



Political art without words: Art's threat of emergence, and its capture within signification and commodification

Autonomous Artists Anonymous

We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present!

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 108)

On hearing the phrase 'political art' most people nowadays will think of art which is trying to make a statement or art enlisted for a specific cause. It is seen as art whose politics is largely overt and explicit. But is this the only way art can be political? Does art need to be legible and meaningful to be political? Or can art be political through its affective sensations? As an artist, currently studying fine art and making untutored forays into philosophy, these questions have dominated my making and thinking. This note, and the accompanying artworks woven through it, are attempts to interrogate how art can operate politically beyond meaning, language and representation. Guided by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I will argue that there is an often-neglected political potency stemming from art's affective abilities to engender what I will call 'emergence': that is new forms, sensations and affects which operate outside and beyond signification and cognition, and which can provoke change, within us, between us and in how we live together, in and of the world.



This emergence does not arise from statements, but from the creation of sensations and affects that move the viewer/participant through the affective, corporeal responses produced in the encounter. It thus acts outside any regime of codification, signification, or representation, and operates on an asignifying register to create new forms, thoughts and feelings. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, in this way art can alert us to other potentials within, beneath or beyond those we are consciously and intellectually aware of, to a virtual realm of potential which is present and immanent to the self, and the world. This capacity to produce the new, and to instigate change at the level of affect, which in turn can provoke change at the level of consciousness and cognition, is key to art's micropolitical potential, neglected by the current tendency within artistic discourse and practice to prioritise signification, representation and cognition. It requires both an altered conception of artistic autonomy, and an understanding of sensations and concepts as intrinsically connected.

Art's potential for emergence is however continually blocked and diverted by the regimes of commodification and signification operating both within and outside of us. Both have dire impacts at the level of subjectivation, inuring us to capitalist oppression, exploitation and destruction and ensnaring us to deploy our creativity in its service. Artistic emergence then is vital in the search for non-capitalist and non-oppressive ways of being with ourselves, each other and the world. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari quoted above, through this emergence art can, when combined with an ethical dimension, ensure that creativity can help us to resist the present.



Art's capture within signification and commodification

Art necessarily produces the unexpected, the unrecognisable and the unacceptable.

(Deleuze, 2006: 288)

Art's political power is both celebrated and contained under capitalism. While relying upon our creativity, capitalism actively ensnares and commodifies it. While this occurs across arenas, it is clearly exemplified in relation to 'political art', where capitalism serves to marginalise and suppress the affective power and politics of sensation.

Contemporary art today is dominated by linguistic signifiers and coded referents – images, tropes, narratives, representations, ideas, and situations are used to construct, demonstrate and/or illustrate legible, discursive meaning. With such art the elicited response derives primarily from the viewer or participant's conscious, cognitive and intellectual powers of interpretation, often requiring knowledge about the work's means of production, rationale and the wider socio-political context, and frequently precipitating copious accompanying notes and wall texts. These works are more explainable than experiential; they elicit the question 'what does it mean?' over that of 'what does it do?' (although of course the experiential aspect may remain important in doing this). As Stephen Zepke observes, since the 1960s, 'all artistic practices have had to involve a minimum of conceptual reflection in order to be considered in any way contemporary' (2006: 157).

