

The aesthetic paradigm (Félix Guattari and art)

Félix Guattari's work, cut short by his untimely passing, does not form a set of clear-cut pieces, with a sub-set dealing specifically with the issue of aesthetics. Art, for him, was a form of living matter rather than a category of thought, and this difference informs the very spirit of his philosophical undertaking. Over and above genres and categories, he wrote: "*The important thing is to know whether a work makes an effective contribution to a changing production of statement (production d'énonciation)*", and not to delimit the specific boundaries of this or that type of utterance. The *psyche* on the one hand, and the *socius* on the other are constructed on productive agencies, with art being just one of these, even if it enjoys a special place. Guattari's concepts are ambivalent and supple, so much so that they can be translated into many different systems. What is thus involved is the definition of a *potential* aesthetics, which only assumes a real consistency provided that it can be given a permanent transcoding. For while the practitioner in La Borde's psychiatric clinic has always granted a predominant place to the "aesthetic paradigm" in the development of his thinking, he has written very little about art, properly so-called, apart from the paper for a lecture on Balthus, and one or two passages in his major works, incorporated within a more general subject matter.

This aesthetic paradigm is nevertheless being practised already in writing itself. The style, if we may use this word, or let us rather say the Guattari scriptorial flow, encompasses every concept in a raft of images. The processes of thought are usually described here as physical phenomena, endowed with a specific texture-drifting "plates" and dovetailed "planes", "machinery", and so on. Serene materialism, where, to be effective, concepts must assume the finery of tangible reality, and become territorialized on images. Guattari's writing is informed by an

obvious visual and plastic, not to say sculptural concern, yet appears to be little bothered by syntactical clarity. At times, Guattari's language may seem obscure. This is because he does not shrink from coming up with neologisms ("nationalitarian", "ritournellize") and portmanteau words, or using English and German terms as they spring to mind and flow from his pen. Nor does he shrink from embarking on propositions with regard for the reader, or juggling with the lesser meanings of an ordinary word. His phrasing is thoroughly oral, chaotic, "wild and outrageous" (*délirant*), off-the-cuff and littered with deceptive short-cuts, quite unlike the conceptual order that presides over the writings of accomplice and fellow Gilles Deleuze.

Guattari may still seem significantly under-estimated to us, and he is often reduced to the role of Deleuze's foil, yet it does today seem easier to acknowledge his specific contribution to the co-authored writings, from *Anti Oedipus* (1972) to *What is Philosophy?* (1991)... From the "ritournelle" concept to the masterful passages dealing with types of subjectivization, the Guattari signature stands out quite clearly, ringing out ever louder in the contemporary philosophical debate. Through its extreme particularness, and the attention it pays to the "production of subjectivity" and its preferred vehicles, the works, Félix Guattari's thinking links up right away with the productive machinery with which present-day art is riddled. In the current dearth of aesthetic thought, it thus seems to us to be increasingly useful, whatever the degree of arbitrariness affecting this operation may be, to proceed to a kind of *grafting* of Guattari's thinking in the domain of present-day art, thus creating a "polyphonic interlacing", rich in possibilities. It is a question, henceforth, of thinking about art with Guattari, and with the *toolbox* he has bequeathed us.

Subjectivity pursued and produced

De-naturalising subjectivity

The idea of subjectivity is certainly the main thread of Guattari's research. He would devote his life to dismantling the tortuous mechanisms and systems of subjectivity and putting them back together again, exploring its constituents and escape modes, and even going so far as to make it the keystone of the social edifice. Psychoanalysis and art? Two sorts of subjectivity production, interconnected, two operational systems, two preferred tool systems, which are joined together in the possible solution to the "Malaise of Civilisation"... The pivotal position given by Guattari to subjectivity defines his conception of art, and art's value, from start to finish. In the Guattari order of things, subjectivity as *production* plays the role of a fulcrum around which forms of knowledge and action can freely pitch in, and soar off in pursuit of the laws of the socius. Which, incidentally, is what defines the field of vocabulary used to describe artistic activity. In it there is no hint of the fetishization that is common in this level of discourse. Art, here, is defined as *a process of non-verbal semiotization*, not as a separate category of global production. Uprooting fetishism to assert art as a line of thought and an "invention of life possibilities" (Nietzsche): the end purpose of subjectivity is nothing other than an individuation still to be won. Artistic practice forms a special terrain for this individuation, providing potential models for human existence in general. This is where we can define Guattari's thinking as a colossal undertaking involving the *de-naturalisation* of subjectivity, its deployment in the area of production, and the theorisation of its inclusion in the framework of the general economy of trade. There is nothing less natural than subjectivity. There is also nothing more constructed, formulated and worked on. *New forms of subjectivization are created the same way that a visual artist creates now forms from the palette at his disposal*¹. What matters is our capacity to create new arrangements and

