

Activism/schizoanalysis. The articulation of political speech

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“Every way in is a way out.”

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Fig. 1- Clockwise from upper right: Anonymous; Occupy; Global Revolution TV; Critical Art Ensemble

Let's start by defining things very simply. An event is a break in a normalized flow of experience. When you have to ask what's happening, and why, and whether it's dangerous or exciting or if it means something to you, then your day has been eventful. Events can be collective, and they can occur at different scales: urban, national, global. Deliberately breaking the normalized flow of collective experience, with the intent to provoke political debate and action, is what I call eventwork (Holmes, 2012a).

It's clear this doesn't happen in a vacuum. The generation, communication, interpretation and historicization of events is a burning issue in control societies where our body rhythms and affective tones are increasingly impacted by so-

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called crises: urban disasters, financial collapses, crimes, terrorism, wars, etc. Events are typically portrayed on the TV screen as natural phenomena or accidents of fate; but they are intensively worked over by competing fractions of the dominant media, in order to shape the public's reactions and hold them within the limits of normalcy. Since crisis-events occur quite frequently – and are sometimes deliberately manufactured – there are more or less regular patterns of response, whose reiteration lends political life its droning continuity. Take a recent example: the financial crisis of 2008 unleashed astoundingly little protest at the outset, even when cause for outrage was in plain view. Instead, the usual disaster scenario took over: a crescendo of short-term reporting, a longer sequence of legislative posturing, a conditioned habituation to new levels of hypocrisy and abject greed, and a rapid return to speculation and profit-seeking. At the epicenter of the crisis in the United States, it was a full three years before grassroots activists were able to raise any popular resistance. They did so through the deliberately experimental production of a complex, multilayered, open-ended event: the Occupy movement. In the wake of that movement and in the expectation of others, I think we should devote more attention to the most effective form of political intervention currently known on the Left. The production of events is the preeminent use of that grab-bag of artistic and agitational techniques known as 'tactical media' (García & Lovink, 1997). Besides, making your own events is a lot more entertaining than what the US military, in its inimitable way, has called 'enduring freedom'.

In this text I'll explore the distributed politics of eventwork, via an analytic cut-up into four distinct and intersecting dimensions: territorial, organizational, theoretical and aesthetic. The scissors for this operation have been borrowed from the post-structuralist writer, therapist and activist Félix Guattari, and particularly from his strange and hermetic book, only recently translated into English, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* (2013) [1]. To suggest how the concepts of this book might be used in the future, I will also look back at some of the problems to which they responded in the past. What I will not do is tell you "what Guattari really thought" – either about schizoanalysis or the event. In my view, the only way to remain faithful to a practice like his is to appropriate it and thoroughly transform it.

Programmed Societies

If contemporary social life has a structure, which appears as an all-encompassing destiny, it is because this structure is imposed by organizations with the power to manipulate the reception of events, particularly but not only through the mass media. In the United States, this power was consolidated through the institutional and informational systems that emerged from World War II, from focus groups to the 'world modeling' of J.W. Forrester (1961, 1971) [2]. Indeed, the imposition of those systems on the country itself and on the rest of the planet constituted the essential 'victory' of the war. The basic principle is that of feedback control loops, whose construction follows a definite order:

1. Gather information about how a population reacts to a wide range of environmental inputs.
2. Construct a mathematical model of the 'system' constituted by the population and its environment.
3. Inject new elements into the real environment on the basis of hypotheses about the mathematical model.
4. Gather fresh information about the results – then adjust all previous steps accordingly.

The general idea here (remember that we are supposed to be living in democracies!) is to manipulate not the individual players, but the rules of the game. A corporation can use these feedback techniques to sell its products, and a government, to support its policies. The history of popular contestation since the Second World War is that of more-or-less confused, more-or-less conscious reactions to the installation and gradual evolution of structuralizing feedback systems.