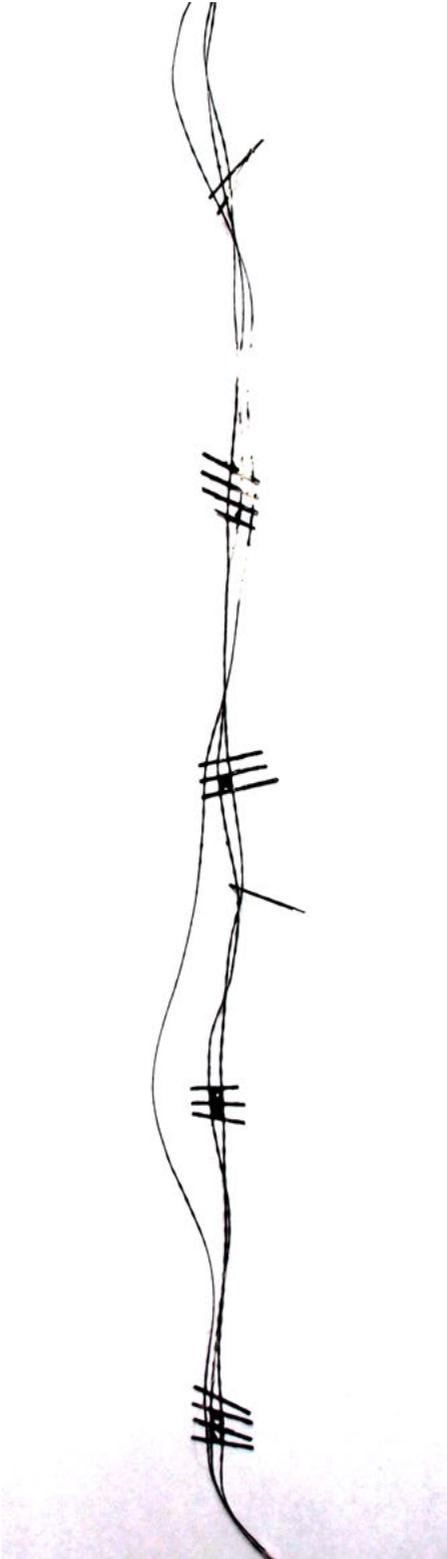
While linguistic signifiers and coded referents have always been present in art, their role changed as, in tandem with the expansion of capitalism, art began to be conceived as the result of autonomous, individual expression, rather than servicing community rituals, high priests or powerful patrons. Marcel Duchamp famously

highlighted and exploited this development by daring the art world to accept a bottle rack as an artwork. His success demonstrated that the market, characteristically rapacious, was catholic in its tastes and flexible with its definitions. The only proviso was that there must be documentation and authentication to provide an object to commodify and a subject to remunerate. For Zepke, Duchamp's readymades 'revealed art's conditions as epistemological (i.e. Conceptual) and institutional' and in so doing effected their dematerialisation, and 'the complete subtraction of the affect from art' (2008: 35-36).

Although initially part of a political technique to resist commercialisation, the dematerialisation of the artworks could even enhance their value, and the emphasis on linguistic meaning as opposed to affective sensation has done nothing to halt the process of turning artworks into luxury trophies, since 'people really did want to buy these things they could make themselves, not least *because* of their political ambitions' (Zepke, 2006: 160). Such ambitions are depoliticised and translated into profitability. Art purchases are made as speculative investments, with the prices set according to projected future trends, encouraging homogeneity through the influence of herd-like dedicated followers of fashions.

In order to achieve this dematerialisation, artworks deploy codes and referents that are most often produced by, and act within, the current semiotic economy. This results



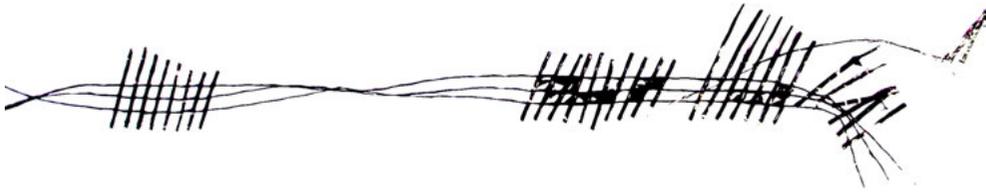


in art which, however critical and important, is unable to escape or challenge the mechanisms through which meaning and sense are formed (Zepke, 2009: 177). They reflect the world back at us, rather than create it anew. While of course signification can be combined with more affective sensations, I would contend that the signifying would usually win out over the asignifying, overcoding the uncoded, since what can be named, defined, and argued over is likely to garner more attention and kudos. This is particularly true in a discursive environment dominated by opinion-formers (such as critics, curators, gallerists) who need to justify their importance (and salaries), as well as in the general environment in which we are encouraged to value reason, interpretation and intellectual faculties above perceptual, corporeal and affective ones.

