a modulation of the attention that informs our memory, our thought and our spatial awareness. As she writes: “The video image does not document the real, but acts as a mnemonic agent or a visual memory.”¹² What results when these mnemonic agents are combined is a kind of phrasing of being in the landscape of time, bringing memories from the past to the surface of the present and mingling them with the

experience of perception, in close relation to the sensibility of others. Following this inspiration – which is deeply influenced by Maurizio Lazzarato's *vidéophilosophie* – she constitutes a moving picture of Corridor X in which multiple layers intertwine: her own travels to her father's homeland of Greece during the summer vacations of her childhood; the construction of the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway in the early twentieth century; the digging of Loibl tunnel by conscript labor during the Second World War; the mobilization of the Yugoslav population for work on the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity; and the actuality of Corridor X, where technical information and political events weave their way into the gestures and voices of those who experience the impacts of the planning process on their everyday lives.

The principle of the two-screen installation works perfectly with this editing philosophy, allowing for parallel narratives and historical contrasts, but also drawing on the play of repetition to generate singular affective rhythms which could never precisely be named, but which pass distinctly through the landscapes, the faces and ourselves. To quote Lefebvre once again, this could be the material of a "rhythmanalysis." As he wrote at the very end of his life:

In the social sciences we continue to divide up time into lived time, measured time, historical time, work time and free time, everyday time, etc., that are most often studied outside their spatial context. Now, concrete times have rhythms, or rather are rhythms – and all rhythms imply the relation of a time to a space, a localized time, or, if one prefers, a temporalized space. ... Let us insist on the relativity of rhythms. ... A rhythm is only slow or fast in relation to other rhythms with which it finds itself associated in a more or less vast unity. ... Every more or less animate body and *a fortiori* every gathering of bodies is consequently polyrhythmic, which is to say composed of diverse rhythms, with each part, each organ or function having its own in a perpetual interaction which constitutes a set [*ensemble*] or a whole [*un tout*].¹³

Could there be any higher ideal for practitioners of video recording and non-linear montage? Like Charles Baudelaire in his "*petits poèmes en prose*," Lefebvre gleaned his inspiration "from frequent contact with enormous cities, from the junction of their innumerable connections." Indeed, the polyrhythmical metropolis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the great resource of differentialism and multiplicity. The works of the "B Zone" embrace a larger scale, extending the rhythmanalysis of the city to an entire region and its history. A politics of precise and detailed information is exposed to its affective and dialogical dimensions, in a process of trans-subjective editing that traverses a continent.

At this point one might object that interiorized totalities were another great resource of the romantic nineteenth century, and that nothing of the sort can help us come any closer to the world of today – that is, to the realities of geography. Yet such an objection ignores the entire aspiration of the project, which is to unfold the inner worlds of its subjects/objects into the outer one, to exfoliate the sedimented layers of the self into the expressive vectors of electronic media. What occurs is the spatialization of subjectivity, the recognition through the editing process of what Ursula Biemann called the "shoots of buried histories," emerging not *from* a unitary metaphysical source but instead *at* the mnemonic place where they begin to diverge and multiply. As Melitopoulos writes: "To see video documents (whose interpretation one believes one knows) integrated in other

montages is a strange experience out of which the connection between creative practice and geographical position emerges and enters into conflict: the emotional potential of the pictures points to their mnemonic tie to the geographical space of memory."¹⁴ In Angela's own film, to be sure, all of this has a distinctly personal dimension, whereby one woman's life becomes tangled up – and to a certain extent dispersed – in a larger field of historical cultures. But the personal and situated dimensions of the film are essential to its ambitions. As she explains: "The mass media do not censor individual opinions, but the complexity of the processes of subjectivation. Many-layered, complex relations of identity and subjectivity affect people beyond their self-attributed identity and produce a group that is not represented by the majority opinion."¹⁵

Aspirations like these most often arise from moments of crisis. Here we should think of the first Gulf War, contemporary with the appearance of CNN. At the time, Melitopoulos shot videos in Paris for an activist project called *Canal Déchaîné* (Unchained Channel), which involved people carrying radical video monitors, complete with battery pack, on their backs through demonstrations in the streets. The Internet platform of the Timescapes project strives toward a future in which images from across the earth can be recombined amidst the urgency of the event, not into the one-dimensional characters of an impoverished subjectivity, but into the rich and contrasting textures of a collective self-reflection that can endure through the awesome shockwaves of idiocy that militarized capitalism now imposes on us. The point is not simply to send a clip around the world; it is to begin responding to the challenge of flatly imposed universals with the alternative of interwoven landscapes of becoming.

Ursula Biemann's work, to this date, has sought no such technological mode of distribution or interactive editing. Yet the production of her videos as multiples, costing the price of a book rather than that of a limited-edition video artwork, means that these visual narratives get around, contributing both to cultural education in the diffuse sense and to the more focused encounters of activist groups concerned with a particular issue. There is a palpable need for this kind of image-production. The fact is that sustained artistic research into the gendered and ethnically hierarchized worlds of uneven geographical development does not yet exist to any massively significant degree – no doubt because it cannot be planned like a pipeline or a corridor, but must instead emerge from the cultivation of desires for a more meaningful mobility. The whole point is to support this cultivation of desire, in the face of instrumental programs that have no need for anything but their own results, the tautological fulfillment of their functions.

One of the speakers of *Corridor X*, Alexandre Zdravkovski, remarks that the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity was full of life, because it was infused by the society of the time with emotional energy. To the contrary, present conditions in Macedonia where he resides are somber, not least because the freedom to travel has actually declined since the early 1990s. "We in Macedonia would like to have all corridors alive," he explains. "But to make such projects alive you need more than professional managers, architects, engineers and work force. ... It is important that the corridor functions on all levels. ... Everything that is made consciously, with good intentions, with emotional energy, is more alive and has a chance to last longer in our time-space continuum."¹⁶ Interviewed on the back seat of a moving car, this modest and alert-looking man tries to formulate a principle of vital resistance, locating its importance somewhere beyond the arrival of what are metaphorically and literally called "the bulldozers."

As the struggle over oil resources drags our planet ever deeper into war, and the extension of Corridor III is planned all the way

to China, this effort to breathe some life into the abstraction of global infrastructures may prove to be the real challenge of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Regulier -Lefebvre, "Portrait Prévisionnel du rythmanalyste," in *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (Paris: Syllepse, 1992). An English translation has been published by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, under the title *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004); but here I preferred to retranslate from the French.
- 2 Anselm Franke, "Introduction," in *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Barcelona: Actar, 2005), p. 7.
- 3 The exhibitions were held at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Dec. 17, 2005 – Feb. 26 2006, and at Fundació Tàpies, Barcelona, March 10 – May 1, 2007.
- 4 Ursula Biemann, "The Black Sea Files," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 25.
- 5 For official information on Corridor X, seee, among others, <http://edessa.topo.auth.gr/x>.
- 6 Ursula Biemann, "File Four," in *Black Sea Files*, 43' 47", 2005.
- 7 Ursula Biemann, "Black Sea Files," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 59.
- 8 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1991/French ed. 1974), pp. 395-96.
- 9 Cf. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), particularly chapters 1 and 3.
- 10 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 144.
- 11 Angela Melitopoulos, "Corridor X," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 168.
- 12 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 140.
- 13 Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Regulier -Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. 89.
- 14 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., pp. 140-41.
- 15 Angela Melitopoulos, "Timescapes," in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 145.
- 16 Alexandre Zdravchovski interviewed by Angela Melitopoulos in *Corridor X* (2005), transcribed in *B-Zone*, op. cit., p. 229.

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THE SPECULATIVE PERFORMANCE

By Brian Holmes

Art's Financial Futures



What's above their heads?

So you were shocked by the prices at Art Basel – the one in Miami, I mean? There is nothing new under the Florida sun. Since the heyday of “tulipomania” in Holland, financiers have been speculating on aesthetics. Their blooming folly way back in the 1620s seems to confirm a remark by Cornelius Castoriadis, on the dysfunctional yet determinant nature of the stock market with respect to real production. “Why must a society seek the complement necessary to its order in the *imaginary*?” asks the Greek political theorist. “Why do we find in every case at the heart of this imaginary and in all of its expressions something that cannot be reduced to the functional, an original investment by society of the world and itself with meaning – meanings which are not ‘dictated’ by real factors, since it is instead this meaning that attributes to the real factors a particular importance and a particular place in the universe constituted by a given society?”¹

Speculation is essential to the “imaginary institution” of the capitalist world-system. Yet until today, nobody ever thought to make market information into raw material for art. That leap has now been taken, with the exhibition “Derivados, Nuevas visiones financieras,” mounted in the summer of 2006 at the Casa Encendida in Madrid. The organizing group, Derivart, brought

together a select bouquet of works to celebrate the birth of "Finance Art." What they claim to achieve is "an artistic exploration and critical analysis of stock markets and financial agents."²

At the heart of this new genre is an aesthetics of information, an "infosthetics": the transformation of data streams into visual or sonic representations, by way of computer algorithms.³ The most impressive work (represented only through video documentation) is entitled *Black Shoals*. That's a reference to the Black-Sholes option-pricing formula, which is at the origin of the little financial miracle called hedge funds. The piece takes the form of a planetarium, a veritable universe, whose myriad stars represent thousands of stocks, twinkling and glowing in real time as they are traded at greater or lesser intensities. Each trade gives off a numerical value (analogous to money) which serves as "food" for a population of freely evolving computer-generated creatures. Over the course of the exhibition they develop more-or-less effective survival strategies (lying dormant in wait, gathering around active constellations, ranging footloose and predatory...). As the curators remark in the catalogue: "Visualization characterizes the experience of stock-market professionals today. An original representation allows you to interpret the data differently and see opportunities that the others ignore."

A few months after the exhibition, members of Derivart tried their own experiment in visualization with the performance "Tickerman." A pseudo-heroic artist wields paint pots and brushes, his slapdash strokes and jabs relaying the rhythms of a "stock-market melody." Financial data translated into sound becomes visible again on the canvas, whose aesthetically trivial quality opens up the real question: where do the most interesting opportunities lie, in the music, in the gesture that transcribes it for the eye, in the pictorial object that results, in the aura of parody that surrounds it, or in the distribution of the whole performance over YouTube? This is what the specialists call *arbitrage*: it all depends on which aspects of the work you want to invest in.

Avid for profits but jittery about the risks, contemporary arbitrageurs know how to double up their bets, by playing both sides of an equation. The economist of the Derivart, Daniel Buena, describes their strategy with great precision: "In contrast to corporate raiders, who buy companies for the purpose of breaking them up to sell as separate properties, the work of arbitrage traders is yet more radically deconstructionist... they attempt to isolate such qualities as the volatility of a security, or its liquidity, its convertibility, its indexability and so on.... Derivatives such as swaps, options, and other financial instruments play an important role in the process of separating the desired qualities from the purchased security. Traders use them to slice and dice their exposure, wielding them in effect like a surgeon's tools - scalpels, scissors, proteases to give the patient (the trader's exposure) the desired contours."⁴

Derivart claims to produce not only artistic curves, but a critical analysis of the market. If we understand critique as a purely deconstructive operation, then a performance like "Tickerman" can be critical, just as arbitrage operations can be considered an "art" in the text by Daniel Buena. But if we understand critique according to its etymology, as the attempt to intervene at the moment of a life-threatening crisis, then maybe we should look elsewhere for a critical art - far from the data-bodies and abstracted surgeries of infosthetics.

What constitutes the imaginary of finance? How has it autonomized itself from what Castoriadis calls "social functionality," to become the dominant institution of contemporary capitalism? Can a critical art help us to understand the power it

exerts over the human psyche? Above all, can art still help to institute *another imaginary*? Michel Foucault's work on neoliberalism has brought to light the degree to which speculation on one's own human capital has become a major vector of subjectivation – that is, one of the primary paths that society offers you for becoming an individual.⁵ The need to intervene along that pathway to the future has become critical since the stock-market krach of 2000, which brought neoliberal expansionism to its crisis-point, ushering in the new regime of warfare.⁶

This article will examine two performances, both of which engage their authors in an embodied reflection on the financial markets. What can be expected from such experiments? The anthropologist Victor Turner gives a clear idea: "Performative reflexivity is a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal roles, and other sociocultural components which make up their public 'selves.'" ⁷ Just one more thing: later on we'll have to distinguish between reflections in the mirror, and the chance to intervene.

Trading on the Razor's Edge

In October of 2002, Michael Goldberg, an Australian artist of South African origin, made a series of decisions that would allow him to "behave as a day trader" while simultaneously analyzing the underlying structures of the computerized financial markets. With an initial capital of AUD \$50,000, lent by a so-called "Consortium" of three veteran day-traders whom he won over to his project through conversations in a specialized chat room, Goldberg set out to deal artistically in derivatives of a single stock: News Corp., the global media empire of the right-wing billionaire Rupert Murdoch.

The performance took place over a period of three weeks at the Artspace Gallery in the city of Sydney in Fall 2002.⁸ It extended onto the Internet via a website featuring art and market information, daily balance sheets and an IRC channel for conversation; there was also a dedicated call-in line to the artist in the gallery. The title was "Catching a Falling Knife" – financial jargon for a risky deal. In effect, the context of the piece was a market still battered by the failure of the new economy and the collapse of giants such as Enron, WorldCom and Vivendi-Universal. The use of derivatives, rather than actual News Corp. shares, allowed Goldberg to play on either a rising or a falling value, with the latter appearing much more likely in the bear market of 2002. Here is how he describes the set-up in the gallery:

The viewer enters a space devoid of natural light. Three walls reflect the glow of floor to ceiling digital projections – real-time stock prices, moving average charts and financial news. The values change and the graphs move, unfolding minute-by-minute, second by second in a sequence of arabesques and set moves. They respond instantly to constantly shifting algorithms pumping in through live feeds from the global bourses. A desk light and standing lamp in the viewers' lounge reveal a desk and computer, armchairs, and a coffee table with a selection of daily newspapers and financial magazines. Opposite, high on a scaffold platform another desk lamp plays on the face of the artist as he stares at his computer screens. He's talking into a phone, placing or closing a trade. Below him there's the continual sweep of the LED ticker declaring current profit and loss. In the background the audio tape drones. The voice of the motivational speaker, urges you 'to create a clear mental picture of just how much money you want to make – and to decide just how you will earn this money until you are as rich as you want to be.'" ⁹



By projecting software readouts and Bloomberg news flashes on the walls, Goldberg sought to immerse the visitor in the pulsating world of information that constantly confronts the trader on his screens. The decision to use a phone-in brokerage service rather than online orders allowed for vocal expression of the fear and greed that animate the markets. Daily reports to the consortium of lenders – who had contractually agreed to take all the risk, but also the potential profit – added the pressure of personalized surveillance and obligation, analogous to what a professional trader confronts in a major financial institution. The real-time charts served to graphically translate the market volatility that is technically known as “emotion.” In an earlier performance, Goldberg even undertook to paint such graphically rendered [emotion](#) on the gallery wall, thus underscoring the link between individual expression and market movements.¹⁰ By reflexively performing his real role as a day trader within an exaggerated gallery environment, Goldberg made a public event out of the intimate interaction between the speculative self and the market as it coalesces into presence on personal computer screens.

What’s at stake in such an interaction? The Swiss sociologists Urs Bruegger and Karin Knorr Cetina define the global financial markets as “knowledge constructs.” They arise by means of individual interactions within carefully structured technological and institutional frames, and they always remain in process – forever incomplete, forever changing.¹¹ The constant variability of these “epistemic objects” makes them resemble a “life form,” one that only appears on the trader’s screens – or more precisely, for the professional currency changers that Bruegger and Knorr Cetina have studied, via his full equipment set, including a telephone, a “voice broker” intercom, two proprietary dealing networks known as the Reuters conversational dealing system and the EBS Electronic Broker, and various other news sources and internal corporate databases, including time-charts displaying the evolution of each individual’s recent positions.¹² As the sociologists stress, “*the screen is a building site on which a whole economic and epistemological world is erected.*” And it’s a world which you can plunge into, which you can manipulate, from which you can emerge “victorious.” The responsive flux that appears on the screens makes possible what the two researchers call “postsocial relationships.”

The term “postsocial” is obviously a provocation – one with huge implications, given the continuing multiplication of screens in both domestic and public space.¹³ However, Bruegger and Knorr Cetina do not consider the postsocial relationship as humanity’s total alienation to an electronic fetish. Well aware of the economic anthropology developed by Karl Polanyi, they demonstrate how the flux of the currency-exchange market is constructed, at least in part, by relations of reciprocity between traders, notably via email conversations over the Reuters dealing system. They also observe

how individuals working at great spatial distances come to feel each other's copresence through temporal coordination, since everyone is simultaneously watching the evolution of the same indicators. And at the same time as they illustrate the relative autonomy that traders enjoy within their field of activity, they show how the chief trader controls and carefully manipulates the parameters, both financial and psychological, within which each individual on the floor makes his deals. In these ways, the interaction that animates the global market is "embedded" in an expansive tissue of social relations, composing a "global microstructure."¹⁴ Nonetheless, what the researchers claim is that the paramount relationship of the trader is with the flux itself, that is, with the informational construct, or what early cyberpunk theory called the "consensual hallucination." This is what they call the postsocial relationship: "engagements with non-human others." The key existential fact in this engagement is that of "taking a position," i.e. placing money in an asset whose value changes with the market flux. Once you have done this, you are *in* – and then it is the movements of the market that matter most of all.

Goldberg's performance displays exactly this anxious relation to an ungraspable object, something like a jostling crowd of fragmentary information, its movements resolving at times into ciphers of opportunity, then dissolving again into panic dispersal. In an interview, he explains that real day traders have little concern for so-called fundamentals, but constantly seek instead to evaluate each other's movements: "They'd rather be looking at what the charts are telling them about how punters are behaving on the market each day, each minute, each second. Get an accurate picture of where the crowd is moving and you jump on for the ride – uphill or downhill – it doesn't matter."¹⁵ He uses an image from a popular film to evoke the plunge of taking a position, then closing it out for a profit or a loss, with all the attendant emotions of fear, greed, and panic desire: "I'm reminded of a scene in Antonioni's *Blow Up* where the character played by David Hemmings mixes in with rock fans as they fight over the remains of a guitar, trashed on stage at the end of a concert and flung into the waiting crowd. He emerges the victor, only to discard the prized relic moments later as so much trash – the adrenalin rush of the pursuit having been the only real satisfaction to be gained."

Similarly, the two sociologists reflect on the intensities of an ultimately void desire, claiming that "what traders encounter on screens are stand-ins for a more basic lack of object." To characterize the postsocial relation, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger recall Jaques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, where the speechless infant is fascinated by the sight of its own body as a whole entity, and at the same time disoriented by the inward perception of a morcellated, untotalizable body-in-pieces. They stress that "*binding (being-in-relation, mutuality) results from a match between a subject that manifests a sequence of wantings and an unfolding object that provides for these wants through the lacks it displays.*"¹⁶ The rhythm of the market on the screens is a way of capturing and modulating the subject's desire. Yet once again, this postsocial tie is not portrayed as total alienation, but as a reflexive culture of coping and dynamic interchange, extending beyond the simple goal of money-making toward what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in a discussion of Balinese cock-fighters and their high-stakes gambling, called "deep play."¹⁷

Could Goldberg's piece be taken as a celebration of this "deep play" in the finance economy – an aestheticized exploration of the actions and gestures unfolding within a global microstructure, without any regard for the macrostructures on which it depends? The baleful presence of a wall-sized portrait of Rupert Murdoch at the entryway to the performance space argues against that reading. The artist's earlier work had been primarily about the

institutions of the British empire in Australia. Here, by speculating exclusively on the value of News Corp. stock, he situates the interactions of a small-time day-trader within an arc of power that extends from Australia to the United States, via Murdoch's extensive holdings in Italy and England. In America, Murdoch is the owner of the bellicose Fox News channel, but also of the *Weekly Standard*, the insider publication of the neoconservatives in Washington. He is a direct supporter of the Anglo-American war coalition, and a transnational entrepreneur who stands only to gain from further extensions of US-style capitalism. As a key player in the construction of satellite TV systems with global reach, he has helped build the infrastructure of a new imperial politics. The billionaire mogul is the master of a postsocial relationship writ large: the relationship of entire populations with the proliferating media screens that structure public affect, through a rhythmic modulation of attention that is orchestrated on a global scale.¹⁸ The reference to Murdoch therefore situates the gallery device within an overall imperial power structure, adding implicit meaning to the military vocabulary that the artist affects when speaking of the day-traders (he calls them "battle-hardened veterans of the tech-wreck," and notes that he prefers this kind of expression). The critique here is tacit, deliberately understated; but it is clear nonetheless. The strength of this carefully conceived gallery performance is to reveal the electronic market, with its relation between face and screen, between desiring mind and fluctuating information, as the fundamental device of control within the wartime economy of neoliberalism in crisis.

The work, then, is no mere illustration or celebration of "deep play" in the financial markets. However, there is a more telling question to ask about its performative intentions. Was Goldberg just hedging his bets with his tacit critique, which in the worst of cases could always serve as a kind of blue-chip value on the intellectualized end of the art world? In other words, was this another arbitrage operation? Because it was clear that in the best of cases, a dazzling string of profitable trades would generate media attention, draw crowds of visitors and create a *succès de scandale*, allowing the artist to win on both the intellectual and commercial levels. And Goldberg was definitely not in it to lose (even though, as mentioned, any monetary profit would go to his backers). An Australian critic described *Catching A Falling Knife* as a "two-edged" proposal, because of the ethical contradiction it staged between the worlds of finance and art.¹⁹ Yet it could also have marked a bid to take two strong positions, to occupy the leading edges of both worlds. What cuts to the quick is the question of the artist's political role, the way his or her own production orients collective desire. How to confront the link between art and finance, without succumbing to the latter's attraction? How to engage a relation of rivalry or artistic antagonism within the most fascinating capture -devices of contemporary capitalism?

At this point – precisely when we could begin to speak about the operations and limits of the artistic device – the performance seems to fall silent and to withdraw into its analytic dimension. Goldberg may have wanted to answer exactly the questions I have asked, seeing them as the highest challenge. Or he may not have seriously considered them. We can't be sure, because reality offered no opportunity to put the matter to the test. He lost money on the sequence of trades – due quite ironically to the fact that instead of falling, the News Corp. stock tended to rise. And so we can only judge his intentions from his final word, which to his credit he issued *before* the outset of the performance itself: "I believe that the real value of the project will emerge in the form of interrogations from the dark recesses of its implausibilities and not from the spectacle of successfully meeting its expectations."²⁰

Cartography off the Tracks

To describe the presence of societal power in the psyche, Castoriadis speaks of an "instituted imaginary," whose stability and apparent naturalness he contrasts to the act of political creation, or the "instituting imaginary." We have now observed the operations of the complex device that institutes the imaginary of finance as the truth and indeed the very future of our societies. How could we rediscover the implausibility (the fiction) of such an institution? Only then would we have a chance to intervene artistically (or to exercise an instituent power). Yet the intervention itself has to be formulated within the real conditions of the present.

This is what Castoriadis himself does not seem to have taken into account, even as late as 1987 when he offered a definition of the political act: "*Create the institutions which, when internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society.*"²¹ The question that must be asked is how such institutions could exert their influence, or indeed, *who* could create them, if the very process of internalization no longer works?

In a text that develops her reflection on postsocial relations, Karin Knorr Cetina goes so far as to speak of an eclipse of the "social imagination." By this she means a decline of the *I-you-me* scenario theorized by psychosociologists such as Freud, Peirce or Herbert Mead, who showed how the individual gains assurance through the capacity to internalize a figure of the other as inner censor, idealized as a positive norm to be fulfilled in one's own person or rejected as a constraining limit to be transgressed and overcome. The traditional relation to an inner completeness is replaced in our time by an infinite quest for partial figures, exterior aspects of a perpetually deferred self-identity. The sociologist enlarges the notion of the unfolding object, developed in the studies of the financial markets, to cover all kinds of knowledge-based prosumer goods that present themselves in endless series (changing fashions, continuously modified software tools, updated work routines etc.). Such processual objects prolong in the everyday environment the function of the mirror where the child desires the completed image of itself, without ever being able to obtain it. "In a nutshell, the argument is that the incompleteness of being which I have attributed to contemporary objects uniquely matches the structure of wanting by which I have characterized the self."²² The Lacanian concept of a "lack-in-being" proves strangely pertinent when it comes to drafting a structural cartography of the relations of subjectivation in capitalist societies. But in such societies, wouldn't an *instituting imaginary* also have to be processual? And wouldn't it also have to be fundamentally exterior to the subject?

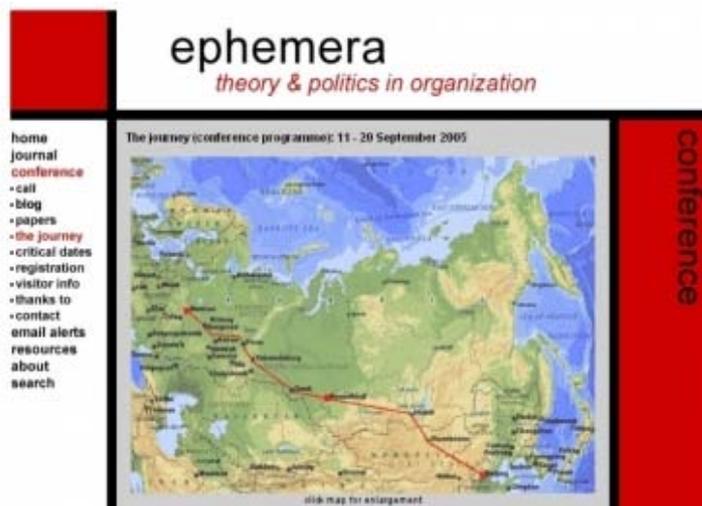
Rather than fixing the structural laws of subjectivation so as to arrive at eternally true statements (like "*les noms du père/les non-dupes errent*," to quote Lacan one last time), Felix Guattari's schizoanalytic cartographies were designed to help people sketch mental models of processes whose parameters are open-ended, and can be altered by whoever participates.²³ His four-part diagrams show how individuals or groups on a given existential territory (T) come to mobilize the rhythmic consciousness of poetic, artistic, visual or affective fragments – the virtual refrains of what he called "universes of reference or of value" (U) – in order to deterritorialize themselves, so as to leave the familiar world behind and engage in new articulations. These take the form of actual energetic flows (F), involving economic, libidinal, and technological components: flows of money, signifiers, sexual desires, machines, devices, architectures, etc. Finally, the diagrams indicate how those flows are continually transformed by the abstract phyla of symbolic codes (Φ), including juridical,

scientific and philosophical knowledge. The point was to understand the complex assemblages in which one is involved, body and soul – assemblages that Guattari called “machines.”

To intervene, under these conditions, is to help create the many-faceted, continuously unfolding mirror where a subjectivity in motion continually grasps for its own externalized image. But to intervene is also to expose oneself to the risks of the machine – that is, the risks of the contemporary unconscious, or of being-in-society.²⁴ What’s prefigured in this way is the possibility of experimental research collectives, or rather, vehicles for the investigation of the crisis. In the world of schizoanalysis, the imaginary is fabricated like spare parts for a dysfunctional machine. And exactly that activity is an attempt to reconfigure a possible institution.

A speculative project points its own curious pathway toward the future. In the summer of 2005, artists, researchers, activists and alternative media producers were invited to put their discourses and practices to the test of movement beyond familiar borders, by joining a conference and art event on the rails between Moscow and Beijing, in the corridors, berths and dining cars of the Trans-Siberian train. The event was organized by collectives associated with the web-journal of the *ephemera* group, devoted to “theory & politics in organization.” Its title was *Capturing the Moving Mind: Management and Movement in the Age of Permanently Temporary War*. I quote from the call to participation:

“In September 2005 a meeting will take place on the Trans-Siberian train from Moscow via Novosibirsk to Beijing. The purpose of this meeting is a ‘cosmological’ one. We would like to gather a group of people, researchers, philosophers, artists and others interested in the changes going on in society and engaged in changing society as their own moving image, an image of time.”²⁵



This “organizational experiment” begins from the state of existential anxiety and ontological restlessness that ensues with any suspension of the production imperatives that normally act to channel the hypermobility of flexibilized individuals. What would happen to a multiple mind inside the long, thin, compartmentalized space of a train snaking across the Siberian wasteland? What forms of intellectual discourse and artistic practice would arise between the members of a linked and disjointed collectivity? These were the questions that the travelers sought to raise, in direct counterpoint to the “new form of control and organization” that weighs on the cognitive workers of our times: “It operates without institutional legitimation or its logic and foundations seem to change from day to day: it is power without *logos*, that is, arbitrary power or pure power, power without any permanent relation to law, to norm, or to some particular task.”²⁶

Not surprisingly, they conceive this new figure of arbitrary power in relation to the fluctuation of money on contemporary financial markets: "Whereas discipline was always related to molded currencies having gold as a numerical standard, control is based on floating exchange rates, modulations, organizations of the movement of currencies. In short, it tries to follow or imitate movements and exchanges as such, paying no attention to their specific contents. The knowledge economy is the continuance of capitalism without a foundation, and arbitrary power is its logical form of organization." Finally, they observe that the "capture of the moving mind" occurs in the context of a "permanently temporary war," where the neoconservative doctrine of the preventative strike appears as an extreme attempt to guarantee a sovereign identity against any possible risk.

Faced with the inexorably *logical* character of this doctrine, the trip became a flesh-and-blood speculation, relayed and reflected by the gestures, images and concepts that could be invented along the way, among some forty participants. Papers were presented in the dining car; a micro-radio transmitted between the berths; works were created by various participatory processes; a "Mobicasting" platform was deployed to send text and images to a webserver back in Finland; encounters with Russian and Chinese academics were organized in Moscow, Novosibirsk and Beijing. The implausible character of the research gave rise to a few spontaneous performances, whereby the participants tried to embody meanings that were escaping in all directions: a silent demonstration at the Russo -Mongolian border; a collective psychodrama at an art gallery in China. The clanging of metal wheels on endless rails stood in for incomparably vast man-machine relations, the ones that constitute the social unconscious of globalized capital: the real risk of the future.

It's difficult to evaluate the results of such an experiment.²⁷ From one angle of view, seen as a punctual meeting of heterogeneities, it resembles an attempt to abstractly model and then replay the strategies of temporary convergence at a given point in time and space – strategies which allowed farflung activist networks to become what was known as the antiglobalization movement, during the tumultuous cycle of counter-summits around the turn of the century. If this is true, the trans-Siberian event would be something like pure research (research without ends) into the ethico-practical domain of political mobilization. What's clear, in any case, is the desire to work with the material elements of an imaginary in motion.

Will there be institutional consequences? Some of the Finnish participants in the project have just put together a collective under the name of Research Station General Intellect, with the goal of carrying out investigations from a base in the economics department of the university of Helsinki. The associated work of the Polemos printing collective continues along similar lines, as well as multimedia experimentation (<http://megafoni.kulma.net>) and the beginnings of precarious political organization. In this case, the ruses of arbitrage seem impossible: no one knows what will emerge. Invisible maps of territories still undreamed.

Notes

1 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (MIT Press, 1987/1975 for the French edition), p. 128. The remark on the stock market itself comes just before, as part of the same questioning of social functionality, pp. 123-24: "In particular, there are a wide number of logical consequences following from the rules posited that were not made explicit at the outset and yet play a real role in social life. They thus contribute to 'shaping' social life in a way that was not required by the functional nature of social relations, one that does not directly contradict it but that

can draw society into one of several different directions left undetermined by functionality, or even create effects that have a rebound effect on the latter (the stock market represents, in relation to industrial capitalism, essentially this sort of case)."

2 See the catalogue of the exhibition, published online ([pdf](#)). The "Tickerman" project, discussed below, is also presented on the website.

3 For a wide range of such procedures, see <http://infosthetics.com>.

4 D. Buenza et D. Stark, « Tools of the Trade : The Socio-Technology of Arbitrage in a Wall Street Trading Room », in *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 13/2, 2004, pp. 369–400 ([pdf](#)).

5 Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France, 1978-79* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004). For a resume of these courses in English, see Thomas Lemke, "The Birth of Bio-Politics," *Economy and Society* 30/2 (May 2001), available on the author's website ([pdf](#)).

6 For the general idea, see Phillipe Zarifian, "Pourquoi ce nouveau régime de guerre ?" *Multitudes* 11, Winter 2003; for an economist's explanation, see Shimshon Bichler and Jonathon Nitzan, "Dominant Capital and the New Wars," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 10/2 (2004) ([pdf](#)).

7 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 24.

8 The original website, www.catchingafallingknife.com, has been taken down; but various documents are available at the artist's site, www.michael-goldberg.com.

9 Michael Goldberg, "Catching a Falling Knife: a Study in Greed, Fear and Irrational Exuberance," lecture at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Sept. 20, 2003 ([doc](#)).

10 Entitled *NCM open/high/low/close*, the performance staged the fluctuating values of Newcrest Mining corporation stocks, but without any real-time trading. It was part of the show *Auriferous: the Gold Project* at the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, New South Wales, April 22 – June 10, 2001; documentation in the "Projects" section at www.michael-goldberg.com.

11 Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger, "Traders' Engagement with Markets: A Postsocial Relationship," in *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 19/5-6 (2002).

12 Interestingly, the first networked price-display screen, the Reuters Monitor, was introduced in 1973 – exactly when the Bretton-Woods fixed-rate currency system was scrapped and floating exchange rates were introduced, leading to the tremendous volumes of trading that now prevail (on the order of \$1.5 trillion *per day*). Today "the Reuters dealing community consists of some 19,000 users located in more than 6,000 organizations in 110 countries worldwide having over one million conversations a week." Source: Reuters [website](#).

13 Cf. "Urban Screens: Discovering the potential of outdoor screens for urban society," special report in the online journal *First Monday* (February 2006); http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_2.

14 For the concept of "embeddedness," see Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, "Global Microstructures: The Virtual Societies of the Financial Markets," in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 7/4 (2002).

15 Geert Lovink, interview with Michael Goldberg, *Catching a Falling Knife: The Art of Day Trading*, posted on the text-filtering list Nettime on Oct. 16, 2002.

16 Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, "Traders Engagements with Markets," op. cit.

17 "Traders not only confront lacks, they turn 'lacking' into a sophisticated game or practice, a domain of shifting, increasing, decreasing, predicting, hiding, delaying, and trying to live with lack." Op. cit.

18 For the modulation of affect through the use of screen technologies, see Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a

spatial politics of affect," *Geografiska Annaler*, vol. 86 (B), #1 (2004).

19 See David McNeill, "Trading Down: Michael Goldberg and the Art of Speculation," in *Broadsheet*, vol. 32, #1 (2003).

20 Lovink, interview with Goldberg, "Catching a Falling Knife: The Art of Day Trading," op. cit.

21 C. Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 173. I have slightly modified the translation for both sound and sense, compare the original in C. Castoriadis, *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe.3*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, p. 170: "Créer les institutions qui, intériorisées par les individus, facilitent le plus possible leur accession à leur autonomie individuelle et leur possibilité de participation effective à tout pouvoir explicite existant dans la société."

22 K. Knorr Cetina, « Postsocial Relations », in G. Ritzer et B. Smart (eds), *Handbook of Social Theory*, Londres, Sage, 2001, p. 530 et sq.

23 F. Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, Paris, Galilée, 1989.

24 The text where Guattari defines his notion of the unconscious as the machine, in distinction from Lacan's linguistic structuralism, is "Machine et Structure" (1969), in F. Guattari, *Psychanalyse et transversalité* (Paris: Maspéro, 1972).

25 "Call for abstracts and proposals," available at www.ephemeraweb.org/conference/call.htm.

26 "Capturing the Moving Mind: An Introduction," available at www.ephemeraweb.org/conference/Intro.pdf (the text is anonymous, but largely the same as "The Structure of Change: An Introduction," by Akseli Virtanen and Jussi Vähämäki, in *ephemera* vol. 5, #X, op. cit.).

27 I tried to nonetheless, in a long text which served as the basis for this one, "The Artistic Device," published in *ephemera* 6/4 ([pdf](#)).

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[...] -The Speculative Performance: Art's Financial Futures [...]

Other blogs about Cornelius Castoriadis (in English) «

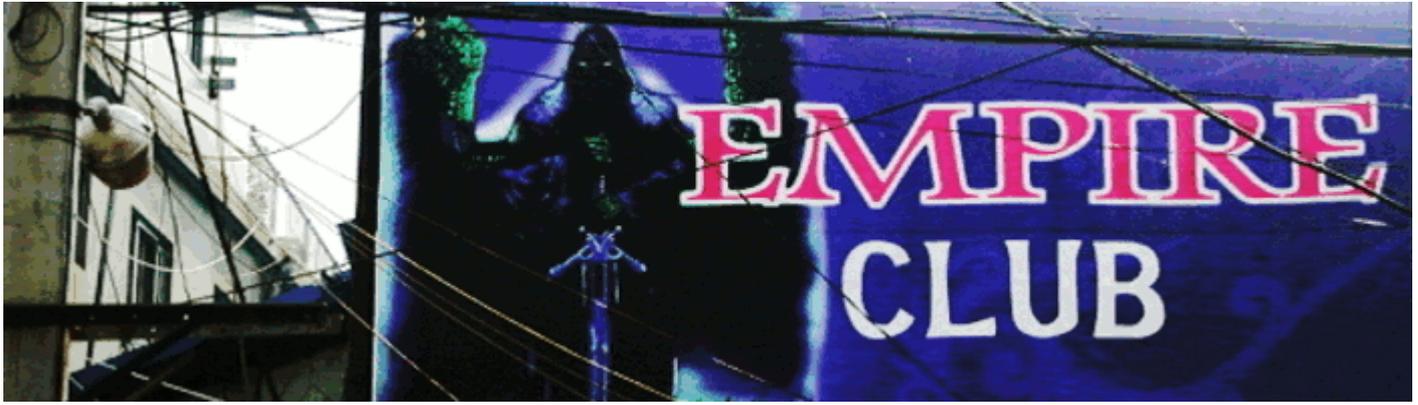
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July 15, 2008

Exit Strategies from Liberal Empire



Sangdon KIM, *Discoplan*

Along the river bank in the city of Dongducheon, some twenty miles north of Seoul in the Republic of Korea, the artist Kim Sangdon organized a hilarious public performance. Participants were invited to create slingshots, kites, catapults, flying machines – in short, to hurl every imaginable homemade projectile over the rusty razor wire separating them from the recently vacated U.S. Army base of Camp Nimble. The missiles carried a payload of clover seeds, which in the best of cases could scatter on impact, sprout, flourish, cover the ground and begin remediating the poisoned soil left behind by decades of military occupation. The players got ready, took aim, failed miserably for the most part, and burst out laughing with each fresh attempt. The inhabitants enjoyed some pointed comments about the hidden costs of the U.S. force relocation plan, and they speculated about possible consequences for their city. The video of the event shows moments of collective reflection and heartfelt comic relief – the feeling that you’ve finally got free of something.¹

I am an American, and like most, I’m ignorant of what’s done in the name of democracy by the U.S. military. Whether it’s the raw facts of land occupation by sprawling bases, the tangled histories of collaboration with host nations, or the latest plans for the use of these lethal installations, I have everything to learn. When I arrived I didn’t know the name of Yun Guem-i, and I couldn’t imagine that the artistic performance at Camp Nimble was also intended to

Sunset is the time of beauty, the prelude to love, the promise of a new day. It's time for the sun to set on the American Empire.

Project launched by Brian Holmes on a residency at Insa Art Space, Seoul, Korea. Contributions welcome.

Critics

[Outposts of Empire](#)

[Foreign Bases Map \(requires Google Earth\)](#)

[American Empire Project](#)

[TomDispatch](#)

[Chalmers Johnson](#)

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Activists

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[Save the Pyeongtaek Farmers](#)

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[Critical Resistance](#)

[No DaI Molin](#)

[After Downing Street](#)

Artists

[16 Beaver Group](#)

[Dongducheon Project](#)

[Critical Spatial Practice](#)

commemorate the day when the 26-year-old club girl was brutally raped and murdered in Dongducheon by Pvt. Kenneth Markle, on October 28, 1992. But I did know that prostitution around American bases in Asia has been a continuous scandal since WWII, and when I was asked to give a lecture on the Dongducheon project, images of neon-drenched R&R districts and men in enormous armored vehicles swirled confusedly to mind. How to approach such an issue? The inspiration that struck me was a 1975 radio hit by Paul Simon, where the singer explains – or rather, has explained to him – that there must be 50 ways to leave your lover. Though it's all about an ending, you realize something new is also in the works:

*You just slip out the back, Jack
Make a new plan, Stan
You don't need to be coy, Roy
Just get yourself free.
Hop on the bus, Gus
You don't need to discuss much
Just drop off the key, Lee
And get yourself free.*

After eight long years of the Bush administration's useless wars, I want OUT of the obscene and seemingly endless love affairs between the U.S. and its army, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea or in our own country. But despite what the song says, there is so much to discuss, so many questions, which the works in this exhibition also raise. What's *between us*, as the 16 Beaver Group asked a group of Korean artists and activists during a trip to the new American megabase at Pyeongtaek? What would it take to *exit* from a sixty-year relationship that has defined the United States no less than the Republic of Korea? Above all, what does it mean to be *free* in an age of liberal empire?

Little Chicago and the Silver Screen

While walking around Seoul looking at the city's splendid museums, my guide for a day, Lee Seul Bi, suggested that we try something interesting for lunch. *Pude chige*, it was called: "troop soup." I found myself looking into a boiling metal pot full of tofu, udong noodles, sliced-up frankfurter sausages and macaroni. Perhaps it is when you eat something like that, and recognize the familiar tastes among the strange ones, that you start to realize what we've really gotten ourselves into, through the mixing of cultures and nations.

During Kim Sangdon's research into the oral history of Dongducheon, he learned that the troops had nicknames for the local districts, like "Queens," "Manhattan" and "L.A." This kind of G.I. banter is familiar, because it's the staple of novels, stories and Hollywood movies. The older residents Kim interviewed recalled the fantastic cynicism of the early days: camptown life was all about money, whether it was the soldiers selling black-market goods from the PX, the prostitutes and club owners selling sex and whiskey, or the police selling protection. One of the residents recalls the popularity of the cinemas, along with real events that seem to match the detective flicks and gangster fictions:

*Around the theater, the soldiers used to sell the "Made in USA's."
But at that time, people would just take the stuff and run. Lots of murders! The soldiers did a lot of killing, too. It was horrible! ...
Prostitutes getting killed, soldiers running away... Mother fuckers!
Same when the 7th division was here too. Lots of fires and lots of incidents. I mean, they called here "Little Chicago," with so many incidents!*³

Of course, everyone must eat and money doesn't grow on trees, but it pours out where people congregate in pursuit of their pleasures. Plus everybody loves the movies. Another thing you learn from Kim's interviews are rumors about the conversion plans for Dongducheon's immense American bases – Camp Casey, Camp Hovey, Camp Mobile – which, it's said, some of the town leaders wanted to turn into giant entertainment complexes with casinos, like "a Korean version of Las Vegas." Gambling and the latest forms of electronic spectacle would replace the outdated nightclubs. In reality, a massive sporting complex has already been built, destroying part of the Sangpae-dong public cemetery as a step toward a "Free Trade City" of the future.

All this appears somehow natural, when you know that after the Second World

War, those involved with the geopolitics of the region – American military brass, Washington officials and local elites – made the wager that an influx of billions of defense dollars could save Asia from communism, through epic battles and dramatic armed standoffs, but also through huge procurement contracts with host-country suppliers, untold thousands of clinging cash registers at local businesses, and all kinds of shady under-the-table deals.⁴ This is what's hinted at in the mottoes that Kim Sangdon inscribes on photographs of banal urban furniture inside Camp Nimble: "Don't tell the truth though it's cold and you're starving," reads one. "Don't tell the secrets though it's hot and you're starving," replies the other. Everyone is supposed to keep quiet and cover everyone else's deal.

By documenting oral histories and giving them form and context in exhibitions, artists like Kim are helping make public the close-lipped and contradictory texture of existence that has been woven around the American military deployments in East Asia since the close of the Second World War. The casual conversation of Dongducheon reads like a chapter of transnational history, lived out at intimate scale in people's daily lives, and reflected in the violent glamor of the silver screen.



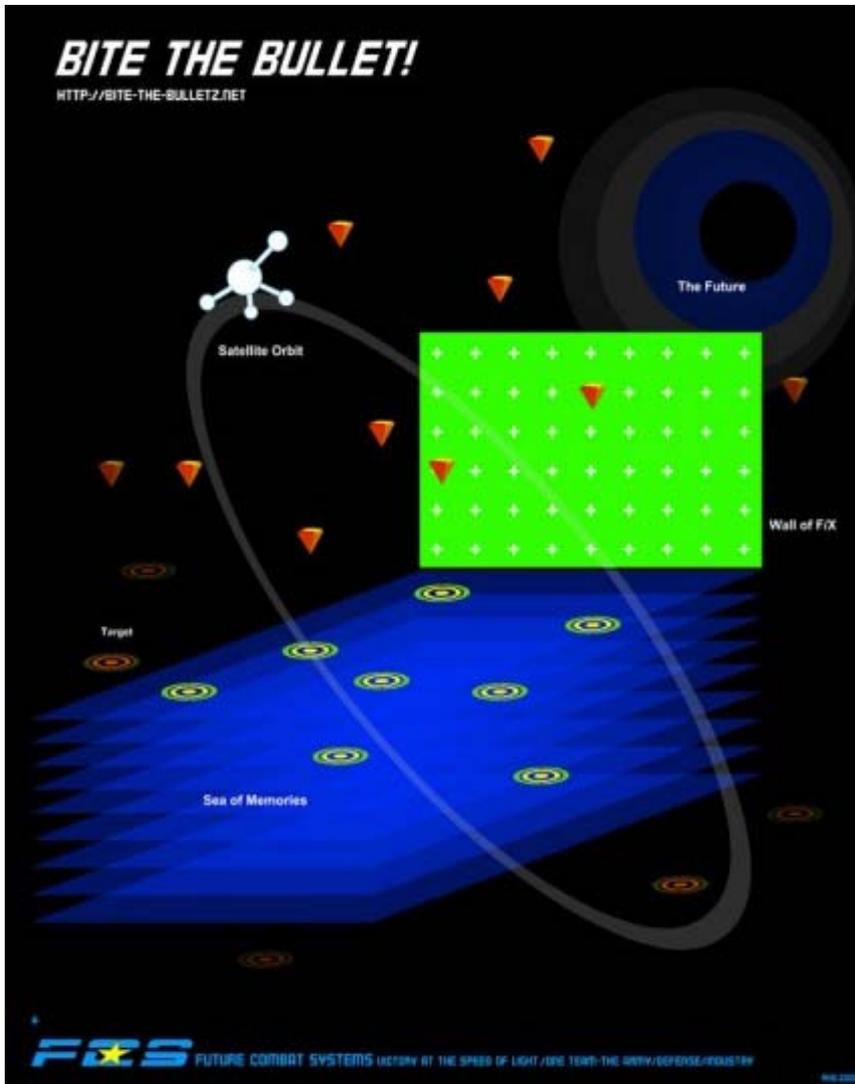
visit the [website](#) of the work

The lived experience of the popular media is exactly what's at stake in Roh Jae Oon's web-based piece, *Bite the Bullet!*, which explores one of the defining genres of cinema: the war flick. The work is an original interpretation of the spectacle society. Dramatic images of war are administered as an ersatz anesthetic, distracting the patient from an operation being performed on his or her own body. The 12-part work proceeds by short excerpts, sometimes from two or more films. What's left out can be as important as what's put in. By highlighting just a few sequences, Roh is asking us to reflect critically on a corpus of films that have defined the imaginary of the Republic of Korea, mostly through North American eyes.

The introductory scenes are from *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, a 1954 Hollywood production about a stern admiral, a concerned wing commander, and a reluctant naval reservist flying bombing missions against North Korea. It all begins with love: a woman's goodbye kiss to her husband departing on an aircraft carrier. Cut to a sky full of bursting anti-aircraft shells, filmed from the pilot's perspective; then a shot of bombs destroying a bridge. The movie won an Oscar for its special effects, which were already carried out in collaboration with the US Navy; and the military-entertainment complex is a major focus of Roh's investigation. But another significant aspect is the famous closing line of the film, which is not included in the excerpt. Reflecting on the discipline that led his pilots to a successful mission and their own deaths, the admiral asks "Where do we get such men?" What *is* the operation that produces them?

American combat films are about the formation of a national character in battle, a theme played out again and again in Roh's selections. But what's at issue in the artwork is also the influence of that process on the population of a client-state engaged in a bitter civil war, elevated to world-historical proportions by Soviet, Chinese and American rivalries. Among the South Korean films that cast their light on the complexities of this relationship is Shin Sang OK's 1958 classic, *Jiokwha*, aka *A Flower in Hell*, represented with an excerpt from a steamy dancing scene. What casual Western viewers won't realize, however, is that in the film, these highly erotic sequences are interspersed with others, showing a small-time Korean gang stealing government-issue supplies from the distracted American viewers...

Much of the interest and cinephilic pleasure of *Bite the Bullet!* lies in the ironic combinations that each viewer is free to make, between the scenes that are actually shown and those whose memory is left floating. But this free-floating memory is exactly that condition that Roh sought to encompass in a larger frame. The poster for the piece shows an ellipsoid satellite orbit, with a screenlike "wall of F/X" (or special effects) raised bright in the sky, and a deep blue "Sea of Memories" floating down below, on which bull's-eyes have been meticulously placed, each at its specific level. The implication seems to be that in the networked system of contemporary media distribution, each spectacular bullet is self-targeted at the memories of individuals, administering its singular anesthetic.

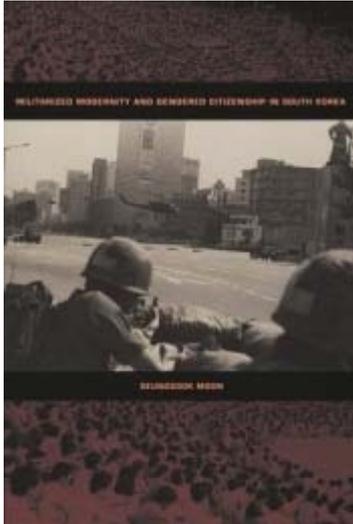


In the last group of excerpts, propaganda images of the US Army's "Future Combat Systems" confirm the implicit reference to the military-entertainment complex. On a text panel, network-centric warfare guru Art Cebrowski proclaims: "Either you create your future or you become the victim of the future someone creates for you." That's a statement by the former director of Rumsfeld's Office of Force Transformation, which initiated the entire relocation concept that is shifting South Korea's military geography. Quoted by a Korean artist, it becomes an intensely ironic expression of the high ambition and deep anxiety that the Dongducheon project is trying to communicate to its viewers.

From Militarized Modernity to Liberal Empire

The exhibition looks back at the past without nostalgia or resentment, in order to grasp the complexities of the present and in that way, share at least some hope of shaping the future. Even after considering barely half the pieces, one can sense that each detail and nuance has been discussed intensively during the research process, working to create that most rare of events, a group exhibition (and not just a selection of works to fit a curatorial concept). One can wonder, then, about the absence from the show of a theme that would seem to be central to its whole proposal. I am thinking about the specifically

Korean form of productive discipline that Moon Seungsook calls “militarized modernity” – and of the ways that it relates to, and differs from, more characteristically American patterns of character-formation.



Moon describes how a particularly harsh form of discipline, based in large part on practices employed by the Japanese Imperial Army, was generalized to the entire male population of South Korea by means of universal conscription. It was then extended to industrial production through the Military Service Special Cases Law of 1973, which allowed men trained either at vocational schools or science and engineering institutes to forgo military service for paid employment at defense factories or in heavy and chemical industries. The distinctly gendered male subjectivity that was developed in the military-industrial ranks through the exaltation of masculinity and the parallel denigration of female sex-objects was then reinforced in society by positive images of the man as historical hero and family provider, in

contrast to the domestic and subordinated role of women.⁵ Reinforced by the massive presence of US troops and the maintenance of an extremely tense Cold War stand-off with the North, this pattern endured in its strongest expression all the way to 1987, when the democracy movement finally led to liberalization and the end of the dictatorship.

It would have been important to explore how militarized modernity took form – and continues to reverberate – in the triple relation between the American occupiers, their ROK allies and procurers (in every sense of the word) and the population of the city. To be sure, such subjects were raised by the Minjung painters of the 1980s, with their satirical pop-art vocabularies.⁶ But they are far more difficult to tackle in the living reality of video. The only place in the show where they begin to surface is in the evasive replies of local inhabitants interviewed for Kim Sangdon's video piece, *Foreign Apartment*, which inquires into the past functions and current ownership of a ruined white building near Camp Casey, used for prostitution in the 1960s and 70s. Just a few shreds of conversation allow us to imagine the virile discipline of the young Korean man waxing the helicopter of the 7th Division commander who occasionally dropped by to oversee the foreign apartment.



What remains largely invisible in the show, therefore, is the lived experience of militarized modernity and its consequences on Korean subjectivities today. Rho Jae Oon has perfectly captured the dynamics of this kind of invisibility, but on the American side only. In *Bite the Bullet!* he presents an audio excerpt from the 1992 courtroom drama *A Few Good Men*, which he superimposes over touching scenes of a blind woman selling flowers, taken from Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*. On the soundtrack, a hard-bitten Marine colonel from Guantánamo, played by Jack Nicholson, defends his decision to apply deadly punitive force to one of his soldiers, reiterating the classic arguments that every American has heard in a hundred different forms: “Son, we live in a world that has walls... and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the freedom I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it!” But his outburst of passion is exactly what allows the young lawyer, played by Tom Cruise, to trick the colonel into admitting his own guilt before the judge.

Here we have the fundamental contradiction that structures liberal empire. On the one hand, a continuous insistence on the necessity of force, to be applied under "states of exception" in distant outposts such as Guantánamo; and on the other, an unshakable confidence in the rule of law, which can always be reestablished back home by the infallible procedures of American democracy. Roh's ironic superimposition of the blind flower seller onto the courtroom dialogue offers two possible readings of this situation. From the colonel's point of view, the blindness is obviously that of a sheltered and effeminate civilian world that cannot face the very force of arms it lives by. But from the post-9/11 viewpoint that is ours today, the blindness lies in civil society's naive belief that traditional legal instruments are still enough to restrain the immense, unbridled powers of the Pentagon. One wonders, for example, how many people are ready to believe that the solicitation of prostitution by American soldiers has really been stopped by the law of 2005 that makes it grounds for dishonorable discharge. The ongoing dispute in the US between the two opposing positions – are we an empire? or are we a law-governed power enforcing a liberal international order? – becomes yet another way of refusing to face the imperious reality of this effective contradiction.⁷

What are the actual consequences of militarized modernity and liberal empire on our societies today? This is the question that critical artists and intellectuals should never avoid, either in Korea or in America. Take, for example, an intellectual for whom I have tremendous respect: Chalmers Johnson, an American academic, experienced Asia hand and former Cold Warrior, who coined the concept of the "developmental state" in 1982.⁸ Johnson became well known in both America and East Asia for his analysis of state-led industrial development in Japan – a model of successful central planning which many projected onto Korea under the Park and Chun dictatorships. Johnson had already begun to learn about the secret history of U.S. foreign policy in the library of former CIA director Allen Dulles, while working as a consultant for the National Intelligence Estimate in the late 1960s. However it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the Cold War ended and American troops did not demobilize but instead remained on their vast array of outposts throughout the world, that he began to revise his views. In 1996, he visited the Japanese island of Okinawa at the request of its governor, Ota Masahide, in order to investigate the rape of a twelve-year old Okinawan girl by two Marines and a Navy seaman. There he began work on another major concept: the "empire of bases."⁹

More than any other single author, Johnson has revealed the secretive, abusive and fundamentally undemocratic character of U.S. military operations overseas. His latest and best book, entitled *Nemesis*, warns of the possible end of American democracy, if the CIA's covert operations, the Pentagon's secret budgets, and above all, the President's "executive privilege" are not brought back under civilian control.¹⁰ But despite all this, Chalmers Johnson has not, to my knowledge, ever revised his positive evaluation of the "developmental state" – a social order that corresponds precisely to the industrial component of militarized modernity. Korean development boomed during the Vietnam war, when the country manufactured wartime matériel for the US and sent some 350,000 soldiers to fight in the jungle, by far the largest contingent of allied troops to fight with the Americans. In the absence of a critical reflection on this model of industrial development it is impossible to understand the particular forms of Korean democracy today, as it shifts from state-centered militarized modernity toward full integration into the self-contradictory, crisis-ridden regime of liberal empire that is now being extended all over the world.

Johnson has led the way towards a geopolitical understanding of American militarism, by describing the network of over 750 U.S. bases on foreign soil, inhabited by approximately half a million soldiers, support staff, private contractors and dependents, and underwritten by a partially secret budget of approximately a trillion dollars a year. Mark Gillem, an architect working critically inside the U.S. Air Force, takes a further step. His recent study of military urbanism is entitled *America Town*, in reference to the gated bar and prostitution district constructed outside Kunsan airbase with the active complicity of South Korean officials and businessmen. But America Town is everywhere. What Gillem describes, on the basis of first-hand research, is the "cultural landscape" of contemporary American consumerism as expressed on a plethora of overseas outposts. This is the overdeveloped landscape that the liberalism of open borders and free financial flows has done everything to create, since the heyday of Reagan and Thatcher in the early 1980s. Gillem's

book is invaluable for helping us to understand how that landscape has been structured by the American version of the developmental planning – namely, military expenditure. Take, for example, the description of Kadena airbase in Okinawa, as seen from a viewpoint in a Blackhawk helicopter:



The base, with its sprawling subdivisions, strip malls and streets wide enough to land fighter jets, abutted the compact urban fabric of Okinawa -chi, Kadena -cho and Chatan -cho. The golf course stood ready to defend the base at its western edge. The split-level ranch homes had yards big enough to land several Blackhawks. The main shopping center's parking lot was bigger than the dense town center of Okinawa -chi. What was the U.S. doing building like this in a place so short of land that airports are constructed on artificial islands? How did this happen and what does this tell us about the culture of America's military and the complicity of the "host" nation?¹¹

Here, no doubt, are the most concrete subjective consequences of contemporary U.S. imperialism, now being cast to the four corners of the earth by the tremendous financial dynamics of neoliberal economics. But to speak of the financial sphere is one thing; and to see how it touches the ground is another. What Gillem has assembled is the portrait of a bloated society living on borrowed money and time, under the shadow of current and impending battles for the ultimate developmental resource: the oil needed to run all those grotesquely oversized cars, trucks, ships and planes. The slick, hedonistic world of contemporary hyper-consumerism has brought on the imminent risk of resource wars.¹² The title of Johnson's book, *Nemesis*, expresses this threatening situation very well, with its reference to the Greek deity of vengeance and retribution for *hubris*, or overweening pride. But how could Johnson have failed to notice that Nemesis is also the goddess who cursed the proud young man Narcissus, causing him to fall fatally in love with his own reflection?

Pretty Things that Glitter in the Dark

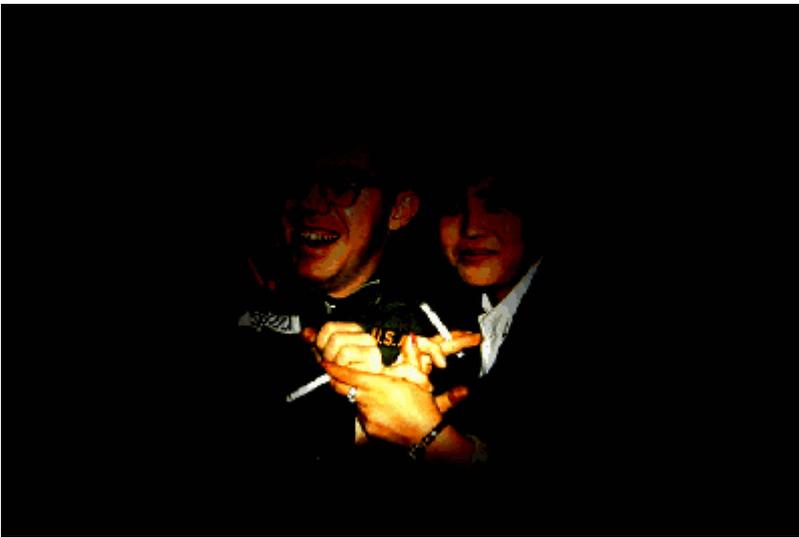
Here's another question, closer to everyday experience. Is it possible to see through the cheap façades on which the history and the future of our desires are reflected? This is what siren eun young jung has attempted in a video installation entitled *The Narrow Sorrow*. She begins with a freeze-frame on one of the tiny doorways barring the walk space between two clubs. The passageway leads back to the lodgings of the Filipino girls who are now brought over by the hundreds to work the strip joints and brothels of Dongducheon. Moving images then begin to appear on the various rectangular spaces: first the gate itself, then the façade of the Bridge Club, the sign of the J.C. Beer Bar Lounge, etc. We see street scenes, construction sites, landscapes and rather ghostly images from the Sangpae-dong cemetery, accompanied by an incomprehensible hubbub of voices and muted music. Towards the end of the video, a woman's body is wrapped in rough cloth for burial. The soundtrack is actually street noise mingled with the organ music from a service in the local Filipino church. The seduction of twinkling lights forms the subject of an elegiac poem that hangs on the wall nearby the installation.



siren eun young jung, *The Narrow Sorrow*

Artistically and politically, *The Narrow Sorrow* tries to walk through the eye of a needle, groping for a representation of the lives and struggles of women who are doubly excluded from Korean society, because they are sex workers and because they are Filipino immigrants. Here, the artistic critique comes to focus on the Korean side of the prostitution business, asking questions about the exploitation of the young Filipino girls by local pimps, and about the racism they must face in Korea. At the same time, one learns from a scholarly article that the departure of peasant girls from the countryside to the city has left a wife-gap, which is presently being filled by mail-order brides. "By 2004 approximately 27.4 per cent of rural South Korean men were married to non-Korean women."¹³ Vietnamese women are particularly prized, because of their Confucian heritage. Behind one out of every four rural façades there are messengers from distant worlds.

The work entitled *Driveling Mouth*, by Koh Seung Wook, explores the destinies of so-called "Western princesses," who left Korea in the tow of their G.I. husbands and found themselves within four American walls haunted by memories. Their pictures, in glittering party dress, can now be found on Internet homepages. The video installation invites you inside the darkness of a camouflaged tent, where no time is wasted on the niceties. "No matter how hard I work, I couldn't see a future ahead," reads a text panel. "I had to become a hooker, and a hooker's grandma if I could." The narrative that unfolds is one of marriage and departure, disappointment and bitterness; and then it is told again, with the same pictures symmetrically reversed, from the viewpoint of an Amerasian boy who was abandoned by his father before birth. At one point we are told that the nameless dead in Sangpae-dong cemetery are called "whores" by some, "Yankee princesses" by others, or "Sisters of the Korean people" by those who resent the violence of the American soldiers. "But what should I call them?" the text asks. "No, why should I even want to call them?" The drivel that pours from two contemporary figures' mouths seems to embody the obscenity of all those useless words. But it is also the moist inner life of a woman and a man, leaving a wet stain on clean, pressed clothes.



What emerges from the multiple layers of representation in the Dongducheon project is both subtle sociological investigation and an outpouring of intimate expression, bound inseparably together by the challenge of the future. There may well be a clue here for those who are wondering how to definitively move beyond the attitudes of the 1980s generation, when the democracy movement violently confronted the forces of order on the streets, while the Minjung artists excoriated militarist discipline on their canvases. That step beyond is clearly being taken by contemporary Korean activism, which, curiously enough, has also been seduced by pretty things that glitter in the dark. I think it's worth noting that the first candlelight demonstrations arose in late 2002, with the massive protests against American bases after the deaths of Shin Hyo-soon and Shim Mi-sun under the treads of a US Army tank; and that those nationwide protests came about spontaneously, at the instigation of an inexperienced youth who spread the idea over the Internet. Here, as in the art exhibition, one might point to the influence of a cooperative and egalitarian feminism, following the arguments of Moon Seungsook who sees a specifically gendered difference in the forms of political engagement developed by women after the end of the dictatorship. But on the basis of my own experiences in Europe and North America, I wonder if the generational question is not equally important. This is now a deeply flexibilized economy, where mainstream unions can help vote in a conservative president like Lee Myung-bak in reaction against the perceived threat of casualized and immigrant workers who are themselves required by the neoliberal policies of that same president. Under such conditions, the impossible and unrepresentable struggles of Filipino club girls could be more relevant to the political landscape than any exclusively working-class tradition would allow us to imagine.

In response to my questions about the aims of the recent protests against the importation of American beef – and against the “bulldozer” approach of the new president – the activist and professor of peace studies, Lee Daehoon, replied that in his view “the people are searching for their soul.” The reason why is clear: in the contemporary period, both political adversaries and political goals are hard to name. Driven by the volatile winds of finance, liberal empire is inherently crisis-ridden; and the chaotic swings of its transnational economy can provoke a conservative return to order at any time, as we’ve seen in the most ugly way in the United States. Under these conditions, the claims of democracy and the rule of law can easily collapse into a state of exception. But it is the ordinary, lawful, democratic functioning of liberal empire that provokes the crises, above all when the endless productivism and consumerism of industrial modernity meets its limits and gives rise to resource wars. How a more sustainable form of society can be found is the ultimate question. The search to articulate political subjectivities with a foundation in personal experience and a consciousness that goes far beyond it is what interests me most today. This articulation isn’t easy, and among other things, it involves changing the definition of what art is and what it can be. That’s almost impossible to do when you have repressive regimes on your back. Yet the shaky footing and extraordinarily poor press of militarism in South Korea, and elsewhere in Latin America and Europe, gives some hope that the worst may be avoided, and that more long-term problems may come to the fore again.¹⁴

I said at the beginning, quite naively, that I was looking for an exit from liberal

empire, and I still am. But beyond the moment of exodus comes a season of new beginnings. Maybe what's needed to redefine freedom in our time are 50 ways to find your lover.



Demonstrations against US bases, Seoul, 2003

NOTES

1 Kim Sangdon's video document, *Discoplan*, was presented along with all the other works I will mention here at the exhibition *Dongducheon, A Walk to Remember, A Walk to Envision*, curated by Kim Heejin at the Insa Art Space in Seoul, July 16-August 24, 2008. It was previously presented at the New Museum, New York, May 8-July 6, 2008.

2 For documentation, see <http://www.16beavergroup.org/korea>.

3 Quote from an interview included in the installation by Kim Sangdon, *Little Chicago*.

4 For insight into the way some of these anti-communist wagers were funded, see Sterling and Peggy Seagrave, *Gold Warriors: America's Secret Recovery of Yamashita's Gold* (London: Verso, 2003). Also see the review by Chalmers Johnson in the *London Review of Books*, Nov. 20, 2003, at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n22/john04_.html.

5 See Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: 2005, Duke University Press).

6 For examples, see *The Battle of Visions*, exhibition catalogue, October 11-December 3, 2005, Kunsthalle Darmstadt.

7 For an argument in favor of liberal empire, see William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 40-44 and *passim*. For a critical approach see Jedediah Purdy, "Liberal Empire: Assessing the Arguments," in *Ethics & International Affairs* 17/2 (Fall 2003), available at http://www.cceia.org/resources/journal/17_2/special_section/1026.html. For a scholarly review of the concept, see Linda S. Bishai, "Liberal Empire," in *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7 (2004), pp. 48-72. For the appearance in Russia of a concept of liberal empire, conceived by Anatoly Chubais in response to US policy, see Konstantin Syroezhkin, "Russia: On the Path to Empire?" in Boris Rumer, ed. *Central Asia at the End of the Transition* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), esp. pp. 113-17.

8 Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial*

Policy, 1925-1975 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1982).

9 This the title of a chapter in Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

10 Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

11 Mark L. Gillem, *America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. xiii-xiv.

12 See Michael T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

13 Charles Armstrong, "Contesting the Peninsula," in *New Left Review* 51 (May-June 2008), p. 154.

14 Among recent events, the closure of the American airbase in Manta, Ecuador, and the tremendous resistance against the new facilities in Vicenza, Italy, are worth one's attention. See <http://www.no-bases.org> and <http://www.nodalmolin.it>. For the latest on the planned American megabase in Pyeongtaek, see <http://saveptfarmers.org>.

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Idéias – José Arbex Jr.
http://www.clubemundo.com.br/revistapangea/show_news.asp?n=151&ed=7



19/8/2002 FHC entrega Base de Alcântara a Tio Sam

José Arbex Jr.

Imagine a seguinte situação: um sujeito quer alugar um quarto da sua casa, onde você mora e vive. Propõe, como pagamento pelo aluguel, uma ninharia, alguns trocados. Exige, em troca, que você se mantenha bem longe do quarto; que renuncie até mesmo ao direito de sequer perguntar para quem servem algumas misteriosas caixas lacradas que o sujeito já diz, de antemão, que pretende levar para o quarto; proíbe, além disso, que você use o dinheiro do aluguel como bem entenda, ou que, finalmente, alugue outros quartos para outros inquilinos sem autorização prévia do tal fulano. Você toparia?

Parece piada, mas estes são os termos do Acordo de Salvaguardas Tecnológicas que o governo Fernando Henrique Cardoso assinou com Washington, em maio de 2000, assegurando aos Estados Unidos o direito de usar a base espacial de Alcântara, no Maranhão, estrategicamente situada na entrada da Amazônia. A posição geográfica da base – situada a dois graus da linha do Equador – é perfeita para o lançamento de foguetes. O preço do "aluguel": 34 milhões de dólares anuais, bem menos do que um mísero cafezinho para os padrões de gastos e investimentos da indústria aeroespacial dos Estados Unidos.

Tudo por um "cafezinho"

Em troca de um cafezinho, FHC garante a Tio Sam o controle total sobre a base de lançamentos, permite aos Estados Unidos desenvolver programas sigilosos, além de realizar operações sem o conhecimento das autoridades brasileiras. Nos termos do acordo, só as pessoas ligadas ao programa aeroespacial estadunidense

poderão circular em Alcântara.

Fica expressamente proibido o acesso e a circulação de brasileiros na base, mesmo que sejam parlamentares ou membros do Executivo (isto é, sequer o presidente da república poderá circular pela área sem autorização de Washington!). Além disso, nenhum material que chegar ou sair da base, de qualquer origem ou destinação, poderá ser sequer tocado por brasileiros.

O acordo também garante a Tio Sam o direito de não comunicar às autoridades brasileiras a natureza ou a data exata em que serão realizadas operações ligadas ao programa aeroespacial norte-americano. E mais: Tio Sam exige que o dinheiro do aluguel não seja investido no programa aeroespacial brasileiro, e que o Brasil não estabeleça parcerias no setor aeroespacial com nenhum outro país sem a sua autorização prévia!

Primeira base militar no Brasil

“Na prática, o governo está permitindo que os Estados Unidos montem sua primeira base militar no país. Desconfiamos – e temos razões de sobra para isto –, que a base será utilizada para fins militares, com o objetivo de controlar estrategicamente a floresta amazônica. Com suas bases na Bolívia, Colômbia e Equador, eles já monitoram toda a parte oeste e sudoeste da Amazônia. Se controlarem Alcântara, terão monitoramento total”, afirma João Pedro Stedile, dirigente nacional do MST.

As implicações são óbvias. Tio Sam já promove operações militares de grande porte na Amazônia, usando como pretexto a “guerra ao narcoterrorismo” (isto é, os grupos guerrilheiros colombianos que não aceitam ocupar o papel de criados servis de Washington). Em Manta, no Equador, pleno coração da floresta, os Estados Unidos estão construindo o maior aeroporto da América do Sul. Para desalojar nações indígenas daquela região, despejam agrotóxicos altamente nocivos à saúde (um fungo transgênico produzido pela Monsanto, chamado “gás verde”). Está em curso a ocupação da maior reserva mundial de água, biodiversidade e recursos naturais do planeta. Só isso.

Capitulação tecnológica

“O acordo é uma capitulação de soberania e de interesses. Impede, em suas cláusulas, o desenvolvimento tecnológico do país. Interdita, a rigor, nossa relação científica, imediata ou futura, que tanto nos convém, com os países tecnologicamente mais avançados do setor, como a Rússia, a China, a França, a Ucrânia e a Índia”, diz Waldir Pires.

“O Brasil investiu mais de 500 milhões de dólares no setor aeroespacial nos últimos vinte anos. Com o desenvolvimento do projeto VLS (Veículo Lançador de Satélites), entrou para o rol das nações que têm algo a dizer em termos de tecnologia para o setor. Além das implicações políticas e militares, seria muito interessante para os Estados Unidos afastar um país com o potencial do Brasil deste mercado”, afirma o deputado.

Breve histórico

1980 – O governo brasileiro cria o Centro de Lançamento de Alcântara (CLA), no Maranhão. Com esse objetivo, desapropria por decreto uma área de 52 mil hectares, onde viviam cerca de 500 famílias, a maioria descendentes de quilombolas que sobreviviam de pesca e de agricultura de subsistência.