In a lecture delivered at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, the critical theorist Bruno Bosteels described postwar French structuralism as a response to the rise of systems theory and cybernetics, which apply mathematical formalisms to human behavior. That might seem a bit strange because structuralism, with its emphasis on the primary importance of linguistic coding, appears to do exactly the same. However, he remarked that the leading exponents of structuralism always focussed not only on structure as a patterned regularity (and therefore as a determinant cause of behavior) but also on the way in which every totalizing structure “seems to harbor within itself a form of inner excess that it cannot control” (Bosteels, 2012). The result of structuralist activity was therefore to bring code-based systems up to and beyond their limits, in a movement of traversal and overflow. The drive toward excess was clearly political. As the philosopher Étienne Balibar writes, in a text referenced by Bosteels, “it was impossible to formulate conditions for entering the field of structural or structuralist discourse without immediately looking for the way out” (Balibar 2005: 3).

This paradoxical tendency within the disciplines of structuralism became the predominant concern of the post-structuralists after the ‘events’ of 1968, which shook both philosophy and society to the core. People began massively looking for a way out. Sociologists of the time, such as Alain Touraine, spoke of the ‘68 movements as a refusal of ‘the programmed society’. As he explains, “All the domains of social life – education, consumption, information, etc. – are being more and more integrated into what used to be called production factors” (Touraine 1971: 5). That was the leading idea of Keynesian economics: the population’s effective demand is the key to the expansion of production. In other words, consumer desire is the feedback loop of industry, and the agenda of capitalism is to structuralize your most intimate existence.

The disruptive events of the Sixties can be read as social equivalents of the philosophical search for what makes the structure break down, for its perverse principle of dysfunction, its wild propensity to self-subversion. To seek this breakdown in socially generated events whose authors and causes are multiple and to some extent always enigmatic, is not to reinstate any privileged agent who could occupy a position of strategic remove and mastery. It is, instead, to focus on social multiplicity as an indeterminate potential. The great attraction to tactics over strategy – and therefore, to what is now called ‘tactical media’ – has its origins here [3]. And these destructuralizing events had their consequences in the lives of millions of people, not only in France but across the earth. In scattered sites all over the globe; ‘68 was the theatre of an audacious but failed revolution. After it was all over, the participants must surely have asked themselves: What pushed us to act as we did? What potentials did we reveal? What traps did we fall into? And how could we go further – when what’s done in the streets is done?

The radical Left movements that reemerged in the Nineties sought explicitly to go beyond the impasses of the Sixties and Seventies. A totalizing ideology (classical Marxism-Leninism) was one such dead-end. A withdrawal to archaic social relations (hippie communalism) was another. The coming revolution would have to be protean, multiform – a ‘molecular revolution’, in Guattari’s words. The arrival of network technologies offered a glimmer of new expressive and cooperative possibilities, the dawn of a postmedia era. As he wrote in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*:

“The emergence of these new practices of subjectification of a postmedia era will be greatly facilitated by a concerted reappropriation of information and communication technologies in so far as they will increasingly authorize:

1. the promotion of innovative forms of consultation and collective action, and in the long run, a reinvention of democracy;

2. the miniaturization and personalization of apparatuses, a resingularization of mediatized means of expression. One may assume, in this respect, that it is the extension into a network of databanks that will have the biggest surprises in store for us;

3. the multiplication to infinity of ‘existential shifters’ permitting access to creative mutant Universes” (Guattari, 2013: 42).

In short, Guattari believed that the equation ‘media = passivity’ was on the way out. Yet the experience of the programmed society led many to realize in its wake that the upcoming struggles would also have to face new and increasingly sophisticated techniques for channeling expression, neutralizing events and stifling what Michel de Certeau, in the aftermath of ‘68, had called ‘the taking of speech’ (de Certeau, 1968/1998). Of course de Certeau’s phrase cuts both ways, and today there is no more double-edged technology than the Internet. The messianic promise of the net was pushed hard by industry, less so by activists and artists. Indeed, much of tactical media is a sophisticated critical and satirical discourse aimed at deflating what a group like Critical Art Ensemble (2001) has called the ‘promissory rhetoric’ of technology, while revealing the hidden agendas of corporate and governmental power. Once again it is a matter of self-subversion: entering the structure to derail it.

This whole discussion is pointing toward something like a counter-program. And maybe it’s bigger, more self-conscious than you think. Let’s put on Guattari’s glasses and look not only at the exploits of tactical media, but at the ways they are rooted in existential territories, etherealized in aesthetic rhythms, engaged in self-organized social movements and dissolved into acid critique. Let’s try to map out the main vectors of eventwork.

