Autonomous Anonymous

On Becoming Whatever

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Dla Fiony i Agaty, z wyrazami miłości

All that is solid melts into air ...

—Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Is not air the whole of our habitation
as mortals?

—Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*

Two names, Autonomous Anonymous. And between the two names? Nothing—no ampersand, no slash, no hyphen, no chevron. No necessary way of connection, no implied method of disconnection. So we could have written, Anonymous Autonomous. But then we also could have written, between the two names a virtual something—void, zero, white space. Or as typographers say, "Air." Air is the simple possibility of our two names forming a relation—any relation whatsoever. Air is that which opens itself out to the providence of the names themselves. To name something or someone is to ex-hale, to determine a passage of air. To name two beings at once is to multiply this passage, by "at least two."[1] Hence, the determination of the anonymous, or what we might

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1   Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans.
     M.B. Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p. 129.

call the here and now of our nameless name, is at the same time counter-actualised by the very act of naming itself, that is, by the simultaneous presentation of our naming name, the autonomous. It is obvious that this "at the same time" creates a paradox, a kind of tension in the air. Nevertheless, we do not regard either name as being a negation of the other, but rather, that each name here expresses a different form of agency whilst also providing the very conditions of that agency for the other: "This passage from oneself to oneself, from oneself to the other of oneself, the same, is made across an expanse that seems to transgress all boundaries: whether horizontal or vertical."[2]

We find an analogous passage (space of becoming) mirrored in Giorgio Agamben's beautiful essay *Genius*, where he tells us—and here we risk an autobiographical reading—that his genius consists of "that yellow paper, that special pen [...] that muted light which cuts in from the left [...] that light blue linen shirt [...] those slim cigarettes in the black wrapping paper."[3] For Agamben, genius is those things and conditions without which he cannot write. Or inversely and perhaps better, it is those things and conditions with which he cannot *but* write. In this second sense Agamben calls his genius a "spur." Or we might say, a motive force, a desire. Hence, genius is both that which is most "intimate and personal"—in his example the *autonomous* gathering together of the shirt, the pen, the cigarettes, and so forth—and that which "surpasses and exceeds" this act, its accompanying *anonymous* desire. Or again and put slightly differently, Agamben is "not only the 'I' and individual consciousness" of his own actions, but also and in some way the "impersonal and pre-individual" being who accompanies them. And this two-fold understanding "prevents [Agamben] from enclosing [himself] in a substantial identity."[4]

A substantial identity? The first and longer section of Agamben's essay is in many ways a critique of this ubiquitous notion. Yet the section also explores the conceptual possibility of a non-substantial identity. And it does all this via the schema, genius. The essay is set in a world inhabited by the Roman gods. It is full of Latin phrases and infused with an excellent and dry Mediterranean air, the kind Nietzsche believed to be the natural condition of his genius.[5] But Agamben knows that genius has many other locales and conditions: there is also a Kantian inflection in the essay, and it is one we discover in other Agamben texts. In *The Coming Community*, for example, the possibility of a non-substantial form or way of being is conceived as "being Whatever" or "Whatever being," thus echoing that problematic and paradoxical any-moment-whatever of Kant's aesthetics. That moment—when it comes—in

2   Irigaray, (1999), p. 24.

3   Giorgio Agamben, 'Genius,' trans. L. Simmons, in *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts, 7* (2006), p. 97.

4   ibid.

5   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 54–55.

which the in-difference and anonymity of the beautiful-in-itself generates within each of us an autonomous desire to de-differentiate and express ourselves beautifully. Yet *The Coming Community* is more than just Kantian. Agamben's text explores the notion of the Whatever in a complex number of different ways: via the Medieval scholasticism of Saint Thomas and Dun Scotus; via Jewish thought; via Arab thought; via Plotinus, Spinoza, Kafka, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein—via the peaceful demonstrators of Tiananmen Square, who gathered together despite "the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands."[6] There is an amazing crowd here, which is already a coming community in itself.