1990 – A área da base é ampliada para 62 mil hectares.

Maio de 2000 – O governo assina o Acordo de Salvaguardas Tecnológicas com Washington, que garante aos Estados Unidos o direito de usar a base. Por força da Constituição nacional, o acordo precisa da aprovação do Congresso.

2001 – A Comissão de Relações Exteriores da Câmara de Deputados rejeita o acordo por unanimidade, a partir de um relatório do deputado Waldir Pires (PT-BA), que considera os seus termos lesivos à soberania nacional. Apesar disso, o acordo é aprovado pela Comissão de Ciência e Tecnologia da Câmara, com base em parecer favorável do deputado José Rocha (PFL-PA). Cria-se um impasse.

Março de 2002 – O acordo é encaminhado à Comissão de Constituição e Justiça, tendo como relator o Deputado Zenaldo Coutinho (PSDB-PA). Após o parecer da comissão, que deverá ser concluído até o final do ano, o acordo vai a votação no plenário da Câmara.

Em defesa da soberania nacional

Em 24 de junho, um público de quase 3.000 pessoas lotou o teatro João Caetano, no Rio de Janeiro, no histórico ato que lançou o manifesto nacional contra o acordo que cede aos Estados Unidos o direito de usar a base de Alcântara. Participaram, entre outros, Dorinete Cerejo (Alcântara), João Pedro Stedile (MST), Waldir Pires (PT), Leonel Brizola (PDT) e o brigadeiro Rui Moreira Lima. Reproduzimos, em seguida, a íntegra do manifesto:

“O mais antigo e legítimo princípio do exercício da soberania dos povos é a defesa da integridade do seu território. Princípio que lhe garante ação soberana inquestionável para desenvolvê-lo de maneira sustentável e oferecê-lo às gerações futuras.

O Governo Fernando Henrique Cardoso está ferindo este princípio, ao acatar as

inaceitáveis condições impostas pelo governo dos Estados Unidos da América, para utilização da Base de Alcântara, no Maranhão. O Acordo de Salvaguardas Tecnológicas, assinado entre os dois governos, em maio de 2000, constitui-se numa peça que envergonha a diplomacia brasileira e num insulto à nossa soberania e inteligência.

É inaceitável para um país soberano, sob qualquer ponto de vista, admitir que a área da Base de Alcântara seja privativa da autoridade do governo dos Estados Unidos, garantindo-lhe total privacidade na circulação de pessoas e equipamentos. O teor do acordo não nos deixa dúvida sobre as reais motivações geopolíticas e militares do governo dos Estados Unidos, ao exigir autonomia total em nosso território, justamente na entrada da Amazônia. E, sorrateiramente, este Acordo sepulta a possibilidade da Aeronáutica brasileira desenvolver um programa espacial autônomo e soberano.

Além disso, coloca em risco as comunidades de remanescentes de Quilombos que há mais de duzentos anos vivem na região.

É indispensável um gesto de altivez do Congresso Nacional, ao apreciar os termos deste malfadado Acordo, visando restabelecer o pressuposto da Soberania Nacional

Nós, cidadãos e cidadãs, atento(a)s aos princípios e a defesa da soberania nacional e conscientes do exercício da soberania popular assegurada pela Constituição da República, nos manifestamos, exigindo:

- Que o Congresso Nacional rejeite o Acordo.
- Que se busque uma solução justa e duradoura para que todos os brasileiros que vivem no município de Alcântara tenham seus direitos assegurados e possam trabalhar e melhorar suas condições de vida.
- Que seja assegurado o direito de nosso povo à investigação, à pesquisa, ao acesso e desenvolvimento de novas tecnologias pacíficas de exploração espacial.

Estaremos sempre dispostos a lutar contra os que, atendendo a interesses de grupos nacionais e estrangeiros, buscam fragilizar o primado da nossa soberania sobre o território nacional. Lutaremos, sempre e incansavelmente, por um Brasil socialmente justo, soberano e democrático.”

(Teatro João Caetano, Praça Tiradentes, Rio de Janeiro, 24 de junho de 2002)

Despejo dos quilombolas

Ao criar o Centro de Lançamento de Alcântara, em 1980, o governo desapropriou por decreto uma área de 52 mil hectares, o que implicou desalojar e transferir cerca de 500 famílias, descendentes de quilombolas, para agrovilas no interior do Estado. Em 1990, Fernando Collor de Mello destinou outros 10 mil hectares para a base. Resultado: outras 200 famílias foram para as agrovilas.

Essas “transferências” são de uma violência brutal, não só por terem mudado radicalmente a vida de comunidades inteiras – que viviam de pesca típica daquela região específica -, mas também pela destruição de patrimônio histórico e cultural preservado pelos quilombolas.

“O governo amontoou nas mesmas agrovilas grupos distintos de pessoas, não respeitando as diferenças culturais”, diz Dorinete Serejo Moraes, do MAB (Movimento dos Atingidos pela Base de Alcântara). João Pedro Stedile resume adequadamente o significado social de tudo isso: “Do jeito que está, a única solução econômica para essas famílias será suas filhas se tornarem prostitutas para atender aos soldados norte-americanos”.

further reading:

<http://resistencia militar.blogspot.com/2009/02/brasilistao-base-de-alcantara-x.html>

http://www.piratininga.org.br/novapagina/leitura.asp?id_noticia=254&topico=Outros%20Temas

❖ by *patricia* March 8, 2009 at 3:03 pm

Reply

[...] its swollen network of overseas bases. I refer directly to Johnson’s work in my article on Dongducheon and the system of American military bases in South Korea; but he has influenced everything [...]

❖

THE ABSENT RIVAL

By Brian Holmes

RADICAL ART IN A POLITICAL VACUUM



Was there ever a vanguard without enlightened industrialists? Is it possible to shock the bourgeoisie in the twenty-first century? Does anyone have ears to hear what activists are saying? Or has the privatization of knowledge destroyed even the common space where words have their meaning?

Our story begins with the archetypal scene of tactical media: the moment when the Yes Men arrive in disguise at their first pseudo-corporate lectures. They expected to raise shock, tumult, outrage, fisticuffs and all manner of projectiles hurled from the floor to halt their delirious speeches, which to their minds were twisted Malthusian parodies of contemporary neoliberal discourse. Instead everybody smiled, shook hands, discussed the finer points (could we really solve our productivity problems by convincing Italians to give up sex in the afternoon?) and asked politely for a business card. They weren't even conscious of the critique. In fact, what never happened in the last ten years of intensifying debate over the global expansion of neoliberalism is the slightest recognition from the corporate class that something might be wrong. It's as though what's called the "pang of conscience" – that ghostly moment when the stakes of someone else's life or death impinge on your sensibility – had vanished from the minds of those who

manage the world's industrial development.

To understand the consequences of the "privatization of knowledge" we will have to discuss the conditions under which words meet ears, or the technological conditions under which human expression circulates. Simultaneously we will have to analyze the control of mediated speech. And finally we will consider the means, milieus and motives for intervention. But first let's consider what it's like to talk when no one's in the room – or what communication might mean in the absence of a conscience.

Skeletons in Suits

Imagine one of the most banal locations on Earth. It's called the Millennium Conference Center in London, England. A gentleman named "Erastus Hamm" will deliver a PowerPoint lecture for the Dow Chemical Corporation, on the subject of risk management. No one realizes that the ham actor is Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men, that the "Dow Ethics" website which the conference organizers consulted is a fake, and that the speaker is about to present an ironic condemnation of the very principles on which corporations like Dow are founded. The unfortunate thing is – they still won't realize it at the end of the speech, which the Yes Men have expertly captured on video.¹

Hamm explains that Dow is about to release Acceptable Risk: the first world's first fully automatic risk calculator. AR will help corporations decide where to locate their most dangerous industrial operations, the ones that could become liabilities: "Will project X be just another skeleton in the closet, something your company comes to regret, or will it be a golden skeleton?" Hamm discusses Agent Orange, the poison Dow sold for US Army use in Vietnam; and he claims that even in 1970, the AR calculator would have predicted a positive balance, for the corporation anyway. He brings up another case, IBM's sale of technology to WWII Germany to help identify certain races – and a Nazi sign flashes up on the screen next to the IBM logo. Definitely a skeleton in the closet, but once again, Hamm gushes to the audience, it's golden!

Applied in our time, Dow's AR device is supposed to calculate liability settlements on big industrial disasters, showing clearly that certain lives in certain regions of the world are worth a lot more than other lives in other regions. The tacit example here, which underlies all of the Yes Men's work on Dow Chemical, is the 1984 disaster at a Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India, killing an estimated 20,000 people. The corporation paid a minimal settlement and left behind over a hundred thousand wounded, as well as tremendous pollution that continues to cause deaths. In 2001 Union Carbide was acquired by Dow, which still refuses any liability.



The upbeat presentation ends with a glittering bone-dance on the screen, then a pop, flash and plume of smoke in the room as the golden skeleton Gilda is unveiled from beneath a crimson cloak. Chuckling businessmen and women are encouraged to come up, take a card and an AR keychain and have themselves photographed next to Gilda, while occasional jerky footage of the crowd, shot from a miniature camera installed in Erastus Hamm's geeky-looking glasses, reminds you that this surreal event is actually *cinéma vérité*. But the astonishing part comes afterwards, in the candid dialogues of the real businessmen with the phony Dow representative.

– Simplex consultant: *As I understood it your risk assessor will work out what is the human impact as opposed to how much money you can make on it (big smile). Whatever way you do this, you're gonna cost some lives, right? But you're gonna make some money in the process of it! It's acceptable! Is that right?*

– Hamm: *Well, yeah, that's exactly what I said. Did you find that not, um...?*

– Simplex: *I thought it was refreshing, actually!*

Great news from the corporate unconscious: disdain of human lives is refreshing! After all, those lives don't cost much, do they? At least, not if you choose the right place to lose them...

I think we have to ask what the Acceptable Risk calculator really proves to the watchers of the Yes Men video. Maybe it proves there's no risk in offering up the most extreme scenarios, so long as they come with a golden keychain? Or that decades of neoliberal greed have eliminated even the slightest risk of conscience among business executives? Could there be a zombie at the wheel in the age of corporate governance? And if so, where is the juggernaut of contemporary capitalism really headed?

Counseling the Prince

Enter an unusual figure: Bernard Stiegler, the French philosopher who leans to the left, believes in industry, dreams of technology, and wants to be the counselor of the prince. He worries about the collapse of today's "libidinal economy" and thinks Europe should develop a new industrial model. He's also nostalgic for the statism of General de Gaulle, dislikes anyone who wears tennis shoes and shows every sign of being a cultural conservative. One of his recent books (but he publishes three or four a year) is dedicated to Laurence Parisot, the president of the French bosses' union: a corporate crusader to whom he proposes "saving capitalism" by "re-enchanting the world."² Stiegler's ideas are stimulating but also weirdly naive, pragmatic yet strangely delirious. Let's have a closer look.

His first move is to establish an equivalence between the technologies of cognitive capitalism and what Foucault calls "the writing of the self." As the ancient Greeks shaped their inner lives through the memory-aids of intimate diaries (*hypomnemata*) to which they consigned formative quotations and reflections, so we postmoderns shape our own subjectivities through the use of computers, video cameras, mp3 players and the Internet. The mediation of externalized linguistic techniques is fundamental to the process of individuation. The problem is that these "technologies of the mind" – or "relationship technologies," in Jeremy Rifkin's term – now take the form of networked devices connecting each singular existence to massive service industries operating at a global level. As Stiegler says, "service capitalism makes all segments of human existence into the targets of a permanent and systematic control of attention and behavior – the targets of statistics, formalizations, rationalizations, investments

and commodifications." Or in Rifkin's less abstract way of putting it: "The company's task is to create communities for the purpose of establishing long-term commercial relationships and optimizing the lifetime value of each customer."³

Here we see that the fundamental commodification is not that of intellectual property. Rather it is the commodification of cognition itself, which becomes a calculable quantity ("lifetime value") to be channeled into relational patterns that meet the needs of giant corporations. It is we who then perform the service. In Stiegler's view, this "proletarianization" of entire populations acts to destroy sublimated desire, leaving people open to the gregariously aggressive drives of "industrial populism." The pandering of bellicose politicians on Berlusconi's or Murdoch's TVs gives some idea of what he means. TV is the classic medium of industrial populism. The question is whether the networked technologies will merely confirm the destructive effects of television, or whether they can be transformed.

To conceptualize the way that civilizational development shapes the thoughts and actions of individuals via the mediation of technology, Stiegler introduces the term "grammatization." It is the process whereby the existential flow of human thought and action is analyzed into discrete segments, and then reproduced in abstract forms or "grams" – the most evident example of this being the writing of language. Indeed, all the varieties of *hypomnemata* or externalized memory can be seen as grammatization techniques for patterning the way people think, speak and act. This structuralization of behavior is endless, operating through various codes and media; its recent manifestations include the analysis of human gestures known as Taylorization (the scientific basis for the Fordist assembly line). The enforced repetition of specific sequences of actions forecloses the existential possibility of becoming oneself, or individuation. TV programming, which imposes an identical modulation of thought and affect upon millions of viewers at the same time, represents a pinnacle of enforced repetition. Similar remarks could be made about computer programs like Windows, which imposes the same routines on hundreds of millions of people. But the relationship to grammatic patterning is not necessarily one of pure imposition. And this ambiguity of the "gram" is what makes all the difference.

With an astonishing historical image, Stiegler suggests that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing "allowed for the control of floodwaters, of flows and stocks of commodities, and of the work of slaves, through the intermediary of scribes specialized in the protection of royal or Pharaonic power." Subsequently, however, "these *hypomnemata*, which for centuries had been in the service of an increasingly rigid royal power... became in ancient Greece the principle of a new process of individuation, that is, *of a new relationship between the psychic and the collective*: the citizen became a new dynamic principle whereby the Greeks rapidly transformed the entire Mediterranean basin." Writing, reinterpreted in alphabetic form by the Phoenicians and the Greeks, becomes not only a vector for authority, but also an instrument of self-government. Yet the whole point is that this very transformation opens up the basic problems of democracy, exactly as they appear in Plato's *Phaedrus*: "Writing is a *pharmakon*, a remedy whereby the process of individuation takes care of itself and struggles against the poison that threatens to destroy it at the heart of its own dynamism. But it is also a poison that allows the sophists to manipulate public opinion, that is, to destroy the dynamism and make it into a dia-bolic force that ruins the symbolic: a power of dis-sociation leading to the loss of individuation."

Stiegler points to the need to take care of the role of mental technologies in the process of psychic and social individuation. He borrows from the epistemologist Gilbert Simondon the idea that

each technological system gradually transforms over time, becoming increasingly distinct *as a system* through the progressive differentiation of all its interdependent devices. He also borrows the related idea that each singular pathway of human individuation (the process that allows one to say "I") is inextricably bound up with a broader pathway of collective individuation (the process that allows us to say "we"). The individuation of each "I" is inscribed in that of the "we" from its very outset; but it is only the differentiation of the two that allows both processes to continue. And this differentiation is multiple: each "I" is intertwined with different "we's" unfolding at different scales (family, town, region, nation, language group, etc.). What Stiegler claims to add to Simondon is the realization that the twofold process of psychosocial individuation is inseparable from the process of technological individuation, to the extent that the former is dependent on the specific kinds of externalized memory made possible by the latter. In other words: I become who *I* am, and we become who *we* are, within the range of possibilities offered by the concomitant evolution of the recording machines to which I/we have access. And this specific and constantly evolving range of technological possibilities can serve to further the process of twofold individuation, or to destroy it.

In this new light the industrial development of the Internet appears as a potentially dynamic principle of technological writing, offering an historical chance to go beyond the stultifying effects of television. Stiegler illustrates those effects by quoting Patrick Le Lay, CEO of the premier French commercial channel TF1, who infamously declared at a corporate strategy session that what he had to sell to Coca-Cola was "available human brain time" for their advertisements. Le Lay is the epitome of a cultural manager without a gram of conscience. But a similar predatory instinct on a much grander scale is behind the developments of American-style service capitalism (and it's surprising that Stiegler doesn't draw a further parallel with Kenneth Lay, former CEO of Enron, who practiced the most extreme financial sophistry of the entire New Economy⁴). The Internet as a "global mnemotechnical system" is itself threatened by industrial populism, whose massively damaging consequences we see all around us – above all in the global warming created by the Fordist economy, whose effects became undeniable at the very moment when the US and Britain launched the war for oil hegemony in Iraq.

A response would have to be imagined at a continental scale, as the smallest possible rival to Anglo-American globalization. Only at the European scale could one envisage an effective, upward-leading spiral of reciprocal emulation, where singularities challenge each another in the quest for a better world that lies beyond everyone's horizon. Stiegler's thinking reaches its peak when he imagines a continental rivalry, which is the necessary conclusion of any extensive reflection on technopolitics. The challenge is to make one's ideals of change materially real. But this same conclusion provokes the desperate appeal to the French corporate elite, whom Stiegler thinks could be convinced of the need to spark a European response to really-existing cognitive capitalism.

Here we come to the heart of the dilemma. Because the appeal to a European corporate elite is at once totally logical and deeply unrealistic. Who could possibly believe that the corporate raiders who gathered around Patrick Le Lay are now going to band together to save capitalism from its own self-destruction? By the same token, who really believes that the businessmen who meet in Davos every year are ready to rescue the planet from climate change? Or that the new "green capitalism" is anywhere near as *green* as it is *capitalist*? Maybe the better question is whether Stiegler's elaborately crafted appeal to the corporate elite is not a subtle heuristic fiction, stimulating readers to imagine all the practical changes required to transform the technological basis of

what is ultimately a cultural system. His pragmatic political text would then become a piece of delirious philosophical sophistry, a *pharmakon* itself, whose real target is the formation of public opinion. The key thing it sparks us to realize is that epochal change could come from either end of the techno-cultural system. For just as the industrial production of better mnemonic devices would stimulate a higher level of participatory culture, so the latter would itself create a broader demand for more intricate and useful machines of self-government. And if we consider the track-record of our capitalist elites, then the cultural demand might seem a much more likely starting point than the industrial offer.

So instead of following the philosopher any further – either in his attempts at counseling the corporate prince, or in his dodgy ideas about sublimation⁵ – let us take the avenue offered by his heuristic fiction, and follow it along radically different cultural paths until we find the real driving forces of a critical and emancipatory use of mnemotechnics. I'm referring to the production of free software, to its uses in a far vaster and historically deeper web of potlatch-type exchange, and above all, to the recent upsurge of media interventionism, including but not limited to the exploits of groups like the Yes Men. Here we shall again encounter forms of rivalry and questions of conscience – all mixed into a poison which is also a remedy.

Letters and Destinations

There is an obvious place to look for positive transformations of networked technology: in cooperatively written, non-proprietary computer code, which comes to most people's desktop as a Linux operating system (like the one that brought you this book). But Linux forks into as many as 300 different "distributions," from Debian to Red Hat via Slackware and Ubuntu, all constructed out of the same basic core. Linux and its various "flavors" are related like Saussurian *langue* and *parole*. The evolving relation between individual and society, mediated by technology, is visibly alive here: the collective project of free software creation continually opens new possibilities from a shared horizon, differentiating along a singular paths even as it consolidates the fundamental distinction of a non-commodified technological system.

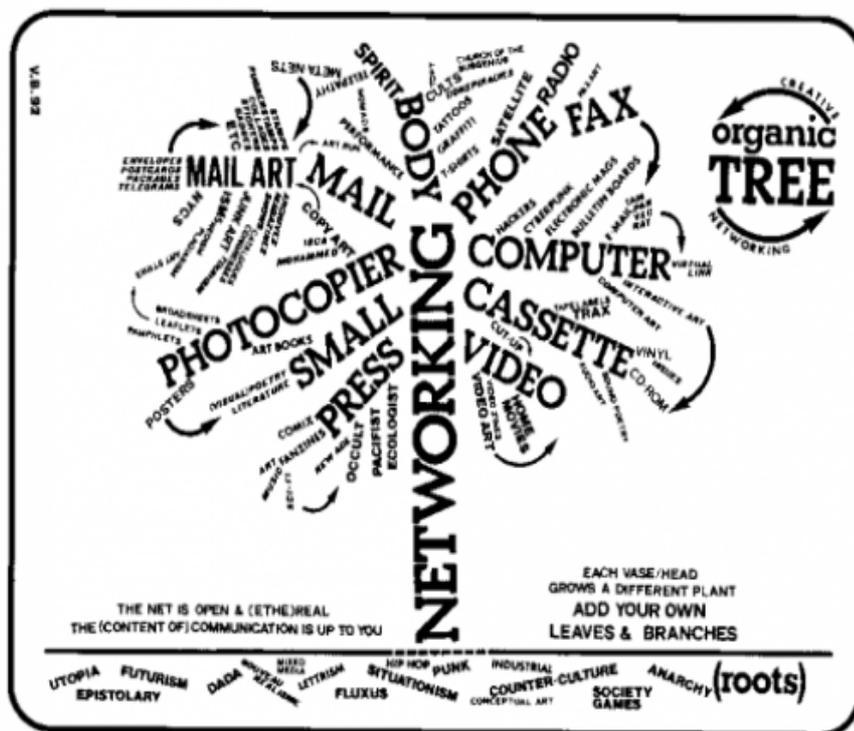
Common interpretations speak of a "high-tech gift economy," where each contribution to the collective pot translates into the multiplying wealth of riches for everyone. But holding closer to the ideas of anthropologist Marcel Mauss, one could conceive certain "gifts" as charged with antagonism, devised in reality to crush an opponent with overwhelming abundance. When the wildly popular music-exchange service, Napster, was shut down by legal attacks from the record companies, free-software programmers immediately launched new formats of peer-to-peer exchange, which had no central clearinghouse. Let the thousand song-lists bloom, they said, offering their new inventions freely to the public. The record companies began to founder – and Hollywood trembled as p2p video made the scene. Why such a concerted reaction from the hacking community? Behind the copyrighted tunes were lurking all the metaphysical subtleties of free software's ancient enemy: private property.

Seizing upon the very device that is used to secure the exclusive ownership of intellectual property, Richard Stallman created the General Public License. This specially formulated copyright contract insures that any computer code written cooperatively will remain open to future modification by other programmers for other uses. The poison of copyright is turned into its own remedy. Stallman himself makes a curious observation about how this came to pass: "In 1984 or 1985, Don Hopkins (a very imaginative fellow) mailed me a letter. On the envelope he had written several amusing

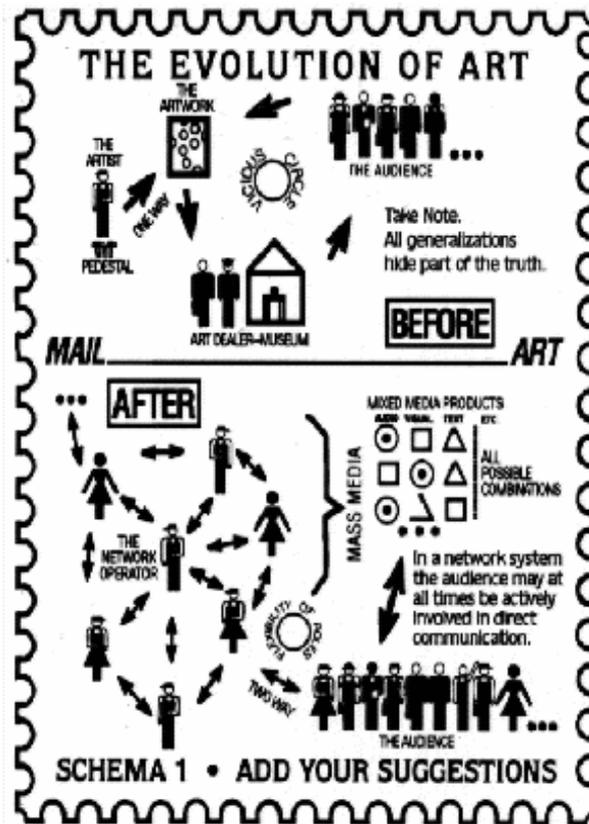
sayings, including this one: 'Copyleft – all rights reversed.' I used the word 'copyleft' to name the distribution concept I was developing at the time."⁶

Few people realize that the keyword of today's most emancipatory technology came mailed through the post. Even fewer probably realize that the term "copyleft" was independently invented by the artist Ray Johnson, founder of the "New York Correspondance School."⁷ But one thing is obvious when you consider art history: Mail Art provided the matrix from which radical uses of the Internet would spring. The international postal network was the cultural crucible of what now appears as the very essence of social radicalism, what the philosopher Christoph Spehr calls "free cooperation."⁸ Participatory practices of differentialist creativity put an indelible stamp on the letters of contemporary activism, which are still reaching their destinations in the world of technopolitics.

Robert Filliou coined the name of the "Eternal Network" to describe the mail art circuit way back in the 1960s. In 1992, Vittore Baroni sketched a prescient diagram that history has confirmed. In the center of a tree of words is a vertical trunk that reads *networking*. Radiating out from the top are the technical possibilities: *small press, photocopier, mail, phone, fax, cassette, video*. Amidst all the others, *computer* is just one more, already sprouting the leaves of *email, virtual link, interactive art*.⁹ Exchanges from peer to peer were a reality, even before the Internet as we know it.



In between Filliou and Baroni is an interview with Ray Johnson, published in 1982 in *Lotta Poetica* (Verona, Italy), with a preface by Henry Martin that may give the best feeling for the prehistory of the net: "To me, Ray Johnson's Correspondance School seems simply an attempt to establish as many significantly human relationships with as many individual people as possible... relationships where true experiences are truly shared and where what makes an experience true is its participation in a secret libidinal energy. And the relationships that the artist values so highly are something that he attempts to pass on to others. The classical exhortation of a Ray Johnson mailing is 'please send to...'"¹⁰ Mail art is an addressing system for the multiplication of desire. Or as William Wilson wrote, "Ray Johnson is a mild-mannered choreographer who sets people in motion."¹¹



Contact through a far-flung network became part of what Ulises Carrión referred to as the shift from “personal worlds” to “cultural strategies.”¹² These strategic moves were initially restricted to a few hundred, then a few thousand artists exchanging singular desires. But as time progressed and technologies ramified, the pleasurable consciousness of the existence of one’s peers became doubled by letters coming from further afield, bearing that affect of conscience that pierces the narcissistic mirror. The growth of the Internet was paralleled, in a minor key, by political transformations. Hackers inspired by Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* changed the postal system into a real-time flux of underground information. And news from the South of the planet, brought by the new functionalities of email, reminded inhabitants of the North what their money was actually doing. Namely, impoverishing entire regions in the name of single-commodity exports and forced loan repayments administered by the IMF. After the first Global Days of Action in 1998, “cultural strategies” came to mean the art of mobilizing tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of people. The networked protests of Seattle, Genoa and Cancún, the World Social forums and the anti-war marches of February 15, 2003, appear as watersheds in retrospect. But that’s because we can’t foresee the responses to the disasters that lie ahead. The privatization of everything may still be confronted with the contagion of contrary desires. It all depends on what uses we make of technology – and with whom.



B - B Prime

The philosopher Christoph Spehr sums it all up, in a film that violates every provision of copyright. *On Blood and Wings: A Study in the Dark Side of Cooperation* is a contribution to the cutting edge of Marxist theory, clipped from the archives of B-grade vampire flicks.¹³ It starts from the classics of 1930s expressionism, then goes on to hilarious 1990s video, dubbed over with Spehr's cutting-edge ideas on free cooperation. In this film, the Prince of Darkness counsels *you*.

The first thing is to understand is a monetary compulsion, a senseless momentum. Listen to its logic in the ghostly voice of narrator Tony Conrad, intoned in deep bass against a gory backdrop: "The blood thing is the only thing you have to know to understand capitalism. The vampire can't act without the blood. And he doesn't keep it, he doesn't feed on it in a way that he would ever be full.... He's more like a machine that is fueled by blood. And the blood he takes only drives him to search for new blood. Like Marx put it in *Capital*: B leads to B prime.¹⁴ If you understand this, it will greatly improve your life under capitalism."

Spehr ranges through the depravity of a civilization and its spectacles, showing how everyone in the developed societies – whether in the academy, the technology sectors or even in activism – comes gradually under the fangs. We are the dash between B and B prime. But the leading edge of a new productive system carries its promise along with its poison, at least when it remains in touch with the past that gives the future meaning. The next thing to understand is what that productive system is good for: "Technology becomes more and more important in the fight against capitalism: networking, communications, the Internet, new forms of organizing. But the core of the action – the social struggle – is still the basis, and cannot be replaced by any of that."

The film that began with the Prince of Darkness comes to an end with a sunrise in Mexico, and with a reflection on the way that solidarity acts as a grounding force to control the avant-gardes, who are necessarily infected: "The ones we expose to highly contaminated areas – like boards, parliaments, any forms of leadership and representation – are always in danger, and they *are* a danger." So while the would-be hero from the North goes off

to a new struggle, the comrade from the South tells him he will “pray... pray for the good medicine.” And the lesson of the *pharmakon* returns, as we hear the ghostly voice repeating “pray... pray for the good medicine.”

Tactical media comes back here with a vengeance. Christoph Spehr has produced a bottom-up vision of transformations that Bernard Stiegler can only imagine from top down. The aim is to produce a confrontation with the absent rival. But the means can only be a complex alchemy of emancipation, where artistic motifs and advanced technology encounter the mobilizing powers of desire.

Today the Yes Men are producing a film with Arte and a British foundation. As far as I can tell, industrialists have still not felt the fangs of conscience, but maybe a few cultural bureaucrats are at least starting to see the work of the vanguards, and to respond to a deeper call of solidarity. A disclaimer on Spehr’s film says it’s designed for political education only: “Any screenings outside this context may be a violation of copyright laws.” In other words, please confront the rule-governed spaces of contemporary capitalism at your own risk – the risk that the absent rival might be listening, and that he might even call the police.

Activism of any kind, even symbolic, is increasingly a risk. But it’s time to reopen the space where words can meet ears. In the age of global war and global warming, what’s the danger of being bit by the law? In November 2008, the Yes Men and friends brought out a million and a half copies of the New York Times, just like the real thing but with a political project for changing what makes the news.¹⁵ The least that the rest of us can do is bring some education into the infected realms of public institutions.

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Notes

1 For the lecture, photos and a clip from the video, see www.dowethics.com/risk/launch.html; or check out the Yes Men’s forthcoming film.

2 Bernard Stiegler & Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanger le monde: La valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), p. 38. All further Stiegler quotes are from this book.

3 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Putnam, 2000), p. 109.

4 See the excellent documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, dir. Alex Gibney, 109’ (USA, 2005).

5 The concept of sublimation is at the center of Bernard Stiegler, *Aimer, s’aimer, nous aimer* (Paris: Galilée, 2003).

6 Richard Stallman, “The GNU Project,” at www.gnu.org/gnu/thegnuproject.html.

7 See McKenzie Wark, “From Mail Art to Net.art: Ray Johnson and the Lives of the Saints,” at www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0210/msg00040.html.

8 Spehr’s ideas were at the center of a brilliant and often hilarious conference/encounter in Buffalo, New York, in 2004, documented in Trebor Scholz and Geert Lovink, eds., *The Art of Free Cooperation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007).

9 Vittore Baroni, *Arte postale* (Bertiolo: AAA Edizioni, 1997), p. 235.

10 Quoted in Donna De Salvo and Catherine Gudis, eds., *Ray Johnson* (Columbus: Wexner Center/Paris: Flammarion, 1999), p. 186.

11 Ibid., p. 147.

12 Ulises Carrión, "Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies?" in *Second Thoughts* (Amsterdam: Void, 1980).

13 The film is included on DVD in T. Scholz and G. Lovink, *The Art of Free Cooperation*, op. cit.; it can be downloaded at <http://wbk.in-berlin.de/wp/?p=212>.

14 For those who grew up on Milton Friedman, Marx's formula is actually M – M prime: money turning into more money on the financial circuit.

15 <http://www.nytimes-se.com>.

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2 Responses to "THE ABSENT RIVAL"

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

November 21, 2008 at 6:18 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] 09-The Absent Rival: [...]

Four Pathways Through Chaos « Continental Drift Says:

November 2, 2009 at 6:32 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] 11 of Michel Foucault's course at the Sorbonne, The Birth of Biopolitics, and my own essay The Absent Rival: Radical Art in a Political Vacuum. Additional readings could include André Gorz's wonderful book *Misère du présent, richesse [...]*

Remember the Present

By Brian Holmes

Representations of Crisis in Argentina



For us it's clear that if we want to strengthen a grassroots democracy, we have to make a definitive bid for radicalization. It's no longer a matter of 'returning to normal,' of returning to political rhetoric, of getting the game of formal democracy into gear, or of constructing a 'true representation of the people.' We have to strengthen other tendencies, other logics. We have to reinforce the popular struggles, and not to channel them back toward power.

Colectivo Situaciones, March 24, 2001

Puerto Madero, the former port of Buenos Aires, was renovated in the mid-1990s under the direct influence of Barcelona's trademark urbanism, within the broader paradigm of the "creative city." Following the classic neoliberal model, the land was handed over to a private entity charged with seeking out the necessary investments, and granted any profit that might arise from the operation. A strategic plan was drafted by Catalanian consultants; corporate buyers were sought around the world; architectural commissions were given to national and international firms. Today the construction is almost complete, and the post-industrial docks look as pretty as a postcard. The cranes that used to unload ships have been left standing, carefully repainted to preserve the patina of age, as if to say that work was once done here. The remodeled warehouses offer a mix of residential spaces, offices and urban entertainment destinations, with a private university at one end and a millionaire's museum at the other, followed by a crown of hi-rise towers whose logos include Microsoft, Bell South and IBM: the perfect recipe for success in the "information economy."

The visitor wandering down the quay is greeted by the sight of an elegant white suspension bridge with a single cantilevered support, signed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava: a must for any waterfront redevelopment project. A memorial plaque informs us that this *Puente de la Mujer*, or "Bridge of Womankind," was inaugurated on December 20, 2001. But that's impossible –

because that was the second day of the Argentinean revolt against the consequences of neoliberal globalization, and the city's elites were in no position to do any celebrating.

With its postmodern historicism and its grandiose dream of participation in the information economy, Puerto Madero appears as a speculation, in all the senses of the word, on the prospects – and the profits – of a total erasure of memory. Its paradigm is the experience of *déjà vu*, where you watch yourself doing what you've already done, performing a prescribed series of actions that seem to have become a destiny. It raises a question about how to represent, or better, how to enact a counter-memory.

I've taken my inspiration from Paolo Virno's book *Il ricordo del presente*; from the unusually searching art show *Ex Argentina*; from the clues to be found in a wide range of books and articles; and above all from the testimonies, viewpoints and interpretations offered by friends and acquaintances in Buenos Aires and Rosario.¹ This is an inquiry into the representations of crisis and the enactments of counter-memory in Argentina. The aim is to provide a discursive frame for some of the most impressive experiments in political art to have emerged around the turn of the millennium. Of course this can only be an incomplete and uncertain reflection of events in what is, for me, a faraway land. The hope is that others may see through this view from afar, and come closer to their own potentials for life in the present.

History Paintings

For the exhibition *Ex Argentina*, the artist Azul Blaseotto carried out a portrait in oils of the people who built the facade of Puerto Madero. This enormous painting – a neo-expressionist *grande machine* with a central panel and two lateral wings – depicts the cultural, economic and political elite of Argentina, gathered together in a glass-walled room that looks down on their creation. On the right side of the canvas you see the architects, tinged with green, always willing to change color for the needs of each new regime. One of them has spilled champagne on a table decorated with a map showing the so-called "ecological reserve" just behind the port. The nineties were the era of "pizza and champagne." Another places a scale model down on the map. Outside the window you can see the residential tower, built within the reserve by virtue of a special exception to the law.



click each section for larger image

Some of the figures are internationally famous, for example, the financier George Soros, portrayed as a winged chimera, a monstrous angel; or the omnipresent French designer Philippe Starck, represented as a kind of cross between a spider and a Hindu god (he is the architect of the so-called "Faena Hotel + Universe" completed a few years after the crisis, an unrepentant monument to all the opulence and arrogance of the nineties). In the corner of the painting is the art patron and millionaire, Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, or "Amalita," the arbiter of contemporary Argentinean culture, looking down with satisfaction at her private museum. At the opening of *Ex Argentina*, Azul Blaseotto told me how much she hated these people and their "*cultura de mierda*,"

the non-culture they impose on all the others. "They want to dominate everything, even the horizon," she said.

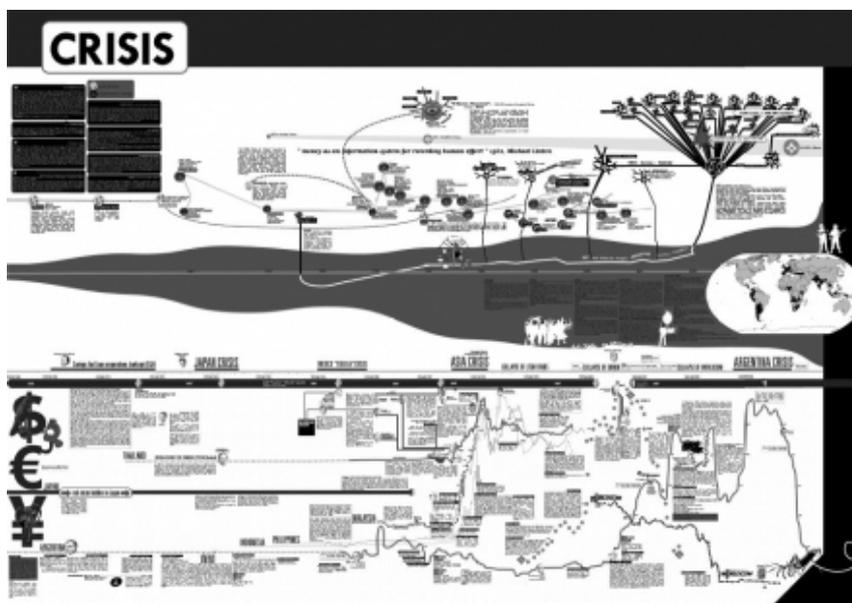
In the center is Carlos Menem, portrayed twice for his two terms, from 1989 -95, then 1995 -99. During the first, while his administration sold off the state-run industries and public services, he became extremely popular, distributing welfare packages to the people and massive kickbacks to his cronies – corruption money that has been estimated at 20% of the product of each sale.² The problems came in his second term, when there was nothing left to auction. At his left, eating pizza, is Roberto Dromi, the author of the Law of State in 1989 – the first step toward the privatizations. At his right is finance minister Domingo Cavallo, an ultraliberal who learned his doctrine in Chicago, like the economic advisers of Pinochet. Cavallo had already been responsible for the so-called "statization" of private debts in the 1980s, during the dictatorship – a way of using public money to pay back loans that were taken out by the oligarchy.

Further down is Fernando de la Rúa, of the radical Party, who succeeded Menem as Argentinean president, until the day he had to leave the Casa Rosada in a helicopter, fleeing from the insults of the crowd. The woman next to him offers a piece of sushi – which had become chic as a diet food during the fat years of globalization. Above De la Rúa, dressed in blue, is Enrique Fazio, former president of the Corporación del Antiguo Puerto Madero, which is the quasi-autonomous agency that auctioned off the dock land in the mid-1990s. Finally, on the lateral wings of the painting are half a dozen wide-open eyes, filled with civil-society figures staring in at the private party. At lower right you see the great Argentinean political satirist and history painter, Antonio Berni. Next to him, looking out at us, is the painter of the picture. What does she see, when she looks beyond the illusion of the "creative city," at the contemporary reality of her country?

Less than a mile away from the Puente de la Mujer is the ruined riverfront of La Boca, filled with the hulks of rusting ships that are no longer called to carry off the products of now-inactive factories. The abandoned infrastructure offers a glimpse of the relatively short period of import-substitution policies, from the thirties through the sixties, when there was something like "endogenous development" at work in Argentina. Today that period is long gone. The old houses of the riverfront lie in ruins. Despite the emergence of a small, Disneyesque tourist zone in a former riverside harbor, no one has bothered to haul off the remains of an industrial past whose interruption still hangs like a pall over the city.

What happened, on December 19 and 20, 2001, in Argentina? How to understand the images of revolt that reached us from those days? The sacked supermarkets? The burning tires? The highway roadblocks? The solidarity between the urban middle classes and the disenfranchised industrial workers, who together raised first great popular revolt against the consequences of neoliberal globalization?

One way to grasp the Argentine crisis is to look at a very different kind of "history painting," by the French conceptual art group Bureau d'Études. This work was also presented in the exhibition *Ex Argentina*, which sought deliberately to bring radical European artists of the late 1990s into contact with politicized Argentines, so as to conduct an international inquiry into the turbulent collapse of the so-called New Economy and the reemergence of an anti-capitalist movement on a global scale. Entitled *Crisis*, the work by Bureau d'Études functions as a chronology of the world financial system in the 1990s. It situates the Argentine revolt within the general framework of a worldwide economic cycle – essentially the period of so-called globalization, from 1989 onward.



pdf [here](#) 

In the lower third of this long, lateral graphic chart, you see three horizontal axes corresponding to events within the three great currency zones of the Yen, the Euro and the Dollar. A special bar at the top is devoted to the management of the IMF, while a line below shows the frequencies of so-called "payment incidents," or delays in the reimbursement of the Argentinean debt. The same bar also serves to mark political events, such as the election of Carlos Menem in 1989. The middle section of the chart widens the focus to look at strikes and riots against privatization processes across the globe in the single year of 2002. Finally, the top part unfolds beneath a phrase by Michael Linton, the inventor of the Local Exchange and Trading Systems (or LETS), who speaks of "money as an information system for recording human effort." This section relates the development of alternative monetary systems over the decade of the 1990s, culminating in the spectacular expansion of the *Red Global de Trueque* or "swap network" in the years of the Argentinean crisis. In short, the chronology looks both at the failure of the financial markets, and at the popular responses to these failures.

The first third of the time period covered by the chart deals with the restructuring of the Japanese and American banking systems in the early 1990s, after the initial round of financial expansionism during the preceding decade. Next we see the tumult of the great Asian crisis, with the radical inflation that hit the currencies of the East Asian region in 1997, after years of excessive speculation on the "tiger" economies. The crisis began with an attack on the Thai currency, which inflated from 30 to over 50 bhat for one US dollar, as you can see in the jagged line spiking suddenly upward. Even worse was the case of the Indonesian rupee, whose rise is capped at the height of its climb with a representation of the head of the authoritarian leader Suharto, who would then fall along with the precarious living standard of the Indonesian people. But the graphic chart also shows very clearly that the capitals fleeing the speculative krach of the East Asian economies found a perfect new home on the US stock market, where the value of companies like WorldCom and Enron shot up precipitously at the end of the millennium, before falling dramatically when the new economy bubble burst in mid-2000.

There is a perfect correlation between the fall of the Northern stock markets and the rise in the "payment incidents" affecting the reimbursement of the Argentinean debt. The world economy is so tightly integrated that the long process of Argentina's economic decay entered its crisis at the very moment when the American

bubble finally burst. The same line of rising "payment incidents" shows the key events in the social history of those tumultuous months: first the *corralito*, or the closure of the Argentine public banking system, just before the currency's radical devaluation but not before the country's wealthiest citizens had converted all their holdings to dollars; then the withholding of a final loan by the IMF, followed by the flight of De la Rúa and the formation of the Piquetero Bloc of unemployed industrial workers, etc.

Seen from the perspective of Marxist crisis-theory, what happened in Argentina is the monstrous fact of a crash in the international financial system, engulfing enormous quantities of fictional capital in a speculative maw, which reduces that money to nothing even while it swallows up the jobs and the savings of the working classes. And in economic terms, that's what happened. But is that the whole story? The only story? Does econometrics provide an adequate language for describing the global division of labor and power? Is money an adequate information system for recording popular resistance? How do those who forced De la Rúa to leave in a helicopter tell the story of December 19 and 20, 2001?

Theater of the Streets

The contemporary Argentinean Left has built itself around the memory of another date: March 24, 1976, when a military coup inaugurated the Videla dictatorship that lasted until 1983. I first saw that date on a wall in the barrio of San Telmo, in Buenos Aires, where it had been painted by a popular assembly during the insurrection. The Right explains the coup as a necessary response to the military tactics of the Guevarist guerrillas. But there was also a powerful workers' movement in Argentina, struggling against exploitation both by the national bourgeoisie and by foreign capital. The workers had begun to exert their power in the street with the revolt of the city of Córdoba in 1969, the "Cordobazo," which ushered in a period of intense crowd mobilizations, culminating in the return to power of the exiled popular leader Juan Perón in 1973. However, despite the victory represented by his return, the movement became increasingly divided between those who remained loyal to union hierarchies seeking a new compromise between capital and labor, and those who joined the students and the guerrilla movements in a call for outright revolution.

By the time of Perón's death in 1974, the split was consummated. The radical workers became increasingly well organized, using shop-floor coordinating committees to escape the control of their union representatives. To carry out a major strike, they would begin by surrounding the union with a crowd of workers, thereby forcing their representatives to follow the movement. Meanwhile, the student movements intensified and the guerrilla activities escalated, with targeted assassinations and attacks on military or police installations. The upper classes felt seriously threatened, less in their formal grip on power than in their ability to maintain a hierarchical society based on Christian values. The death squads of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA) had already been operational since November of 1973. After the March 24, coup the oligarchy unleashed military force on the population.

Soldiers occupied the factories and the universities. They applied counter-insurgency techniques learned from the French and the Americans. Little by little they identified the ideological elements. It was in 1976-77 that the worst was done. Everyone knows the figure of 30,000 disappeared. Often they were thrown from airplanes into the river. Many more were tortured. An estimated nine hundred children were born in prison and adopted by the torturers, after the disappearance of their mothers.

For Latin Americans, the dictatorships of the 1970s, and not the

financial globalization of the 1990s, mark the beginnings of neoliberalism. Economic historians on the Left now characterize this decade as an initial phase of strategic de-industrialization: a way of disciplining national working classes by breaking down their opportunities to exert any influence on the development of the productive process. But in Argentina, the 1970s were also a period of full-scale cultural war, "the clash of two civilizations, ours and the Marxist, to determine which one will be dominant and thus inspire or direct the future organization of the world," as stated in 1981 by Leopoldo Galtieri, one of the junta generals.³ The rebellion had to be quelled; but the very thoughts which inspired it also had to be eradicated. The logical culmination of the ideological struggle was the reduction of the population to silence, which also entailed an impossibility of mourning.

The contemporary history of Argentina can be represented as an empty silhouette: an absent body whose vanished image becomes part of a struggle to remember.

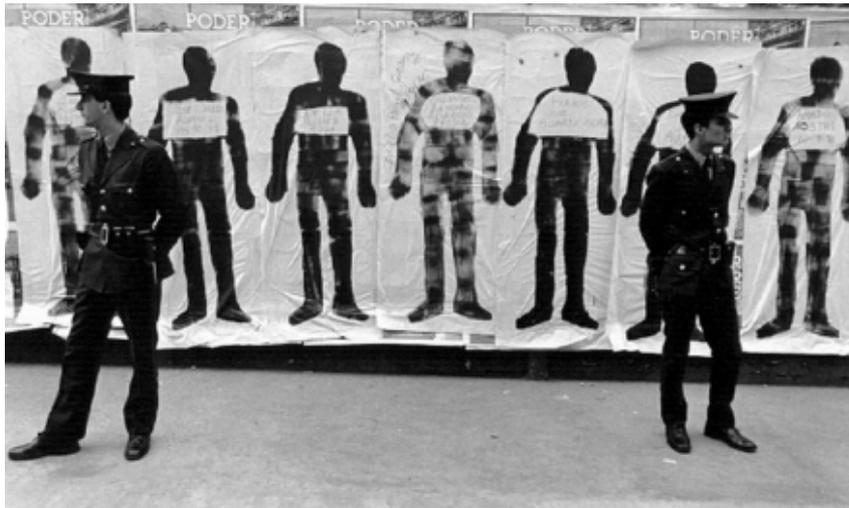


photo Marcelo Brodsky

An immensely influential political art project began just before the end of the dictatorship, on September 21, 1983, under the name of the *Siluetazo*, or "Great Silhouette." It was launched by three artists, Rodolfo Aguereberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel, and taken up by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, along with other human rights organizations and participants in the "Third March of Resistance" held in Buenos Aires on that day. The technique was extremely simple: it involved tracing the outline of a human body lying flat on a large sheet of paper. But the effect was fundamental. I quote from a text by the photographer Marcelo Brodsky:

The *Siluetazo* was one of the most powerful artistic events in twentieth-century Argentina. Where are the disappeared? What did they do with them? That unanswered question flooded the streets of the country when the dictatorship fell and democracy began its return. The silhouettes were stamped on walls, window shutters and city billboards, pleading for truth and justice. Little by little they vanished from the streets, but they left their demand impressed on collective memory. The artistic interpretation of what was happening melded together with the popular mobilizations demanding trial and punishment for the assassins of the dictatorship, and thereby it gained legitimacy as a powerful tool of struggle in the streets.

The challenge for the Argentinean Left was to build up the legitimacy of their struggle within what was still a radically hostile institutional environment, even after the end of the dictatorship. In their very mutism, in their accusatory emptiness, the silhouettes were a potent symbol; but even more important was the possibility for this symbol to be created by those whom it directly concerned. As Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone have

written: "The *Siluetazo* points to one of those exceptional moments in history when an artistic initiative coincides with a demand from social movements, and is embodied by the impulse of the multitude. It involved the participation, in a huge, improvised open-air studio that lasted until midnight, of hundreds of demonstrators who painted, who *put their bodies on the line* to sketch the silhouettes, then hung them on the walls, monuments and trees despite the imposing deployment of the police." The authors stress the collective status of this creation: "The *Siluetazo* entailed the socialization of the means of artistic production and distribution, to the extent that the spectator joined in as producer. The visual deed is 'done by everyone and belongs to everyone.' This radically participatory artistic practice encourages the massive appropriation of an idea or concept, and of simple but striking artistic forms and techniques for the repetition of an image."⁴

The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo used the silhouettes in their marches in memory of the disappeared, as part of the impossible but deeply meaningful demand for *aparición con vida*, or "appearance alive." Since their foundation in 1978 the Madres had worked to reconstruct justice from below, by tirelessly appearing in public space with the portraits of their missing family members in their arms and an increasingly broad social network behind them. As Susana Kaiser writes: "By turning motherhood into a public activity, they were crucial in setting new boundaries of what politics or political spaces are."⁵ Their strategy of deliberately non-violent militancy, based on the legitimate public presence of socially repressed memory, is fundamental for understanding how the Argentinean Left would react to the crisis of the late 1990s and the turn of the millennium. But in urban centers throughout Argentina, this expressive role would be taken up quite differently by a new movement that emerged in October of 1995, under the name H.I.J.O.S., or "Children."⁶ That's an abbreviation of a longer name, which translates as "Children for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence."

This is the second generation of Argentinean human rights activists, who invented an extraordinary new form of political intervention, the *escrache*. The word is derived from the Argentinean slang word *escrache*, meaning "to uncover," "to reveal," "to show someone's face"; the *escrache* is an act of denunciation that aims to inform the public of the crimes of unpunished collaborators of the dictatorship. "*Si no hay justicia, hay escrache*," repeat the members of H.I.J.O.S.: "If there is no justice, there is denunciation." It is an utterly serious public practice, but it takes the form of a satirical carnival, full of farce, raucous noise and biting black humor, carried out by crowds of young activists and accompanied by the music of traditional marching bands known as *murgas*.⁷

At first, the *escraches* were conceived as media actions, directed against well-known figures of the military regime living in the center of Buenos Aires. But from 1998 onward, H.I.J.O.S. changed their approach and began to engage in long preparatory periods of popular education before each action, now typically held in popular neighborhoods. Even while the antiglobalization demonstrations in North America and Europe reached their height in summit-hopping campaigns against transnational institutions like the G8, the IMF and the WTO, the protagonists of H.I.J.O.S. were attempting to radicalize ordinary people on the ground, in resistance to the local agents of the repressive forces that had ushered in the first phase of neoliberalism. In Argentina, the grassroots critique of present injustice was inseparable from an historical consciousness of the way the country had developed over the past twenty-five years, with a sharp awareness that the same classes that had profited from the dictatorship could always reassert their power, if their impunity was simply accepted and their crimes left unremembered.

Once again, people put their bodies on the line, expanding the concept of art into direct action. Among the protesters from the very beginning were the members of Etcétera, who thought of themselves less as an artists' group, and more as a political movement of the surrealist imagination. During the heyday of the *escraches* from 1998 to 2001, they staged delirious theatrical events in front of the houses of former murderers and torturers. Protest tactics of the usual sort will never be enough for Etcétera, whose story is filled with improbable encounters and unlikely inventions. While seeking to squat an empty building for their activities, the collective chanced upon the abandoned premises of the former Argonauta publishing house founded by the surrealist artist Juan Andralis, filled with dusty books, photographs, images, paintings, sculptures, costumes and old mannequins from the 1930s and 40s. It was a turning point, a moment of "objective chance," just as Marcel Duchamp had described. They built up a library, a darkroom, a studio and a small theater with seats recovered from an old cinema, and they used the materials around them as the accessories of a unique aesthetic.⁸ Their relation to the public became clear when they created the *Niño Globalizado* (Globalized Boy), with a hand-pump that the art audience could use to bloat the child's belly into a distended globe of hunger. But that was only one station on a longer journey. The point was to develop an art as poetically unpredictable as a dream, and then hurl it like a football into an unbelievable reality.



One of their early protest pieces was the satirical soccer match, "Argentina vs. Argentina," held before the home of the former dictator, General Galtieri, in June of 1998 during the World Cup pitting Argentina against England. It recalled the waste of life in the Malvinas war under the direct command of Galtieri, but also the shame of the 1978 World Cup, held in Argentina beneath the spotlights of the media even while torture and assassination continued off camera. The mock soccer match reached its conclusion when a member of H.I.J.O.S. kicked a penalty ball full of red paint into the former dictator's house, triggering the climax of the public denunciation. Video recordings show the paint splattering onto the hats of police lined up in rows around the building. At other *escraches*, like the one against Dr. Raúl Sánchez Ruiz, the Etcétera performance served as a lure, a decoy, distracting the attention of the police at a critical moment. It's impressive to realize that interventions like this unfolded at the exact time when groups such as Reclaim the Streets were inventing the carnivalesque demonstrations of the antiglobalization movement. In the Argentinean case, the political carnival would culminate in a national insurrection.

The graphic work of the *Grupo de Arte Callejero*, which translates

as the "Street Art Group," can exemplify the way that the *escraches* acted to make history public. The GAC was formed in 1997; but its members prefer not to talk too much about their own history. Their actions speak for them. Before the day of an *escrache*, they would help print fliers giving the date and time of the event and also the name, address, telephone number and portrait of the agent of the dictatorship, along with a list of his crimes. In addition to fliers and posters, the GAC makes extremely direct iconography that simulates the codes of commercial operations, such as the private security firms that now employ many former soldiers and policemen. Above all, they appropriate the codes of street signs, creating plaques that become like historical markers on the road towards the construction of a counter-memory. "300 meters ahead, ASSASSIN, Luis Juan Donocik, Honorio Pueyrredon 1047, first floor," reads one. "50 meters ahead..." continues another. The GAC provide a graphic presence and a clarity of information that reinforces the ritual theater of the *escrache*. The approach to the criminal's dwelling is very consciously staged by all the participants, as a pathway toward the living history of a violent struggle that can't just be forgotten, because there's no guarantee that the other side won't again use the weapons it employed in the 1970s. Finally the crowd comes before the house of the murderer, and it is at this culminating point that a public speech is made along with others gestures and performances.



To give some idea of what this moment could be like, I will translate an extended quote from a book entitled *Genocida en el Barrio*, produced by Colectivo Situaciones, a group of militant researchers who have worked directly with many different Argentinean social movements – not only H.I.J.O.S. but also groups of unemployed *piqueteros*, marginalized peasants, popular education associations and so on. Colectivo Situaciones typically contributes by forming hypotheses about the autonomy of the groups they work with, and about the meaning of their struggles, then engaging discussions with the groups on that basis, after which they transcribe and publish the results in cheap booklets that serve to distribute the results of the collective process. What follows, however, is not one of these interviews, but rather the text of a speech that was given on the street by a member of H.I.J.O.S. on the day after such a discussion session, at the culminating moment of an *escrache*:

Today we are before the house of another torturer: Ernesto Enrique Frimon Weber. Subcommissioner of the federal police, he acted as an agent of repression during the military dictatorship, in the clandestine

extermination center that operated in the Naval Engineering School. Assigned to the logistics department of the working group 3.3.2, he practiced kidnapping and torture and was responsible for the capture of 3,500 persons. He worked under the pseudonym of 220, a nickname given to him in recognition of the classes he gave in torture with electric wires. Free in accordance with the end-point or *punto final* law, and under an international warrant of arrest issued by the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón, he is accused of genocide and state terrorism. He lives at 1245 Virgilio Street, apartment 3, and his phone number is 45 67 21 12.

From this point onward the speech continues in a more philosophical, self-reflexive tone, which tries to sum up the meaning of the process of denunciation itself:

Almost four years have now gone by since our first *escrache*, in December of 1996. Over the course of these four years, the *escrache* has become a new tool of struggle. The *escrache* has been and continues to be a way to turn memory into action, an innovative way to denounce impunity. A way to show that impunity is not just an abstract word. Impunity is a very concrete term: impunity is called Emilio Eduardo Massera, supposedly detained in his palace on Avenue Libertador; impunity is called Miguel Etchecolatz, strolling around Cordoba square; impunity is called Turco Julián, having a coffee in the Congreso district; impunity is called José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, giving his advice from the City on the progress of the Argentine economy... Impunity lives on in each of these figures, agents of repression, torturers, expropriators, genocidal killers, the ideological authors of the massive extermination of thousands of popular activists who were struggling against privileges and inequality, the same inequality that is now the supreme law of the Republic of Argentina. This is why the *escrache* has been and continues to be a blow on the side of justice. A justice founded on the certainty that true justice will not fall from the heights of power like a ripe fruit. A justice which understands that if crime is organized from within the State, then it is society that will have to identify the criminals, judge them, condemn them, pursue them even in their dreams. A justice of the popular sectors, who do not forget and who do not pardon State terrorism, concentration camps, torture, death flights and the abduction of children....⁹

At this powerful culminating moment of the *escrache*, red paint balloons are thrown against the house of the individual, in order to mark the blood that was spilled years ago. But despite the emotion of those whose parents or relatives were killed during the dictatorship, what appears quite clearly in these public events is the attempt to invent an effective judgment from below, one that relies not on violence but on symbolic force, whose purpose is to ostracize the individuals in question, to achieve what Colectivo Situaciones calls "social condemnation," and at the same time, to inscribe a public warning against the continuity of the past in the present. To this end, the Grupo de Arte Callejero worked with H.I.J.O.S. to create a map of all the places where *escraches* had occurred, under the title *AQUI VIVEN GENOCIDAS*, or "Assassins live here."¹⁰ The map was posted throughout Buenos Aires on March 24, 2001, and then again on the same date in 2002. It's hard to imagine the experience of reading this historical map of your own city, of your own history, so far from anything humanly imaginable, so frighteningly close in both time and space. The wealthy Center, Barrio Norte, Palermo and Recoleta neighborhoods require a special enlargement to show all the collaborators of the dictatorship living there.

Insurrection

Having considered the larger history of the dictatorship as well as the specific ways in which activist artists on the Argentine Left sought to evoke the memory of its victims, let us now return to the economic collapse and the revolt of December 19 and 20, 2001, with which we began. Martial law was declared on December 19, a month after the crisis had opened with the prohibition on withdrawals from the banks (known as the *corralito*) and just a day after the sacking of supermarkets had commenced on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Masses of unemployed *piqueteros*, who had begun their revolt long years before in the

provinces, were now advancing on the capital. No one could predict what would happen when they reached their destination. But what December 19 and 20 ultimately proved was the effectiveness of all the efforts to maintain the people's latent awareness of the historical danger embodied by the oligarchy, the army and the police. There was no question of any return to dictatorship. The middle classes of Buenos Aires heard the strange swelling roar of thousands of people streaming by their doorsteps, beating pots and pans; and often without knowing what exactly they were doing or where it would lead them, they took their own pots and pans out of their kitchens and streamed to the city center, passing through innumerable intersections blocked to traffic by protesters. Upon arrival in the center, they joined forces with the *piqueteros* and launched the urban insurrection that forced Fernando de la Rúa out of the presidential palace in a helicopter. It was the "Argentinazo."¹¹ These two days opened up the two years of crisis during which Argentina would renegotiate its internal political system and its relationship to the outside world, and above all, to the IMF.

From that point forth, the *escraches* went beyond the specific aims of HIJOS to become the major form of public demonstration, often planned by direct -democratic process in the vast *asambleas* (popular assemblies) that gathered for direct-democratic deliberation in public parks and squares. Many different art groups intervened in the turmoil that followed, including the *Taller Popular de Serigrafía*, or "People's Silkscreen Workshop." These were artists whose studio practices didn't allow them to contribute directly to the revolt, and who decided instead to work with a process of collective image -making, including silk-screening directly on the tee-shirts of *piquetero* protesters. The themes were indicated by the *piqueteros*, often to commemorate the victims of repression. The work was exemplary of a desire to leave behind the professional role of the artist, to cross class lines and to explore the most immediate use-value of aesthetic creation. The results are a pragmatic, wearable symbolism, an artistic language that moves through the streets, based on drawings which are quite beautiful in the traditional aesthetic sense – as could be seen in an installation of prints on paper at the exhibition *Collective Creativity* in Kassel, Germany, in 2005.¹²



A larger organization arose from a gathering between some 120 people who had documented the two-day uprising of December 2001. The meeting was called by Boedo Films, Cine Insurgente, Contraimagen and Indymedia Argentina in the face of a veritable black-out on the events by the major national media. It was held on January 19, 2002, at the University of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, around the slogan "*Vos lo viviste, no dejes que te sigan mintiendo*" (You lived through it, don't let them go on lying to you). Out of this first meeting came [Argentina Arde](#), named in homage to the radical artistic research project *Tucumán Arde*, exhibited in Rosario in 1968 and rapidly censored by the authorities. The group immediately subdivided into photography, press and video committees, which then multiplied and spread throughout the country with the aim of producing valid and useful information from below, outside the professional hierarchies.¹³ Exhibitions, video compilations and an excellent photo-reportage

newspaper were realized during the two tumultuous years that followed. Indymedia Argentina remains exceptionally active even now. From the larger network emerged the visual art group Arde Arte, practicing a variety of street actions that emphasize participation. One of their most striking interventions, in March 2002, involved groups of demonstrators advancing toward the police with large plaques of reflective material, on which were inscribed the slogan "Vete y Vete" (see yourself and scam).¹⁴

Etcétera did some of their wildest actions at this time, including *Otra realidad es posible* (Another Reality Is Possible), in which they dressed up as a kind of medieval troupe of knives and forks with tin -pot helmets and silvery shields, comically attacking transnational corporations like McDonalds, YPF and Shell with the oversized tableware they had made in an occupied aluminum factory. Their riot-performance recalled the desperate hunger stalking the provinces, but it also represented a fusion between the pot-banging middle-classes and the more militant *piqueteros*, armed with shields and batons. Etcétera's most outlandish event was the *Mierdazo*, in February 2002, when they invited people to hurl shit at the Congress building and to "crap on the system" during the vote of the 2002 national budget.¹⁵ The action had been approved by due process in the inter-barrio assembly and was destined to a huge popular success, leading to a similar assault on banks like HSBC. Television news clips – often the only trace of Etcétera performances, since the group was more concerned with acting than recording – portray the protest beneath the caption, "*Algo Huele Mal en el Congreso*" (something really stinks in Congress).

Many other artists' groups and representational practices could be discussed, but I will close with one last series of works by the Grupo de Arte Callejero, which are the ceramic plaques they created at street level to preserve the memory of those who fell in the uprising of December 19 and 20. One of these plaques recalls the life and death of Gustavo Benedetto, a 23 year-old protester killed by a gunshot outside the enormous HSBC tower in downtown Buenos Aires, allegedly by a bank security guard named Jorge Varando (who was a former collaborator of the dictatorship and had been trained in counter-insurgency at the infamous School of the Americas). The memorial plaque was destroyed several times by the police; but that act was finally filmed and revealed in the media, and the ensuing scandal gave the popular movements the legitimacy they needed to impose this piece of history on the built fabric of the city.¹⁶ This use of visual representation within a social process in order to create a memory of the present can be contrasted to the architecture of Puerto Madero that I described at the outset, with its clear intention to make sure that nothing whatsoever will be remembered – except, perhaps, the non-event of the supposed inauguration of the Puente de la Mujer on December 20, 2001.



The specific opposite of Caltrava's multi-million-dollar bridge could be found in a horizontal monument, a kind of warning sign made by the Grupo de Arte Callejero from a simple piece of printed paper, showing the heraldic insignia of a policeman's cap with a text that calls for *Juicio y Castigo* ("Trial and Punishment"). The paper is fixed to the ground and covered by several coats of clear plastic resin. It's a cheap and practical technique, but one that can remain visible to the public eye for years, if the social forces of memory are strong enough to keep it there.

Coda

The artists discussed here would hardly be known in the North – or recognized in their home country – without *Ex Argentina*, the exhibition organized by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann. The show, held in Cologne in 2004, included most of the artists I have discussed, as well as the Argentineans Sonia Abián and Carlos Piegari, Leon Ferrari, Eduardo Molinari, Proyecto Pluja and Sergio Raimondi. They were juxtaposed to politicized artists operating in the European context, including Bernadette Corporation, Alejandra Riera and Fulvia Carnevale, Jürgen Stollhans and many others. A philosophical foundation was provided by the investigations of Colectivo Situaciones and by the proposals of John Holloway, an Irish emigré to Mexico whose book *Change the World with Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (2002) was as important to the antiglobalization movement in Latin America as it was in Europe.

To stage the confrontation between these different experiences, the organizers created a conceptual map of the exhibition, which they hung on the wall near the entryway (and placed on the cover of the catalogue). To create this map, the choreographed arrival of the Western heads of state at the G8 summit in Cologne on June 18-20, 1999 – a meeting held at the Ludwig Museum where the art exhibition was later staged – was superimposed on the outline of a Buenos Aires freeway bridge, Puente Pueyrredon, where two protesters, Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán, were killed by federal police on June 26, 2002. Thus the outbreak of the antiglobalization movement at the moment of the transnational "Carnival against Capital" on June 18, 1999, was contrasted to the beginnings of a "return to order" in post-insurrection Argentina. Inside the museum itself, a simulacrum of the G8 negotiating table was decorated with pig's heads, to which were attached the names of the heads of state. At this table a German activist group, the *Glücklichen Arbeitslosen* ("Happy Unemployed"), shared a bacchanalian feast with the invited artists on the night before

the opening, leaving the remains as an ironic message to the public. Only in Germany can vanguard Marxist intellectualism still be publicly expressed at this level of sophistication and symbolic violence.

No doubt the allegorical complexities of *Ex Argentina* were not fully translatable to the context of Buenos Aires, where a new version of the show – including contributions by some of the Brazilian artists of *Collective Creativity* – was finally exhibited under the name of *La Normalidad* (“Normality”) in February of 2006.¹⁷ The change of name is attributable to the Argentines themselves, to their awareness of the inexorable repression to which their historical memory is subject; they preferred to explicitly designate the process of normalization against which they continually resist. The exhibition, with its international validation, gave a chance for local residents to measure the extremely innovative character of the interventionist work that had been accomplished in Argentina before the return to normal. Yet perhaps an even more effective statement came one month later, in March 2006, with the exhibition *Estéticas de la memoria* (Aesthetics of Memory), held at the Recoleta Cultural Center thirty years after the onset of the Videla dictatorship, where Etcétera and the Grupo de Arte Callejero proposed “a collective work that seeks to appropriate the institutional space of art, using words as a medium in the face of the empire of the image.”

The exhibition took place in a vastly transformed social landscape, where the government of Nestor Kirchner had sided with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S., reopening trials against the agents of the dictatorship and proposing the establishment of a museum of memory in the former Naval Engineering School (ESMA), which had served as a clandestine torture center. For the two organizing groups, it was a matter of inviting all the activist-artists who had worked on human rights issues over the long period of impunity to come together for a moment of collective debate, reflection on the past and evaluation of the challenges ahead. The medium was to be words, not images. Therefore the walls of the gallery space allotted to them were left blank until the day before the opening. Only then, when it would be too difficult for the museum management to intervene, did the artists write on them the question, “HOW DOES THE STATE JUSTIFY THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS TODAY?” They also listed on the walls the names of 1,888 persons killed by the security forces of the democratic republic, since the end of the dictatorship in 1983.

Notes

1 Thanks for a warm welcome and a lot of insight to the members of the groups Arde Arte, Etcétera, Grupo de Arte Callejero, Taller Popular de Serigrafía and Colectivo Situaciones, as well as Azul Baseotto, Graciela Carnevale, Ana Longoni, Eduardo Molinari and Santiago García Navarro.

2 See the estimates provided by the critical economist Eduardo Basualdo, in *Sistema político y modelo de acumulación en la Argentina: Notas sobre el transformismo argentino durante la valorización financiera, 1946-2001* (Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Ediciones, 2001).

3 Quoted in Antonius C.G.M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 172. Robben gives extensive development to the notion of “cultural war.”

4 Unpublished manuscript.

5 Susana Kaiser, “*Escraches*: demonstrations, communication and political memory in post-dictatorial Argentina,” in *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2002), p. 505.

6 For an account of the origins of H.I.J.O.S., see Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy*

(Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 2004), ch. 6, "Youth Finds a Way."

7 On the *murga*, see "Carnaval es dar vuelta el mundo," in *HIJOS* 4 (1998), at www.hijos-capital.org.ar.

8 The story is told in an interview with Etcétera, "Al que lucha por la realidad la hacen fama de loco," in *Ex Argentina: Pasos para huir del trabajo al hacer*, exhibition catalogue, Ludwig Museum Cologne, March 6 -May 16, 2004 (Buenos Aires: Interzona Editora/Cologne: Walter König, 2004), pp. 238-41.

9 Colectivo Situaciones, *Genocida en el barrio: Mesa de Escrache Popular* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones de mano en mano, 2002).

10 The image can be seen at:

www.pushthebuttonplay.com/dlwd/scotini/disobedience/imgs/aquiviven.jpg. 

11 The two best books I have found on these events are Colectivo Situaciones, *19 y 20: Apuntes para el nuevo protagonismo social* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones de mano en mano, 2002) and Raúl Zibechi, *Genealogía de la revuelta* (La Plata: Letra Libre/Montevideo; Nordan-Comunidad, 2003).

12 *Kollektive Kreativität/Collective Creativity*, exhibition catalogue, Fridericianum, Kassel, May 1 -July 17, 2005. The exhibition, curated by the What, How & for Whom group from Croatia, included Etcétera, the GAC and the Taller Popular de Serigrafía, as well as the archive of the Tucumán Arde project, preserved by Graciela Carnevale; it gave the Argentine artists a chance to meet radical art groups from all over the world and to strengthen ties with the Brazilian groups Bijari, Contra Filé and The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.

13 A master's thesis exists on Argentina Arde, in English, by Veronika Miralles; it can be consulted at <http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/handle/1892/2046?mode=full>.

14 An image can be seen at the group's website, www.geocities.com/ardearte2001/arde_acciones.htm; it is also reproduced in *Collective Creativity*, op. cit., p 173.

15 Both these actions are discussed in the interview in *Ex Argentina*, op. cit., and documented in the video that Etcétera prepared for *Collective Creativity*.

16 For this case and its background, see the article by Naomi Klein, "Out of the Ordinary," published in *The Guardian*, January 25, 2003, www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,,880651,00.html. Also see Klein's film *The Take, 87" 05"*, 2004.

17 For this version of the exhibition, Bureau d'Études realized a Spanish-language version of the work *Crisis*, printed as a foldable map in thousands of copies which could thus be distributed freely to those who had inspired its creation.

[holmes 3 cs3](#)

This entry was posted on April 28, 2007 at 1:38 pm and is filed under [1](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

4 Responses to "Remember the Present"

[Book Materials « Continental Drift](#) Says:

February 2, 2008 at 2:07 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] -Remember the Present: Representations of Crisis in Argentina [...]