Through its incorporation and instrumentalisation within capitalist logic, signifying art feeds and affirms the logic of neoliberal capitalism, in which seemingly nothing, even the immaterial, can escape commodification, and in which the production of concepts by a precarious workforce constitutes another new virgin territory to colonise and a labour force to exploit (Zepke, 2006: 16). The designation of anything as potentially art and the promotion of art-as-idea does not make art more autonomous, it makes it more reliant upon already-existing codes of signification and market-driven processes of commodification.

The fetishisation and commodification of the art object has been resisted, through

either refusing to produce artworks or dissolving the artwork into life. Lazzarato interprets Duchamp's ready-mades as a refusal to work and a repudiation of the 'hand and virtuosity of the artist' (2014a: 13) while the Situationists and more recently proponents of 'relational aesthetics', amongst many others, designate political and social interventions as art. Both strategies have been inspiring, radical and powerful, but they also relinquish the production of art as affectively and sensorily powerful objects. Moreover, designating interventions as art can render them politically safe: incorporated into the state capitalist machinery they are reduced to equivalent of their market or social value, occluding at least some of their political power. In Zepke's damning critique, 'art becomes life (but life stays as it is)' (2011: 74).



Art and commodification of the self

What mechanisms of our subjectivity lead us to offer our creative force for the fulfilment of the market?

(Rolnik, 2011: 36)

Art's subsumption under the logic and mechanisms of late capitalism carries a wider significance in terms of effecting our subjectification – that is how we are made as subjects. The putatively autonomous artist is now the archetype for all post-Fordist workers (Lazzarato, 2011; Lorey, 2011), exemplifying the selling of one's self, via one's creativity and becoming what Lazzarato has called an 'entrepreneur of her/himself' (*ibid.*: 47). While seeming to embody freedom, autonomy and radicalism – society's outspoken outsider – today's artist can only succeed if they are able and willing to 'choose' to be the flexible, precarious, itinerant 'creative' whose income is predicated on never-ending and never-sufficient game of self-promotion and self-commodification. In order to construct and express one's 'true' self, one must be prepared to sell one's creativity: all workers must be like 'artists' who create, commodify and market themselves in order to *be* themselves, whose subjectivity becomes based on becoming an individualistic, neoliberal hustler required to safeguard and express a coherence,

unity and sovereignty to be marketed and sold. My experience is testament to how this filters through to art schools: currently I am being encouraged to promote myself, to put myself ‘out there’, and attempts are being made to teach me how to hustle. I am also being urged to provide interpretations and meanings for my work, since this is deemed a requirement of a ‘successful work’ and of ‘making it’ as an artist.

A wider consequence is that artists’ putative radicalism – which may or may not be evidenced in their artworks – is harnessed not only to glamourise and normalise precarity but to neutralise and commodify alternative and resistant subject positions. In so doing, the artist-as-entrepreneur glorifies, celebrates and normalises the increasingly widespread neoliberal conditions of post-Fordist labour: temporary contract-based work, with fluctuating pay, no job security, sick-pay or pension, and no clear boundaries between one’s alienating job and life outside it, producing constant anxiety, fear and loss of control (Lorey, 2009). Such insecurity is a key aspect of neoliberalism’s onslaught of workers’ rights and ties of solidarity and the figure of the artist is its new model. With the outside brought inside, the alternative has become the norm, and their radical critiques are nullified, with grave impacts on the world we are able to both build and imagine. As Suely Rolnik writes:

[T]his kind of pimping of the creative force is what has been transforming the planet into a gigantic marketplace... This is the world that the imagination creates in the present. (2011: 29)