Four Ways In

Guattari’s approach to analysis tries to help open up ‘collective assemblages of enunciation’, or possibilities for taking speech. This does not just mean speaking in the restricted sense: it could be gestures, affects, symbols, practices. The point is to articulate something singular, not systematized, not overcoded in advance. And the point is to articulate it collectively, in public. But the strange thing is that Guattari approaches the collective assemblages through a schiz, that is to say, a splitting, a dissociation. Schizoanalysis splits subjectivity into four incommensurable dimensions: Territories, Universes, Phyla and Flows. They are separate and more-or-less autonomous assemblages, even within the experience of a single individual. They are not functions of any primary cause or mobilizing energy; but they can be approached as functors, that is to say, operators of a relational process. Life does not necessarily add up, but we all move through it anyway. Here goes:

1. Existential Territories. They are literally grounds, inhabited spaces of the body, pacings, ranges, graspings, sinkholes and sometimes dead ends. Think of a landscape, an ocean, a neighborhood, a street corner, the four walls of your ecstatic and unbearable room. Territory is not only a category of human settlement but also of ethology, it is the home and at the same time the nest, the lair or the den, the warm and familiar haunt that can coax you into well-being or veer off into obsessional repetition: the clamminess of sweat, the black hole of anxiety. It is crucial to realize that in Guattari's fourfold matrix, the Territories lie at the intersection of the real and the virtual, so they can be expressed as the Territories of the Virtually Real. Through their virtuality they relate (or not) to something else:

2. Incorporeal Universes of reference (or of value). Now we're talking about the insistence of rhythms, forms, images, aesthetic patterns of all sorts, fragments of poetry or film that return in memory as what Guattari called 'refrains'. It's not the painting on the wall, but the one you see in the dark that matters here. These constellations of Universes are never complete, they are in but not of the body, they point beyond themselves to further horizons. Yet they are what sparks the pathic trance of self-reference or 'autopoiesis': an affective appropriation, a singularizing process that turns the outside in. Reaching beyond the real, these are the Universes of the Virtually Possible. And it is by following their incorporeal call that the bounds of an existential Territory can be overstepped, so as to relate (or not) to something else:

3. Material and semiotic Flows. Here is the domain not only of speech but also of action, in a world understood less as one of things and more as one of processes, that is, things that appear in streams: signs, bean counters, money, libido, gasoline, semen, milk, electricity... The space of flows is taken by social science as the very realm of reality, institutions, economics, relations of classes, things we can measure – or even things that we can change. So this is the dreaded realm of acting out, where you move from intuition and upwelling desire to concrete statements and irrevocable deeds. These Flows of the Actually Real are as different from Virtual Territories as the word on the tip of your tongue is from the one you've just spoken. Yet the force of actuality relates them (or not) to something else:

4. Abstract machinic Phyla. Now we arrive at the realm of the symbolic, of code, of formalized concepts: rhizomes of abstract ideas whose destiny is to complexify forever, like science, philosophy, mathematics, law, and everything that fills the Borgesian Library of Babel. The notion of the 'phylum', with its connotations of metamorphosis over time, is a way to indicate this evolutionary movement. As formalized codes, the machinic Phyla exist beneath the regime of the Actually Possible. They interact with the realm of material and semiotic Flows, not only through the dialectic of theory and practice, but also in a more estranging or deterritorializing relation where practice is pulled outside itself and into the endless labyrinth of ideas. Guattari seemed to think that abstract ideas have a direct relation (maybe not) to the glimmering of aesthetic Universes.

Schizoanalysis offers four pathways into the complexity of human experience. It could also have been six or seventeen: four is just the first number beyond the binary pair and the threefold dialectic of opposition and synthesis (aka the Oedipal triangle). The point of a four-field model is to understand subjectivity as a generative matrix rather than a calculable system.