[kashklash:: exchanging the future » Blog Archive » Currency evolution and crisis](#) Says:

December 3, 2008 at 6:15 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Entitled Crisis, this map by Bureau d'Études is a chronology of the world financial system at the end of the 20th century. This representation shows the evolution of various currencies as well as political crises. This chronology show both the failure of the financial markets and the popular responses to these failures. For example, it represents alternative monetary systems that has been introduced during the Argentinean crisis. Brian Holmes describes this more thoroughly in this blogpost. [...]

art and politics Says:

[August 17, 2009 at 3:21 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Thoughts on art and memory

Malka Cooper Says:

[February 2, 2010 at 3:36 am](#) | [Reply](#)

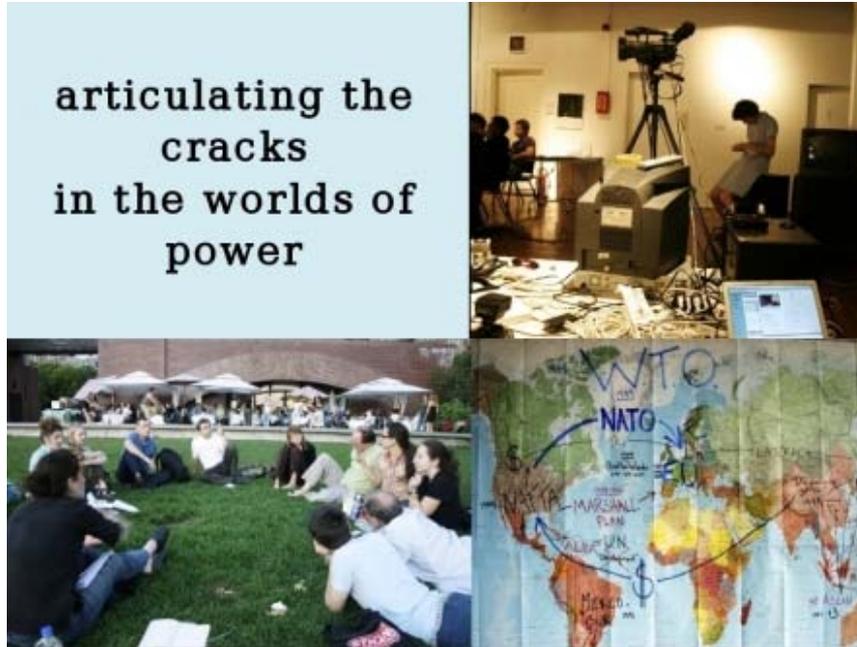
I trust you would not have reservations if I placed a part of this on my univeristy blog?

-> I am happy for people to use these texts. A link back to the complete version would be appropriate. This is now part of my new book I'm glad to say: *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* (Eindhoven/Zagreb/Istanbul: Van Abbemuseum/WHW, 2009). All the best, Brian

Activist Research

By Brian Holmes

Geopolitics to Geopoetics



Seminar at 16 Beaver St., NYC (2006)

How does a world come together? How does a world fall apart? Neoliberalism made these questions into one – and September 11 showed that there can be no perfect synthesis. In the twenty-first century the continents have gone adrift. Here is where the maps of a new “great game” unfold, for activists and also for researchers. Locating yourself against the horizons of disaster, then finding the modes and scales of concrete intervention into lived experience, are the pathways for grassroots intellectual action in the contemporary world-system.

Neolib goes Neocon

A double dynamic is at work today, which destroys what it constructs, dissolves what it unifies. And that is exactly what we all have to deal with. One example is the continuous enlargement of the European Union since the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, right up to the fiasco of the ultraliberal constitution, proposed by continental elites and rejected by popular referenda in 2005. The end of the historic split with the East now appears as the beginning of a Core Europe/New Europe divide, with the social-democratic bastions of the West seeking shelter from the global market, while post-Communist states refuse any speed

limits on their road to riches. The backlash against Europe has largely been the work of traditional sovereignists, with leftist forces wavering between their national and internationalist ideals. But the absence of a fully democratic constitution only favors corporate lobbies and big -power deals, leaving yesterday's parliaments as a smokescreen over tomorrow's real decisions.

An even more striking case is the self-eclipsing rise of the WTO, which in the 1990s seemed fated for the role of a depoliticized World Government. No sooner was the international trading regime consolidated than tariff wars sprang up between the US and the EU, protests flared around the globe and the process of bloc formation gathered steam, with negotiations for both the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and a renewed Mercosur in the Southern Cone, plus bold new moves toward an expanded ASEAN system (joined by China, Japan and South Korea). And don't forget the Venezuelan proposal of ALBA, or Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas, calling for a leftist "dawn" in Latin America after the sundown of Yankee-style free trade. Today the FTAA has already failed, while North America's NAFTA has been strengthened by the so-called Security and Prosperity Partnership of 2005 and the East Asian system has continued its inexorable climb toward economic hegemony. But the international monetary crisis continually looms; and as any historian remembers, trading-bloc formation after the collapse of the gold standard was a prelude to the global conflicts of the 1940s.

For the strangest embrace of contradictory forces in the world today, consider the symbiotic tie between industrialized China and the financialized United States. China constantly struggles to produce what the US constantly struggles to consume – at an ecological risk that no one can even measure. To make the wheel of fortune go on spinning, the Chinese lend their manufacturing profits back to the US, so as to prop up speculation on the almighty dollar and keep the world's largest market soluble. Every economic crisis makes this equation more uncertain: and over the last decade we've been seeing more and more of them. What will happen if the Chinese pipeline to the US Treasury stops flowing is anybody's guess; but America's attempts to save its fading hegemony have already begun to look desperate, ever since the New Orleans floodwaters receded into a domestic quagmire that clearly recalled the international disaster in Iraq. A new period of systemic upheaval could already be upon us. Levels of conflict are rising all across the globe, and the problem of how to intervene as a world citizen becomes more complex and daunting than ever.

The counter-globalization movements marked the first attempt at a widespread, meshworked response to the chaos of the post-'89 world system. These movements were an uneasy mix between democratic sovereignists, no-border libertarians (David Graeber's "new anarchists") and traditional, union-oriented Keynesians. They could all critique the failures of neoliberal governance, but they all diverged and faltered before its cultural consequences. And the latter wasted no time in coming. By undercutting social solidarities and destroying ecological equilibriums, the neoliberal program of accelerated capital expansion immediately spawned its neoconservative shadow in the form of a military, moral and religious return to order. Nothing could have made better cover for the denial of democratic critique, the clampdown on civil liberties and the continuing budgetary shift from social welfare to corporate security. The backlash against globalization became a powerful new tool of manipulation, used by the same elites who launched the whole process in the first place.

The current scramble to consolidate regional blocs reflects the search for a compromise between global reach and territorial stability. Beyond any "clash of civilizations," finding a feasible scale

for contemporary social relations has now become a pressing question. From this perspective, the free-market policy of the Bush administration in Latin America is comparable to Al Qaeda's dream of an Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East: both want to impose a single ideology for political and economic ends. The networked production system forming around Japan and China, or the EU's continuous diplomatic courtship of Russia despite flagrant atrocities in Chechnya, give similar insights into this quest for a workable scale, which is essentially that of a "continent," however elastic or imprecise the term may be. Paradoxically, continentalization is not countered but is driven ahead by global unification. Behind the tectonic shifts at the turn of the millennium lies the accumulated violence of a thirty-year neoliberal push toward a borderless world, wide open to the biggest and most predatory corporations.

Disorienting Compass

The extraordinary breadth and speed of the current metamorphosis – a veritable phase-change in the world system – leaves progressive leftist activists facing a double challenge, or a double opportunity. They must remap the cultural and political parameters that have been transformed by the neoconservative veneer, while remaining keenly aware of the neoliberal principles that remain active beneath the surface. In this effort the social sciences are the key, whenever it's possible to emancipate them from their illusory neutrality. Economic geography is crucial for tracing the global division of labor and grasping the wider frameworks of what European activists call "precarity." The sociology of organizations reveals who is in control, how power is distributed and maintained in a chaotic world. The study of technics charts out the future in advance, to show how it operates and on whom. And the toolkits of social psychology offer insights into the structures of willful blindness and confused consent that uphold the reigning hegemonies. This kind of analysis is critically important for activist initiatives, which can stumble all too easily into the programmed dead-ends of manipulated ideologies.

Yet the disciplines also have to be overcome, dissolved into experimentation. Autonomous inquiry demands a rupture from the dominant cartographies. Both compass and coordinates must be reinvented if you really want to transform the dynamics of a changing world-system. Only by disorienting the self and uprooting epistemic certainties could anyone hope to inject a positive difference into the unconscious dynamics of the geopolitical order.

How could activist-researchers move to disorient the reigning maps, to transform the dominant cartographies, without falling into the never-never lands of aesthetic extrapolation? The solution is inseparable from its embodiment, from its social elaboration. Just try this experiment in public presence: literally tracing out the flows of capital, the currents of warfare and the rise and fall of transnational organizations since 1945, using hand-drawn dates and arrows on a conventional Mercator projection. The effect is to build a cartographic frame-narrative of the emergence, complexification and crisis of US hegemony since 1945; but at the same time, through gesture and movement, to act out the ways that geopolitical flows traverse living bodies and become part of haptic consciousness, entering what some of us have called "felt public space." Intellectual work becomes intensive when it is unmoored from normalizing frameworks, acted out as a social experiment in a self-organized seminar, in a squat or an occupied building, at a counter-summit, on a train hurtling through Siberia... As supranational regions engulf ever-larger populations and the passage of shifting borders becomes an ever-more common activity, geopolitics is increasingly experienced in the flesh and in the imaginary, it is traced out on the collective skin. This is when geopoetics becomes a vital activity, a promise of liberation.

How to interpret artworks and artistic-activist interventions so as to highlight the forms taken by the geopoetic imaginary? Through analytical work on the dynamics of form and the efficacy of symbolic ruptures, one can try to approach the diagrammatic level where the cartography of sensation is reconfigured through experiment. This level comes constantly into play whenever it is a matter of moving through analysis back into intervention. Because of the transverse nature of global flows, it is possible to draw on the experiences of faraway acts of resistance in the midst of one's own confrontations with power, both in its brute objective forms, and in its subtle interiorizations. The network of inspiration between the pot-banging *cacerolazos* of the Argentinean insurrection in 2001 and the almost continuous urban mobilizations in Spain, from February 15, 2003, all the way up to the ouster of the mendacious and power hungry Aznar government in March 2004, is a large-scale example of this process of transduction. This is the generative side of the contemporary continental drift. To sense the dynamics of resistance and creation across the interlinked world space is to start taking part in the solidarities and modes of cooperation that have been emerging across the planet since the late 1990s.

Just Doing It

If you want to accomplish anything like this kind of research, don't expect much assistance from the existing institutions. Most are still busy adapting to the dictates of neoliberal management; and the best we could achieve during the first big round of meshworked critique was to hijack a few of their people, to divert a few of their resources. What's more, the open windows that do subsist are likely to close with any further hardening of the neocon turn. Self-organized groups will have to generate a collective learning process about the effects of social atomization and economic subjugation – essentially, a new understanding of the forms of contemporary alienation – and they will have to explore the reactions to those trends, whether intensely negative (the fascist and racist closure of formerly democratic societies) or positive and forward-looking (activist interventions, the invention of new modes of social self-management, cultural reorientations, ecologically viable forms of development). Another goal of the critique is to raise the level of debate and engagement in the cultural and artistic sectors – the vital media of social expression – where a narcissistic blindness to the violence of current conditions is still the norm. Yet a further realm that urgently needs exploration is the matrix of interlinguistic exchange and the crisscrossing vectors of translation, beyond the common currency of imperial English. Other possible worlds will only be articulated by a multitude of tongues, speaking the relations of the scales in their own words and in the words of strangers: intimate, urban, national, continental, global, all overflowing their idiosyncratic dictions. Geopoetics is the revelry of Babel.

Still the most important aim, for me anyway, is to help relaunch the grassroots mobilizations that were so promising around the turn of the millennium. "Help" is the word here, because there is no intellectual privilege in the activist domain. Activist-researchers can contribute to a short, middle and long-term analysis of the crisis by examining and inventing new modes of intervention at the micropolitical scales where even the largest social movements begin.

Who can play this great game? Whoever is able to join or form a meshwork of independent researchers. What are the pieces, the territories, the wagers and rules? Whichever ones your group finds most productive and contagious. How does the game continue when the ball goes out of your field or domain? Through shared meetings in a meshwork of meshworks, through collective actions, positions, projects and publications. And most importantly, who

wins? Whoever can provoke some effective resistance to the downward spiral of human coexistence at the outset of the twenty-first century.

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2 Responses to “Activist Research”

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

March 20, 2008 at 1:45 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] –Continental Drift [...]

Book - machine quotidienne Says:

July 27, 2009 at 8:47 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] 11-Continental Drift: [...]

Articulating the Cracks in the Worlds of Power

16 Beaver Group talking with Brian Holmes



Between Us, Demilitarized Zone, Korea

16 Beaver: *When we started thinking about doing something like a seminar together, a few ideas emerged:*

A. We didn't want it to be a seminar in the ordinary sense, nor a workshop, nor a conference, nor a convergence, nor even a "model" for others.

B. We wanted to organize it with the minimum amount of money and without relying on any outside organizations, grants, or institutions.

C. We wanted it to be the beginning of a collaboration, between 16beaver and Tangent University and Brian Holmes and other colleagues ... to explore a new way of working together and sharing our know-what and know-how.

D. We wanted to bring people together who have been associated with our respective efforts to engage over a longer term in actually influencing one another.

E. To combine together, even more than our past collective efforts, our research interests and our activities, to try and make sense of what is taking place around us in the name of "politics" or "economic rationality" or "development," and to find within our own practices the spaces and modes which might pose the greatest challenges and problems to "business as usual."

F. To not be afraid to ask the most ambitious of questions, or to fail entirely.

Having arrived at year 2, we have a much larger number of collaborators and individuals who will be contributing to our ongoing inquiries. So these questions to you, Brian, are not meant in any way to reduce the voice of these inquiries to one spokesperson. They are instead meant to come back to some of the points of departure we shared and to explore both the theoretical concerns as well as the organizational ones.

In relation to the ideas we were exploring in the first year, what would you outline as the main theses?

Brian Holmes: Well, of course there are different levels, analytic and metaphorical, poetic and political, all entangled in the title, "Continental Drift." And since we've tended in our work together to be strict, sociological and painstakingly historical, with an

obsessive attention to economics, infrastructure and ideology, I'd like to turn that all upside down for a change and begin with the poetics. On the one hand, the title evokes geology, plate tectonics, the geohistorical splitting of great landmasses, the telluric shifts that rip continents apart, the incredibly powerful and violent energies coursing through the world today. It's a name for immensity. On the other hand, it immediately recalls something intimate and experimental, the situationist practice of drifting, of losing yourself, of abandoning conventional purposes and rationalized coordinates to seek out radically different orientations in experience, but on an unexpected planetary scale - as though you could wander across entire regions, spanning the gaps between worlds, or spiraling weightlessly through civilizations. So it's a name for intimacy in immensity. At the same time, without any possible escape, the overblown image of continental drift tends to deflate into its opposite, something familiar or downright banal: the basic condition of global unification by technology and money, where it's possible for privileged individuals to move freely but ignorantly about the earth, like taking the train across town for a buck and a quarter. So if you weave all those sensations together, the whole thing speaks of fault-lines in an overwhelming global unity, and of the elusive quest for a direct experience of a split reality. As though you could embrace the movement of a world that falls apart, as though you could embody the splintering cracks, the bifurcations, the shattering, and on the far side, begin understanding what it will be like to have to pick up the pieces....

16B: *OK, so what about the economy, the sociology, that obsessively analytic dimension?*

BH: What we managed to explore last year was above all a single thesis, drawn from the history of political economy: Karl Polanyi's notion of the "double movement." This refers to the fundamental paradox of capitalism, which by commodifying everything, by bringing every aspect of human experience under the rules of profit and reinvestment, at the same time provokes a defensive reaction of breakup, of escape, whether through withdrawal and autarky, warlike aggression, or the search for a better alternative. Polanyi, whose major work is called *The Great Transformation*, is really an ecological thinker. He shows how the notion of the self-



Between Us, Garibong Dong, Seoul.

regulating market, which is supposed to assign a proper price to everything and thereby secure the necessary resources for the continual production of an ever-expanding range of goods, fails tragically to account for all the factors involved in the reproduction of land, of labor, and of the very institution of exchange, money itself. What happens instead is that careless trading in these "fictitious commodities" tends to destroy them, to blight the land, to exhaust and even kill the laborer, to ruin the value of the money through unchecked speculation. Polanyi showed how these self-destructive processes operated up to the First World War, how they ultimately wiped out the international gold standard that had been built up by British liberalism, and then brought on the Great Depression. What resulted was a division of the world into five rival currency-blocs, which went to deadly war against each other from 1938 to 1945. After the war, of course, the people of the world had to pick up the pieces, for better or worse; they had to establish new balances, new systems. Giving in to the history obsession, I tried to explain both the new basis of stability and the potential weaknesses of the postwar world-system that came together under the domination of the United States. With David Harvey's help we analyzed the very shaky state of that system today, with all the strains that neoliberal globalization is now placing on the world ecology, on

the conditions of existence for the global labor force, and even on the hegemony of the US dollar, whose continuing status as the international reserve currency has never been so uncertain.

16B: *That's something we realized during the first sessions: empires always find a way to tax, and the US has done it through the dollar.*

BH: Exactly. By printing more dollars for export, by floating more Treasury bonds, by manipulating interest rates to create a favorable trade conditions, even by exploiting huge monetary crises, like the so-called "Asian crisis" in 1997-89. But all that finally destroys any possibility of cooperation. Observing the first movements toward the constitution of rival blocs - the emergence of the EU, of the Japanese-Chinese-Southeast Asian trading system, of NAFTA itself, of a potential socialist pole in Latin America around Venezuela - was a way to ask whether the "double movement" described by Polanyi might be repeating itself before our eyes. It was also a way to understand Al Qaeda's call for a "new Caliphate" in the Middle East as another defensive reaction - though a particularly desperate and dangerous one - to the neoliberal push for global integration under highly exploitative unilateralist rules. I was very convinced by all those ideas, but at the same time, quite uncertain as to whether anyone would be ready to hear such things. Now, just one year later, all that speculation about a possibly violent breakup of the postwar world-system looks a lot less unlikely, after the experience of Hurricane Katrina, after the further decline of Iraq and Afghanistan into chaos, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the continually deteriorating situation in Palestine. Maybe we didn't go far enough with the geopolitics! But at another level, closer to everyday experience, we also explored the consequences of the commodification of knowledge and culture, which many now consider a fourth "fictitious commodity." As people working with knowledge and culture - as "immaterial laborers" - we tried to look around us, on Wall Street where 16beaver is located, and see what the pinnacle of networked symbolic exchange really entails. It's tremendously important to understand the degree to which all forms of cultural and scientific production are increasingly being functionalized for market exchange, whose quintessence is the



Continental Drift - Chapter 1 - Part I with David Harvey

trading of immaterial goods on Wall Street. Financialization means the lived experience of semiotic obsolescence: the fact of producing symbolic trash, numbers that vanish infinitely into other numbers, the meaninglessness of making money with money. There is no inherently progressive aspect to immaterial labor, and "Empire" is still driven and piloted by imperialist nation-states, above all Britain and the USA. But still there is a deep ambiguity in the practice of immaterial labor, to the extent that it too is subject to a double movement - or in other words, to the extent that we too can recoil from the pressure of total commodification of ourselves, and look for ways to escape, or ways to fight back culturally, or better alternatives for the use of our minds, our expressive capacities and our sensoriums. I think that this uncertainty over the appropriate uses of culture and knowledge is potentially something which can be shared today, even across the geographical divides.

16B: *Based on the contributions others gave last year, what additional questions emerged for you, if any?*

BH: What emerges for me first of all is a better sense of the possible, of what we can really do together. Last year we had two

separate sessions, each very intense, but different. The first was more formal, more difficult in a way, and I think whether rightly or wrongly I put out a lot of pressure to up the intellectual ante, to introduce a tremendous amount of political and economic theory into what have largely been artistic and activist discussions. I think that was important to most people, and at the same time there were some very good interventions by the more activist-minded participants, mostly people who have worked together in Chicago, who have learned how to cooperate on very risky and often very successful projects, and who injected some elements of group process and horizontality that you can easily lose sight of in a heavily arty and academic context like New York.

The second session was somehow more relaxed, basically because we had gotten to know each other, and also because we had established some shared vocabularies. I forget at which point there emerged the notion of "felt public space" - related, I think, to a kind of dodgy reference to the artist Joseph Beuys - but anyway, the phrase was definitely an icebreaker, and it gives a good description, not only of the conversations that we had in that second session, but also of the kind of enlarged conversations that we might get to this time. By pooling experiences and talking through the details and difficulties of work that has been done in a wide range of places and contexts, what emerges is nothing homogeneous, but an incredible texture of differences and open possibilities that can't be reduced either to political sloganeering or to discrete little rungs leading up the golden ladder of the art world. Instead there is just a world out there, the real one: and little animated bits of it come walking through the doors of 16beaver. After this excruciating year, with the new outbreak of war during the summer and the realization, by so many people around the planet, that the problems facing us are deep and vast and unlikely to just resolve themselves with passing time or the usual elections, what stands out is a heightened sense of the importance of speaking with other people, and of listening. The hope is to extend the conversations of last year into a network of feelers that reach out further and maybe touch all of us a little deeper, so that we can really get somewhere with all the crazy hyperstimulated global wandering that present-day life seems to require.



Continental Drift - Chapter 1 - Part 1 Concluding Discussion

16B: *For some people, it is difficult to distinguish what we are attempting here from a colloquium that would happen say at some university or art institution. Is it important to differentiate?*

BH: Well, the problem I have, and maybe others have it too, is that the formalism and the professionalism of the museum-university-festival circuit sometimes keeps you from knowing either who you are, or what you're really talking about. This is not to say we should close the museums, picket the universities, burn the libraries or go back to the land or whatever. But it is to say that unconventional and dissenting ideas don't often come out of established and conventional functions. And when everybody tacitly agrees that cultural production can only take place under the beneficent gaze of the market and the state, and on their payrolls, what you get in my opinion is very dull and timid attitudes combined with grotesquely simulated and overblown emotions. Or, from the more ambitious and professional types, you may get hyper-specialized discourses and elaborate aesthetic affects, this sort of highly valorized cultural production which appears irrefutable when it comes out of MIT or MoMA, but still doesn't seem to be what we're looking for.

To put it in more theoretical terms, there is no possibility of generating a critical counter-power - or counter-public, or counter-public sphere - when there is no more search for relative autonomy, or when the collective self (*autos*) no longer even asks the question of how to make its own law (*nomos*). So the importance of this kind of project is to use it as a moment of experimentation, not just in the quest for the perfect theory or the perfect procedure, but cosmologically, to rearrange the stars above your head. Such events don't often happen, the only solution is do-it-yourself. It's also part of the search for the outside, which has existential necessity. I think I've learned the most about art and social theory from counter-summits with lines of teargas-belching cops, and from those kinds of anarchist summer universities where you camp out for a week and have a hard time finding a shower, but also get to cooperate directly with people whose words and gestures aren't totally dissociated from their bodies and their actions. Well, since those moments I have felt a need to develop more complex discourses and experiments, but hopefully not more conventional and complacent ones; and it seems like with this project, 16beaver has been a kind of convergence center in many people's search for different formats.

16B: *Organizationally speaking, what do you think is the importance of these kinds of activities? Although we may be reluctant to employ the word model, we are positing a certain mode of research/practice?*

BH: I guess we're positing it. I would guess that everyone involved in the organizing is secretly hoping that this will be some kind of turning point for their own practice, both in terms of the kind of critical research into contemporary society that is being proposed, and as a way to get beyond a certain social limit, a certain dependency on conventional institutions for fixing the calendars, setting the topics and themes, generally guiding the rhythm and focus of public interactions. I would guess that we're all dreaming that with a little extra effort, we could regain a certain intellectual and artistic dignity, a sense that we are establishing our own questions and problematics, while setting up experimental spaces to deal with them. I think this is a widely shared aspiration right now, not only for people who are operating autonomously and

independently, but also for others who are pushing the limits of institutions and regaining the capacity to do something challenging in public. But it still remains to do it, to fulfill collective goals and get some palpable and usable results - which probably explains the reluctance to talk about models in the meantime!

16B: *What is the relation between this mode of inquiry we are positing and the topics we are actually exploring together?*

BH: For me, the relation would be in the possibility to have some transformative influence on the damnably complex reality that confronts everyone today, precisely the political-economic-cultural situations that we're trying to discuss. For example, you've probably heard me use the phrase "liberal fascism." What does that mean? Why should people involved with art and culture have to deal with such an idea? I've been trying to clarify the preconditions for liberal fascism on the psychosocial level, since I started my work on the flexible personality about five years ago. But at this point I think we should collectively define the concept, now that the reality exists, now that so-called Democrats have voted for the Military Commissions Act, which suspends habeas corpus and the right to a fair trial, or even the right not to be tortured, for anyone arbitrarily designated an "unlawful enemy combatant." Meanwhile, in case you managed to forget it, a corporation named Kellogg Brown & Root, aka Halliburton, has been given a \$385 million contract to establish - I'm quoting directly from their website - "temporary detention and processing capabilities" to augment existing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities, "in the event of an emergency influx of immigrants into the U.S., or to support the rapid development of new programs." New programs? Which new programs? What kind of potential is hiding in that juxtaposition between "unlawful enemies" and domestic Guantánamos? Why don't people talk about it?

One thing is that there's no adequate language to describe what's going on. But the other problem is that defining a concept doesn't necessarily help you do anything about the reality. What used to



Camp Campaign Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans

be known as the Left in the USA has lost any significant capacity to move from theoretical definitions to effective actions. Under such conditions, there is really no use to go blithely ahead with utopian thinking, it becomes hypocrisy. But utopian thinking is at the very origin of cultural practice, so far as I'm concerned. So this is what you call a crisis, a life-threatening moment. We know we should all "go out in the streets," but when we get there, there's no there there. We have to create arguments so strong that they can merge with feelings, in order to reshape reality. By trying to articulate an examination of contemporary conditions with a cooperative, non-professional public practice, I think we are moving away from the self-imposed blindness and silence that characterizes the hypermobile, hyperproductive citizen under a regime of liberal fascism. But there is much more to be done, and I am hoping to learn more about the practices of making things public that different people in the group have been developing.

16B: *Given that in this second year, we are attempting to expand our questions from last year, what would you say from your perspective are the developments intellectually in*

your own work, discursively in terms of writings you have come across, and politically in the last year?

BH: Well, a year is a long time, so it may take a while to answer! Certainly in my own work I have pursued the inquiry that began with the text on "Neoliberal Appetites," which I presented at 16beaver last year. The point is to see how specific social institutions impress upon us the basic underlying procedure of neoliberal subjectivity, which consists in understanding yourself, your accomplishments and your own creativity, indeed your own desire, as *human capital*, to be nourished and cherished in terms of its potential returns on the market, and to be used as a measurement of the value of any kind of experience whatsoever. Of course, this capital is also something to be risked in particular ventures, the way you risk your money on the stock market. I think that both museums and universities are now doing a lot to encourage this kind of self-valuation among intellectuals and artists, through the exaltation of creativity as a productive force, and through the institution of intellectual property as a technique for reifying that force, making inventions into contractual "things" that can be securely owned. I have written a text called "The Artistic Device" to explore how neoliberal subjectivation takes place in the knowledge society, notably by examining a performance where an artist takes on the role of a day trader. The text also looks at a deliberate attempt to escape this form of subjectivation, to establish a new cooperative ethic and even a new imaginary, inseparable from the immanent experience of crossing a continent on the trans-Siberian train. The text ends with a Foucauldian analysis of a British university museum that's now under construction, called The Panopticon Museum. But I can guarantee you, this is not the same analysis of centralized power and internalized surveillance that has been repeated for the last thirty years. "The Artistic Device" is a text that people might want to read before our sessions. In addition to that I have been structuring a book on the whole problematic, with essays on the artists Ricardo Basbaum and Marko Peljhan, on the concept of swarming and its limits, on Felix Guattari and his schizoanalytic cartographies, as well as other things in the works. It's all online at the Continental Drift section of www.u-tangente.org.



unfair TRADE Jonathan Lowe's Shop, Carrick on Shannon, Ireland

Outside my work, a particularly interesting discursive event has been the publication of two essays by Malcom Bull, "The Limits of Multitude" and "States of Failure." These use the language of political philosophy to point to something very much like Polanyi's "double movement": namely an attempt to consolidate a World Government, which inherently fails and whose failure gives rise to what Bull calls the "dissipative structures" of a new multi-polar world. In "States of Failure" Bull shows the root impossibility of a world run by pure economics, as in the Clintonian dream of the World Trade Organization. Such a World Government either becomes a full-blown global state with military powers, or it dissolves, in various fashions, under the influence of different groups and social formations. What becomes clear at the end of the text, in a few amazing pages, is that this dissolution is already underway, and that the whole political question is how to keep it as peaceful as possible: that's where the specific character and orientation of the "dissipative structures" has so much importance. I think it can be interesting for the philosophically minded to read those texts before the upcoming Continental Drift sessions, as a

way to understand that the issues we are dealing with here are very much those of our times. Bull's development of the concept of World Government also vindicates, in a general way at least, the speculative research that my friends in Bureau d'Etudes have been doing for years.

The main thrust of my own research, however, has been in another direction, spurred on by the long-term realities of conflict and the particularly insane war of the summer months. It comes partially to light in a text called "Peace-for-War," which I wrote for the conference series recorded at www.dictionaryofwar.org. But I have a lot left to do before I can complete this argument. In order to grasp the strange mix, in the current American administration, between a kind of archaic Cold-War mindset and a very futurist, hi-tech practice of preemption, I have been looking into the early period of cybernetics, which was the great applied social science of the postwar period. Basically it's about control through negative feedback, or error control - like an anti-aircraft gun gradually homing in on its target, with the assistance of its automated tracking device and its human operator. This was the primary model for the early worldwide control systems that were installed after WWII, typically leaving a very reduced place for the human operator, as a kind of logical calculator and biological servomechanism nested inside the larger machine. The research shows how the fulfillment and closure of something like World Government was sought through the applications of cybernetic logic to city planning and to organizational and technological system-building at a global scale. But it also shows that the ambition to constitute a "closed world" (the title of a great book by Paul N. Edwards) was already overcome on the theoretical level in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the innovations of second-order cybernetics, with its emphasis on positive rather than negative feedback. Second-order cybernetics was first defined by a guy named Heinz von Foerster, who tried to understand all the perturbations that arise when the observer is part of the machine that he or she observes, and attempts to reorient or transform. Rather than seeking to preserve the balanced state of a homeostatic system, second-order cybernetics tries to map out how a system unbalances itself, alters its very parameters and rules, then goes through phase-changes provoked by the excess of

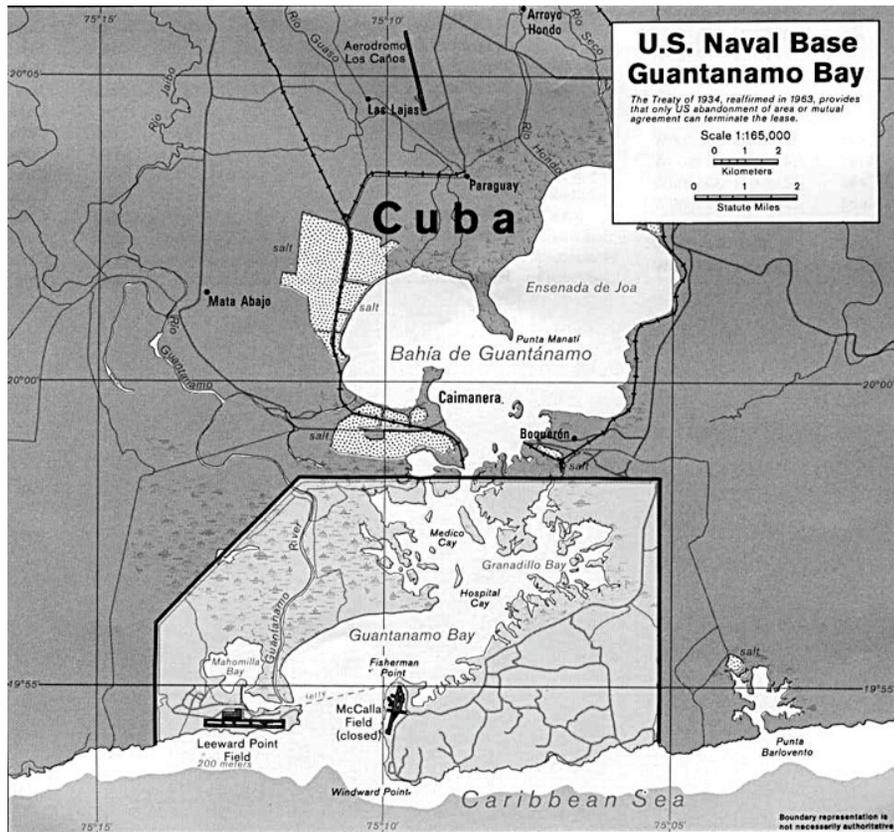
positive feedback. In fact, the notion of "dissipative structures" would come in right here. Similar ideas were taken up and played out in daily life by the counter-cultures, as a way to break down the grip of monolithic control systems on our minds. I think that if you look back on the psychedelic "acid tests" that were done around San Francisco in the mid-sixties, and at the particular role of electronic media as a kind of delirious counter- or alter-information source in those experiences, you get a first inkling of this kind of systemic unbalancing.

Recently I've been reading a lot of texts by Felix Guattari to understand the deeper principles of counter-cultural subversion, and I think Deleuze and Guattari's work does exactly that: it overflows cybernetic control through an excess of nomadic desire, in an aesthetic equivalent to the kinds of guerrilla tactics that were able to overcome the rationalist battlefield strategies of the US imperial system. Much of what we think of as avant-garde art still tries to pursue this kind of disruptive, overflowing movement. However, what the strategy of subversion ultimately led to, when postmodern capitalism had finished recycling it back into a new functional pattern, was the optimistic emphasis on innovation and phase changes that was characteristic of the New Economy. Second-order cybernetics, reborn as complexity theory, became the master discourse of the 1990s, of post-modernism, of the Internet boom: it was the cynical reason of immaterial labor, something I already more or less described in "The Flexible Personality." Semiotic chaos was made into a productive principle, as becomes clear when you look at a landmark book like "Increasing Returns and Path Dependency in the Economy" published by W.B. Arthur in 1994, which specifically focuses on the role of positive feedback in the creation of financial values. But this kind of economic logic couldn't last, it was just too unstable. In parallel to the collapse of the New Economy and the World Trade Towers, what we saw coming to the fore, with incredible suddenness, were more militant versions of emergence, practiced first by the antiglobalization movements, then very differently by the networked terrorists. In the 1990s, the system believed it could thrive on its capacity to destabilize itself. But in the end, that was an illusion.



Williamsburg (not) for Sale Brooklyn, New York

What we finally arrive at is a desperate moment where the US government tries to regain or prolong the paranoid fantasy of static control promised by the Cold-War image of World Government, but now through an entirely new, extremely dynamic strategy of "preempting emergence," to borrow the title of a brilliant article by Melinda Cooper, which is the third text I'd like to recommend. The individual's sense of a desiring, creative and valuable self at risk in an unpredictable world - in other words, the neoliberal appetite for self-capitalization - is paralleled on a macro level by a government that lashes out with its full hegemonic power in the attempt to annihilate risks which at the same time it continually re-creates, by its own compulsive drive to extend neoliberalism's constitutive instability to the entire earth. Here we have a situation as patently mad as the Cold War was, with all its strategic zero-sum games of Mutually Assured Destruction. And we see this new form of civilizational madness being built around us, in the form of the security architecture of biometrics, used for the computerized tracking and targeting of singularities on their labyrinthine paths through the world-space. This hyper-individualized control obsession underlies the liberal fascism of the Military Commissions Act.



Map for Camp Campaign

In the face of the long-term bid by the US to achieve a kind of total planetary lockdown, societies in danger have reacted in two ways: by developing dangerous and aggressive forms of chaotic emergence, and by plunging into archaic religious identities which do not obey the rational models of mainframe cybernetics. In other words, they have reacted by risking the future and hiding in the past, which is the same symptomatic movement that we identified last year as "neolib goes neocon." The Bush administration itself has become at once archaic, in its dependency on a religious address to world populations, and hypermodern, in its attempt to institute a molecular surveillance of the future. But there's no room for a sane response on those two opposed planes: what we need is a way to survive and flower in a present that's open to becoming and alterity. So all of the above is just a more precise, perhaps deeper and more urgent way of asking the basic question: What to do in the face of the double movement of contemporary

capitalism, with its disastrous consequences? Or in other words, how can we "subvert" (if that's still the word) a system which is so dramatically and dangerously failing in its simultaneous attempts to instrumentalize the archaic and to preempt emergence?

16B: *Based on that response, one question is whether what you outline above is compatible with a multi-scale social ontology as proposed by some thinkers like Manuel De Landa. (consisting of individuals, families, groups, communities, neighborhood associations, social and cultural groups, activist groups, small and medium sized corporations, unions, courts, towns, cities, city councils, regional groups, universities, large enterprises, states, state governments, nations, federal governments, national political organizations, media organizations, lobby groups, ngo's, international bodies, int'l courts, global corporations, conglomerates, trading blocs,)? The question is not meant to undermine the proposals we have examined so far, nor to reject the assertion that there are extremely powerful forces attempting to preempt emergence, nor even to deny the fact that there are large concentrations of power in the hands of a shrinking number of players. It is meant instead to demand a theoretical approach that does not reduce the complexity of our societies - an approach which makes it more plausible to retain spaces for contradiction as well as spaces for hope, for the heterogeneous potentialities which will alter the course of history.*

BH: Well, I definitely agree, and what we are doing together is predicated on that approach. But to acknowledge the existence of multiple actors and a multi-scalar society is one thing, to know what to do with it is another! The very quandary of democracy has always been the uncertainty of moving through those scales, compounded by the question of whether one would really want access to the power techniques used by the larger formations to manipulate the smaller ones, to homogenize them and make their actions knowable, predictable, steerable. The unpleasant suspicion that you are being steered, and the difficulty, or more

often the impossibility, of going high enough up the ladder to challenge that steering effect and ask for more transparent decision-making procedures, is one of the things that can literally drive people nuts under the paradoxical regime of democracy, which says you are free to participate in the drafting and interpretation of the collective law, but then consistently proves the contrary. One of the traditional responses to this problem has been to become more deliberate, to participate in or actually develop structures which are at once larger than the immediate forms of face-to-face association, yet at the same time contain both ethical cultures and formal procedures to make sure that individuals and small groups still have some input. I don't think that kind of deliberate action should be discounted, and the emergence of new parties, unions, NGOs, or the reform of old ones, is always worth attention. That's also why I keep intervening in formal art institutions and university programs, and encouraging group interventions, though always from a position of relative autonomy. I admire tenacious people who are able to introduce change and experimentation on those levels, and want to contribute. But the present-day situation has seen a real paralysis of most of those structures, which becomes clear when you look at the paradigmatic case of the political party.

There were a lot of reasons, in the late nineteenth century, for individual politicians to accept party discipline, one of them being that the party provided a new place and a new set of rules for the decision-making process, outside the cacophony of the parliaments. So increasingly, in the twentieth century, policy was worked out at the headquarters of parties, which then confronted each other as voting blocs in the parliaments. Another advantage of the party was that it could have a broad popular membership, which proved essential for gathering information about what people really want in a democracy. And the fact of being consulted, of participating in workshops or surveys devoted to a particular issue, perhaps even of going out on the street to ask questions as a party member addressing a general public, all that helped create loyalty at the voting booth - another essential attraction for the politicians. But the professionally conducted opinion poll, then in recent years the focus group, gradually replaced the function of broad party membership as an information-gathering device; and the function

of advertising, then of the campaign as an integrated spectacle, also replaced the older, more organic ways of motivating people's votes. So today the political party has everywhere become a televisual juggernaut piloted by a sociological research arm, which serves only to get the vote out once every few years, while the specialized political-economic deals required to raise money to pay for those studies and campaign extravaganzas are struck under a veil of ignorance and manipulated information, at levels of complexity which citizens are completely unprepared to understand. And this same kind of phenomenon also crops up at the municipal scale, the corporate scale, the branch scale in unions, the state or national scale in big NGOs and so on, to the point where the idea of moving freely between them becomes a real fiction! The need for very large actors to operate at the world scale and at the speeds made possible by modern communication and transportation finally makes leaders just give up the whole pretense of any complex give-and-take between the different groups and organizations you mentioned, to the point where a guy like Bush says, almost immediately after taking office, "If this were a dictatorship, it would be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I'm the dictator." Under the pretext of urgency, people with that kind of mentality will actually set about destroying the possibility of any bottom-up relationship between the scales, the way the Israeli military methodically destroyed the brand-new civil communication and transportation infrastructure this summer in Lebanon, and over the last year or so in Gaza.

16B: *This is why we wanted to add a fourth text to our list of shared references: a chapter from the Retort book "Afflicted Powers," entitled "The State, the Spectacle and September 11." Their book raises various critical questions and points where we may diverge from their analysis. But one interesting link to us is their discussion of the current regime's need both for "failed states" abroad and for "weak citizenship" at the centers of capitalism.*

BH: Yes, the Retort book is one of the few major statements to have come out of radical circles in the United States. They make an essential point when they say that state power now "depends more and more on maintaining an impoverished and hygienized

public realm, in which only the ghosts of an older, more idiosyncratic civil society live on." That's what I was describing above. Yet they tend to see the spectacle cracking in the wake of September 11, and I think that's particularly true beyond the US. September 11 and its consequences have brought many people to a shared understanding that traverses all the borders. We are becoming increasingly conscious that we live, not just in any one city or country or region, but in a world society: a world constantly traversed by people with multiple belongings, people who are acutely aware both of the interdependence of supposedly autonomous organizations, political units and sovereign power blocs, and also of the extreme fragility of the networks that link us all together. Never before has so vast a conversation and interchange been possible, even if it does not mean that any new articulations of power are necessarily emerging. What has emerged, despite all attempts to preempt it, is something like a resistance power, the power of people to block off the very worst, to self-organize in fundamentally negative, but still very joyful and cooperative ways, which I find extremely promising. What this seems to mean, in cultural and intellectual terms, is that every small meeting or working session is in reality just one temporarily active condensation of the immense and continuing process that is leading to the formation of a global public opinion and of a felt public space on a world scale, which may be called upon, in the near future, to resist the worst of what our governments and corporate oligarchs are now preparing. Such resistance, each time it becomes necessary, can happen only through cooperative events whose contours and distributed intelligence we ourselves will have to invent. That's what I call articulation. And what it suggests, in turn, is that what we say and do in such small meetings has more meaning and import than we are led to believe by the careerist and consumerist norms that have taken over the mediated surface of political spectacle.

Is it possible to fulfill a responsibility to this world conversation? Even in New York City at the heart of the financial district? We are proposing the Continental Drift experiment again because we believe it can have positive consequences, particularly in the arenas of art and activism that link most of us together. What we need, I think, is just for everyone who participates to take some

small, self-assigned and untabulated responsibility for the practical unfolding of the event as it happens, and above all, to prepare in advance for the expression of a certain number of inquiries, activities and concerns, along with a readiness to listen to what all the others have prepared. We are organizing a "program" of contributions, as before; but experience shows that the program is only activated and made useful by the multiple proposals that undercut it, over-arch it and generally loosen the collective tongue, that feed the intellect and the imaginary. "Articulating the Cracks" is the theme. We have to find ways to make our activities more resonant. The shattering of old complacencies is at least an invitation to join all those who have taken the crisis of the present as a springboard.



A, B, Continental Drift

INVISIBLE STATES

By Brian Holmes

EUROPE IN THE AGE OF CAPITAL FAILURE



Michael Blum, *Wandering Marxwards*
featured in the exhibition *Capital (It Fails US Now)*

Introduction

After 9/11 and its worldwide consequences, after the travesty of Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction, after the collapse of the project for an EU Constitution, after the banlieue riots in France and all they reveal about neocolonial racism on the Old Continent, it might be easier to agree that capital is really failing us, right now. But the most important question is: who are "we"? And how exactly do we experience the very real breakdowns of that immense and highly abstracted articulation of society which goes under the name of capital? How to map out that articulation, as it changes over time to reach a point of what now appears as permanent crisis? How to locate and name the living flesh of capital failure?

The exhibition *Capital (It Fails Us Now)* has its locus in two national states on the northern edges of Europe: Norway, which has declined to be a formal member of the European Union, and Estonia, which is among the new members in the former East. In both these countries (but for very different reasons) the form of the state as a democratic instance and an economic project is intensely at issue.

In what follows I will not give any account of the exhibition itself, but rather focus on the changing forms of the capitalist state, within a European context that is structured not only by its shaky supranational architecture, but also by far-ranging transformations of the world economy. The point is not to expect salvation or damnation from what Engels famously referred to as "the ideal collective capitalist."¹ Instead, the point is to create a framework for understanding the transformations of an institutional and legal mix (the state) that attempts to mediate, on the one hand, between the inhabitants of a national territory and the individual capitalist enterprises that organize their productivity; and on the other, between this bounded national territory and the relatively anarchic transnational space into which it is inserted by the constant flux of trade, investment, interstate alliances and relations of force.

Within the world-system composed by the capitalist democracies of the post-WWII era, the state has in effect been called upon to act a kind of double filter, articulating the specific relations between its various classes of inhabitants, as well as their general relations with the outside world. In this respect, the state is – or more precisely, has attempted to be – the "integral of power formations," to borrow the phrase with which Félix Guattari once described capital.² The democratic state, as a crossroads of economic power and popular representation, has at its best been something like the means which society has given itself to make capital visible, to place its operations on the negotiating table. One need not be surprised, then, to find a complex and problematizing exhibition of visual art exploring precisely the ways in which this project of visibility now appears to fail.

Indeed, the postwar democratic state has claimed to be an integrally public and fully transparent articulation between all the conflicting forces at play in the human universe, including not only the powers of capital and its associated imperatives of military production and warfare, but also the expressed needs and desires of populations outside any economic logic or will to domination. It is precisely the existence of this claim, or this aspiration – concretized for a time in what was known as "the welfare state" – that allows us to speak of the failure of capital. But it is also this democratic claim that is clearly and inexorably breaking down, as the form and function of the mediating national state morphs and reconfigures under the pressure of global economic forces and conflicting wills to dominance. The result of the breakdown is a murky, opaque society, a world of unexpected clashes and fires in the night. What we should then explore – if there is any wish to even begin rediscovering a "we" – is the very texture of this opacity: the forms of capital failure.³ Which are also the forms of our lives today.

Metamorphoses of the Welfare State

In an article published in 1982, and destined to become an enduring definition of a fast-disappearing reality, the American specialist in international relations John Gerard Ruggie described the structure of the post-WWII economic compromise as "embedded liberalism."⁴ This was before the days of US Army journalism, when one could still aspire to express complex meanings. Ruggie borrowed his key term from an anthropologist, Karl Polanyi, who had maintained that in all known societies prior to that of nineteenth-century England, exchanges of goods were embedded in an institutional mix, indeed in a human ecology: there was no separation between specifically economic calculations and a broader set of social reciprocities regulating the care and reproduction of land (i.e. the natural environment), labor (the human body/mind) and money itself (whether the cowrie shells of

the Trobriand Islanders, or the fiduciary currencies of nation-states). Polanyi showed that the development of English economic liberalism, propelled by the industrial revolution and extended to worldwide dimensions by the gold standard, had effectively disembedded the economy from society, transforming land, labor and money into what he called "fictitious commodities," continuously bought and sold on a supposedly "self-regulating market."⁵

Why are these three commodities any different from the average widget? The thing that makes them "fictitious," in Polanyi's sense, is that their production and sustainable reproduction is not ensured by market mechanisms. Land that isn't cared for beyond the cycle of a cash-crop or a mineral dig can be durably blighted by misuse; labor with no life-support outside the workplace can be physically destroyed by downward pressure on wages; and the very medium of exchange, money, can be discredited by speculative trading of promissory notes without regard for the institutions from which their value derives. All these phenomena, which had been observed since the Industrial Revolution, were experienced at their cruelest extremes during the early twentieth century, and most acutely, during the Great Depression of the 1930s – and Polanyi was hardly alone in identifying the liberal doctrines of free trade and self-regulating markets as the underlying causes of the wars themselves. The essence of the postwar international regime could therefore be convincingly portrayed by Ruggie as an attempt to "re-embed" the worldwide economy of liberalism within territorial systems of checks and balances, regulated at the level of the nation-state.

"Embedded liberalism" described the effort to reconcile the benefits of international trade with the domestic policies for full employment and social welfare that had first emerged (though in disastrously isolationist forms) during the period of closed currency zones and trading blocs in the 1930s. The postwar instruments of this reconciliation were regulated international currency exchange (Bretton Woods), import quotas and tariffs to protect certain productive sectors (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and labor legislation and social programs (the domestic welfare states). This compromise, striking a balance between the two normative principles of domestic well-being and international free trade, provided what Ruggie called the "generative grammar" of postwar interstate relations, shaping the possible forms of action by the participating states and contributing to what he called "the internationalization of political authority."

Closer to our time, the regulation-school economist Bob Jessop has developed the most comprehensive description of the general form or ideal-type of the capitalist state that resulted from the postwar compromise.⁶ He calls it the "Keynesian Welfare National State" (KWNS), in reference to the economist and statesman John Maynard Keynes, the English negotiator at Bretton Woods. Keynes was the first to theorize the full employment of the working classes, supported by government debt-financing of works projects, social services and social insurance payments. He saw full employment as the source of "effective demand," which could spur industrial economies to virtuous cycles of continuous growth. The application of this type of policy accompanied the postwar exportation to Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand of the American Fordist model of industrial development, driven by large, multi-divisional, vertically integrated mass-production corporations. These were the engines of extraordinary economic expansion for some thirty years, in the context the reconstruction boom in Europe, and at a time when mass production had not yet begun in most other regions of the world (excepting Japan and the Asian "tiger" economies, which developed more centrally planned or authoritarian variations on the Euro-American model).

The Keynesian pattern of state intervention took on different shapes depending on the size and political culture of the country in question, with the most purely social-democratic forms developing in Scandinavia. The aim (and to some extent, the result) was to create a nexus of supportive and reparative institutions in which competitive economic functions could be embedded, so that their violence could be tempered, softened (while at the same time it continued to be exported outside, in the new forms of corporate neocolonialism). Today, for better and often for worse, the Keynesian, and the white, male, industrial factory worker who was its privileged subject, still serves as the normative and nostalgic horizon for discussions of public economic policy. But the interest of Jessop's analysis, and of the regulation school more generally, is to help us see how a change in the "generative grammar" of international relations, from the mid-1970s onward, has provoked a gradual metamorphosis of the forms of the state, which would only be given clear ideological expression with the "Third Way" programs of the British New Labour party at the very close of the century.

What happened to the compromise of embedded liberalism? As markers of its crisis, all the historians point to the breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency system in the period of 1968-71 and the emergence of the floating exchange regime, the oil shock and recession of 1973-75, and more broadly, the spread of Fordist production throughout the world and the resultant saturation of markets for mass-produced industrial goods. Equally important from a more radical viewpoint were high levels of labor militancy, rejections of bureaucratic normalization and widespread protests against the colonial and imperialist postures of the Western powers.⁷ The industrialized countries were beset with persistent conditions of industrial stagnation coupled with inflationary wage-price spirals ("stagflation"), and from the mid-1970s onward, the decline of the United States itself was widely predicted. More recently, however, understanding has grown of the way that the US hegemon was able to convince the rest of the world to go on funding what seemed to be a terminally indebted economy, both by forcing the OPEC countries to continue pricing their oil in dollars, and more broadly, by ensuring that dollar-denominated financial markets remain the most highly performing investment destination for global liquidity – among other things, because only those markets are insulated from the violent exchange-rate swings that periodically affect all other currencies with respect to the dollar.⁸ The upshot of all this has been to make the US (with its sophisticated financial markets, its control over transnational institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, its far-reaching media sector and its unparalleled army) into the institutional support-structure of what, for all other economic agents, is essentially a stateless world currency, a necessary but uncontrollable medium of exchange. Thus the dollar remained the linchpin of the floating exchange regime, while around it multiplied the sophisticated forms of credit-money (futures, options, swaptions and the entire panoply of derivatives, managed in direct competition with national fiduciary currencies by hedge-fund operators like George Soros).

From the early 1980s onward, this new position of the US as an extremely aggressive world financial player, with its industrial production shifting towards a strategic focus on cutting-edge growth technologies (stimulated and directed by lavish defense spending), gave it every reason to force greater trade and investment liberalization on all the countries that wanted access to its gigantic and endlessly debt-financed consumer markets. The IMF emerged as the global prophet and enforcer of this liberalization, which was to be coupled with austerity policies for all governments other than that of the hegemon.⁹ The liberalization of foreign direct investment (and the ultimate

disappearance of the revolutionary threat posed by really-existing Communism) meant that much more productive plant could be located outside the core countries of the world-system, and therefore, beyond the reach of the national labor and ecology movements. A new pattern of global circulation then took form, where formerly underdeveloped countries (such as China) could export not only raw materials, but also high-level manufactured goods; while the professionals of the former industrial core would focus on financial management, technological innovation, project coordination, and cultural services (including tourism, which has become one of the largest sectors of the world economy). Such was the basic system of constraints – the underlying grammar of international relations – that generated the initial trend toward what Jessop analyzes as the SWPR: the “Schumpeterian Workfare Postnational Regime,” named in reference to the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, who focused on entrepreneurial innovation as the motor of economic growth.¹⁰ What’s indicated with that reference is the transformation of the welfare state according to the requirements of the transnational information economy.

The SWPR, also known as the “competition state,” does not represent the clean break with welfare and the eclipse of interventionist “big government” that is usually evoked in simplistic descriptions of neoliberalism. Instead it signifies a deep and still-ongoing modification in the ways that intervention is carried out, for whom, and to what ends. The former goal of extending employment and benefits programs to all citizens is effectively cast aside, having become impossible under the conditions of functionally borderless economies. The wage is treated, not as a source of effective demand to be propped up for the general good, but instead as a factor of production among others, which can be pushed downward according to the needs of the competitive struggle. The primary focus of intervention now becomes high-quality information access and lifelong education: in other words, the grooming of the most productive citizens for innovation in transnational knowledge and image markets, whose operations can no longer be regulated by a national state, but only adapted to by a postnational regime, which seeks insofar as possible to influence the parameters within which productive individuals make free choices.

A pattern of changes in the forms of state intervention then sets in, which is fulfilled unequally, depending on the specific conditions of each country. These changes are often proposed in the form of “performance-based contracts” between public administrations and citizens. Automatic unemployment benefits, suspected of encouraging idleness, tend to be scrapped in favor of workfare “activation” programs that require continuous job searches, compulsory retraining, or community service (with the Danish “flexicurity” model becoming the new paragon of perfectly calibrated government intervention to meet the needs of a high-turnover job market). In the name of efficiency (but also as a disguised form of societal indoctrination) the former notion of public services provided to citizens is replaced by that of “public enterprises” competing with each other on subsidized “quasi-markets” for the patronage of non-paying “customers.” Vouchers or compensatory tax breaks may also be offered to those who prefer private service-providers, notably in the areas of health and education. Voluntarist or charitable “third sector” associations (often religious in nature) are called upon to fill in the gaps of stripped-down social programs; while in business operations, centralized state regulation is limited in favor of “governance” exercised by networks of interested parties or “stakeholders.” Infrastructures to support high value-adding sectors, which would formerly have been built by employment-generating state agencies as a form of pump priming for the Keynesian economy, are now

done almost exclusively by “public-private partnerships” (PPPs), which are renowned (justifiably or not) for their superior efficiency – and which above all do not create more fiscal liabilities on the state’s unemployment or retirement rolls.

This is the basic repertory of the “New Public Management” that has spread from Britain throughout the formerly social-democratic countries (including Norway in particular), and has also been proposed as a model of state-formation for the post-socialist countries of the former East.¹¹ The avowed aim of its neoliberal ideologues is to gradually strip the public sector down to the hardcore functions of a night-watchman state: police, justice, diplomacy, army. But for electoral reasons that goal can never be attained, at least not in northwestern European lands, because it would require a break with too many core constituencies, even on the right side of the political spectrum. Full neoliberal “regime shift” has occurred only in a few countries, primarily the US and Britain. Elsewhere, what results are subtle but far-reaching changes in the way the state socializes its populations, the kinds of expectations it cultivates, the types of subjectivity it fosters.¹² Thus the “disembedding” of the transnational economy from its sustaining institutional nexus is accomplished under the veil of a persistent, but increasingly attenuated and gradually hollowed-out social democracy.¹³ The hope, it seems, is that the gaping zones of exclusion and alienation of entire populations can be covered over for just a little while more – until the productive classes have learned to take responsibility for cultivating their own blindness.

Towards a New Political Ecology

A deeper understanding of the structural transformations that have come to bear upon the European societies obviously requires consideration of the European Union, in its relationship of cooperation and competition with the United States. Postwar European reconstruction was decisively influenced by the US, first via the Marshall Plan, then through the formation of NATO. For the US, Europe was a less an export market than a region for direct foreign investment and the implantation of industry. This was chiefly done in Germany, the largest and most industrially advanced European nation, whose postwar constitution had been written by the United States. The creation of the European Economic Community offered an expanded market for US corporations established in Germany, and as such received strong US encouragement.¹⁴ In the 1960s and 70s, only France resisted the fundamental Americanization of Europe; but even there, the resistance was merely gestural and diplomatic. Yet as understanding grew, in the 1980s, of the ways in which the US had succeeded in changing the rule-sets of global production and trade, European elites came to press for a single means of exchange, which would lessen their dependence on the dollar as the *de facto* international reserve currency. Monetary union was proposed in 1986 with the Single European Act, launched in 1992 with the Maastricht treaty, and completed with the introduction of paper notes in 2002. In order to escape similar dependence on the American consumer market, the European Economic Area (EEA) was created in 1994, and has been continuously expanded since then. It should be noted that despite its refusal to be part of the EU, Norway is a fully fledged member of EEA, via the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), of which it was a founding member as far back as 1960. In this way it has become something like an invisible member of a purely functional, non-democratic European economic union.

From 1994 onward, a specular rivalry can be observed between European expansion and the process of hemispherical integration in the Americas. The EU tends to become the distorted mirror-image of NAFTA – though without recognizing itself as such. In

many ways, it is again the embedding and disembedding of liberalism that is at stake. From the idealizing perspective of European social democrats, monetary union and the single market should allow the reconstitution of a domestic territory outside the dictates of the world market, so that social relations can be regulated democratically, not just economically. Indeed, the classic European diplomatic posture is to insist on such regulation; and the EU's leading cosmopolitan philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, constantly invokes the normative horizon of a "world domestic policy" (*Weltinnenpolitik*).¹⁵ But one should never forget that the EU only functions as a democracy at one remove, via the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, both of which emanate from the arcana of national administrations, leaving room for only very limited direct representation of the continent's voters in the European Parliament. And behind the internationalist symbols of the Hague Court and the Kyoto climate-control protocols, the EU's tendency toward an objective alliance with the US within the World Trade Organization, against the demands of the Global South, reveals a quite different function of international public law. As Peter Gowan remarks: "The imperial secret of the whole concept lies in who writes the rules in the first place... The model here is, of course, the European-inspired WTO which presents its rules as rooted in universalist-liberal free trade norms while in fact they are a concoction of positive law rules serving Atlantic capitalist interests."¹⁶

A similar pattern can be seen within the really-existing domestic territory of the EU, particularly since the ten-member enlargement of May 2004. The result of the enlargement is a three-part division: Core Europe, New Europe, and what might be termed "Edge Europe," i.e. the peripheral countries to the south and east of the current borders. Ideally, the social rights of the core countries would be extended through redistribution programs to the new members, while foreign aid and the umbrella of cosmopolitan trading laws would allow the gradual integration of the peripheral zones, whose resources and labor forces are, in any case, streaming into the center. In reality, a hierarchy emerges between the full citizens of Core Europe, who expect some democratic control over the evolution their societies; the subordinated citizens of New Europe, whose political privileges have been substantively weakened by the loss of economic control over their industries and the westward migration of their younger and more educated people; and the dominated populations of Edge Europe, whose territories and resources are wide open to exploitation by transnational corporations – and whose rights, if they are migrants, can be curtailed arbitrarily, as painfully shown by the experience of French citizens of African origin under the recent state of emergency.

A New Europe country like Estonia exemplifies this three-tiered situation. Its most promising industries and the mainstays of its banking sector were snatched up by corporate investors from the core countries, particularly Finland and Sweden, in the wake of the worldwide financial crisis of 1997-98 (which put an end to the period of "primitive accumulation" in the post-Soviet sphere). Meanwhile, the country's enormous Russian-speaking population – imported from across the empire to work in the Soviet versions of Fordist industry – languishes for the most part without employment and without any right to citizenship and a passport, which are unobtainable without mastery of the complex Estonian language. This means that full-fledged Estonian citizens occupy what at times can seem like a narrow strip of their own small country, between the economic incursions of their more powerful European neighbors and the inconvenient presence of a former working class which they feel they did not ask for, and to whom, in any case, they cannot really speak. The current heroin epidemic among this former working-class population, and the explosion of

HIV that inevitably accompanies it, raises the specter of a long-term condition of ghettoization and social exclusion, with the attendant development of the police apparatus and prison complexes that have been characteristic of neoliberal regime-shifts. Under these circumstances, the formation of a state to match far-off Keynesian standards of inclusion and social welfare is more than just difficult; it is impossible. Demands for European-level social regulation from labor interests in the core countries are understandably rejected, because there is no way to redistribute money to the population and remain competitive internationally, as membership in Europe also demands. The "social question" can only become a yawning chasm. Leaders, parties, political programs succeed each other in a confusing whirl; and what stands out from the rest is the default option of nationalist populism.

But just how far from that same sort of predicament are the hollowed-out social -democratic states of the European core, including Norway and the other Scandinavian lands ? The generative grammar of global liberalism – which has structured the development of the EU, and was even written into the articles of its proposed constitution – has given rise to an extraordinarily dynamic upper-middle class, whose members, often involved in the business of culture, are able to switch countries, languages and affective universes with an ease and fluency that could be staggering, if there were any outside perspective from which to judge it. However, the very acceleration of transport and transaction tends to isolate the rarefied upper echelon of the core populations within a highly cohesive network of mobility, insulated from the increasingly heterogeneous composition of the societies they live in (or move through). The decline of the old working classes and the relative eclipse of national traditions in favor of a syncretic, recombinatory culture, coupled with the arrival of new service classes and technology specialists from Edge Europe and beyond, makes it very difficult for the would-be reformers of state services to craft a political platform that can appeal to any kind of majority. The needs of the rising sectors of society and of the financial elites will be satisfied in any case, since these are the foundation stones and principal clients of the SWPR state-form. But to address the people outside the ideal profiles of the knowledge-workers and the corporate financiers, two basic solutions present themselves, which are generally taken together. The first is to cut sectoral deals for specific voting blocs: farmers, unionized industrial workers, functionaries, small businessmen, state pensioners, etc., all of whom still have access to established representational mechanisms dating back to the Fordist era. And the second solution is to cover over those sectoral deals with a broad populist rhetoric of national identity and national dramas, which do not necessarily exist in reality.

The obvious danger in Core Europe today is that of slipping into a new political ecology of fear, which sutures the gaps between diverging social fractions by the knee-jerk scapegoating of the easiest targets, who are the immigrants, the people gathered to do the jobs that aging Core Europeans no longer desire to perform, or are no longer allowed to perform in an economy that needs under-the-table employment as the only possible way to compress the wage-variable, and therefore continue to make a profit in a fiercely competitive economy. To manipulate the figure of the immigrant as a security threat (or even worse, of the Muslim as a civilizational threat) is the most expedient way to cover up much more difficult negotiations over the dismantling of the old welfare state, while avoiding complaints about its replacement by a hodgepodge of changing dispositions that obey no particular sense of justice or even economic rationality. And the problem is that this dynamic of scapegoating and cover-up can only get worse, as core populations grow older and more immigrants are called in to replace them, despite the growing

crunch on work permits and residency papers. The question then becomes, why does such an obviously short-sighted tactic seem to be spreading throughout Europe? Why are we looking at the rise of liberal -fascism, and talking about something else? What explains this inability to see the future, when it's already right here before our eyes?

The Chances of Vision

In the finance-driven, networked economy of the postnational competition regimes, it is necessary to add a fourth "fictitious commodity" to Polanyi's list of three (land, labor and money). This fourth fictitious commodity is knowledge, in a spectrum of forms ranging from science, technology and law to literature, cooking and everyday know-how. Its production depends on long-term institutionalized learning and teaching experiences, publicly available libraries, archives, museums and databanks, internalized modes of individual self-cultivation, urban spaces of improvisational or structured group interaction, processes of hybridization between different cultural traditions, the constitution of critical and dissident discourses ranging from punk rock and poetry slams to networks of concerned scientists or alliances of traditional and organic farmers, and so on through a near-infinite spectrum of practices whereby objective observation, theoretical abstraction, individual expression and patterns of social solidarity are laid down in complex traces and artifacts that can be taken up and transformed by successive individuals, groups and generations. The impossibility of completely functionalizing this subtle interweave of practices and motivations is obvious, and was recognized throughout the long era of national institution-building, from the early nineteenth century onwards in most parts of the Western world. As Jessop writes concerning education during the Keynesian period: "In stylized terms that were never fully matched in reality, we can say that education was expected to promote equality of access and opportunity, to create the basis for a talented and just 'meritocracy' that would undermine inherited class and status structures, to create, codify and disseminate a shared national identity and culture appropriate to a universal and solidaristic welfare state, and to develop knowledgeable and critical citizens able and willing to participate in an expanding public sphere as well as a mass plebiscitary democracy."¹⁷ In terms of practices, values, experiences of time and the other, the educational and cultural spheres undoubtedly formed the most complex institutional mix produced by the era of embedded liberalism.

The expansion of the state's cultural and educational mandate, and its hesitant extension to class, gender and ethnic groups that were formerly excluded from representation, brought new conflicts and challenges to this institutional mix, which undertook a difficult period of transformation in the wake of 1968 and the decade of unrest that followed. It is precisely this "difficulty of representation," precluding any simple reiteration of supposed national icons and values, that has been the source of most vitally engaging developments in culture over the last thirty years; and the same kind of questioning has even extended into a reevaluation of certain economic and technoscientific functions. However, with the educational streamlining of the Bologna process, with the corporate sponsorship and instrumentalization of the arts and sciences, with the retooling of national cultural institutions for the transnational tourist market, and with the pervasive trend towards the commodification of knowledge under intellectual property law, what is being challenged right now is the very ideal of the educational-cultural sphere as the locus of a problematic quest for mutual understanding in a pluralist society. Indeed, the commodification of knowledge is the driving force and central goal of the Schumpeterian competition state, to the precise

extent that the leading edge of capitalist production is redefined as technological and managerial innovation (particularly in the financial sphere). All the flowerings of human aspiration and experience can then be treated not just as commodities, but as investments in an entrepreneurial self, as the economist Gary Becker has shown with his notion of "human capital."¹⁸ One of the ways Europeans now experience capital failure is when education and culture come packaged with a price tag that disfigures them, even when it doesn't leave them completely out of reach.

Paradoxically, the damage caused by this capitalization of knowledge is at once a primary factor in societal blindness, and a chance to bring the new states of human coexistence under the neoliberal regimes to visibility. The collaboration of artists with social scientists, labor organizations and ecology movements during the recent cycle of antiglobalization counter-summits, and now around the theme of the "precariousness of existence" in the flexible economy, has marked a step forward in the ability to name and describe the effects of the neoliberal transformation process. Art has become one of the means of investigation, akin to social science, but irreducible to it. Similarly, a transnational organization such as Attac, whose economic critique has gained a certain influence in social-democratic countries like Norway, seeks to make visible the negative influence of a stateless, privatized currency on the fundamental realms of human labor and the natural environment, but also on the cultural-scientific domain that constitutes a second nature or an artificial environment (just as necessary as the air we breathe – and as likely to be polluted).¹⁹ The growth of the Socialist Left Party in Norway (reaching 12.5% of the vote in the 2001 general elections) represents an attempt at a political translation of such investigations. When artists begin to explore the operations of capital, and to point directly to instances of capital failure, they are participating with their own expressive methods in a complex response to the gradual installation of the competition regime, imposed as a single set of exclusive and increasingly intolerant rules for the difficult and irrevocably multiple states of human coexistence in society. The process of exploring and interpellating these currently invisible states is one aspect of the broader effort to constitute social formations that might act in common, having not only shared objective interests but potentially even an interest in each other.

The problem, however, is not only the gradual phasing-out of national cultural institutions, together with their outdated canons of beauty and elitist ideals of identity. The deeper problem is that in order to survive as exploratory and transformative practices, and in order to generate enough interest and involvement to reconstitute a socialized cultural sphere under fresh auspices, the contemporary arts have to throw off their blatant or subtle dependence on the new corporate-oriented institutions that promote an opportunistic and flexible subjectivity. And this is easier said than done, as shown by the ambiguous relations between cultural producers on the museum circuit and activists seeking forms of organization for precarious labor.²⁰ Because it's easy to invest in a little anguish over the biopolitical instrumentalization of one's own creativity, in order to produce a new niche product for the originality markets. And it's just as facile to criticize that investment. Indeed, hyperindividualization and the capitalization of everything seems to be the very formula for the breakdown of solidarities, and the emergence of liberal-fascism. What's more complicated – as those involved in different aspects of the precarity movements are discovering – is to create lines of invention and critique that reinforce each other in their differences, across professional and class divides. In this respect, the role of knowledge producers in recreating an ability to say "we" is potentially decisive.²¹ By pursuing a new transvaluation of

the old national values, it may be possible to arrive at what is now lacking: a sustainable constitution of multiplicity. But there is no assurance whatsoever that this potential will be realized.

The accession of ten new members to the European Union underscores the difficulty. The problem is that none of these countries can find any interest in maintaining the conditions of a welfare state which they cannot afford, and whose restrictions would block their own path to development. One can then only "join the union" on a battle footing – as proved by the preemptive drafting of certain former Eastern states into the Iraq war. Fighting to support the US petrodollar becomes a paradoxical guarantee of sovereignty, at the very moment of subsumption under a supranational hierarchy. As though the long-held project of becoming a fully fledged member of the EU could only be realized through a dream of the American way of life. To be sure, great dreams are natural, positive, after decades of foreign occupation. But what some Estonian observers consider to be a contemporary culture of wish-fulfilling narcissism (punctuated or punctured by deep mistrust and aggressivity) could also be understood as a way of coping with traumatic change, in the sense of the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka, who goes so far as to speak of a "trauma of victory."²² How to lend tangibility and public visibility to theoretical freedoms that are not always matched by substantive improvements? An entire cartography of existence has been redrawn in fifteen years. The ambiguous class-status and uncertain integration of whole populations along Europe's eastern rim, within and beyond the New Europe, marks the need for lucid and challenging artistic practices that can reveal and transform the unconscious conflicts that lurk beneath the surface of contemporary experience. Ways must be found to carry on this kind of work within the framework of new social relations that are unfolding across the entire European territory, at a time when cultural institutions have no clear mandate or support base for dealing with the difficult questions of identity and difference.

These concerns must surely feel distant to those who live in the state of Norway, outside most of the EU's political constraints, and close to the North Sea oil wells, with a newly elected center-left government coming into power in the fall of 2005. The Norwegians seem to inhabit a different cartography. Yet despite the hopes of intellectuals, the Socialist Left Party lost ground to traditional Labor in the last elections; while the conservative liberal right-wing Progress Party, with its populist and racist leanings, received "only" 22% of the vote, making it the second largest force. Is it possible for a small nation to steer itself safely through tumultuous changes in the world-system? For a few weeks that same fall, in the self-run space of the artists' union in Oslo, highly abstracted forms of capital failure were on display. Behind them, one could almost glimpse the invisible states of the union.

I would like to thank all the people, in Estonia and Norway, who generously allowed me to interview them in preparation for this text; as well as Anders Härm and Trude Iverson, for arranging those conversations.

Notes

1 F. Engels, *Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (1878), part 3, chap. 2: "Der moderne Staat, was auch seine Form, ist eine wesentlich kapitalistische Maschine, Staat der Kapitalisten, der ideelle Gesamtkapitalist"; online at www.mlwerke.de/me/me20/me20_239.htm#Kap_II. English

version: "The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital"; online at [/www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm).

2 F. Guattari, "Capital as the Integral of Power Formations", in: *Chaosophy: Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996).

3 In this text I will use the term "capital failure" to describe the combined shortfalls in human well-being caused by what sociologists know separately as "market failure" and "state failure." As I will show, the possibility of separating these two categories is increasingly reduced as the entrepreneurial dimension of neoliberal governance comes to predominate.

4 J. G. Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," in: *International Organization* 36, vol. 2, 1982.

5 K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1957/1944).

6 B. Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), chap 2 and *passim*. The introductory chapter can be downloaded [here](#).

7 For the crisis of US hegemony in relation to previous world-systemic crises, cf. Giovanni Arrighi, Beverley Silver et. al., *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

8 For interpretations of the shift towards a new international regime, cf. among others David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford UP, 2003), as well as Peter Gowan, *Global Gamble* (London: Verso, 1999).

9 For the new role of the IMF since the early 1980s, cf. D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford UP, 2005), chap. 1.

