

Chapter 11

From Aesthetics to the Abstract Machine: Deleuze, Guattari and Contemporary Art Practice

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The following essay is in three inter-related parts. The first section introduces and attempts to think through a certain kind of contemporary art practice utilising what might loosely be called a Deleuzian framework (and via an argument that is in part made against Craig Owens and Nicolas Bourriaud). This section begins with an account of my encounter with a particular object and an art scene that contributed to my own rethinking about what contemporary is and what it does. The second section revisits some of the points made in the first but is more explicit (and abstract) in its mobilisation of Deleuze's thought in that it takes concepts from across Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari's corpus of work and brings them to bear on the field of contemporary art practice in general. The third brief and concluding section homes in on one particular concept and also turns to Guattari's solo writings in order to think a little more about what I take to be one of contemporary art's most important characteristics: its future orientation (and it is in this sense, ultimately, that contemporary art names not just a type of art, but art's very diagrammatic function).

Aesthetics and Art Practice

It seems to me that a new style – or attitude – has emerged in some of the contemporary art that has recently been exhibited in London and indeed elsewhere in Britain. A style that, I want to claim, has a certain resonance with Deleuze's philosophy, and, as such, I want to use it as a personal and somewhat idiosyncratic 'way in' to think about the conjunction Deleuze *and* contemporary art. It is a style at odds with the more conceptual and post-conceptual work of the 1980s and early '90s; that work, we might say, involved attention to the signifier and indeed an emphasis on art as sign (albeit one often in crisis). One of

the characteristics of this new attitude, if there is one, is a turn towards more object-based practices and more specifically towards the production of new ‘assemblages’ (I am thinking here, for example, of artists such as Jim Lambie and Eva Rothschild). It also seems to involve a re-engagement with painting, a painting that oscillates between figuration and abstraction and is characterised by its own idiosyncratic, we might even say specifically *subjective*, subject matter (examples here would be the painting practices of Rachel Morton and Hayley Tompkins).¹

In this context I want to mention Cathy Wilkes’ work, which involves both the kind of painting and assemblages I mentioned above, as an example of this ‘new’ style of art practice. I remember the first time I saw Wilkes’ work in the late 1990s. The particular object I have in mind is *Beautiful Human Body*, an assemblage of different parts and pieces in a careful, and seemingly precarious construction that was somehow figurative and yet non-figurative at the same time (see image 11.1). Quite frankly I found this particular assemblage unfathomable, impossible to place. It seemed to stymie any interpretive strategies at my disposal (signifier enthusiast as I was myself back then). Although I knew something was going on with the work – it had a certain complexity and a definite intentionality – I found I had very few reference points with which to approach it. In fact, Wilkes’ art was not alone in eliciting this response from me. The artists mentioned above were, with Wilkes, part of a particular scene in Glasgow that was producing work that just seemed, at that time, *different*. Looking back, this art did not seem to fit in with the ‘political’ practices being carried out elsewhere and that in general characterised what for many, including myself, was the more interesting and important art being produced at the time. Put even more bluntly it did not fit my own interpretive frameworks and although this was bothersome, I also found it interesting, in fact, ultimately, compelling.

This turn, within some of these practices, away from straightforward signifying strategies and away from a certain kind of politics of art might be characterised as a turn (back) to what I would call the aesthetic potential of art. This is not necessarily to reinstate a transcendent space for art, to position it in an ‘elsewhere’ or to suggest that it transports us to an ‘elsewhere’, but it is to say that art is more than just an object to be read. Another way of saying this is that art is ultimately irreducible to signification and indeed to any discursive account given of it (something always remains – an excess – after any written/spoken report). As a first moment then, the aesthetic, as I am using the term, names art’s specificity *as* art – its operation up and beyond signification. Such art, we might say, is not just ‘meaningful’, or, not only an object of knowledge



11.1: Cathy Wilkes, *Beautiful Human Body*, 1999; mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view from 'Fantasy Heckler' (curated by Padraig Timoney), Trace, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, 1999, image courtesy of The Modern Institute.

(although it is that too). It goes without saying that art has always had this character, however a certain kind of conceptualism, allied with a particular attitude within art history and theory (we might call it simply the prevalence of 'ideological critique'), has for a long time stymied this aesthetic character of art in an over investment of the idea of art as sign (albeit, again, one that is often in crisis).