Before their formalization as a book, the schizoanalytic cartographies were developed in a seminar with a group of therapists (Guattari, 2007). In that context, the four assemblages were conceived as aspects of the patient's experience, and as entry-points for the therapist's practice. The idea was never to carry out an instrumental mapping that would lay hidden contents bare to the therapist's intervention. Instead it was an activity of 'meta-modelling', or in other words,

a conversation with the patient about the ways in which he or she represented, imagined or perhaps joked about the different aspects of his or her own existence. In this way the therapist could experiment with the approach to one assemblage – whether corporeally, aesthetically, materially or discursively – while remaining sensitive to ‘transitional components’ that might touch or transform the others. As in structuralist activity, what was sought on the way in was the way out: an excess or overflow into a relation. By recognizing the schiz of the self, you can start to hear a collective assemblage of enunciation, even when the speaking subject is ostensibly an individual. The larger question – the one that Guattari the activist pursued throughout his life – was this: How does a collectivity ‘take speech’ in contemporary democratic societies?

Your Way Out

It has become difficult to create what used to be called ‘public space’, that is, the possibility to articulate differing perspectives on a common condition. On one hand, the structuralization of the political process is now complete. Every national population is ceaselessly analyzed, modeled, stimulated and then measured again for results by a narrow spectrum of competing/collaborating interest groups, whose mouthpieces are called ‘leaders’. Meanwhile, thanks essentially to finance and its proliferation of networked technologies, another wrinkle has been added to the programmed societies of the postwar period. The overlay of a vast and dynamic grid of hyperindividualized motivations atop the older mass-control environments has given rise to a new normalized figure, the ‘entrepreneur of the self’, whose boundlessly calculating opportunism and compulsive service-with-a-smile makes the ‘fascist in your head’ look seriously outdated. Today, the biggest obstacle to grassroots democracy is the well-known impossibility of scheduling a face-to-face meeting to fit the calendars of five or more people. And so it becomes clear why there is such an intensive focus on the crisis-management of urban disasters, financial collapses, crimes, terrorism, wars, etc. The goal is to keep our clocks desynchronized, and to block the spontaneous collective response that a real emergency – like climate change or a coup d’état by the bankers – would otherwise provoke. Just-in-time production, with its intricate systems for sequencing the efforts of millions of workers who will never meet or even know what each other are doing, is only the living allegory of a broader neoliberal predicament (Holmes, 2011).

Let’s redefine ‘tactical media’ as the art of breaking the strictly functional relays between the human microchips of the integrated social processor. Schizoanalysis would suggest that this is not going to be done by a totalizing ideology, or even the wonderful old Wobblie dream of ‘one big union’. Instead, actual assemblages are taken on their own terms, and dissociation is pushed to an excess. In the early days of OWS, protesters lay belly on the ground writing slogans and demands on cardboard. The by-passing businessmen thought they were completely nuts. Maybe they themselves thought they were completely nuts. Behind the incomprehension was a deliberate organizational process that aimed at the creation of a public general assembly. It did so by actually holding such assemblies, step by step over a couple of months leading up to the initial events on September 17, 2011. The schiz on Wall Street became a catalyst for the taking of speech on national and global scales.

Notice that a schizoanalytic mapping would look for at least two different assemblages on the scene of these public protests. One is the existential territory of the street. In societies of controlled and captivated flows, the occupation of the street is an ecstatic discovery (maybe that’s the reason for all the drumming). Along with the exceptional circumstance of thousands of people with nothing to focus on but each other, there is an invitation to a new mobility. A crowd moves with a multitude of legs and arms and eyes and tongues. It dances upon itself like a swarm of bees (the general assembly).

Then it surges like an uncurling wave, whose powerful current (the protest march) can instantly scatter into glittering, self-reflexive spray (the flashing cameras). Subjectively, the territory of the street is a release from imposed privacy, a space of possibility, an opening of social desire. But on the objective level it is all about deliberation, organization, communication, action. Some bodies made the meals, put together the library, facilitated the assembly, took the notes, did the dishes, set up the websites, wrote the communiqués, scouted out the scene and bore detailed witness to the police abuse. There is a rough-and-tumble technical precision to grassroots political events, not only in the electronic communications but in all the skill-sets that are delivered over to collective elaboration. The key is deprofessionalization, or the shift away from protected, quasi-sacralized circuits of exchange to a profane world of everyday use (Holmes, 2012b). The occupation of the street – the opening of the existential territory – is what makes this difference.