10 Cf. J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins 1975/1942), chap. 7, "The Process of Creative Destruction," p. 83: "The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers' goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates."

11 The term was coined by Christopher Hood, in the article "A Public Management for All Seasons?." in: *Public Administration* 69 (1991). For a critical review of the practices it describes (which date from the 1980s, and betray the influence of the "Total Quality Management" procedures developed in Anglo-Saxon business circles), see among others Linda Kaboolian, "The New Public Management: Challenging the Boundaries of the Management vs. Administration Debate," and the articles from the symposium on "Leadership, Democracy and the New Public Management," in: *Public Administration Review* vol. 58, #3 (May-June 1998).

12 For an ideal-type of "flexible subjectivity" in fully neoliberalized societies, see B. Holmes, "The Flexible Personality," in *Hieroglyphs of the Future* (Zagreb: WHW, 2002). The text is also available in my archive at www.u-tangente.org.

13 A classic case in this respect is France. For an account of the way the country's economy has been flexibilized around a dwindling core of unionized workers who still serve as representative for the entire labor force, via the classic tripartite state-labor-employer bargaining structures, cf. Christian Boltanski

and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris:Gallimard, 1999), chaps. 4 and 5 ("La déconstruction du monde du travail" and "L'affaiblissement des défenses du monde du travail").

14 Consider this quote from Arrighi et. al. (*Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System*, op. cit., p. 139), which sums up the perspective of the postwar American elites on European unification: "As John Foster Dulles had declared in 1948, 'a healthy Europe' could not be 'divided into small compartments.' It had to be organized into a market 'big enough to justify modern methods of cheap production for mass consumption.' To this end, the new Europe had to include a reindustrialized Germany. Without German integration into the European economy, remarked General Motors corporation chairman Alfred P. Sloan, 'there is nothing that could convince us in General Motors that it was either sound or desirable or worthwhile to undertake an operation of any consequence in a country like France.'"

15 See for example J. Habermas, "The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy," in: *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

16 P. Gowan, "US Hegemony Today," in: *Monthly Review*, vol. 55, #3, July-August 2003, online at: www.mail-archive.com/marxist-leninist-list@lists.econ.utah.edu/msg04762.html.

17 B. Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, op. cit. pp. 162-63.

18 G.Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (University of Chicago Press, 1993/1964).

19 See www.attac.no and www.attac.org.

20 The missed encounter between artists and activists at the Klartexte! conference in Berlin in January 2005 was an example of this ambiguity. As Marcelo Expósito writes: "It's essential to understand what blocks the compatibility in practice between the remarkable work of the Kleines postfordistisches Drama and Marion von Osten on the new figures of cultural production, and the necessary process of politically organizing precarious social subjects defended by Alex Folti of Chainworkers." See Expósito's review of the conference, "Hablando Claro," in: *Brumaria* 5 (Barcelona, 2005).

21 See the text by the French *intermittents du spectacle*, "La puissance du nous" [The Power of the "We"], at www.cip-idf.org/article.php3?id_article=1124. The absolute untranslatability of this text, which is immersed in the remnants of the French welfare state, itself speaks volumes about the difficulty of establishing solidarities on a European level.

22 P. Sztompka, "The Ambivalence of Social Change: Triumph or Trauma?" (2000), online at <http://skylla.wz-berlin.de/pdf/2000/p00-001.pdf>. Also see Sztompka's contribution to J.C. Alexander et. al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

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DISCONNECTING THE DOTS

By Brian Holmes

OF THE RESEARCH TRIANGLE



Entry to IBM plant, RTP North Carolina

Corporatization, Flexibilization and Militarization in the Creative Industries

We've heard a lot in recent years from urbanists and economic planners about the 'creative city', the 'creative class' and the 'creative industries'. To compare facts with fictions, I decided to take a little tour of one of the urban areas that have been specially designed to put the creativity into industry.

The Research Triangle is an unusually wealthy, unusually brainy metropolitan region of North Carolina, centred around the university towns of Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh, and home to about one-and-a-half million people. It owes its name and fame to the establishment in the late 1950s of a state-funded science park, the Research Triangle Park, which is a woodsy retreat for the R&D labs of giant transnational corporations. 'Where the minds of the world meet' is the RTP motto.

Long before Silicon Valley or even Northern Italy, Research Triangle Park was the template for the creative industries. At the

time, the phrase would have evoked men and women in white coats with test tubes in their hands, bringing you a better tomorrow with chemicals, plastics, nuclear radiation and colour TV, all beneath the umbrella of the US government and its Cold War agendas. The RTP project can easily appear as its own caricature, like other relics of the fifties. But is the present-day picture really that different? As our tour unfolds, we're going to see that far more intricate private-public partnerships in the universities have taken up where the old-style science park left off, boosting employment and productivity and continually advertising the potential to do more, with the result that the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill technopolis is now being touted as a model for the emerging knowledge dumps of Europe. The question for everyone living downstream of the 'Triangle model' is whether we want to throw our minds away in the restricted space of corporatisation, flexibilisation and militarisation – the triple dead-end of the neoliberal knowledge economy.

Entropy and its Discontents

To raise a few doubts, I'm going to try something between thick geographical description and allegorical landscape. The approach has an illustrious predecessor. Some forty years ago and a few hundred miles to the north, the artist Robert Smithson proposed 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey'. He was looking not at majestic beaux-arts sculptures but at freeway projects, or what he thought of as involuntary earthworks: 'the Bridge Monument', 'the Great Pipe Monument', 'the Monument with Pontoons', etc. Smithson saw these infrastructure projects as *ruins in reverse*: 'This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built'. [1] Coming of age in the era of peak production and planned obsolescence, Smithson was fascinated with the dark side of the American dream, with what he conceived as the entropic nature of the industrial monuments. Their very construction seemed imbued with an invisible dissolution and decay, a hidden destiny of collapse and disorder, which he brought out graphically in the black-and-white snapshots that illustrate his essay.



The monuments of Passaic, New Jersey, seen by Robert Smithson in 1967



The monuments of the Research Triangle today (click for larger image)

Ours is a more optimistic age. The new monuments of the Research Triangle appear in bright digital colour, like projected images, or life-sized advertisements for someone else's utopia. As you glide by them in your air-conditioned American car – from the GlaxoSmithKline building and the National Centre for the Humanities at Research Triangle Park, to the Nasher Museum on the Duke University campus, the Lucky Strike Water Tower at the American Tobacco Historic District in Durham, or even the the

brand-new County Jail right next door – what’s striking is that here in the South, in cities like Durham or Raleigh with historically important black communities, everything that looks the slightest bit monumental tends toward an increasingly pure, clinical white. Maybe this shade of ‘laboratory white’ signifies a different type of entropic monument, beyond the limits of thermodynamics with its simple laws of energetic decay. And since the knowledge-based economy – with its emphasis on superstructure, not infrastructure – requires such extraordinary rates of data transmission, maybe this new entropy is of the kind that telecommunications engineer Claude Shannon famously ascribed to information.

Shannon is the founder of the ‘mathematical theory of communication’. Recall that for him, ‘meaning’ is irrelevant: all that matters is the quantity of information, the ratio of signal to noise. More signal, less decay, less disorder – less entropy in the usual sense of the word. [2] Shannon’s ideal is maximum order, perfect transmission, i.e. *negentropy*, which literally means entropy in reverse. Now, negative entropy is held by modern science to be the characteristic of life, of growth. Which obviously has its economic connotations – in biotech for instance, where everyone constantly predicts the next great financial bonanza. [3] The Research Triangle is banking heavily on biotech, as we shall see. Still there comes a point when you have to ask the question: where does all this knowledge-driven growth really lead? When the entire spectrum of human concerns, from knowledge and creativity to democracy, social justice and ecological sustainability, is subsumed under the imperative of economic expansion, then the absolute purity of the informational signal becomes indistinguishable from noise.

In the knowledge-based economy, growth just cranks up the volume of white noise. This is the most basic idea I’m going to offer, inseparable from the pixellated images of the Triangle monuments. The ever-expanding range of digital choice – starting from the 0/1 alternative which is the essence of information – finally culminates in a meaningless blur.



Surface Illusions

Let’s begin our tour of the negentropic monuments like any good tourist would, with the new UED or ‘urban entertainment destination’ of the American Tobacco Historic District in Durham, right across the street from the County Jail. Once a factory for poison products, now a veritable leisure campus, still unfinished but already in full swing, it conforms in every way to Richard Florida’s descriptions of successful urban theme parks for the creative class, combining luxurious consumption environments with chic professional interiors, everywhere marked by the presence of art and design. Like any prosumer paradise, it calls out to the intellectual side of you, it offers you informative lectures accompanied with lunch or drinks, it includes an extension of Duke University, and mingles PR firms with perky restaurant ideas – so you can do your corporate duty while having some innocent fun,

or vice versa. In short, it's a perfect architecture for what I call 'the flexible personality'. [4]

It's fascinating to go into such a place as it is being built, to see the underside of the façade, the material end of the immaterial labour, and then to follow the workers outside to the 'ordinary' city, which now appears as an immense reserve of nostalgia and available space, ripe for gentrification. For your eyes only, every dilapidated building, every vacant lot, can be a Disney-in-waiting, just as the ruined American Tobacco factory once was. The whole seduction of the postmodern lies in its capacity to transform entire urban environments into 3-D images. Your pupils become the cinematic lens, reshaping everything through your own free experience. But back at the Historic District, paradox awaits: because this narcissistic mirror is all under copyright, and if you take out your camera to fulfil your artistic aspirations, you'll be rapidly hailed by a security guard and required to sign a contract restricting any use of the images.



One could no doubt explore the ways that the exercise of copyrighted creativity gradually turns the open space of experience into a labyrinth of obligation, constraint and submission, subverted but also reinforced by the clandestine pleasures of immaterial piracy. It's a perversely gratifying sort of game, with which American academics will be all too familiar. This would be perfect material for yet another exercise in what the literati like to call 'theory' – after all, we're at Duke, the stomping grounds of Fred Jameson, who wrote the definitive post-Marxist book on postmodernism. [5] But maybe that would be a bit too much local colour.

What I really think is that in the Triangle all creation of images, and probably every activity subject to copyright, functions primarily as advertising for the region, laying a seductive gloss over a more fundamental vector of wealth production which arises from the patenting of technological inventions. Between the two, copyrighting and patenting, there is a functional division of what has been called 'immaterial labour'. That is, the creation of images still helps you to forget what's really going on – even if today, in the new version of the spectacle society, it will as often as not be yourself doing the creating. And so it might be possible to say, in a very general vein, that there can be no critical approach to the creative industries without a dissolution of the commodity veil that both conceals and reinforces the relation between copyrighted image and patented technology.

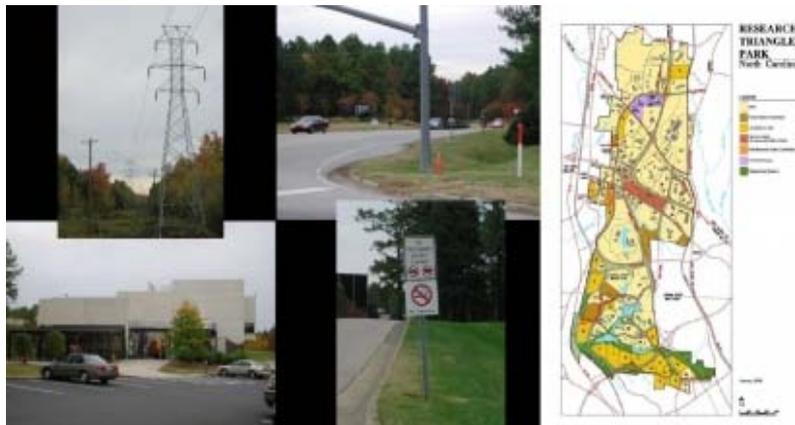
But this kind of ultra-Leftist pronouncement is ultimately void without an examination of concrete situations, which always evolve in time, following their intrinsic trajectories. So now we're gonna have to put some history in our postmodern geography.

Back to the Future

Research Triangle Park, or RTP, is a separated, isolated space designed specifically for patent production. It was officially founded in 1959 as a non-profit foundation, charged with developing, managing and gradually selling off a strip of

unincorporated land four kilometres wide and fifteen kilometres long, close to the airport, well served by freeways and theoretically just a twenty -minute drive from all the major universities of the metropolitan area. This is the place that brought you Astroturf and the Universal Product Code – but also 3-D ultrasound technology and AZT, the Aids treatment.

Initially it was conceived as a private venture, promoted by corporate officers of Wachovia bank and a local building contractor with the benevolent support of the governor's office, Duke University and the University of North Carolina. [6] The loftier goals were to stem the tide of unemployment in a state dominated by low-wage manufacturing and small-scale agriculture, and to halt the brain drain of educated youth. However, its backers soon realised that only clear commitments from the state and the universities would give corporations the confidence to locate their labs in a relatively unknown area of the American South. Public money was therefore raised for the Foundation, and the non-profit Research Triangle Institute (RTI) was installed alongside it, to perform contract research for government, business and industry. The aim of RTI was to spark interest in the park from social-science faculty who might like to try their hand at the messy practicalities of governance, while at the same time setting the example of a functioning business, in the hopes of attracting private investors. IBM led the way, with the decision to build a 600,000 square-foot research facility in 1965. Today there are some 137 corporate landowners in the park. In addition to IBM, residents include Nortel Networks, GlaxoSmithKline, Cisco Systems, Ericsson, BASF, Eisai, Biogen, Credit Suisse and Syngenta, as well as a host of federal agencies. With its nearly fifty-year history, RTP claims to be the premier science park in the world.



What you see on the tour is forest, parking lots, curving driveways, stop signs, heterogeneous buildings and omnipresent warnings prohibiting photography – this time for reasons of corporate secrecy. The architecture has a boxy, outdated look, recalling the shoddy modernist designs and Formica interiors of the postwar era. There is no housing anywhere on the grounds, as the whole point was to avoid incorporation into a municipality, and thus be able to offer tax-free status to the businesses. The original guidelines called for no industrial production, but these were eased to permit 'approximately 20%' manufacturing activity – a figure which no one suspects the sprawling IBM plant of having ever respected. Still the mainstay of the park is scientific innovation, recognised from the 1950s onward as the major driver of advanced economies. The sylvan landscaping, vast green lawns and endless jogging trails evoke the Apollonian imaginary of research in the fifties and sixties.

A building with the intriguing inscription of 'Cape Fear' – the name of a North Carolina river – revealed nothing of any particular interest. Nonetheless, fear has a certain tacit currency at the RTP

Foundation these days. A graph entitled 'Expected Results', distributed to visitors, shows the sharpest-ever decline in jobs in the park since 2001, as well as a pronounced flattening in the curve of R&D firms moving in. While biotech and pharmaceutical companies remain strong, IBM has sold its manufacturing to the Chinese firm Lenovo, Nortel remains mired in the scandals of the new-economy bubble and Cisco has seriously cut back operations. The major upswing shown for the next six years, in dark black, is entirely hypothetical.

A regional report, entitled 'Staying on Top', notes further job loss in the rest of the Triangle area. [7] Yet another one analyses critical weaknesses with respect to comparable regions in the US: failure to meet the needs of start-up companies, less opportunities for social interaction, a lower level of popular brand-name recognition, an absence of networking and awareness-raising mechanisms to encourage the creation of spin-offs. [8] To that can be added the transport crisis: freeway bottlenecks at quitting time, when 40,000 employees all simultaneously get behind the wheel.

To be sure, the last few open plots in the south of the park have recently been sold to massive financial institutions such as Fidelity and Crédit Suisse, looking to install backup facilities in the woods, in case New York is ever bombed again. But a bunker mentality is hardly a key resource for the overwhelming priority that now obsesses corporate execs: namely, achieving the highest possible rank in global competitiveness. The hope seems to be that solutions will come from elsewhere.

Great Expectations

Don't forget you're still on tour. Take the time for a leisurely stroll around the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: admire the tree-covered grounds, the stately classical buildings. A blue banner stretched between the columns of the School of Information and Library Science proudly reads: 'Ranked 1st in the Nation by U.S. News and World Report'. Make no mistake, that ranking is all-important. A little further on you'll find what students call 'the Pit': a sunken plaza reserved for democratic expression, where a volunteer sandwich man gesticulates and vociferates, his personal billboard reading 'Trust Jesus, Fear God'. The link between an ostentatious quest for the highest economic rank and an intimate desire for salvation was revealed long ago by Max Weber. [9] It has found an extraordinary new field of expression in neoconservative America, where public mores were decisively influenced in the 1990s by religiously oriented technophiles such as George Gilder. [10] All this has had its consequences on education. The real 'ruin in reverse' in the USA today is the university, and the minds it manufactures. The campus is the ultimate negentropic monument – the key resource on which the entire Triangle concept was based.



The effort to restructure the educational system for a vastly more

intensive production of patented technologies dates from the late 1970s, when US corporations were perceived as losing technological leadership to Japan. The problem, according to sociologists Walter Powell and Jason Owen-Smith, was that at the cutting edges of industrial development, 'research breakthroughs were distributed so broadly across both disciplines and institutions that no single firm had the necessary capabilities to keep pace'. [11] The solution has been to engineer a fusion between corporate appetites for technical innovation and the university's capacity to span the most diverse domains of fundamental research – often at enormous capital expense, paid for by the public.

Two things were required for the transition from in-park secrecy to open cooperation between state, corporations and civil society. The first was a way to keep the technologies acquired functionally private, reserved for exploitation by a single licensee. The patenting of material formerly in the public domain accomplishes this, with worldwide profits, thanks to the extension of intellectual property treaties under the WTO. The second thing was a maximum of social legitimacy, a pure and unquestionable ideology of direct benefits for everyone, to maintain an unruffled equilibrium among all the minds that are destined to meet, even those still tempted to believe in utopias of technological progress for the whole planet. This could be provided by the touchy-feely side of the new technologies, or what are now called 'the creative industries'. Yet if you look around the world, what meets your eyes is really an updated version of classical imperialism, where intellectual property laws and IMF-guaranteed loans are used to extract profits from a global 'South of the Border'. Is it too much to speak of a white ideology?

What gets lost, in the meeting of minds under the aegis of a search for excellence, is exactly that sense of utopian separation and critical reserve that campus architecture – and the whole concept of the modern university – was designed to foster. The appearance of religiously backed neoconservatism as the major US political actor in the post-bubble era, with its continuous injunction to 'fear God', has served above all as a distraction from the psychic consequences of the vast social overhaul carried out by neoliberal policy over the past thirty years, spurred on by a more basic narcissistic fear of competition from a distant, abstract other – no longer Japan, but now the strangely Americanized clone of communist neoliberal China.

Intellectual Incubators

The money's the thing, where you'll catch the conscience of the postmodern king. The same goes for educational reform as for genetic engineering. The archaeology of the public university's ruin goes way back to the invention of the Cohen-Boyer gene-splicing technique in 1973, and its privatisation by Stanford's patent administrator, Niels Reimers. A significant event because it involved not an application but a primary research technique. And even more because of the enormous profits it netted: some \$300 million in the 17 years before the patent's expiration. [12] This is the figure that made the University Patent Office inevitable.

The privatisation of research formerly held in the public domain has been a long process, whose major phases have only recently been retraced. But there is a landmark piece of legislation in this story, something like the genetic code of the corporate university: the Bayh-Dole act of 1980. [13] Passed in a context of rising international competition and declining federal funding for education, it served to codify the increasingly prevalent practice of patenting and commercialising publicly funded research. Exclusive licensing of inventions would be legal, even encouraged; and the inventors would be allowed and even required to take a cut of the profits. The keyword here is technology transfer, or the process of

moving ideas as quickly as possible from laboratory to industry. This transfer has spawned two new identities: the professor as small-time entrepreneur, and the university as big-time business.

A glance at one of the University of North Carolina [websites](#) reveals the basic procedure: *'The Office of Technology Development (OTD) manages inventions resulting from research conducted at UNC-Chapel Hill. OTD evaluates and markets UNC technologies, obtains intellectual property protection where appropriate, and licenses these technologies to industry. OTD also assists faculty in obtaining research support from corporate sponsors. OTD is dedicated to serving its faculty and helping corporations gain access to UNC's technological resources. This process works best when companies first identify specific areas of scientific interest, OTD can then bring inventions to a company's attention which specifically match those areas of interest. We invite companies to get to know us and hope you will think of us as a guide to the technology and collaborative opportunities available at UNC-Chapel Hill.'* [14]

In short, the university itself now takes charge, not only of the mechanics of licensing, but also of the functions of what is known in business circles as an 'incubator', providing support to fledging businesses in the start-up phase before they attain commercial success – or, more commonly, before they're snapped up by a major corporation.

To do all this has required a change in the institutional nexus that guides the activity of scientists, but also a deep-running change in what Michel Foucault theorised as 'governmentality', i.e. the underlying logic or common sense that structures individual modes of self-evaluation, of public expression, of relation to others and to the future. [15] Nigel Thrift catches this imbrication of policy and individual subjectivity very well, in his book *Knowing Capitalism*: 'Nearly all western states nowadays subscribe to a rhetoric and metric of modernisation based on fashioning a citizen who can become an actively seeking factor of production... And that rhetoric, in turn, has hinged on a few key management tropes – globalisation, knowledge, learning, network, flexibility, information technology, urgency – which are meant to come together in a new kind of self-willed subject whose industry will boost the powers of the state to compete'. [16] The disinterested university becomes the active incubator of *homo economicus*.

In the case of a teaching school like UNC Chapel Hill, the payoff may appear slim: a measly \$2 million in 2005, with a peak of around \$4 million in 2004, sums still dwarfed by federal and state contributions. Consider, however, how far the process of corporatisation has gone in nearby Duke University, an elite private school which boasts the most romantic faux -Gothic architecture in the region. Duke is currently on a building spree, thanks to the \$2.3 billion it raised in an eight-year campaign; it leads all other American universities in industry funding for R&D, obtaining approximately a quarter of its research budget from corporate sponsorship (\$135 million in 2005). [17] What's more, it is now partnering with Singapore on a seven-year, \$350 million project to install a new graduate medical school in the Asian city-state, 'as part of a national strategy [for Singapore] to become a leading centre for medical research and education'. 'They told us, you hire the faculty, you admit the students, but we'll build it and give you total control', says [a Duke spokesman](#). 'It's a very cool deal'. [18]

Little wonder that the theoretical infinity of biological growth – negative entropy – has fascinated corporate capital for the last ten years. Given the way that American universities such as Duke are now run – as incubators – deals like this could proliferate into the greatest exportation of governance that the world has ever seen.

Nigel Thrift lists no less than fourteen universities – including one each from France, Holland, Germany, Sweden and India – which have agreed to similar contracts with Singapore (even if one, John Hopkins University, has since proved unable to uphold its end of the bargain). Thrift describes the strategy of the Singapore Economic Development Board as consisting in: *'the creation of a "world-class" education sector which would import "foreign talent", both to expose Singaporean educational institutions to competition (thereby forcing them to upgrade), and also to produce a diverse global education hub attractive to students from around the Asia-Pacific region. In theory this cluster of educational institutions would produce and disseminate knowledge at a range of scales, supporting local and foreign firms in Singapore, state institutions in Singapore, and firms and states in the South East, East and South Asian regions'*. [19] The big prize here is the China market, followed by India. The question is apparently not whether Asians will get American-style neoliberal governmentality, but instead, whether they will get it directly, or through a Singaporean relay.

In any case, there is now a huge market for the education of the flexible knowledge-worker. Such an education is an export product for its chief supplier, the United States, with a profitable role left for all kinds of intermediaries. One could make similar remarks about the role of Britain – the great promoter of the creative industries – as a major relay in the transmission of 'white noise' from the USA to Europe.

The Final Frontier

Meanwhile, back in the metropolitan region where so many basic tenets of contemporary societal planning were born, the problems that confronted the 1950s-vintage RTP science park are well on their way to being solved. The driving force this time appears most nakedly at the third corner of the Triangle, North Carolina State University at Raleigh. NCSU Raleigh is in the process of executing a full-fledged vision of the future: the Centennial Campus, a perfectly integrated private-public partnership, explicitly described as a 'knowledge enterprise zone', making the best of all corporate, governmental, leisure and academic worlds. Every lesson from the long history of neoliberal planning, including the fluffier ones more recently offered by Richard Florida, seems to have been applied. I quote from the [project description](#): *'This "technopolis" consists of multi-disciplinary R&D neighbourhoods, with university, corporate, and government facilities intertwined. A middle school, residential housing, executive conference centre and hotel, golf course, town centre and recreational amenities will weave the campus into a true interactive community.... The unique master plan for this environmentally sensitive, mixed-use, academic village responds to the professional, educational and recreational needs of the University's faculty, staff and student body, as well as those of corporate and government affiliates whose presence on Centennial Campus adds to its vigour and effectiveness'*. [20]



No longer an isolated, secluded activity, R&D is now proposed as a whole way of life, able to extract the full spectrum of value from every creative person engaged in it. It seems that the final frontier of knowledge-based capitalism – or the last natural reserve of energy to be exploited by the state and its corporations – is *you*, your body, your intelligence, your imagination. The question is, what will you be used for? Some inkling of the innovative possibilities that lie in wait at Centennial Campus can be gained from the first completed facilities: not one but *two* Biosafety Level 3 laboratories, built with federal subsidies as part of an effort to increase America's readiness in the ever more likely event of bioterrorism. [21] You guessed it, the growth market is potentially tremendous. It's worth noting that this effort also serves to bail out the failing biotech industry, which US economic planners have slated to replace networked computer technologies as the new benchmark of technological superiority on the world market. Indeed, Defence Department funding is an essential piece of the puzzle. [22] The 'third leg' of the triangle that defines the meeting place of minds in the knowledge-based economy is militarisation, which alone can provide the massive influx of subsidies on which private-public partnerships depend. But the question of whether this kind of military-driven economic growth is viable, in the face of rising hostility abroad and deepening inequality at home, does not seem to get asked in the US anymore.

While waiting to judge the lifesaving capacities of NCSU Raleigh's unfinished biomedical campus, we can get a whiff of the creative-industrial future from a news item on the NCSU Engineering website: 'Sponsored by the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, the [Grand Challenge](#) competition was created to answer a congressional mandate to convert one-third of military vehicles to driverless, computer-driven mode by 2015'. [23] This is a nationwide program, conceived to mobilise an entire population, from amateur computer geeks and small-town racing aficionados to corporate project teams and university engineering labs. The Raleigh campus has been thoroughly hooked in. Already the road tests of a lushly designed and specially modified Lotus Elise sports car are generating enormous excitement, at least if you believe the PR campaign. But what this kind of remote-controlled creativity conceals is a deepening militarisation of society, heralding not only the advent of robotised battles in foreign countries (the only way to escape the shortfalls of a mercenary army), but also an increasing regimentation of life on local streets.

As the rhetoric continues: 'The technology that will guide the Elise through city streets may one day revolutionise not only the way the military performs missions but also the way that commuters drive to work each day'. In other words, someday the steering wheel of your car may be connected to a centralised computer, in the name of rush-hour efficiency. But by that point, what else will be hooked in? The silver lining is that such an invention would finally solve the bedeviling RTP traffic problems, and allow the would-be visionaries of North Carolina to make it back in less than twenty minutes to the Research Triangle Institute – which as early as March of 2003 had won its largest-ever contract, worth over \$400 million dollars, for the redesign of local governments in the fledgling democracy of Iraq. [24]

So our tour comes full circle, back to its point of origin, just when the illusions of the creative industries finally come to coincide with the meaningless economy of war. And it all works so smoothly, so perfectly. Who knows? With the help of defence, academic and corporate contracts, along with a dash of aesthetics and a few computer-piloted automobiles, the declining science park might still contribute to a future World Government. Unless some more radically creative class finds the way to disconnect the dots of this hell machine.



click the crystal ball to peer into the future

Epilogue

These reflections were inspired by an in-depth introduction to the Triangle region, offered generously by the [3Cs Counter - Cartography Collective](#) at UNC Chapel Hill. 3Cs is about permeability and difference: students, professors, community members, political groups, distant interlocutors; labour, leisure, professionalism, amateurism, discipline, organising, satire, statistics, subversion... They've created a '[disorientation guide](#)' to the school, with a definition of precarious labour on the back, and a cartographic image stating that the university is both a 'functioning body' and 'a factory producing your world'. [25] It's my belief that an extended network of such personal-political partnerships could throw the ruined future of the world-factory into reverse, by dissolving the surface images and uncovering the triple program of corporatisation, flexibilisation and militarisation that increasingly defines the shapes and destinies of the knowledge-based economy. But to do so means establishing priorities that aren't fixed by an ideal of unsustainable and ultimately meaningless economic growth, and that aren't pictured through the seductive lens of PR and advertising. To do so, in other words, requires a kind of revolution.

The public universities – not only in the US, but everywhere – are the places to begin imagining an entirely different future, a turn away from war and ecological collapse. And if it's impossible to use them for anything but intellectual property production and self-fetishization, then it's time to start up free ones, where there's some room to think among the debris of the future. Every step through the postmodern mirror offers our still-functioning bodies another chance to cut the signal, click off the automatic pilot, give

away the dots and open our minds to other possible worlds.

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(Thanks to Claire Pentecost for the constructive critique.)

Notes

1. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' (1967), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, U.C. Press, 1996; p. 72.
2. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949), University of Illinois Press, 1998. 'Entropy' is a strange word to describe the quantity of information, which is obviously ordered. Von Neumann apparently made this remark to Shannon: 'You should call it entropy, for two reasons. In the first place your uncertainty function has been used in statistical mechanics under that name, so it already has a name. In the second place, and more important, no one really knows what entropy really is, so in a debate you will always have the advantage.' *Scientific American* 1971, volume 225, page 180; cited at en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_von_Neumann.
3. 'Negative entropy' was theorized as the characteristic of life by Erwin Schrödinger, *What Is Life?* (1944), Cambridge University Press, 1992. Shannon entropy was identified as 'negentropy' by Léon Brillouin, *Science and Information Theory* (1956), New York, Academic Press, 1962. For a full discussion of the relations between information, negentropy and biotech, see Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, London, Pluto Press, 2004, chaps 1 and 4.
4. Brian Holmes, 'The Flexible Personality', in *Hieroglyphs of the Future*, Zagreb, Arkzin/WHW, 2002; online at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106>.
5. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1992.
6. Albert Link and John Scott, 'The Growth of Research Triangle Park', in *Small Business Economics* 20/2 (2003); at www.dartmouth.edu/~jtscott/Papers/00-22.pdf.
7. Future Cluster Competitiveness Task Force, 'Staying on Top: Winning the Job Wars of the Future', Research Triangle Regional Partnership, 2004, www.researchtriangle.org/uploads/Reports/StayingOnTop.pdf.
8. Research Triangle Foundation, 'Triangle Innovation Project: Preparing for the Next 50 Years', 2005, www.rtp.org/files/final.pdf.
9. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958. [The whole book is online [here](#).]
10. Cf. Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God*, New York, Doubleday, 2001, pp. 79-83.
11. Walter Powell and Jason Owen-Smith, 'Universities and the Market for Intellectual Property in the Life Sciences', in *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 17/2, 1998, p. 257; quoted in Jennifer Washburn, *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*, New York, Basic Books, 2005, p. 59.
12. Cf. Jennifer Washburn, *University Inc.*, *ibid.* pp. 49-54; and Niels Riemers, 'Stanford's Office of Technology Licensing and the Cohen/Boyer Cloning Patents', interview by Sally Smith Hughes, 1997, <http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=kt4b69n6sc&brand=calisphere>.

13. Bayh-Dole act, United States Congress, 1980, www.cctec.cornell.edu/bayh-dole.html.
14. Office of Technology Development, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 'Overview for Companies', <http://research.unc.edu/otd/industry/overview.html>
15. Cf. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, 1991; and Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, Nikolas Rose (eds), *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.
16. Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism*, London, Sage, 2005, p. 98.
17. Ella Powers, 'Corporate Research Support Rebounds', *Inside Higher Ed*, Feb. 1, 2007, http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/02/01/r_d.
18. Michael Wagner, 'Duke on track with \$100M Singapore medical school', *Triangle Business Journal*, August 11, 2006, <http://triangle.bizjournals.com/triangle/stories/2006/08/14/story9.html>.
19. Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism*, op. cit., p. 100.
20. 'Vision of the Future', Centennial Campus, <http://centennial.ncsu.edu/overview/index.html>.
21. 'NC State College of Veterinary Medicine Dedicates Research Building', Media Advisory, NC State University, April 27, 2005, http://www.ncsu.edu/news/press_releases/05_04/103.htm. Duke University also operates two Biosafety Level 3 labs, one of them installed in 2003; see <http://dukenews.duke.edu/2003/10/20031003-4.html>.
22. Cf. Vernon Ruttan, *Is War Necessary for Economic Growth? Military Procurement and Technology Development*, New York, Oxford UP, 2006. Ruttan studies the role of US military R&D in the development of 'six general-purpose technologies: (1) interchangeable parts and mass -production, (2) military and commercial aircraft, (3) nuclear energy and electric power, (4) computers and semi-conductors, (5) the Internet, and (6) the space industries' (p. 7). These major civilian technologies are 'spin-offs' from previous military research, which thus acts as a planning instrument, following the notion of the 'permanent war economy' advocated in 1944 by Charles Erwin Wilson (CEO of General Motors, later Secretary of Defence under Eisenhower). However, Ruttan suggests that recent military investment in biotech is a 'spin-on' approach, which involves 'weaponizing' basic discoveries made with non-military funding (pp. 178-181). Note that so-called 'biodefence' always involves the *creation* of new bioweapons, considered the only way of knowing whether there is a potential threat!
23. 'NC State Unveils New DARPA Urban Challenge Driverless Vehicle', NC State University News, Nov. 15, 2006, <http://news.ncsu.edu/releases/2006/nov/203.html>.
24. Brooke Williams, 'Windfalls of War: Research Triangle Institute', Center for Public Integrity, Washington D.C., <http://www.public-i.org/wow/bio.aspx?act=pro&ddIC=49>.

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10 Responses to “DISCONNECTING THE DOTS”

Michael Bacon Says:

[February 27, 2007 at 5:15 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

A wonderful piece. I will likely write something more extensive in response on my own blog and trackback it, but I wanted to leave a couple of quick notes here.

First, some basic edits: You name the school in Chapel Hill in its first introduction as “North Carolina University,” and in the Epilogue as “NCSU Chapel Hill.” Neither are correct, although the first was used as an alternate name long ago. The strict name is the “University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,” although it’s commonly known simply as “UNC.” NCSU refers to its counterpart in Raleigh, which was originally North Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical University, but hasn’t been for nearly a century.

Secondly, describing both Durham and Raleigh as “historically black cities” misses the mark by a bit. Raleigh, to my knowledge, has never even approached being a majority black city. I can’t remember who coined the phrase, but at one point it was described as “a state capital surrounded by mayonaise.” Its reputation has long been one of a staid, buttoned-down government town. Durham, on the other hand, was for a period a majority black city, but never by overwhelming majorities (56% I believe was the peak), and that was largely due to white flight to the suburbs, of course. I believe the current percentages are around 48% black, 42% white, and the remainder a growing Latino population with a smattering of various Asian populations.

I’ll hopefully have a chance to respond to more of the substance of the piece later, rather than just editorial comments. In particular, are you familiar, or possibly interested, in a recent fight between local neighborhoods and Duke University over its plan to install a large, tax-free retail installation on its campus? The text from neighborhood activists centered largely around the narrative that Duke wanted to exploit its non-profit status into a money-making venture, in which it would align with corporate chains and gain an unfair advantage over a largely locally-owned business district nearby.

David Rollins Says:

[March 3, 2007 at 10:18 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

One correction — the park was not “promoted by the president of Wachovia bank”, but rather by George Watts Hill, who founded Central Carolina Bank (now known as Suntrust). The other chief promoter was Terry Sanford, who was NC senator, governor, and president of Duke Univ.

brianholmes Says:

[March 11, 2007 at 4:50 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Thanks for this comment, David, but I have what seems like a pretty good source, by Albert Link and John Scott, who tell the story differently. In

fact, I realize when going back over it that they mention not one but 2 corporate officers of Wachovia Bank, one of whom, Archie Davis, ends up being the guy who did most to promote the whole thing. Davis' portrait hangs in the RTP Foundation entryway. Wachovia still seems to be closely associated (I noticed cars marked Wachovia in the parking lot of the RTP Foundation when I visited). So I'd be curious about these other people you mention. I quote from the Link/Scott text and give the references below:

"In early 1954, Brandon Hodges, the state treasurer of North Carolina, Robert Hanes, the president of Wachovia Bank and Trust Company, and Romeo Guest, a Greensboro building contractor who some say gave birth to the idea of a research park in the triangle area, met to discuss North Carolina's need for industrial growth. Hanes, an extremely influential citizen, was not immediately sold on the idea. In the fall of 1954, Hodges and Guest enlisted the support of key deans and faculty at North Carolina State, and in December 1954, the group convinced Chancellor Carey Bostian to take the triangle idea to Governor Luther Hodges. While the governor, like Hanes, did not immediately see the potential of the idea for North Carolina, he was willing to commission a concept report. The 10-page document, written by William Newell, director of the Textile Research Center at North Carolina State, was delivered to the governor on January 27, 1955, and soon thereafter the triangle idea became known as the "Governor's Research Triangle" (Link 1995, p. 20).

"In April 1955, having solicited the support of Gordon Gray, president of the University of North Carolina, and Hollis Edens, president of Duke University, Governor Hodges organized the Research Triangle Development Council with Hanes as chairman...

"In August 1958, Governor Hodges and Hanes approached Archibald (Archie) Davis, also of Wachovia Bank and Trust, to help attract North Carolina investors for the Pinelands Company. Davis recognized that the Research Triangle had the potential to be extremely important for the future economic direction of the state, and he realized that if the Triangle was designed for public service rather than for private gain it would be much easier to raise money from corporations and institutions that were interested in serving the state of North Carolina. Thus, he agreed to raise contributions, as opposed to solicit financial investments, under the condition that the pledged funds would be used to pay the Pinelands Company's borrowed debt (\$415,000), to finance the establishment of a research institute (\$500,000 estimated), and to construct a building (\$250,000 estimated). In October, Davis presented this proposal to the Committee and it was accepted. He began his fund raising efforts on December 1, and on January 9, 1959, Governor Hodges announced that Davis had raised \$1.425 million and that these funds would be used to acquire the land assembled by Pinelands and to pass control of this enterprise to the recently constituted nonprofit Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina."

Albert Link and John Scott, "The Growth of Research Triangle Park," in *Small Business Economics* 20/2 (2003); at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~jtscott/Papers/00-22.pdf>.

The Bull in Full Says:

August 23, 2007 at 8:24 pm | [Reply](#)

The geographic critique of RTP-style public investment and economic development

In the past couple of weeks, I got into a bit of an online spat with my neighbor Chris Sevick in the comments section of Kevin's blog, particularly following this post and this post. I have to confess, this is

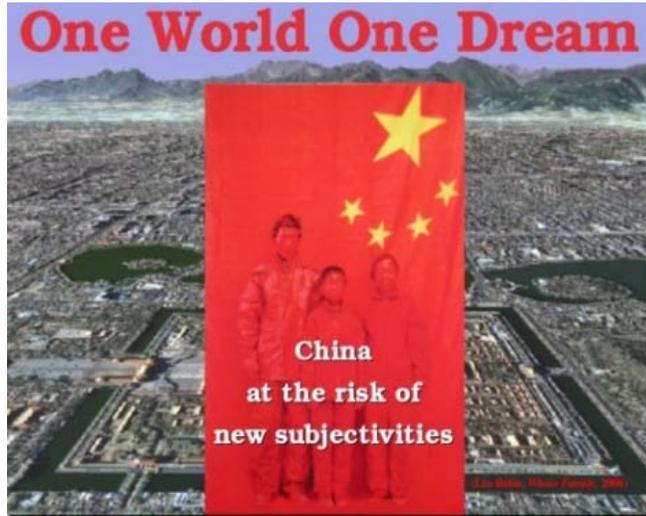
brianholmes Says:

August 23, 2007 at 9:00 pm | [Reply](#)

The Bull in Full wrote:

One World One Dream

By Brian Holmes



Flag image from the "Camouflage" series by Liu Bolin

text in Chinese

As early as 2007, the slogan of the Olympic Games was everywhere, on brochures, magazines, billboards, light boxes, LED tickers, neon signs, and of course, on the omnipresent urban video screens: *One World, One Dream*. With all the resources of state-controlled media, Beijing was preparing to claim its place in the pantheon of global cities. This time there would be no denial, no memory of the failed 1993 Olympics bid under the shadow of the "Tiananmen incident." Already, the hallucinatory congestion of the skyline makes the prophecy come true. There is only one possible world, only one possible dream: continuous buildings, endless highways, infinite urbanization, a city beyond the limits of the imagination. Huge urban blocks, surging arteries, expanding ring roads, metros, airports, refineries, power plants, bullet trains, a city that devours the countryside, scraping the mountains and the sky. A world city.

How does a society remake itself in a global image? The answer lies in a process of internalization, at once psychological and material. Around the world over the last two decades, since the fateful year of 1989, formerly underdeveloped countries have embarked on an accelerated course of self-makeover, absorbing and adapting industrial techniques, institutional forms, aesthetic styles, mental frameworks. Such transformations have happened before; but unprecedented increases in productive capacity and intensified transnational exchanges make this process different, even compared to the great wave of change that followed World War II. The gravitational shift of wealth accumulation to new centers in East Asia may well bring a metamorphosis of capitalism itself, as the historian Giovanni Arrighi has suggested.¹ But in the meantime the transition is disconcerting, tumultuous, violent, marked not only by its tremendous acceleration ("Shenzhen speed"), but also by the particular forms of social control that characterize the present. China's transformation is becoming the central phenomenon in the emergence of a new, complex and disorienting world society.

Global Individuals

To see the process of makeover in its early stages you can travel by taxi back in time, fifteen years ago, to Beijing World Park on the southwest edges of the capital city. This classic piece of Chinese spectacle culture was opened in the early 1990s, and

more recently became the subject of Jia Zhangke's great film, *The World* (2005). What's offered to the gaze is a collection of miniature monuments: the Eiffel tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Great Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the Leaning Tower of Pisa. In an age when travel outside the country was virtually impossible, tourists would come by train to take their weekend tour, and brides would pose for a photo, as they still do today, in front of the gleaming white Sydney Opera. As Jia insists, this is where you can "see the world without ever leaving Beijing." What's not mentioned in the film, however, is in many ways the *punctum* of the whole affair: the identity of the aging and decrepit airliner where Jia's heroine, Tao, dressed as a stewardess, repels yet more advances from her erstwhile boyfriend Taisheng. This was Deng Xiaoping's official plane, the one used for his state visits and excursions. So the casual tourist on a weekend in Beijing could experience the fantasy of flying in the personal airplane of the man who literally brought the world to China, in the form of foreign direct investment, the magic key that opened the forbidden cities.



Fifteen years is an eternity at Chinese speeds. Today the Beijing World Park is a sad place left behind by progress, like a bad joke gone stale and flat with age. Rather than rushing here, a visitor from the interior would head in the opposite direction, toward the future that Deng made possible, in the northeast corner of the capital. There you find Beijing's own full-sized World Trade Center in the brand-new Central Business District, not far from Koolhaas's CCTV building, rising up like an ideogram of power. The city itself is now the world park, glittering with the stardust of transnational architecture. The current phase of internalization is no longer psychological, but material. Beijing, in many different ways, has *become* the world.

The experience of Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen confirms two things. The first is that the global extension of the Anglo-American technological and organizational toolkit has given rise to a world civilization, what Félix Guattari called "integrated world capitalism."² The second is that this overall pattern of world civilization can only be governed and normed at a regional or continental scale, using cultural and political resources that are specific to that scale. The continental scale – whether a nation-state like India or China, or a regional bloc like the Russian Federation or the EU – has become decisive in the world today, because only that scale can fully internalize, but also *resist* global forces. Resistance, this context, means the attempt to impose different societal norms at the specifically continental level, according to whatever social or political power imperatives have taken hold there. What confronts us then are intersecting realities: something like "transnational capitalism with Chinese characteristics." An entire political economy lodges in the tension of these intersections. The unanswered question is how those tensions are expressed and elaborated by individuals and smaller groups: how the emergence of a world society is tangled up with the production of new subjectivities.

The word *individual* signals the micropolitical dimension, where cultural commentary is now typically confined as a celebration of subjective choice. Yet individualism is no way the opposite of globalism. Following sociologists like Ulrich Beck, I'll be arguing that globalism is inseparable from a process of intensive individualization which is its other face, the flip side of the same basic currency.³ This is the symbolic meaning of the slogan, "One World, One Dream." When we look at the highly original and highly commodified practices of the creative industries, it is globalism that we are really seeing, in the expression of each singular dream. Global individualism results from the monetization and contractualization of social relations, which is an essential part of the neoliberal economic order. And it is a very exciting thing,

involving a break from traditional patterns, new possibilities of thought and sensation, even the literal experience of flying through the air – deterritorialization, in a word. That's first of all a liberating experience. What you feel in urban China today is an extraordinary productive energy, coursing through the architecture and the bodies of the people. The feeling corresponds to a tremendous achievement: an exit from hunger, stagnation and poverty for hundreds of millions of people, and the invention of a new development path promising equality with the Western nations. But the same social reality has a much crueller side, which few of its proponents care to mention.

This darker side is revealed in Jia Zhangke's film, when the migrant worker known only as "Little Sister" is fatally wounded by a falling crane at the construction site where he worked at night for higher pay. Dying in the hospital, he can offer nothing more in his last words to Taisheng than a list of the minor debts he incurred in his short life in the capital. The same theme reappears when Taisheng counts the insurance money in front of the grieving relatives, even as the nephew (the only one in the family who can read) signs a waiver of any future claims. Why the insistence on monetization and contractualization? With his depiction of migrant laborers in the world city, Jia tries to break through the generalized ignorance that surrounds the division of labor, to the point where it renders invisible the very relation that *builds* the city. This unconsciousness, sustained by global individualism, now constitutes a fundamental risk for society at all levels, as the political and environmental contradictions of integrated world capitalism accumulate at an alarming rate. World society develops at the risk of new subjectivities.

The increasingly authoritarian forms of governance that are emerging all over the globe can be conceived as techniques for managing that risk, each time in a specific fashion that is inextricable from a particular social and cultural history. Driven by its quest to hang on to power, and perhaps even more, by its ambition to provide development for the people, the Chinese communist party is at the forefront of this neo-authoritarian governance, offering a specifically continental solution to the problems of insertion into global neoliberalism. It has developed a balance between a strongly normative political system and a wildly expansive economy, with the paradoxical sense of openness that such expansion brings. It is now attempting to deploy the concept of the creative industries, as part of a bid to increase its international and domestic legitimacy, to overcome a longstanding deficit in product innovation and to build a much-needed internal market for the consumption of sophisticated goods and services. According to that concept, the kind of human energy and aspiration that was formerly invested in the transcendent values of the traditional artistic genres, or in the revolutionary experimentation of the avant-gardes, should now be seamlessly merged with audiovisual production, advertising, design, entertainment events, software and video games – in other words, with everything that creates the aesthetic experience of the hyper-mediated city. These are the forms on which the Western consumer paradise is founded. Do they render other realities invisible? By examining the social, economic and monetary underpinnings of the push for a creative China, I want to suggest some of the contradictions that are at work in the country, and some of the ways that the rest of us are implicated in them.

Just a warning before beginning: I'm no Sinologist, and I have no particular authority to pronounce on all these things. What I'm going to offer are some observations and questions for research into a situation that concerns us all: the development of a global division of labor, and indeed, of a global society, which is now coming concretely into being. In any case, the point of cultural critique is never to supply unequivocal answers. Rather it is to spark off a dialogue that can help crack open the one-world dream.

Urban Divide

Clearly there are artists who might be interested in such a dialogue. For a 1996 performance entitled *Half White Collar, Half Peasant*, Luo Zidan confectioned a double or split exterior, wearing a tattered Mao suit on the right of his body and an impeccable shirt, tie and slacks on the left. He used cosmetics and hairstyling to distinguish a smoothed, whitened face from the pockmarked bronze skin of a country-dweller. This is how he appeared on the city streets of Chengdu in Sichuan province, holding a crisp hundred-yuan note in one hand and what appeared to be a crumpled rag in the other.



As Chen Hongjie has written:

Walking through the area around Chunxi Road in Chengdu, the performer appears both real and illusory in his actions. At the Holiday Inn he uses the peasant's sleeve to clean the marble at the entrance... In a watch store, the white-collar worker tries on a 2,300,000 RMB diamond studded watch, admiring his reflection. At a KFC restaurant, he happily eats a meal, while the peasant, left with the fries and salad, is confused as to how they should be devoured. The concept of this work expressed the issues of class, and on a deeper level, social roles common to all human society and the roots of the contradictions that inhibit human desire.⁴

Luo provides a brilliant metaphor of the split personality of contemporary China, with its sparkling new cities and its 800 million impoverished peasants who aspire to live in them. In this way, he points at one of the fundamental traits of what I called "transnational capitalism with Chinese characteristics." Everybody knows that since the establishment of the Special Economic Zones in the Pearl River Delta area in the early 1980s, China has become the factory of the world. It owes that status to the "China price," i.e. the lowest asking price on the entire planet for any given category of basic manufactured goods. But the availability of the China price depends in its turn on the capacity of the urban white-collar worker to extract tremendous amounts of underpaid labor from his other half, the peasant arriving to toil in the factories. How do the two figures co-exist within the same city, and perhaps, as Luo suggests, within the same skin?

Their relation has been formalized, since 1949, in the communist version of the *hukou* or household registration system, which served to immobilize people in their locality of origin. In the revolutionary era, development priorities were focused on the city: social guarantees and advantages were reserved for the urban proletariat, and rural-urban migration was strictly controlled, with occasional tumultuous exceptions during periods of rapid industrial expansion, often followed by forced transfer back to the countryside.⁵ What's surprising is the continuity of this policy since the 1980s. Throughout the period of reform, amidst massive and relatively uncontrolled influx to the city, urban *hukou* remained almost impossible for country-dwellers to obtain. It barred migrants from access to social services and education for their children, and left them subject to arrest and deportation to their residence of origin at the whim of the police, according to the so-called "custody and repatriation" regulations. The paradox is that the very system that denies peasant populations their full urban citizenship is also at the basis of the incredible engine of wealth-production that attracts them to the city in the first place. This paradox has set an entire continent in motion. The 120 million migrants who make up China's so-called "floating population" are in between the country and the city, crowding at the gates of modern urban life and yet partially excluded from it.

According to statistics whose accuracy is always difficult to verify, in 2008 there were some 30 million migrant workers in the major industrial cities, while the remainder of the floating population wandered between rural provinces. All such mobile individuals are considered displaced, they are not where they should be. The *hukou* system allows rural labor to play the same role in China that transnational migrant labor does in the European or North American economies, furnishing human fuel to sweatshops and low-end service industries while exerting downward pressure on the wages of more established workers. Recently there has also been a lot of pressure on the state to transform this system, particularly after public outcry in 2003 when a man named Sun Zhigang died inside a Guangzhou police station under the custody

and repatriation procedure.⁶ Meanwhile the government, faced with growing unemployment in the countryside and an inability of smaller towns to generate industry, is projecting the transfer of hundreds of millions of people to the urbanized areas. The stated concern of the officials, however, is that complete abolition of the limits on mobility would result in a chaotic shift of population toward the coastal cities. In fact, the digitalization of up to 80% of the country's household registration records has made the system into a powerful tool of social control, which is unlikely to be abandoned in the near future.⁷ The urban/rural divide will not just disappear. To the extent that this particular social relation is implicated in the production of so many of the clothes we wear and the goods we consume, could it be worth knowing about? Are we as foreign to China as we seem? The evolution of the *hukou* system over the next ten years may be the most precise barometer for registering the inevitable changes in the class structure, not just of China, but of the world.

It's intriguing to learn that Luo Zidan did his performance in 1996, just a few years after Deng's "Southern Excursion" had opened up new development zones, stock markets and the possibility of real-estate speculation, thus creating "the policy basis and market conditions enabling the emergence in China of a class of the newly rich," as the New Left critic Wang Hui has written.⁸ While state-owned enterprises were dismembered, giving rise to massive unemployment, Chinese intellectuals engaged in debates over the capacity of civil society to bring about democratic transformation. This was supposed to happen, not through radical change of the system, but instead "through reliance on marketization, the formation of local and intragovernmental interest groups, and the unlocking of traditional resources embedded in such things as clan structures." What that meant in practice was the proliferation of more-or-less shady business deals at the local level, based on contracts and land-use rights accorded by the government.

However, Wang continues, "the 'civil society' that was imagined [by the intellectuals] completely left out the huge working class and rural society, thus not only according perfectly with state policies that had the effect of drastically increasing the polarization between rich and poor, but also cutting off in principle the links between the ongoing progress of democracy and its true social foundations." The result is that Chinese levels of inequality have dramatically risen, to the point where they now match the highest levels in the developed world: those of the United States.⁹ Luo dramatized this situation perfectly with a 1997 performance entitled *White-Collar Exemplar*, which stages a businessman in shirtsleeves and tie, standing at attention on a city street somewhat like an army security guard, but inside a transparent plastic box attached to an oxygen tank so as to hermetically seal him off from any contact with the crowd milling all around.¹⁰



When social divides are created with such suddenness, against a backdrop of official egalitarianism and communist rhetoric, then the disconnect between "class issues" and "the contradictions that inhibit human desire" reaches an extreme. Dialogue is only present in its absence, as a gaping psychosocial divide that affects the individual no less than the group. The question asked by Luo's two performances might finally be this: Does the air conditioning make it impossible for you to feel your other half sweating inside the same skin?

Coastal Networks

Let's travel from provincial Chengdu to the great industrial center of Chongqing, then through the Three Gorges Dam and down the Yangtze to Shanghai – one of the most exuberant cities in the world. Shanghai was granted the status of Special Economic Zone

in 1992. With the growth of its heavy industry, the attraction of its high-tech research centers and the prestige of its brand-new stock exchange, it has outstripped Shenzhen to become China's most productive megalopolis. In 2002 it won the competition to host the 2010 World Expo. As a Canadian consultant explains, "Shanghai wants to be a 'world class city,' comparable to New York in finance, London in trade, and Paris in culture. Make no bones about it – Shanghai will achieve its vision by 2025, and is using World Expo 2010 as a stepping stone."¹¹

Once again, this is a city that wants to remake itself in a global image. But on what basis? Here I want to step back for a moment, and look at some of the infrastructure that underlies China's status as the world factory. Historically, the city of Shanghai owes its wealth to its position as a port on the Yangtze river, making it an interface between the maritime routes of global trade and the manufacturing capacities of the interior. The port is still tremendously important, as you can see by taking a trip beneath the Huangpu bridge and out to the mouth of the Yangtze. Container transshipment, bulk raw materials, steel, shipbuilding, petrochemicals and navy installations are the most visible. There's a lot of heavy equipment out there, with an aesthetics of rust that's fascinating for people from the deindustrializing countries. But more importantly, by venturing out into the Shanghai harbor you begin to grasp the operations of the East Asian network.



What's going on are intensive exchanges between a series of interlocking seas: the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, then onward to India and Australia. These are the historical circuits of China's ancient tributary system – but also the foundations of a more recent regional economy.¹² It was Japan that laid the basis of that economy in the years after World War II, after its industrial sector had been built up again by American investment for the production of Korean war supplies. Drawing on Australian coal and iron ore, Japan was gradually able to increase its steel output until it rivaled that of the USA. In the process it generated a new pattern of coastal production, dependent on shipping rather than on rail or road; and it extended this productive system to the rest of the region, through all kinds of joint-ventures and informal cooperation arrangements.¹³ This maritime trading pattern ultimately gave rise to what analysts have called the "network power" of East Asia, which has not managed to constitute a formal economic bloc or currency zone like NAFTA and the EU – but which has managed to constitute the new growth center of the world economy.¹⁴ In the boom years of the 1970s-80s, Japanese investments and technology helped China to develop new steel-making facilities, including the Baoshan complex in the port of Shanghai. Today that complex has become the largest steel producer on earth.

Again it's a matter of internalization, this time of fixed capital. Foreign direct investment figures tell the story: Japan and the "Four Tigers" of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong poured \$34 billion into China in the year 2005, dwarfing the Western total of \$17 billion.¹⁵ Of course the figures are difficult to interpret: Hong Kong is the single largest source of FDI (\$17.95 billion), but it also serves as an intermediary for others; and most of the money goes into simple manufacturing for export, with no long-term value on the ground. But in domains such as steel-making and ship-building, and more recently in high-end sectors like finance or research and development, China has been using foreign direct investment to build the infrastructure that will eventually allow it to supplant Japan as the major node in the East Asian network. With the support of a vast diaspora, China is regaining its historical place at the center of the East Asian trading system. And it's doing so along the coastline, in the zones of

exchange constituted by an interlocking series of seas.

The distance between the interior and the coast is the distance between a continental system of social control and a maritime network of high-tech production. It's the distance between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of the sea – the geography of a class divide which has become so great that it threatens to rip China apart. Here we rediscover the scalar tensions that constitute “transnational capitalism with Chinese characteristics.” The geographical divide is now one of the main preoccupations of the Communist party. That's why they launched the “Go West” campaign in 1999, a drive to attract foreign investment to the interior. The centerpiece of that campaign is the completion of the Three Gorges Dam, and with it, the projected transformation of Chongqing into an industrial colossus that's supposed to rival Shanghai. This can be seen as a literal attempt to extend the coastal mode of production into the depths of the continental landmass, via the Yangtze river and the hyper-electrified inland sea that is being created by the dam. In that process, anything stable or traditional – any popular identity or “still life,” as Jia Zhangke puts it in his award-winning film – tends to disappear into the flux of the productive network.



What's presented in *Still Life* (2007) is the desolation of a landscape that has become purely economic. The transformation is symbolized when the main character, Sanming, has to look at the sketch of the Three Gorges on a ten-yuan note to confirm the beauty, or even the reality, of the mountains in the distance. It's a classic case of life collapsing into art. What you mostly see in the film, however, is not artistic beauty or its monetary sign, but instead, the ceaseless round of construction, destruction and reconstruction that underlies them, resulting in the devastation of the landscape and those who inhabit it. At the end, after demolishing countless houses whose ruins will be covered by the rising waters of the dam, Sanming leaves to the interior, to work in a coal mine for money to buy back his bride of sixteen years ago who has been indentured into service on the river. But the other women of the story all escape in the opposite direction: Shen Hong, the estranged wife of Sanming's violent boss; the neighbor woman, who tries to sell him the services of a prostitute; and finally his own elusive daughter, who only appears in a photograph. They all take flight toward the coast, to Guangzhou and Dongguan in the Pearl River Delta, or down the Yangtze to Shanghai.

Jumping into the Sea

You have to wonder: what's it like to take part in the productive network? How do people internalize all this infrastructure, to become individuals in the contemporary sense – that is, participants in a global process? To describe the experience of leaving socialized security behind, the Chinese of the reform era used the expression “jumping into the sea” (*xiahai*). After all the studies of neoliberal governmentality, we know what this embrace of entrepreneurial capitalism can mean. As Nikolas Rose explains, it requires people “to conduct themselves with boldness and vigour, to calculate for their own advantage, to drive themselves hard and to accept risks.”¹⁶ Similar things hold true in China – but the academics leave out a basic dimension, the splash of the body in the ocean, the shock and pleasure of the new, either because you arrive as a peasant from the country or because the city where you live has changed beyond all recognition. How that transformation feels is the aesthetics of Chinese urbanism.

To get a first taste you can visit the Shanghai Urban Planning Museum, an outlandish piece of architecture looking down on People's Square. It's got a scale model of the metropolis in the year 2020, with catwalks over the towers of the future. Even better are the interactive exhibits, like a vehicle simulator that lets you drive out the 32.5-kilometer Donghai bridge to the new deepwater port, then turns into a boat when you arrive. The cartographic displays are packed with information and at the same time strangely popular, as though addressing two different publics.

A museum like this can serve as a 3-D negotiating table, where transnational elites debate each other's proposals for urban development. For the VIPs, it's about calculating the city's risks and chances, it's about making the most profitable bid for world-class status in the decade to come. But it's even more interesting to consider how the museum addresses itself to the newcomers, to the people who will actually have to live and work here. How are they supposed to make the leap to the endlessly transforming universe of Shanghai?

A panoramic video display entitled "Virtual World" invites you to ride and above all to fly through the city, giving you an almost instantaneous introduction to its attractions and facilities, orienting you in a space that is beyond the grasp of ordinary perception, and above all, bringing you up to speed. There is a biopolitical function to this kind of exhibit, and indeed, to all the accelerated, syncopated video displays and computer graphics that one constantly encounters in East Asia. It's a matter of inserting the body in the new urban sensorium created by advanced production, transportation and consumption technology – science-fiction environments of superhuman scale, which could be totally overwhelming if there were not ways to get used to them, to tame them, to let yourself be energized by them. One recalls the role played by film and photomontage in the process of imagining the mechanized European metropolis, the *Großstadt* of the early twentieth century; but now it's digital sense-surround in the Far Eastern megalopolis. And this kind of experience is hardly restricted to museums. In cities where the mirrored skins of skyscrapers morph into immense screens at night, the pulse of neon, and increasingly, of video, becomes a device for the mobilization of millions of people.

How is this mobilization effected? And what is its social significance? Video is the medium used by Yang Zhenzhong, for an ingenious piece called "Spring Story" (2003) carried out with the Shanghai production unit of Siemens Mobile Communications.¹⁷ The work is based on the speeches delivered by Deng Xiaoping during his celebrated Southern Excursion in 1992, when the initiator of China's capitalist turn redefined reform as "the emancipation of the productive forces." Deng's verdict of success in the Special Economic Zones of Guangdong province led to the almost immediate opening of Shanghai and other northern cities, and consequently to the installation of thousands of factories and businesses, the employment of millions of people, and the emergence of a consumer economy on the mainland. What Yang did to express this historical transition is to break Deng's lengthy and complex speech into some 1,500 separate pieces, then film the entire workforce of the Siemens plant as each recites a single phrase, or sometimes even a single word. Each one in isolation from the others, and – by the artist's own testimony – ignorant or oblivious of the significance of the text, captivated instead by the prospect of appearing on camera, the employees unwittingly collaborate on a supremely unself-conscious portrait of the contemporary division of labor, inside a mobile phone factory which at once symbolizes and effectuates the concrete technological conditions of a flexible, hyperindividualized, "always-on" workforce.



One of the things that this rigorously sustained blurring of faces and subjectivities becomes is a long variation on the virtuoso theme of the "Shanghai haircut," whose defining characteristic is to never be the same. A distinct personal style now defines the "average" individual, just as it formerly did the artist. But the ultimate enigma for the stylized individual is the overarching power that guides and integrates social cooperation. Through his access to the corporate resources of the Siemens Art Program, Yang was able to choreograph this unlikely performance of Deng's speech, using a carefully annotated score designed to insure that proper rhythm and intonation were maintained despite the fractional, atomized nature of the actual delivery. One could hardly imagine a more precise metaphor of the contemporary division of labor, in which massively individualized mobility is channeled and orchestrated to fit the needs of those with superior information gathering power and organizational technique. The central question under such a social system is: Who will supply the mobilizing energies to hundreds of millions of free agents? Who will communicate to the communicators?

Outracing the Economy

Here is where the creative industries come in: not the traditional fine arts, nor the modernist cultural industries like cinema and radio, but instead the newly minted and digitized professions that shape the lightweight, complex, ephemeral, ever-changing aesthetic experiences of the hyper-mediated city.¹⁸ The professionals who create the advertising, the color schemes, the lighting, the ambiance, the interactive circuits, the interior design, but also the artists and musicians and publics who soak up that light and make those ambiances vibrant and interesting and valuable on the market. Throughout China right now there is a rising buzz around the creative industries, in Beijing as they work for the Games, in Shanghai as they build toward the World Expo, in the Pearl River Delta as they add entire new city centers and cultural facilities to urban production zones trying to upgrade from their former status as the world factory. The interest in this new "new economy" is sustained at the governmental level by a small army of foreign consultants who have come to sell their skills and reinvent themselves in Beijing, and it's amplified back in the West by professional style magazines like *Fast Company*, which ran a glitzy special on "China's New Creative Class" in mid-2007.¹⁹ As the name of the magazine would suggest, this kind of culture is produced at high speeds, usually by very young people who can always accelerate to outrace the competition. In that respect it's like the dot-com boom. As a twenty-five year-old computer programmer confided to labor researcher Andrew Ross: "China is a very crowded world and Shanghai is not a place you can ever relax. Even when I try to relax, I can feel the economy behind me, running up at my back."²⁰ The art of outracing the economy, of dancing and twirling and glittering just in advance of its leading edges, is what defines the creative industries.



The creative industries discourse (CI) is brand new, since it was only codified by the British cultural ministry's Creative Industries Task Force in 1998. But it's also very old, if you date it back to Ronald Reagan's "Creative Society" speech in the mid-1960s, one of the foundation stones of neoliberal doctrine. During the California state gubernatorial campaign of 1966, Reagan audaciously proposed to replace president Lyndon Johnson's federal welfare programs with a voluntary mobilization of California's talented individuals, local governments and innovative businesses. As Hollywood's Great Communicator explained to the masses: "That is the basis of the Creative Society - government no longer substituting for the people, but recognizing that it cannot possibly match the great potential of the people, and thus, must coordinate the creative energies of the people for the good of the whole."²¹ Thirty-two years after that Maoist pronouncement, British culture minister Chris Smith and his functionaries would draw up their famous Creative Industries Mapping Document.²² All they really did was to package and re-export a set of practices that had long characterized the productive hegemony of the USA. Yet they did it at the perfect moment: exactly when digitalization was set to expand the knowledge-based economy from a few advanced OECD countries to the entire world.

CI is both a policy discourse and a promotional rhetoric. It flourishes in financialized economies, driven by speculation on prosumer appetites for aesthetic goods and services. For governments, the aim is to attain higher levels of employment and economic growth, by commodifying and privatizing some of the cultural programs judged necessary for social cohesion. For businesses, it's a matter of competing in highly profitable sectors where new-style design products, entertainment and IT meet the old-fashioned pay dirt of real-estate. CI has exploded in East Asia since the turn of the millennium. Michael Keane has shown how it emerged as a full-fledged policy discourse in China over a mere two-year period (2004-06). Updating their former emphasis on mass-media spectacles with traditional content, officials now speak of "Cultural and Creative Industries." The goal is a rise of Chinese products through the global value-chain, from "Made in China" to "Created in China."²³ But the advertising and design professions are also supposed to fuel a surge in the nation's consumption of its own seemingly boundless productivity - an elusive goal which is considered essential by both the Communist party and American trade representatives.^{23b} The concrete results of all this have been the overnight bloom of "creative clusters" in China's coastal cities: integrated districts where the multiple arts of human creativity are brought into a theoretically ideal mix on the urban territory.



For a compact example, consider the "1933" project now on the rise in Shanghai: the ambitious remodel of a 31,000 sq. meter Art Deco slaughterhouse, transformed into a creative industries center by a private-public partnership between the Axons Concepts Company and the Hongkou government. Architectural form was the key to this project, whose organizational aim is to bring the creative capacities of the human nervous system up to the scale of the megalopolis:

Inside, the neurological influences are apparent. The five-floor concrete structure is supported by solid "flowering" pillars whose stems open out like petals at the point of contact with the ceiling. The funicular central building is linked to a square outer casing by a striking series of sloping concrete pathways and staircases. "This is the brain of the building," says [Axons manager Paul] Liu. "You can see the inter-linking effect of these original walkways. We can use that to help carry creative energies throughout the whole structure."²⁴

Projects like this move fast in China. While still unfinished, the building had already hosted the Shanghai Creative Industries Week, November 15-21, 2007. To attract an elite roster of tenants, it's advertised as a lifestyle paradise of "restaurants, bars, private clubs and cigar lounges," with an upscale learning sector focused on self-cultivation: "Bookstores and education spaces will include elements such as drama, yoga, sculpture workshops, calligraphy and painting classes, cooking school, tea ceremony

courses and Beijing opera appreciation... 1933 will redefine what it means to be a 'person in full' by having all the elements to inspire in one location."²⁵ But it also aims to be a productive facility, with university partnerships and private corporations generating intellectual property for profit – in short, a ready-made version of the "creative city" condensed into a single urban block. The classic question of whether creativity can be managed and produced doesn't seem to bother the real-estate developers one whit. After all, there is money to be made in this domain – as a reported \$3.8 billion of deals at the 2007 Cultural and Creative Industries Expo in Beijing has proven.²⁶

No one can predict what future subjectivities will emerge from the hothouse of China's new creativity boom. Access to culture is likely to expand immensely, at least for the professionals and the business elites; and the consequences of that expansion may surprise everyone. Artistic invention has been given an operational role in economic development, fulfilling one of the long-held ambitions of the modernist vanguards. But the willingness of governments to use aesthetics as a form of psycho-engineering – and the efforts that corporations have expended, since the time of Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, in the quest to manipulate their clients' dreams²⁷ – make the dangers all too obvious. Critical interpretations of the new cultural forms, and of the social and political frames in which they create their effects and meanings, will be crucial in opening the imaginary space where people can gain some kind of relative autonomy, some capacity to be their own steersman. But that critique must reach all the way into the images themselves, it must be transformative. The stakes of these new images are tremendous. When state-capitalist power begins manufacturing your dreams, then art becomes the primary process of politics.

The contemporary visual arts do give clues about ethical/political positions in today's China. But critique and contradiction aren't exactly the strong points of the creative economy. Amidst the plethora of opening ceremonies and real-estate deals, the artists themselves are outflanked by the functionaries, the galleries and the museums. In the early 1990s, exiles from the Tiananmen movement began exhibiting around the world, opening up the possibility of markets beyond traditional or social-realist painting. A decade later, when those artists had been taken up as a neutralized elder generation in China itself via the explosion of Biennials and Triennials, the critic and curator Gao Minglu diagnosed the entry into a "museum age." In such an age, he says, the avant-garde way of making meaning – which consisted in transgressively entering the institutions that claimed to embody the highest values of society, then violently breaking away to show their hollowness and insufficiency – has become practically impossible. The multiplication of spaces acts to blur the hierarchies of value, rendering transgression insignificant. As Gao writes:

Today, Chinese avant-garde or experimental artists have gradually lost the consciousness of space that once defined their identity. Their creative spaces, studios, exhibition spaces, galleries and museums have gradually been integrated into one. The art world in China today can be described as a "triumph of systems." ... The external environment for an avant-garde artist no longer exists since the "wall" between the avant-garde artist and the official system is no longer there.²⁸

The most disorienting confirmation of these ideas comes from a stroll through the dream-like spaces of Factory 798 in Beijing's Dashanzi District, or of its smaller and somewhat more recent clone, Moganshan Lu in Shanghai – or tomorrow, of the thousand-and-one "art factories" that will flower across China. The boom in these spaces is clearly bound up with real-estate speculation, in markets like Shanghai's where already-inflated properties are said to have doubled in price over the course of 2006. The difference with San Francisco or London is that it's less about gentrifying a run-down neighborhood, and more about razing an area as soon as it appears valuable, to put up a high-rise complex for gigantic payoffs. For the time being, however, the state seems to have other plans for the art districts, particularly after the meteoric career of Factory 798 and the apparently successful negotiation by the artists, which saved the area from the wrecking balls at the price of turning it into a tourist attraction and upscale lifestyle destination. To judge from that story – which involved evicting one of the earliest art spaces, the Beijing Architecture Studio Enterprise, and opening a Nike-sponsored "Mr. Shoe Museum" in its place – the Olympic state now wants to use the art districts as vitrines for foreign visitors, in order to dispel the idea that free expression is not tolerated in China. And it undoubtedly wants to use them as laboratories as well, in order to see whether design innovations and profitable new consumer environments will really be invented by these Chinese children of Warhol.



This is not to say that Factory 798 or Moganshan Lu are uninteresting or merely “co-opted” places, far from it. They both represent the kind of cultural infrastructure that makes an artistic gesture or a literary conversation possible, and on that strength they are worth defending. But like it or not, they also bear witness to the capacity of an authoritarian government to control a population by carefully sketching out the open pathways on which it can evolve with apparent freedom. Of course those open pathways have to include some modest critique – which is how the Chinese state is internalizing what currently passes for democracy. When an artist like Liu Bolin sculpts an immense iron fist pressing with all its oppressive weight on the ground, he clearly enacts an anti-authoritarian gesture.²⁹ What’s less clear is where that gesture resonates, what kind of weight it has in the imagination. Fifteen or twenty years ago, such things would not have been tolerated; but they would have had immense symbolic significance. In today’s context of total economic pragmatism no one pays any them mind: the attention is elsewhere, still looking for the perfect fit between the banknote in hand and the beautiful landscape in the distance. What world society cannot find the time or space or concentration to really discuss is the ground we are creating beneath our feet.