Of course, aesthetics also names a response to the world and specifically to certain objects in that world. Following Kant, at least on this point, aesthetics names a specifically disinterested response, or, we might say, a response that is not 'of' the self as already constituted. This amounts to saying that it is not enough for new assemblages and combinations to exist, after all, anything can be *read*, that is to say, can be referred back to previous knowledges and frames of reference. There will always be those 'maintenance crews for the big explanatory machines', as Jean-François Lyotard once called them (Lyotard 1989: 182). At stake in this 'new' work, if it really is new, is then also a new spectator or participant and his or her own particular 'production of subjectivity'. Put simply, the change in attitude – if there is one – is one which these artists and their public share (even if the latter is often only a limited scene). To return to my encounter with Wilkes, we might say that I was somehow ready, open perhaps, to being challenged (or, at least, to having my ideas about art tested).

These art practices (and here I am thinking of Wilkes, but also Rothschild and Lambie for example) do not however just involve this aesthetic impulse as I am calling it. Indeed, paradoxically, they also often involve the utilisation of signifying material, previous art for example, and indeed other aspects of popular and mainstream culture. Here the production of new assemblages involves a recombination of already existing elements in and of the world. In general however, at least at first glance, this latter strategy (if we can call it one) of reappropriation/recasting does not appear to be that new. Certainly 'postmodern' practices, as characterised by Craig Owens amongst others, self-consciously utilised previous forms (this was the so-called allegorical turn tracked by *October* and its writers). Owens' seminal essay mapped out this 'allegorical impulse' that was also a particular mode of reading objects ('one is text *read through* another' [Owens 1998: 317]). It is here that we encounter that specifically deconstructive attitude – the solicitation and deferral of meaning – that characterised much of the art (and art theory) of the 1980s (see, for example, Owens discussion of Brauntuch [Owens 1998: 317–18]). Another name for this attitude towards art is the aforementioned crisis in representation.

It might be instructive to move forward here from Owens' postmodernism to Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction*. In that book Bourriaud makes the argument that contemporary art today – post-postmodernism as it were – likewise utilises previous artistic and other cultural forms (often more popular cultures) in its practice. Hence the 'twin figures of the DJ and the programmer' are seen by Bourriaud as being characteristic of our age, 'both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts' (Bourriaud 2002: 7). Bourriaud names these 'new' art practitioners, 'semionauts', characterised as they are by a 'willingness to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and significations, instead of considering it an autonomous or original form' (7, 10). In a sense then, Bourriaud is proffering a kind of intertextuality for art practice, although he does make the point that such practices are linked to other non-discursive regimes, other circuits of production, and, as such, we might say he has moved, at least a little, away from the restricted textual economy of Craig Owens and the other *October* writers.

We can certainly agree to an extent with Bourriaud that contemporary art does indeed involve the recasting of signifying material from elsewhere. Indeed, in one sense at least, it is the specific character of this manipulation that distinguishes art from other aspects of culture. It is this that constitutes an artist's archive as it were, an archive that is then worked over by the artist in question (I am thinking here particularly of the manner in which art utilises/references previous art). Again, this is not to return to Craig Owens et al. and to identify a general postmodern allegorical impulse within art, but it is to note that contemporary art is involved in multiple regimes of signs. We might say then, taking this point and what I have already said about the aesthetic above, that art – and specifically the work I introduced at the beginning of this section – is both asignifying *and* signifying, or, that it is both simple *and* complex. I will return to this point towards the end of my essay.

But is such art also involved in the crisis, or critique, of representation that Owens saw as characteristic of the allegorical impulse? Are these recastings that we see today deconstructions? Or, is there something different in these newer practices? Well, I would claim (in addition to the points made above) that there is indeed a different attitude at stake here. Whereas the *representation* of modern forms in the 1980s often operated as an ironic critique of the tenets of modernism, what we have with some of these other practices is a *repetition* of the modern. A repetition that repeats the energy, the force, of the latter. We might say then that rather than a critique of originality and authenticity these practices

repeat and celebrate the modern impulse, which we might characterise generally as the desire for, and production of, the new (these practices cannot be understood as parodies or pastiches in this sense). Again, for myself, this is what is at stake in what I have been calling the aesthetic: an impulse towards the new, towards something *different* to that which is already here.