Perhaps we can now imagine that at exactly the same time as Agamben is gathering together his little writing machine—that special pen, that yellow paper, that shirt, those cigarettes—he is also being gathered together by this other assemblage, this crowd, these other genii of his text. They are the co-presence for whom his little writing machine is being set up. They are the other side of this machine. To speak like Leibniz, Agamben is thus "big with the future."[7] He lacks nothing. He is, as gathered together within this autonomous event, the very possibility of the Whatever. The very possibility of this thought being expressed anywhere anytime—that is, not everywhere

and at the same time nowhere, but rather anywhere and at the same time somewhere. And of course Agamben did express all this. He wrote, he acted, and hence *The Coming Community* became what we might consider both an adjustment to and the inscription of this Whatever-event. His text, in other words, became a kind of register, a register of the pure awareness of being Whatever, yet also here—here in the filigreed trace left by the pen on the surface of the yellow paper. And as such this register could now travel as such, that is, as a text does.

How does a text travel? Heidegger remarks somewhere that language is the house of Being. He forgot to add: a house that is continually rearranging itself, dismantling itself and rebuilding itself in relation to its own outside, or in relation to the air which it always shelters and breathes. Heidegger was obsessed with remembering an authentic mode of dwelling, with discovering Being's primal abode. But in this regard he fatefully awarded preeminence to the German and Greek languages, forgetting his own concepts of relation and difference. Or maybe it was that he privileged just one set of linguistic differences, one set of relations, and this, as Deleuze and Guattari commented, at the worst possible moment in German history.[8] So when it comes time to speak of the primal abode, we would prefer not to. For us, language is the *tent* of being. Or even *translation* is the tent of being, of being as becoming... "folding, unfolding,

6   Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt
    (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 85.

7   Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Monadology,' in *Philosophical Writings*,
    trans. M. Morris and G.H.R. Parkinson (London: Everyman, 1973), p. 182.

8   Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans.
    G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 108.

refolding."[9] Perhaps then, the first human "text" was the patterned surface of a folding patchwork of quilted skins, and the first human "voice" a murmur of newly supple cords, a whispered *accord* traveling the vast and open silence of the savannas. Were we not always already in transit? We are not suggesting any alphabet here—the Sumerian city-states invented the first alphabet—but rather, that patterning, ideograms, and pictographs are inherently close to the ideas of journeying and cartography. Cartographic thought is thought expressed via a multiplicity of codes, signals, gestures, and manners. Not purely linguistic ones, and not only of linear, signifier to signifier translatability. Perhaps before when we wrote "translation" what we really meant was non-linear and multidimensional trans-coding.[10] If human expression of all kinds—including language, hand/tool coordination, and so forth—is an *externalised* form of thought, then we have to imagine that it was created, before entering and remaining close to any cave, before departing from any cave, before constructing any permanent house or temple, on shared outward journeys into open space. All the caves, houses, and temples must simply have been different kinds of resting place along the way, other examples of shelter, and other relay points (dis-shelter). And there were thousands: over-hang, thicket, waterhole,

9   Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 137.

10   c.f. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. P. Bains & J. Pefanis (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), pp. 48–51.

tall grass, ambulant fire, spring, bramble-fold, clearing... The sheltering sky itself. Yet all only made possible by air. By the very element which in fact never does take-place. The very element which, like language, because it relates all to all, eludes each and every fixed horizon.

Today we conduct our trans-coding in the city (the world-city, the global city) as displaced natives, refugees, tourists, exiles and émigrés. As the disenfranchised citizens of a World Republic of Anywhere. But also and simultaneously, as the singularities and the potential group-subjects of this city, here tonight. And it was within this enfolded geo-political topology that Agamben's beautiful register of the Whatever—the little text-tent he named *The Coming Community*—arrived. Yet what is really interesting about this event is that it occurred at roughly the same time as fresh, newly spoken versions of the Whatever arrived. And they arrived via the almost anonymous voice of the young.