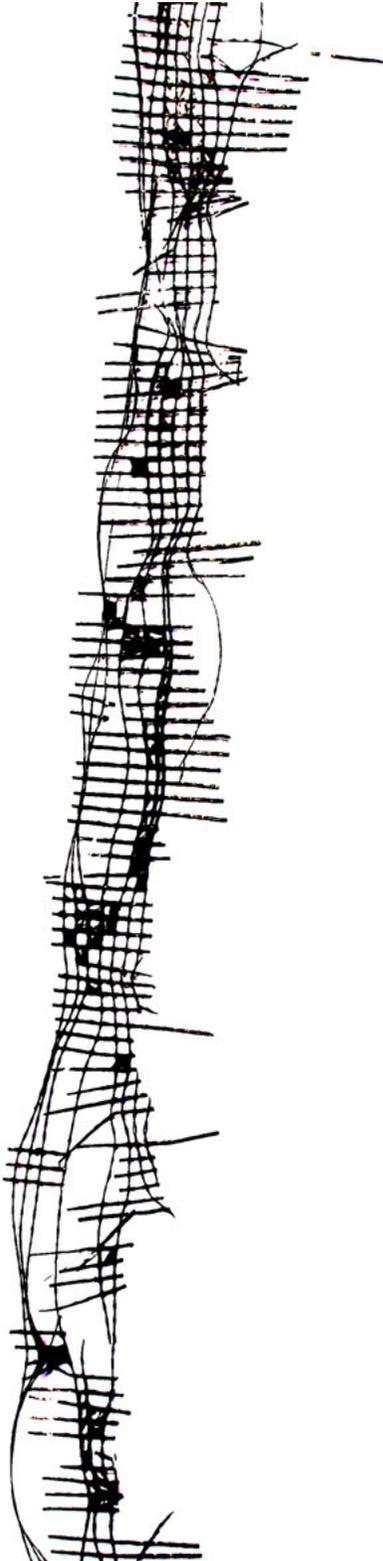
Left in this desolate landscape are hordes of ‘emerging’ artists toiling away, accumulating academic qualifications and pop-up exhibitions to adorn their CVs, often making ends meet in some other job(s), desperate to be discovered and secure the patronage of the cultural gatekeepers all tied to state or corporate capitalist institutions. Their ‘emergence’ in the art world is defined as the profitability of their art, and those who do ‘emerge’ and become ‘established’ are those whose subsumption within the capitalist logic is complete. This exemplifies the suppression of emergence that arises through the art itself, that resists the market-driven means of understanding and valuation, and in particular that which arise through affective sensations. Of course artworks can still act politically through the affective responses they engender, but they will be combating forces of signification and commodification. We need therefore a mode of creativity that operates, is viewed and is valued outside the constrictions of capitalism, that is free to be incoherent, arational and unorganised, untethered to linguistic signifiers or commodity-form, which exceeds representation in order to speak with sensations. For how can we imagine or build alternative practices and ways of life outside capitalism and its systems of signification, if our most basic tool – our creativity – is ensnared within them?



Art and philosophy – twin techniques of creation

We paint, sculpt, compose and write with sensations. We paint, sculpt, compose and write sensations.

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 166)



Art can enact another kind of politics however. Affective politics can take us outside of what we know, beyond what we can consciously, intellectually and linguistically process. Such a conception of artistic creation chimes with a philosophy of creation that seeks to construct new ways of feeling, thinking and existing. Working together, both can help us find ways out of the entangled traps of signification and commodification. In this section I will explore how I have tackled this in my own thinking and artistic practice. Over the past three years I have made various artworks, which have intersected with my more philosophical enquiries, circling around the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (writing separately and together). I have chosen to have these 'discrepant grid-lines' intersecting with the text because they often feature in my work in various incarnations, and I hope this intersection to embody the connected-but-different relationship I conceive for art and philosophy.

In bringing together art and philosophy as I am doing here there is a danger of treating practice as illustrations of philosophical theories, and of treating philosophical concepts as metaphors rather than active, operative and material. This is not my intention: I have not made my artworks in order to explain any concept, nor do I wish them to be explained by any. This would limit them both. I intend my works to be sensed and experienced, freely and openly, not interpreted. However, this is not to say that

my works are conceptually empty and just pretty pictures. Since thought and feeling can never be fully separated, sensations are inseparable from concepts. I like to think of sensations as the raw material for concepts, with the capacity to engender conceptual and cognitive shifts. The question for me then is how affective sensations can operate in ways which *enact* a philosophical proposition; and obversely, how a philosophical proposition can *enact* an aesthetic sensation. Thus, in what follows I do not wish to describe how I have consciously planned and constructed my work but how I think it operates.