agencies within the system of *collective facilities* formed by the ideologies and categories of thought, a creation that shows many similarities with artistic activity. Guattari's contribution to aesthetics would be incomprehensible if we did not underline his effort to de-naturalize and deterritorialize subjectivity, expel it from his earmarked domain, the sacrosanct subject, and tackle the disconcerting shores with their proliferation of mechanistic devices and existential territories in the process of being formed. They are disconcerting because the non-human is an intrinsic part of them, contrary to the phenomenological plans with which humanist thinking is riddled. Proliferation, because it turns out to be henceforth possible to decipher the entirety of the capitalist system in terms of subjectivity. Wherever this system holds sway, the more forcefully it is caught in its nets, and kidnapped on behalf of its immediate interests. For "*just like the social machines that can be arrayed under the general heading of collective facilities, so the technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity*"². We must thus learn to "*seize, enhance and reinvent*" subjectivity, for otherwise we shall see it transformed into a rigid collective apparatus at the exclusive service of the powers that be.

Status and operation of subjectivity

This declaration of the *de facto* naturalisation of human subjectivity is an input of paramount importance. Phenomenology wielded it as the unsurpassable symbol of reality, beyond which nothing can exist, whereas structuralism saw in it at times something superstitious, and at others the effect of an ideology. Here Guattari offers a complex and dynamic reading, contrasting with the deification of the subject which is common currency in the phenomenological vulgate, but just as impervious to the fossilisation being brought about by the structuralists, by placing it at the crossroads of the interplay of signifiers. We might say that Guattari's method consists in *bringing to boil* the structures fixed

by Lacan, Althusser and Lévi-Strauss: by replacing the static order by structural analyses, and the "slow movements" of Braudelian history by the novel, dynamic and undulatory linkages which matter takes on when it is reorganised by the effect of heat. Guattari's subjectivity is determined by a chaotic order, and no longer, as it was the case for the structuralists, by the quest for cosmoeses hidden beneath everyday institutions. *"A certain balance still has to be found between structuralist discoveries, which are certainly considerable, and their pragmatic management, so as not to remotely founder in social post-modern abandonism"*.

This balance only comes about provided that the socius is observed at its proper temperature, at the heat of inter-human relationships, and not artificially "cooled", the better to single out the structures... This chaotic urgency gives rise to a certain number of operations. The first consists in unsticking the subjectivity of the subject, and doing away with the bonds that make it the natural attribute of this latter. So a mapping of it has to be drawn which spills considerably beyond the limits of the individual. But it is by extending the territory of the subjective to the regulatory impersonal machinery of sociability that Guattari can call on its "re-singularization", going beyond the traditional notion of *ideology*. Only a mastery of the "collective agencies" of subjectivity makes it possible to invent particular agencies. Real individuation proceeds by way of the invention of eco-mental recycling devices, just as the demonstration of economic alienation by Marx enables him to work on an emancipation of man within the world of labour. All Guattari does is indicate the degree to which subjectivity is alienated and dependent on a mental superstructure, and point to liberation possibilities.