We might ask ourselves what this means in terms of the politics of art practice? What indeed constitutes contemporary art's political effectivity? For, I would argue, political art does not always look political and art that looks political ('speaks' its message as it were) does not always operate politically. In fact art is not politics in the typical – or molar and signifying – sense. It operates under a different logic. Such a politics, if we can still call it this, comes from this play with matter and with this production of difference. Returning to Wilkes' work, we might say that it is this, the production of something different – often a construction as in image 11.1 but also sometimes the arrangement of found objects and materials (some worked on, others left as found) in a very specific, but unfamiliar and surprising composition (for example the work '1/4 Moon' [image 11.2]) – that gives the work its singular and forceful character. Put simply, it is a new thing, a new assemblage in the world that has a definite intentionality albeit one that is difficult to read (it is not just more of the same however this might be dressed up as innovation). Much more might be said about Wilkes' work – especially in relation to the maternal and to our present-day commodity culture – but it is this *strangeness* and what I would call *newness* that, for me, is most compelling.² Contemporary art might indeed involve itself in critique, the critique of representation or of that apparatus of capture that feeds off creativity (deconstructive strategies/ideological critique), but it can also plug into the creativity and fundamental productivity in and of the world that is ontologically prior to this capture. It is this second move that I think characterises a practice like that of Wilkes.

I want to end this first introductory section of my essay, then, by foregrounding a notion of difference and repetition. Perhaps what is at stake with contemporary art is the repetition of previous art forms, and indeed non art forms of life from elsewhere, but a repetition with difference. A new dice throw, as perhaps Deleuze would say. This production of difference in itself involves the deployment of different temporalities, for example, a general slowing down, even a stillness, or, in other cases, an absolute acceleration (when thought leaps or pounces at a speed irreducible to the regulative movements and rhythms of the market).



11.2: Cathy Wilkes, *1/4 Moon*, 2004; drill, wood, paper, glass panels, fabric, candles, telephones, VHC, plastic, oil on canvas, mixed media on canvas, 167 x 465 x 430 cm. Installation view at '1/4' Moon, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, 2004, image courtesy of The Modern Institute.

Indeed, time, as well as matter, becomes a material of sorts to play with in these practices. I will be returning to this point below, but we might note here the different temporal experiments at the cusp of modernity/postmodernity where these different speeds were also at stake. Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* or Carolee Schneeman's performances, for example. In passing we might also point to the different temporalities at stake in other media, for example film, which, as Deleuze argues in the *Cinema* books, involves precisely the exploration of different space-times. And then, following Spinoza, there is the possible deployment of the eternal *against* temporality, when art offers us an experience (though perhaps it is not an unaltered 'us' that experiences) that takes place 'beyond' time (again, I will return to this). Suffice to say, in a time of total capitalism (when lived time is increasingly colonised), the time of art becomes crucial.³

None of this, I think, is really new. Modern art certainly, in some of its instantiations, has always involved this logic of difference. Perhaps what is new then, as I suggested above, is our attitude as participants with such art. Rather than mobilising pre-existing reading strategies and interpretive paradigms, capturing art within our already set up temporal frames and systems of reference, we have become attentive to art's own logic of invention and creation. This does not mean a simple turning away from critique, for the production of something new will always also involve the turning away from, or simply the refusal of, that which came before. It does, however, mean taking a more affirmative attitude towards contemporary art understood here as the production of new combinations in and of the world which suggest new ways and times of being and acting in that world.

Concepts and Components

So far I have been writing about my encounter with a particular kind of contemporary art practice from what might be called, again very loosely, a Deleuzian perspective. I want now to change tack and attempt to account for the effectivity of these new practices, and of certain aspects of contemporary art in general, by being a little more specific, but also more abstract. Below then, I assemble a number of concepts or components, seven in all, that I think are useful for thinking the expanded field of contemporary art. All of them have been extracted from Deleuze or certainly use the latter as their point of departure (although the last one, it seems to me, moves away somewhat from what we might call a strict Deleuzian take on art).