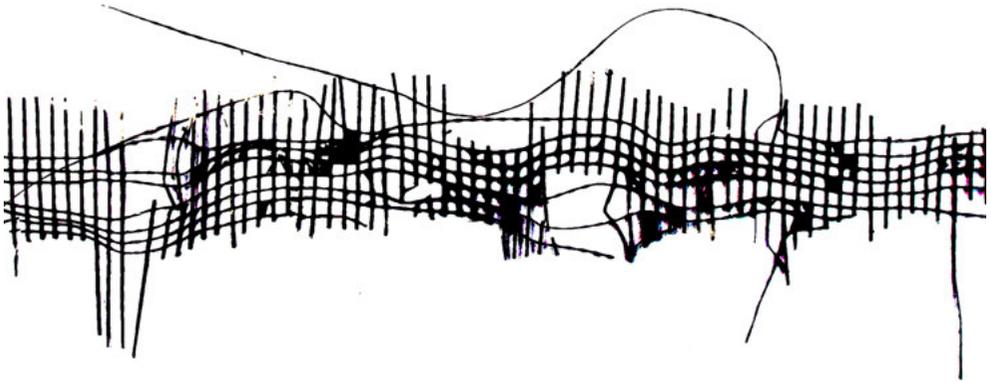
My use of geometry, more specifically, the grid (totemic in the recent history of Western abstraction, and central to other less imperialising histories of abstraction) operates through its refusal of resemblance or correspondence to existing forms. Of course, this can never be entirely successful as any image will always evoke associations, but the aim was to create asignifying forms which did not stem from representation or include legible referents, abstraction rather than something abstracted. Recognisable forms are easily found – faces, bodies, animals, landscapes – in non-geometric forms even if unintended. Further, works that are truly ‘chaotic’ in appearance evoke order through its absence: they still activate the binary opposition between order and chaos, and between representation and abstraction.

Instead, with abstract geometry I try to create without models or representation, in order to gain a certain independence and autonomy from the current. In addition, working outside language and other regimes of representation, signification and codification permits an autonomy from set agendas or messages. For some, my abstract geometry resembles a digital code or a musical score. I am happy with this correspondence since it recalls language and codes while, particularly since they have been deliberately pulled, broken and twisted, they remain impervious to any reading or deciphering; their resemblance to asignifying codes serves to emphasise their illegibility.

This abstraction and asignification is a technique to hone the work down to its sensations, rather than any intended,



conscious meaning. It creates a different relationship between subject/object, form/content and form/matter. Representative or more consciously conceptual artworks operate through mobilising the distinctions between these states, applying thought to materials to turn them into a representation, and thereby instituting clear distinctions between the subject (artist) and object (artwork), and the artwork (the representer) and the world (the represented). Sensation however offers no viewpoint or commentary on the world, and speaks from no vantage point above it, describing it; instead it speaks from within and yet simultaneously, and paradoxically, outside the world. Such art creates groundless, formless sensations, produced through the encounter rather than from the form/content or subject/object relationships.