This Marxist backdrop turns out to be readable even in the terms whereby Guattari defines subjectivity: *"All the conditions making it possible for individual and/or collective agencies to be in a position to emerge as sui-referential existential Territory, adjacent*

to or in a relation of delimitation with an otherness that is itself subjective". Otherwise put, subjectivity can only be defined by the presence of a second subjectivity. It does not form a "territory" except on the basis of the other territories it comes across; as an evolving formation, it is modelled on the difference which forms it itself, on the principle of otherness. It is in this plural, polyphonic definition of subjectivity that we find the perspective tremor that Guattari inflicts on philosophical economy. Subjectivity, he explains, cannot exist in an independent way, and in no case can it ground the existence of the subject. It only exists in the pairing mode: association with *"human groups, socio-economic machines, informational machines"*. Involved here is decisive, dazzling intuition. If the force of Marx's impact, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, consisted in defining the crux of man as "the set of social relations", Guattari, for his part, defined subjectivity as the set of relations that are created between the individual and the vehicles of subjectivity he comes across, be they individual or collective, human or inhuman. This is a decisive breakthrough: the essence of the subjectivity of the subject was sought, and we find it, permanently off-centre, caught in "a-significant semiotic systems"... Here, Guattari shows himself to be still reliant on the world of structuralist references. Just as in the Lévi-Strauss forest, the signifier reigns supreme in Guattari's "machine-like subconscious"⁶. The "production of collective subjectivity" provides as much by the score, serving to construct "minimum territories" with which the individual can identify. What are the fluid signifiers that make up the production of subjectivity? First and foremost, the cultural environment ("family, education, environment, religion, art, sport"); then, cultural consumerism (*"things made by the media and film industry, etc."*), ideological gadgets, spare parts of the subjective machinery... And last of all the set of informational machinery, which forms the a-semiological, a-linguistic chord of contemporary subjectivity, by *"operating in tandem with or independently of the fact that they*

produce meanings". The process of singularisation consists, as it happens, in incorporating these signifiers in personal "existential territories", as tools helping to invent new relations "to the body, to fantasy, to time passing, to the 'mysteries' of life and death", and helping, too, to withstand the uniformization of thinking and behaving⁷. From this angle, social productions must be put through the sieve of a "mental ecosophy". Individual subjectivity is thus formed from the processing of the products of this machinery: as the outcome of *dissensus*, of gaps and differences, of alienating operations, it cannot be separated from all the other social relations, just like problems connected with the environment cannot be detached from all other production relations. This determination to handle existence like a network of interdependent factors, stemming from a unifying ecology, defines Guattari's relationship with the art thing: it is just one field of sensibility among others, associated with a global system. His thinking on ecology also led Guattari to become aware, before most people in the "aesthetics trade", of the obsolescence of the Romantic models still in force when it comes to describing modern art. Guattari's version of subjectivity thus provides aesthetics with an operational paradigm, which is in return legitimised by the practice of artists over the past three decades.

Subjectivization units

If Kant admitted landscapes and all natural forms in the field of applied aesthetics, we know that Hegel reined in this domain by reducing it exclusively to that specific class of objects formed by works of the mind. Romantic aesthetics, from which we may very well not have really emerged⁸, postulates that the work of art, as a product of human subjectivity, expresses the mental world of a subject. During the 20th century, many theories discussed this Romantic version of creation, but without ever totally toppling its foundations. Let us mention the work of Marcel Duchamp, whose "ready-mades" reduced the author's own action or interference to

merely selecting a mass-produced object and incorporating it in a personal linguistic system, thus redefining the artist's role in terms of responsibility towards the real. Or, alternatively, the generalised aesthetics of Roger Caillois, who put forms produced by accident, growth and mould on the same footing as those originating from a project⁹. Guattari's theses may head in the same direction, by refusing the Romantic idea of genius and depicting the artist as an operator of meaning, rather than a pure "creator" relying on cryptodivine inspiration, but they do not tally with those structuralist anthems about the "death of the author". For Guattari, a phoney problem is involved here. It is the processes of subjectivity production which need redefining with a view to their collectivisation. Because the individual does not have a monopoly on subjectivity, the model of the Author and his alleged disappearance are of no importance: "*Devices for producing subjectivity may exist in the scale of megalopolis as well as on the scale of an individual's linguistic games*"¹⁰. The Romantic contrast between individual and society, which informs artistic role-playing and its mercantile system, has become truly null and void. Only a "transversalist" conception of creative operations, lessening the figure of the author in favour of that of the artist-cum operator, may describe the "mutation" under way: Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Beuys and Warhol all constructed their work on a system of exchanges with social movements, unhinging the mental "ivory tower" myth allocated to the artist by the Romantic ideology. It is not haphazard if the gradual dematerialization of the artwork, throughout the 20th century, came with an upsurge of the work within the sphere of work. The signature, which seals into the artistic economy the exchange mechanisms of subjectivity (an exclusive form of its distribution, turning it into a commodity), implies a loss of "polyphony", of that rough form of subjectivity represented by many-voiceness, in favour of a sterilising, reifying fragmentation. In *Chaosmosis*, in order to lament its loss, Guattari refers to a practice current in archaic societies which consists in