1. *Aesthetics*. As I have already mentioned, reinstating a notion of aesthetics within contemporary art discourse need not involve a wholesale turn to the Kantian heritage or indeed to (re)installing a transcendent operating space of, and for, art. Aesthetics might in fact be a name, on the one hand, for the rupturing quality of art: its power to break our habitual ways of being and acting in the world (our reactive selves); and on the other, for a concomitant second moment: the production of something new. We might say then that what is at stake with aesthetics is what Deleuze would call a genuine *encounter*. For Deleuze such an encounter is always with an object of sense that in itself involves the short-circuiting of sorts of our cognitive and conceptual capacities (see Deleuze 1994: 139). We might add to this, following some of my comments above, that such an object of encounter might also operate to rupture certain circuits of reception and consumption and other habits of ‘spectatorship’ (those that reinforce a certain ‘knowledge’ of art, or even a given subjectivity) whilst opening us up to other perhaps more unfamiliar but more productive economies.

At stake then are two moments in what I am calling the aesthetics of contemporary art: one of dissent (a turn from, or refusal of, the typical) and one of affirmation (of something different). Two operations then: one of criticism, one of creativity. We might call the first parasitical (on an already existing body, for example an institution); the second, germinal (the birth of the new). Often it is only the former that is discussed in relation to contemporary art (as I indicated above, this was, it seems to me, the ‘attitude’ of the Academy in the 1980s and ’90s: critical art practice was positioned as a form of expanded ideological [and institutional] critique). And certainly an untheorised celebration of the latter, particularly when it is pinned to a transcendent aesthetic, can be nothing more than an apology for the status quo (the critique of the latter being precisely the position of the former). We might say then that the more interesting examples of contemporary art today (and here I am thinking of those practices I introduced above) take the former – the critique – as their point of departure, but are not content with remaining with the critique, trapped as it can be by the very thing it critiques. These new practices have *worked through* the ruins of representation, hence, I think, their often ‘knowing’, or self-conscious character. One way of thinking this is that such practices are involved in the production of worlds rather than in the critique of the world as is. And at stake here, I think, is one’s style of thought, as Deleuze might say: whether one is drawn to negation and critique or to affirmation and creativity.

2. *Affect*. Affect names the intensive quality of life. The risings and fallings, the movement from one state of being to another, the *becomings*. For Deleuze-Spinoza, ethics would be the organisation of one's life so as to increase specifically joyful affects, those that increase our capacity to act in the world (see Deleuze 1988a: esp. 48–51). This ethics will then involve certain kinds of encounter, for example when we come across an object with which we positively resonate, or when two or more individuals come together that essentially 'agree' (albeit this agreement might operate below that of apparent complicity in a register of *becoming*, as it were). This is to move the register from one of rupture to one of conjunction. In Spinoza's terms it is to form a 'common notion' that refers to an essence shared by two or more modes. It is in this sense that the concept of 'disinterest' I introduced above might be seen to involve the mobilisation of a 'common notion' in that it moves the dynamics of an encounter away from purely subjective coordinates towards those of the longitudes and latitudes that determine the limits of wider assemblages.

Our encounter with art has the capacity to produce these kinds of common notions and transversal becomings (and this might be specifically the case with collaborative practices, or more generally with art scenes). We might say then that art practice can involve the production of specifically joyful affects as oppose to sad affects, for example that fear and paranoia produced by our encounter with more typical affective assemblages (I am thinking here of the mass media). Sad affects, of course, specifically decrease our capacity to act in the world. (It is as well to remind ourselves here that joy is not just an ego term, that is, having simply to do with 'getting what we want', but is something more impersonal, again, more 'disinterested'. Put starkly, sadness, in Spinozist terms, is a diminishment of life; joy its increase.)

Certainly the encounter with art can produce this kind of joy. Indeed, many of the practices I mentioned above have this joy-increasing effect; there is something fundamentally affirming of life and of creativity within them. However, the same work, as I suggested in my opening section (and indeed in point 1 above), also operates to undo, or to break with, typical ways of thinking and feeling. Indeed, the work's work is often about stymieing any agreement or simple 'understanding'. From a certain point of view we might say then that contemporary art can problematise the idea that we are purely rational beings, or that our experiences in the world can be the basis for a rational system of ethics. There will in fact always be moments of rupture – irrational points – within life that open us up to something different. However, from another perspective, we might understand these affective ruptures as

ruptures in an already ruptured world, as it were. This then is a rupture of the already existing rupture between subject and object, which is to say the production of something ‘common’ that operates specifically *contra* alienation. The common notion overcomes the rupture between subject and object and it is this that allows Deleuze to use the former to examine the transcendental conditions of individuation as such, beyond the subject–object determination.