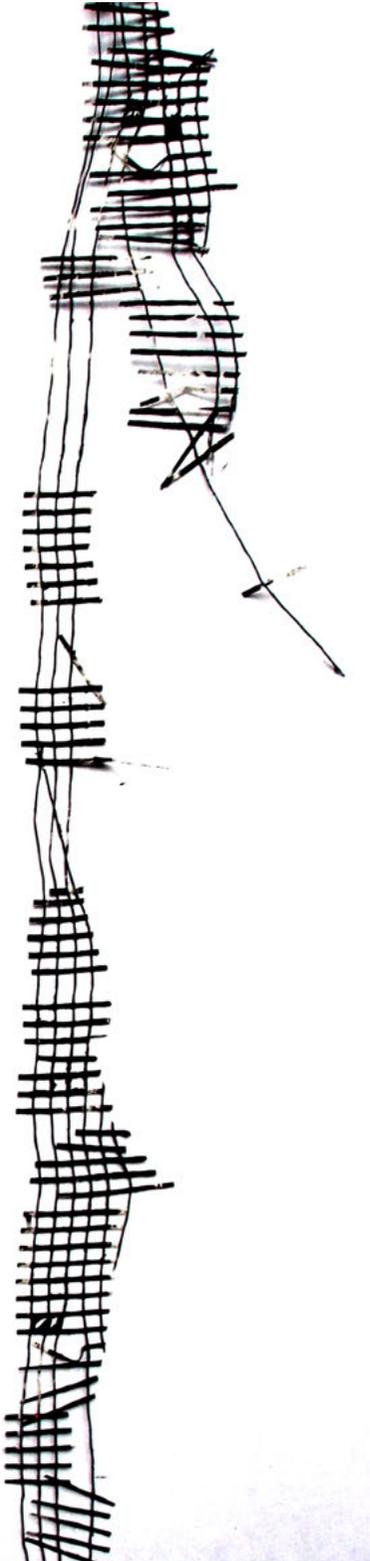
Art's affective micropolitics

Abstraction is the attempt to show in thought as in art, in sensation as in concept, the odd, multiple, unpredictable potential in the midst of things of other new things, other new mixtures.

(Rajchman, 1998: 76)

Encounters with affective sensations can thus provide a route towards a realm of perception outside of or beneath language, meaning and interpretation. Affective responses bypass our intellectual, rational senses as they are not based on what we know or understand, nor on any system of logic, representation or signification. Sensations affect us directly, bodily, and singularly – that is differently each time – in ways which though autonomous of conscious thought and feeling, may still provoke new and changed conscious thoughts and feelings.

Affect can be understood beyond the phenomenological framework with its focus on the material, individual and embodied experience, and as a portal into an



imperceptible, virtual realm of potentials which are present and immanent to the self, the event and the world. As Grosz writes (2008: 3, fn.2), affects 'link the lived or phenomenological body with cosmological forces, forces of the outside, that the body can never experience directly'. I like to imagine that this realm *hovers within* what we can see and process consciously and intellectually, since this conveys both its virtuality and materiality. Through creating sensations which mobilise affects, art can make visible these imperceptible forces that, as Deleuze and Guattari write, 'populate the world, affect us and make us become' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 181).

I feel that this is enacted within my practice through a constant disavowal of my hand. Throughout my work I often find, not entirely consciously, that there is something in between my hand or implement and the paper or canvas – some tape, a printing block, fabric etc. – which diminishes how much control I can exert, inserting another agency within the process, and often making the process feel more like a conversation, or sometimes an argument, between myself and my materials, rather than purely my sovereign volition. The use of the tape here demonstrates this tendency. I enjoy the fact that it constructs the forms for me, while I disrupt the perfection of the grid by painting, cutting and pulling the tape, producing unpredictable effects. This leaves the composition to forces outside of my subjectivity, and eschews any sense of expressing any personal narrative, often still present even in abstract art. My tapeworks include the outside to co-create the work, to depurify and mix-up the elements within the work, and decentre the subjectivity behind it.

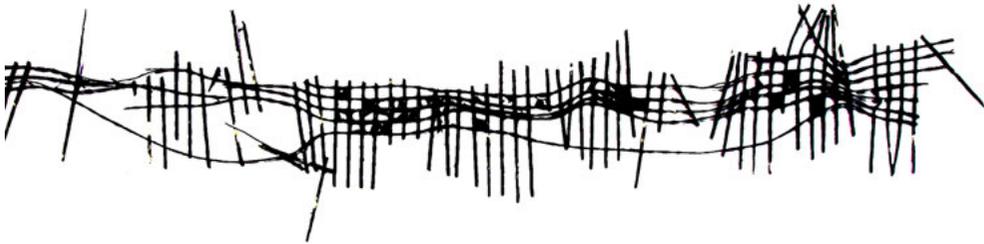
Affect is then also always wider than our own personal experience, and always has an apersonal, asubjective dimension. It allows us to connect to others and to the world, by reminding us that we do not begin or end as pre-formed, sovereign individuals, but exist in-relation to and in-process with the world around us, which is also constantly in flux. When we respond affectively we are reminded that we do not know ourselves, that we cannot know ourselves, that our selves are always in process, forming out of a myriad of relationships, intensities and forces beyond what appear as the boundaries of the self. Affect names the capacities of the body to act and experience in ways we cannot predict or control, making us feel this in-relation-ness. In short, they can take us out of ourselves, out of what we can already imagine, activating un-felt feelings, and un-thought thoughts. As Erin Manning writes, “I am” is always, to a large degree, “was that me?” (Manning, 2016: 37). This offers a necessary corrective to the Modernist, sovereign and enclosed sense of artistic autonomy (usually normalised as belonging to a white, bourgeois, heterosexual, able-bodied male), in which the art is conceived as somehow above life, made up of pure and transcendent universals. Instead, affects are autonomous of codes, signification and representation, but not autonomous of the world and others. This kind of autonomy is not individual and disconnected, but always both embodied within and connected to others, and the world.