giving a large number of proper names to one and the same individual.

Polyphony is nevertheless restored at another level, in these sets of subjectivization which bind heterogeneous arenas together. These blocks, "individual – group – machine – multiple exchanges"¹¹ which "offer a person the possibility of getting back together as an existential corporeity, and becoming particular once again" in the framework of a psychoanalytical therapy. Suffice it to accept the fact that subjectivity does not stem from any homogeneity. On the contrary, it develops it by cuts, segmenting and dismembering the illusory units of psychic life. "It is not familiar with any predominant agency of determination steering other agencies in accordance with an unambiguous causality"¹². When applied to artistic practices, this fact causes the total collapse of the notion of style. Endowed with the authority of the signature, the artist is usually introduced as the conductor of manual and mental faculties coiled around a single principle, its *style*. The modern, western artist is defined, first and foremost, as a subject whose signature acts as a "unifier of states of consciousness", producing a calculated muddle between subjectivity and style. But can we still talk in terms of the creative subject, the author and his mastery, when the "components of subjectivization", which "each work more or less on their own behalf"¹³, only appear unified by the effect of a consensual illusion, the accredited guardians of which are signature and style, guarantors of the goods?

The Guattari subject is made up of independent plates, linking up with different pairings drifting towards heterogeneous fields of subjectivisation. The "Integrated World Capitalism" [IWC] described by Guattari only cares about the "existential territories" which it is art's mission to produce. Through the exclusive enhancement of the signature, a factor of behavioural homogenisation and reification, it can carry on in its role, i.e. transforming these territories into products. Otherwise put, wherever art proposes "life possibilities", IWC presents us with the

bill. And what if real style, as Deleuze and Guattari write, were not the repetition of reified "making" but the "movement of thought"? Guattari contrasts the homogenisation and standardisation of types of subjectivity with the need to involve the being in "*heterogenetic processes*". This is the primary principle of mental ecosophy: articulating particular worlds and rare life forms; cultivating *per se* differentness, before *moving it* over into the social. The whole Guattari argument proceeds from this preliminary, inner modelling of social relations. Nothing is possible without a far-reaching ecological transformation of subjectivities, without an awareness of the various forms of founding interdependence of subjectivity. As such, it links up most of the century's avant-gardes, which called for a joint transformation of attitudes and social structures. Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Situationists, all thus tried to promote a total revolution, postulating that nothing could change in the infrastructure (the devices of production) if the superstructure (ideology) were not likewise far-reachingly refashioned. Guattari's plea for the "Three Ecologies" (environmental, social, and mental) under the aegis of an "aesthetic paradigm" likely to link up the various human claims and challenges, thus lies in the mainstream of modern artistic utopias.