Another artist, Liu Wei, has made this missing ground explicit. On June 4, 2005, he took his video camera to Xinhua University in Beijing and asked the passers-by what day it was.³⁰ Most of them simply reply, “June 4th.” When they’re pressed – “But what *day* is it?” – they avert their gaze and walk swiftly away, covering their faces, shielding themselves from the camera and its questions. What the video shows with painful lucidity is a moment of choked-off speech, so that you literally see the personality of the non-respondent dissolving into the impossibility of saying publicly what everyone knows as an intimate truth: June 4 is the anniversary of the massacre on Tiananmen Square, the birthday of authoritarian neoliberalism.³¹ After the sequence at the university, Liu Wei goes out to film this ground, its calm, perfect order, without agitation. The historical experience of repression has been internalized as the everyday reality of self-censorship, which remains a palpable force in the lives of an overwhelming majority of the population, including the artists and intellectuals.



Ma Yansong – MAD 2050 Design, Project for Green Tiananmen

Here is where the ideologues of liberal democracy take up their rhetorical positions, in defence of Western freedom. But I don’t propose to join them. A similar, if less dramatic, internalization of repression occurred in the Western societies after 1968, and in the former Soviet bloc in the course of the 1990s. Today it is the economic imperative, not the state, that commands in detail what should or should not be represented by the creative industries. The result has been a gradual neutralization of ethical and political speech. This gap at the heart of self-expression is now being exported across the earth. What’s missing in all our societies are

the psychic and social resources for resistance to the present.

Floating Cities

The journey ends, not in Shenzhen where the reforms began, but somewhere else, in a floating city. Shiny gold letters flash up on the screen and the music starts playing, repetitious and optimistic, like a lilting Chinese lute plugged into a rhythm box. The first thing you see against the brilliant red ground is a tiny drum kit shrinking rapidly out of sight; but already the viewpoint has receded, the ground becomes a bright red flag cradling a sharp-pointed yellow star – and there's a panda hovering up in the sky, a Mao-statue foundering out at sea and an over-sized plastic hardhat set down on a bustling ring road. A bicycle wheel spins, a patterned fish flops out of a techno-blue cascade, a city bus circles round in the air and the iconic CCTV building dangles crazily from a crane, high above a rotating mass of skyscrapers looking for all the world like a virtual Hong Kong. A smokestack belches flame at the summit until finally it explodes, billowing smoke and swirling ruins, while the mountain of buildings goes on spinning round and round with the music, and a shopping cart full of buildings and a leftover Buddha never quite finishes sinking into the rippling ocean. The title of this looping video is "RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by Tracy China." It's a promotional clip for a 3-D fiction yet to come.³²



RMB is, of course, the abbreviation of the Chinese currency, the people's money or *renminbi*; and Tracy China is the Second-Life avatar of Cao Fei, busily rendering all enduring clichés of her country into the synthetic landscapes of the latest global village. The video captures the inexorable economic unreality of contemporary China, in a satirical computer-graphics form that evokes both the neon-drenched arcades of Shenzhen, and the endless streams of finance transiting through Hong Kong to the mainland. What better symbol of the future than the dreamland of Second Life, for a country that has gone in a single generation from the extremes of popular socialism to the extremes of popular capitalism?

The paradox of the Chinese development model is written in sheet metal and electric pylons all across the Pearl River Delta. Debt-financed spending by Western households has encouraged foreign investors to build a sprawling factory landscape producing low-end consumer goods that the mass of the local population can still barely afford to purchase. The peasants who work at the plants are crying for better pay, a decent meal on the table and maybe even the right to go shopping – which would ultimately require a higher exchange rate for the RMB and a chance to bring home some of the profit that all this manufacturing has generated. But a rise in the standard of living means the inflation of average wages and the end of the China Price, choking off the export-driven mode of development that has brought so many millions from the country to the city. How to shift to another economy, where the fruits of labor are redistributed internally? How to invent another industry, where the price of progress is not deadly pollution? Here is the riddle that the country's elites have tried so hard not to answer. The collapse of home equity values and the consequent halt to the credit-card spree in Anglo-Saxon lands has finally opened up the question of the Asian transition, whose answer will give concrete forms to the twenty-first century.

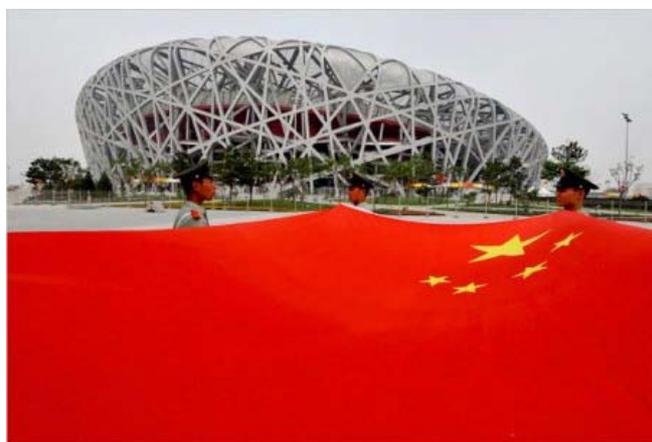
Rem Koolhaas and his Harvard research team first brought news of the Pearl River Delta to the creative classes of the West in the mid-1990s, amid the early stirrings of the new economy. Pasted up on the walls at Documenta X in 1997, texts and images from the PRD promised a new mode of critical research into the transformations of the world system.³³ But the global technocracy just goes on recycling the old love-hate relations of the bourgeoisie and its avant-gardes. Today the radical Koolhaas is building not only the Beijing headquarters of China's CCTV broadcasting conglomerate – the central Communist party control institution – but also the Shenzhen stock exchange, to inflame the

investor appetites of the coastal classes. Meanwhile his partner Bruce Mau promotes the spectacular fiction of “massive change” by means of graphic design, without any curb on the ecology of infinite competition.³⁴ If you want to understand the reality of the Pearl River Delta, the concise texts and images of Adrian Blackwell and Xu Jian could be a lot more useful. They diagram the structures of a camp-like “factory territory” based on land leased by village collectives to industrialists, and on dormitories built by individuals to extract rent from migrant workers.³⁵ Following their indications, I traveled to the village of Houting in the Shajing District of Shenzhen. The neoliberal formula of massive change by individual and small-group initiative has functioned perfectly in Southern China. What results is the banality of ordinary sprawl: modern apartments crowded tightly around a decaying village core; austere collective blocks inside the industrial perimeter; simpler factories with guards sleeping at the gate; residual traces of an agricultural life that has vanished into the concrete. As usual, the labor process itself remains completely invisible. The walls that Gao Minglu no longer sees between the artist and the system have sprung up everywhere.



In 1995, the Guangzhou artist Lin Yilin did a performance entitled “Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road.” The video shows him sheltering from the onrushing traffic behind a temporary wall of breeze blocks, which he displaces brick by brick to make the crossing.³⁶ The scene takes on an incredibly vivid meaning when you see the tremendous sprawl of the southern cities, choked with traffic and polluted, bordering on insanity, but at the same time, gleaming with refinement and luxury. The work could be a metaphor of an entire society moving ahead beneath a shield of overdevelopment that is about to become life-threatening, but that remains the only game in town – the one you’ve got to play to be part of anything. There is a wild lucidity to the best of Chinese art, which asks for a response, for a dialogue, for a critical engagement with the present. As Lin writes on his website, “The rapidly popular art market also brings the trial to the artists. Chinese contemporary artists take the risk to change their isolated status, suddenly to become brand name stars. If Chinese contemporary art cannot develop a particular theory, then ultimately [it will] only be expensive craftwork for this period of history.”³⁷ But Chinese artists are not alone in this reluctance or refusal to develop a theory of their role in world society.

Cao Fei is also from the Pearl River Delta. “RMB City” bears witness to the wild humor and deep disbelief of people who know how easily the dream of contemporary China could disappear into the maw of some unforeseen crisis. What you don’t see in the virtual city is what everyone who lives there knows: the wasted landscapes, the choked horizons, the pollution lying black and sticky on the shore. What you don’t see are the labor revolts, the “mass incidents,” the migrant workers billeted on the peripheries. What you don’t see are the wildly swinging real-estate prices, the continual financial turmoil awaiting a full-fledged crash, or the dependent relations with Americans as consumers of last resort, absorbing floods of products that China itself now pays for by investments in Treasury Bonds looking more worthless every minute. What you don’t see is what everybody knows, what everybody feels in the ground beneath their feet, what nobody can put into an image. The incalculable risk of the twenty-first century. The infinite uncertainty of global individualism.



Notes

Thanks to all the people who extended their hospitality, insight and support, including Stephen Wright, Ned Rossiter, Gao Minglu, Adrian Blackwell, the *Urban China* editors, the *Walking Cities* project, Yang Zhenzhong, Howard Chan, the people at Vitamin Creative Space, Luca Martinazzoli, Anselm Franke, so many others, your help was essential.

1 Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First century* (London: Verso, 2007).

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3 See the Introduction to Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

4 Chen Hongjie, text on Luo Zidan's work in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)*, catalogue of the First Guangzhou Triennial, Nov. 18, 2002-January 19, 2003, Guangdong Museum of Art, p. 226.

5 For the historical background, see Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1999).

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8 Wang Hui, *China's New Order* (Harvard UP, 2003), p. 83; the following quotes are from pp. 87-88.

9

10 For photographic documentation of the performance, see the artist's file at ShangArt gallery:

<http://www.shanghgartgallery.com/galleryarchive/archives/detail/code/LZDU022>.

11 Victor S. Deyglio, "Success, Opportunity, Change: Shanghai World Expo HR Strategies," in *Logistics Quarterly* II/2 (May 2005), p. 26; available as a PDF document, http://logisticsquarterly.com/issues/11-2/LQ_11-2.pdf.

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13 On the role of steel production and maritime transportation in China's development, Paul Ciccantell and Stephen Bunker, "The Economic Ascent of China and the Potential for Restructuring the Capitalist World -Economy," in the *Journal of World -Systems Research*, X/3, Fall 2004, pp. 565-89.

14 For an extremely interesting account of Japan's motives in the early constitution of this network, see Peter Gowan, *Global Gamble* (London: Verso, 1999), esp. pp. 46-48.

15 The Western figure includes \$9 billion from the fiscal paradise of the Virgin Islands and another \$3.3 billion from the Cayman Islands and Western Samoa. Source: "Foreign Investment in China" (April 2006), published on the US-China Business Council Website, <http://www.uschina.org/info/chops/2006/fdi.html>.

16 Nikolas Rose, quoted in Gilles, Guiheux, "The Promotion of a New Calculating Chinese Subject: the case of laid-off workers turning into entrepreneurs," in *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16/50 (February 2007), pp. 149-71.

17 For documentation of the piece, see the Siemens Art Program booklet, *Yang Zhenzhong: "Spring Story"* (Ostfildern: Cantz,

2003), or the artist's website, www.yangzhengzhong.com.

18 For definitions and critiques of the creative industries, see Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, eds., *My Creativity Reader* (Amsterdam: Insitute of Networked Cultures, 2007).

19 *Fast Company* 116 (June 2007), online at www.fastcompany.com/magazine/116.

20 Andrew Ross, *Fast Boat to China* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), p. 59.

21 Ronald Reagan, "The Creative Society," speech delivered at the University of Southern California, April 19, 1966, online at www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/speech.asp?spid=2.

22

www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_1998/Creative_Industries_Mapping_Document_1998.htm.

23 See Micheal Keane, "Re-imagining Chinese creativity: the rise of a supersign," in *My Creativity Reader*, op. cit.; and "From Made in China to Created in China," in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9/3 (2006), pp. 285-96.

23b For a history of the more-or-less failed attempts to enlarge the internal market, see Elisabeth Croll, *China's New Consumers: Social development and domestic demand* (London: Routledge, 2006).

24 "Back to the Future: 1933 Abattoir Becomes Shanghai's Hottest New Venue," Scribes of the Orient webzine, www.scribesoftheorient.com/soto/article_02.html.

25 Quote from the project website, www.1933-shanghai.com.

26 "Beijing cultural industry expo ends with \$3.8-bln deals," *People's Daily Online*, Nov. 12, 2007, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90884/6300443.html>.

27 For the latest on this front, see Clotilde Rapaille, *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People around the World Buy and Live as They Do* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

28 Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, exhibition catalogue, Albright-Knox Art Gallery and University at Buffalo Art Galleries, Buffalo, New York; Millennium Art Museum, Beijing (2005), p. 81.

29 The sculpture is located in the Dashanzi complex, outside Hot Sun Art Space. For Liu Bolin's work, see <http://hotsunart.com>.

30 The work, entitled "A Day to Remember," has been shown extensively in Europe (for example, in the exhibition "Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves," at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, June 15-Oct. 21, 2007). Liu lives in China. Not surprisingly, however, this piece does not figure in the list of videos on his website, www.lwstudio.com/video.htm.

31 As Wang Hui writes, "After 1989, the Chinese version of Scottish liberalism or 'classical liberalism' was nothing more than a Chinese version of neoconservatism. Its attack on the tactics, timing, and moral character of the student movement was intent on deconstructing the radicalism of the Chinese revolution and critiquing the radicalism of the movement itself without any hint of deep reflection on the social conditions and underlying causes that had given rise to the events of 1989." In *China's New Order*, op. cit., pp. 81-82.

32 The video is available online at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MhfATPZA0g>. It has been exhibited at many different venues, including Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou where a book on the project is underway. Also see the Tracy China blog,

<http://www.alternativearchive.com/chinatracys>.

33 See the book of Documenta X, *Politics/Poetics* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1997), pp. 557-92. The research was finally published as a thick volume by a four-person team of editors under the copyright of Harvard University, with the title *Great Leap Forward* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001).

34 See Bruce Mau et al. eds., *Massive Change* (London: Phaidon, 2004); the book is a catalogue for a traveling exhibition.

35 Adrian Blackwell and Xu Jian, "New village = cellular structure of the factory territory" in *Urban China* 12 (August 2006), pp. 88-93; Adrian Blackwell, "Territory = Factory," in *Architecture and Ideas* VI/1-2 (2007), pp. 50-67.

36 See the artist's website for documentation, www.linyilin.com.

37 Interview with the artist by David Garcia, posted on Nov. 26, 2007, www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0711/msg00085.html.

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15 Responses to "One World One Dream"

b Says:

[January 11, 2008 at 5:32 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

thanks for this, brian. fascinating

Michael Keane Says:

[January 12, 2008 at 5:04 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Brian: really enjoyed this piece of work; some great insights, particularly, 'No one can predict what future subjectivities will emerge from the hothouse of China's new creativity boom. Access to culture is likely to expand immensely, at least for the professionals and the business elites; and the consequences of that expansion may surprise everyone'.

Michael: Thanks for your remarks and I'm glad you noticed that bit, for me it's fundamental. From the period of my rural grandparents to this day, the extension of access to culture for Americans has been extraordinary. When I reflect on that and I look at what's going on in China, of course I see productive regimes, monetary interests, patterns of control and so forth - because those things are real, just as they are in America - but I also see fabulous chances for people to open up their imaginations and to invent things of which we can't yet even dream....

Els Says:

[January 23, 2008 at 11:35 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Dear Brian - some very interesting insights here. I need a bit of time to digest it all and think it through and will be happy to continue the conversation over mail or who knows, sometime back in Beijing.

ruediger Says:

[February 12, 2008 at 5:55 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Hi Brian,

great piece - and I am particularly interested in the CI line of thoughts. Working as an international consultant in publishing, and returning from Beijing where I could meet a number of publishing people, I wonder if you have thoughts on comparing your observations in art and architecture with book publishing (or publishing in general - including online).

Books are subject to more direct state control so far, but does this make their sphere different from what you see in the arts?

==> You know, as I don't read Chinese I would rather ask for your thoughts on the matter. There are serious limits to what I can grasp. Can philosophy and literature be so deftly channeled and commodified as visual art appears to be? How does self-censorship play out there, and what are its limits? Is China a mirror for the Western societies, revealing truths about contemporary forms of development and control that also hold "for us"? Are there not forms of ironic resistance and critical reserve that go far beyond and even nullify everything I have said in this text? I wish I knew the answers.

best, BH

[2007](#) | [Oh My Media](#) | [Says:](#)

[February 29, 2008 at 12:43 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] [One World, One Dream](#) « [Continental Drift](#) [...]

encounters and leftovers Says:

[April 2, 2008 at 1:44 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] [Brian Holmes' "One World, One Dream"] This entry was posted on Saturday, March 29th, 2008 at 9:37 am and is filed under Uncategorized. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site. [Leave a Reply](#) [...]

Zhongguoist Says:

[April 2, 2008 at 2:06 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I found your article really interesting to read. I'm currently in China(would be able to access your post without my proxy) and I like that you brought together lots of strands about China today.

==> Well, I am glad if it interests you! And pleased to say that the text is now being translated in its entirety into Chinese, after a partial publication in Urban China magazine. So I will be very curious about the uses that can be made of it, once it circulates in print and online in China. best, BH

[derelictspaces](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Toff's, the fracturing of the middle classes and shame](#) **Says:**

[May 11, 2008 at 9:38 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] prosperous (and validated) future than their parents). But I think the results of the pressures of entrepreneurial capitalism coupled with spiraling costs and a downward mobility that is now substantially visible really does [...]

justreading Says:

May 30, 2008 at 11:05 am | Reply

| great chapter, i link to it from twitter | one spelling mistake: Großstadt (not Großtadt) |

Brits in Hock « Continental Drift Says:

July 31, 2008 at 10:24 pm | Reply

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/one-world-one-dream>
[...]

□□□□ » **Blog Archive » Brian Holmes :**□□□□□□□□□□

[□□□] Says:

September 10, 2008 at 9:04 am | Reply

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/one-world-one-dream/>
[...]

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

November 21, 2008 at 5:54 pm | Reply

[...] 16-One World, One Dream: China at the Risk of New Subjectivities
[...]

Jedan svet, jedan san « vladimir.jeric (150/08) Says:

December 14, 2008 at 10:07 am | Reply

[...] brze pruge, grad koji jede selo, grabi prema planinama i nebesima. Svetski grad." – piše američki teoretičar Brajan Holms (Brian Holmes), komentarišući materijalne i subjektivne osnove Olimpijskog slogana "Jedan [...]

China Study Group Says:

October 5, 2009 at 7:08 pm | Reply

I would like to repost both English and Chinese versions of this article on ChinaStudyGroup.net – is that ok? Your site is blocked in China and I want it to be available. Also I just want to give wider exposure to this excellent essay. Of course we'll indicate the author and source.

–Thank you. It would be an honor. I wish only peace, prosperity, freedom and equality for the Chinese people. – BH

china study group » Blog Archive » One world, one dream: China at the risk of new subjectivitiesw Says:

October 5, 2009 at 7:53 pm | Reply

[...] by Brian Holmes | 5 October 2009 | No Comment | Last modified: 5 Oct 2:53 pm Reposted from Continental Drift: The Other Side of Neoliberal Globalization (January 8, 2008) – the present blog of author Brian Holmes. All photos and videos have been [...]

ADAM CURTIS: Alarm-Clock Films

By Brian Holmes

Cultural Critique in the 21st Century



For those entranced by the essay-films of, say, Chris Marker, the documentaries of Adam Curtis might seem crude. The insistent visual trope of a flashlight probing erratically into a dark, abandoned space full of conduits and wires returns one too many times. Where Marker offers you first-hand accounts of singular voyages and existential encounters full of depth and intensity, Curtis constructs a broad, abstracted picture by splicing together bits of tape from talk-show interviews, promo spots or the odd government-service newsreel. Where Marker clears his throat and plunges into an idiosyncratically unfolding phrase that releases a lifetime of historical experience in a moment of filmic poetry, Curtis clips off his dramatic pronouncements with a chilling diction that rarely varies – a functional replacement for the suspense-building bass line that you end up hearing in your mind, through the involuntary memory of manipulations past. The point is that despite the intellectual depth and visual complexity of Curtis's work, there is no comparison with the aesthetic subtlety of the essay-film: cinephiles can go back to their darkened theaters. This is TV, made for the anxious postmoderns with their zappers and their 36-inch screens. But what great TV!

The story Curtis has to tell is always fundamentally the same, except for the fantastic attention to detail. He retraces the intellectual history of the twentieth century to find out how arcane psychiatric and managerial ideas became widespread governmental techniques, which in turn have produced what we call our private

selves and what we feel as our shared predicament. He has clearly read a lot of Foucault; but he has also developed an expressive practice of the archive. He is more concerned with social reality than with critical theory. What interests him are specific thinkers and inventors, often minor and half-forgotten ones, along with the commercial, political and military decisions that place those forgotten thinkers and inventors at the origin of everything that orders and controls. He never hesitates to follow the labyrinthine path of ideas into the pragmatic world of parties and governments. Political engagement, historical research, incisive theory and an extremely effective use of the televisual medium – offering him upwards of a million viewers per broadcast – have made Curtis into one of the most influential cultural critics of the twenty-first century.

His own technique is to isolate key figures and to interview them personally, or if they are no longer alive, to unearth the historical footage and professorial commentaries that will sum up their discoveries in a nutshell, along with the consequences for society at large. After that he delivers an unsourced barrage of information about social change at a given period and in a given country – usually Britain or the USA – while gradually introducing other privileged thinkers or inventors, and other professorial commentators on them, either as relays, evil twins or dialectical rivals of the first. Accompanying this discourse are both standard documentary treatments of whatever is being discussed, and complex, non-linear edits from an extremely well-researched trove of images: bits of news reports, excerpts of film classics, commercials, scientific, professional or military documents, TV outtakes, experimental cinema, stills, freeze frames, all threaded through each other in a rapid montage, agile and unpredictable like thought itself. Through this virtuoso editing, the audiovisual experience comes very close to reproducing the uncanny gap one often feels between the steady flow of inner discursivity and the startling movements of one's own imagination.

What the documentarian achieves with his complex technique and probing rhetoric are hour-long bursts of intense awareness that the events we are living through right now have been constructed long in advance, that behind common knowledge there are hidden sciences of control and that government comes down to the choice of a ruling epistemology, about which the public is never sufficiently informed. Like Foucault, Curtis asks one question: "Do you want to be governed like that?" And he asks it with respect to the most contemporary forms of psychological manipulation, of military and security rhetoric, of economic doctrine and labor organization. These are alarm -clock films, wake -up calls for passive populations whose only recourse would be to think sociologically: but not as their masters do.

Genealogies of Power

Like many other people who live out of BBC range and don't watch TV anyway, I discovered Curtis on the Internet in late 2004, when references started cropping up to *The Power of Nightmares*.¹ The three-part series establishes a genealogy of the War on Terror, beginning with a double portrait in an American frame: the Egyptian writer Sayeed Qutb, who lived briefly in the United States before going on to become the spiritual source of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the German-Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss, who settled in Chicago and inspired the heroic doctrines of the neoconservatives. Both men, according to Curtis, were revolted by the commercial ignorance and tawdry sexuality of popular democracy in the USA, as they experienced it during the country's rise to hegemony in the 1940s. When viewed in the light of Qutb's Islamic morality, the nationalistic fervor of the neocons appears as

just one more way of recoiling from the consumerist void. From these very similar conservative convictions an immense and bitter clash of civilizations was born. At the same time, fear became the most valued currency of democratic politics, in a disenchanted world where utopian hopes have been abandoned. The ambiguity of the series is that you never know whether Curtis shares the philosophers' sense of disgust, or what alternative he would offer to their moralism.

Most of the politically scandalous material is familiar to us now, thanks to hundreds of journalists investigating the obscure relations between the US, the Saudis and the Taliban. But in 2004 the series offered vital insights into the raw historical materials from which the Americans constructed, first an Islamist ally in their struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, then a hugely exaggerated terrorist threat to replace the structural rivalry of the Cold War. The episodes are still worth watching for a dozen reasons, not least the documents of Qutb and other Muslim Brothers being tortured in Egyptian jails, or the story of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board's "Team B," formed under Ford's presidency to investigate the supposed missile gap between the US and the Soviets. Team B reads as a nearly complete list of the necons: the operation was called for by Albert Wohlstetter, promoted by Richard Perle and Donald Rumsfeld, and staffed by long-lived vampires such as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pipes and Paul Nitze, the latter having already been the founder of the Cold War era "Committee on the Present Danger" that came back to haunt us in 2004. What could be more urgent to understand than this eternal return of the politically undead?

The claim that Bush and Blair exploited the Al Qaeda menace for geopolitical power agendas is widely accepted today. But getting that claim onto British television in 2004 was quite another story. What's really shocking is that *The Power of Nightmares* was never shown on American TV, and remains largely unknown in the land of Infinite Justice.² The same holds true for *Century of the Self* (2002), a series on psychiatry's dubious contributions to who we think we are and what the clever and unscrupulous can do with us.³ The evil-twin relation plays out here between uncle and nephew: the austere and pessimistic Sigmund Freud, who invented psychoanalysis, and his cynical, fortune-seeking relative Edward Bernays, who invented public relations.

To understand Bernays just read his famous essay, "The Engineering of Consent," still cherished by the PR profession; or better yet, check out his "Torches of Freedom" campaign, a sexy and sassy public gesture conceived to liberate (the disposable income of) women smokers in the 1920s.⁴ The transfer of knowledge from depth psychology to advertising is obvious: for Bernays, a cigar was never just a cigar. But Curtis's film becomes historically fascinating as it portrays the degree of authority that Freud's iconoclastic thought could offer to the guardians of bureaucratic normalcy in 1940s and 1950s America. Even more compelling is the story of Freud's rejection by the public in the late 1960s, in favor of new injunctions to openly express and explore not just your sexuality, as Wilhelm Reich had proposed, but also your most aggressive and competitive drives, as business guru Werner Erhard taught in the confrontational group encounters of his Erhard Seminars Training (EST), the psychic crucible of a new managerial elite.

Erhard appears as the dialectical rival of Freud: not an evil twin, but a hip Californian sublation of the brooding Austrian analyst. The corporate-friendly 1980s, complete with Yippee Jerry Rubin's timely reincarnation as a PR exec, come off in the series as the world-that-Erhard-made. The manipulative psychology of the focus group, used by Clinton and then Blair to target narrow individual insecurities or desires, appears in the final section as a logical

corollary of this self-centered world.

What's essential in this film is the ability to track an existential model from its inception in a particular time and place, to its phase of diffusion through the habits and dreams of an entire population. But equally important is the ability to assess its most far-flung consequences, and to analyze the judgments that are subsequently brought to bear on them. To my eyes, the political point is that if the conservative Right has effectively denounced the capitalist worm in the fruit of 1960s experimentalism, the New Left has not been able to formulate a widely shared narrative of its cooptation; nor has it clearly identified what we still find positive in the Nietzschean adventures of those years. Curtis hasn't done that either, which is his shortfall; but at least he has helped to raise the question. That is what the self-satisfied generations of the Reagan and Clinton eras failed to do, leading to the dead-ends of the present.

Fatal Equilibrium

Curtis tries to analyze our condition of suspended political animation in his latest series, *The Trap – What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom*.⁵ Cultural critique, as you find out here, has become devilishly complex in the twenty-first century. In the 1930s the Frankfurt School had to face the socialization of family authority, taken over by the Fascist state dressed up as your dad or your preacher. They could use Freudian psychological theory to track the displacement of the super-ego into the propaganda of state institutions. The kind of power that we now have to face involves the mathematical reduction of all conceivable behavior to probability distributions, allowing for the computer-assisted prediction of minority and majority trends by businessmen and politicians (or whoever else can draw effective conclusions from the vast, meticulous and expensive data-gathering processes). On the one hand, the scientific story of an extremely influential epistemology is begging to be told; but on the other, an understanding of the political reasons behind its massive deployment holds the key to any effective change. This is where thinking sociologically can bring you to the heart of our civilizational predicament. That is, if you're willing to tease out a few more threads from the history of ideas...

The Trap begins with imagery that is immediately familiar to anyone who has read Paul Edwards' great book on Cold-War computer science, *The Closed World*.⁶ What you see are American military personnel operating the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment, or SAGE early warning system – the sprawling, Pynchonesque white elephant of nuclear paranoia that sparked the industrial development of digital computers and cybernetic systems, despite its functional uselessness for the protection of the United States. Edwards can tell you everything about the way that SAGE morphed into both the automated SABRE airline ticketing network that is still used by all the major airlines today, and into the now -defunct Worldwide Military Command and Control System (1962-1996). Out of the latter came Operation Igloo White, headquartered in Nakhom Phanom in Thailand, which was the US Air Force surveillance center that directed high-altitude bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam, inaugurating the perpetually faked American claims to pinpoint accuracy. But Curtis doesn't go into all that, because he's after more rarefied game: namely, the atomic-era game theory developed at an Air Force think tank called the RAND corporation, by a literally crazy mathematician named John Nash.

Everyone remembers the Cold War premise of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and the elaborate system of reciprocal signaling that emerged from it, whereby the construction of new weapons

only served to prove that one had recognized the opponent's firm expectation that any rise in the stakes would be matched by the other side in the most deliberate and rational manner. Game theory was an attempt to establish the mathematical certainties of a war that was far too dangerous to ever be fought in reality. The economic historian Philip Mirowski – who contributes many key ideas to *The Trap* – explains the RAND corporation mentality in an interview: "They still wanted to say that there was a rational way to approach such a virtual war, and game theory seemed to offer that to them. [The idea] that you could, in a sense, incorporate your enemy into your own thinking; that you could mathematically understand what your enemy would do to the point where you and your enemy will play the exact same set of strategies."⁷ But the psychotic Nash (who according to Curtis was hardly the gentle hero portrayed in the Hollywood movie *A Beautiful Mind*) took the theory much further, applying it to the everyday actions of entire populations:

He made the fundamental assumption that all human behavior was exactly like that involved in the hostile, competitive world of the nuclear standoff, that human beings constantly watched and monitored each other, and to get what they wanted, they would adjust their strategies to each other. In a series of equations for which he would win the Nobel prize, Nash showed that a system driven by suspicion and selfishness did not have to lead to chaos. He proved that there could always be a point of equilibrium, in which everyone's self-interest was perfectly balanced against each other.

In classic Curtis fashion, the last sentence, defining the concept of the Nash equilibrium, unfolds against three views of the same busy, four-lane city street: the first, close up and agitated, from a skewed diagonal vantage that emphasizes erratic movement; the second, still off-center, at a middle distance that accentuates the globular flow of the automobiles; and the third, a stable, orthogonal shot from above, revealing a single straight line of cars and a perfect grid of intersections, with traffic crossing first from one direction, then from the other and so on in infinite binary regress.

The German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle famously remarked that nineteenth-century liberalism had reduced the state to the status of a night watchman. But in the original text he adds: "or a traffic policeman." Classical liberalism was already about regulating economic flows, ordering the business of the city. But postwar economics had to develop an abstract calculus of conflict resolution that could be applied via technological systems to vast populations. What the image of the city streets suggests is that the realization of a Nash equilibrium on a twentieth-century scale requires the work of a traffic engineer steeped in the political-economic abstractions of game theory. Control, in this scenario, means the isolation of atomized individuals within privatized and often highly paranoid bubbles of self-interest, like automobilists moving through the traffic-planner's grid. In the rush to get ahead – to beat the traffic, or the market, or the odds, or whatever – they relentlessly calculate each others' strategies and try to counteract them in myriad ways that ultimately cancel each other out, while the red-and-green patterns of the carefully timed signal lights reign supreme.

What postwar America exported to the world – in collaboration with its major ally, Britain – was a cybernetic concept of homeostasis, whereby an organism or a machine achieves a state of dynamic equilibrium by continuously adjusting its control parameters to any changes in the environment. The new generation of feedback systems that emerged after 1945 were all

designed to maintain this kind of dynamic equilibrium, or “ultrastability,” which appeared as a fundamental value after the chaos of the Great Depression and the Second World War.⁸ Curtis, however, is not primarily interested in specific technologies or in the models of interaction that they embody. His concern in *The Trap* is more general and overarching: society’s abandonment of any individual responsibility or collective vision beneath the dictates of a mathematicized economics of human behavior, promising certainty and prosperity by the numbers and denying an effective role for politics in social existence.

“We will benefit our fellow men most if we are guided solely by the striving for gain,” claims the father of neoliberal economics, Friedrich von Hayek, in the first archival interview of the series. “For this purpose we have to return to an automatic system which brings this about, a self-directing automatic system which alone can restore the liberty and prosperity,” he continues in Strangelovian tones. “What about altruism, where does that come in?” asks the British interviewer. “Ah... it doesn’t come in,” replies Hayek after a brief hesitation. For a moment his face, equipped with a hearing aid, also seems to hesitate in time, caught in a freeze frame, staring out from the ghostly archives of television.

Statistical Madness

The first installment of *The Trap* is largely concerned with the Cold War theory of *homo economicus*. The second returns to this “machine model of human beings,” examining its expression in theories of the genetic encoding of behavior and in psychiatric treatment of anxiety by drugs alone, according to strictly objective diagnostic criteria. But most importantly, the second part explores the social destinies of individual self-interest, in an age when every citizen is conceived as a little information-processor elaborating strategies of monetary gain within a rule-governed economic system.

In the British civil service under Blair, and more broadly, under the 1990s paradigm of “the new public management,” game-theory models gave rise to techniques of continuous statistical self-monitoring. Section chiefs were given salary incentives to meet improvement targets expressed by means of bar graphs; but the methods they should use to change the readouts on the graphs were left to their own initiative. This reification of responsibilities not only alienated the new managers, but also spread through society the normative model of a calculating individual, bereft of fellow-feeling, cooperative spirit, ideals of the public good or any other sense of solidarity. The result, Curtis insists, has been a dramatic rise in social inequality. And this whole pattern was introduced, we are told, in the late 1980s under the government of Mrs. Thatcher, who confided the reform of the National Health Service to an American economist, Alain Enthoven – a man who studied game theory at RAND in the 1950s, then worked in the 1960s for Secretary of Defense McNamara as the primary strategist of nuclear deterrence.

Trusting the numbers became a kind of religion with the government of Tony Blair. “The Treasury under Gordon Brown invented a vast mathematical system,” recounts Curtis. “They invented way of giving numerical values to things that previously no one thought could be measured. Hunger in sub-Saharan Africa was to be reduced to below 48%, while world conflict was to be reduced by 6%. And all the towns and villages in Britain were to be measured for a community vibrancy index. And even the quality of life in the countryside was to be broken down into a series of indices, one of which measured how much birdsong there should be.” What passes for comic relief in *The Trap* is a shot of a plump, blue-suited bureaucrat reporting that since 1970s, half the

skylarks have disappeared. "And if you want to measure the quality of life," he exclaims, "one of the things that counts is that dawn chorus!"

Less comical are the interviews with National Health Service auditors, who found out that hospital managers were particularly ingenious when it came to meeting their performance targets: they would do the most innocuous operations first, so as to cut down the numbers on the waiting-lists, or they would schedule surgery during patients' vacations, as an easy way to get them momentarily out of the queue. Blair's performance targets rapidly appeared disastrous; and what is more, Curtis indicates, the economic theory on which they were based began to be seriously cast into doubt around the turn of the millennium.

In a strange and arresting interview, the mathematician John Nash admits to having suffered from delirium and explains that in reality, human motivations are far more complex than any model based on the simple idea of self-interest could ever convey. The images of the frail, hesitant Nash exposing his own mistaken trust in the rational order provide a strong sense of closure for the second episode. Without citing his sources, Curtis claims that a new discipline called behavioral economics has done studies to find out if people really behaved as the theories of self-interest predicted they would. The only ones who did, it seems, were economists themselves – and psychotics.⁹

Neolib Goes Neocon

To evoke the genesis of government by statistics Curtis could have focused on the aggressive scientific genius John von Neumann, who not only developed the logical architecture of the computers used in the SAGE early warning system, but was also the author, with Oskar Morgenstern, of *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), the book that launched an entire discipline. If Curtis chose instead to highlight the Nash equilibrium, it was undoubtedly because of the fascinating interview he obtained. But it was also because Nash's vision of a perfectly privatized, entirely neutralized social order fit into a broader analysis of Cold War political strategy, foreshadowed throughout the series but only made explicit in the final part. This larger strategy involves the adherence of the Western democracies to a doctrine that philosopher Isaiah Berlin defined as "negative freedom."¹⁰ For Berlin this is freedom from governmental constraint, the freedom to decide privately on a private destiny – at antipodes from the revolutionary notion of a positive freedom to change the world and to remake society in the image of a higher ideal. The price of such positive freedom, according to Berlin, was always totalitarianism.

From the liberal viewpoint, the preference for negative freedom arises from a radical skepticism about the powers of the state. "I hate government. I hate power. I think that man's existence, insofar as he achieves anything, is to resist power, to minimize power, to devise systems of society in which power is the least exerted," insists the British pundit Malcolm Muggeridge in a fragment from a TV interview. If not for the emphatic tone, one could mistake his ideas for those of 1960s critics such as Michel Foucault. Yet the series shows clearly how this kind of freedom-loving posture can be used by the Right. The "public choice theory" of American political scientist James Buchanan justified liberal skepticism and hostility to the social state by pointing to the ways how officials personally profited from their positions. The solution was to slash government budgets in order to eliminate such temptations. By these paths, the logic of negative freedom ultimately led to the disavowal of any possibility of genuine commitment to public service. And in Curtis's reading of the 1960s and 1970s, radical critiques of institutional authority came to

dovetail with the anti-revolutionary stance of Isiah Berlin, thus giving total legitimacy to the supposedly objective, depersonalized equilibrium of a game-theoretical world.

Developing an historical irony, Curtis points to the way that renegade psychiatrist R.D. Laing used game theory to analyze family dynamics, showing how they internalized the dominant forms of political struggle for power and control. "People induced their children to adjust to life by poisoning themselves to a level of subsistence existence," the psychiatrist explains in an interview filmed in the 1960s. Laing used his bleak portrait of intimate relations to attack all claims of morality and disinterested public service, as held up by psychiatric institutions in particular.¹¹ But the unforeseen consequence of this attack, claims Curtis, was yet another victory of depersonalized society: the introduction of purely objective criteria for the diagnosis of mental illness (the *Diagnostic Symptoms Manual*), and the almost universal recourse to drugs like Prozac to help people adjust to difficult situations in life, rather than confronting consciously and solving them. The dead-end of negative freedom and its purely private destinies is a life without any meaning or purpose – which, for Curtis, is exactly what the winners of the Cold War have sought to impose on the rest of the world.

The strong point of *The Trap's* third section is to reveal how the pretense to democratic objectivity and axiomatic neutrality is gradually shattered at the very heart of the Western political system, not only on the religiously inflected American Right, but also with the rise of New Labour in Britain. First Reagan, then Blair and Bush begin to seek a wider meaning for politics, attempting to export the Western system of self-regulating democracy by force of arms if necessary – attempting, in other words, to remake the world in the image of an idealized negative freedom. In so doing, Curtis claims, they unwittingly go down the same path that leads from the French revolutionary Terror to the more recent calls for violent liberation espoused by Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Pol Pot or the Iranian insurrectionalist Ali Shariati. What is envisioned in the contemporary West, however, is not any kind of collective transformation based on solidarity or community. Instead, the neoconservatives try to impose on the entire earth and all its peoples the freedom to decide privately on a private destiny.

There are two major examples of this contradiction at the heart of neoconservatism. The first concerns the disastrous restructuring of the Russian economy after the fall of the Soviet Union, following the shock therapy dictates of Jeffrey Sachs. Ordinary Russians, now living in a democracy, suffered extraordinary hardship as the Russian economy was brought brutally into line with Western prices and rule-sets, under intense pressure from the IMF. For Curtis this is a radically impoverished or shrunken version of democracy, in which the electoral facade merely covers a predatory economic system. The result in Russia was the economic collapse of 1998, then the ascension of Putin to power, documented by impressive sequences in which the Russian leader describes the breakdown of society in the 1990s and the reasons why firm military authority is now more relevant to his people than democracy.

The second example revolves around the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, then the extremely summary establishment in those two countries of electoral democracies that do not even include the right to unionized labor. This sham democratization is followed by the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism as a response to invasion on all levels. Curtis shows forcefully what most politicians, public intellectuals and commentators in the West still refuse to accept: that worldwide opposition to the democratic program arises not just from fear of modernity and atavistic regression, but

above all in reaction to the intense exploitation, oppression and domination put into effect by that same "democratic" program.

Curtis tries to clinch all this by referring to a letter written by Blair to Isaiah Berlin shortly before the philosopher's death in 1997, in which the Labour party leader evokes both an existential void and the urgent need to overcome it:

You seem to be saying... that because traditional socialism no longer exists, there is no Left. But surely the Left over the last 200 years has been based on a value system, predating the Soviet model and living on beyond it. As you say, the origins of the Left lie in opposition to arbitrary authority, intolerance and hierarchy. The values remain as strong as ever, but no longer have a ready made vehicle to take them forward. That seems to me to be today's challenge.

Blair is portrayed as an idealist without a cause, or more precisely, as an idealist who is incapable of having a cause, because of the very content of his ideals. Yet he goes to war anyway, with a vengeance. The "just war" that he called for in Kosovo, followed by the anti-terrorist crusades of Afghanistan and Iraq, were the symptoms of an intrinsically contradictory desire to fill the existential gap, by imposing a positive ideal of negative liberty.

As in *The Power of Nightmares*, the suggestion here is that the democratic ideologues share something essential with the Islamic fundamentalists, namely a kind of *horror vacui* before the failings of market hegemony. But much has been added. Curtis is no longer equivocal about his own feeling of revulsion toward market society. He recognizes that feeling as a primary motivator across the political spectrum, pinpoints its origins in the application of mathematical reason to large-scale policies and programs of social engineering, and catalogues the diverse range of consequences it is now producing in different regions of the globe and at different class levels of world society. Above all, he points to its deep internal contradiction. *The Trap* is a probing and often very successful effort to come to grips with one of the great political enigmas of the present: how a supremely rationalized version of laissez-faire capitalism suddenly collapses back into religious moralism and the geopolitical claims of imperial authority. In short, how neoliberalism goes neocon.

Last Look

What's impressive in the recent work of Adam Curtis is the ability to follow a complex paradigm like game theory through an intricate tissue of changing historical contexts, showing how it continues to influence society today. Yet this attachment to a "red thread" tends to minimize the effects of dissent and conflict on the meanings and applications of analytical models; and therefore Curtis ends up portraying nearly everyone as the unwitting mouthpiece of a diabolical idea. Both the substance and the effects of major intellectual debates are lost in this way.

At the very outset of *The Trap*, for instance, Friedrich von Hayek is made into the spokesman of the mechanistic Cold War economists, through his declaration of the need for "a self-directing automatic system which alone can restore liberty and prosperity." What Curtis fails to mention is that Hayek was entirely out of favor with the Anglo-American establishment of the time, which had thoroughly converted to Keynesian economic and military planning and tended to reason as though the production and distribution requirements of entire nations could be calculated by supercomputers. Hayek, to the contrary, believed that no one could ever assemble all the information needed to run a modern

economy. What could do the job were the price signals of the market, which gave individuals sufficient information to make profitable decisions on their own, while at the same time insuring the best allocation of productive resources. This meant that market society was an emergent, self-organizing phenomenon – far from the mathematical certainties sought by the Cold Warriors.¹² Hayek's views only came into favor in the late 1970s, when governments and corporations sought a way out of the stagnation into which the highly rationalized mass-production economies had fallen.

This could seem like a detail: after all, Hayek's economic thinking retains the key principle of self-interest that Curtis is tracking across the decades. Yet by avoiding this detail, Curtis skirts the entire debate over state planning versus corporate self-organization, which has deeply colored all of social development from the 1980s onward. The transformation of top-down planning techniques into a diffuse, bottom-up governmentality where the calculation of economic strategy becomes the responsibility of each individual would have been unimaginable without Hayek's neoliberal concept of social organization. And this transformation of economic theory is inseparable from a broader epistemological shift, whereby the cybernetic logic of stable homeostatic systems and clearly traceable feedback loops is replaced by the theories of chaos and complexity, with their attention to emergent phenomena in situations far from equilibrium. Epistemology, in its turn, is inseparable from technopolitics: the concept of the market as an information system for a self-organizing society was a tremendous spur to the development of the Internet and personal computing. Yet all these are non-debates for Curtis, who seems to believe that social change can be entirely explained by the application of state power. The characteristic reflexivity of "second-order cybernetics" – elaborated in social terms by an entire spectrum of contemporary thinkers, from Beck and Giddens to Deleuze and Guattari or Hardt and Negri – is flatly ignored, along with its political predicaments and potentials. Yet it is in these arenas that the dominant logics of the corporations and the state are now being forged and contested, while new forms of collective freedom are invented in response.

The lack of any attention to progressive social experimentation is the weakest point of Curtis's recent work. And sometimes it leads to real distortions. Throughout *The Trap* and also in *The Century of the Self*, Curtis insinuates that the counter-cultural critique of institutional authority is to blame for ruining the foundations of social trust. Yet at the same time, his own analysis shows how that critique was motivated by the very real dead ends of Cold War society. At worst, his condemnation of Leftist nihilism seems to hark back to some Golden Age of responsible public service that it would be difficult to find in reality. What is more, he skirts uncomfortably close to the discourse of neoconservatism itself, as formulated in the early 1970s by one of its elder statesmen, the American essayist Irving Kristol. In the face of the New Left's critique of technocratic capitalism, Kristol offered this diagnosis:

One of the keystones of modern economic thought is that it is impossible to have an a priori knowledge of what constitutes happiness for other people; that such knowledge is incorporated in an individual's "utility schedules"; and this knowledge, in turn, is revealed by the choices the individual makes in a free market.... What we are witnessing in Western society today [with the New Left] are the beginnings of a counterrevolution against this conception of man and society. It is a shamefaced counterrevolution, full of bad faith and paltry sophistry, because it feels compelled to define itself as some kind of progressive extension of modernity

instead of what it so clearly is, a reactionary revulsion against modernity.... For well over a hundred and fifty years now, social critics have been warning us that bourgeois society was living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy, and that once this capital was depleted, bourgeois society would find its legitimacy ever more questionable... It is becoming clear that religion, and a moral philosophy associated with religion, is far more important politically than the philosophy of liberal individualism admits... The enemy of liberal capitalism today is not so much socialism as nihilism.¹³

Reading Kristol, one realizes that the debates of the 1970s on both the conservative Right and the New Left turned around responses to the hollowness and existential futility of the postwar technocracies. It is surprising that Curtis, with his extraordinary ability to follow the paths of ideas through recent history, does not seem to realize how explicitly the broad lines of his own argument were formulated on the Right as early as the 1970s. The shift from neoliberalism to neoconservatism that we witnessed in the first decade of the new millennium was predicted and guided far in advance by figures like Kristol, whose key insight was that in highly complex societies, the power and coherence of religious belief was an invaluable resource of governance. To overcome the manipulative political norms that the neocons have put into place, the Left does have to argue at least partially on their terrain (the problem of nihilism), but certainly not in their terms (the inevitability of a religious or communitarian belief system). After such a brilliant rehearsal of complex historical debates, it is disappointing to hear Curtis relapsing, as he occasionally does, into a moralizing language that recalls Etzioni and the communitarians, or worse, the mumblings of Prince Charles about the failure of modern architecture.

Curtis ends the *The Trap* with a grand rhetorical plea, delivered on top of a swelling orchestral rendition of "La Marseillaise," against a backdrop of rather ludicrous slow-motion images of ordinary people running a marathon: "Our government relies on a simplistic economic model of human beings, that allows inequality to grow and offers nothing positive in the face of the reactionary forces they have helped to awake around the world. If we ever want to escape from this limited world view, we will have to rediscover the progressive, positive ideas of freedom."

One can only hope that Curtis himself will soon explore the positive content of such ideas – or that the bracing qualities of his alarm-clock films will encourage others to do so. The strength of his work lies in its power to awaken us to historical transformation, at a time when neoliberalism itself is fading into the same background blur that now surrounds the rationalist modernism of the Cold War. Yet awakening implies action, or indeed, invention. As the contorted visage of Hayek recedes into the backdrops of memory, what lingers in your mind is unfortunately not any new idea, but instead, the image of Putin slowly raising his eyes, then deliberately staring with the gaze of resurgent authority. Progressive cultural critique has much left to achieve in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Adam Curtis, *The Power of Nightmares* (180', 2004), TV series in

three parts: *Baby it's Cold Outside* (broadcast on BBC 2 on October 20), *The Phantom Victory* (October 27) and *The Shadows in the Cave* (November 3); available for download at <http://www.archive.org/details/ThePowerOfNightmares>.

2 Curtis reflects on this situation in an article by Stuart Jeffries, "The film US TV networks dare not show," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2005: "Something extraordinary has happened to American TV since September 11.... A head of the leading networks who had better remain nameless said to me that there was no way they could show it. He said, 'Who are you to say this?' and then he added, 'We would get slaughtered if we put this out.'... When I was in New York I took a DVD to the head of documentaries at HBO. I still haven't heard from him."

3 Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self* (240', 2002), TV series in four parts: *Happiness Machines* (broadcast on BBC 4 on April 29, 2002), *The Engineering of Consent* (April 30, 2002), *There is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads: He Must Be Destroyed* (May 1, 2002), *Eight People Sipping Wine in Kettering* (May 2, 2002); available for download at <http://www.archive.org> (search for "Century of the Self").

4 Edward L. Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 250 (March, 1947), pp. 113-120; Curtis includes visual material about the "Torches of Freedom" operation.

5 Adam Curtis, *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (180', 2002), TV series in three parts: *Fuck You Buddy* (broadcast on BBC 2 on March 11, 2007), *The Lonely Robot* (March 18, 2007), *We Will Force You To Be Free* (March 25, 2007); available on Google video.

6 Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

7 For detailed explorations of the major economic questions raised in *The Trap*, see Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge U.P., 2002).

8 The cybernetic concept of homeostasis was introduced, along with a machine called a "homeostat," by the British cybernetician W. Ross Ashby, *Design for a Brain* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1952). See also the description of the homeostat in Andrew Pickering, "Cybernetics and the Mangle: Ashby, Beer and Pask," in *Social Studies of Science* 32/3 (June 2002), pp. 413-437.

9 I couldn't find the study to which Curtis refers, but for a survey of recent work along similar lines see Samuel Bowles, "Policies Designed for Self-Interested Citizens May Undermine 'The Moral Sentiments': Evidence from Economic Experiments," *Science* 320 (June 2008), pp. 1605-09.

10 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford on October 31, 1958, published in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford U.P., 1990/1st ed. 1969).

11 Curtis's treatment of R.D. Laing undoubtedly misses everything the renegade psychiatrist was after, when he began to take notes on interpersonal strategies within the family. Compare the assessment of Laing's use of game-theoretical notation by Gerald Alper, "The Theory of Games and Psychoanalysis," in *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 23/1 (1993), pp. 54-55: "We can not help but note the striking similarity of the stark regularity of Laing's pattern and the behavioral strategies which game theorists love to postulate. Yet, there is a huge difference. Despite the beauty of near precision, there is nothing quantitative,

mathematical, logical, or even cognitive about Laing's patterns. As a matter of fact, especially in *Knots*, Laing appears to derive mischievous pleasure in the self-defeating, schizoid entanglements he is at pains to unfold. This is understandable once it is recognized that Laing's patterns are psychodynamic to the core, shot through with meaning, intrapsychic as well as interpersonal, and have little if anything to do with hypothesized costs and benefits or cognitive, adaptive strategies."

12 Cf. Friedrich von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 159: "Much of the opposition to a system of freedom under general laws arises from the inability to conceive of an effective co-ordination of human activities without deliberate organization by a commanding intelligence. One of the achievements of economic theory has been to explain how such a mutual adjustment of the spontaneous activities of individuals is brought about by the market, provided that there is a known delimitation of the sphere of control of each individual." See also "The Use of Knowledge in Society," in *The American Economic Review* 35/4 (1945), where, Hayek describes the price mechanism as "a system of telecommunications which enables individual producers to watch merely the movement of a few pointers, as an engineer might watch the hands of a few dials, in order to adjust their activities to changes of which they may never know more than is reflected in the price movement" (p.. 527).

13 Irving Kristol, "Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism" (1973), in *Neoconservatism, the Autobiography of an Idea* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 92-105.

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14 Responses to "ADAM CURTIS: Alarm-Clock Films"

ryan Says:

June 25, 2007 at 7:41 pm | [Reply](#)

Glad to read your critique of Curtis' works Brian, as we just recently finished watching the three series you mention (The Trap, Power of Nightmares and the Century of the Self). It is certainly disappointing, if not surprising that they are not more widely known in the US. We came across them on Google video and Archive.org about a year or so ago. Watching them all in such close order, your observation of Curtis' use of singular texts as a thread is right on, and i think that holds true across the three series as well as within them - there is quite a bit of overlap and consistency in their trajectories.

Benjamin Geer Says:

June 25, 2007 at 8:03 pm | [Reply](#)

A very useful review, thanks!

Honestly Says:

June 28, 2007 at 4:53 am | [Reply](#)

This is rambling, pseudo-intellectual bullshit.

[>> mind the __ GAP* ? » Blog Archive » Cultural critique has much left to achieve](#) Says:

June 29, 2007 at 11:11 am | [Reply](#)

[...] .. and now to go on with the article which attracted my attention and brought me there: NEOLIB GOES NEOCON – Adam Curtis, or Cultural Critique in the 21st Century. After giving a short introduction to A.Curtis and his method of working he specifically reviews [...]

Sanity For Sale Says:

July 16, 2007 at 1:27 pm | [Reply](#)

good work. have not been able to find any of Chris Marker's work though which is a pity.

curtis does rule supreme in the docu making arena. he has probably opened more eyes recently than anyone else.

gb Says:

July 30, 2007 at 8:04 pm | [Reply](#)

I would like to know which book "provided the red thread along which the narrative unfolds" for "Century of the Self"?

brianholmes Says:

August 8, 2007 at 6:42 pm | [Reply](#)

Hello GB -

A fellow named David Ryan wrote to me:

"You might be interested to know that the Century of the Self relies heavily on Stuart Ewen's book "Spin: A Social History of PR" which is a very good read BTW."

I haven't read it but I am working on the book "Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes A Cyborg Science." A 600-pager which I'm not sure I can recommend to everyone... or even sure I can finish myself!

Nicholas Roberts Says:

May 13, 2011 at 7:28 am | [Reply](#)

the most fascinating snippet from Cyborg Science was the taxonomy of markets, the kind of Chomskyan Grammar for Markets.

The idea of designing "markets" that are so different from the mechanisms we have now is really powerful, and the taxonomy seems really useful

I am wondering a lot about commons systems ...

Brian Holmes Says:

May 14, 2011 at 12:36 pm

Hi Nicholas -

Now it's been five years and I totally forgot the taxonomy snippet. Can you tell more?

That said, the idea of designing markets has been huge in governmental strategies for a long time. Regulate and tax a given activity in such a way that a particular kind of market comes into being. The big example is carbon trading. I remember pawing through heaps of literature on that kind of

thing. What you are talking about must be quite different?

best, BH

Adam Curtis - Documentaries « **Kevin Flanagan** Says:

August 19, 2007 at 2:19 pm | Reply

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/06/25/neolib-goes-neocon/>
[...]

Book Materials « **Continental Drift** Says:

February 2, 2008 at 2:05 pm | Reply

[...] –Adam Curtis: Cultural Critique in the 21st Century [...]

diagonal thoughts » **Blog Archive** » **Adam Curtis' Alarm-Clock films** Says:

March 22, 2008 at 7:07 pm | Reply

[...] and his latest 'The Trap – What Happened to our Dream of Freedom' (which is, as Brian Holmes suggests, about "coming to grips with one of the great enigmas of the present: how neoliberal [...]

Acutia Says:

May 20, 2008 at 12:48 am | Reply

Good thorough overview Brian. Have anybody else noticed the prevalence around the web of really shallow understandings of Curtis's films, especially by those on the left addled by conspiracy fixations.

I have the feeling that Curtis' research for "The Power of Nightmares" may have drawn strongly on both Paul Berman's "Terror and Liberalism" and maybe Buruma and Margalit's "Occidentalism". That's just my guess though.

You can catch a recentish interview with Curtis regarding his views of the internet, its effects on news journalism and his hopes for how the internet will allow him to make his films even more complex and knotted with details.

See:

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/23/beeb_week_adam_curtis_2/

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/20/adam_curtis_interview/

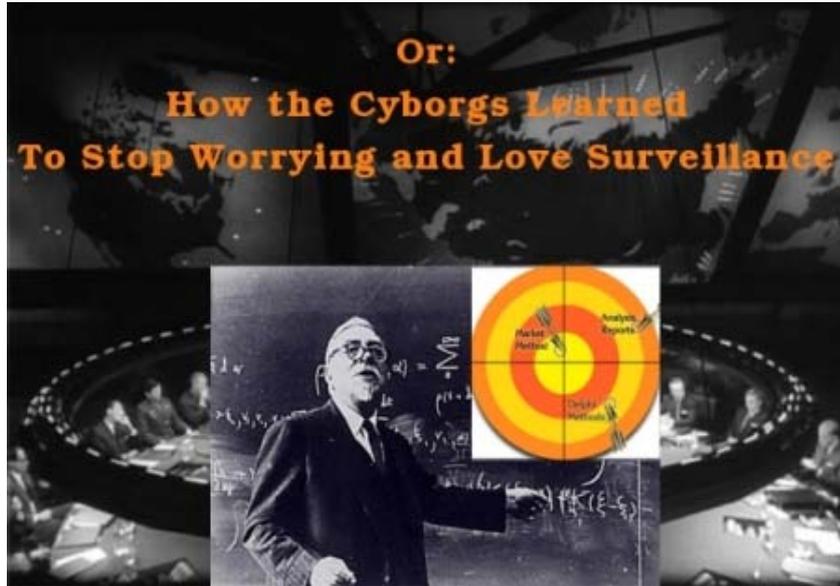
Book - machine quotidienne Says:

July 27, 2009 at 8:48 pm | Reply

[...] 16-Adam Curtis: Alarm-Clock Films [...]

FUTURE MAP

By Brian Holmes



"We are living through a movement from an organic industrial society to a polymorphous information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game."

Donna Haraway, The Cyborg Manifesto

In his final book, published in 1964 at the height of the industrial boom under the title of *God & Golem, Inc.*, the scientist Norbert Wiener asked a question: "Can God play a significant game with his own creature? Can *any* creator, even a limited one, play a significant game with his own creature?"¹ The example he used was trivial: a computer program for playing checkers, written by A.L. Samuel of the IBM corporation. As for the definition of "significant," it's not very clear: but Wiener does observe that just as in the contest between God and Lucifer, the programmer may well lose the game.

He had reason to be nervous. During the war he had worked on electronic targeting mechanisms and had come to conceive the feedback loop as a model for every kind of purpose, whether of animals or machines. In December of 1944, acting jointly with his colleagues Howard Aiken and John von Neumann, he invited a select group of researchers to join a "Teleological Society" to study the intersections of neurology and engineering.² The name made use of a term that had previously been reserved for the final causes of speculative philosophers and theologians. Soon after its first meeting, the Teleological Society transformed into the famous Macy Conferences on "Circular Causal and Feedback Mechanisms

in Biological and Social Systems” – a title summed up as “Cybernetics” after Wiener had coined the word in 1947.

In the course of that year he publicly renounced any direct collaboration with the military brass and the giant corporations. He was repelled by his wartime experience and sought to exercise his mind against nature alone, a passive, transparent, Augustinian nature harboring no hidden intentions, and not some Manichean universe full of opaque bluffs, evil designs and dissimulations. He did not want his new science to develop as a calculator’s battle against an unseen, calculating enemy.³ This anti-militarist stance placed him at odds with the fiercely anti -communist Von Neumann, a mathematical genius and a central figure in the creation of the atom bomb. Von Neumann, who attended Atomic Energy Commission meetings on a wheelchair, is thought to have been among the models for Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove.⁴ One of his theories, developed extensively by the mathematicians at the RAND corporation, sought to identify the most rational strategies for any two-person game by relentlessly calculating all the possible moves of each player.

Wiener saw Von Neumann’s game theory as deterministic and scientifically outdated. He preferred the statistical analysis of stochastic processes, and a policy of continuous error-correction rather than any quest for absolute certainty. By the 1960s he was increasingly concerned that decision-making might be taken over by game-theoretical robots, capable of learning checkers and many other things – until one day, like the Golem, they would run amok and unleash some kind of Doomsday Machine. In the face of that final cause, every human game would become insignificant.



Today Dr. Strangelove has receded into the never-never lands of science fiction and game theory no longer unnerves the general public. But for an understanding of the God and Golem equation in the postindustrial information age, one need only look closer into the nature of Wiener’s own research during WWII. Here, in effect, lay the origins of his revulsion. Beginning in 1940, he set to work on a closed -loop information system called an anti-aircraft predictor. This was a three-part problem: use radar to record the zigzagging path of an airplane performing evasive maneuvers; calculate the probabilities of its future course based on its past behavior; and convey this information to a servomechanism that would correct the firing of the gun – an operation to be repeated in a continuous, circular fashion. Yet more was at stake than a sensor, a calculator and a servomotor, because the gun, like the enemy airplane, was also connected to a human being. This, for Wiener, was fundamental:

It does not seem even remotely possible to eliminate the human element as far as it shows itself in enemy behavior. Therefore, in order to obtain as complete a mathematical treatment as possible of the overall control problem, it is

necessary to assimilate the different parts of the system to a single basis, either human or mechanical. Since our understanding of the mechanical aspects of gun pointing appeared to us far ahead of our psychological understanding, we chose to try and find a mechanical analogue of the gun pointer and the airplane pilot. In both cases, the operators seemed to regulate their conduct by observing the errors committed in a certain pattern of behavior and by opposing these errors by actions deliberately tending to reduce them.... We call this negative feedback.⁵

The upshot of Wiener's prediction research was a double inscription of the "human element" into the system: on the one hand, as a servomechanism, pointing the gun or steering the plane, and on the other, as a source of information for the feedback loop. The historian of technology, Peter Galison, stresses the mechanical side of the equation: "The core lesson that Wiener drew from his antiaircraft work was that the conceptualization of the pilot *and* gunner as servomechanisms within a single system was essential and irreducible."⁶ Philip Mirowski, in his study of the cybernetic model in economics, lays the emphasis on the informational aspect of the paradigm: "The physical and the human both had to undergo ontological metamorphosis into 'messages with noise' in order to be combined into a new synthesis."⁷ But Galison and Mirowski are speaking of the same thing: the infomechanical being that emerged from the Second World War.

Its double constitution could be felt in the uncanny identity of the strange new creatures that fired the guns and piloted the planes: both seemed to waver between machinelike, implacable humans and intelligent, humanlike machines. Where did this uncanniness come from? Galison's insight was to realize that the closed-loop information machine, in its circular, self-correcting unity, was ultimately defined by the opaque maneuvers of the dodging pilot in the plane, whenever he was pursued by the aggressive eye of the gunner. In other words, cybernetics was a Manichean science, permeated by the violent interrogations of its subject and the dissimulating absence of its object. This founding relation makes up what Galison calls "the ontology of the enemy."

The systemic unity of man and machine, split at its heart by an ontology of the enemy, is what I will explore in this essay, in order to gain a new understanding of surveillance. But the concept of surveillance itself will have to be expanded far beyond its traditional range. Here is the thesis in a nutshell. The automated inspection of personal data can no longer be conceived as a purely negative function, an all-seeing eye, a hidden ear, a baleful presence behind the scenes. The myriad forms of contemporary electronic surveillance now constitute a proactive force, the irremediably multiple feedback loops of a cybernetic society, devoted to controlling the future. Conflict lodges within these cybernetic circles. They knit together the actors of transnational state capitalism, in all its cultural and commercial complexity; but their distant model is Wiener's antiaircraft predictor, which programs the antagonistic eye into an obedient killing machine. Under the auspices of a lowly servomechanism coupled into an informational loop, we glimpse the earliest stirrings of the Golem that matters to us today, in the age of data-mining and neuromarketing. And this Golem is ourselves, the cyborg populations of the computerized democracies.

Our movements, our speech, our emotions and even our dreams have become the informational message that is incessantly decoded, probed, and reconfigured into statistical silhouettes, serving as targets for products, services, political slogans or interventions of the police. Each of us, paradoxically, is at once the promise and the threat of the future, which itself is our Telos,

our God, our Creator. And so, under the incessant scrutiny of today's surveillance technologies, Wiener's philosophical question returns in an inverse form. Can a creature play a significant game with her creator? Can we play a significant game with the cybernetic society that has created us?

Cardinal Points

To set up the context of this question, I would like to introduce four characteristic technological systems, which together trace out the contours of our society. These systems are all of North American origin. They illustrate how the hegemonic power spends its immense defense budgets on "dual-use" technologies, both civil and military, which continually intertwine with each other even as they reshape the emerging global order.⁸ You might think of these four systems as cardinal points, or even mapping instruments: they exemplify the way that concentrated computing power charts out the present, in order to wipe clean the slates of the past and colonize the future.

The Joint Helmet-Mounted Cueing System is a semi-opaque visor set into a magnetic helmet that tracks where the pilot's head is pointing.⁹ It functions as a display surface, replacing the traditional control panel and allowing the pilot to read aircraft performance, targeting information, weaponry status and threat predictions from the greenish letters of a computational scrim that remains constantly within his field of vision. At the same time, he is able to lock on a Sidewinder missile by just *looking* at its target. The helmets are made by Vision Systems International, a joint venture between Rockwell Collins and Elbit Systems of Israel. The fighter-plane cockpit places the human being at the junction between information-delivery systems and a whole battery of controls and launch mechanisms, to be operated in quasi-extraterrestrial environments. It is the ultimate man-machine interface, something like the cyborg's natural home.¹⁰ It is here that new answers are constantly found to the question raised by military psychologist John Stroud at the Sixth Macy Conference in 1949, way back at the dawn of cybernetics: "So we have the human operator surrounded on both sides by very precisely known mechanisms and the question comes up, 'What kind of a machine have we placed in the middle?'"¹¹

InferX privacy preserving real-time analytics is a data -mining tool based on previous research carried out by the parent company, Datamat, for the targeting of missile interceptors.¹² It works by inserting an "InferAgent" program into an entire range of computer systems – banks, airports, ticketing agencies, harbor authorities, etc. – then using encrypted transmissions to perform real-time pattern-recognition analysis on the data that circulates through those systems. The software is promoted by Michael Brown, the disgraced former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): "What these algorithms do is they look at what's the normal pattern for any given set of data points, and if those veer off by any fashion, then the protocol says you need to look at that."¹³ InferX is designed to hunt around the world for "unknown unknowns": those things that "we don't know we don't know," as Donald Rumsfeld puts it. Because the data is not physically warehoused, it escapes the restrictions placed by Congress on DARPA's Total

Information Awareness. Indeed, the company has actively marketed its system for the US military's TANGRAM project, which effectively replaces TIA.¹⁴ And InferX is a dual-use technology, including a marketing application: "InferCluster uses the same distributed architecture as InferAgent to send agents over networks for the clustering of groups of objects with similar features from multiple data sources. InferCluster can be used to group customers with similar purchasing behavior, or to even discover patterns of who is not buying and why." In that last phrase, one begins to sense the disquieting pervasiveness of what Peter Galison calls "the ontology of the enemy."

The **Personicx customer relationship management system**, developed by the Acxiom corporation, divides the entire US population into 70 demographic clusters, according to "age, estimated household income, presence and age range of children, marital status, home ownership status, estimated net worth and population density."¹⁵ The system is built on Acxiom's InfoBase, which is the largest continuously updated consumer database in the United States, containing public tax and census information as well as innumerable bits of data culled from the records of corporate clients. The database covers some 110 million households – basically the entire marketing universe of the United States – and, unlike the geodemographic systems of rival companies such as Claritas, it provides direct-mail, telephone and email access to *individual* households, not just zipcode groups. It profiles the cultural background, lifestyle, hobbies and aspirations of each cluster, and it also tracks them through life-stage changes, allowing for what Acxiom calls "preemptive marketing," or the chance to begin pitching products and services to households shortly *before* they enter a new phase. The resources of companies like Acxiom are increasingly used by politicians. As Democratic campaigner Terry McAuliffe said: "If I want to sit at my desk, pull up on the screen the state of Ohio, and say, 'Who in Ohio says that education is going to be the number one issue they're going to vote on,' six seconds later, 1.2 million names will pop up. I then have the ability to hit buttons and do telemarketing to them immediately, or to send emails to them immediately, send direct mail to them immediately, or actually send someone to their door to talk to them."¹⁶ The technology of the "panoptic sort," studied in the early 1990s by Oscar Gandy,¹⁷ has taken a quantum leap forward – and it will take another one very soon, when the lifestyle information offered by social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace start being exploited by the data-miners.

Orbit Traffic Management Technology, sold by the ShopperTrak corporation,¹⁸ is the last point on the quadrant. It consists of an unobtrusive ceiling-mounted video camera that compiles records of customer movement through the store and correlates them with both sales figures and labor-force data. Up to 254 units can be networked to cover large areas, and cameras can also be installed outside to compare how many people pass by and how many actually enter. The data is transmitted to ShopperTrak's treatment center, where it is processed and presented on a web-platform for remote access by management. The point is to use

the information as a guide for adjusting in-store traffic flow, product placement, signage and advertising. The effectiveness of the design changes can then be checked against the hard data of sales. The cash-register results of individual stores can also be compared with macro-trends at the regional and national levels, allowing for performance benchmarking. Even more crucially, real-time data on regional and national sales of a given product line can be used for hour-by-hour adjustments in the size of the retail labor force, by means of an application called ESP, or "Easy Staffing Planner." In this way, businesses are expected to move toward "customer experience management," which consists of an ability to reconfigure both the built environment and the reception staff in real time, in order to more efficiently capture the client's desire and convert it into sales. The ideal seems to be a situation where a single look leads inevitably to a purchase.

Each of these four technologies represents a major innovation in its class. But at the same time, they are only a tiny part of a vastly wider range of surveillance techniques, all integrated to larger control systems which increasingly rely on predictive algorithms. When surveillance develops to this degree you can say goodbye not only to privacy, but to the entire public/private divide on which individual choice in a democracy was founded. Today, what Habermas called the "structural transformation of the public sphere" has crossed another threshold.¹⁹ In the twentieth century, it was a matter of large-scale news and advertising companies distorting the public sphere in which ideas are exchanged. Now we are heading toward an entirely different kind of society, based not on informed debate and democratic decision but on electronic identification, statistical prediction and environmental seduction. A society whose major professional preoccupation is preemptively shaping the consciousness of the consumer. In this kind of society, the ciphers of opportunity presented by marketing data are never very far from the targeting information thrown off by an evasive enemy.

The four examples I've presented take us from looks that kill, with the helmet-mounted cueing system, all the way to looks that consume, with customer experience management. In between, they show how data -mining provides the power to identify probable criminals or terrorists, but also probable buyers of a product or voters for a candidate. This kind of "future mapping" via the combination of data collection, predictive analysis and environmental simulation could be found in dozens of other realms, from traffic control to finance. In every case, the tracking and analysis of human beings helps to configure a man-machine interface. The classical example is the explicitly cyborg form of the pilot inside his molded cockpit, which has led to extensive development of flight-simulation devices for both testing and training.²⁰ But the most extensive condition of interface arises from the relation between mobile consumers and what the architectural critic Sze Tsung Leong calls "control space," i.e. urban design shaped by real-time information on the aggregate behavior of individuals.²¹ The word "control" has a precise meaning here: it refers to the continuous adjustment of an apparatus, or in this case, an environment, according to feedback data on its human variables. The environment is overcoded with an optimizing algorithm, fed by data coming directly from *you*. This notion of continuous adjustments to an overcoded environment is key, if we want to understand the pervasiveness of surveillance in today's societies – a pervasiveness that goes well beyond military, police and secret -service functions. To understand contemporary surveillance, however, requires abandoning two commonly held ideas: the literary image of Big Brother peering out from a screen, and the more complex architectural image of the Panopticon.

What's interesting is that both these images correspond to comprehensive models of society and subjectivity. The world of Orwell's *1984* is not only defined by a camera hidden in a telescreen, manned by secret police watching out for crimethink. It's also a regime of absolute identification with the dark-haired, mustachioed image of Big Brother, and absolute rejection and hatred of the Jewish traitor Goldstein. *1984* depicts a totalitarian state, regulated by arbitrary trials, torture and spectacular executions, and articulated by the language of Newspeak that allows for no internal contradictions, indeed, no difference whatsoever in society or the inmost conscience of the individual. But in that respect it's an archaic image, one that corresponds very little to the world in which we live, even if there are thousands of NSA operatives devoting all their time to spying on specific persons, and even if there are orange-suited prisoners held in the spectacular torture centers of Guantánamo.

Similarly, the Panopticon is not just a circular building with windowed cells and a central tower outfitted with venetian blinds, where a functionary can watch a prisoner's every move without himself being seen. It's also a world of proliferating files, dossiers and case histories, each administered by professionals who seek to reform and retrain the individual, to ingrain a discipline into his mind, emotions and reflexes, a discipline that will operate even without the all-seeing eye. Panoptic society is a bureaucracy that individualizes its subjects through the imposition of a regular and codified system of differences, creating functional categories of able-bodied men and women whose actions and gestures can be articulated into a productive whole, and whose truth can be distilled into the discourses of specialists. Despite their inexorably ramifying knowledge, these specialists always retain something of the warden, the doctor, the educator, shaping pliable personalities within the stable framework of all-encompassing institutions. But as we know, such clearly defined institutions with their carefully molded subjects are increasingly hard to find in present-day society, even if we do not lack schoolmasters, sergeants and psychiatrists in the pay of the state.