Now, there is a complex range of inflections here: "Whatever"... "Whatever"... "Whatever"... Yet all variously express an acceptance: begrudging acceptance, sceptical acceptance, stoned acceptance, angry acceptance, cynical acceptance. But the inflection closest to Agamben's written version—as conceived in the various short sections of *The Coming Community*—is perhaps the most difficult to pronounce, "Whatever." It too requires an acceptance, a sort of resignation to situational spontaneity, but it also requires that this acceptance include a very precise ethical imperative. Agamben's concept signifies two entwined meanings. On the one hand,

the Whatever relays an acceptance of the world as given or fallen, as being irreparably, "Thus!" Or as he puts it: "All will be just as it is, irreparably, but precisely this will be its novelty."[11] Yet on the other hand, this Agambian acceptance of the way of the world does not mean that we can choose to be "Whatever" (as said in a cynical manner) but rather, that "there is in effect something that humans are and have to be", and this something is not an essence or a substantial identity. To the contrary, "it is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality."[12]

Such an ethical imperative may be found in Alain Badiou's theory of the formation of subjectivity. Badiou proposes that an individual becomes a subject only when, or better, while, he or she is being faithful to an event; a moment, when it comes, that "however foreign and abnormal—does in fact belong to the situation [the here and now] and thus cannot be overlooked." Badiou's subject "emerges through an autonomous chain of actions within a changing situation" and, by being faithful to an event not only does the subject come-in-to-being, but so too does a new situation.[13] Badiou accommodates this novelty within his ontology by using the complex methodology of

11   op. cit., Agamben, (1993), p. 39.

12   ibid., p. 43.

13   As cited in Oliver Feltham & Justin Clemens, 'An Introduction to Alain Badiou's Philosophy,' in Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, trans. O. Feltham and J. Clemens (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 6.

set theory. Following the concept of the generic set, as invented by the American mathematician Paul Cohen, he calls this potentiality "the generic", and characterises it variously as "indiscerniblity," the "globally indescribable" or "anything whatsoever". In light of Agamben's thinking then, Badiou's ontology may be understood as a kind of irreparable one, one that accepts and accounts for both an infinite number of situations (assemblages of multiple multiplicities) and an infinite number of events that present breaks from these situations towards a situation yet to come. Any such situation remains indiscernible, and as we will see, like Marx's praxis demands of its subjects a retrospective investigation of the ongoing consequences of the instigating event, or what Badiou calls a "generic truth procedure." Thus any coming community will require that its subjects, in order to become subjects, place a bet or make a wager via their fidelity to being irreparably who they are. And yet always in relation to an event; and it is here, in the determination of what may constitute such an event that an important distinction separates Badiou from Agamben. Whereas Badiou considers events in which subjects may emerge to be "rare," and in fact occurring only in four very specific situations (amorous, political, artistic and scientific), for Agamben these events are far more varied and numerous, and dispersed as such throughout the fabric of our everyday worlds.

Written in 10th century Japan, Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* contains a very precise trace of this quotidian irreparable:

112. When a Woman Lives Alone

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water-plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage-brush; but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look.

I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clear that she has scurried about with a know-ing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate is kept tightly shut.[14]

This short passage conveys an everyday ethics of becom-ing Whatever. Sei Shonagon is quite emphatic here about the manner in which a woman should conduct a life lived alone. Or at least the domestic conduct of such a life. And she is annoyed by a very specific counter-manner. Why? Because she understands the prospect of living alone, that is, of living autonomously, to be an amazing oppor-tunity for anonymity and errancy—as a chance at last, and at a distance from the strictures of court, to dwell in the world, to become with the world, irreparably. This is when the weeds poke through and the gate is unclasped, when Sei Shonagon opens up to a unique un-measure of

herself. It is as if she has suddenly and for the first time encountered a desire to be "consigned without remedy" to her own way of being.[15]

In *The Coming Community* Agamben also tracks the Irreparable to America, discovering there Melville's short story *Bartleby the Scribe*, and Duchamp's concep-tualism during his New York years. We in turn could extend this path to the music of Bob Dylan, to Thomas Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon* (a remarkable foil to the paranoia and entropy of his *Gravity's Rainbow*) or to the work of Rem Koolhaas, who we think is an amazing contemporary theorist of the Whatever. His installation work at the 2005 Venice Biennale, for example, posed such questions as: "Why modernise at all?", and "Might there be a virtue in neglect?" And these inside Venice's Arsenale, itself a wonderful monument to the virtues of neglect.[16] And then there is Koolhaas's incredible notion of "junk-space", from his collaborative two-volume set *Project on the City*. This is how he defines junk-space:

> If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue man-kind leaves on the planet. ... Junk-space ex-poses what *previous generations* kept under wraps: structures emerge like springs from a mattress, exit stairs dangle in didactic trapeze, probes thrust into space to deliver laboriously

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14   Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. I. Morris (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 182.