The aesthetic paradigm

The critique of scientific paradigm

In Guattari's "schizoanalytical" world, aesthetics has a place all of its own. It represents a "paradigm", a flexible agency capable of operating on several levels and on differing planes of knowledge. And, first and foremost, as the pedestal that enables it to propound its "ecosophy"; as a subjectivity-producing model; as an instrument used for enriching psychiatric and psychoanalytical practice. Guattari calls upon aesthetics to offset the hegemony of the "scientific superego", which lays down

analytical practices in formulae. What he has against the "psy people" is the way they turn towards the past by manipulating Freudian and Lacanian concepts as so many insurmountable certainties. The subconscious itself is likened to an "*Institution, a collective amenity*"... Permanent revolution in method? "*The same should go [...] for painting and literature, areas within which the task of each concrete performance is to evolve, innovate, and usher in forward-looking openings, without their authors managing to lay claim to guaranteed theoretical foundations or the authority of a group, school, conservatory or academy*"¹⁴. The only thing that matters is the "Work in progress". Thought originates from an art, which is not synonymous with rhetoric... So it should come as no surprise to read the definition given by Deleuze/Guattari to philosophy, "*the art of forming, inventing, and manufacturing concepts*"¹⁵.

In a more general way, it was Guattari's intent to reshape the whole of science and technology based on an "aesthetic paradigm". "*My intention consists in conveying the human sciences and the social sciences from scientific paradigms to ethical-aesthetic paradigms*", he explains. An intent that is akin to a form of scientific scepticism. For him, theories and concepts merely have the value of "models of subjectivization", *inter alia*, and no certainty is irrevocable. The primary criterion of scientificity, as stated by Popper, is falsifiability, is it not? According to Guattari, the aesthetic paradigm is called upon to contaminate every chord of discourse, and inoculate the venom of creative uncertainty and outrageous invention in every field of knowledge. Denial of claimed scientific "neutrality": "*what will henceforth be on the agenda is the clearance of 'futuristic' and 'constructivist' fields of virtuality*"¹⁶. Portrait of the psychoanalyst as an artist: "*just as an artist borrows from his precursors and his contemporaries the features that suit him, so I invite those who read me to freely accept and reject my concepts*"¹⁷.

Ritournelle, symptom and work

Like Nietzsche's aesthetics, from which Guattari's broadly originate, the latter only considers the creator's viewpoint. In it there is no sign of considerations to do with aesthetic reception, apart from those pages dealing with the notion of "ritournelle". It takes for example the fact of looking at television. For switching on the TV set is to expose "your feeling of personal identity" to temporary break-up. The TV viewer thus exists at the crossroads of several subjective nodes: the "perceptual fascination" caused by electronic image scanning; the "capture" obtained by narrative content, enlivened by perceptive "parasites" happening in the room, the telephone, for example; and lastly, the "world of fantasies" aroused by the programme, perceived as an "existential motif" working like an "attractor" within the "perceptible and significationnal chaos".

Plural subjectivity here is "ritournellized", "caught" by what it looks at, a prelude to the formation of an "existential territory". Here again, contemplation of form comes across not as any old kind of "suspension of the will" (Schopenhauer), but rather as a thermodynamic process, a phenomenon of condensation and accumulation of psychic energy on a "motif", with a view to action. Art fixes energy, and "ritournellizes" it, diverting it from everyday life: a matter of repercussion and ricochet.. As a pure "*clash between a will and a material*"¹⁸, art, for Guattari, might be compared with the thoroughly Nietzschean activity that consists in outlining *texts* in the *chaos* of the world. In other words, in the act of "interpreting and assessing"... The "existential motifs" offered for aesthetic contemplation, in a broad sense, catch the different components of subjectivity and guide them. Art is the thing upon and around which subjectivity can reform itself, the way several light spots are brought together to form a beam, and light up a single point. The opposite of this condensation, for which art provides the most conclusive example, is neurosis, in which the "ritournelle", hallmarked by fluidity, "hardens" into obsession; but

psychosis, too, which makes the personality implode by making the "partial components" leave subjectivity "in hallucinatory, delirious lines"¹⁹... Which suggests to us that the *object* itself is neurotic: unlike the fluidity of "ritournellization", whose successive crystallisations bounce on supple partial objects, neurosis "hardens" whatever it touches. Integrated capitalism, which turns existential territories into goods and shunts subjective energy towards products, thus functions in neurotic mode. It produces an "immense void in subjectivity", a "machine-like solitude"²⁰, rushing into spaces left vacant by the desertification of direct trading areas. A void which can only be filled by drawing up a new contract with the inhuman, i.e. the machine.