It's obvious that both Big Brother and the Panopticon are dated, though they have not entirely disappeared. The question, then, is how do we characterize a surveillance regime that is neither totalitarian nor disciplinary, but depends primarily on the statistical treatment of aggregate data in order to shape environments in which populations of mobile individuals can be channeled and controlled? How, in other words, do we understand the political economy of surveillance in a cybernetic society?

Security Devices

It's astonishing to see how Foucault, in his 1978 lectures at the Collège de France, immediately begins to distance himself from the image of the Panopticon and the concept of a disciplinary society that he had advanced only two years before, in *Discipline and Punish*. The 1978 lectures are entitled *Security, Territory, Population*. They deal with what Foucault calls "security devices," or the regulatory mechanisms whereby the economic activity of a population is both optimized and protected against disruption.²² The first example is a mid 18th-century redevelopment plan for the city of Nantes, which involves cutting out new streets to serve four overlapping functions: the aeration of unhygienic neighborhoods; the facilitation of trade inside the city; the direct connection of the streets to long-distance transportation networks; and the surveillance of traffic in an urban environment that is no longer walled or subject to curfew. The keyword here is *circulation*. Instead of developing closed, precisely defined spaces for exclusive uses, as in a disciplinary architecture, the plan creates an open series of multifunctional devices that can expand in various directions according to patterns of future growth that can only be foreseen as probabilities. Further examples include the

treatment of the plague by an identification of its transmission vectors, or the mitigation of famine by economic adjustments that discourage the hoarding of grain. In each case, the nature of an existing phenomenon and its effects on a population are carefully analyzed before any measures are taken. The aim of the liberal art of government is not to punish, transform or even save individuals, as in a disciplinary regime, but instead to arrive at the optimal distribution of certain phenomena in society, "to reduce the most unfavorable, deviant normalities in relation to the normal, general curve."

All of this is quite unlike a sovereign upholding an arbitrary and terrifying law (which was the role of the ancient kings, or of Big Brother). But it is equally distinct from an administration imposing disciplinary routines on an individual (which is the effect of panoptic surveillance, whether in prison or on the factory floor). It is now a matter of political economists adjusting the parameters of an open environment so as to stimulate and channel the probable behaviors of a population, and to manage the risks entailed by its free and natural mobility, or indeed, by the expression of its desire. The problem of governments under this liberal paradigm, Foucault explains, "is how they can say yes; it is how to say yes to this desire."

What's impressive here is the about-face in Foucault's theory of the panoptic order – a rethinking motivated by the rise of neoliberalism, amid the shift to a post-industrial society. He goes so far as to say he was wrong when he claimed in his work on the prison that the disciplines were the coercive "dark side" of Enlightenment liberties, the fundamental mechanisms of power lying beneath the formal surface of liberal theory. Instead, he now maintains, "freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security." The two, in other words, evolve as a function of each other. Developing that same idea a year later, he declares with a certain irony that the liberal art of government "consumes freedom" – "freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression" – and therefore, "it must produce it, it must organize it."²³ It must provide the institutional environment for the exercise of certain freedoms, including the conditions under which one person's freedom can be prevented from limiting another's, or indeed, from threatening the entire mechanism of economic exchanges. The liberal art of government, for Foucault, consists in intervening not on the players but on "the rules of the game."

From here it would have taken just one more step to foresee how the statistical interpretation of computerized surveillance data would open up entirely new possibilities for the governance of mobile populations circulating through the world space. In effect, the analysis of liberal economic regulation allows us to understand the tremendous incentives for the global deployment of feedback environments since the close of the Cold War. Cybernetics – whose etymology means both "steersman" and "governor" – has become the applied social science of control at a distance, the necessary correlate of American aspirations to global free trade, and indeed, to liberal empire. This relation between classical liberalism and technological control would have been faintly visible some three decades ago, for someone trying to look into the future.²⁴ But Foucault was not a social forecaster, as the sociologist Daniel Bell claimed to be. Instead he worked as a genealogist, examining the successive historical strata that combine in the present. He conceived the security devices as an eighteenth-century addition to the disciplinary procedures of the sixteenth century, just as those procedures had been superimposed on the juridical forms of medieval sovereignty: "There is not a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear. There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, the security age... In reality you have a series of complex edifices... in which what above all

changes is the dominant characteristic, or more exactly, the system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security.”²⁵

It is the complexity of such an architecture that we must take into account, if we want to develop an image of surveillance within the wider panorama of the corporate and military order. The difficulty, in a fully fledged neoliberal society, is to see how a wide range of different actors continually attempt to manipulate the environments in which individuals freely take their decisions; and to see in turn how state power intervenes at the highest level, with attempts to readjust the concrete “security devices” of the corporations and the police, along with the broader and more abstract rules of economic governance. The difficulty, in short, is to create the image or the metaphor of a deeply Manichean society where, as Daniel Bell observed, “games between persons” have definitively replaced any kind of collective struggle against nature.²⁶ This society, which displaces so much of its conflict into the future, is nonetheless the present framework in which individuals, groups and populations all become cyborgs, that is, people bound inseparably to machines, struggling to make sense and to achieve purposes within mediated environments that are expressly designed to manipulate them. But this is also the framework that a neoconservative state power like that of the Bush administration seeks to restructure, by reinforcing the earlier paradigms of military discipline and sovereign law. Very few people have sought to theorize this highly unstable condition of governance; but has anyone managed to crystallize it in an image? And has anyone managed to oppose it with what Foucault would have called “counter-behaviors”?

Precog Visions

One of the most original images of data-gathering technologies is proposed by William Bogard, in his book *The Simulation of Surveillance*. Going beyond Big Brother and the Panopticon, he explores an imaginary future – or “social science fiction” – where surveillance outstrips itself to become simulation, a virtual reality in which crime is already vanquished and desire is already satisfied. Bogard is keenly aware of the historical role of cybernetics in preparing the ground for such a society, as he indicates by speaking of simulation as “hypersurveillant control.” But he works in a Baudrillardian vein, with an ecstatic fascination for the synthesized image. Simulation, he writes, “is nothing less than perfect surveillance, surveillance raised to the highest power, where nothing escapes the gaze. Everything already observed, absolute foreknowledge of events grounded in the possession of the codes which generate them.”²⁷ There is something very close here to a game-theoretic vision, in which all the moves are already known and all the strategies have already been played. Bogard probably felt vindicated by movies like *The Truman Show*, or even better, *The Matrix*, both of which came out after his book. But what gets lost in the fascination of simulation is the fundamental paradox of control, its Manichean nature.

Another film offers a stranger and more searching image of surveillance, though without quite matching the science-fiction story on which it was based. I’m thinking of Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report*, which tells the tale of the experimental “Pre-Crime Department” of the Washington D.C. police in the year 2054. Spielberg is known for special effects, and some of them go straight to the point. The chase scene captures the ambiguity of contemporary identification and tracking technologies by imagining their logical development in the future. Billboard advertisements spring to life, activated by a retinal scan, to call out the name of the central character John Anderton as he strides anxiously through a corridor to the subway. In a bit of poetic justice, American Express, one of the pioneers of the “panoptic sort” studied by Oscar Gandy, gets the highest visibility in this thirty-

second orgy of brand-name seductions. Another quick scan at the subway turnstile epitomizes the convenience of biometric identification. And the matching cut to the police, tracking their prey through the transport system, recalls the price we pay for it. Later on, this imaginary vision comes extremely close to Foucault's notion of enforced optimization, when the inventor of Pre-Crime, police commissioner Lamar Burgess, addresses a crowd of people celebrating the extension of the device to the entire country. He says to them: "Enjoy yourselves! That's an order." And everyone seems delighted to hear even the police commissioner saying yes, saying yes to their desire. Still the most powerful, most haunting image in the film is that of the precognitives themselves: strange, misshapen creatures, pumped full of drugs, bathing in some amniotic solution, with electrodes pressed to their heads to read off their visions of the future.



These three creatures are clearly cyborgs. Yet rather than being outfitted with powerful mechanical prosthetics and assisted with augmented cognitive faculties, as in fighter-plane cockpits or in movies like *The Terminator*, here they are merely monitored, probed to their innermost imaginings. It is the sensitivity of their emotional responses to the world that makes it possible for the police to predict the future. Philip K. Dick's short story is worth quoting here: :

In the gloomy half-darkness the three idiots sat babbling. Every incoherent utterance, every random syllable, was analyzed, compared and reassembled in the form of visual symbols, transcribed on conventional punchcards, and ejected into various coded slots. All day long the idiots babbled, imprisoned in their special high-backed chairs, held in one rigid position by metal bands, and bundles of wiring, clamps. Their physical needs were taken care of automatically. They had no spiritual needs. Vegetable-like, they muttered and dozed and existed. Their minds were dull, confused, lost in shadows. But not the shadows of today. The three gibbering, fumbling creatures, with their enlarged heads and wasted bodies, were contemplating the future.²⁷

In the movie, Spielberg has the precogs generate mental images of the future, without any mediation of computer analysis. He makes them self-aware, conscious of their visions and even able to suggest a course of action, as when the precog Agatha tells Anderton that he can change the future. But in that way, Spielberg simplifies a metaphor that was much more brutal and precise in Dick's short story. There the precogs are pure sensibility, without reason or personal identity – something like the "reptilian brains" that contemporary marketers try to map out in their experimental subjects.²⁸ The precogs, in Dick's story, are uncanny, Golem-like creatures, wavering between men and machines. They stand in for the populations whose affects and mental activities are relentlessly probed and palpitated, so that their aggregate data-image can be mirrored by seductive products and waking dreams.

Other elements from the narrative are also lost in the film. Spielberg and his scriptwriters make the Anderton character into

the victim of a plot woven by his hierarchical superior, Lamar Burgess, in order to cover up the killing of Agatha's mother, who sought to take the precog back from the police. The result is a typical emotional drama, focused on the daughter's anguished visions of her mother's death and on Anderton's parallel memories of his own murdered son. Whereas in Dick's vastly more paranoid imagination, the plot against Anderton is a way for the Army to abolish Pre-Crime as an independent department and to wrest the control of the future back from the civilian authorities. What's more, Dick gave a precious indication in the story, having Anderton explain that when he worked out the theory of Pre-Crime he refused the temptation to apply it to the stock market, where he could obviously have made fortunes. Had Spielberg been able to seize these two motifs – the relation to finance, and the army's hunger for power over the civilian state – then the film, which came out shortly after September 11, could have become the metaphor of an entire epoch.

Truth is stranger than fiction. The neocon takeover of the American state effectively transferred power to the President as Commander-in-Chief of the military, and to the Pentagon under Rumsfeld. The oil and arms industries that had taken a back seat to finance in the 1990s now returned to the forefront with a vengeance.²⁹ A financially driven liberal regime regressed to its disciplinary reflexes under a resurgent sovereign gaze, as the "complex edifice" of power suddenly shifted on its bases. In a world where the speculative futures of the long stock-market boom had collapsed, the fabricated need to invade Iraq became a new kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, a vastly more violent way to shape the future.

In 2002, shortly before the invasion of Iraq, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency launched what may have been its most twisted program ever: FutureMAP, or "Futures Markets Applied to Prediction," developed as part of the Total Information Awareness program under the authority of a convicted criminal, the retired Admiral John Poindexter.³⁰ Here one can observe a precise and yet insane readjustment of what Foucault called "the system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security." Even as *Minority Report* was hitting the movie theaters, consultants for the United States Department of Defense were proposing a computerized "Policy Analysis Market" (PAM) that would mobilize the predictive capacities of investors by getting them to bet their money on civil, economic and military trends in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey. Finance, which for twenty years had been at the leading edge of cybernetic transformations, would now be repurposed for the needs of sovereign and disciplinary power. In this way, the distributed intelligence of the market would be harnessed and the price signals given off by these fictional "futures" would indicate the likelihood of given trends or events.

At this point it's worth quoting from the mission statement of the Total Information Awareness program, because it exemplifies the military interpretation of the kinds of feedback loops that I have been discussing: "The DARPA Information Awareness Office (IAO) will imagine, develop, apply, integrate, demonstrate and transition information technologies, components, and prototype closed-loop information systems that will counter asymmetric threats by achieving total information awareness useful for preemption, national security warning, and national security decision making."³¹ The Policy Analysis Market would be a sensing device in such a self-regulating, closed-loop system – like a human thermostat connected to the inferno of American economic, diplomatic and military power. A mockup of the trading interface, prepared by the Net Exchange company, shows Special Event Contracts concerning such eventualities as "Jordanian monarchy overthrown in 4th [quarter] 2004," or "Arafat assassinated in 4th 2004"; while a Global Contracts section includes ranges of possible

bets on “terror deaths” and “US military deaths.” The trading function are overlaid on a map of the Middle East, like windows of geopolitical risk-opportunity. This interface, and the lure of profit it offered, would be the electrodes attached to the precognitive lobes of the investors. If they produced striking images, then preemptive policies would follow.



The PAM trading interface is literally a map of the future. It is also a perfect example of what Foucault calls a “security device,” offering precise insight into the dynamics of surveillance under cybernetic capitalism. It is not a police program, but a market instituted in such a way as to precisely condition the free behavior of its participants. It produces information while turning human actors into functional relays, or indeed, into servomechanisms; and it “consumes freedom” for a purpose. Like all security devices, it serves two functions. One is to optimize economic development: in this case, the development of financial speculation. But the other function is to produce information that will help to eliminate deviant behavior, of the kind that can’t be brought into line with any “normal” curve. This is the double teleology of closed-loop information systems in cybercapitalism. The map of the future is always a promised land to come. But there are always a few enemy targets on the way to get there. The question is, do you hold the gun? Do you watch as the others take aim? Or do you try to dodge the magic bullet?

God Machines

The heraldic emblem of Total Information Awareness – a sky-blue sphere encompassing an earthly globe caught in the gaze of a radiant eye detached from the summit of a Masonic pyramid – is surely the purest expression of the exorbitant will to power unleashed on the twenty-first century. But all around the world, complex systems are striving to realize the goals of Wiener’s original predictor, which itself had been a practical failure, destined for the closets of useless circuitry and the fevers of theoretical dreams. The sleep of reason under informatic surveillance gives rise to God machines. Yet every new claim to “shock and awe” or “full-spectrum dominance” is ill-conceived, illusory, useless.

The latest financial crisis, unfolding as I write in late 2007, is caused in part by the inability of banks to even know who will take the inevitable losses on subprime loans, since these have been bundled by computer into ultra -complex collateralized debt obligations (CDOs), themselves further collateralized into derivatives called “CDO-squared,” whose monetary value has become almost impossible to assess.³² Meanwhile the “surge” of fresh (or more often, returning) American troops in Iraq effectively defends the Stars and Stripes under the gaze of the media, but only on small parcels of territory and at limited hours of the day. Victory, too, has become hard to calculate. And as the humiliation of anticipated defeat pushes the dollar-economy ever closer to its

black hole of unpayable debt, one wonders which inventions of abstract mathematics will allow the insurance men to offer policies against collapse of the system. The hilarious scene in Kubrick's war room, with the wheelchair-genius calculating the underground survival of selected members of the human race and the five-star general screaming to the president about the dangers of a "mineshaft gap," suddenly does not look so far away from these horizons. Except, of course, for the subversive humor.³³



Our society's obsession with controlling the future – and insuring accumulation – has at least two consequences. The first is the organization of a consumer environment for the immediate satisfaction of anticipated desires, with the effect of eliminating desire as such. In its place comes an atmosphere of suspended disbelief where entire populations move zombie-like and intellectually silent beneath exaggerated images of their unconscious drives. The second consequence, which we have seen with such violence in recent years, is the simple removal of those who might conceivably trouble this tranquilized landscape with any kind of disturbing presence or speech. What remains in the field of public politics is dampened voice, dulled curiosity and insignificant critique, sinking to a nadir in the period of national consensus over American military intervention after September 11.

In the face of these trends, which have been gathering since at least the 1980s, large swathes of the world's population have reacted to the colonization of the future by seeking refuge in the distant past or revealed religion, giving rise to fundamentalisms, both Christian and Muslim, whose archaic vision of better days to come can only translate as a violent desire for apocalypse. Any number of national militaries, terrorist groups or guerrilla armies are willing to oblige, particularly in the historical lands of the Sacred Books, but also in places of deadly emptiness like Waco, Texas. The thing to realize is that the prophets of past and future go hand in hand. The computerized trader, the religious zealot, the military pilot and the suicidal terrorist are all protagonists in the "time wars" of the 21st century, whose coming Jeremy Rifkin predicted two decades ago, without being able to foresee the *dramatis personae*.³⁴ As Maurizio Lazzarato has written more recently: "The West is horrified by the new Islamic subjectivities. But it helped to create this monster, using its most peaceful and seductive techniques. We are not confronted with remnants of traditional societies in need of further modernization, but with veritable cyborgs that articulate the most ancient and most modern."³⁵

In 1964, the year of *Dr. Strangelove*, Norbert Wiener tried to conjure away the threat of deterministic game theory, which he saw as a sure-fire path to "push-button war." He thought that by placing flawless reason on a single continuum with the imperfect human mind and the limited electronic computer – or in other

words, by understanding God and Golem to be “incorporated” within human experience – he could open up a more flexible ethical space, unbound to any ideology whether of religion or science. Yet today it is within this interface of God, man and machine that the Manichean games of corporate and military strategy are played, with few significant questions as to the rules, the stakes or the final causes. The cyborgs, like Kubrick’s strategic air commanders, have learned to stop worrying and love surveillance. But through the magic of computer media, their strange kind of love is now distributed much more widely through the population. The telos of humanity – its future map – once again looks like a bull’s eye of blind self-destruction.

Conclusions

The question isn’t one of dodging the magic bullet, or of constructing some fantasy space where you could survive un surveilled. The question for artists, intellectuals and technologists is how to play a significant game, instead of reclining and declining in a gilded cage, as the PR and development wing for yet more corporate spin-offs of the mainline military devices. The question is how to engage in counter-behaviors, able to subvert the effects of cybernetic governance.

One thing we could do is to create more precise images and more evocative metaphors of the neoliberal art of government, in order to heighten awareness of the ways that intimate desire is predicted and manipulated. Such images and metaphors are desperately lacking, along with a Karl Marx of cybercapitalism. But another, more important thing we can do is to dig into the existential present and transform the everyday machines, by hacking them into unexpected shapes and configurations that can provide collaborative answers to the spaces of control. Critical communities of deviant subjectivity, forming at the site of the eviscerated private/public divide, are not subcultural frivolities but attempts to reinvent the very basis of the political. What’s at stake is the elaboration of different functional rules for our collective games, which in today’s society cannot be put into effect without the language of technology. Distributed infrastructure exists for such projects, in the form of open-source software. Laboratories for this kind of experimentation have been built *ad hoc*, by people such as Jaromil, Konrad Becker, Laurence Rassel, Natalie Jeremijenko, Critical Art Ensemble, Hackitectura, the Institute for Applied Autonomy, Marko Peljhan and hundreds of others. But what we don’t have is any sustained institutional commitment, any governmental Golems who are willing to wake up from their waking dreams. And that makes it very difficult to bring together, over the middle and long term, the diverse range of people who are needed to help change the culture of the present.

Social interaction is always a game of control, as David Lyon’s work on surveillance shows.³⁶ But everything depends on who writes the rules, and even more, on how you play the game. To find a better way, or even to help raise the problem in its urgency and complexity, we would have to invent new kinds of cultural institutions able to take on more difficult and divisive issues – exactly the ones that the Manichean sciences of the postwar era succeeded in automating and hiding from view. Until artists, hackers and cultural critics are joined by scientists, sociologists, economists and philosophers with a purpose, there will be no deep and distributed critique of military neoliberalism, nor of the surveillance that articulates it. And in the absence of such an exorcism the ontology of the enemy will keep coming back to haunt us, like some undead ghost of the Cold War that never dissolved in the sun. This might even be the significance of the hilarious and supremely subversive ending that Kubrick gave to his film, when he has Vera Lynn’s optimistic, forties-era lyric come billowing up out of the mushroom clouds:



We'll meet again

Don't know where, don't know when

But I know we'll meet again some sunny day...

Notes

1Norbert Wiener, *God & Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1966/1st ed. 1964), p. 17.

2On the Teleological Society, and on Wiener generally, see Steve Heims, *John von Neumann and Norbert Weiner: From Mathematics to the Technologies of Life and Death* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1980), and Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, the Father of Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005).

3Cf. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (New York: Da Capo, 1954/1st ed. 1950), pp. 34-35: "The scientist is always working to discover the order and organization of the universe, and is thus playing a game against the arch enemy, disorganization. Is this devil Manichaeian or Augustinian? Is it a contrary force opposed to order or is it the very absence of order itself?... The Manichaeian devil is playing a game of poker against us and will readily resort to bluffing; which, as von Neumann explains in his *Theory of Games*, is intended not merely to enable us to win on a bluff, but also to prevent the other side from winning on the basis of a certainty that we will not bluff. Compared to this Manichaeian being of refined malice, the Augustinian devil is stupid. He plays a difficult game, but he may be defeated by our intelligence as thoroughly as by a sprinkle of holy water." Also see pp. 190-93 for explicit considerations on the Manichean nature of interstate politics, which Wiener considered "a bad atmosphere for science."

4Cf. William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma: John von Neuman, Game Theory, and the Puzzle of the Bomb* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p. 190, n. 3. But there are other models for Dr. Strangelove: Teller, von Braun, Kissinger and above all the game theorist Herbert Kahn, famous for "thinking the unthinkable."

5Norbert Wiener, *I Am a Mathematician* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), pp. 251-52.

6Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," in *Critical Inquiry* 21/1 (Fall 1994), p. 238.

7 Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 61.

8 For an excellent discussion of dual-use technologies, see Jonathan D. Moreno, "DARPA on Your Mind," in *Mind Wars: Brain Research and National Defense* (New York: Dana, 2006).

9 See the product page at http://www.vsi-hmcs.com/pages_hmcs/02_jhm.html.

10 For the origin of the word, see Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," in *Astronautics* (September 1960); facsimile at <http://web.mit.edu/digitalapollo/Documents/Chapter1/cyborgs.pdf>.

11 John Stroud, "Psychological Moment in Perception," in Heinz von Foerster, ed., *Cybernetics: Circular Causal, and Feedback Mechanisms in Biological and Social Systems, Transcriptions of the Sixth Conference* (New York: Josiah Macy Foundation, 1950), pp. 27-28.

12 Corporate homepage at <http://www.inferx.com>.

13 From a video interview with Brown on Dan Vernton's Homeland Defense Week, at [link](#).

14 See the TANGRAM Proposer's Information Packet, at [link](#); and the White Paper by Jesus Mena, "Modernizing the National Targeting System," available in the "Expert Insight" section of the InferX site. The firm Allen Booz Hamilton, which won the general contract for the TANGRAM project, is located in McLean, Virginia, alongside Datamat and InferX; it is not clear whether InferX has actually been hired for the project.

15 Acxiom corporate homepage at <http://www.acxiom.com>.

16 Terry McAuliffe, quoted in the PBS documentary by Douglas Rushkoff, *The Persuaders*, 2004; the transcript can be accessed [here](#).

17 Oscar H. Gandy, *The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information* (Boulder: Westview, 1993).

18 ShopperTrak corporate homepage at <http://www.shoppertrak.com>.

19 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991/1st German ed. 1962).

20 For an insightful study of how the cockpit model has served for the retooling of public education in the US, see Douglas D. Noble, "Cockpit Cognition: Education, the Military and Cognitive Engineering," in *AI & Society* 3 (1989). In conclusion Noble writes: "The means and ends of education are being reshaped within a massive military/industrial research and development enterprise, ongoing since World War II, to engineer appropriate human factors for high performance technological systems."

21 Sze Tsung Leong, "Ulterior Spaces," in Chuihua Judy Chung et. al., eds., *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001). Also see Stephen Graham, "Spaces of Surveillant-Simulation: New Technologies, Digital Representations, and Material Geographies," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16 (1998). Graham writes: "Computerised simulation and modelling systems now allow the vast quantities of data captured by automated surveillance systems to be fed directly into dynamic facsimiles of the time-space 'reality' of geographic territories (neighbourhoods, cities, regions, nations etc), which can then, in turn, be fed into support new types of social practices, organisational change, and urban and regional restructuring."

22 The French phrase *dispositifs de sécurité* could equally well be translated as "safety devices," or even (catching the ambiguity that I will explore later on) as "safety-and-security devices." The published translation speaks of "security apparatuses." See the opening chapters of Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007/1st French ed. 2004). The following quotes are from pp. 62, 73, 48.

23 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008/1st French ed. 2004), p. 63; following quote on p. 260.

24 The historian of technology Otto Mayr has documented the pervasiveness of simple feedback mechanisms (thermostats, governors) in liberal Britain during the eighteenth century, at a time when such devices remained rare among the authoritarian societies of the Continent. More importantly, he shows that these mechanical devices were commonly used as metaphors for such characteristic political-economy notions as supply-and-demand, checks-and-balances and self-regulation. However, Foucault never cites Mayr's groundbreaking work of technical history, *The Origins of Feedback Control* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970). The more explicit comparative study only came later: *Authority, Liberty and Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986). Cf. Galison's discussion in "The Ontology of the Enemy," op. cit. pp. 262-63.

25 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op. cit., p. 8.

26 Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1999/1st ed. 1973). Bell writes: "The 'design' of a post-industrial society is a 'game between persons' in which an 'intellectual technology,' based on information, arises alongside of machine technology" (p. 116).

27 William Bogard, *The Simulation of Surveillance: Hypercontrol in telematic societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 55.

28 See the interviews with Clotaire Rapaille in Douglas Rushkoff's PBS documentary *The Persuaders*, op. cit.

29 For an understanding of how this kind of economic shift occurs, see Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, "Dominant Capital and the New Wars," in *Journal of World Systems Research* 10/ 2 (Spring 2004), available at <http://bnarchives.yorku.ca>.

30 The TIA program was shut down by the US Congress, in part because of the outcry over the PAM interface; however, all of the information concerning PAM has been archived by its proud inventor, Robin Hanson, at <http://hanson.gmu.edu/policyanalysismarket.html>.

31 From the reconstruction of the original TIA website at <http://infowar.net/tia/www.darpa.mil/iao>.

32 The anthropologist and finance expert Paul Jorion, who detailed the mechanisms of the subprime crash over a year before it actually happened, quotes a remark from a specialized document emitted by the Union de Banques Suisses: "To analyze a simple CDO 'squared' constituted of 125 different securities... we would have to know the information pertaining to 9,375 securities." <http://www.pauljorion.com/blog/?p=174>

33 Apparently there is a little humor left in Washington, to judge from what seems to be the work of a Beltway insider. In July of 2007 a series of articles appeared by a certain "Herman Mindshaftgap" of "The Bland Corporation," casting doubt on some of the numbers and concepts used by the administration war machine. Cf. "Why In Truth There Is No Surge," in *Counterpunch*, July 13, 2007; available at <http://www.counterpunch.org/mindshaftgap07132007.html>.

34 Jeremy Rifkin, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History* (New York: Holt, 1987).

35 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004), p. 101.

36 See, among others, David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001); *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).



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18 Responses to “FUTURE MAP”

Brian Holmes / Nettime: Surveillance, dystopia and utopia
« **Identity Unknown** Says:

[September 14, 2007 at 2:49 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/09/09/future-map/> [...]

Thirtyseven Says:

[September 14, 2007 at 9:26 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

This was a really damn excellent read, thank you. I got linked here by a friend and did not expect to find something with this much depth and brainfood.

ed phillips Says:

[September 14, 2007 at 10:33 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

very nicely done,

In particular, the way you constellate the liberal modus of permission as control, the ways that saying yes to “personal freedom” allow for populations to be channeled into somewhat calculabe valences is, to my thinking, spot on. Some kind of hedged language here is important: “somewhat calculabe”, not predictable, and “valences”, not specific outcomes. It does certainly look as if control through permission is operating smoothly in the G8 at the current time, but it is tenuous and contingent upon the fact that the shoppers need little chits to spend and at least the illusion of future earnings to probably pay off chit-debt.

The question remains as to whether or not people are being controlled, however, even under current conditions. Are those who are fiddling with the governing mechanisms leading or following after this “golem cum leviathan”? The governing mechanisms are losing their power at their greatest moment, and the theory and ideology behind the mechanisms is exposed.

Thanks for writing this. I'll post some more response.

–yet another inveterate lurker

Hello Ed -

Thanks for your comments. I quite agree with the remark about valence. The amazing thing about Wiener is that he not only saw all the vast machinic possibilities in the relatively minor technical innovation of the

electronic feedback loop, but also was able, from the very outset, to interpret the feedback according to statistical probabilities. It was a bit too complicated to explain in the text (though maybe I should anyway), but the predictive algorithm of the famous AA predictor, necessary because it will take some 20 seconds for the shell to get near the enemy plane, was derived by testing a large number of individuals engaging in dodging behavior, and then averaging that to provide a range of possible evasive maneuvers. So you then have a pattern to which the real-time information supplied by the radar could be added. Wiener intersects with Shannon's information theory precisely because he integrated these statistical elements into his control engineering. He hails from the statistical mechanics of Gibbs, who is known as the first "world-class" American scientist. This type of feedback -plus-predictive-algorithm has been developed ad infinitum by the military, and every time I read about a new software package for cybernetically controlling stocks, flows, store design, customer response or whatever, there always a little note in there somewhere that says, "This revolutionary application, originally developed by Defense Department research, etc etc..." — "Star Wars turns on to Shoppers," as an article in the press once put it.

As for the question about who's doing the controlling, well, yeah, no one's in control, but some ones are doing a little more of it than others. I dunno how to make this clear in a text which has to do all kinds of other things simultaneously (co-ordinate dozens of theories, keep up a rhythm and a metaphorical regime, stage the intersections of science, art, economics, politics and individual subjectivity, etc etc), but anyway, what seems characteristic of contemporary society to me, with all these high-rolling corporations and semi-autonomous state functions around, is that the individual is constantly confronted by a whole variety of competing programs, whether informatic, architectural, political, economic or military. You turn on the TV, take a walk in a park, enter the grocery store, everywhere there are these Manichean attempts to find out who you are in advance of your arrival and use the knowledge to make some action of yours immensely more probable. Control is both statistical and irremediably multiple (except when the red light goes on, and suddenly its individualized). It does converge into patterns, when you see it from a distance. But the whole paradox is, no one planned it that way. Well, OK, there is a level of metaplanning out there, whose history I'm trying to get to now, in particular via a political scientist turned cyberneticist of the fifties and sixties named Karl Deutsch, who wrote this intriguing book, *The Nerves of Government*. And I hope I can get into that in the next text of this series, which will be about model-making, gaming and the ideas of Felix Guattari in his book *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*.

all the best, Brian

enthusiasm : archive : » links for 2007-09-14 Says:

[September 14, 2007 at 11:39 pm | Reply](#)

[...] [FUTURE MAP](#) « [Continental Drift Or: How the Cyborgs Learned To Stop Worrying and Love Surveillance](#) by Brian Holmes, via [nettime](#) looo-ong and interesting (tags: [culture](#) [technology](#) [surveillance](#) [cybernetics](#)) [...]

Brian Holmes over privacy en surveillance at DOGTIME Says:

[September 16, 2007 at 1:21 pm | Reply](#)

[...] Ik heb het nog niet helemaal gelezen, maar dit lijkt me een erg interessant artikel wat gaat over controle op (persoons)informatie, de geschiedenis ervan en de implicaties voor de toekomst. <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/09/09/future-map/> [...]

sebastian diaz Says:

[October 2, 2007 at 6:17 pm | Reply](#)

Hello Brian

I want you to check

<http://foucaultblog.wordpress.com/>

for example

<http://foucaultblog.wordpress.com/?s=maps>

<http://foucaultblog.wordpress.com/?s=geography>

http://www.ashgate.com/subject_area/downloads/sample_chapters/Space_Knowledge_and_Power_Intro.pdf

yours

Sebastian Diaz Angel

W: <http://www.razoncartografica.wordpress.com> [preliminary only in sapanish]

[personal blog: <http://www.historiaenmapas.blogspot.com>

Thanks Sebastian, I have checked.

I wish I could say I was reeling with delirious excitement, but you know, there is a lot of commentary on Michel Foucault out there. What I find interesting is when someone does a work or an action or creates a machine or a social movement with it. At the last Documenta a work was presented called 9 Scripts from a Nation at War. It's an archive of videos showing people reading the scripts of interviews that were conducted with other people enmeshed in the US war machine, or sometimes, actual transcripts of people on trial by the same war machine. Without mentioning Foucault they dug deeper into the relations between individuals, institutional roles and legal codes than just about anything I have ever come across, short of reality itself. So, viva el arte! And watch out for InferX...

best, Brian

Networked_Performance — "Future Map" by Brian Holmes

Says:

[October 11, 2007 at 5:15 pm | Reply](#)

[...] between God and Lucifer, the programmer may well be the one to lose." Continue reading Future Map by Brian Holmes. Oct 11, 13:15
Trackback [...]

perezdelama@htca_0607 » Blog Archive » M-cas:: módulo interdisciplinarietà sesión 17.01.2008 Says:

[January 17, 2008 at 5:22 pm | Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes, 2007, Future Map: enlace [...]

Wayne Clements Says:

[January 23, 2008 at 10:37 am | Reply](#)

Brian, I've recently found your paper. I wish had found it sooner!

"What I find interesting is when someone does a work or an action or creates a machine or a social movement with it". BH.

If so, maybe you would find this useful:

'Art, War, and Cambridge Cybernetics'

(<http://193.171.60.44/dspace/handle/10002/435>)

This is the full paper of a presentation and investigates the work of Gordon Pask and his colleagues, particularly the connection between their cybernetic art machines and cybernetic business and military applications. (Some of the latter involve 'vehicle recognition' tasks in combat situations. Surveillance was certainly part of the original cybernetic project and one that did not stop at Wiener).

Wayne.

Recapturing Subversion « Continental Drift Says:

[May 22, 2008 at 7:08 pm | Reply](#)

[...] –Future Map: Or, How the Cyborgs Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Surveillance [...]

katelyn Says:

[October 17, 2008 at 12:52 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

bull shit

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

[November 21, 2008 at 5:50 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] 18-Future Map: Or How the Cyborgs Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Surveillance [...]

bob Says:

[May 12, 2009 at 6:30 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

boring

nomadic historian Says:

[June 15, 2009 at 5:59 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

In your conclusion you state:

“The question for artists, intellectuals and technologists is how to play a significant game, instead of reclining and declining in a gilded cage, as the PR and development wing for yet more corporate spin-offs of the mainline military devices.”

You are already playing the game, and the one “they” want you to play because then it is easier for them to monitor you and know that you are not a threat as you sit sipping your adult beverage of choice believing you have removed yourself from the “gilded cage”. All you are really doing is turning your chair to face the other way while pretending you have escaped the “gilded cage”.

sportsBabel » Abstracting Ender, Swarming Sender Says:

[August 15, 2009 at 4:37 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] of terrorist attacks and assassinations. Political considerations aside, Brian Holmes' more nuanced and formal analysis of PAM suggests that it “produces information, while turning human actors into functional relays, or [...]

Four Pathways Through Chaos « Continental Drift Says:

[November 2, 2009 at 4:16 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] Negri's landmark essay, Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State Post-1929 and my own Future Map. Further readings could include the first two essays from James Boggs' 1964 book The American [...]

Helge Says:

[January 14, 2011 at 12:40 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Still an amazing read.

Brian Holmes Says:

[January 14, 2011 at 8:40 am](#) | [Reply](#)

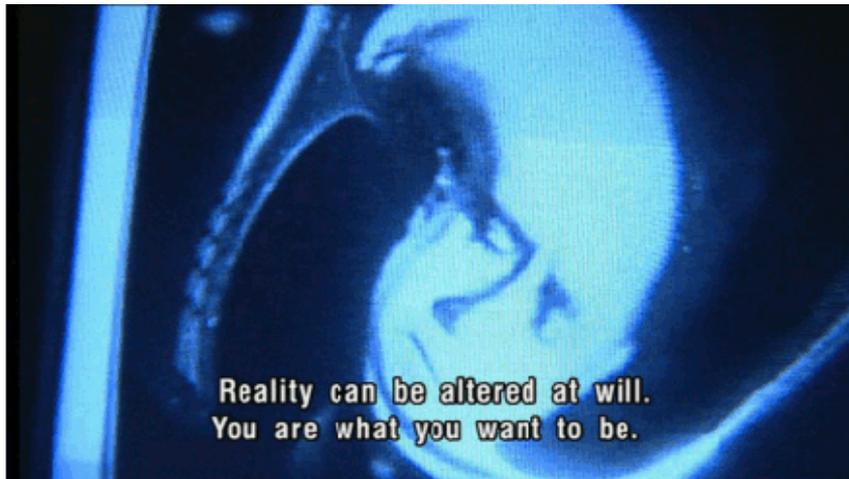
Thank you for that comment.

As a writer, it is interesting to mix a strong brew of literary metaphor, philosophical theory and observed social fact. The three don't exactly mix – they are heterogeneous – and they pull at each other, distort each other in the course of the writing, producing something that in the end is perhaps monstrous enough to correspond both to reality and to our unfulfilled potentials.

Filming the World Laboratory

By Brian Holmes

Cybernetic History in *Das Netz*



What does it mean to be part of a cybernetic system? For a conscious human being it means taking part in an evolving loop, where you are both the subject and the object of experimentation. This is the relation that has developed between scientific inquiry and world-changing technology. Researchers reshape the environment that defines them, and vice-versa. Such self-affecting loops are the vectors of a radical constructivism, an artificialization of existence. Their content and their continuous metamorphosis are what gives form to life in a cybernetic society.

From its earliest beginnings in logic and control engineering, cybernetics grew to become not a single discipline but a full-fledged scientific paradigm, based on the concepts of purpose, information, feedback, circular causality and dynamic equilibrium. Warren McCulloch conceived this science as an "experimental epistemology": a way of knowing continually tested and modified through laboratory investigations which only that particular way of knowing makes possible.¹ Biological processes and man-machine interactions were the initial sites of cybernetic investigation. But as the paradigm expanded, thanks to the patronage of Anglo-American research administrators in the 1940s and 1950s, the laboratory shifted its sites of inquiry from the deepest recesses of the mind to the entire range of social relations, before finally focusing on the most integrated circuit of them all, the ecosystem. Engineers, physicists, mathematicians, biologists, neurologists,

linguists, psychiatrists, anthropologists and sociologists all made it their business to animate this experimental laboratory, in order to satisfy their own curiosity as well as the demands of the state, the military and the corporations. To the extent that such experimentation continues – using the almost limitless behavioral data furnished by the Internet – we are all part of a cybernetic system, which may be called the world laboratory. One crucial question for understanding the societies we live in today is how this laboratory has developed historically, on what basis, with which raw materials and to which ends: because only through its historical unfolding can an epistemology bring forth a world. Another crucial question concerns our own roles in the construction, alteration or rejection of the world laboratory.

Cybernetics was a hot topic in scientific journals and the mainstream press from the end of World War II until the late 1970s. Its public presence then declined, as the disciplines it had transformed began producing their own breakthroughs and as cognitivism arose to provide a more strictly objective paradigm for the sciences of mind. Mass access to the Internet in the 1990s gave millions of people their first chance to use the communications technologies that had been developed in the military labs, to experience their global reach and to verify that information, as Gregory Bateson had explained, is the “difference that makes a difference” in your own life. This turning-point in the experience of everyday existence was accompanied by a spate of fascinating books on the history of cybernetics, whose authors have become well known among hackers, cyberpunks, computer scientists and social theorists. But it was left to an artist and filmmaker, Lutz Dammbeck, to attempt a deeply historical and fully actual critique of this technological way of knowing, in a feature-length documentary film entitled *Das Netz*.²

Dammbeck is a former East German, born in 1948, the year that Norbert Wiener published his foundational work, *Cybernetics: or Communication and Control in the Animal and the Machine*. His distance from the Western euphoria over computers has given rise to the most probing and skeptical documentary film yet to be made about networked technologies. In the tense, militarized atmosphere of post-9/11 America, he uses interviews and archival research to explore the relations between the Internet, Adorno, LSD and the motivations of Ted Kaczynski: the mathematician, madman and violent eco-revolutionary known to the world as the Unabomber.

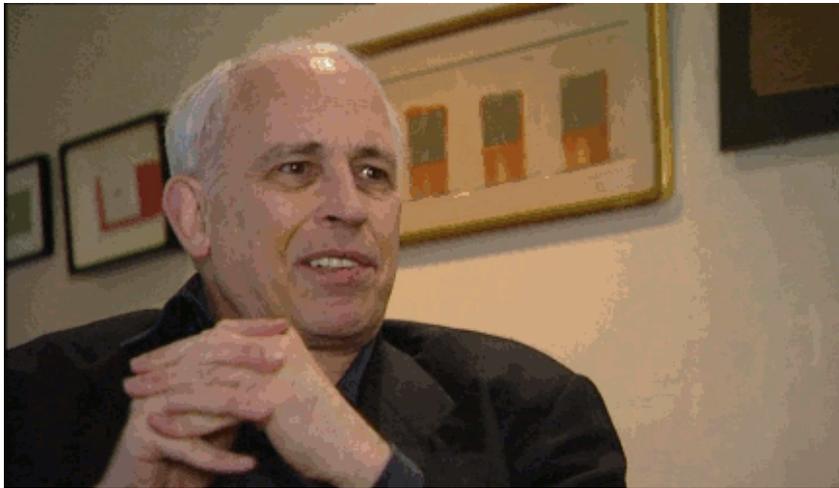
Pushing his outsider status to the hilt, Dammbeck raises questions that most American intellectuals do not dare to formulate, because they challenge our basic sense of legitimacy.³ Why did control engineering leave such a deep mark on postwar social science, and indeed, on the American psyche? How did avant-garde artistic culture become so entangled with the ultra-rationalized discourse of cybernetics and the libertarian techno-utopia of the Internet? What else might be strung on the red thread that binds together the Cold Warriors of repressive military psychiatry, the psychedelic Merry Pranksters of the 1960s and the hybrid entrepreneurs of the New Economy? And what were the motivations of the man who mailed deadly letter bombs to a number of figures located precisely within that paradoxical triangle?

Feedback in the Flesh

The film begins with artistic images, like Marshall McLuhan’s face distorted into a spiral on one of Nam June Paik’s early videos: an exploration of reality’s fundamental plasticity. Dammbeck uses a cool female voice-over for his distanced commentaries, but he also stages himself as a faux-naive narrator. He has just bought a new Macintosh: intrigued by the shared multimedia rhetoric of ‘60s

artistic vanguards and '90s consumer electronics, he sets off on a trip to the USA, to do interviews with figures from the histories of experimental art and informatics. On the plane he sketches a network of interconnected concepts: Art, Technology, Computer. The network will morph and transform as the investigation continues. His first contact is John Brockman, a former investment banker who became the literary agent of a hybrid group of scientists, artists and entrepreneurs called "the Digerati."⁴

Brockman sees technology as a fundamentally artistic or artificializing force. His reminiscences take us through a world of circuit diagrams, mainframe computers, avant-garde cinematographers and cybernetic theorists. He quotes the biologist J.Z. Young: "We create tools and then we mold ourselves in the use of them." This is a doctrine of radical constructivism. But when Dambeck asks Brockman about the Unabomber – who mailed a letter-bomb to David Gelernter, a member of the Digerati network – the businessman suddenly freezes up, cutting short the conversation and leaving the room. Such a brusque reaction only sparks the narrator's curiosity. What might lie behind Brockman's refusal to even speak about Ted Kaczynski? And why would anyone want to attack the Digerati?



John Brockman / Stewart Brand

The quest for an answer propels him from the New York skyscrapers to a houseboat on the San Francisco Bay, for an interview with another member of the Digerati: Stewart Brand, the hippie promoter of cybernetics and back-to-the-land survivalism in the 1960s. Brand worked as an artist with the multimedia group USCO, then helped organize Ken Kesey's acid tests in San Francisco. He traveled with the Merry Pranksters on Kesey's psychedelic bus (described by Dambeck as a "moving laboratory") and along with copious doses of electric Koolaid he absorbed the ideas of Buckminster Fuller, Norbert Wiener and Gregory Bateson, using them to create the immensely popular *Whole Earth Catalog*. He went on to set up the pioneering WELL network in the 1980s, the forerunner of today's virtual communities.⁵ In the film he appears as one of the cultural gurus of what Dambeck calls "an alternative form of cybernetics," marked by an enduring fascination for the libertarian appeal of "open systems." His psychedelic catalogue featured cybernetic ideas and technologies alongside craftsman's tools for ecological homesteaders. It also included the plans for the tiny backwoods cabin where Ted Kaczynski lived for some twenty-five years, writing the Unabomber Manifesto and fashioning his deadly letters.

Unlike Brockman, Stewart Brand admits to a contradiction in his vision, between ecology and computers. He acknowledges that he was eventually forced to choose, and he chose the side of technology. Yet he is still able to see down the road not taken. He

describes Kaczynski as a classic counter-cultural figure, who used "vile means" to be sure, but whose legitimate critique of technological society was ultimately heard. With that admission, the scattered pieces of the film's introduction fall into place. Dammebeck has gained a mandate to find out what it was about postwar cybernetic culture that drove Kaczynski to terrorism.

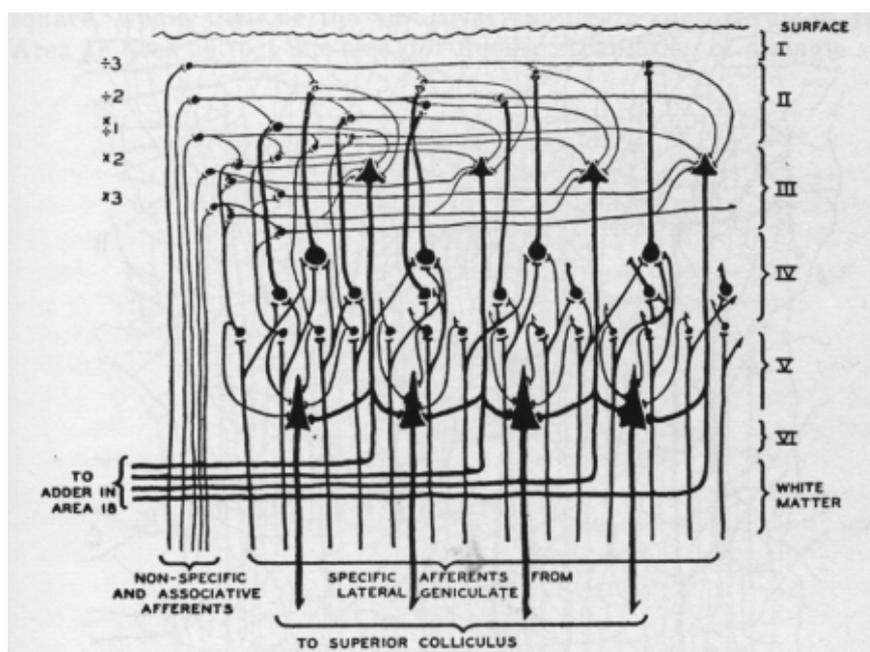
Scenes filmed by anarchist protesters skid erratically over the screen of the Macintosh, along with quotes from the Unabomber Manifesto urging the use of advanced technologies to distribute the anti-technological message. With these activist clips Dammebeck explores the revival of 1970s ecological critique in the turn-of-the-century revolt against the WTO in Seattle. Cut without transition to the sophisticated cityscapes of Boston and an astounding archival sequence, opening with architectural plans of MIT – a key site in the collaboration between universities and the military-industrial complex – then moving rapidly to the wartime career of Norbert Wiener, the invention of cybernetics and the rise of the United States to superpower status. "How does a utopia emerge?" asks the cool off-screen voice. "Does it come into being by chance, are there one or more inventors, or is there a plan?"

The images – German dive-bombers, circuit diagrams, cut-away anatomical heads, primitive mainframe computers – are strange, distant, arresting. They show the dramatic origins of a technological cosmos, an engineer's universe of circuits and feedback loops: "The pilot becomes one with his plane, the boundary between man and machine is blurred, and what emerges is an anonymous mechanized opponent whose actions can be modeled in war labs." Under the cybernetic gaze, the brain is no longer the place "where ego and identity are mysteriously created through memory and consciousness." Instead, humanity has become a "flesh machine." The sequence lingers over bluish recordings of carefully numbered neuroanatomical models and early mainframe computers, before culminating in excerpts from staged propaganda clips displaying the global command-and-control systems of the Cold War. In a vertiginous acceleration of historical time, we watch an arcane scientific theory become worldwide practice. Before gaining its aura of countercultural liberation, cybernetics would be the operating code of America's imperial dominance in the postwar period.

Das Netz is a brilliantly constructed film, but the demands of its narrative flow permit only this brief evocation of the genesis of an experimental epistemology. Dammebeck recalls the key notions of informational feedback and error-correction along the pathway to

a goal, as developed in Wiener's writings, but he does not even mention the logical ancestor of cybernetic automation: the Turing machine, a conceptual model developed in the late 1930s by the British mathematician, Alan Turing. This theoretical device consists of a hypothetical mechanical "head" that can read and inscribe binary symbols (zeros and ones) on the square sections of an infinitely long tape, which it moves to the left or the right. The tape is processed according to "transition rules" stored in a "table"; any specific input on the tape will yield the output values of a particular mathematical function. As Turing noted, "it is possible to invent a *single machine* which can be used to compute *any* computable sequence."⁶ The transition rules of all these singular machines could then be recorded on the tape itself, so as to constitute a "universal Turing machine" capable of performing every mathematical operation on every computable number. The abstract logic of this proposal – exactly what Deleuze and Guattari would later call an "abstract machine" – is what opened the way for the multipurpose computers that would be built after the war.

Yet Turing alone would not have led to the cybernetic paradigm. The striking images of anatomical models and the evocation of the "flesh machine" are the film's allusions to the ground-breaking work of the neuroanatomist, Warren McCulloch, and the logician, Walter Pitts. Together they developed an intricate system for notating the pathways of electrochemical signals through networks of idealized neurons. Their notation was based on the assumption that each single neuron either fires or does not fire according to the kind and quantity of signals received from other neurons. What this means is that the brain, too, is conceived to function with a binary code of zeros and ones, just like the Turing machine. But in the brain as McCulloch and Pitts imagine it, computation does not proceed along an infinite linear tape. Instead, complex series of equations are mapped out as pathways through a finite network of neurons. Patterns of electrochemical impulses correspond to the propositions of symbolic logic, expressed in the mathematical terms developed earlier in the century by logical empiricists such as Carnap (with whom Pitts had studied).⁷ Thus, the very process of thinking in language becomes equivalent to neural computation. In this way, the two scientists arrived at their fundamental breakthrough, stated in the title of their 1943 paper: "A Logical Calculus of Ideas Immanent in Nervous Activity."⁸ What they had done was to map out the possible circuits of feedback in the flesh.



The crucial thing to realize is that this model of nervous activity both preceded and inspired the logical architecture of the

computer, sketched out by John von Neumann in 1945 after he had encountered the work of McCulloch and Pitts.⁹ Yet their influence did not stop with the computer. The incarnation of Turing's abstract machine in the anatomical model of neural nets served as the primary example of a potentially endless extension of computational intelligence into physical matter. This is what allowed cybernetics to become, not just a specialized domain of control engineering, but a general model for the informational manipulation of all dynamic systems, reiterating its structural principles in psychiatry, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, political science, genetics, etc.¹⁰ In a similar sense, Wiener would speak of cybernetics as the study of communication and control in both the animal and the machine. Today it is difficult to even imagine the prestige that came to surround this model, which promised both a unifying paradigm for the sciences *and* a formula for their application to the man-machine systems of industrialized society. The age of the world laboratory begins with the ambition to extend the universal model of coded informational loops into every substrate, whether physical or biological.

The influence of cybernetics was as international as American hegemony itself, and as Dambeck shows, it responded to the need for procedures of control at a distance that had arisen during the multi-theater combat of WWII. These are the military realities that Internet enthusiasts of the 1990s were loath to remember, despite the inexorable rise of the surveillance society. Yet the extent of this influence on the social sciences and the humanities has been just as frequently neglected over the last twenty years, even as the everyday use of information technology has expanded. For example, very few students of linguistic theory now recall that Wiener's founding book was first published in France at the instigation of a French editor, and that the information theory developed in parallel by Wiener and the telecommunications engineer, Claude Shannon, came to exercise a decisive influence on the linguist, Roman Jakobson, the anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan – in short, on the entire range of French structuralism.¹¹ Without this background, how can post-structuralist theories be understood and evaluated? Even Félix Guattari's fascination with abstract machines appears to have its origins in an ambiguous nexus of attraction-repulsion toward cybernetics, which would later morph into his post-68 opposition to Lacanian psychoanalysis.¹²

This kind of intellectual history is absent from Dambeck's film, which has a more pressing agenda. What's represented on the screen is the relation of hunter and hunted, of attacker and target, from which the concepts of the feedback loop and the man-machine system first emerged. *Das Netz* provides a filmic approach to the "ontology of the enemy" that the historian of technology, Peter Galison, has identified at the origins of cybernetics.¹³ By focusing on the German bombers of the Battle of Britain and the response they elicited from Norbert Wiener, the film lets us see and feel how the victors of World War II internalized the aggressive science that informed the Nazi war machine. This rarely explored psychic drama could have been the subject of the entire documentary: the exchange of a deadly will to power between the two contenders for world hegemony.¹⁴ What both Dambeck and Galison suggest is that the characteristic relations of this dialectical combat have been inscribed into the very circuits of cybernetic devices. But the film takes one step further than this, by analyzing the cultural and political articulations of postwar economic liberalism and thereby leading us onward to the more intricate and disorienting predicaments of the present. It shows how a command-and-control logic focused on the ontology of the enemy was transformed into its seeming opposite: the "open systems" of today's supposedly borderless world society.

Another accelerated sequence evokes the Macy Conferences of 1946 to 1953, which gathered the outstanding minds of an era to develop the operating technologies of America's new global governance. Conference members included McCulloch, Pitts, Wiener, Von Neumann, Bateson, Heinz von Foerster, Margaret Mead, Kurt Lewin and many others. These meetings wrote the prehistory of the digital age – but precisely here, where contemporary commentators locate the origins of computing, cognitive science and the Internet, Dammbeck shifts the focus to behavioral research in sociology and psychiatry. He claims that the participants “registered a particular interest” in a book called *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950 under the direction of Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School.¹⁵ The authors, including T. W. Adorno, used the statistical methods of empirical sociology to analyze the American population for elements of the “authoritarian matrix” of traditional European nationalism, which in their view had given rise to fascism in Germany. The authoritarian matrix would have to be identified, dismantled and transformed to prevent any future outbreaks of racist or totalitarian aggression. This, for the filmmaker, is the focus of struggle on “the Cold War battlefield of the unconscious,” where cybernetics became the weapon of choice in the configuration of a new world order.



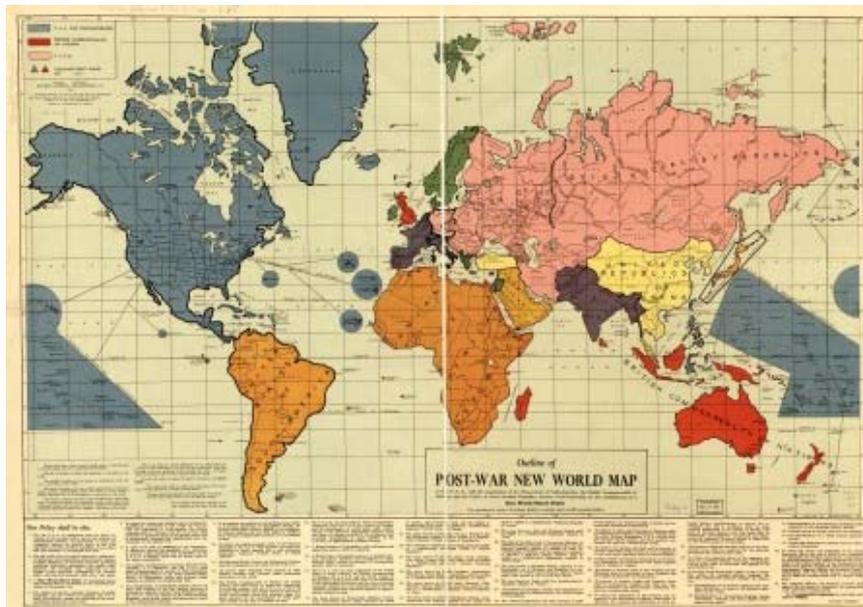
Macy Conferences / Authoritarian Personality

The evidence that Dammbeck can provide for direct connections between the Macy Conferences and *The Authoritarian Personality* is slim. But it is clear from the historical record that the dissolution of nationalist cultures and the creation of a new “world-mindedness” had been a major preoccupation of American social scientists since the 1940s. The total mobilization of the liberal principles of civilization against the Nazis led the anthropologist and future Macy Conference participant Margaret Mead to declare: “We must see this war as the prelude to a greater job – the restructuring of the culture of the world.”¹⁶ For Mead, cybernetics would be a vital contribution to this civilizing project, because it helped her see how change could be offered as a possibility to be freely chosen, rather than a straitjacket to be imposed by force. Victory in 1944-45 would set the stage for new and highly sophisticated forms of “democratic” social engineering.

Following his dialectical method, Dammbeck focuses on the contributions of the German émigré thinkers to the new American hegemony. The off-screen voice intones: “According to the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, a member of the Macy Group, the old values and balances must be destroyed, in order to make conditions ‘fluid.’” A cut to flashback-style images of laboratory surgery, followed by the zany oscillations of Nam June Paik’s electronic art, gives a hint of how such fluidity could be achieved. “Then it is possible to establish new balances and values,” the cool narrative voice continues. “Re-education will then develop into

self-re-education. This would transform the world into a post-national, multi-ethnic society, with no fixed borders." The scene cuts from a pharmaceutical production line of the 1950s, with thousands of little white pills flowing in even ranks toward their destinations, back to a contemporary American lunch-buffet under electric lights, filled with attractive and colorful dishes from around the globe. A standardized cube of orange jello trembles ever so slightly, like cellular plasma on a spoon.

At this point another figure enters the narrative: Henry Murray, who invented the Thematic Apperception Test used by the researchers of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Murray, a psychologist, had worked for the US government on a personality profile of Hitler, then devised stress-tests for soldiers. During the war he adopted the ideas of the World Federalist movement and argued for a process of global political unification, which, as he wrote in a letter to Lewis Mumford, "involves transformations of personality such as never occurred quickly in human history; one transformation being that of National Man into World Man."¹⁷ As we hear in the film, "Murray sees psychology and the new social sciences as destined to make a contribution to a world that can live in peace and harmony: in a new world order, with world laws, a world police force and a world government."



"New World Moral Order" (1942)

(for enlargement click on map; for further info [click here](#))

These were the ideals of wartime liberalism, instituted by the United Nations, the World Health Organization and UNESCO, then revived in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall with the opening of international borders and the meteoric rise of the World Trade Organization. Yet here again we are invited to look at the dark side of the democratic project: for it was also Murray, the idealist of the post-war period, who administered damaging psychological tests to groups of Harvard students in the years 1949-1962. Ted Kaczynski was among the subjects in the year 1958. Although the laboratory reports of these studies have not been released, we know that the future Unabomber was given the code-name "LAWFUL."

Dammbeck passes over the Harvard period very rapidly, retaining only key clues and symbols. Looking at the documents of the case, one discovers astonishing facts that underlie the tightly edited version of the story in the film. The year-long ordeal administered to the students by Henry Murray was designed to examine the effects of extreme psychological stress in order to improve screening and selection processes for the military. It

required the participants to spend a month writing a statement of their highest ideals, in preparation for what they were told would be an inspiring discussion with a brilliant young lawyer. But in reality the lawyer's role was to engage in character assassination, totally destroying the ideal ego of the experimental subject. For Murray, this one-to-one combat was a chance to explore the smallest of all social units, what he called "the dyad": the exact point where psychology spills over into sociology. In other words, it was a chance to explore the psychodynamics of a social system under conditions of intense aggression, where the very plasticity of being is exposed to violent metamorphosis.¹⁸ Here again, at the heart of a carefully calibrated laboratory experiment unfolding in the calm and privileged atmosphere of a liberal university, we discover the ontology of the enemy.

Das Netz confronts us with the demons of the past: the inscriptions of the Cold War military-industrial complex on an individual psyche, standing in for the experiences of an entire population. But the important question is what this final avatar of military-industrial coercion could mean later on, in Ted Kaczynski's adult life in 1970s and 1980s, and then again in our own era. What becomes of the world laboratory during the heyday of alternative cybernetics and "open systems"? And in what form do its violent experiments return, in the age of unlimited surveillance and the War on Terror?

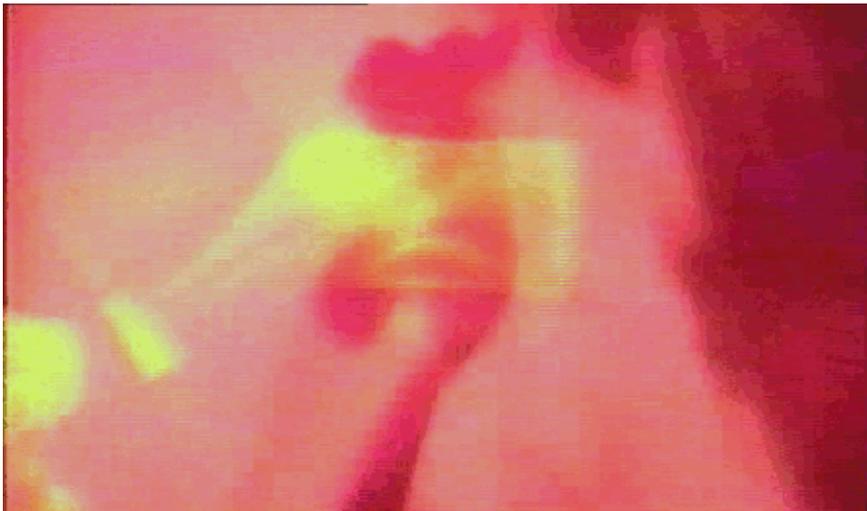
Blowback in Society

The extravagant, utopian world of the year 2000, buoyed up by speculation on the Internet revolution, was suddenly shaken by the attacks of September 11. A forgotten atmosphere sprang back to the fore: executive privilege, domestic surveillance, military secrecy. Dambeck's strategy in *Das Netz* is to examine the networked society through the dark crystals of Cold War behavioral science, in the attempt to catch some prescient glimmer of America's resurgent will to social control and sovereign power in the present. The intellectuals on whom he focuses all provide insights into the artificial nature of today's society. During the 1940s, the sociologist Kurt Lewin was preoccupied with such questions as how to contribute to the war effort by changing the eating habits of average families. His highly influential research on group dynamics showed that citizens of a democracy could be far more effectively manipulated when they were given an active role in the process that changed their own beliefs.¹⁹ As for Henry Murray, his early work in personality assessment is considered "the first systematic effort to evaluate an individual's personality to predict his future behavior."²⁰ It was subsequently used by the personnel departments of major corporations and by the CIA for the recruitment of foreign agents. Moreover, the personality assessment of Hitler which Murray produced during the war featured extensive commentary on the German national psyche, its relationship to the Nazi leadership and the most effective ways to shake that authoritarian grip and convert the population to a more liberal mentality.²¹ But it is the scholars with the least substantiated links either to the Macy Conferences or to Kaczynski – namely, the Frankfurt School and their study of *The Authoritarian Personality* – that allow Dambeck to forge his most provocative speculations on the artificially induced "second nature" of contemporary society.

There is a parallel here with my own research into the psychosocial transformations of contemporary culture. In an essay called "The Flexible Personality," published in 2002, I tried to show how a more pliable subjectivity emerged from the 1960s revolts against the military regimentation and industrial discipline that had produced the authoritarian character.²² The critique of the time was largely successful, according to this argument; but the

openness of counter-cultural practices also proved remarkably amenable to the needs of the emerging neoliberal economy. The highly adaptive production system of the 1980s and 1990s, with its exaltation of mobility and its emphasis on cultural labor, was informed and qualified by the preceding attempts at a revolution of everyday life, whose demands for flattened hierarchies and spontaneous communications finally helped legitimate the new electronic toolkits and to distract attention from their built-in capacities for surveillance, exploitation and oppression. Flexibility, in short, was a ruse of capitalist history. Thus the authoritarian personality gave way to its dialectical successor.

Dammbeck's analysis of Internet culture also hinges on this transition away from authoritarianism. But his conclusions are far more radical. Recurrent images of industrialized food services, coupled with scenes of people swallowing LSD on paper strips and sugar cubes, insinuate the idea that the fluid, borderless culture of a liberal "open system" was literally fed to Americans in the 1960s, along with the softer utopia of an alternative cybernetics. One generation later, he suggests, that same kind of culture was exported to the entire world by the multimedia magic of the Internet, bringing the liberal utopia to its culmination in the globalized economy. Here is where the focus on specific social scientists takes on an uncanny pertinence. It is as though Lewin's experiments in manipulating a population's eating habits with the full consent of the participating subjects had been applied on a massive scale, across several concerted waves of societal transformation.



No doubt this all sounds conspiratorial, if not frankly delirious. But when you know that the vast majority of early LSD research was sponsored by the CIA's MKULTRA program – acting through the Macy Foundation among others – then such radical speculations take on their full significance.²³ To be sure, as John Marks indicates, "the men from MKULTRA remained oblivious, for the most part, to the rebellious effect of the drug culture in the United States."²⁴ But as we have seen, nothing could be more widespread in postwar America than the involvement of social scientists in experiments seeking to impart the liberal values of a capitalist democracy even while insuring their military-industrial foundations. Where the CIA acted out brutal fantasies of "mind control" – going so far as to slip LSD-laced whiskey to unsuspecting clients in a phony brothel outfitted with two-way mirrors, or working with doctors who administered the drug in conjunction with electroshock therapy – social scientists like Murray and Lewin set up less intrusive, more rigorous and ultimately more effective experiments. What *Das Netz* asks us to perceive and measure are their continuing consequences on our own minds and sensoriums.

The most challenging thing the film suggests is that Ted Kaczynski was a distorted product of efforts to transform the national character: an unwanted side-effect of psychosocial engineering. As Dammebeck hints, at least some part of Kaczynski's bizarre and twisted fate can be attributed to complex, time-delayed blowback from the American absorption of Nazi science after WWII. But this notion of unforeseen consequences takes on greater resonance when one reflects that just a few years after the publication of the Unabomber Manifesto, Al Qaeda emerged as blowback from the CIA's attempts to subvert the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The post-9/11 atmosphere in which the film unfolds connects the isolated and eccentric American ecoterrorist to a far more successful movement of Islamist revolutionaries operating on the other side of the globe. The subject of the film now appears as a symbolic crystal, traversed in every direction by an uncanny system of interlocking fractures – or “circular causalities” – that allow the major conflicts of the present to be glimpsed in all their historical, spatial and ideological displacements. Behind them, what one begins to see is something like a cybernetic unconscious, structured at the level of entire populations by the unbearable coercion of command-and control experiments whose breakdown unleashes violence and psychic trauma. Yet as I said at the outset, in a cybernetic society, one is always both the object and the subject of the experiment. All that can be done with a powerful feedback loop is to subtly change its informational contents, its flow parameters, its intensity and modulation. Rather than remaining a neutral, external observer of American society, Dammebeck enters into the fractured networks of this dark crystal. He does so by exchanging letters with the letter bomber.

In a radical transgression of the unwritten law that bars the terrorist from ever appearing as a subject (or as an experimenter) Dammebeck lets Kaczynski speak for himself throughout the entire film, in haunting German phrases read aloud from his letters (German being one of the subjects at which the future Unabomber excelled in his Harvard days). The theme to which the prisoner continually returns in these letters is the right of resistance against a technoscientific utopia. Here is a key passage:

When I wrote that the concept of a “utopia” is crazy and dangerous, I didn't mean that all utopias are crazy and dangerous, but rather the utopia that makes possible the creation of a society according to a specific, ideal design. You yourself, I am sure, will have your own idea of utopia. Someone else will have a different idea, which may diverge considerably from yours. How would you like it if he forced his utopia on you? Do you have the right to force your utopia on him?

Kaczynski's rejection of the technoscientific utopia is based on arguments borrowed from deep ecology, or from mid-century critics of rationalization like Jacques Ellul. He asks whether one would want to live in a virtual world, where machines are smarter than men and all the animals and plants have been made artificial by the application of biotech. Dammebeck contrasts his resistance to the euphoric celebration surrounding the Internet, whose benefits nobody in the film seems able to question. “What do I have thus far?” he asks himself midway through the film. “I have a former mathematician, but none of my interview partners want to talk about his criticism of the system. And I have engineers and artists who are obsessed with technology.” News flashes about Afghanistan and Al Qaeda punctuate the media background as the filmmaker works his way through this national elation with the miracles of the Internet. The enthusiasm reaches its height in an interview with Robert Taylor, a former NASA engineer who managed the development of the Arpanet in the late 1960s under contract from the Pentagon, but who denies any connection between his own creation and “communication systems on today's fully electronic battlefield.” In the opening scene of the interview

where he will explain the genesis of the networked society, Taylor is shown playing the videogame *Civilization* on his desktop computer. One feels compelled to place the engineer's enthusiasm and the ecoterrorist's resistance within some larger societal pattern – or indeed, some wider net. What springs to mind is the extraordinary doctrine of a geostrategist working for the US Navy.



Robert Taylor, managing engineer, ARPANET

Over the last ten years, in a continuous stream of books, articles, websites and briefing sessions aimed primarily at the military, but also at the fears and hopes of a civilian audience, the idea-man Thomas P. Barnett proclaims that “disconnectedness defines danger.”²⁵ He explicitly conceives the US military as the “enabler” of financially driven corporate globalization, whose “new rule sets” he studied in collaboration with the Wall Street firm Cantor Fitzgerald in joint seminars held on the upper floors of the former World Trade Towers, before the firm’s offices and most of its personnel were blown to pieces on September 11. Emboldened by the real occurrence of what he had theorized as a “system perturbation,” Barnett attempted to sketch a new doctrine, and even a new geography, for the projection of US military force. Wherever flows of capital and communication are violently cut off or simply do not penetrate, he explained, the Pentagon must prepare to intervene. Not surprisingly, the areas he maps out as most likely for invasion – what he calls the “Non-Integrating Gap” – contain both the majority of the planet’s oil reserves, and the majority of its indigenous and Muslim populations. The map is a battle plan for America’s civilizing project in the twenty-first century. This the Great Game for the Pentagon’s cartographer. And the connectivity of the Internet that allows you to play it is literally the utopia that must be imposed upon world populations. It is “a future worth creating,” as he puts it in his recent book, *Blueprint for Action*.

Radical constructivism reaches its height in a networked map that is destined to become the territory. When official geostrategists publish books like Barnett’s, nothing remains for paranoid critics to reveal. Conspiracy theories of the Right and the Left pale before the doctrines of today’s world-shaping elites. But what Dambeck adds to our understanding of cybernetics is not any unveiling of hidden secrets, but instead an ontological question. What about the ground realities of life and death, he asks, in a world that has instituted the shape-shifting potential of the virtual as its dominant order? This is the question that the Unabomber raises, when he refuses to be the recipient of a technological utopia imposed by others and sends them his deadly letters in return. To be sure, the filmmaker insists that the Unabomber is part of a system, that his feedback only adds to its implacable dynamics. Still he reiterates the terrorist’s question throughout the film, by quoting his correspondence and continually bringing up his

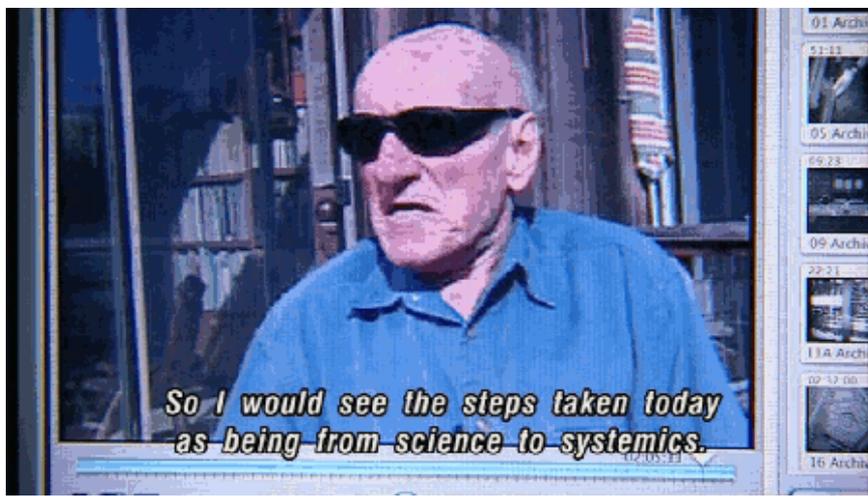
name in the interviews with the cyber-elites. Responding, as it were, to Lacan's early fascination with cybernetics, Dammebeck attempts to be "the instance of the letter" in the American technological unconscious.²⁶ Yet what kind of reality principle does he bring to a civilization that has placed itself entirely within the realm of the signifier – transforming not just the mind but the world itself into a flesh -and-blood experiment with the mathematical formalisms of a universal Turing machine?

