Dissenting Machines

The following paper was given as part of the seminar '(In) Permanent Ignition: Towards an Aesthetic of Dissent' held at 'Big Torino 2002' in May. It is published here as it was given. For information on the exhibition and exhibiting artists see: . The talk itself was partly inspired by - and related to - the work of the art collective ccred, for furtherinformation on this practice (and their project '(In) Permanent Ignition').

The theme, or at least one of the themes, of this years Turin biennale has been the interaction between art and the social. The different art practices on display might then be seen as different kinds of experiments about - and enquiries into - the social role or function that art plays in today's world. In many of the displays what we see is an end point - or perhaps even just an arbitrary point - in a process which has involved the artist - or artists - interacting with the wider social milieu (whether this be the city of Turin itself - or the culture of the world wide web - or even the new global world order). Many of these art practices then operate it seems to me as exploratory prototypes for how life might be lived. This might involve a critical aspect - the art practice as a critical barb into an aspect of late capitalist life - but it also, I think, involves a more affirmative aspect: the positing of alternative models in place of those prescribed by the dominant mechanisms of capitalism.

However I think there is another way in which such practices are prototypes - particularly those which involve collaboration. The practices themselves produce new and different kinds of subjectivities (*proto*subjectivities) from within the practice - from within the *dynamics* of the practice itself. What I mean here is that often the practice itself has - as well as a social effect spreading outwards (and this can be critical or affirmative (or both)) - also a kind of 'subjectifying' effect moving inwards - an effect on the practice and on the practioners themselves (a kind of 'collectivisation' of the individual). Two kinds of effect then: a centrifugal political effect and a centripetal ethical effect.

To a certain extent this is obvious - making art changes you as much as it changes the world. However in drawing attention to this double operation - if you like in producing a diagram of it - we not only become aware of the complexity of effects art might produce (here the doubling of effect) - but we also put ourselves in a position of power: we can alter the parameters, the composition of the practice and hence alter the effects. This is to think art practice machinically.

No longer to ask 'what does art mean?' ('what does that art object mean?') but instead to ask how art practice might work - and how it might be made to work differently. As Deleuze and Guattari might say - we think of the effect desired and then build, borrow - steal - *assemble* the required machine which can produce this effect (which might be political, aesthetic - or indeed a combination of these two). And in assembling this art machine any and all materials might be utilised (i.e. no Greenbergian specificity of medium). Indeed in this place it might be broken machines and redundant machines (those that have been 'left behind') which are most 'useful' - at least in producing a certain political, critical effect. In fact we might find machines that have to be unplugged and replugged, tinkered with, in order that they produce the desired kind of effect. And this is to say nothing about side effects - those unintended outcomes and possibilities which we might characterise here as precisely moments of creativity.

This is of course to understand notions of the machine in a wider sense - i.e. as not just applicable to technological machines (although, of course these too). Indeed all of the various art practices here in Turin can be thought of as small - and not so small - machines plugged into the larger biennale machine, the Turin City-Machine - and outwards into ever larger and more complex social machines. And as machines these practices work on a variety of registers. For example there is certainly a signifying element to these art machines - they interact with - and often intervene in various regimes of signification (and in today's 'art world' it seems as if art is increasingly involving itself in the wider systems of signification (i.e. the social) rather than limiting itself to the narrow regime of art itself (i.e. 'art history' and the international art market)).

Parallel to these signifying registers art also, of course, operates on more affective registers. Put simply, many of the practices here in Turin, at base level, provide sensory experiences. Indeed many of the practices inasmuch as they organise immersive experiences are involved precisely in altering our sensory experiences of the world. This is as true, I think, for practices which seem to be purely about signification as it is for those which function on a different register (I am thinking here of the practices which involve that 'new' regime of signification, the world wide web).