For Deleuze and Guattari, affects can also be thought of as self-supporting elements in the world and art itself figured as a ‘bloc of affects’ (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 163–99 and esp. 164). Art, we might say, is made of those becomings mentioned above frozen in time and space, waiting to be reactivated, waiting to be unleashed. It is an artist’s style that coheres this assemblage together into a particular composition. Artists offer up new compositions of affect, new affective assemblages that are different to those we are more familiar with. It is this that differentiates art, as a specific form of thought, from mere opinion (a more habitual assemblage and one tied to a certain ‘common sense’). Indeed, art practice does not necessarily communicate anything in this sense (and, as such, does not, I think, offer any knowledge of the world *as it is*). Art, when it really is art, operates at the very limit of our understanding, hence its always difficult (and often bothersome) character.

3. *The Production of Subjectivity*. It follows from the above that art is involved in a different kind of production of subjectivity from the typical. Indeed, the active production of subjectivity – our processual self-creation – is in general an aesthetic business. We can understand this in two ways: i) art objects and practices – specific combinations of affect – offer us models, or diagrams, for our own subjectivities (after all, we are also blocs of affect); ii) such practices might also operate to break a certain model of subjectivity and indeed other dominant modes of subjection. Again, this is the production of a kind of affective break within the typical (I will be returning once more to this point in my conclusion). Following on from my introductory remarks, this might involve a rethinking of the political functioning of art and an assessment of the role the latter might have in a programme of the production of subjectivity rather than in critiquing the existent or of being at the service of political regimes of signification (left-wing or otherwise).

Guattari’s solo writings are particularly attentive to this question of how we might reconfigure – or resingularise – our own lives through interaction with one another, with groups, with different objects and

practices and so forth. In Guattari's terminology, we access 'new universes of reference' through interacting and experimenting with new and different 'materials of expression' (Guattari 1995: 6–7). In passing it is worth noting the similarities with Spinoza here; both philosophers offer a kind of chemistry of subjectivity. In relation to the art cited in my introduction we might say that this kind of active mapping, what we may also call a realm of heterogenetic encounter, constitutes a particular art *scene*. This, I think, is also to begin to bring the aesthetic and the therapeutic together, and, as such, points towards a notion of art practice as a form of schizoanalysis.

4. *The Minor*. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature as it is developed in the *Kafka* book involves three components (see Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16–18): i) The foregrounding of the affective – or intensive – quality of language, or simply the latter's operation on an asignifying register. A minor literature stutters and stammers the major. It breaks with the operation of 'order-words', or simply stops making sense.⁴ ii) The always already political nature of such literature (it is always connected to the wider social milieu and not fixated on the domestic/Oedipal). iii) Its collective nature. A minor literature is always a collective enunciation, in fact a minor literature works to pave the way for a community – sometimes a nation – yet to come. This is a minor literature's peculiar future orientation.

Each of these components of a minor literature seem pertinent to contemporary art practice. Indeed, the first has resonances with what I have been saying above – and will return to below – about asignification and rupture. The second also would allow us to move from the critique of sorts I made of notions of a political art above (for example, we might position contemporary art as a desiring-machine that is always connected to [and interferes with] larger social-machines). However it is the last point that seems to me especially relevant to many of the practices I mentioned in my first section. These practices are not made for an already existing audience as it were, but in order to call forth – to invoke – an audience. We might say, following point 3 above, to draw out a new subjectivity from within the old. Such practices do not offer a reassuring mirror reflection of a subjectivity already in place (they do not multiply the 'fantasies of realism' as Lyotard called them [1984: 74]). Indeed, with such art 'the people are missing'. We might say then that the operating field of these practices is the future, and that the artists operate here as kind of prophets, and specifically *traitor* prophets (traitors to a given affective/signifying regime). Traitor prophets offering

up traitor objects perhaps? This gives art a utopian function of sorts, although it is a specifically *immanent* utopia intrinsically connected to the present, made out of the same materials, the same matter, as it were. I will be returning to this crucial point in my conclusion.