From the first scene of the film, Dammebeck places *Das Netz* beneath the fallen star of the mathematician Kurt Gödel, who proved the impossibility of laying a perfect axiomatic ground for the sciences, then lapsed into the waking nightmares of paranoia. An eerie psychedelic dirge by the Grateful Dead moans in the background; a hand-held video camera wavers through the forest toward the site of one of Kaczynski's abandoned workshops. This text stands out against the pixellated trees:

In 1930, the Viennese mathematician Kurt Gödel shakes the foundations of mathematics with his incompleteness theorems. He demonstrates that in every formal -logical system there are problems that are not solvable or exclusively determinable.

Gödel appears as the tragic genius who exposed the gaping hole at the heart of early twentieth-century pretensions to certainty in mathematical physics. "The truth is superior to provability," asserts Dammebeck in white letters on the screen. But at the center of his inquiries into the cybernetic theories of the late twentieth century, the filmmaker places a figure who both accepts and undermines that assertion: the brilliant Viennese physicist and philosopher of science Heinz von Foerster, who moved to the US shortly after the Second World War and became the secretary of the Macy Conferences. Von Foerster initiated the reflexive turn of second-order cybernetics in the early 1970s by insisting on the inseparability of all feedback systems from the thought-processes of their scientific observers.²⁷ Interviewed shortly before his death in 2002, he repeats with childlike candor his belief in radical constructivism, that is, in the artificial nature of all perception, which is only brought to its specific forms through the creative activity of thinking. "The environment as we perceive it is our invention," he wrote in his 1973 essay, "On Constructing a Reality."²⁸

Strangely enough, this apparently solipsistic proposal led him to a unitary theory of systems. In an initial interview with the scientist – whose recording he then watches on the fold-out screen of Dammebeck's ever -present Macintosh – the self -reflexive Von Foerster explains that the Indo -European root of the word "science" (but also of "schism" and "schizophrenia") is *scy*, which means to separate; whereas the root *sys* points in the opposite direction, toward ideas of joining, merger, integration. Systems theory is an attempt to go beyond the split between observer and observed. What he sees as common to both research and art is the movement "from science to systemics."



Heinz von Foerster

Von Foerster was both a contract researcher for the military and a fundamental critic of instrumental reason in the sciences, deeply interested in the social contestation of the 1960s and close to the radical Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. His insistence on a self-reflexive ethics of the observer's role within any observed system gradually permeated all of cybernetic thinking, ultimately drawing it outside the pale of the objective sciences and thus effecting a deep epistemological subversion. Seen from this angle, Von Foerster becomes something like a double-agent in the American technoscientific establishment. Yet here again, one must remain aware of the ambiguity that presides over the passage from the 1960s to the 1980s. For in the new era of the world laboratory inaugurated by massively distributed networked communications, Von Foerster's enchanting system of self-constructed representations would become yet another justification for an entire world of simulacra and simulation, an integrated "Matrix" of semiotic illusions without any critical divide, without any trait of distinction or separation. The social order that arose in the the period of financialized abundance, after the paranoid nightmares of the Cold War, would increasingly appear as a kind of total, all-embracing hallucination, a system of perpetually suspended disbelief whose unstable equilibrium is maintained by the continuous computerized production of images and signs, constantly adapted by networked feedback to the changing fantasies and desires of entire populations. It is this overwhelmingly fictional world, still trembling with the shock of terrorist attack, that Dambeck encounters in America.

Despite the intense critique that permeates the film, something about Von Foerster's ambiguous philosophy clearly appeals to the author of *Das Netz*. Indeed, the self-reflexive visual trope that recurs with subtle variations in each interview, when the filmmaker shows the subject framed between a video recorder and its real-time output on the screen of his personal computer, can be seen as an artistic homage to the constructivist epistemology of Heinz von Foerster. If an all-embracing utopia of command and control has been deconstructed, Dambeck seems to ask, does that give us a fresh chance for face-to-face dialogue? Or does it resolve into nothing more than myriad representations of irrevocably different worlds, each of them archived solipsistically in our personal computers? This was the kind of dilemma with which the second-order cyberneticians had to grapple, when they set out on their quest to understand how the human activity of representing and modeling both natural and social processes inevitably contributed to shaping and altering those very same processes.

On the one hand, the exploration of the individual's ethical position within the collective activity of scientific modeling could

point outside the instrumental logic of the world laboratory and beyond the notion of "experimental epistemology," toward an ecological understanding of the interdependency of living beings. This would be the path of Gregory Bateson, of Francisco Varela, of Félix Guattari, whose work I will describe in a following essay. On the other hand, it could lead to an infinite multiplication of clearly circumscribed and incommensurable world -models, open to manipulation by anyone with a superior understanding of the modeling process and its effects on the lives of those who engage in it. This would be the path that was massively taken by the entrepreneurial cultures of the new economy, giving rise to the highly sophisticated productive devices of the control society, in which most forms of artistic creativity are now caught and instrumentalized for financial, ideological and military purposes.

The second cybernetics would be far more expansive than the first, creating an entire universe of fictions. For the Viennese philosopher of science, even the subatomic particles studied by contemporary physicists are mere inventions, ways to patch holes in inadequate theories. Yet unlike Gödel, Von Foerster is not paranoid and betrays no particular anxiety about scientific incompleteness. "All that is relevant" he concludes in his discussion of the new subatomic models, "is how interesting a story each one invents to explain the origin of the universe." He goes on to describe physics as a cosmological struggle between different poets, and when Dambeck asks whether a theory full of holes isn't an uncertain and dangerous basis for a worldwide system of networked machines, he offers this reply:

- "All theories are correct... because they can all be deduced from other theories... It goes on deducing indefinitely... That's the good thing about it. You can go on forever."
- "In logic," chides the interviewer.
- "Yes, precisely," replies the cybernetician.
- "*But in reality?*" asks Dambeck insistently.

Von Foerster protests that there is no reality, he continues his excited gesturing. The scene is extraordinary: a wizened old man on the edge of the grave, discovering dazzling new universes. In a few minutes of candid philosophical testimony, one of the last living participants of the Macy Conferences reveals the underlying structure of the "mirror worlds" that were described in the the 1990s by the Internet enthusiast David Gelernter – the member of the Digerati who was targeted by Kaczynski.

For Gelernter, the founder of a dotcom company, the multiplication of informational worlds is simply advantageous – it offers an easier way to contact obscure offices at his university.²⁹ For Kaczynski, who blew off Gelernter's hand and eye with a letter bomb, the replication of the human world in a virtual counterpart is a threat, a shattering of nature's wholeness. For Von Foerster, the self-fragmenting structure of linguistic reflexivity is itself absolute: the cybernetic system is the unity of its infinite divergences, an infinitely expanding mirror -world inherent to humanity's very powers of creation – and therefore, a second nature of a higher and more complex logical order. Three figures of truth dispute the stage, beyond all provability. Still it is Dambeck's insistent question that makes the deepest impression on our minds. Is logic the only fundament of human existence? Can representations be multiplied to infinity? Where is the ground of reality in this worldwide system of machines?



Kurt Gödel

NOTES

1 Laboratory research into the ways of knowing reality was exemplified for McCulloch by a paper he co-authored with J.Y. Lettvin, H.R. Maturana and W. Pitts, "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain" (1959), reprinted in Warren McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT, 1965), pp. 230-55. Also see McCulloch's preface to the book.

2 Lutz Dammbeck, *Das Netz*, 121', 2003; released on DVD with English subtitles as *The Net: The Unabomber, LSD and the Internet*. (In the quotes that follow I have retranslated a few of the phrases from the original German, for minor questions of style.)

3 The only recent critique of comparable depth and radicality was proposed by the French ultra-left group Tiqqun, "L'hypothèse cybernétique," in *Tiqqun 2* (2002).

4 Cf. John Brockman, *Digerati: Encounters with the Cyber Elite* (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1996).

5 For Brand's ideas and career, see the critical biography by Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

6 Alan Turing, "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*," *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society 2*, vol. 42 (1937), pp. 230-65.

7 The foundations of the mathematicized logic used by McCulloch and Pitts are Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937) and Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica* (Cambridge University Press, 1997/1st ed. 1910).

8 Reprinted in Warren McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind*, op. cit.

9 John von Neumann, "First Draft of a Report on the EDVAC" (transcribed typescript of contract research for the US Army Ordnance Department: University of Pennsylvania, Moore School of Engineering, June 30, 1945), section 4.2; available (among others) at <http://www.virtualtravelog.net/entries/2003-08-TheFirstDraft.pdf>.

10 On the role of the McCulloch-Pitts model in the establishment of the cybernetic paradigm, cf. Jean -Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind: On the Origins of Cognitive Science* (Princeton University Press, 2000/1st French edition 1994), pp. 58-63.

- 11 The influence of cybernetics on structuralism is discussed in *The Mechanization of the Mind*, *ibid.*, pp. 15-22, and Céline Lafontaine, "The Cybernetic Matrix of 'French Theory,'" in *Theory, Culture & Society* 24/5 (2007).
- 12 As Guattari writes in the autobiographical text "So What": "For as long as I can remember, I was preoccupied with joining together different different layers of things which fascinated me: the philosophy of science, logic, biology, early works in cybernetics, militantism..." Félix Guattari, *Chaosology* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), pp. 7-8.
- 13 Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," in *Critical Inquiry* 21/1 (Fall 1994).
- 14 The covert programs to extend US citizenship to German scientists after WWII (operations "Overcast" and "Paperclip") are discussed in Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: The First Full Account of America's Recruitment of Nazis, and its Disastrous Effect on our Domestic and Foreign Policy* (New York: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), pp. 27-39.
- 15 Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).
- 16 Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1971/1942), p. 261.
- 17 Quoted in Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 257.
- 18 See the chapters on Murray in *Harvard and the Unabomber*, *ibid.*, pp. 228-94.
- 19 Cf. Martin Gold, ed., *The Complete Social Scientist: A Kurt Lewin Reader* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1999), chapters 10 and 11, "The Dynamics of Social Change" and "Group Decision and Action."
- 20 John Marks, *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate: The CIA and Mind Control* (New York: Norton, 1991/1st ed. 1979), p. 19.
- 21 Henry Murray, "An Analysis of the Personality of Adolf Hitler," typescript, O.S.S. Confidential, October 1943; available from Cornell University Law Library at <http://library.lawschool.cornell.edu/WhatWeHave/SpecialCollections/Donovan/Hitler/Hitler-TOC.cfm>. Cf. esp. p. 41, where Murray discusses the need for the "Substitution of a Higher Symbol" such as "World Federation" or "World Conscience" as an object for German national identification.
- 22 Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For A New Cultural critique," in *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Art and Politics in a Networked Era* (Zagreb: Arkzin/WHW, 2002); available at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>.
- 23 See the discussion of Fremont-Smith's relations with LSD researcher Harold Abramson (who also attended the Sixth Macy Conference), in Steve Joshua Heims, *Constructing a Social Science for Postwar America: The Cybernetics Group, 1946-1953* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 167-68.
- 24 John Marks, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- 25 This is the leitmotif of Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Putnam, 2004).
- 26 Cf. Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," in Bruce Fink, tr., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: Norton, 2006); here Lacan describes the

divide between signifier and signified as the “algorithm” that grounds the modern science of linguistics, p. 497.

27 See the discussion in Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), chap. 6, which stresses the primary importance of Varela and Maturana in this reflexive turn. Indeed, Maturana was a participant in the research project on the frog’s eye that exemplified McCulloch’s experimental epistemology (cf. note 1).

28 Heinz von Foerster, “On Constructing a Reality” (1973), in *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York: Springer, 2003), p. 212.

29 Cf. David Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds: or the Day Software Puts the Universe in a Shoebox... How It Will Happen and What It Will Mean* (Oxford University Press, 1992). Writing before the invention of the web, Gelernter was prophetic: “A Mirror World that encompasses a large hospital or university or a moderate-sized company is an enormous, complicated structure. A City Mirror World is immense. And such programs will blend as they grow, eventually encompassing many universities, or every hospital in the region, or all the somethings in the country or, conceivably, in many countries” (p. 35).

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[...] the World Laboratory Posted in ubiwar by Tim Stevens on October 15th, 2008 Brian Holmes on Filming the World Laboratory, ostensibly a review of Lutz Dammbeck’s film *Das Netz* (2003). This is a quick post before I [...]

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well written.

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[December 7, 2009 at 3:02 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] mean to give a univocal reading of informationalism as some kind of dark plot. In my text *Filming the World Laboratory* I proposed looking at Von Foerster as a kind of double-agent within the military-industrial [...]

Jozsef Says:

[March 16, 2011 at 9:15 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

This is a very thought provoking article. I have myself singled out maturana, varela, bateson, and foerster as representing a kind of light in the darkness of totalizing technomancy of informational metaphors. However even their well intentioned constructions are still quite useable by the system at large. I think we could even more broadly add some of the American Pragmatist tradition of William James et al as a kind of forerunners to experimental constructive epistemics. Indeed "Poison" Ivy Lee, Walter Lipmann and many of the other propagandists and PR men of the progressive era latched strongly onto the notion of "truth" as a kind of expedient social commodity to be constructed for immediate use then disbanded when opportunistic usually in the favor of corporate power or the creation of corporate image in the public mind.

« Marcelo Expósito's "Entre Sueños" »

-> New Media from the Neolithic to Now >

Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies

By Brian Holmes

or, the Pathic Core at the Heart of Cybernetics



[This text was developed through a large number of improvised presentations. Thanks to all who listened and responded. The very first, in Chicago at the invitation of Jon Cates, is archived [here](#). - BH]

A desiring mind seeks infinity, and finds it today in a proliferation of signals: electromagnetic waves beaming down from the skies, fiber-optic cables emerging from the seas, copper wires woven across the continents. The earthly envelope of land, air and ocean – the realm of organic life, or *biosphere* – is doubled by a second skin of electronically mediated thought: the *noosphere*. It's a vast, pulsating machine: a coded universe grown complex beyond our grasp, yet connected at every pulse to the microscopic mesh of nerve cells in our flesh.

Such is the contemporary circuit of communication. Its existence raises two basic questions. What will be the destiny of this intangible planetary skin? And how does it unfold in our own

bodies?

Picture yourself long ago, as a child, discovering the pairs of terrestrial and celestial globes that are found in the museums of the old European sovereigns. The room is inexplicably empty, and you, the child, chance on the twin rotating spheres with their intricate designs, clasped in heavy armatures of wood and brass. One of them sketches the contours of land and sea in meticulous detail, while the other paints extravagant fantasies over a map of the stars. But what is the relation between the continents and the constellations? Why give such rigorously equal weight to fact and imagination? What has the lion, the crab, the archer, the serpent, to do with the compass or the colonies? And why would the sovereign have wavered between the two?

Seen from the child's perspective, the terrestrial and celestial globes mark the split between a physical science of the territory and a free-floating realm of the imagination. The precisely drawn lines of latitude and longitude speak of exploration and conquest, of industry and trade; while the mythical figures of the celestial globe beckon elsewhere, toward mysterious constellations of universes. It was here, you might imagine, in this very room, that the geometric cartographer parted ways with the mystical astrologer. But wasn't it also here that the highest task of the artist first emerged: that of giving form to the heavens, of rearranging the stars above our heads?

The historian of technics, Lewis Mumford, had a different way of telling this story. In his final book, *The Pentagon of Power* – the second volume of *The Myth of the Machine* – Mumford explained how astrology itself had contributed to the royal sciences of the early Renaissance:

It established as a canon of faith a belief in the strictest sort of determinism; for it interpreted singular life events in terms of collective statistical probabilities, based on data originally gathered from a mass of individual biographies, collected and collated, it is reported, by royal mandate. Thus royal patronage had not merely promoted star-gazing but laid the groundwork for the more austere and pragmatically useful determinism of the physical sciences. Once firmly embedded in the mind, this assumption would even lead a proud mathematician to boast that from a sufficient knowledge of a single event the position and state of every other particle in the universe could be predicted. That unfortunate exhibition of intellectual *hubris* laid the foundation at an early date for the dubious alliance between scientific determinism and authoritarian control that now menaces human existence.¹

The Renaissance saw the birth of modern science under the cloak of astrology; but it also saw the beginnings of world conquest by the Western sovereigns. Our own era of global expansion has seen the birth of a new science, cybernetics, which emerged along with America's liberal empire in the course of the Second World War. Cybernetics established a remarkable faith in the power of information to make a difference, to change the fates of lives and nations. But it also generated unprecedented capacities for surveillance of the most minute behaviors of human beings. "Information is indeed 'such stuff as a dreams are made on,'" observed an American social scientist in the early 1960s. "Yet it can be transmitted, recorded, analyzed and measured."² Information machines have become the elusive myth and the threatening master of human desire in the postmodern era.

How does the myth of the machine exert its pragmatic effects,

reinforcing the coercive functions of the social order? Mumford described Renaissance astrology as a "supplementary religion," opening the way to a clockwork vision of the universe and a mechanistic organization of human existence. Working along similar lines, Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of *overcoding* to describe the process whereby singular human actions are integrated to dominant social structures. Overcoding is first of all a linguistic notion: it designates the syntactic articulation of a material substrate, giving rise to "phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization."³ The overcode is the signifier of structuralist theory, the abstract unit of language that cuts out standardized concepts and organizes them according to binary oppositions (raw/cooked, man/woman, friend/enemy etc). But structuralism treats language as a normalizing function, a master-code imposing itself on singular styles of behavior and speech. As Guattari wrote in one of his solo texts: "Only the use of a more general language that overcodes all the local languages and dialects makes it possible for an economic and state machine to seize power at a more totalitarian level."⁴ Thus the linguistic notion reveals itself to be fundamentally political.

In the chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* devoted to the theory of the state – under the title "Apparatus of Capture" – these political implications of overcoding are developed into a far-reaching understanding of human history. Here, overcoding designates the quasi-magical nexus of imperial governance, which subdues the anarchically scattered lineages and tribes and restructures their particular territorial encodings (their languages and ways of life) into the hierarchical symbolism of its larger order. The application of power is inseparable from its linguistic organization:

A state apparatus is erected upon the primitive agricultural communities, which already have lineal-territorial codes; *but it overcodes them*, submitting them to the power of a despotic emperor, the sole and transcendent public-property owner, the master of the surplus or the stock, the organizer of large-scale works (surplus labor), the source of public functions and bureaucracy. This is the *paradigm* of the bond, the knot. Such is the regime of signs of the State: overcoding, or the Signifier. It is a system of *machinic enslavement*: the first "megamachine" in the strict sense, to use Mumford's term.⁵

For Mumford, the megamachine finds its origins among the ancient Pharaohs, worshipers of the Sun God Atum-Re. The power that built the Pyramids is not any single technology, but a social order that subsumes entire populations, "an invisible structure composed of living, but rigid, human parts, each assigned to his special office, role, and task, to make possible the immense work output and grand designs of this great collective organization."⁶ It reappears under new guises in the modern era with the absolutism of the Sun King Louis XIV, before reaching its twentieth-century apotheosis in the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Hitler. But Mumford also saw the American technocratic system under which he lived as a megamachine, able to trace out in advance the "collective statistical probabilities" of a diverse and populous nation. Its essential components were an all-powerful wartime President (or commander in chief) and the devastating artificial sun of atomic weapons. Only after the Second World War were its full imperial dimensions attained, through the economic restructuring of Europe under the Marshall Plan, the conquest of orbital space through the moon-shot program and the multi-pronged "containment strategy" directed against the Soviet Union.

Deleuze and Guattari take Mumford's critique two steps further, bringing it closer to the complexities of everyday experience. They

begin by distinguishing between the outright enslavement of overcoded empires and the modern condition of *social subjection*: "There is enslavement when human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine that they compose among themselves and with other things (animals, tools) under the control and direction of a higher unity. But there is subjection when the higher unity constitutes the human being as a subject linked to a now exterior object."⁷ Subjection entails a *decoding* of hierarchies, it takes place in a capitalist society of free laborers, fluidly channeled into productive assemblages where each one retains some degree of autonomy with respect to the use of the machine. Thus there arises a more dynamic order, where disciplinary subjection to the specific rhythms of industrial devices marks one end of a finely gradated spectrum, contrasting on the other with a free subjectivation that internalizes a wide range of machinic possibilities. The capacity to govern oneself according to the models provided by complex machines is what catapults the most flexible subjects to positions of linguistic control: "In effect, capital acts as the point of subjectivation that constitutes all human beings as subjects; but some, the 'capitalists,' are subjects of enunciation that form the private subjectivity of capital, while the others, the 'proletarians,' are subjects of the statement, subjected to the technical machines."

One could imagine that with the increasing automation of agricultural and industrial labor, the process of decoding would continue indefinitely, giving ever greater numbers of individuals the mastery of capital's privatizing speech. Yet a paradox arises: despite their privileged position, the freest subjectivities are precisely those who continually refine the machinic mesh of communication and control, extending it ever more deeply into the intimacy of their own lives and bodies. In this way the infinite decoding of traditional hierarchies finally reaches a limit-point where the supple and flexible map of social relations begins to take on rigorous and constraining contours once again:

If motorized machines constituted the second age of the technical machine, cybernetic and informational machines form a third age that reconstructs a generalized regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible "human-machine systems" replace the old non-recurrent and non-reversible relations of subjection between the two elements; the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication and no longer on usage or action.... It could also be said that a small amount of subjectivation took us away from machinic enslavement, but a large amount brings us back to it.... The modern States of the third age do indeed restore the most absolute of empires, a new "megamachine"...

Deleuze and Guattari give a date for their first encounter with this latest configuration of the megamachine: November 8, 1947, one year after the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine offering military support against communist insurgencies, and only a few months after the speech announcing the Marshall Plan. This was the day of the radio broadcast of Antonin Artaud's most radical performance, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* – a poetic revolt against the overcoding of body and mind by the advancing armies of organized commerce and industrialized war. What Artaud proposed in response to the megamachine was a "body without organs": a smooth slippage of flesh without grasp for the robots of battle, and an exit from the geopolitical map of the Cold War. The broadcast never happened: it was censored by the French government.

How can we escape from the subtler encoding machines that

would scan our neuronal mesh at the molecular level, and synchronize it with the algorithms of computers? The flexible economy confronts us with the paradoxical trap of our own freedoms. What I'd like to do with the help of Guattari's later works is to spark off some conversations about the models of existence that we bring into play, in hopes of leaving behind the dominant patterns that shape our destinies. The question is how you rearrange the stars above your head, to open up unexpected paths on the ground beneath your feet.

Guattari took the perspective of an artist and an activist, seeking an ethico-aesthetic paradigm. He explored all the technologies of his day and laid the theoretical and practical basis for the wildest media experiments of the 1990s, even while carrying out a fundamental critique of information science and its applications in the capitalist societies. His aim was to appropriate the powers previously ascribed to myth, in order to reconfigure the articulation of bodies and machines (the relations of biosphere and noosphere). This was the desire of the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*: to provoke fresh intersections of artistic constellations, existential territories, social flows and abstract ideas. Not a map of positions and probabilities, but a set of vectors whereby the virtual and the actual come to meet. A cartography of escape routes leading beyond the black holes of neoliberal control, toward the possibility of collective speech.

Systemic Entanglement

First of all: how did Guattari conceive of the individual's relationship to the neoliberal economic order as it began taking form in the 1980s? Where did his cartographic concepts come up against the engineering practices of cybernetics? And what, for him, were the fundamental micro and macropolitical questions of the new world system?

His late work begins with a lecture entitled "Integrated World Capitalism and the Molecular Revolution," delivered in 1981 shortly after the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁸ At stake here is a psychosociology of power and liberation, in an era when the geopolitical rift between the capitalist West and the communist East was already on the wane and an "immense reconversion" had begun, ultimately leading to the installation of similar technologies, organizational forms and models of desire across the face of the earth. How could "new kinds of revolutionary machines" be assembled in this environment, drawing on the mutations of subjectivity and desire that were stimulated at the heart of the productive apparatus? And how could these "molecular revolutions" be brought into articulation with the traditional workerist struggles that had been neutralized and absorbed into the consumer system? These were the gnawing questions that presided over all the breakthroughs and innovations of Guattari's final period, up to his untimely death in 1992.

Here are the opening lines of the text: "Contemporary capitalism can be defined as integrated world capitalism, because it tends toward a state where no human activity on the planet can escape it. It can be considered to have already colonized all the planet's surfaces, so that the essential aspect of its expression now concerns the new activities that it seeks to overcode and control." Guattari points beyond the core-periphery exchanges that had been theorized as the "new international division of labor"⁹ and speaks instead of "a globalization of the division of labor, a general capture of all the modes of activity, including those not formally covered by the economic definition of labor." Informatics is a driving force in the establishment of this totally capitalized world system:

The computer revolution considerably accelerates the

process of integration, which also spills over into unconscious subjectivity, both individual and social. This machinic-semiotic integration of human labor implies that the mental models of each worker must be taken into account in the productive process: not just their knowledge (or what some economists call their "knowledge capital"), but all their systems of interaction with society and the machinic environment.

What's striking is the juxtaposition of scales. The capitalist production system now extends to fully global dimensions, but at the same time it has intensified its grip over humanity to the point of charting out detailed mental models and interaction routines, not only for classes, ethnicities, income groups and local populations, but also for the most intimate behaviors of individuals. The aim is to extract surplus value not only from our labor but also from our inherent sociability, our desires to love, play, flourish and therefore to produce and consume. As most of us have only recently understood, the computerized mapping capacities of integrated world capitalism allow for seamless transitions between macro and micro scales of intervention. Guattari speaks of a shift toward "intensive imperialisms" that uproot or deterritorialize individual subjectivities and entire social classes, in order to reconfigure them according to the axioms of globally integrated capital. Yet what he describes as capital is not an all-determining force, but instead the opportunistic application of abstract functions to particular local conditions which are themselves in flux, bubbling over with growth and invention: "Its ambiguity with respect to the machinic mutations, both material and semiotic, that characterize the current situation is such that it uses the full machinic power, the semiotic proliferation of the developed industrial societies, even as it neutralizes them by its specific means of economic expression. It only encourages innovation and machinic expansion to the extent that it can coopt them and consolidate the fundamental social axioms on which it cannot compromise."

The key concepts of this far-seeing text are *modeling* and *machinic-semiotic integration*. The word "modeling" designates the simulation of dynamic systems, typically carried out by the application of strategically formulated computer algorithms to data-inputs gathered by scientists (which can be social scientists, psychologists, market researchers and so on). This kind of modeling has become essential to the planning of what Guattari called "collective facilities," which increasingly take the form of privately owned consumption environments, like the commercial mall whose design process has been recorded and analyzed in precise technical detail by the filmmaker Harun Farocki in a remarkable video entitled *The Creator of Shopping Worlds*.¹⁰ The *model* is therefore a system of effective signs, a "cartography" conceived not as a mere representation of an existing or ideal human environment, but rather as an active, diagrammatic force ("where the sign systems enter into direct concatenation with their referents, as instruments of modeling, programming, planning of social segments and productive assemblages").

The phrase "machinic-semiotic integration" refers to what actually happens when such a cartography is constructed in three dimensions, as the material prolongation of the data-gathering and simulation process. It describes how the functional capacities of the architecture can be programmed with specific contents, qualities and characteristics, so as to elicit and transform the semiotic expressions of the users, which for Guattari are not limited to verbal language but include affects, gestures, patterns of movement and so on. Machinic-semiotic integration occurs when those individual expressions actually refine and prolong the purposes that have been coded into the built environment.

Integrated world capitalism therefore implies the cybernetic inclusion of the creative operator within a complex, ever-expanding machine – a process, not of molecular revolution, but of systemic entanglement.

Here we can grasp the full ambiguity of what the theorists of self-reflexive or second-order cybernetics call “radical constructivism.” For Heinz von Foerster, the world appears as the infinitely malleable creation of our own perceptions, whose operations can be observed and reworked at a meta level, through a practice of self-apprehension expressed in curious phrases that double back upon themselves, such as “understanding understanding.”¹¹ Yet with the multiplication of technical environments – audiovisual screens, shopping malls, transport corridors, communications systems – our perceptions are constantly mediated, subject to inflection by preprogrammed flows of language and aesthetic stimulus. Before any reflection, perception itself is constructed by the mediated environment in which it takes place, displacing the moment of radicality from the perceiver to the builder of the system, or even more, to the shaper of its underlying models. The understanding is preprogrammed. As Von Foerster’s contemporary Herbert Simon, America’s premier theorist of modeling, wrote in the 1981 preface to his book *The Sciences of the Artificial*: “The thesis is that certain phenomena are ‘artificial’ in a very specific sense: they are as they are only because of a system’s being molded, by goals or purposes, to the environment in which it lives.” The concept of the strategically designed “artifact” or “interface” is central to Simon’s general program for the environmental management of human behavior, formulated as early as 1969:

An artifact can be thought of as a meeting point – an ‘interface’ in today’s terms – between an “inner” environment, the substance and organization of the artifact itself, and the “outer” environment, the surroundings in which it operates.... Description of an artifice in terms of its organization and functioning – its interface between inner and outer environments – is a major objective of invention and design activity.... If the inner system is properly designed, it will be adapted to the outer environment, so that its behavior will be determined in large part by the latter, exactly as in the case of “economic man.”¹²

This slippage from a mediated “interface” to a wholly artificialized “inner system” is the basic formula of the control society, theorized first of all by its inventors and primary agents. As Simon indicates, the overriding ambition of the psychosocial engineers of integrated world capitalism has been to design the artificial model of homo economicus and to impose it on the real thing: flesh-and-blood populations with their historical experience and their open-ended potentials. Since WWII, the primary vector of this uniquely neoliberal form of control has been cybernetic modeling and the construction of interactive environments, or sites of “machinic-semiotic integration,” where the very freedom of the users continually generates the data allowing our progressively fine-tuned entrapment, within custom-built settings that morph and mutate to match the evolution of our already programmed dreams. Hence the creeping sense of artificialization, indeed of derealization, that thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard denounced in the course of the 1980s, in terms that cry out for a direct confrontation with with Simon’s concepts of modeling and interface:

This is our destiny, subjected to opinion polls, information, publicity, statistics: constantly confronted with the anticipated statistical verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent

refraction of our least movements, we are no longer confronted with our own will. We are no longer even alienated, because for that it is necessary for the subject to be divided in itself, confronted with the other, contradictory. Now, where there is no other, the scene of the other, like that of politics and of society, has disappeared. Each individual is forced despite himself into the undivided coherency of statistics. There is in this a positive absorption into the transparency of computers, which is something worse than alienation.¹³

There is obviously a good deal of truth to such pronouncements, as every page of the essay on "integrated world capitalism" confirms. Still Guattari revolted against Baudrillard, critiquing the subterranean influence of "reductionist concepts spread immediately after the war by information theory and early research in cybernetics," whose hasty absorption by postmodern thinkers "put us far behind the phenomenological research that preceded them."¹⁴ What he proposed in response to this pure reiteration of the status quo was not a refusal of technology or a retreat from machinic complexity, but a shift from the binary logics of information theory to a more heterogeneous matrix of interactions, including the trans-subjective phenomena of a "pathic subjectivation" that the cybernetic sciences had never been able to compute. Here lay the promise of the molecular revolutions, whose psychic and libidinal dynamics lay at the heart of integrated world capitalism and its "intensive imperialisms," but whose existential contradictions were ultimately irreducible to the procedures of integration and control.

At stake was an escape from the transparency that Baudrillard denounced, and a rediscovery of the inherent contradictions whose expression could open up a pathway toward other human beings in their fundamental alterity and their own self-division. On the one hand, this would entail a deliberate reflection on the models that each person brings into play. But it would also require a deep rethinking of the concept of system. For decades, the cyberneticians had relentlessly sought to extend the boundaries of *systemics*, which, as Von Foerster pointed out, is a word based on the Indo-European phoneme *sys*, meaning to join, to integrate.¹⁵ In the age of integrated world capitalism, Guattari would be drawn toward quite different conceptual frontiers, the ones marked by the phoneme *skei*, which means to separate or cut – as in *science*, of course, but also in *schism* or *schizophrenia*.

Chaotic Thresholds

How could a dissociation – a *schiz* – become the basis for a better society? In December of 1980, in the opening remarks of a seminar that would run throughout the decade, Guattari wondered aloud if the time was finally ripe to leave behind a strictly critical approach: that of the *Anti-Oedipus*. "Was it conceivable to envisage a methodological perspective, trying to account in a different way for practices of intervention, of therapy, of psychoanalysis?"¹⁶ The answer to this question would become the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*.

The seminar was launched in dialogue with Mony Elkaïm, the Moroccan-born, Brussels-based psychotherapist whom he had first met in a Porto Rican neighborhood of New York.¹⁷ What gradually emerged from this dialogue was a series of diagrams pointing to four domains of the unconscious, four interrelated varieties of experience that overflow the ego to constitute an expanded field of trans-subjective interaction. Each zone of this fourfold map is understood not as the definitive structural model of an unconscious process, able to render its truth or meaning, but rather as a *meta-model*, a way of perceiving and perhaps

reorienting the singular factors at play. "What I am precisely concerned with," Guattari wrote, "is a displacement of the analytic problematic, a drift from systems of statement [*énoncé*] and preformed subjective *structures* toward *assemblages of enunciation* that can forge new coordinates of interpretation and 'bring to existence' unheard-of ideas and proposals."¹⁸ What he was concerned with, in short, was the articulation of collective speech.

The four divisions of the diagram deal with cutouts of existential territories, complexions of material and energetic flows, rhizomes of abstract ideas and constellations of aesthetic refrains. Or more tangibly: the ground beneath your feet, the turbulence of social experience, the blue sky of ideas and the rhythmic insistence of waking dreams. These varieties or moments of experience are linked into a cycle of transformations, whose consistency and dynamics make up an assemblage (individual, family, group, project, workshop, society, etc.). The ultimate aim in the relation with each assemblage was to arrive at "a procedure of 'automodeling,' which appropriates all or part of existing models in order to construct its own cartographies, its own reference points, and thus its own analytic approach, its own analytic methodology."¹⁹

The transcriptions of the seminars and the published volume of texts and diagrams account for the major part of Guattari's work in the 1980s, and form the basis of his most well-known books, *Chaosmosis* and *The Three Ecologies*, as well as his extraordinary final statement, "Remaking Social Practices." In all of these he goes beyond the critical perspective, suggesting how marginal groups acting on their subjective territories can put together experimental formations at the cutting edges of science and art, following the compass-points on their intimate cartographies of desire. While writing the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* Guattari was directly involved in such experiments. Since his meeting with Franco Berardi ("Bifo") and his support of the Radio Alice project that unfolded in Bologna during the Italian social upheavals of 1977 he had been a practitioner of what is now called tactical media, launching Radio Tomate in Paris in 1981, then working subversively with the Minitel commercial information network from 1986 onwards, in collaboration with a broad spectrum of voluntary associations including striking hospital workers.²⁰ At the outset of the 1990s he theorized the subversive uses of information technology, in view of a "reorganization of the mass-media power that crushes contemporary subjectivity and a shift toward a postmedia era, consisting in the individual and collective appropriation and interactive use of the machines of information, communication, intelligence, art and culture."²¹

Guattari points in exactly the direction that would be taken by social movements, toward "new kinds of revolutionary machines." Self-modeling within the confines of the contemporary information system was achieved in myriad ways by the explosion of artist-activist practices after the Zapatista uprising of 1994, revealing the acuity of his vision. Indeed, all the artistic and activist projects I have focused on in this book can be approached through the lens of his writings. Yet what remains insufficiently understood, even by media tacticians working directly with computerized tools, is the degree to which his theoretical trajectory forms a response to the reductionism of the postwar cybernetic paradigm, whose entry into structuralist psychoanalysis he directly witnessed in the seminars of Lacan in the mid-1950s²² and whose far-reaching consequences he would encounter some two decades later in the "systemic therapy" practiced by Mony Elkäim.

At issue in Elkäim's practice were two discourses emerging from the cybernetic paradigm. One was the general systems theory of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, which gave the basic coordinates for an approach to the family as a feedback system tending toward

homeostatic equilibrium. ²³ The other was the technique of “paradoxical intervention” used by Paul Watzlawick and the Palo Alto school for the treatment of the self-contradictory injunctions or “double-binds” that were believed to cause distortions and blockages in family systems.²⁴ Guattari was initially hostile to the Palo Alto group, which borrowed its vocabulary of senders, receivers and messages directly from information theory, banishing any irruption of desire from the linguistic act. As he wrote in *Molecular Revolution*: “They set out in search of a mechanism – not a machine, which is a very different thing! – that would fix the flows, determine the intersections, identify the stopping points, stabilize the structures and provide a reassuring feeling of having at last got hold of something quasi-eternal in the human sciences, while absolving the researcher of all political responsibility.”²⁵ Nonetheless, he must have appreciated the way that systemic concepts allowed Elkaïm to conceive of trans-individual relations beyond the ego and the normative figure of the individual, as in the framework of institutional analysis that he had helped to develop in the 1960s. And while he undoubtedly could see no therapeutic effectiveness in simply revealing the logical contradiction of a double-bind, still he admired the way that Elkaïm was able to embody his paradoxical formulations in the clinical context. What Guattari wanted was to cast aside the normative idea of homeostasis, the illusion of systemic continuity. Thus *Chaosmosis* speaks of “a movement which, around Mony Elkaïm, is attempting to free itself from the grip of the systems theories that circulate in Anglo-Saxon countries and in Italy”:

The inventiveness of treatment distances us from scientific paradigms and brings us closer to an ethico-aesthetic paradigm. Therapists get involved, take risks and put their own fantasies into operation, creating a paradoxical climate of existential authenticity accompanied by the freedom of play and simulacra. Family therapy produces subjectivity in the most artificial way imaginable. This can be observed in training sessions, when the therapists improvise psychodramatic scenes. Here, the scene implies a layering of enunciation: a vision of oneself as a concrete embodiment; a subject of enunciation which doubles the subject of the statement and the distribution of roles; a collective management of the game; a verbal exchange with observers commenting on the scene; and finally, a video gaze which returns all these superimposed levels as feedback. This type of performance favors the relinquishment of a “realist” attitude which would apprehend the lived scenes as systems actually embodied in family structures.²⁶

The passage stages an incommensurable gap between the scientist’s will to understand a system in its totality and the trans-subjective process of a treatment delivered over to its own heterogeneity, engaging all the participants by means of aesthetic acts that shed incisive light on the models of interaction being brought into play. In such an atmosphere, constructivism and artificiality become synonymous with openness and ethical responsibility, rather than opposed to them. What Guattari sought in the seminar was a meta-modeling of this kind, which would transform the theoretical tools used by the participants in their relationships with their patients. As he recounted in the inaugural session: “I brought in a certain emphasis on the heterogeneity of the components at play in the systems, the problematic of singularities and so forth; and insofar as that allowed me to get somewhere in my dialogue with M., I could see that it was worth it.”²⁷ Meta-modeling was a way to open up an effective dialogue about practice, making the seminar itself into an experimental

assemblage of enunciation. In return, Elkaim brought a major theoretical breakthrough into the mix, one that responded exactly to Guattari's intentions: the book *Order out of Chaos*, by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers.²⁸

The book could be seen as a culmination of the "order-from-noise principle" proposed by Heinz von Foerster as far back as 1960.²⁹ Both Prigogine and Stengers were chemists, concerned with material metamorphoses. Their key concept was that of phase changes at the molecular level of organization, where the introduction of heat energy pushes a liquid beyond its state of equilibrium, giving rise to patterns of turbulence or "dissipative structures" from which a new order emerges. Important to this description are moments of bifurcation, where the departure points of new pathways are set by chance. What this meant philosophically was the overcoming of the atemporal outlook characteristic of classical physics, which deduced every movement of a system from the characteristics of an initial state existing independently of the observer. Strange as it may seem, change in the classical model could only be conceived as entirely reversible: energy did not dissipate and the fundamental identity of physical bodies was conserved. From the new perspective time appeared irreversible and the observer was understood to be inseparable from its evolution over thresholds of more -or-less radical discontinuity. For the theorist of micropolitical transformations, who saw the singularities of small -group breakthroughs as catalysts for larger social movements, such a model could only come as a huge encouragement. If matter itself could be disorganized by an influx of energy to the point of bringing forth an entirely new equilibrium, why not imagine that the passivity and conformism of societies – or worse, their pathological regressions toward authoritarianism – could be thrown into chaos by the introduction of disruptive and paradoxical elements, whether linguistic, aesthetic, philosophic, sexual or machinic? Why not imagine that the "steady states" of industrial society, and indeed, the repressive state itself, could dissipate into open potentials for new ways of living?

Such ideas are quite tantalizing, because they promise an expanded historical role for relatively small-scale experiments in collective cooperation and self-organization. But they too have to be placed in their socio-economic context. The 1980s were the inaugural decade of neoliberalism, which brought new forms of financialized wealth-creation and motivational management into play, alongside the militaristic technologies of surveillance and control that had been inherited from the Cold War. A vast expansion of the semiotic economy – that is, the economy of images and signs, detached from any referent in reality – gave immense powers to those who could manipulate mathematical models of behavior and shape new environments on the basis of their analyses and simulations. The theories of complexity and chaos were highly productive at the end of the twentieth century. They restructured the terrains that emancipatory movements would have to occupy and radically alter, in order to bring forth singular desires from cracks in the dominant paradigm.

Here I want to rapidly list some of these theories, just to give an impression of the times, without inquiring into Guattari's specific knowledge of each development. In 1979 the American economist W. Brian Arthur began a series of investigations that would revolutionize general equilibrium theory, which traditionally held that overproduction would always be corrected by falling prices. He proposed instead that the positive feedback of rising sales could lead to new investment, spiraling growth and increasing returns on production, particularly in industries based on unlimited knowledge rather than on scarce material resources.³⁰ In other words, there would be no necessary limit to profitability. Fifteen years later, Arthur and the complexity theorists of the Santa Fe

school would become the gurus of the "new economy." Also in the course of the 1980s, news began filtering back to the USA and Europe of the Japanese *kanban* or "just in time" production system, which reoriented the automobile industry from the "push" of demand forecasts to the "pull" of actual sales, tabulated at market and relayed instantly back to the factory.³¹ These information flows would at last begin providing real-time numbers for the computer modeling of feedback loops in industrial production, pioneered in the 1960s by the American engineer Jay Wright Forrester.³² The prestige of Japanese methods was accompanied by the exportation and adaptation of *kaizen* management techniques, which demanded the active implication of workers as shop-floor inventors and problem-solvers. In the West, this would lead to a new emphasis on "human capital" and to major investments in the analysis and modeling of psychological and relational processes for the improvement of productivity.³³ Every aspect of society had to be retooled for quick response to market signals. The subjection of industrial workers to rigid disciplinary models, codified by Frederick Taylor in the early twentieth century, would gradually be replaced by the subjectivation of prosumers seduced into action by the new possibilities of miniaturized, ergonomic technologies.

The late 1980s were the golden age of junk bonds, which helped inflate the unprecedented stock market bubble of 1987. As in recent times, one could witness the radical constructivism of human beings interacting directly with their own symbolic creations (stocks, bonds, derivatives). During this same period, the fractal geometry of Benoît Mandelbrot with its proportional transitions from micro to macro scales – which had been used to define the expansive characteristics of "smooth space" in *A Thousand Plateaus* – began to be adopted by traders as a way to chart the contours of turbulence in the computerized financial markets.³⁴ Interpretations of postmodern society multiplied along with "exotic" financial instruments. As the geographer Nigel Thrift has shown in a brilliant essay, chaos and complexity theories began to circulate as a new kind of governmental logic (or governmentality) in the the course of the 1990s.³⁵ Already by 1992, Brian Arthur could write: "Steering an economy with positive feedbacks into the best of its many possible equilibrium states requires good fortune and good timing – a feel for the moments when beneficial change from one pattern to another is most possible. Theory can help identify these states and times, and it can guide policymakers in applying the right amount of effort (not too little but not too much) to dislodge locked-in structures."³⁶ The most sophisticated versions of chaos theory and second-order cybernetics were immediately applicable to the turbulent developments of the post-industrial economy.

In a short text entitled "Models of Constraint and Creative Modeling" (1991), Guattari observes that "the control society is dominated by a kind of collective deterministic drive which, paradoxically, is nonetheless undermined from within by an imperious need to preserve minimal degrees of freedom, creativity and inventiveness in the domains of science, technology and the arts, without which the system would collapse into a kind of entropic inertia."³⁷ The analyst of overcoding was totally lucid about the mainstream uses of the chaotic transformations sketched out by Prigogine and Stengers. He was fully aware that the contemporary megamachine had taken on increasingly sophisticated forms, profiting from carefully managed ambiguity. The fundamental question for a revolutionary was that of steering the molecular forces away from their normative patterns. But who exactly would do it? The only guidelines could be found in a respect for heterogeneous singularities which did not add up to any modelizable system, and in a striving for autonomy from the fundamental axioms of integrated world capitalism.

The *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* are oriented from start to finish by one of Guattari's oldest ideas as a therapist and political activist, developed under the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre. It concerns the passage from a "subjected group," alienated by social forces, to a "subject group," capable of formulating its own statements.³⁸ However, the Sartrean notions of individual choice and undivided responsibility for one's own actions now appeared too restrictive and linear, from a systemic viewpoint where the range of possible statements is determined by the basic parameters of the system. The passage of transformational thresholds became the leading issue. Through the meta-modeling of chaotic processes and perhaps even more, through pragmatic experimentation with the material and semiotic components at play within such processes, groups would better understand how to move themselves toward moments of bifurcation. At best, they would know how to embody the opaque and incalculable element of chance that inflects the development of an entire system.

The utopian aspirations that permeate the later works all have their generative matrix in these ideas, which merge into the broader currents of complexity theory and what Guattari called *ecosophy*. At the horizon of his vision was an exit from determinism and domination by way of a "new alliance" between humanity and technology, each reshaping the other through a coevolutionary process:

Machines are not totalities closed in upon themselves. They maintain determined relations with a spatio-temporal exteriority, as well as with universes of signs and fields of virtuality.... A machine rises to the surface of the present like the completion of a past lineage, and it is the point of restarting, or of rupture, from which an evolving lineage will unfold in the future. The emergence of these genealogies and fields of alterity is complex. It is continually worked over by all the creative forces of the sciences, the arts and social innovations, which become entangled and constitute a mecosphere surrounding our biosphere – not as the constraining yoke of an exterior armor, but as an abstract, machinic efflorescence, exploring the future of humanity [*le devenir humain*].³⁹

The relation of biosphere and noosphere returns in this text, like a geophilosophy of humanity seeking a new compass. Guattari speaks of "ecosophic cartographies" developed by social groups that are able "to postulate a human meaning for future technological transformations." At issue is the steering function of society, which cybernetics tried to automate through the application of feedback loops. Yet no universal truth or teleological principle is offered in replacement for cybernetic governance. The ecosophic groups were to remain inherently singular: "Each 'cartography' represents a particular vision of the world, which, even when adopted by a large number of individuals, would always harbor a core of uncertainty at its heart. That is, in truth, its most precious capital; on its basis, an authentic hearing of the other could be established." The core of uncertainty at the heart of each cartography offers an instance of dissociation that resists what Baudrillard called the "transparency" of contemporary information societies. Now I will explore the ways that this resistance comes into play on existential territories.

The Fourfold

What's at stake in a color, an atmosphere, a feeling, when all these pass through me and provoke not just a phrase but a tone of voice, a rhythm, a vibration seeking resonance in someone else's ear? What constitutes speech and what do we hear in it, in

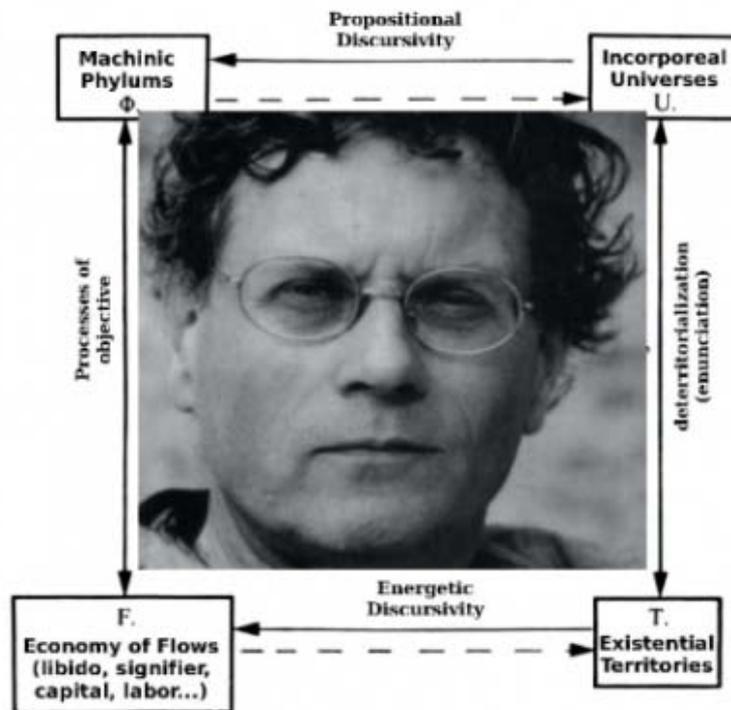
addition to its strictly denotative content ? And what about expression beyond the word, in gestures, affects, diagrammatic signs, a-signifying particles? As Guattari writes in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*:

Affect speaks to me, or at least it speaks through me. The deep red color of my curtain enters into an existential constellation with the falling night, in the twilight hour between dog and wolf, engendering an affect of uncanniness that devalues all the clarities and urgencies pressing upon me just moments before, to plunge the world into a seemingly irremediable emptiness.⁴⁰

What I “see” in this phrase – as if in a painting – is an image of the sensation it provokes within me: an assemblage of self and surroundings where pathic interiority is traversed by external components that carry it to the threshold of language. The *schiz* is palpable since the affect is shown spilling over from the atmospheric surround, destabilizing the ego and opening up a chaotic void in subjectivity, which can either resolve itself into verbal expression or sink into a black hole of anxiety. The moment of trembling between affect and expression is the departure-point of the *Cartographies*. Yet what the fourfold diagrams try to map out are not just the latencies and possibilities of speech on the edge of an all-absorbing trance, but also the material situations and logical problematics that draw subjectivity out of its chaos, into unfolding social flows and projects which are themselves reshaped through their interplay with the ceaselessly mutating operational diagrams that Guattari calls “abstract machines.” The affective pulse that leads from territorialized subjectivity through social flows to the relation with abstract machines is the heartbeat of the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*.

What the book tries to show is not how behavior is structured in adaptation to its context – because every discourse of power does that – but instead, how people are able to leave their initial territories and articulate original expressions in problematic interaction with others on a multiplicity of grounds, so as to resist, create, propose alternatives and also escape into their evolving singularities, despite the normalizing forces that are continually brought to bear on them by capitalist society. Where cybernetic engineering programs a determinant goal directly into the circuits of a machine, and systemic analysis deduces a functional model of purpose from the fit between an organism and its environment, the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* map out the existential and social parameters within which a desire comes both to problematize itself in thought and to release its otherness in expression – thereby helping to create a new context and to launch a new cycle of transformations.

To do this meant squaring the processual circle of existence, or analyzing what Guattari calls the *plane of consistency*, in order to distinguish four domains that subtend any possible awareness and can therefore be considered as varieties or models of the unconscious. Analysis, or the process of splitting – the *schiz* itself – is merely another way of describing the movement of deterritorialization that brings the four domains at least partially to consciousness. Any of the fields can be a source or a stimulant of this deterritorialization; thus the domains are called “functors,” to indicate their transformative effects on the assemblage whose overall dynamics they initiate and sustain.



The map of the functors appears two dimensionally as four separate fields organized into a square, or three dimensionally as a set of vertical planes arrayed in a circle and traversed by arrows of time. Taking the square presentation, we can begin at the upper right corner with *Universes of reference or of value* (U), then proceed down the right-hand axis to the *existential Territories* (T). At lower left we find the domain of *material and energetic Flows* (F), while the upper left corner is occupied by the *Phyla of abstract machines* (Φ). What's being sought are the interrelations between these four heterogeneous domains: the self-referential dimension of aesthetic qualities (form, color, rhythm, tone, intensity); the body with its sensible experience (grasping, becoming, anxiety, ecstasy); the social world of things, energies and signs (institutions, projects, constructions, conflicts); and the conceptual realm of ideas (logic, diagrammatism, invention, reflexivity). The cycle of relations follows an order, and the adjacencies between the domains are significant. But we could equally well begin with any of the four functors and follow the cycle in either direction, to generate a differently inflected analysis of the dynamics at work in a given assemblage.

Further indications enrich the meanings of the meta-map, by specifying the nature of the relations between the domains. The upper side of the square is conceived as the axis of the possible, in contrast to the axis of the real below. The right-hand side in its turn is conceived as the axis of the virtual, while the left is that of actuality. Thus if we consider each corner as the intersection of two axes, we have a fourfold matrix consisting of the *virtually possible* (U), the *virtually real* (T), the *actually real* (F) and the *actually possible* (Φ). Existence itself – or the *event* that is existence – can be understood as a continuous temporal permutation linking and transforming these four poles; while the condition of domination consists in any attempt to freeze the cycle into a structure of fixed relations, or to guide it along a predetermined and repetitive path. Perhaps most importantly for an understanding of the generative nature of the fourfold matrix, the right-hand side is identified with subjective deterritorialization, or *enunciation* (that is, the pole from which speech and expression in general emerges); whereas the left-hand side is equated with objective deterritorialization, or *content* (that which has been expressed, the actual reality of forms detached from their locus of

expression). To “speak” in Guattari’s sense is to shake up the existing order and balance of the world with new contents. What’s most concrete, then, is the right-left movement from the virtual to the actual, or from the process of enunciation to the effective content of statements. This is the movement of subjectivity leaving its territory of origin to engage with objective things and ideas in the world: a movement which itself is a generator of possibilities, of virtualities...

As one might guess, there are other, still more intricate relations between the domains, many of which I will only touch upon in what follows. The text of the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* is highly abstract, borrowing freely from the sciences and from mathematical formalisms. It is also highly condensed, proceeding without examples or illustrations. To this extent it tends to remain in the upper left-hand quadrant, among the rhizomes of the machinic phyla. As Anne Querrien has remarked, the book has not yet found its readers; it is awaiting “translation” (and even translation into French, she claims).⁴¹ In its own terms, it is awaiting components of passage toward the other three domains. These transitional elements are partially supplied by the texts of *Chaosmosis*, which are based on the fourfold cycle; but it is also up to readers and users to “fill out” the meta-models with their own experience. So rather than merely reiterating the logical constructions of the *Cartographies*, what I will do now is to explore these complex diagrams in a more evocative way, borrowing extensively from *Chaosmosis* but also interjecting other images, other transitional components. The movement through the cycle of assemblages will begin at bottom right, with the ground beneath your feet – the singular ground of subjective reality that is missing from the “mirror worlds” of second-order cybernetics and its radical constructivism.

Guattari speaks of existential territories. Where do you feel familiar, at home, what paths do you retrace without thinking? This is a realm before or beyond signification, it’s about an animal’s touch with the land, sheer sensibility, where language collapses into skin. The territory is your living space, your cruising range, your neighborhood or worse, your fortress, your bottomless black hole. It’s the experience of pacing, of wandering, like a dog in the back yard, like lovers on a bed or teenagers on the street, like a baby exploring the body of the mother. The territory is the object of an “existential grasping” whereby an inchoate subjectivity tries to hang onto something, to mark off a boundary, to open up a world. But this territory is only virtually real: it opens up the space for an existential choice of materials, it provides the substance of expression.

Guattari was touched by the psychotherapy of Fernand Deligny, who took care of autistic children on a farm in the hills of the Cevennes in southeastern France. The autistic children do not speak. To give the therapists something else to do, to distract their attention, Deligny had them trace out maps of the children’s paths over the landscape. These are sensitive documents: meshworks of accumulated pathways unfurling toward points of attraction, zones of lingering and wordless interest for the children, superimposed over a territory that we do not see. Deligny spoke of the children’s paths as *wanderlines*, “where the halts, returns, hesitations and loops respond to invitations at once real and imaginary, decoded, opening into constellations and not fenced into a system.” And he wrote this: “The real work of the maps, the difficult thing, is to retrace the wanderline of a kid and see that it escapes us, that we can’t begin to grasp what this kid’s intention might be – and to realize that the wanderlines are magnetized by something.”⁴² But what could it mean to be the very needle of the compass?

The territory is the *virtually real*, the material place where

subjectivity emerges. But it cannot be understood, and indeed, no word can be spoken, without the deterritorialization that precedes it and gives it form. To move forward then, into the social domain of material and energetic flows, is already to feel the transiting desire of incorporeal universes: fragments of music, poetry, images, which return rhythmically to your imagination in the form of refrains, blocs of disembodied artifice. Guattari speaks of "universes of reference or of value." What returns is the difference of aesthetic intensities, which might be laser lights, Renaissance painting, Chinese characters or raw graffiti sprayed directly into the urban beat. Their patterning is not experienced as the calculated difference of code, but as the pulsing concatenation of rhythm. The presence of an elsewhere is nothing you can possess, nor does it possess you: instead there is a kind of tearing in the territory of being, an intimate dehiscence, like curtains of sensation parting in the wind. Perhaps no artistic gesture has better expressed this than Lucio Fontana's rhythmically repeated slashes into the textured color of an egg-shaped canvas, in the series of paintings entitled *Fine di Dio*. Using a similarly punctuated image ("the Dogon egg") Deleuze and Guattari evoked the latency and fullness of the body without organs. It is a feeling of presence and absence, of oscillation, the elusive capacity of being in two places at once: the *virtually possible*, which carries you beyond the familiar territory and into realms of the unknown, toward expression.

The field of subjectivity constituted by the two right-hand elements, speechless territory and disembodied universes, is something like the "autopoietic machine" described by the biologist Francisco Varela: an autonomous cell, a living organism that constitutes its own organizational pattern and continually reproduces the material components in which that pattern is embodied.⁴³ Guattari speaks of a condition of intensive self-reference, a state of "self-retroaction" or positive feedback which produces subjectivity in itself. But if he notes a difference from Varela, the reason is clear: because the mobilizing element of the subjective pole comes from outside the organism proper, from disembodied constellations of universes; and it persists beyond the autonomous organization, allowing its passage through mortal time and its evolution over generations. The realm of the virtually possible is therefore constitutive of the pathic core of territorialized existence. It alone can give rise to the "nuclei of mutant subjectivity" described in *Chaosmosis*: "We are not in the presence of a passively representational image, but of a vector of subjectivation. We are actually confronted by a non-discursive, pathic knowledge, which presents itself as a subjectivity that one actively meets, an absorbent subjectivity given immediately in all its complexity."⁴⁴ This connection or even momentary fusion with the virtual is what makes existence on the territory overstep itself, becoming productive in the objective sense and opening up to the complexity of material-energetic flows and abstract ideas.

How does the virtual become actual? From a therapeutic perspective, what matters most is the passage from the "black hole" of a fantasmatic territory to the world of material and energetic flows: milk, sperm, blood, loose change, gasoline, libido, foodstuffs, information, alcohol, spare parts and so on ad infinitum. This is the social world of projects and gestures, of lifestyles, couplings, organizations and constructions, built on territories that are eminently concrete but always shifting, flowing, drawn out of themselves and open to new combinations. They offer objects, relationships and contexts that can be imbued with a singular expressive content, but at the same time can detach themselves from the subject, changing their circulation patterns and establishing connections with others. In the best of cases, the aesthetic pulse of territorialized experience provides the impetus for this self-release into the world of more-or-less chaotic flows.

As one reads in *Chaosmosis*:

The important thing here is not only the confrontation with a new material of expression, but the constitution of complexes of subjectivation: multiple exchanges between individual-group-machine. These complexes offer people diverse possibilities to recompose their existential embodiment, to escape their repetitive impasses and to resingularize themselves. Transferential grafts are effected, not from ready-made dimensions of subjectivity crystallized into structural complexes, but from a creation which, as such, implies some kind of aesthetic paradigm.... In such a context the most heterogeneous components may work toward a patient's positive development: an involvement with architectural space, economic relations, the co-management of the vectors of treatment by patient and care-giver, a willingness to take any occasion opening up to the outside world, a processual use of event-driven "singularities" – everything that contributes to an authentic relation with the other.⁴⁵

Clearly, this kind of transition does not only apply to the psychotic sufferer, but also to the corporate workaholic glued to the screen, to the credit-spree consumer immersed in a fantasmatic "shopping world," or indeed, to anyone trapped on the constrictively stabilized territories of contemporary capitalist culture. The opening might be artistic, but it might also be a break in the routine, an objection of conscience, a strike, an improvised revolt on the streets, or whatever pierces the curtain of normalcy and reveals the existence of other possible worlds. These punctual outbreaks are the sites from which "transferential grafts" can be taken, destabilizing neighboring assemblages and precipitating new flows. The co-management of the "treatment" then devolves to social movements and participants in dissident aesthetic or political projects, breathing the fresh air of massive demonstrations or the rarefied atmospheres of experimental workshops and collaborative devices for the reconfiguration of the intellect, the imagination and the senses. In the age of predatory environments and generalized simulacra, such contestatory projects, inseparably artistic and political, can aspire to the status of a therapeutic "cure" for a sick society, disentangling self-motivated minorities from the toxic conditions of life under today's political-economic rules.

At stake in these material and energetic flows is an extension and multiplication of the subjective territory, a deterritorialization that alone produces the *actually real* dimension of coexistence. The resulting step outside the merely virtual or fantasmatic self is what allows the displacements initiated by the constellations of aesthetic refrains to take on a problematic, mobile consistency, itself continually reworked and complexified through its relations to the machinic phyla. This last category indicates the realm of abstraction, of rhizomatic concatenation and intricate coding, but above all of paradigm shifts and the irreversible *decoding* that attends any scientific or philosophical breakthrough. Therefore the machinic domain does not refer to any concrete, really existing machine: it is not technology itself, but rather the diagram of forces that precipitates it into form, then dismantles it again at a moment of rupture. The machinic phyla mark out the realm of the *actually possible*, continually provoking real bifurcations in the existing patterns of social circulation and initiating new departure points that leave the old machines behind like so much junk in the dustbin: decoded raw materials, aestheticized antiquities or jealously guarded and frozen territories turning inward on themselves like black holes. Yet inertia never triumphs and the realm of the actually possible continually asserts itself as the negentropic principle of social existence: everything around us has

already changed, history has broken its course and renewed its march once again.

The dynamic relations between the concrete forms of social circulation and the mutating rhizomes of ideas are what reveal the capacity of Guattari's meta-model to embrace the full complexity of contemporary existence, marked by ceaseless innovations in science, philosophy, law, organizational theory, mathematics, cosmology – everything that transforms the lifeworld irreparably, calling for new images of existence and new existential territories. Seen from this angle – or approached from this direction in the movement through the cycle of assemblages – the machinic phyla appear to initiate the heterogenesis of the social order. Simply inexistent before their emergence as a transformative force, they constitute a non-dialectical otherness, appearing without confrontation or struggle to dissolve the stability of human assemblages, which they project toward distant futures. They redraw the map of existence, transforming the plane of consistency and thrusting us further into the unknown.

Like those modernists who believe in the ineluctable progress of science, Guattari sometimes ascribes an absolute status to the recombinant productivity of the machinic phyla. The virtual then appears as an inexhaustible reservoir of proliferating invention, like an all-powerful hand of God extending down from the heaven of ideas to the world. Yet the technical discussions of the *Cartographies* end in a quite different fashion, by detailing a process of "enunciative recursion" which follows the opposite path around the cycle of assemblages. It is by reaching in the other direction, from the complexities of the social predicament through the necessity of existential grounds into the aerial mobility of aesthetic images, that discoveries are made: new concepts, new formulas, new diagrams of possibility. Einstein himself, in Switzerland during the chaos of the Great War, inventing the theory of relativity that would break up the edifice of Euclidean geometry, had to pass through the image that we all still retain in our memories and our senses: the image of a man on a moving train, observing from his own curve of experience the velocities of others on other moving trains. Speech in the strong sense – symbolic inventions that shake up the existing order – always begins in the uncertainty of social situations, amid the shifting realm of material and energetic flows. Yet to cohere in original forms it always finds singular voices and bodies at grips with existential territories; and it always transits toward the productivity of code through the immaterial density of images, through sensible intensities that appear on the horizons of experience like unheard-of constellations. Guattari's most powerful insight in the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* was that individual bodies and aesthetic intensities play essential roles in the generation of collective speech, which when it finally appears is impersonal, rhizomatic, the voice of no one. To speak is to produce this singular pulsation of social experience: to create another world.

Start Again

As this book goes to press in spring 2009, the neoliberal economy is dissolving before our eyes, swept into the bad infinity of financial crisis. Over the course of only a few years, asset bubbles inflated to dizzying proportions within the parameters set by the most powerful transnational actors (Wall Street, the American Treasury, the City of London). The functions of reflexivity and positive feedback, theorized by second-order cybernetics, built an entire financial world out of mathematical fictions. Yet that fiction drove the material expansion of the new industrial powers, particularly China. The cracks in the dream appeared directly on its existential territories: the homes of the planetary petty bourgeoisie who had subscribed to impossible loans, without any

inquiry into the chances of massive non-payment. The extreme deterritorialization of those home grounds, accomplished through the use of sophisticated derivatives, finally turned the black holes of defaulting borrowers into bottomless sinks draining away the fantastic excess of global liquidity. An entire ethos – what I call the “flexible personality” – has now begun to collapse along with world markets. The outcome of all this remains uncertain. Yet even if stopgap measures are found, the persistent downward trend in the economy that began around the year 2000 is not likely to be reversed without deep changes in the order of society, of a magnitude similar to those that occurred after the previous long downturns of 1929-1947 and 1967-1983.⁴⁶

Guattari’s writing is linked with May ‘68 and the crisis of the 1970s, when anarchic elements of individual desire emerged to disrupt the regimentation and standardization of the postwar industrial boom. Yet throughout the period, he and Deleuze were acutely aware of the systemic adjustments tending toward the flexibilization of labor and the financialization of the economy. While continuing to develop the emancipatory potentials of the “molecular revolutions,” they anticipated the ways in which the mobility, life energy and imaginative capacity of liberated individuals would gradually become entangled in the pulsating networks of the control society, constituting a self-reflexive diagram of power on the micro and macro scales – a megamachine of the second order, which integrates our bodies to far-flung informational circuits. What is happening now is the crisis of this vast machine, whose ultimate target has always been the atomized individual of liberal theory, conceived and modeled as *homo economicus*. The interest of Guattari’s late work is to sketch out the ontological grounds and the modes of deterritorialization that allow trans-individual subjectivities to gain consistency within, against and outside the global networks.

How do we orchestrate our own becomings, without imposing models that aim at a surreptitious reorganization of freely evolving assemblages? Guattari offers a double response to the increasingly sophisticated entrapments of the cybernetic society. On the one hand, his fourfold meta-model invites us to examine the materials, affects, discourses and processes with which we construct our realities, so as to better understand the maps that guide us through existence and to achieve greater degrees of self-modeling, along with deeper potentials for collective speech. But at the same time, his insistence on an ontological experience of the territory, modulated by the rhythmic presence -absence of aesthetic constellations, introduced a pathic core of uncertainty into any possible model, calling for intimate sensitivity to an otherness that could never be calculated or integrated to a semiotic system. Awareness of the *schiz* becomes the basis for an art of existence: “I is another, a multiplicity of others, embodied at the intersection of partial components of enunciation, overflowing individuated identity and the organized body in all directions.”⁴⁷

It is clear that art took on an increasing importance in his conception of political action, not in the romantic sense of a transcendent or mythical figure capable of imprinting its destiny on the passive substance of a people, but instead as a kind of psychic shifter, enabling the passage from bounded existential territories to the social worlds of interconnected flows, and serving as a kind of fuzzy translation between the necessary embodiment of voice and the infinite proliferation of abstract ideas. Aesthetic experience is recognized in its intrinsic or even ineffable qualities and is welcomed as a moment of irreducible singularization; yet it is also understood to produce discursive, technological, philosophical and societal effects in its passage through the adjacent domains of existence. The result is that art is neither instrumentalized or explained away as a symptom, nor is it set apart from politics and society as a domain of pure creation/revelation. To be sure, in

Deleuze and Guattari's final co-written work, *What Is Philosophy?*, the specific locus of art is identified as the plane of composition, producing the constellation of a sensible universe.⁴⁸ But rather than isolating this artistic function, the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* reveal the dynamic relations of territories, flows, rhizomatic ideas and perceptual/affective intensities, inviting us to the composition of a processual map whose vocation is to become a sharable territory. For Guattari, cartography itself is an ethical-aesthetic act that provokes an event of existence.

Here, it seems to me, lies the political significance of his late work, which has been intuitively grasped by a multitude of activist groups using cultural forms as vectors of organization and action in an irremediably complex and deterritorializing world. The question is whether broader emancipatory movements will now arise to give these existential possibilities embodied presence and effective symbolic translation amid the current crisis, at a time when the dominant maps are being swept away without anything yet emerging to replace them. If cartography has been a key metaphor for so many movements over the course of this last decade, it is because the hyperinflation of capitalist values, the resurgence of naked imperialism and the onrushing ecological collapse have brought about a generalized disorientation and a change in the very coordinates of change, leaving behind devitalized images in the arts and "zombie categories" in the sciences, as the sociologist Ulrich Beck recently put it.⁴⁹ But what even the best sociologists do not seem to understand is that new coordinates cannot just be deduced from a purely intellectual analysis of the totality of the world-system, however "cosmopolitical" it is claimed to be. They have to be invented in a rupture from its existing state, or better, from its illusory continuity. This act of collective invention is the preeminent use of the noosphere, with its proliferation of pulsating signals.

And so at the end of a long journey we enter the echoing chamber once again, with its terrestrial and celestial globes still enclosing their undiscovered meanings. This time the lingering presence of the sovereign seems to have finally disappeared. But the link between the two spheres is all the more visible. Where is the art that will rearrange the stars above our heads? And the science that will shift the ground beneath our feet?

Notes

¹Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power: The Myth of the Machine* vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), pp. 31-32.

²Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York: The Free Press, 1966/1st ed. 1963), p. 83.

³Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* vol. 2 (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 55. English translation by Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 41. All translations of Deleuze and Guattari have been reviewed and occasionally revised on the basis of the French texts.

⁴Félix Guattari, "Sens et pouvoir," in *La Révolution moléculaire* (Paris: Recherches, 1977) pp. 307 -8. English translation by Rosemary Sheed, "Meaning and Power," in *Molecular Revolution: Society and Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 169.

5Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, op. cit., p. 533 (English trans. pp. 427-28).

6Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967/1st ed. 1966), p. 189.

7For the quotes in this and the following paragraph, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, op. cit., pp. 570-75 (English trans. pp. 456-60).

8Felix Guattari, "Le Capitalisme Mondial Intégré et la révolution moléculaire," lecture delivered in 1981 at the CINEL (Centre d'Information sur les Nouveaux Espaces de Liberté), online at http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeres/files/cmi.pdf. All quotes from this text are my translations.

9See Folker Fröbel et al., *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980/1st German ed. 1977).

10Harun Farocki, dir., *The Creator of Shopping Worlds*, 2001.

11See Heinz von Foerster, "On Constructing a Reality" (1973), in *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York: Springer, 2003).

12Herbert A. Simon, *Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996; 1st edition 1969), pp. xi and 11-12.

13Jean Baudrillard, "The Implosion of the Social," in *New Literary History* 16/3 (Spring 1985), p. 580

14Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), p. 57; English translation of this section by Todd Dufresne, as "The Postmodern Impasse," in Gary Genosko, ed., *The Guattari Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 111.

15See my discussion of Heinz von Foerster's interview with Lutz Dammbeck, at the end of "Filming the World Laboratory."

16Félix Guattari, "Presentation du séminaire" (Dec. 9, 1980), p. 1; available at http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeraes/files/801209.pdf.

17Cf. Mony Elkaïm, "Schizoanalyse et thérapie familiale : Ce que j'ai appris de Félix Guattari," available at <http://www.therapie-familiale.org/resonances/pdf/monyelkaim.pdf>.

18Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, op. cit., p. 28.

19Interview with Guattari by Jacques Pain, "Institutional Practice and Politics," in *The Guattari Reader*, op. cit., p. 122. Apparently this was originally published in Jacques Pain, ed., *Pratiques de l'institutionnel et politique* (Vigneux: Matrice, 1985).