As we have seen these machines are also machines for the production of subjectivity - for the production of the subjectivities of the collaboration itself. Indeed we might say that these art machines are precisely to do with an ever expanding collectivity . As such, I would suggest that the *modus operandi* of this machinic art is participation. Notions of the individual artist creator become less relevant here. Indeed any notion of the artist versus spectator become increasingly

redundant in a milieu in which the art works very functioning involves a call to participation. This is of course paradigmatically the case with web projects (and emergent VR technologies) - but I think it also the case with many of the other practices here at Turin. That is to say you *can* merely treat them as objects - to be looked at - but they also asked to be interacted with. Which means, I think, a move away from the disinterested spectator of the autonomous art object - to something more involved: the practices ask you to become an interested participant. As such we the spectators of art have as much a responsibility in our interaction with these practices as the artists themselves do. Both ourselves - and the artists - are, if you like, components of the machine. It is up to us whether we plug into these machines - participate with them - and thus increase their effect.

What then of the aesthetics of dissent? Well at stake in the above is the production of dissenting subjectivities - subjectivities of refusal (a refusal of the alternatives offered by the dominant systems of production and representation) - but also subjectivities of difference - alternative subjectivities - alternative ways of organising subjectivity from those offered by for example the mass media. An aesthetics of dissent has then for me a double articulation: at once a refusal - and thus a critique but also, and at the same time an affirmation - and thus an alternative. It is perhaps this second moment that has become increasingly apparent in expanded art practices - which might well be understood as precisely the construction of alternatives - micro utopias, micro manifestos - for other ways of living.

However we lose sight of that other moment of dissent at our peril. Without the refusal - the critical edge - the alternative models of life which art practice offer can become little but more than life style choices in a world which increasingly trades in the latter. Indeed the increasing globalisation of the world market brings with it an increasing globalisation of the art market - as demonstrated by the increase in the amount of biennale's such as the one here in Turin. Art practices then come to imitate - and also in some sense lead - the practices of capitalism (they present prototype commodities). In such a climate all sorts of strategies become viable. For example a turn towards the local - towards the specifics of a locality (for example Turin) in place of attention being placed on a kind of neutral global smooth space. Again this will involve, importantly, the interaction, and invitation to participation, with/of a local community. Another example might be the choice of materials of an art practice. A trash aesthetic in place of a slick one. A bothersome practice in place of one that seduces. Indeed in a time and space of globalisation a turn back - to previous moments in history - as well as a turn forwards (to new

technologies) may be a viable strategy of dissent. As, no doubt, will be the involvement of other non artistic factors and non artistic collaborators.

This is not an argument for a fictitious stand point 'outside' capitalism - outside the art market, outside the biennale. Rather, these structures, these systems have to be worked from within inside. Indeed it is not a question of being inside or outside of the world art system - of being inside or outside of the capitalist mode of production - but rather of moving at a different speed - living at a different rhythm. To be in permanent ignition means to be constantly on the move - to be constantly moving at a different tempo to the apparatus of capture of the world art market, the market in general - and indeed the larger structures of capitalist domination.

It also means, I think, following a different trajectory - operating on a different level of reality to these latter systems. Art practice, I think, might productively be understood, following Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, as the actualisation of the plane of immanence - the actualisation of the different potentialities of life in all its creative abundance. As such, as well as concerning itself with the actual - the world in which we live and love - such practices might be characterised also as a site of actualisation - as operating on that edge between the actual and the virtual. The virtual here being simply the realm of potentiality (what Hardt and Negri call 'bioproductivity') - the realm of things that have not yet been actualised - the future yet to come.

So then, actual, but also virtual. Speed but also, when appropriate slowness. Recent technology (the www) but also - as strategy - yesterday's technologies. And an art practice which in its call to participation alters the parameters of art - but also, and perhaps more important, the parameters of our subjectivities. Art practice then as a dissenting machine: a call to arms, a call to refusal - but also, and at the same time, a call to participate - and a call to explore, and experiment with, the myriad possibilities and potentialities, of life.