5. *The Virtual*. Although in his own writings Deleuze characterises philosophy itself as that form of thought that actualises the virtual (art being concerned with the possible) (see Deleuze 1988a: 96–7; 1994: 211–12), it might be useful to borrow his terminology and understand art as operating as a kind of ‘actualising machine’ (and, of course, there is the more obvious point to be made here that contemporary art today, post-Duchamp, might also operate through the concept). We might briefly remind ourselves of Deleuze’s ontology here: a univocity of Being when the latter is understood *as* multiplicity. This is to foreground a ‘fullness’ or plenitude in and of the world. A superabundance of which only a fraction is ever actualised. Rather than looking to a transcendent horizon, or positioning art as taking us to ‘another place’ (or promising to take us there), we might then understand art practice as simply being involved in the actualisation of some of this potential that surrounds us here and now.

If with point 2 above we looked briefly at Deleuze’s Spinozism, then the present point relates to his Bergsonism. The world, or rather space *and* time, are fractal in nature. We only ever access (perceive/remember) a part. For Deleuze technologies such as cinema – especially when it moves from the movement to the time image – continue Bergson’s intuitive method of thinking beyond this human configuration. Put simply, and as I remarked at the end of the first section, the camera eye actualises different spatialities and different temporalities. It is in this sense that Deleuze’s writings on cinema are so useful for thinking through the potentialities and operating logics of new media in contemporary art. However, I think we can also understand other art practices as actualisations; certainly Wilkes’ work actualises a different sense of space, and, more importantly, opens us up to unfamiliar durations. For example, and as I also briefly mentioned above, it slows us down, and in this sense operates as what Deleuze might call a ‘vacuole of non-communication’ inasmuch as contemporary communication technologies – and the worlds they produce – specifically operate at a certain speed of contact and commerce (Deleuze 1995: 74). In Bergsonian terms we might say such art can further open that gap between stimulus and response from within which genuine creativity arises (I am thinking here of the celebrated virtual-cone of Bergson [see Bergson 1991: 150–5]). Again, this is

the *time* of art, a time different to our more habitual clock-work-leisure time. I will be returning to this point in a moment.

6. *The Event*. The state machine increasingly utilises indeterminacy in its strategies of control and coercion. These strategies move from anticipatory ‘pre-emptive strike’ politics and military action through to ‘softer’ media strategies that utilise an affect of fear. In each case there is an attempt to colonise the virtual, or, we might say, to harness the strange temporality of the event, understood as a point of indeterminacy, a point of potentiality *before* bifurcation, *before* signification and action. This point operates on and at the very cusp between the virtual and the actual.

However, as I also implied above, we can see art as a kind of counter-technology to this nervous-system-machine. Put simply, indeterminacy is the very operating logic of certain objects and practices, and especially, I would argue, of performance. Indeed, if the current strategies of fear (and especially the production of a kind of ambient anxiety) are to be countered they need to be met with something operating with a similar logic and on a similar level, albeit for different ends. Performance art, and especially more absurdist performance that ‘stops making sense’, can incorporate these points of indeterminacy. Practices such as these mobilise the transformative power of the event – the way in which it holds the potential to open up new pathways, new possibilities of being for all participants (artists and spectators as it were). To stay with the Glasgow scene in particular, we might point to Sue Tompkin’s spoken performances, which, in their use of breaks and pauses, slowness and speed, stutterings and stammerings, foreground these points of indeterminacy, these glitches.⁵ In fact, I would say that it is a characteristic of much of the artwork cited earlier that it presents itself *as* event in terms of being a point of indetermination (and this logic is accentuated by the work in question being in a gallery, that is, isolated from typical regimes of circulation, set free from the burden of being useful, as it were).

It is also in this sense that chance is an important part of contemporary art practice. Chance understood as a specifically productive technology, a mechanism for escaping cliché and the habits of the self. We might say then that an art practice, as well as having a certain cohesiveness, also needs to be able to incorporate points of collapse. This is the mobilisation of indeterminacy through a determinate practice. This might involve accident or just the chance coming together of objects and/or other materials (and it is in this sense that art is always, ultimately, a thinking with and through materials) or it might involve a practice that

deliberately moves between sense and nonsense (which is to say, deliberately scrambles existing codes and coding).