Another difference is made where pragmatic activists would expect it the least: in the realm of social theory. Political action in a complex society is impossible without theory. First, the structures of everyday capitalist life and the strategies of those who impose them must be analyzed, deciphered and correlated with the latest trends in technoscience, economics, governance and military practice. Next, the conclusions must be crafted into concepts that can be seized and used by those who do not make such things their specialty. This is not particularly easy. Theorizing in, for and against the street is a tightrope act where the inevitable fall is not only openly desired by the crowd, but needed by the theorist as a reality check. Universities, where the acuity of thought is pursued most intensively, are not by accident a disciplinary space that seems dedicated to the ultimate neutralization of all ideas. The communications machine of the social movement offers a test for those whose philosophy of praxis forbids an infinite delay of commitment in the search for theoretical perfection. If that machine can be thrown off the rails – if inquiry can remain open and sharp at the very heart of political urgency – then it is possible to go on mobilizing for the next decisive phase of the endless revolution.

But we would miss something if we stuck only with the actual, the factual, the ultra-theoretical and the ‘territories of the virtually real’. As Gary Genosko asks, “What inspires a sixteen-year-old with a dead-end McJob to try to organize her fellow employees into a bargaining unit in the face of the intimidating power of a multinational known for union busting?” (2002: 3). No one knows the answer, and aesthetics is far too narrow a term for the siren songs of political desire. While emerging one morning from the subway in Brussels, on the day of a big demo, I realized that everyone around me was donning a mask, hoisting a sign, brandishing a puppet or readying some more complicated expressive machine – all no doubt in echo of subjective possibilities glimpsed elsewhere, in painting, in cinema, in literature or out in the street. It’s clear that many artists, by plunging ever deeper into whatever they are striving to create, end up more politically aware than the most dedicated cadres, because they have kept a living link between perception and expression. If a latter-day ‘workers’ self-inquiry’ were ever able to reveal the sources of the precariat’s dreams, we could expect immediate victory. Or mediated cooptation!

Events are moments when the map of subjectivity is at stake and can be transformed. This can happen all the way from micro-levels of the self to the world-historical events of wars, economic collapses, imperial conquests and revolutions. It can happen in any of the four fields of subjectivity, singularly, or more often, in complex combinations. Eventwork is the schizoanalysis of political activism. It doesn’t proceed by fiat, but by listening. It doesn’t marshal forces, but accepts dissociation. It doesn’t simplify and channel, but overflows and filters further than any particular issue. It is the culture of the Left and the key, not only to whatever ‘successes’ we may have and desperately need, but also to the continuing existence of the we that desires such things. This work is now being carried out with increasingly sophisticated organizational, philosophical and aesthetic resources, going beyond the limits of what was initially called ‘tactical media’

(Holmes, 2007/2009). If what happened in 2011 is any indication, its territories will dramatically multiply in the upcoming decade of long-term political-economic crisis.

The present is no time to make excuses for sloppiness and failure. But at the same time, the social process that brings radically different aspects of existence together into a powerful event is not something one can entirely master. Like the Freudian dreamwork, it 'thinks' when you are not fully conscious, it 'acts' when you are not fully in control. Such is the challenge of multiplicity, or rule by the demos. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people know this in an intimate and practical way. Their grace and audacity is the breath of contemporary movements for the articulation of political speech.

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Notas

[1] Guattari (2013). Las ideas atribuidas a Guattari a partir de ahora contienen todas una dosis importante de interpretación.

[2] Cf. Merton y Kendall (1946); Forrester (1961; 1971). Sobre técnicas de retroalimentación en ciencias sociales, véase Deutsch (1963, 1986); Para una perspectiva crítica sobre sistemas cibernéticos en el período de posguerra, véase la sección final de Holmes (2009). Y si no le impresiona la teoría, vea el artículo de periódico Moss (2013).

[3] El concepto de táctica usado por los teóricos de los medios tácticos en Ámsterdam proviene de uno de los escritores más directamente relacionados con mayo del 68, Michel de Certeau (1974/1984).