For me, this is an often neglected and suppressed source of art’s political potency. This is a special type of politics however: a micropolitics, which works through imperceptible forces and impacts upon one’s subjectivity. This politics is not conscious, literal, or chosen. Through mobilising affects, sensation activates and challenges our capacity to move, to experiment, and to change. In contrast to the explicit, literal politics of most so-called conceptual art, the politics of affect can be thought of as pre-political, since its politics is non-verbal and nonconscious. Sensations then are created and they produce affects, which are defined not by how they are interpreted, but by the unpredictable and singular impacts they have upon the



viewer/participant. Affects attune us to the world of the virtual, in ways which can help and inspire us to reconfigure the actual.

This affective political potency unique to art can help us get both deeper within and out of ourselves, our subjectivation and representation. As Guattari writes, art can operate politically when it ‘engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being’ (Guattari, 1995: 106). It does so through a fidelity to experiment and to break out of spoken or unspoken diktats or fashions, and to operate outside regimes of meaning. Indeed, as John Rajchman has written, it is only via encountering the outside that one can break out of consensus and act and think creatively: we are forced to think, he writes, ‘by something we cannot recognise, given through a violent aesthetic element, a sensory or affective contact with something that doesn’t fit, which shakes up how we are accustomed to think’ (Rajchman, 2008: 87). However, as we have seen, our capacities and desires to break out of the known are being restricted and dampened through a co-opted and desensitised conception of art acting within the regimes of commodification and signification. We need to conceive of art, its politics and its context differently.

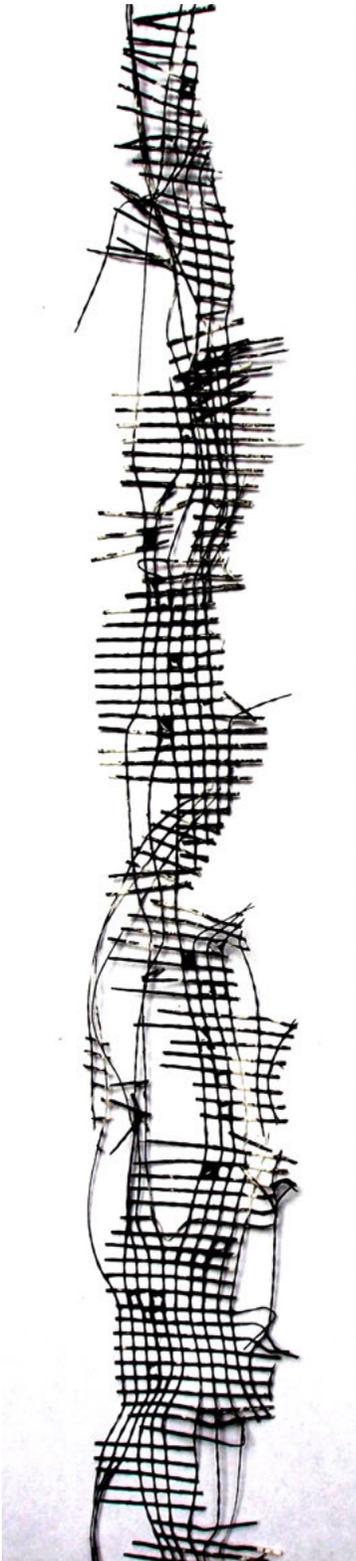


The ‘ethico-aesthetic paradigm’

Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in O’Sullivan and Zepke, 2010: 3)