In passing we might remark that this time of the event is not only a key logic of art practice today, but also that a radical politics can learn much by following this aesthetic event-based technology. Indeed, if Antonio Negri is correct in his thesis in *Time for Revolution* (Negri 2003) that there has been a complete colonisation of time by capital, then the time of this affect-event becomes crucial. This is then to argue that both the state, and that which attempts to orientate itself against the state, increasingly operate in and as an aesthetic-temporal modality. All sorts of strange strategies might make themselves apparent here, for example, short circuiting the aesthetic-nervous system or producing random feedback and diverting flows into other stranger circuits.

7. *Mythopoesis*. Mythopoesis names the imaginative transformation of the world through fiction. This is the production of new and different myths for those who do not recognise themselves in the narratives and image clichés that surround them. The expanded field of contemporary art includes many explicit examples of the production of these new fictions, for example the *Cremaster* films of Matthew Barney, but, I would argue, we can also understand art practices like Wilkes' as mythopoetic inasmuch as they present us with a different narrative of sorts – a different arrangement of reality – albeit one that is difficult to read using our typical frames of reference. Such narratives need to be built up using a variety of techniques, objects and text, which is to say, echoing a point made in the opening section and in point 5 above, that mythopoesis involves both signifying *and* asignifying components (again, it is complex *and* simple).

In fact so-called 'reality' is always already the result of myth-construction in the above sense. Events are made sense of through causal logic and other framing devices that dictate meaning and, indeed, the conditions of what might be considered 'meaningful'. Language, and especially the language of commodities (inasmuch as the latter are signs that give life 'meaning') produce our dominant sense of the world. When we grasp the world as fiction in this way we begin to 'see' the limits of what is seeable/sayable and are thus able to gesture beyond these very limits. Indeed, released from the political obligation to speak of the world *as it is*, contemporary art practice, in its mythopoetic character, is able to imagine another place in another space-time. We might say that art operates in two directions in this sense. It has a face turned to us and

towards the world we inhabit, but it also has a face turned to that which is precisely otherworldly.

Finally, to return to point 5 above, mythopoesis can also operate as a general slowing down so as to allow access to something beyond the world. In a contemporary world that celebrates contact and communication, ever-increasing accessibility and an ideal of always-being-switched-on, this slowing down has an important, if not crucial role to play in actually living a life. We might note here Bergson's ideas on fiction, or what he calls fabulation. The latter can, again, produce a gap, for those who choose to hear, between the fixed habits and rituals of society which in itself allows for what Deleuze calls 'creative emotion' to arise (see Deleuze 1988a: 111; Bergson 1935: 209–65). Fabulation involves the use of signifying material to access something specifically asignifying. More simply put, story-telling allows us to unplug and to enter a different duration. It functions as a catalyst for that idleness, which, as Nietzsche remarked, is the progenitor of any truly creative thought (Nietzsche 2001: 183–4). This is the productivity of anti-productivity; in fact the *super*-productivity of that which is, from a certain point of view, useless.

Ethico-Aesthetics and the Abstract Machine

In conclusion I want to look a little more closely at what might be called my eighth concept or component, the abstract machine, and link this briefly to Guattari's solo work on ethico-aesthetics. The abstract machine names something that is perhaps most characteristic of Deleuze's aesthetic, and something I touched upon earlier: the future orientation of art. Indeed, for Deleuze, the future holds a kind of potential that can be deployed in the present. Art especially draws its own audience forth, calls a people into being. Again, we might say that such art is not just made for an existing subject in the world, but to draw forth a new subject from within that which is already in place. This constitutes the very difficulty of art, we might even say its ontological difficulty. But if art's operating field is the future, how does this link with the production of subjectivity that must always begin in the present? Well, it might be said that art – and in particular the contemporary art practices mentioned above – operates as an intentional object, a point of subjectification as Guattari might call it, whilst at the same time functioning as a corrective to any simple assertion and affirmation of a 'new' people that is already here.

In one sense then, the sense of the present, art might be understood as always already incorporated within various systems and circuits of

reception and consumption. But from another perspective this incorporation will always necessarily miss that which defines art: its future orientation (this orientation, I would argue, is not necessarily disabled even if such art is located within a gallery or other institution). The operating field of contemporary art might then be understood as a future field, which is to say the field of the abstract machine itself: 'The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 142).