20See Félix Guattari, "Des millions et des millions d'Alice en puissance," in *La révolution moléculaire*, op. cit. [English trans., "Millions and Millions of Potential Alices," in *Molecular Revolution*, op. cit.], and Bernard Prince and Emmanuel Videcoq, "Félix Guattari et les agencements post-média: L'expérience de Radio Tomato et du Minitel Alter," in *Multitudes* 21 (September 2005).

- 21 Felix Guattari, "Vers une ère post-média" (1990), in *Chimères* 28 (Spring -Summer 1996), pp. 5 -6; available at http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeres/files/28chi02.pdf.
- 22 For the seminars in question, see Jaques-Alain Miller, ed., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955* (New York: Norton, 1988), esp. chapters XV, XVI and XXIII.
- 23 Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory* (New York: George Braziller, 1969). Bertalanffy claimed to have elaborated his concepts before the war, but by his own admission (p. 90) it was only in the wake of cybernetics that the ideas of general systems theory gained hold in scientific discourse.
- 24 Paul Watzlawick et. al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York: Norton, 1967).
- 25 Félix Guattari, *La Révolution moléculaire*, op. cit., pp. 250-53 [English trans. pp. 88-90].
- 26 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), pp. 20-21; English translation by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico -Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp. 7-8.
- 27 Félix Guattari, "Presentation du séminaire," op. cit., p. 1.
- 28 Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1984/1st French ed. 1979). Also see the transcript of a conversation held in 1981 between Stengers, Prigogine, Elkaïm and Guattari, in *Mony Elkaïm, If You Love Me, Don't Love Me: Constructions of Reality and Change in Family Therapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
- 29 Heinz von Foerster, "On Self-Organizing Systems and Their Environments" (1960), in *Understanding Understanding*, op. cit.
- 30 See the introduction and first chapter of W. Brian Arthur, *Increasing Returns and Path Dependency in the Economy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- 31 The book that brought widespread awareness of the *kanban* system to the West was James Womack et. al., *The Machine That Changed the World: Based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology 5-Million-Dollar 5-Year Study on the Future of the Automobile* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1990).
- 32 Jay Wright Forrester, *Industrial Dynamics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Pres, 1961).
- 33 See Sanford M. Jacoby, *The Embedded Corporation: Corporate Governance and Employment Relations in Japan and the United States* (Princeton University Press, 2005), chap. 4, "The Evolution of Human Resource Management in the United States."
- 34 See Benoit Mandelbrot and Richard Hudson, *The (Mis)Behavior of Markets: A Fractal View of Risk, Ruin and Reward* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), esp. chap. 11.
- 35 Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 44.
- 36 W. Brian Arthur, *Increasing Returns and Path Dependency in the Economy*, op. cit., p. 12.

37Félix Guattari, "Modèles de contrainte et modélisation créative" (April 1991), in *Chimères* 28, 1996.

38The theme crops up throughout Guattari's first book, *Psychanalyse et transversalité: Essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003/1972), for example in "Introduction à la psychothérapie institutionnelle."

39Félix Guattari, "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales," in *Le Monde diplomatique* (Octobre 1992); English translation by Sophie Thomas, "Remaking Social Practices," in Gary Genosko, ed., *The Guattari Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

40Félix Guattari, "Ritournelles et Affects existentiels," in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, op. cit., p. 254. English translation by Juliana Schiesari and Georges Van Den Abbeele, "Ritornellos and Existential Affects," in Gary Genosko, ed., *The Guattari Reader*, op. cit., p. 160.

41Anne Querrien, "Les cartes et les ritournelles d'une panthère arc-en-ciel," in *Multitudes* 34 (Fall 2008).

42Fernand Deligny, "Les Cartes" (1976), in Sandra Alvarez de Toledo, ed., *Fernand Deligny: Oeuvres* (Paris: Editions l'Arachnéen, 2007), p. 949. See also Jean-Claude Groshens et al., *Cartes et Figures de la Terre*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980).

43Guattari refers to Varela in *Cartographies*, op. cit., p. 93, and in *Chaosmose*, op. cit., pp. 20 and 61 [English trans. pp. 7 and 39]. For an extremely rich discussion of the relations between the two, see Paul Bains, *The Primacy of Semiosis: An Ontology of Relations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chapter 5.

44Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose*, op. cit., p. 44 [English trans. p. 25]

45Ibid., p. 19 [English trans. p. 7].

46For an historical insight into the inevitability of societal change after long economic downturns, see the article by Shimson Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, "Contours of Crisis: Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil?" (December 2008), available at <http://bnarchives.yorku.ca/256>.

47Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose*, op. cit., p. 117 [English trans. p. 83].

48Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), chapter 7. English translation by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1994), chapter 7.

49Johannes Willms, *Conversations with Ulrich Beck* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 16.

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8 Responses to “Guattari’s Schizoanalytic Cartographies”

Data Models and Complexes of Subjectivation at netzmedium Says:

March 3, 2009 at 7:16 am | [Reply](#)

[...] Holmes just posted an interesting text on „Guattari’s Schizoanalytic Cartographies“. Since I haven’t read a lot of Guattari, I was surprised to learn that he had quite an elaborated [...]

Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:

March 11, 2009 at 5:47 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] 19-Guattari’s Schizoanalytic Cartographies [...]

yrumpala Says:

October 18, 2009 at 4:33 pm | [Reply](#)

In a similar vein, there could be a praxical solution helping to rebuild a political project for our complex world-system : tracing the networks that it is made of and trying to reconfigure them. For an explanation, see : <http://yannickrumpala.wordpress.com/2008/09/16/knowledge-and-praxis-of-networks-as-a-political-project/>

Four Pathways Through Chaos « Continental Drift Says:

November 2, 2009 at 9:54 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] for popular consciousness in the film “The Matrix.” The key text here would be my essay Guattari’s Schizoanalytic Cartographies: The Pathic Core at the Heart of Cybernetics, which contains so many references and flightlines that it seems futile to suggest anything [...]

E. Costa Says:

March 17, 2010 at 4:52 pm | [Reply](#)

Excellent and penetrating.

One elucidation—in order for “desire” to seek “infinity” there must first be concept of what is sought insofar as it is expressible. Spengler was very clear about the Faustian concept of “infinity”, seen in infinitesimal calculus and Gothic cathedral.

Classical man had a completely different concept. Whatever temptation one has to define to apeiron in terms of the “infinite”, it is much more concrete and more “open” than it is conceptually unlimited. As mythos it is not inconsistent with either Parmenides or—ironically—Einstein’s relativistic universe.

There lies an exit (and entrance) Guattari is approaching which will not be either Classical or Faustian—and certainly not Einsteinian. Penrose, it must be added, has some interesting observations about “informationless truth” carried forward and backward “in time.”

—> **This is a very interesting comment**, thanks a lot. I understand what you say about infinity, I did read Spengler long ago and those parts about calculus and about Baroque organ-playing in the acoustic space of cathedrals are really unforgettable. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe also made some important observations about the “infinite” of the subject since Romantic times, in their book on the Literary Absolute. So I was thinking of this infinite desire/desire for the infinite, and how it is caught in capture-devices that ultimately become vast machinic apparatuses, a

capitalistic noosphere of cables and wires, very much the work of Faust-as-engineer (the modernizing Faust who appears at the end of the second part of Goethe's play). The question is how to deal with this bad infinity, how to deal with its ramifications in your own body and mind?

Actually, the idea of this long text — but I am sorry, it is too long and this is probably unclear — is to point in the end to processes that act to singularize desire, so that instead of infinite deferrals and circulations, desire is able to gain concrete embodiment which is nonetheless open to something rather different from the infinite, namely the virtual, potentiality, which I guess is the potential to be actual, to be singular. This what I am looking for, and I think maybe what Guattari was looking for, an open finitude if you will.

However I do not know anything about Penrose so maybe you can expand or suggest something I could read someday?

¡A la información! « Continental Drift Says:

October 10, 2010 at 5:56 am | [Reply](#)

[...] [6] Brian Holmes: «Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies, or, The Pathic Core at the Heart of Cybernetics», *Escape the Overcode. Activist Art in the Control Society*. Amsterdam: Van Abbemuseum, 2009 (<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/guattaris-schizoanalytic-cartographies>). [...]

¡A la información! - machine quotidienne Says:

October 10, 2010 at 9:54 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] [6] Brian Holmes: «Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies, or, The Pathic Core at the Heart of Cybernetics», *Escape the Overcode. Activist Art in the Control Society*. Amsterdam: Van Abbemuseum, 2009 (<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/guattaris-schizoanalytic-cartographies>). [...]

<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02...>

«

Status_Quote Says:

January 3, 2011 at 12:11 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/guattaris-schizoanalytic-cartographies/#sdfootnote35anc> [...]

SWARMACHINE

By Brian Holmes

Activist Media Tomorrow*



Milano, EuroMayday 2004: "The metropolis is a beast, let's cultivate micropolitics for resistance"

What happened at the turn of the millennium, when a myriad of recording devices were hooked up to the Internet and the World Wide Web became an electronic prism refracting all the colors of a single anti-capitalist struggle? What kind of movement takes to the barricades with samba bands and videocams, tracing an embodied map through a maze of virtual hyperlinks and actual city streets? The organizational aesthetics of the networked movements was called "tactical media," a concept that mixed the quick-and-dirty appropriation of consumer electronics with the subtle counter-cultural anthropology of Michel de Certeau. The idea was to evoke a new kind of popular subjectivity, constitutionally "under the radar," impossible to identify, constantly shifting with the inventions of digital storytelling and the ruses of open-source practice. Too bad so much of this subversive process was frozen into a single seductive phrase.

In the neutralizing languages of academia and in the showrooms of the electronic arts festivals, "tactical media" has come to describe playful or satirical incursions into everyday consumer reality: the digital graffiti of the neoliberal city, the info-poetics of the postmodern multitudes. But in the early days there was something much more virulent at stake: grassroots impatience with old-left hierarchies, overflowing anger against governments and businesses, an urge to rethink the art of campaigning on the fly – all of which were at the center of the Next 5 Minutes gatherings in Amsterdam in the 1990s, before pouring out into the streets at the century's turn. Only when the urgency subsided (or was repressed by the police) did the multiple inventions of daily media-life become aesthetics -as-usual, enjoyed by specialist

consumers and supported by the state, for the benefit of the corporations. A decade after Seattle, we still don't understand the role of decentralized media intervention as a catalyst for grassroots action at the global scale. The concept of "tactical media" should be abandoned for another one, closer to what really happened on the streets and on the screens, and richer with promises for the future.

Pulsating Networks

Let's look back at the early campaigns and demonstrations where the political potential of the Internet first appeared in broad daylight. The mobilizing process for global resistance actions immediately became known as "self-organization" because of the absence of hierarchical chains of command. At the same time, the starburst patterns of network graphs became emblems of a cooperative potential that seemed to define the "movement of movements." As Naomi Klein wrote in the year 2000, shortly after Seattle and the IMF protests in Washington:

What emerged on the streets of Seattle and Washington was an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet – the Internet come to life. The Washington-based research center TeleGeography has taken it upon itself to map out the architecture of the Internet as if it were the solar system. Recently, TeleGeography pronounced that the Internet is not one giant web but a network of "hubs and spokes." The hubs are the centers of activity, the spokes the links to other centers, which are autonomous but interconnected.¹

Condensed here are three key ideas. The first concerns the morphology of the Internet as an all-channel meshwork, where each node is connected to others by several different pathways. Ultimately there are only a few degrees of separation between every element – a flattened hierarchy. The second concerns the property of emergence, associated with large populations of living organisms like ants and bees, where group behavior is coordinated in real time and manifests a purposiveness beyond the capacities of any individual. Emergence describes a moment when the possible becomes actual – a phase-change in a complex system. The third idea concerns the multiplicity of networked society: the poles that emerge from its interconnections are autonomous, they are endowed with intentions that distinguish each one from the others, creating a situation of irremediable complexity. These ideas came together in the early 1990s, in the image of the swarm promoted by technovisionary Kevin Kelly in the book *Out of Control*. It was a great insight. But now we can compare that visionary image to a few realities.

What lends form and regularity to emergent action? How to grasp the consistency of self-organized groups and networks? The word "swarming" describes a pattern of self-organization in real time, which seems to arise from nowhere yet is immediately recognizable, because it rhythmically repeats. It was understood by strategists as a pattern of attack, in the classic definition given by RAND corporation theorists Arquilla and Ronfeldt: "Swarming occurs when the dispersed units of a network of small (and perhaps some large) forces converge on a target from multiple directions. The overall aim is sustainable pulsing – swarm networks must be able to coalesce rapidly and stealthily on a target, then disperse and redisperse, immediately ready to recombine for a new pulse."² Arquilla and Ronfeldt studied these pulsating tactics in the complex patterns of mediated and on-the-ground support for the Zapatistas, which prevented the Mexican

state from isolating and destroying them. Interestingly, the “target” of the swarm was the repressive activity of the state. But the swarm tactic only became reality for the world at large with the successful blockade of the November 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle, Washington, thanks largely to the Direct Action Network (DAN).

The DAN used swarming as part of a broader strategy to draw union protesters into a radical blockade of the meeting. Arquilla and Ronfeldt suddenly had palpable proof of their theories.³ For a short but very intense two-year period, emergent collective intelligence seemed to promise an unexpected resurgence of civil society as a stunningly agile political actor in the postmodern public realm. After the events of September 11, the threat of swarming became a major concern of Western military establishments, while informal, criminal, revolutionary and terrorist networks proliferated around the world. A decade of so-called “military intelligence” has poisoned the idea of the self-organized multitude, along with so many other aspects of our daily existence. But military analysis, focused uniquely on the destruction of its objects, can hardly tell us all there is to know. If the image of the swarm remains somehow appealing it is because it points to a process of cooperation where subjects merge into an intentional unity, before separating to reevaluate the dynamics of their action. What we need to understand, then, is the “ecology” of emergent behavior, to use a word that suggests a dynamic, fractal unity: a oneness of the many and a multiplicity of the one. We need to understand what really works in the relation between the streets and the screens.

Twice-Woven Worlds

Two factors can explain the consistency of self-organized actions. The first is the capacity for temporal coordination at a distance: the exchange among dispersed individuals of information, but also of affect, about unique events unfolding in specific locations. This exchange becomes a flow of constantly changing, constantly reinterpreted clues about how to act within a shared environment. But temporal coordination itself depends on a second factor, which is the existence of a common horizon – aesthetic, ethical, philosophical and/or metaphysical – that is deliberately built up over longer periods of time, and that allows the scattered members of a network to recognize each other as existing within a shared referential and imaginary universe. Media used in this way is more than just information: it is a mnemonic image that calls up a world of sensation. At best it opens up the possibility of a response, a dialogic exchange, a new creation. Think of activist media as the continuous process of “making worlds” within an otherwise fragmented, inchoate market society.

For an example, take Indymedia, launched at the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 using an Active Software program that allows for the spontaneous uploading of various file formats onto a “newswire.” On the one hand, this is a strictly determined technical environment: Indymedia operates on precisely defined codes and server architectures that only allow for a limited range of inputs. In addition to those technical protocols, the content of the sites is shaped by clearly stated ethical principles which attempt to regulate and legitimate the kind of editing that may or may not take place. The existence of both protocols and principles is a necessary condition for the interaction of large numbers of anonymous persons at locations far distant from the surroundings of their daily existence.⁴ The self-organization of the December 2008 protests in Greece is a fantastic example of the continuing importance of Indymedia, alongside many other forms of real-time networked communication. But the creation of possible worlds cannot stop with protest and riots. It also requires a cultural strategy of liberation, where media is “tactile” first of all: where it

touches you as a process of expression, open to creative reception and transformation by each person.

This tactile approach can be understood through the aesthetics of the Reclaim the Streets carnivals or the Pink Bloc campaigns, to name well-known activist projects that create entire participatory environments, or "constructed situations." At stake in such situations is the development of an existential frame for collective experience, what Prem Chandavarkar calls an "inhabitable metaphor."⁵ Only such metaphors make dispersed intervention possible. What needs to be understood – the media strategy of the global campaigns – is this tight imbrication of technological protocols and cultural horizons. Swarming is what happens when the aesthetic or metaphorical dimensions of radical social protest are enriched around the planet via electronic communications. A transnational activist movement is a swarmachine.

Thresholds of Invention

The point is that the contemporary movements are original, and should not be reduced to models from earlier periods. To illustrate this distance from the ideas of the 1960s and 70s, we can look more closely at the strategy/tactics distinction, as developed by Michel de Certeau. He describes strategic actors as having a "proper" place from which they can analyze and manage exterior objects conceived as targets or threats. By contrast, he says, the dominated have no place to call their own and must operate by ruse and subterfuge within the grid of the opponent's strategy. This is the condition of the working classes, the colonized and the excluded, but for De Certeau it also becomes the archetypal plight of the marginalized individual: "Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the 'art' of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days. The fragmentation of the social fabric today lends a *political* dimension to the problem of the subject."⁶ Here, it seems, lies the connection with tactical media.

The Practice of Everyday Life delves into premodern registers, in search of styles of sociability that are irreducible, invisible, untotalizable. The idea is to discover a wandering, unfocused consumer *usage* as the multiple, unquantifiable other of an instrumental, goal-oriented rationality. Subjective errancy becomes a politics of difference, which can be expressed even amid the standardized environments of consumption. But a kind of nightmare inhabits this dream: the fear that even tactics will become random, indifferent and indistinct, as they extend throughout a strategic system whose corrosive force has at once liberated them from their traditional limits, and colonized everything with its rational calculations:

Because of this, the "strategic" model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success: it was based on the definition of a "proper" distinct from everything else; but now that "proper" has become the whole. It could be that, little by little, it will exhaust its capacity to transform itself and constitute only the space (just as totalitarian as the cosmos of ancient times) in which a cybernetic society will arise, the scene of the Brownian movements of invisible and innumerable tactics. One would thus have a proliferation of aleatory and indeterminable manipulations within an immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities: myriads of almost invisible movements, playing on the more and more refined texture of a

place that is even, continuous, and constitutes a proper place for all people.⁷

Everyday tactics, in De Certeau's sense, are a refuge of multiplicity amid a dominant technological rationality. Yet by his own account they are destined increasingly to lose their archaic depth and secret purpose, and to dance in agitated, aleatory spasms over the surfaces of a cybernetically programmed society. We are not far from the nihilistic abandon of the postmodern revolutionaries, influenced by disenchanting situationists like Baudrillard. But their apocalyptic aesthetics may not be the best way to describe the media production of the alterglobalization movements.

Ironically, the Brownian motion which De Certeau takes as the very signifier of aimlessness and unpredictability was in fact mathematicized as a probability function by Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics. Wiener was fascinated by the turbulence of water, the volatility of steam, the erratic, bifurcating course of a flying bee, or "the path of a drunken man walking across a large deserted playing field."⁸ He invented a formula that could describe the probable trajectories, not of individual particles, but of aggregate groups. In 1973, just a year before *The Practice of Everyday Life* was first published, Wiener's equations were employed by the economist Robert C. Merton to predict the volatility and drift of equity values on the stock market, giving rise to the infamous Black-Scholes option pricing formula, which led in its turn to the hedge funds of the 1980s and 1990s and the subprime derivatives of our own era. The Brownian motion of the stock markets became predictable, even profitable. In the age of predatory mathematics the forms of expression are never just random, but always liable to be harnessed in their very randomness, for ends that transcend their seeming aimlessness. But all that just means that the thresholds of social invention are elsewhere.

Global Microstructures

One way to approach the new formations of social activism is through the work of the sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, whose studies of currency traders led her to the concept of "complex global microstructures." By this she means geographically extended interactions that are not bound by the multi-layered organizations and expert systems that modern industrial states have developed to manage uncertainty. Thus she remarks that currency-trading networks were able to precipitate the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, reorganizing the global economy; and obviously, the unregulated actions of derivatives traders have done so yet again in the late 2000s, with a vengeance. The financial markets, Knorr Cetina observes, "are too fast, and change too quickly to be 'contained' by institutional orders." At stake are the dynamics of chaos and complexity. Surprisingly, she explains financial innovations as an outcome of "play," recalling the free-floating tactics of Michel de Certeau. Yet in the end her terms are quite different, because they describe a complex tension between order and chaos: "Global systems based on microstructural principles do not exhibit institutional complexity but rather the asymmetries, unpredictabilities and playfulness of complex (and dispersed) interaction patterns; a complexity that results from a situation where order is not the outcome of purified social processes and is always intertwined with chaos."⁹

Knorr Cetina stresses the importance of real-time coordination and the creation of shared horizons. She shows how networked ICTs allow distant participants to see and recognize each other, and to achieve cohesion by observing and commenting on the same events at the same time.¹⁰ Yet the technology employed is used opportunistically, it can be "outsourced." What matters is the system of goals or beliefs that binds the participants together. She

reinterprets the usual view of networks as a system of pipes conveying informational contents, insisting instead on their visual function: there is a shift from "pipes" to "scopes." It is the experience of the mediated image that maintains the shared horizon and insists on the urgency of acting within it, especially through what Barthes called the *punctum* : the affective register that leaps out from the general dull flatness of the image and touches you. Finally, the idea of "auto-affection" derives from Maturana and Varela's concept of the living organism as a self-sustaining autopoietic machine, defined in classic circular fashion as "a network of processes of production" which "through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them."¹¹

Standard social network theory found its dynamic principle in more-or-less random attractions between atomistic units bound only by the "weak ties" of contemporary liberal societies.¹² The notion of autopoietic social groups introduces a very different type of actor. To understand the implications, one has to realize that each autopoietic machine or "microstructure" is unique, depending on the coordinates and horizons that configure it. For example, take the open-source software networks. There is a shared horizon constituted by texts and exemplary projects: Richard Stallman's declarations and the GNU project; Linus Torvald's launch of Linux; essays like "The Hacker Ethic" ; projects such as Creative Commons; the relation of all that to older ideals of public science; etc. There are formal principles: above all the General Public License, known as "copyleft," with its legal requirements for both the indication of authorship (allowing recognition of everyone's efforts) and the continued openness of any resulting code (allowing widespread cooperation and innovation). Finally there are concrete modes of temporal coordination via the Internet: Sourceforge as a general version-tracker for continuously forking projects, and the specific wiki-forums devoted to each free software application. The whole thing has as little institutional complexity as possible, but instead is full of self-motivation and auto-affection between dispersed members of a highly coherent, swiftly moving and effective social group.

Tendencies favoring the emergence of global microstructures have been developing for decades, along the unraveling edges of national institutional environments weakened by neoliberalism. But a turning-point was reached in September of 2001. Knorr Cetina's article is subtitled "The New Terrorist Societies," and it extends the analysis of global financial microstructures to Al Qaeda. Where in the nineties, everyone saw networks, now everyone would see the threat of radical militants. The alterglobalization movement, long plagued by the difficulty of distinguishing its own mobile formation from the vanguards of financial globalization, began rapidly to fall apart when accusations conflating the protesters with the terrorists started rising on all sides. Almost four years after 9-11, on the last day of the 2005 G-8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, the explosion of terrorist bombs in London totally eclipsed any message that could have been brought by the protesters. Al Qaeda appeared on the nightly news as the exemplar of global activist movements – and the perfect excuse for eradicating all of them.

Second Chances

Sociological parallels can be drawn between the alterglobalization movements and both financiers and terrorists. But the only thing that really brings these distant galaxies together is the force of historical change, which each of them expresses differently, for vastly different ends. Knorr Cetina claims that change in the contemporary world is driven by microprocesses, put into effect by light, agile formations that can risk innovation at geographical

scales and degrees of complexity where traditional organizations are paralyzed. As she has written: "The texture of a global world becomes articulated through microstructural patterns that develop in the shadow of (but liberated from) national and local institutional patterns." But in the last decade, the debate around microstructural processes was totally dominated by the police. The reactions of the national institutions to terrorism posed a major problem for all the movements seeking progressive and egalitarian social change.

Even as swarm theory became a strong paradigm for the militarized social sciences, attempts were launched around the planet to stabilize the dangerously mobile relational patterns unleashed by the neoliberal market society and its weak ties. But the overarching trends remain completely contradictory. On the one hand, there is a continuing effort to enforce the rules of free trade to the benefit of major banks and corporations, thus sustaining the project of liberal empire. On the other hand, the most common popular responses to this market enforcement are regressions to exacerbated forms of nationalism, often with a deep-seated fundamentalist component, as in the United States itself under Bush. Neconservatism in all its forms is the "blowback" of neoliberal economics, which could become even worse under the influence of the financial crisis. In this regard there's something prophetic about Félix Guattari's discussion in the late 1980s of the interplay between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Guattari describes the situation in these terms:

As the deterritorializing revolutions, tied to the development of science, technology and the arts, sweep everything aside before them, a compulsion toward subjective reterritorialization also emerges. And this antagonism is heightened even more with the phenomenal growth of the communications and computer fields, to the extent that the latter concentrate their deterritorializing effects on such human faculties as memory, perception, understanding, imagination, etc. In this way, a certain formula of anthropological functioning, a certain ancestral model of humanity, is expropriated at its very heart. And I think that it is as a result of an incapacity to adequately confront this phenomenal mutation that collective subjectivity has abandoned itself to the absurd wave of conservatism that we are presently witnessing.¹³

How to invent alternatives to the violence of capitalist deterritorialization, but also to the fundamentalist reterritorialization that follows it? The dilemma of the contemporary world is not just Christianity versus Islam. It's at the very heart of the modern project that human potential is expropriated. Since September 11, the American corporate class and its allies have at once exacerbated the abstract, hyperindividualizing dynamics of capitalist globalization, and at the same time, reinvented the most archaic figures of power (Guantanamo, Fortress Europe, the Israeli wall around Palestine, the dichotomy of sovereign majesty and bare life). Nothing can guarantee that this basic pattern will not be maintained in subtler forms, long after the departure of the neoconservatives from the political scene. Guattari speaks of a capitalist "drive" to deterritorialization, and a "compulsion" to reterritorialize. What this means is that essential dimensions of human life are twisted into violent and oppressive caricatures. The effect is to render the promise of a borderless world repulsive and even murderous, while at the same time precipitating the crisis, decay and regression of national institutions, increasingly incapable of contributing to liberty, equality or the respect for each other's difference.

So after all the definitions of tactical media, what we still need to know is whether one can consciously participate in the improvisational, asymmetrical play of microprocesses operating at a global scale, and whether one can use their relative autonomy from institutional norms as a way to influence a more positive reterritorialization, a dynamic equilibrium, a viable coexistence with technoscientific development and the trend toward the unification of world society. It should be clear by now that to do all this means ceasing to be "one": it means taking on the trans-subjective risk of micropolitics, and extending it, whenever possible, from the intimate to the territorial, national, continental and global scales. This can only be achieved by drawing out mnemonic images from latent historical experience and from the intricate textures of everyday life, and mixing them into electronic media interventions in order to help reweave the imaginary threads that give radical-democratic movements their strong and paradoxical consistency. At stake is the refusal of arbitrary authority, of course, but also solidarity across differences and the desire to create consensus not on the basis of tradition, but rather on the basis of invention, experimentation and collective self-critique. If grassroots social movements can have an effect in the future, particularly in the face of integrated drives to surveillance, oppression and war, it will be by inventing both the principles and the transmissibility of a new ethical-political position: an intensely public resistance to the forces that claim power over intimate existence.

The ability to create the event is what gave the alterglobalization movements their surprising agility in the world space. But the character of the event is precisely what you can never be sure of. As Maurizio Lazzarato writes: "The activist is not someone who becomes the brains of the movement, who sums up its force, anticipates its choices, draws his or her legitimacy from a capacity to read and interpret the evolution of power, but instead, the activist is simply someone who introduces a discontinuity in what exists. She creates a bifurcation in the flow of words, of desires, of images, to put them at the service of the multiplicity's power of articulation; she links the singular situations together, without placing herself at a superior and totalizing point of view. She is an experimenter."¹⁴

The shape of the present makes it clear, however, that what is to be sought is not a simple exit into chaos. Exodus or what I have called "escape" has a very different meaning. The point is to find articulations of human effort that can oppose and even durably replace the death-dealing powers of the present society. The inexorability of historical forces seems to offer few chances for grassroots intervention into macropolitical realities. Still the outcomes of the processes at work before our eyes are totally uncertain; and we can prefer to believe that there will be important second chances for radical democracy movements, and new roles for improvised global media. The future belongs to those who can make the experimental difference.



"Five-finger" blockade tactics for G-8 summit at Heiligendam, Germany, 2007.

Notes

*This text emerged from a debate on the Internet mailing list Nettime, April 10-25, 2006 – and to that extent, it was really written by the many-headed hydra of the list. Thanks everyone. The whole debate is accessible at

www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0604/maillist.html#00058.

1 Naomi Klein, "The Vision Thing," in *The Nation* (July 10, 2000); www.thenation.com/doc/20000710/klein.

2 D. Ronfeldt, J. Arquilla, et alii, *The Zapatista "Social Netwar" in Mexico* (Rand Corporation, 1998), chapter 2; www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR994.

3 See Paul de Armond, "Netwar in the Emerald City," in D. Ronfeldt, J. Arquilla, eds., *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (RAND, 2001); www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch7.pdf.

4 This discussion of protocols and principles has been informed by Felix Stalder's definition of a network, both on Nettime and in his book, *Manuel Castells: The Theory of the Network Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), chapter 6.

5 See Prem Chandavarkar's insightful reply to these ideas, posted by on Nettime on 20.04.2006.

6 Michel de Certeau (1974), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

7 Ibid, pp. 40-41.

8 Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, the Father of Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005), p. 51.

9 Karin Knorr Cetina, "Complex Global Microstructures," in *Theory Culture Society* 22 (2005), pp. 213-234.

10 Cf. Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger, "Global Microstructures: The Virtual Societies of the Financial Markets," in *American Journal of Sociology* 7/4 (2002).

11 Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1973), "Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living," in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 78-79.

12 Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78/6 (May 1973), pp. 1360-80.

13 Felix Guattari, "Du post-modernisme à l'ère post-media," in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), p. 54.

14 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme*, op. cit., p. 230.

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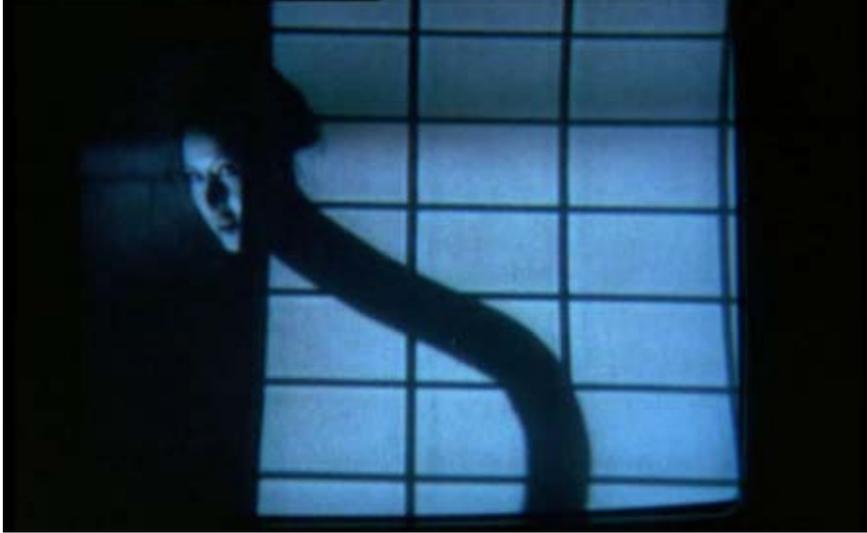


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Decipher the Future

By Brian Holmes



Chris Marker, *Sans soleil* (1982)

We are at a threshold of social change, brought on by a failed economic model which has also led to melting icecaps and blazing war. The paradox is that few people appear willing to make a change in their own lives and to contribute to a historical transformation – the kind of which art and philosophy make us dream, and which the violence of the world makes us desire so intensely. Unlike in turn-of-the-century Argentina the banks have not even temporarily closed their doors, and the middle classes of the overdeveloped countries are not out in the streets alongside the workers and the excluded. Not that it would necessarily suffice if they were.

It is hard to forget the photographs of endless ranks of police on guard before the Buenos Aires boutiques, while the insurrectionists marched in their thousands. It is equally hard to forget the testimony of one of the *enragés* of May 68 in Paris whom I happened to meet, who explained that to his shock and eternal disappointment, August came and the radicals who had paralyzed the city *left on vacation*. These emblematic images – the power to enforce a suffocating status quo and the imperious aspiration of a pleasurable void – can serve as a prelude to this inquiry, which tries to answer a triple question. What constitutes a break, a *rupture*, in societies like ours? How does a momentary departure from the norm become a durable alternative in people's lives? And if such alternatives do exist, what are their chances in the current crisis?

The question asks about the metamorphosis of subjectivities through processes of collective resistance. But it also asks how such shifts play out in the more diffuse evolution of society over time. Finally it asks about the horizons of these mutations, what they make possible for the future.

Electric Shades

A consensus on the Left locates the last historical break in the global movement of 1968, not only in the affluent North but also in the South, marking the apex of the national independence struggles. The same thinking grudgingly concedes another break in 1989, often cast as an inevitable implosion rather than the consequence of any political will. But this concept of the "historical break" is drawn from Marxist dialectics, with its teleological schema of history as a struggle between self-aware social classes. And as the most acute witnesses of the Sixties recall, the culminating episodes of Third World liberation also marked the dissolution of the communist notion of collective action that had defined the Left since 1917.

Chris Marker offered a reflection on the breaking wave of twentieth-century collectivism in his film *Sunless* (1982), particularly in the scene filmed in 1980 in Guinea-Bissau, where then-president Luis Cabral decorates a military fighter for his revolutionary deeds. Cabral's half-brother Amilcar had waged a successful guerrilla war against the Portuguese, which this ceremony commemorates. Yet the soldier's tears upon receiving his honors "did not express a former warrior's emotion, but the wounded pride of a hero who felt he had not been raised high enough above the others." One year later the soldier, Major Nino, would be the author of a military coup. The desire for singularity is the worm in the fruit of collective vision. The commentary continues: "Beneath each of these faces, a memory. And in place of what we were told had been forged into a collective memory, a thousand memories of men who parade their personal trauma through the great trauma of history."

The film's pathway through the spiral of a nascent world society, from Europe to Africa, Asia and North America, has its origins in *this* rupture, understood on the historical Left as a break-up of the very dynamic of history. Marker insists on the point, quoting the Portuguese poet Miguel Torga on the 1975 revolution against the Salazar dictatorship: "Every protagonist represents only himself; in place of a change in the social setting, all he seeks in the revolutionary act is the sublimation of his own image." But then the scene shifts to the fascinating synthesized images of Hayao Yameneko, electric shadows replaying the struggles of the 1960s and 70s (the first to be shown are the great Japanese protests against the construction of Narita airport). The facticity of filmic recording (what André Bazin called "the ontology of the photographic image") has dissolved into mobile sprays of colored dots, making the sequences appear as shades of the dead. For Yameneko, the electronic realm is a space of freedom. In a bittersweet phrase that delivers the key to his own predicament, the narrator draws the cultural consequences of the sublimated self-image: "I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend."



Chris Marker/Hayao Yameneko, *Sans soleil*

Twenty years before, pop art had monumentalized the images of press photos and comics, exposing the manufactured collectivities of postwar Fordist culture to their own affective origins. Marker still does it in *Sunless*, showing streaming Japanese crowds beneath huge, idiosyncratic billboards. Yet what he understood at the outset of the 1980s, through the youthful intercessor Hayao Yameneko, was that future histories of subjectivity would be miniaturized into personal electronic mirrors, like those reflective glasses that tint the world and make everyone an enigma to the others. Is there a politics of the endlessly mediated urban dream whose musical score the narrator of *Sunless* claimed to decipher in the Tokyo subway?

From the 1980s onward, postmodern sociologists repeat the contrary. They say that ours is the age of liquid life, liquid love, liquid fear, liquid time.¹ Amid the flux of technoscientific change, they say, our reactions to events can never gain the consistency of viable politics and shared ethical principles. And they are right about one thing. Any alternative to the postmodern norm has to deal with the chaotic flux of change – and its systemic regularities.

99, our 68

The communist notion of collectivity cast a long shadow over both its adherents and its opponents. In order to “think seriously” on the Left we cling to the idea of class categories, although they have no home in common consciousness. We expect that in a crisis the individuals produced by neoliberalism, with their private interests and fantasies, will automatically find or adopt a collective identity that alone would give them the power to act politically. It should have been understood decades ago that not individuals submitted to massive investments in consciousness management, but only social movements with their unique combinations of embodied practices, philosophical discourses and aesthetic inspirations can launch changes in political subjectivity. And it should have been understood that in our age of relentless overcoding, only experimental groups and tightly woven networks can prolong those transformations into any kind of durable alternative.

When seen from this angle, the ruptures of contemporary society are many – hardly reducible to 1968 or 1989. The year that counts is the year that changed your life, the year you merged into the crowd, discovering a language, a set of gestures, a way of reasoning and acting and also forms of pleasure, of sexuality, a manner of being among friends, of working, of collaborating. But this is also the year, perhaps repeated several times over the course of a life, when you discover systems, implacable and

deadly forces on a large scale, operating on strong instrumental, juridical and sovereign grounds, systems that crush other people and threaten what appears as an increasingly precarious existence. You want to break from that nexus of forces. Emerging from the compact heterotopian crowd of protesters, you try to communicate what you have understood – and the panoply around you is vast, of assertions, interpretations, calls to action, lifestyles too. This is the state of ambient confusion in which a political subjectivity is born.



Pink Bloc, World Bank/IMF protests in Prague, 2000

99 was our 68. So I read, in an echo of my own thoughts, on someone's weblog.² In June of that year, Reclaim the Streets launched the first "carnival against capital," followed by the Seattle protests. But the year could have been 1997, when the Zapatista *encuentro* was held in Spain, or 1998, with the first global days of action against the WTO. Once again, lines of communication and collaboration were opening between the militarized bastions of consumer society in the North and other ways of living and struggling in Latin America, Africa, India or even China: the map of the world was redrawn, somewhat as the invention of a "Third World" had transformed the bipolar map of the Cold War order in the early 1950s. Yet for this new political generation, the tracing, the very cross-hatching of the continents was different. Because the map of the world was now overlaid with a microscopic mesh; and if distant struggles mattered *here*, where you live, it was because your struggles were intimately connected to farflung communities of collaborators, *compañeros*, persuasive voices, friends.

The experiments with networks were not only an aesthetic fashion or a new entertainment. They offered access to the intimate thoughts of strangers, to newly invented rituals of exchange, to debates and dialogues on the most important issues, to crowds on the streets and above all to political agency. They reawakened a feeling of generosity, a gift economy on a massive and molecular scale. Through social movements that are discounted by the pundits and the mainstream sociologists, but which were in reality immense, a political generation regained the capacity to come to grips with an unprecedented geographical redeployment of capitalism – whose crisis-prone business cycles and savage outbursts of aggression and barbarism were about to show themselves at full force once again.

That recently lived history was infused with a constructivist spirit, responding in our time to the experiments of the Soviet

vanguards. But this “new productivity” emerged in the context of the economy’s linguistic turn and therefore has to be discussed not only in terms of tools and work routines, but above all in terms of communication and codes.³ The Internet’s emergence as a transnational public sphere in the mid-1990s involved a literal *decoding* of specialized government, military and corporate knowledge. The black boxes of Cold War technology were gradually opened and the operating codes of planetary communication were revealed to the profane.

Hackers continually extended the process of decoding to anything with a digital lock on it, launching a notion of open cultures in the process. The Linux project, based on the public-domain Unix operating system, threw a wrench into the global game-plan of corporate expansion by reverse-engineering a type of Intel chip that had been designed to work only with Microsoft code. Soon a majority of web-servers would run free software. As the open media formats became widely available, new kinds of voluntary association and self-organization were developed to make use of them. Control hierarchies, connective possibilities, structural limits and default options were all *recoded*, at the level of the machines themselves and more broadly in an increasingly transnational society. For the explosion of the Internet occurred at a time of suddenly opening borders and democratization, in the wake of 1989. Decoding and recoding became fundamental to social change, as individuals, groups and organizations struggled to make a fresh start, with new tool kits at hand and without the perception of overwhelming constraints or pre-inscribed rules.



Hackitectura, Fadaiat festival, 2005

Since the year 2000, when the dotcom boom deflated and the trending machineries of the overdeveloped nations called a halt to the widespread experimentation with digital gift economies, what we’ve witnessed – and experienced as intensive pressure on the nervous system – is an attempted return to order, or a planetary campaign of *overcoding*, as Deleuze and Guattari named it in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The notion, developed from the critique of linguistic structuralism, describes the analysis of human behavior, the constitution of abstracted and regularized models conceived to channel it along preferred paths, and the imposition of those models upon entire populations, via devices, interaction routines, collective facilities and built environments.

I have detailed both the history of this concept and its pertinence for the current situation in closing series of texts included in this volume. But to grasp intuitively what overcoding means, just consider the explosion of Web 2.0 platforms for the solicitation and surveillance of everyday comportments, combined with the

constitution of strictly traceable identities, the securitization of public space and the more sinister aspects of contemporary military programs – including “homeland” programs. The targeting society in which we live is a *containment strategy* that attempts to overwrite and codify the swirling cloud of aspirations to emancipation that always unfold in the capitalist democracies. The fundamental ambiguity of networked existence sprang into full view after 2001, as multiple processes of overcoding began to cohere into a new imperium. Its deep symbolic and affective structures – its most powerful capture devices – are what today’s political generation has to deal with, in order to give itself consistency in time and find its responses to the present.

Territory and Experiment

I realized what I was doing when a friend said to me: “That’s a territory.” He was talking about images of the streets, chronicles of the global upheavals. The experience of mobile grounds, constellated with aesthetic performances, underwritten with oppositional discourses and functioning as proliferating social assemblages, led onwards to other territories, where the question each time is the articulation of the many in view of a horizon. The reason is that a horizon is open and yet does not prevent you from seeing where you are, from feeling the ground beneath your feet. Not by chance did the cartography of potentials become the emblematic expression of a rhizomatic culture.

For me, the mapping aesthetic has culminated in a recovery of Guattari’s most singular project, the *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*.⁴ The four fields of experience that Guattari proposed do not map out anything in space but instead try to diagram the overlap of rhythms, images, ideas and embodied pacings that allow a subjectivity to cohere in one place, the territory. Yet the very rhythm that touches a ground also tends to dissolve that one place into the clasping of other milieus, other possible activities that may become places in their turn, always beneath the call of the virtual. Setting up such mobile “places” and exploring their horizons of possibility becomes the most interesting and urgent thing to do. It involves the convocation of metaphors, the analysis of actualities, the forging of devices and points of entry, the unleashing of an experimental project in society with all the energies and capacities of those who compose it. The “continental drift” in which some of us have been involved for years now requires its vehicles, its multiple eyes, tongues and ears. It requires the intensity of its locales, meetings, expressions; but also its means of dissemination and archiving, its protocols and its emblematic dreams, plus a few mailboxes and land addresses.⁵ Once again: “That’s a territory.”



Artist-activists, whether readers of Guattari or not, have taken this social and machinic creativity in the most diverse directions. Projects such as Makrolab or Hackitectura offer explicit examples, complete with their own models and prototypes, their meta-narratives. But I am also thinking of the kernels of marginal political and aesthetic activity that have multiplied around the world, from the Social Forums to the wildest anarchist cells, the neighborhood centers, the cooperatives of artists, the publishing groups and research projects, all the dissident attempts to transform the law or the psyche or the living space. These are not blueprints for a future society but *territorial experiments*, alert to what moves on the horizons around them but also to the inner dynamics of their own endeavor, its evolving metaphors, physical locales and discursive linkages to the possible and the real. What could seem like a retreat from the global movements of a few years ago has been a deepening of experimentation, in the space that opened up again when the scattered threads of a former internationalism were rewoven into a new relation of distance and proximity. Borrowing a phrase from the Uruguayan sociologist Raúl Zibechi, one could say that in many lands and at many different social levels, the development of alternative projects currently resembles a phase of latency and *crecimiento interior* (growth inside).⁶

The reference to Zibechi's work on autonomous social movements in Argentina in the mid-1990s has a meaning, despite the huge differences from any situation in the Northern hemisphere. After a period of tremendous economic expansionism that solicited the vital energies of great populations – and which led, on the autonomous left, to a corresponding inflation of the concepts of "biopower" and "biopolitics" – what is now staring the citizens of northern states in the eye is a widespread erosion of middle-class status, as has occurred in successive waves throughout Latin America since the outset of the neoliberal period in the 1970s. Because it shakes institutional stability and undermines the dominant processes of overcoding, "precarity" or "precaritization" can offer a chance for critiques to be validated, and above all, for alternatives to make sense. One European country, Greece, has even seen the rise of grassroots movements spreading like wildfire and spearheaded by determined insurrectionists. But one cannot expect social forces in all countries to be so robust; nor does the Argentinian example let us be certain that if the streets are blocked and the city stops for a month or two, the order of the world will change. If the movement of *crecimiento interioris* so vital right now, it is because of an urgent need to know the ground on which you are standing, including its cracks, its buried secrets, its backwaters and dead-ends. It's a practical question. The limit-experience of political marginality is to look around at the people in a crowd and to realize that you do not really have any idea what they might do if this situation were suddenly to get worse.

Among the Sphinxes

The problem with the overcoded societies is that they do not leave you in the face of your own questions. The frame of the answer is sketched out in advance: not the exact contents, but the abstract parameters. In art as in politics, the serious discussions always go back to the 1960s and 70s. Maybe our chronologies need reevaluating. Maybe it is the questions of the present, or even the future, that make past thoughts important. In any case I want to close with an unfinished story, borrowed from a contemporary videomaker, in order to explore the scales of existence on a North American territory to which I've gradually been returning over the past few years.

Brian Springer is known in media-activist circles for one great work: the pirate documentary *Spin* (1995). What he did was to purchase a satellite dish and an off-the-shelf decoder, allowing him to record broadcasts from the emerging corporate sector of orbital TV. In the early 1990s, major news channels had just adopted a networked mode of production, sending live feeds of interviews and eyewitness reports across the microwave spectrum for editing at distant studios, without applying any kind of signal encryption. Average consumers stuck to existing channels and ignored these uncensored frequencies, but Springer was able to capture some 500 hours of raw news feeds, full of candid gestures during the make-up sessions and commercial breaks, as well as shocking declarations that were never intended for the public ear. Televisual decorum – the overcode of spectacular politics – was shattered by its primary exponents, allowing a media activist without much funding to construct an astonishing documentary of the 1992 Clinton-Bush campaign from *between* rather than *behind* the scenes. Along with Ujica and Farocki's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), *Spin* became a touchstone for a generation of tactical media practitioners trying to open up the broadcast system, both to expose official manipulations and to develop new kinds of informed expression.⁷

Fast-forward to 2007, now infamous as the year in which the overblown American real-estate market began to collapse. Springer releases a very different, semi-autobiographical film called *The Disappointment: Or, the Force of Credulity*.⁸ The film takes its name from the earliest American ballad-opera, written in 1767 as a satire on the twin colonial crazes of treasure-hunting and spiritism. But the 2007 version opens with a close-up on a strange syncretic sculpture, a "creature" at once insect, reptile, amphibian and mammal. A halting, faintly British-accented female voice, clearly synthesized by a computer, reads a database entry on this mysterious stone artifact. Switching to the first person, the creature's electronic voice then explains: "I have been lost for a very long time..."



Brian Springer, *The Disappointment: Or, the Force of Credulity*, 2007

The hybrid creature, a narrator of its own legend, introduces us to the Springer family: the mother, Doris; the father, C.W.; and the two sons, Larry and Brian. Their story is a search for a Spanish explorer's golden treasure and personal diary, supposedly buried in the limestone caves beneath a Missouri farm. But there is another main character: Kate Austin, a friend of Emma Goldman and an unsung heroine of American anarchism, who lived on that same farm in the late nineteenth century. Her personal papers disappeared at her death, leaving an aura of uncertainty around this rare bird, a rural woman anarchist. A satellite image of the

Missouri countryside becomes a treasure map. A red dot on the site of the Austin farm connects to three others: the limestone cave, a mysterious hieroglyph carved into a rock, and the spot where the hybrid creature was found in the 1880s, before archaeologists declared it a fake and it was "lost by the institutions of history." With that, all the elements are in place for a plunge into a very personal story, and an excavation of the national unconscious.

Amid reflections from Emma Goldman on the willingness of patriots to drop bombs from flying machines and recollections of Ben Franklin's fears that the craze for treasure-hunting might ruin the country's fledgling economy, what gradually emerges is the tale of an average man, C.W. Springer, who left the United States for one of America's most thoroughly forgotten wars, the "Korean conflict." His job was to operate in advance of the front lines, directing the extensive napalm bombing that killed hundreds of thousands and reduced much of the country to violet ash. Upon return from the war he could not speak for weeks; but he gradually came back to life and, as we learn from the distant, almost disbelieving voice of the electronic narrator, he "rose into the middle class, and purchased a home in eastern Kansas." Years later he would teach the Springer family how to see ghosts, by staring at an image and then brusquely closing your eyes. In the early 1970s, they found that the strongest afterglow was produced by TV news anchors reporting on Vietnam... But then rumors about buried treasure led C.W. and his family to Church Hollow in Missouri, the site of the Austin farm. The traumatic memories of Korea faded away into a seemingly endless quest to find the buried gold.

The film reaches its enigmatic center with re-enactments of the automatic writing seances of Springer's mother, Doris. She feels that her hand has been mysteriously injured, before realizing that what she can and must do with it is trace out the diaries of a Spanish priest who was killed by Indians in the cave, with the gold of an earlier empire in his possession. This "channeled" diary (the spiritist equivalent of spurious campaign promises?) is described by Springer as "a repressed retelling of her husband's experience with wartime atrocity." It becomes the blueprint for an endless, futile and increasingly dangerous quest in the cave, which the movie appears to be trying to exorcise on several levels. But what never does come to light are Kate Austin's vanished writings: a possible signpost to another future, outside the nightmare of imperial war and domestic expropriation from which millions of credulous Americans are now struggling to wake up in disbelief.

In 1995, *Spin* pointed to the open window of technological and organizational change at a moment when the scramble for globalized markets left gaping holes in all kinds of security systems. Soon afterwards, activists in disguise like the Yes Men would step through those gaps and create their own public twists on world events, relying on a knowledge of complex networking processes that the corporate powers did not yet fully control. In 2007 when that openness had become ancient history, the same filmmaker who looked upward at the stars began peering down into the networks of delusion beneath our feet, even as an occupying army tried to secure dinosaur wealth beneath the desert sands of Iraq and the subprime mortgage debacle swept away the average man's home-owning dreams.

To define the "apparatus of capture," *A Thousand Plateaus* explores two opposed ideas: the legalistic concept of *mutuum*, the medium of exchange, involving freely drawn and freely severed contracts; and the hierarchical concept of *nexum*, the bond, the knot, the social tie of obedience and submission. The latter is the symbolic domain of the "fearsome magician-emperor" found under multiple guises in Georges Dumézil's studies of Indo-European

mythology. We have seen the sobering return of that figure in the United States over the last decade; yet it now appears mistaken to suppose that a borderless flux of mutual exchange represents the definitive overcoming of the old territorializing claims of sovereign power. For the two concepts mark the opposite poles of a single economic relation, as Dumézil makes clear: "*Mutuuum* is, literally, (*aes*) *mutuum*, 'the money borrowed,' and also 'borrowing.' *Nexum* is the state of the *nexus*, of the insolvent debtor who was, very literally, bound and subjugated by the creditor."⁹

Springer's film explores the same issues in material and embodied forms. The quest for release from wage labor (through buried treasure, real estate, the stock market...) opens up a darker morass of ancient debts, where sensations of promise and entrapment become inseparable. There are vital clues here for a future cultural activism that will have to deal not only with advanced technological communications but also with more obscure human motivations, and with the archaeology of an economic order that threatens to collapse into the myriad holes, blind tunnels and architectures of bluff that comprise its very foundations. *The Disappointment* taps a formidable underground vein – the kind that pulses with buried life, and that you can only mine deeply, at your own risk.

In his *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, Guattari associates the territory not only with openness to deterritorialization but also with the threat of a "black hole": the loss of the outside, the inability to think, to feel, to see anything except a near environment which has become so close that it merges with your own skin. Groups working experimentally at a territorial level, at grips with the aesthetics of everyday life, try to open a horizon after recognizing and exploring the common pitfalls where the languages of power become rooted in the generations. In the industrial democracies, the link between Fordist mass production, consumer desire and faraway war – underwritten by colonial racism – remains the bedrock of symbolic politics, overcoded in our time by the sophisticated and yet violent financial nexus. Under pressure, every country becomes an enigma, crying out to be deciphered. To open up a mobile territory at this level of societal paralysis is to create a break in the psychic decor, to offer the uncertain crowd an exit at the moment of greatest tension.

For Springer amid the industrial ruins of the Midwest, the feminist anarchism of Emma Goldman's unknown rural friend is a diagram of possibilities yet unrealized, a free rhizome. Following its imagined and desired pathways, the narrator, a local sphinx with an electronically frozen voice, could emerge into the daylight and speak with the others.



Notes

1 See Zygmunt Bauman's work on these themes, beginning with *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

2 Karl Palmås, "99, our 68," http://www.isk-gbg.org/99our68/?page_id=37.

3 See my conclusion to the conference "The New Productivisms," March 27-28, 2009, at the MacBA in Barcelona (MacBa), audio archive here: <http://tinyurl.com/new-productivisms> (printed volume forthcoming).

4 Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1989).

5 See <http://www.16beavergroup.org/drift> and <http://www.heavyduty.com/books/farms.pdf>.

6 Raúl Zibechi, *Genealogía de la revuelta* (La Plata: Letra Libre, 2003).

7 Spin is distributed by the Illegal Art website, at <http://www.illegal-art.org/video/index.html>.

8 *The Disappointment* is distributed by the Video Data Bank in Chicago, <http://www.vdb.org>.

9 Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 99.

This entry was posted on September 6, 2009 at 2:21 pm and is filed under [1](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

5 Responses to "Decipher the Future"

Book « Continental Drift Says:

September 7, 2009 at 7:03 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Decipher the Future [...]

karakolum Says:

September 14, 2009 at 3:58 am | [Reply](#)

then why bial?

–Well, longer response in comments to the previous post, but short version: I wanted to use some of the neoliberal machinery to distribute the book of which this text is the conclusion. The Vanabbemuseum and What, How & for Whom (curators of 11th Istanbul Biennial) published a book they believe in, and I participated in one of the most searching art shows to be done in this decade, DESPITE THE REPULSIVE FACT that the show is produced under totally neoliberal conditions. We all know that and, speaking for myself, I am disgusted by the hypocrisy. Glad to say that the money for the book did not come from Koc holding, but you know, the Dutch state where the money for the book did come from has plenty of aspects very similar to Koc holding... I think sometimes you have to try an

antagonistic position from within the system. Which doesn't mean the people throwing stones and rotten eggs from outside are wrong to do so.

ana australiana Says:

September 28, 2009 at 8:33 am | [Reply](#)

Thankyou for this!

To do an odd thing and pick out one sentence from many – could you elaborate further on what you mean by “that recently lived history” of activism (1999, networks, experimentation) as being “infused with a constructivist spirit, responding in our time to the experiments of the Soviet vanguards”?

I'm not sure that these orders of experimentation are related quite so simply...?

marcelo Says:

November 5, 2009 at 2:04 pm | [Reply](#)

hi ana – and everyone here -

in fact, in my opinion, they are related: but probably not in the lineal, consecutive, progressive sense that classical historiography is used to establish – i mean, one can throw the hypothesis that the formal inventions of the historical avant-gardes have survived through several paths, underground and not underground, despite the fact that art history has always attempted to silence the formal/political achievements of the avant-gardes, reconsidering them under a totally different focus that was never at all political – or under a focus where the “politics of the forms” were mostly understood under the modernist paradigm -

most of us who have been into punk culture and produced our own fanzines when sixteen, only later on knew how much that was aesthetically indebted to dadá – you dont need to read greil marcus 😊 or – i remember all the 80s industrial culture and the international musical exchange network was pretty much intertwined with the “matrix” of 50s-60s mail art... which in its turn was so much rooted in dadaism and other avant-garde practices -

probably the path to follow backwards towards russian constructivism is a bit more complicated – but – i guess that the more or less contemporary emphasis on networking *as a productive* collective experience – is pretty much connected to the ideas of leaving the art institution to step into *production* as an art-social practice...- and the emphasis that certain trends of later constructivism were to put on the relationship between the usefulness/communicative aspects of the “artwork”, might be seen as one of the origins of recent activist/communicative/network experimentations...
-

Brian Holmes Says:

November 29, 2009 at 11:16 pm | [Reply](#)

The above are great comments, and I totally agree with Ana when she says, “I'm not sure that these orders of experimentation are related quite so simply...?” It is not so simple at all, but I do think there is some kind of inverted parallel between the productivist artists and the most highly self-conscious militant experimentation with the Internet. I developed this idea in my conclusion to the New Productivisms conference organized by Marcelo Exposito and Jorge Ribalta (see note 3 above) and I have finally written that up right here, check it out:

<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/into-information/>

INTO INFORMATION!

By Brian Holmes

BACK TO THE BOOK

Reversing History for the Present



Osip Brik with logo of the journal *Lef*, photomontage by Aleksandr Rodchenko (1924)

Makrolab on Campalto Island (2003)

Here is the synthesis I attempted to put together at the end of a fascinating conference entitled [The New Productivisms](#), organized by Marcelo Expósito and Jorge Ribalta at the MacBa in Barcelona, March 27-28, 2009. Recordings of all the lectures can be downloaded from the site; the book is forthcoming in Spanish.

As Dimitry Vilensky explained, the experimental process of the Chto Delat group only advances by “permanently risking a shared madness.” I offer the following in exactly that spirit.

Like the Soviet productivists, we are faced today with immense changes in both the technological system and in the social relations whereby it functions. Since 1989 the capitalist labor force has doubled, due to the introduction of the former communist countries into the international trading system and to massive shifts of rural peasantries to market economics or indeed, to a worker’s life in the city. Whatever name you care to give it – globalization, informationalism, flexible accumulation – this new

deployment of capitalism represents a metamorphosis no less sweeping than the advent of assembly-line manufacturing in the early decades of the twentieth century. As I summed it up a few years ago: "Geographical dispersal and global coordination of manufacturing, just-in-time production and containerized delivery systems, a generalized acceleration of consumption cycles and a flight of over-accumulated capital into the lightning-fast financial sphere, whose movements are at once reflected and stimulated by the equally swift evolution of global media: these are among the major features of the flexible accumulation regime as it has developed since the late 1970s." The new productive regime opens up vast possibilities of intervention to any artist who tries to engage with it – and many have done so. Any look back at the productivists from our position today remains incomplete without drawing explicit parallels to the activities of artists in the tumultuous period of transformation that has unfolded in living memory, and is still unfolding.

These changes in the mode of production could not have occurred without the massification of access to the Internet and to the many technological systems that have converged over the last two decades, via the global hardware networks of cables, servers and routers and the TCP/IP transmission standard that functions as the general equivalent of information. The existence of a new distribution system fundamentally altered the status, potential and responsibility of the artist, or at least, of those artists who were most aware of and most sensitive to the shifts in social relations. The ardently desired opportunity to hook a whole range of publishing platforms and lightweight audiovisual recording devices into the worldwide distribution system gave rise to vital needs for the disalienated appropriation and redeployment of what had originally been a technology of command and control. The networked communications devices emerging from the military and corporate labs had to be grasped in their materiality and in their logical and semiotic structures, in order to reshape their potentials and reorient their uses. This meant leaving the studio, the gallery, the museum and the academy, to take up the tools of the engineer and to explore the infrastructures of globalized industry. After a careful, yet also audacious look back at the Soviet productivists of the 1920s, the agenda of the leftist vanguards in the 1990s becomes clear. It can be summed up in two words: "Into information!"

Specialists in the field will undoubtedly gasp at my adaptation of Osip Brik's famous slogan, "Into production!" The reasons why are evident: first constructivism, then productivism were ostensibly founded on the rejection of language, syntax, representation, reflection and interpretation, as well as the compositional techniques that they imply in art and all the visual adaptations of literary simile, metaphor, allegory, allusion, etc. In other words, from a strict historical viewpoint the linguistic vagaries of information could only be the opposite of the material functionality sought by the productivists. Yet this did not stop Marko Peljhan from cloaking his reinvention of the artist's laboratory in an explicitly constructivist and productivist guise, which is the sculptural form and the operational agenda of the [Makrolab](#), with its extensive capacities for grappling directly with the military and corporate technologies of information. The proposal of a "new productivism" in contemporary art clearly owes much to this example, as it also does to the equally explicit gesture of the [Activist Club](#) constructed by Chto Delat. These are strong proposals, where the historical reference is not merely decorative, but generative. As art critics, can we not glimpse the unfulfilled potentials of the past in the most audacious inventions of the present?

However, I do not want to appeal only to the audacity of artists in this attempt to describe a new productivism. The contributions of

the art historians Devin Fore and Christina Kiaer challenge the initial self-interpretation of the constructivist artists during their "laboratory phase," revealing some of the paradoxes that the Soviet artists faced when they went *into production*. The results of these fertile inquiries show that the difficulties faced by what might be called the "informationalist" artists of the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the attempts to resolve those difficulties, are not without parallels to the conditions that the productivists faced during their entry into the realm of mass manufacturing and the machine process. Let us look more closely at these parallels.



Poster, Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

On the one hand, the issue of appropriation is paramount in both cases: for resistant leftist artists confronted with an emerging industrial system, it is a matter of finding languages to make the reified products of distant laborers appear as the fully sensible, comprehensible and sharable tools of a collectively productive activity. This is the role of the "operative word" whose theory Devin Fore uncovers in the work of Alexei Gastev, which anticipates many of the concerns of cybernetics.¹ It is also the role of filmic montage for Vertov, in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) or in the sound film *Enthusiasm: A Symphony of the Donbass* (1931), portraying Ukrainian coal miners. The corollary of Vertovian montage in the informational economy is clearly hypertext in the revolutionary and disalienated perspective opened up by Ted Nelson in his early book *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* (1974). Nelson launched one of the major strategies of resistance to the control society, by seizing and appropriating the information-processing device at its very core: the code. And let no one object that the Soviet artists who reached the factory floor did not have to be resistant: for it would be naive to think that the imposition of Taylorist-type management techniques in the revolutionary factories was any less alienating in the late 1920s and mid -30s than the continual flux of cybernetic control messages has been from the 1990s to today. Only when Soviet productivism is conceived in its resistant, vanguard role does it begin to take on meaning for our time.

On the other hand, it is a matter in both cases of entering into the subtle and intimate struggle over the production of subjectivity at the affective and partially unconscious levels of sexuated existence and re-production, as mediated by the clothing, fashion, domestic tools and commodities that Popova, Stepanova and Rodchenko attempted to design and put into production, as we see in Christina Kiaer's pathbreaking texts.² Grasping the relation between industrial production and affective experience in the Soviet era makes it particularly relevant to our own time, where the "mediatization of consciousness" through electronic devices

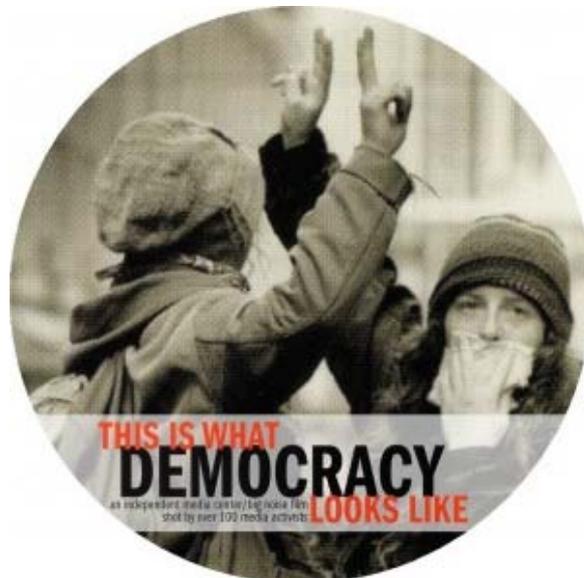
and the symbolic contents they help circulate has become the mainstay of the economy. The feminist front of informational art, opened up discursively by Donna Haraway in her famous portrait of the cyborg, came to exercise a major influence on all levels from the mid-1990s onward, through carefully constructed circuits such as the ironically named [Old Boys Network](#). The histories of net.art and net.criticism in the 1990s, as well as the continuing development of an immanent critique of the Internet by circuits such as Nettime, provide many examples of the parallels between the productivists and the informationists – that is, for anyone who can throw off their attachment to the authority of the past and overcome the general unwillingness to take a stand in the present disaster, the way the Soviet artists did.

That said, it would be a mistake to over-stress the similarities. A gaping chasm obviously separates leftist artists in nascent proto-socialist societies from new-leftist artists in dying hyper-capitalist societies. In addition to that caveat, I see two almost perfect inversions between the figures of the productivist and the informational artist. Indeed, this inverse symmetry is so strong that it reinforces the possibility of comparison even while destroying any misleading point-by-point analogy. The reason for this is that the precisely opposite positions of the two types of artists result from the dialectical negations that each new mode of production (or if you prefer, of industrial praxis) imposes on the previous one. Thus the artistic responses to the two modes of production – the factory and the network, the machine process and informationalism, or if you prefer, Fordism and post-Fordism – appear in their symmetrical differences, displaying the formally inverted structure of a chiasmus. Let us consider the double dialectical reversal that produces this chiasmus.

First of all, in the text delivered at the MacBa conference – under the title “*Arbeit sans phrase*” – Devin Fore reflects on the condition of industrialized man subjected to the drudgery of the Fordist assembly line, quoting Hannah Arendt to evoke the danger of a mute subservience that left humanity “on the verge of developing into an animal species.” He sees Vertov’s filmmaking as a response to this underlying menace. But the post-Fordist cybernetic communication regime, whose rise has precisely to do with the attempt in the capitalist countries to overcome the alienation of the machine process to which the downfall of communism is often attributed, confronts us with exactly the opposite threat. Humanity is now in danger of becoming *all talk*, with no body, no time, no territory. The recent realization, as a really existing social-technical device, of Paul Klee’s quizzical pictorial utopia [The Twittering Machine](#) (1922) clearly confirms the point. What is missing today is not language but the mutism of resistance, the “I would prefer not to” of Bartelby the Scrivener – or what I have elsewhere called “the pathic core at the heart of cybernetics.” Doug Ashford’s text, which recounts his rediscovered concern with the pictorial sovereignty of abstraction following upon a dismaying experience with the pseudo-politics of contemporary linguistic chatter, fits directly into this new predicament. The ultimate meaninglessness of the informational flux is the distractive background against which an art of percepts and affects – or what Guattari would have called an a-signifying semiotics – takes on a new resonance, far from the machine process that confronted the productivists.

The second inversion between the situation of productivist and informationalist artists becomes apparent when one reconsiders Benjamin Buchloh’s assessment of factography. He claims that the visual factographers sought systems of representation-production-distribution that could recognize collective participation by establishing the conditions of “simultaneous collective reception” in a vast territory that was spatially fragmented by the industrial division of labor.³ Yet the historical realization of this quest, in

Buchloh's analysis, was the oppressive propaganda machine of the fascist and totalitarian dictatorships, whose lingering effects can still be felt in the contemporary mass media (Fox News, etc). Today, however, the informationalist artist does not only face the visual and discursive hangovers of the former mass-mediated societies, but above all, a situation where the disjointed assembly lines of globally coordinated just-in-time production are reflected at light-speed (literally: via fiber-optic cable) in the disjointed, desynchronized, hyper-individualized reception of networked media, whose extreme tendency is that of automatically generating pseudo-messages tailored to the profiles of single receivers. The difficulty for leftist thinking is inescapable here, because as Hito Steyerl insists in her critical work as well as her films, we cannot possibly desire any return to simultaneous collective reception. The reason is that differentially articulated reception represents a victory – or at least, a partial victory – over the oppressive nature of fascist broadcasting and contemporary capitalist mass media. What we need therefore, in my view, is to produce is the possibility of a *simultaneous collective response* to the fragmented conditions of differentiated reception. This, and perhaps this alone, can lend political agency to informationalist art production.



Big Noise Films and Indymedia (2000)
Shot by over 100 media activists

So far, the most clearly self-aware attempt to insert an alternative operational process into the new system of communication and control is the one carried out by the meeting of open-source software engineers and agit-prop tactical media artists collaborating within the broad spectrum of social and political forces that was known as the counter-globalization movement, and that is now being re-articulated within the context of the twin struggles against precarity and climate change. In these movements, people from vastly different horizons, animated by their own singular concerns, succeed in converging at particular times, in particular places, around particular sets of issues that have been carefully framed so as to leave their evolution open to the new existential situations that continually arise amid the rapidly circulating flow of affects and images and signs. What is striking in these contexts is the relation of the informational flux and knowledgeable bodies in the street, as well as the social relation, most apparent in the Latin American region, between post-Fordist language workers and indigenous peoples – a relation which has gained extraordinary salience in the World Social Forums as well as in the electoral victories of Chávez and Morales. Similar encounters also occur without the ostensible presence of engineers and technicians. One example, plucked from among hundreds, would be the remarkably virulent work of [Mujeres](#)

[Creando](#) with all kinds of marginal social actors in Bolivia. In a different vein, one could recall the [urban tactics](#) of Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou with local inhabitants and vernacular architecture in Paris, or [Precarias a la Deriva](#) in Spain, and so forth.

These aestheticized relations between language workers and marginal social subjects appear at first glance paradoxical, as they disturb the purity of an analysis based on successive modes of production, fetishizing first the assembly line, then the computer. What is at stake, however, is precisely a *resistant critique* of the dominant relations of production, a critique which includes both the appropriation of useful tools and the rupture with mystifying ideologies. Just as the productivists needed to go to the factory floor to complete the critique of the bourgeois idealism from which their artistic practice was gradually emerging, so the informationalist artist must sink all the way *into* the biological substrate of every information system – and therefore, *into* the human nervous system in its cellular and sexuated chaos, far from its schematic cybernetic caricature. What is called biopolitics is exactly this movement of submersion/subversion: learning to inhabit and fully embody the circulation of mathematicized information that currently alienates our linguistic capacities and estranges us from political agency. Such a bodily engagement risks at once the speed of information through fiber-optic cables and the resistance of flesh, bone and memory, discovering a living solidarity where capitalism can only see – and manage – the abstract circulation of meaningless deadly bits. At the outset of the 1990s and perhaps even more so today, the great artistic challenge remains the plunge *into information*, that is to say, into the unfolding of the present as the lived experience of social relations that can be changed.

The tracing of a chiasmatic parallel between productivist and informationalist artists is exactly the kind of contribution that art history *could* make to aesthetic and political practice in the present, *if* it dared; and that contemporary art criticism *could* make, *if* it had the conceptual tools and the historical sophistication to do so. These are the pressing reasons for collectivism in the interpretation of art, and not only in its creation. To sketch out such a parallel as I have done above is not to fully realize its full potential, not by any means. For that we would need more time, deeper work, and above all, more acute and emancipated desire. But in these few short remarks formulated at the close of an extraordinarily interesting seminar, and at a time when the ultra-differentiated and mathematicized flux of financial capital appears to be reducing any form of resistance and political agency to a condition of fragmented and hyper-individualized insignificance, what I do hope to have done is something rather simple and yet essential. I hope to have reiterated, with the gains and insights of the experience itself, the demand that was implicit in the very proposal of a seminar on “the new productivisms”: the demand to face the conditions of the present, and to reach the core level at which they might ultimately be transformed.

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

Notes

¹Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” *October* 118, special issue on Soviet factography, Winter 2006.

²Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

3 Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30, 1984, available [here](#).

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6 Responses to "INTO INFORMATION!"

Rebecca Says:

November 23, 2009 at 9:28 pm | [Reply](#)

Brian — I live in Chicago and attended UC Santa Barbara, your posts hit me close to home. I am setting up a conference on anti-nuke youth organizing in Chicago in the spring. Hit me up sometime, we seem to be on the same wavelength. — Rebecca

CHRIS FREMANTLE» Blog Archive» Bike Bloc Says:

December 1, 2009 at 2:08 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Holmes writes very well, and his piece Into Information on Productivist strategies suggesting informationist strategies is very provoking, but for sheer [...]

Solidarity and Deterritorialization « Continental Drift Says:

December 7, 2009 at 3:02 am | [Reply](#)

[...] has to do with the dialectical reversal of industrialism into informationalism (cf. my short text Into Information!). Orit writes the following, concerning the operative procedures that evolved in the wake of Kepes [...]

Alexander Rodchenko links « Stmk's Blog Says:

December 16, 2009 at 10:49 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/into-information/#more-1565> [...]

¡A la información! « Continental Drift Says:

October 10, 2010 at 5:56 am | [Reply](#)

[...] English version of this text is here [...]

<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11...> <<

Status_Quote Says:

January 4, 2011 at 7:13 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/into-information/> [...]

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)