I have argued that speaking with affective sensations is a neglected but necessary part of art’s potential politics and can aid our attempts to exit and resist capitalist norms, modes and behaviours. However, there is an additional way in which this kind of art can operate politically: it is an instructive model for how we should all be able to conduct our lives, and create our worlds. Taking a cue from this conception of art’s power to activate emergence through sensation and affect, Guattari instructs us to conceive of the world and our selves to be in a permanent state of creative and experimental flux: for everything to be subject to forces of



creative emergence and the production of the new, without reference to any models, norms or representations, but aiming to respond to cues from the immanent, virtual realm. As Guattari noted, ‘one creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette’ (Guattari, 1995: 7). Unsurprisingly, this approach is not inherently liberating – affect is increasingly used to mobilise reactionary, even fascist, forces. It requires an ‘ethical commitment’ (O’Sullivan and Zepke, 2008: 4), hence Guattari’s coinage of the term ‘ethico-aesthetic paradigm’ (Guattari, 1995).

The implications for this ethico-aesthetic paradigm, the instruction for genuinely creative, emergent and resistant art, are deep and wide-ranging. To me they speak most keenly of an alternative to the current dominant mode of subjectivity. Instead of trying to understand our selves and our experiences as individual, rational, and coherent (which most often will be based on a model – usually white, male, bourgeois etc.), and with particular uses (which are usually defined in relation to the capitalist economy), Guattari’s paradigm encourages a more generous, sensitive and open version of subjectivity, placed in a more ecological relationship with the outside: like various components (within and without our ‘selves’, human and non-human) existing in a complex ecosystem rather than individuals stacked against (and often on top of) each other. This guards against both a view of individual selves at the centre of our universe, and of humans at the centre of the universe, diminishing our sense of control over the world (which produces, for example, obscene forms of technophilia such as genetic modification, and catastrophic intransigence over climate change) and increasing our power to effect change within and with the world.

At a more individual level it can lead to a more intensive, attuned and sympathetic reading of one another – without always expecting logicity or reasonableness, and attending to how we will always also be in thrall to imperceptible and affective forces and intensities which are not subject to the laws of rationality, logicity and legibility. Rolnik characterises this as being vulnerable to the other, arguing that this is a ‘precondition for the other to cease being a simple object for the projection of pre-established images, in order to become a living presence, with whom we can construct the territories of our existence and the changing contours of our subjectivity’ (Rolnik, 2011: 25). This vulnerability is precisely what is activated by ‘a specific capacity of the sensible’ by which she means the body’s capacities to respond beyond cognition and consciousness, attuned to imperceptible forces and intensities, capacities which are exercised by art’s powers of affect and sensation. This connection with the virtual that hovers within and outside us, the excess that escapes any system of codification or subjectification and remains ever in flux, is what enables change and creation.

Evidently it is well-nigh impossible, at least in the supposedly developed ‘West’, for art to operate outside capitalism, unless it is created, engaged with and spread through private or underground networks. The Internet, for some an archetypal rhizome might offer some redress, but most sensations are rather diminished when pixelated, and one must of course beware the commodifying forces at work attempting to capture its liberatory potential (see Buchanan, 2007). All the structures in place to support the larger-scale production, dissemination and consumption of art are infected with and reproduce capitalist processes and values. So are our habitual modes of viewing and experiencing art – for instance the gentrifying pop-up exhibition, the commercial gallery, or the corporate-sponsored national museum. What is required is a transformed context for art, in which we can make and experience art beyond personal expression, and without profit-generating commodification. Only within this resistant and liberatory ethical paradigm can art’s affective power be fully unleashed, and art can function as a ‘collective reappropriation of the production of subjectivity’ (Guattari, 1995: 133). While escape is currently impossible for most of us, and it is impossible to avoid capitalism and its many and insidious, often invisible and internalised, proscriptions, affectively forming so much of how we think, see and feel, I believe that art which resists and escapes totalising regimes of codification will, even if enclosed in the gallery, produce through the sensations and affects they create, an excess and an emergence. This emergence, operating as it does on the level of affect, can help give us the power and capacity to create moments, spaces and routes in which it is possible to think, feel and act differently, to access the outside that is inside, the radical potential within the present.

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the author

This note has been written anonymously in the name of a collective – Autonomous Artists Anonymous – in an admittedly limited attempt to resist marketing a 'self' as an entity to produce capital (financial or social).