Guattari's thinking is organised around an analytical perspective, the cure for which forms the distant horizon. Invariably, the method of partial healing emerges to re-form the shattered picture of forms of subjectivization. Art is never that far removed from the symptom, but does not overlap with it. This latter "*operates like an existential ritournelle from the moment when it is repeated*", when the ritournelle "*is embodied in a 'hardened' representation, for example, an obsessive ritual*". But if the analogy between the sick patient's assumption of independence and artistic creation is at times pushed very far, Guattari fights shy of "*likening psychosis to a work of art, and the psychoanalyst to an artist*"... Except that both deal with the same subjective material, which must be brought forward in order to "heal" the disastrous effects of homogenisation, that violence wielded by the capitalist system towards the individual; suppression of forms of dissent and disagreement that can only be founded by his subjectivity. In any event, art and psychic life are interwoven in the same agencies. Guattari only describes art in immaterial terms the better to materialise the mechanisms of the *psyche*. In analysis as in artistic activity, "*time stops being suffered; it is worked, oriented, as the object of qualificative changes*". If the analyst's role consists in "*creating mutant foci of subjectivization*", the formula might easily be applied to artists.

The work of art as partial object

The work of art is only of interest to Guattari inasmuch as it is not a matter of a "passively representative image", otherwise put, a product. The work gives a material quality to existential territories, within which the image takes on the role of *subjectivization vector* or "shifter", capable of deterring our perception before "hooking it up again" to other possibilities: that of an "*operator of junctions in subjectivity*". Here again, the work of art cannot claim anything exclusive, even if it offers the model of that "pathic knowledge" which is the particular feature of aesthetics, that "non-discursive experience of the time span"... This type of knowledge is only possible provided that we do not see mere delight in the contemplation of the artwork. Guattari prowls in the vicinity of Nietzsche, transposing the vitalism of the German philosopher ("A problem that bestirs us to exceed ourselves is beautiful") into the psycho-ecological area of vocabulary for which he has a soft spot. In aesthetic contemplation he thus sees a process of "subjectivization transfer". Borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtine, this concept earmarks the moment when the "matter of expression" becomes "formally creative"²¹, a split-second in the telltale passage between author and beholder.

Here, Guattari's postulates turn out to be very akin to those uttered by Marcel Duchamp in his famous 1954 Houston lecture on "the creative process"²²: the beholder is the joint creator of the work, venturing into the mysteries of creation by way of the "coefficient of art", which is the "difference between what [the artist] had planned to make and what he did". Duchamp described this phenomenon in terms not unlike those of psychoanalysis: it is indeed a question of a "transfer" of which "the artist is in no way aware", and the reaction of the beholder in front of the work occurs in a kind of "aesthetic osmosis which takes place through the inert matter: colour, piano, marble, etc." This *transitional* theory of the work of art was taken up by Guattari, who turned it into the pedestal for his own hunches about the fluid nature of subjectivity,

whose component parts operate, as we have seen, by temporarily *clinging* to heterogeneous "existential territories". The work of art doesn't halt the eye. It's the spellbinding, para-hypnotic process of the aesthetic way of looking that crystallises around it the different ingredients of subjectivity, and redistributes them towards new vanishing points. The work is the opposite of the *buffer* defined by classical aesthetic perception, exercised on finished objects and closed entities. This aesthetic fluidity cannot be detached from a questioning addressed at the work's independence. Guattari defined this latter as a "*partial object*", which derives advantage solely from a "*relative subjective autonomization*", like object *a* in the Lacanian subconscious²³. Here, the aesthetic object acquires the status of a "partial enunciator", whose assumption of autonomy makes it possible to "*foster new fields of reference*". This definition embraces the development of art forms in a very fruitful way: the theory of the aesthetic *partial object* as "semiotic segment" separate from collective subjective production so as to start "*working on its own behalf*" perfectly describes the most widespread artistic production methods today: *sampling* of pictures and data, recycling now socialised and historicized forms, invention of collective identities... Such are the procedures of present-day art, stemming from a hyper-inflational system of imagery. These strategies for partial objects incorporate the work in the *continuum* of a device of existence, instead of endowing it with the traditional independence of the masterpiece in the system of conceptual mastery. These works are no longer paintings, sculptures or installations, all terms corresponding with categories of mastery and types of products, but simple *surfaces*, *volumes* and *devices*, which are dovetailed within strategies of existence. Here we are bordering on the limits of the definition of artistic activity proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy*: "*knowledge of the world through percepts and affects*"... For how could the very idea of a partial object referring to a singularisation movement of the heterogeneous ingredients of subjectivity bring on an idea of *totality*: "*the partial enunciator*"