15   op. cit. Agamben, (1993), p. 39.

16   as cited in Hal Foster, 'In Venice' in *London Review of Books, Vol. 27 No. 15* (2005), p.14

what is in fact omnipresent, free air, acres of glass hang from spidery cables, tautly stretched skins enclose flaccid non-events.[17]

Could there be a more precise description of our architectural present? All this craziness we inhabit, all this effort and thrusting, all these mega-structures, this over-production and waste—all this junk piling up. And for what? Oblivion or free air? Anyway, this is what Koolhaas seems to be asking.

Inspired in 1972 by another example of junk-space, Robert Smithson had occasion to ask a related set of questions. Invited to present a lecture to the Architectural Faculty of the University of Utah Smithson, eschewing expectations to deliver images and exegesis of the Mayan monuments and ruins of Palenque in Mexico and which he had recently visited, instead never let his audience leave the hotel. Showing images of Hotel Palenque where he had stayed during his visit, he delivered a meandering and hilarious but disarmingly precise (faithful) tour of the hotel's present tense ruins: passages without doorways, doorways without rooms, rooms without roofs, roofs becoming floors, floors broken off to leave suspended lines of steel; the same spiky irregular lines we are familiar with in the continual reconfiguring of our own cities, lines content for the moment, and without attachment to anything else properly architectural, to bisect and contain nothing but air. Smithson's lecture, "more stoned than stentorian"[18] was a joyful and nonchalant meditation on a site where one "see[s] buildings being both ripped down and built up at the same time."[19] Yet at the same time, and in the language of his practice, the lecture was also a non-site, an occasion to register a past which Smithson appeared so disarmingly to leave out. A non-site exists as a void, a de-differentiation or "de-architecturization" that can only be referred to in relation to an actual site, and always at the cost of altering that site. In his lecture on the irreparable and autonomous hotel, Smithson gave audience to an anonymous past, but in a present where "the Mayan's are still building."[20]

Let us return to Agamben's essay *Genius*, to the last brief section where he allows for a wonderful and we think crucial departure from genius. Here he writes, "It is the final late period of life when the old artist breaks his paintbrushes in half and contemplates." What does this mean? Agamben asks. It means that "the gestures, for the first time are entirely our own, they are completely demystified of any incantation." And a little further on: "Only the leave-taking is true, only now begins the long process of unlearning oneself."[21] Maybe the "idle child" that Agamben speaks of at the very end of

17 Rem Koolhaas, 'Junk-space,' in C.J. Chung, et al, eds., *Harvard Design School Project on the City* (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2002), 2 Vols., p. 748.

18 Neville Wakefield, 'Yucatan is elsewhere,' in *Parkett 43* (1995), p. 133.

19 Robert Smithson, 'Hotel Palenque: 1969–1972,' in *Parkett 43* (1995), p. 120.

20 ibid.

21 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti & C. Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 101.

the essay is the being of a coming time. We are tempted to read all this allegorically, as a possible leave-taking from the "genius" of modernity. And it is exactly this kind of a radical break or leave-taking that is set out by Marx in his introduction to *Grundrisse* where by use of a reversed Darwinian analogy, he proposes that it is not the anatomy of the ape that explains human anatomy, but rather the other way around: "Human anatomy is the key to that of the ape."[22] His point being that it is not until a certain limit has been reached and a break taken, that any previous stage or phase can actually present itself to thought, as such. Hence, genealogical modes of thought always operate from within the limits of their own present. But the twist is that as they do so they in fact simultaneously create this very present. It is via a two-fold procedure that both the past and the present emerge for each other in genealogical thought and action.