Indeed, the abstract machine is the cutting edge, the point of deterritorialisation, of any given assemblage. It is where everything happens. In order to understand the mechanism at work here we can look once more to Guattari's solo writings. For Guattari – following Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein, but also Mikhail Bakhtin – in the art experience, there is a 'detachment of an ethico-aesthetic "partial object" from the field of dominant significations' that 'corresponds both to the promotion of a mutant desire and to the achievement of a certain disinterestedness' (Guattari 1995: 13). The partial object operates as a rupture but also a point around which a different subjectivity might crystallise; a point of entry into a different incorporeal universe. Importantly, and as Guattari remarks, this must involve a certain disinterestedness. As I remarked in the first section, art, in order to be activated, requires the prior preparation of the participant. One has to be open to the deterritorialising power of art, its molecularity, or affective power, operating 'beneath' its molar 'appearance'.

Our interaction with art then has the character of an event, as I discussed it in point 6 above; an event that must be seen, and responded to, as an event, 'as the potential bearer of new constellations of Universes of reference' (Guattari 1995: 18). This is to affirm an 'ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealises and deterritorialises contingency, linear causality and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us' (Guattari 1995: 29). Art ruptures dominant regimes and habitual formations and in so doing actualises other durations, other possibilities for life. It is within the field of contemporary art (and indeed with that which is contemporary in all art) that this future-orientation – this diagrammatic function – is particularly evident. Contemporary art then has what Deleuze, following Nietzsche, might call an 'untimely' character. It operates on the cusp between any given present and the future (and, in this sense, is always irreducible to any present it belongs to). Certainly, it is 'made' in the present, out of the materials at hand, as it were, but its 'content' calls for a something yet to come.

We might say then that contemporary art practice, as I am figuring it here, turns away from the habits and impasses of the present, offering up new assemblages – new refrains – to those that surround us on an everyday basis. I began this essay thinking about specific kinds of practice and indeed about specific artists, in particular Cathy Wilkes, but I want to end on a more general and expansive note that, I think, follows from the above. Everyone can break with habitual patterns at least to a certain extent. Everyone can experiment with the materials at hand and produce something new in the world or themselves anew in that world. Indeed, it is only with this creative participation in and with the world that the production of an ‘auto-enriching’ subjectivity can proceed (Guattari 1995: 21). Perhaps then, finally, we can think about two different kinds of contemporary art practice with Deleuze: the production of actual artworks or simply of composed things in the world, but also the practice of a life and of treating one’s ‘life as a work of art’ (see Deleuze 1995: 95). In both cases such aesthetic production will involve working against the habitual and the normative, working at the very edge of our subjectivities as they are. In each case we might then also call such an aesthetics an ethics, inasmuch as we ask the question (following Deleuze) ‘what am I capable of creating?’ And further (following Deleuze and Guattari, following Spinoza) ‘what am I capable of becoming?’

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Notes

1. These four artists are represented by The Modern Institute in Glasgow. For representative images of each practice (and for further images of Cathy Wilkes' work) see www.themoderninstitute.com
2. I have attempted a more sustained engagement with Wilkes' practice that addresses some of these other aspects of the work in O'Sullivan (2005).
3. My article 'The Care of the Self and the Production of the New' (2008) explores this idea – via Spinoza, as well as Bergson and Foucault – of 'accessing' a time, or truth, beyond the finite, as it were. This is also the subject of my recent article, 'The Strange Temporality of the Subject: Badiou and Deleuze Between the Finite and the Infinite' (O'Sullivan 2009a), which thinks through the same themes in relation to Badiou and Deleuze. Both of these essays are work towards a future monograph on *The Production of Subjectivity*.
4. I have attended to this second component of a minor literature – in relation to contemporary art and what I call the 'glitch' – in my article 'From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Deleuze, Bacon and Contemporary Art Practice' (O'Sullivan 2009b). That article is a companion of sorts to the present one inasmuch as it mobilises a number of other Deleuzian concepts – specifically from the Bacon book – to think contemporary art.
5. For still images of these performances see www.themoderninstitute.com