that forms the work of art does not depend on a specific category of human activity, so how could it be limited to this particular arrangement suggested by the level of "affects" and "percepts"? To be fully an artwork, it must also put forward concepts necessary for the working of these affects and percepts, as part of a total experience of thought. For want of such, the categorisation fought against by function is inevitably reformed at the level of the materials that ground thought. So it would seem to be more sound, in the light of Guattari's writings themselves, to define art as *a construction of concepts with the help of percepts and affects, aimed at a knowledge of the world...*

For an artistic, ecosophic practice

The ecosophic fact consists in an ethical-cum-political articulation between the environment, the social and subjectivity. It is a question of re-forming a lost political territory, lost by being riven by the deterritorializing violence of "Integrated World Capitalism". "*By exacerbating the production of material and immaterial goods, to the detriment of the consistency of individual and collective existential Territories, the contemporary period has given rise to an immense void in subjectivity which is tending to become more and more absurd and without recourse*"²⁴. And ecosophic practice, geared to ideas of globalness and interdependence, aims to re-form these existential territories based on operational methods of subjectivity hitherto painstakingly underplayed. Ecosophy may claim "*to replace the old ideologies which used to mistakenly divide the social, the private and the civil into sectors*"²⁵. From this angle, art is still a valuable auxiliary, insofar as it provides a "plane of immanence"²⁶, at once highly organised and very "absorbent", for the exercise of subjectivity. All the more so because contemporary art has developed in the sense of a denial of the independence (and thus of the sectorization) given it by the formalist theories of "modernism", of which Clement Greenberg was the prime advocate.

Nowadays, art is not defined as a place that imports methods and concepts, a zone of forms of hybridisation. As one of the driving spirits behind the *Fluxus* movement, Robert Filliou said that art offers an immediate "right of asylum" to all deviant practices which cannot find their place in their natural bed. So many forceful works of the last three decades only arrived in the realm of art for the simple reason that they had reached a limit in other realms. Marcel Broodthaers thus found a way of carrying poetry on in imagery; and Joseph Beuys found a way of pursuing politics in form. Guattari seems to have recorded these shifts, this capacity of modern art to embrace the most varied of production systems. He readily criticises art as a specific activity, conducted by a particular corporate body. The experience of the clinic accounts for a lot in this astonishment in front of this fragmentation of knowledge, this "corporatist subjectivity" that is in the end quite recent, a corporatist subjectivity that leads us, for example, into a reflex of "sectorization", to "*aestheticize a cave art in which everything suggests that it had an essentially technological and cultural range*".

The exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, recently held at the MoMA in New York, thus fetishizes "*formal, formalist and in the end rather superficial correlations*", between works that are wrenched out of their context, "*on the one hand tribal, ethnic and mythical, on the other cultural, historical and economic*". The root of artistic practice lies in the production of subjectivity; it matters little what the specific production method may be. But this activity nevertheless turns out to be determined by the *enunciative agency* chosen.