And in the "world of light"? We believe that this Marxian procedure may be discovered operating within the mytho-praxis of Māori thought. Let us cite our abbreviated version of the Māori creation myth.

Before time there existed an all-encompassing static Oneness. This original Oneness was comprised of the eternal and selfish—perhaps even evil—sex act of a Two. But only of a potential Two. In order for there to be life, this primal Oneness had to be divided, separated out into an actual Two. It was Tane who divided the One into Two. It was Tane who separated his father Rangi from his mother Papa, thus causing them to become his parents. By forcing this Oneness apart Tane created the world of light, the space-time in which life could develop and multiply, in which the many could come into being as becoming.

What this says is that it is the child who in fact gives birth to the parents. It is the present generation in the here and now of their continually renewed thought and action who give birth to the ancestors. Yet with an aim to what? What of the future, the yet to come? What, in other words, of time's third gesture? Let us return again to Marx. Despite everything, Marx did not refer to the future that much, but when he did he spoke of communism (a name one hardly hears anymore) which he (and Engels) actually defined as the "*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence."[23] Marx's future, then, is not an ideal to be achieved. And nor is it a state of affairs to be established. Rather, the future in Marx is that which resists, and continues to resist, the given limits of the present. And Agamben's Whatever possesses the same political intent.

22 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 105.

23 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology,' in R.C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 162.

The coming community is not mediated by any pre-given "condition of belonging."[24] The coming community is a belonging-as-such. The coming community is a community which resists the formation of any substantial identity whatsoever.

As the Whatever becomes more and more common it approaches the conditions of what Marx called a "general intellect."[25] And within this approach it is apparent that art need not be considered a separate realm. Art in the age of general intellect would thus coincide with the subsumption of all living labour under capital, or within the capitalist *mode of production*. This is when—and here we follow the magisterial analyses of Antonio Negri—use value=exchange value, time=money, work=leisure, the law=the marketplace, *bios*=machine, and when art can no longer be conceived as occupying a special time (the Aesthetic). So all productive labour would then be considered art, and all art productive labour. This approach then, offers us a simple tautology. But it is also an extremely dynamic and powerful one, in that if all of life is now conceived as productive, creative labour—the "time of life"—then what is of utmost importance is to embrace this refreshed understanding of time.[26] Hence, the approach to a general intellect would have to coincide with both a resistance to all notions

of substantial identity, and a break with all transcendentalisms of time, that is, with all notions of time-as-measure (the time of Power). Potentially, this approach is a radical transformation in the presentation and constitution of both time and subjectivity. So rather than art remaining an endless lament on the disappearance of the Aesthetic as such, and/or a study of indifference in the face of measure and control (the museum-function), and/or a retreat into the mystical traditions that once upon a time conceived time as non-being, it is possible today for artists to fully immerse themselves in the task of aiding and enhancing the everyday, cooperative and common constitution of the project that we may now call the rainbowed, open city of time.

An allegorical city? Yes, because in allegory the logical relation of a concept to its object is "surpassed." In allegory objects overflow their borders, entering cycles and series and thus taking on "natural relations;" while concepts become "compressed, interiorized," in a manner "that can ultimately be called personal."[27] Hence, the *objective* that is the rainbowed, open city of time overflows itself; is in excess of itself—in excess of the subjects who compose it. Fecund, dialogical, swarming, polyglot, contagious... The city reveals—will reveal—a natural (global) history "that no longer has its centre." Or being nowhere in particular, its centre is extended, spread out, vaporised, and endlessly dispersed. And this would mean that the personal, that is, the here and nows of the city's

24 op. cit. Agamben, (1993), p. 86.

25 op. cit. Marx, (1972), p. 699.

26 Antonio Negri, 'The Constitution of Time,' in *Time For Revolution*, trans. M. Mandarini (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 36.

27 op. cit. Deleuze, (1993), p. 125.

subjectivity, will be nothing if not the conceptual "ownership" of this city: an interior space of "belonging-to" and responsibility where the disparate all is compressed—is compressing itself—into a unity. A unity, then, of the autonomous anonymous.

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