The behavioural economy of present-day art

"How do you render a school class as an artwork?", asks Guattari²⁷... He thus poses the final problem of aesthetics, that of its use, and its possible injection into fabric rendered rigid by the capitalist economy. Everything conspires to make us think that

modernity has been constructed, from the late 19th century on, on the idea of "life as artwork". Based on Oscar Wilde's formula, modernity is the moment when "it is not art imitating life, but life imitating art"... Marx is headed in the same direction, by criticising the classical distinction between *Praxis* (the act of self-transformation) and *poiesis* (the necessary, servile action aimed at producing and transforming matter). Marx thought, on the contrary, that "praxis moves constantly into poiesis, and vice versa". Later on, Georges Bataille built his work on the critique of this "renunciation of existence in exchange for function" which grounds the capitalist economy. The three orders –science, fiction and action– shatter human existence by *calibrating* it on the basis of preordained categories²⁸. Guattari's brand of ecosophy likewise posits the totality of existence as a precondition for the production of subjectivity. In it, this latter takes pride of place, the place earmarked by Marx for labour, and which Bataille gives to *inner experience*, in an effort involving the individual and collective reformation of lost subjectivity. For "*the only acceptable end purpose of human activities*," writes Guattari, "*is the production of a subjectivity that is forever self-enriching its relationship with the world*"²⁹. A definition that ideally applies to the practices of contemporary artists: by creating and staging devices of existence including working methods and ways of being, instead of concrete objects which hitherto bounded the realm of art, they use time as a material. The form holds sway over the thing, and movements over categories. The production of gestures wins out over the production of material things. These days, beholders are prompted to cross the threshold of "catalyst-like time modules", rather than contemplate immanent objects closed in on their world of reference. The artist goes as far as to come across as a world of subjectivization on the move, like the mannequin of his own subjectivity. He thus becomes the terrain of special experiences and the synthetic principle of his work, a development that foreshadows the entire history of modernity. In this behavioural economy, the art object acquires a

kind of deceptive aura, an agent of resistance to its commercial distribution and a mimetic parasite of the same.

In a mental world where the readymade represents a particular model, as a collective production (the mass-produced object) assumed and recycled in an auto-poietic visual device, Guattari's lines of thinking help us to consider the changes currently under way in present-day art. But this, however, was not the primary aim of their author, for whom aesthetics must above all else go hand in hand with societal changes, and inflect them... The poetic function, which consists in re-forming worlds of subjectivization, possibly would not have any meaning if it, too, were not able to help us to negotiate the "*ordeal of barbarity, mental implosion, and chaosmic spasm which are taking shape on the horizon, to turn them into riches and unforeseeable pleasures*"³⁰...

* Chance is important, but only in relation to production. Once exhibited, the work leaves the world of contrivance, and everything in it stems from an interpretation.

1. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An ethicoaesthetic paradigm*, Indiana Press. I only refer to precise works when the sentences quoted refer to a development in the author. For example, some quotations will not be annotated, because their content refers to several passages or several books.

2. *Chaosmosis*.

3. *Chaosmosis*.

4. *Chaosmosis*.

5. Félix Guattari, *The three ecologies*, Athlone Press, 2001.

6. *L'inconscient machinique. Essai de schizoanalyse*, Recherches, Paris, 1979.

7. *The three ecologies*.

8. Marc Sherringham, *Introduction à la philosophie esthétique*, Editions Payot, Paris, 1993.

9. Roger Caillois, *Cohérences aventureuses*, Editions Idées-Gallimard.

10. *Chaosmosis*.

11. *Chaosmosis*.

12. *Chaosmosis*.

13. *The three ecologies*.

14. *The three ecologies*.

15. Deleuze/Guattari, *What is philosophy*, Verso, London, 1994.

16. *The three ecologies*.

17. *Chaosmosis*.

18. *Chaosmosis*. See also: Félix Guattari, "*Cracks in the Street*", in *Flash Art*, no. 135, Summer 1987.

19. *Chaosmosis*.

20. Félix Guattari, "*Refonder les pratiques sociales*", in *Le Monde diplomatique*, "*L'agonie de la culture*", October 1993.

21. *Chaosmosis*.

22. Marcel Duchamp, "*Le processus créatif*", in *Duchamp du signe*, Editions Flammarion, Paris.

23. *Chaosmosis*.

24. *The three ecologies*.

25. *Chaosmosis*.

26. *What is philosophy*.

27. *Chaosmosis*.

28. Georges Bataille, "*L'Apprenti sorcier*", in Denis Hollier, *Le collège de sociologie*, Editions Idées-Gallimard.

29. *Chaosmosis*.

30. *Chaosmosis*.