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'But that was my idea!' Problems of Authorship and Validation in Contemporary Practices of Creative Dissent

Susan Kelly

One of the central tensions in the production of creative dissent in the current and recent social movements remains the vexed issue of authorship. Trained to operate as hyper-individuals in a competitive and brand-oriented set of institutional and market hierarchies, many artists often have no idea how to actually work with others or how to begin to break out of regimes of value linked to cultural capital. Practices of creative dissent typically bring together individuals or groups of people who identify as artists, and groups of people who might identify as activists: those involved in political organizing, direct action, campaigning, claiming and organizing alternative social and cultural spaces and so on. Many artists and activists who participate in creative dissent often say that they are not interested in claiming the category of art or its institutional framework as a means of defining their practice. Yet, the persistence of the authorship question within the often temporary groups I have encountered and been part of in Europe and North America over the last decade illustrates how the values and power dynamics of the art world often underpin the antagonisms between individuals that limit the potential of collective political action. For in these experiences, very real battles and blockages occur, making it clear that such collective work is often pulling in very different directions. These clashes not only tell us much about the modes of subjectivation that take place in the field of contemporary art; they also shed significant light on the micropolitical processes that thwart the radical potential of contemporary transversal, emancipatory practices of art and politics.

This ambivalence around the figure of the artist in the contemporary context of growing anti-austerity and occupy movements can be fleshed out with reference to stories and anecdotal examples – to a rhetorical mode that often articulates the primarily contingent, partially understood and fractious exchanges that structure collective political action. A friend in Barcelona joked recently that it took a while for the assemblies of the Spanish 15M movement to figure out that artists were not necessarily their friends and that artists in fact often represent the worst part of our societies today: artists preserve the image of capital, they campaign against net freedom, they take over empty houses for 'pop up' galleries in the midst of housing crises and so on. Another friend in Sao Paulo smiles as she explains, 'you know whenever the artists show up to the squatted social centre and the hack lab, the first

question they ask is: where is my space?’ Somewhat more polemically, Hito Steyerl compares contemporary artists to Soviet style strike-workers: super productive enthusiastic labourers ‘produced [...] on post-Fordist all-you-can-work conveyor belts’, feeding on ‘exhaustion and tempo, on deadlines and curatorial bullshit’, driving down wages and thriving on accelerated exploitation.¹

What we glimpse here is the image of an arch opportunist, devoid of social solidarity and without political consciousness beyond their narrow desire for exposure and success. Yet in this moment, as in times of political transformation before, many artists gravitate toward the scene of the demonstration, to the camps, to the meetings in the squats and occupied spaces, sometimes forming their own collectives and working groups.² Many dissatisfied with the conditions of their own field – the exploitation of free labour, the reliance of cultural institutions on unethical sponsorship and so on – wish to put these issues on the agenda. But what is it that motivates these social assemblages, and how might we understand the forces that create these blockages of transversal potential? Recently, the term transversality has become closely linked to forms of experimentation with modes of political organization, and to practices that explicitly aim to produce new connections between subjects, territories and disciplines.³ In Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, the movement of transversality signals a non-representational, additive form of alliance that explicitly sets out to de-territorialise the disciplines, subjectivities, fields and institutions it works across.⁴ Within the context of art theory, the term has also been used by Gerald Raunig to describe new terrains of open co-operation between different activist, artistic, social and political practices in the first years of the new century.⁵ This article will utilise the notion of transversality and the related concept of micropolitics, together with a series of anecdotes from recent events in the social movements in London, to probe further these ambivalent regimes of authorship.

From the alter-globalization movements of the late 1990s through to the recent anti-austerity and occupy movements, an array of experimental transversal practices of art, activism and political organizing has surfaced.⁶ At the time of the student demonstrations in London during November 2010, shifting and dynamic groups of students, teachers, artists, squatters, environmentalists, anti-austerity campaigners and others wove in and out of each others’ worlds on the streets, in the occupations, the temporary free schools and camps. As part of this rebellion, an ad hoc group called ‘Arts Against Cuts’ assembled and organized weekly meetings and series of gatherings at events call ‘Long Weekends’. Many of the artists, art students and other cultural workers who initially gravitated toward this group were joined on those weekends by a much broader array of individuals and groups such as tax evasion campaigners UK Uncut, alternative media groups, feminist alliances, anti-poverty groups and so on.⁷ These weekends operated as spaces for both reflection and planning, and provided an opportunity to reclaim the public function of the university buildings in which they were held as places to re-imagine resistance, and to fight the cuts and the relentless and violent marketization of our society and our lives. Often organized just before large demonstrations or strike days in 2010 and 2011, the events produced actions such as the Book Block, the National Gallery and Tate Gallery temporary occupations and the Sotheby’s Auction House intervention.⁸ One of the main difficulties of these gatherings was keeping the

format open, avoiding the replication of given positions, hierarchies and roles of teachers, students, artists, onlookers and so on. We also faced the constant challenge of maintaining affiliations with different struggles and groups. When this worked, the atmosphere of the working spaces and assemblies seemed electric and everything felt possible. To many of the people in the groups, it seemed like we had the numbers, the technical skills, the militancy, the imagination and the desire to transform conditions of impossibility into tangible possibilities. We met people we'd never met before, never worked with or known, and for many of us, our relationships felt temporarily transformed, our vulnerabilities exposed and prior positions and defences left irrelevant, or at least suspended. Like many others, I came in and out of these organizations, at times deeply involved, and at other times, stretched too thin with a full time job and health issues to participate as much as I wanted. Nevertheless, these contingent gatherings felt like moments of force that provided a glimpse into what the beginnings of a transversal movement might look like: a situation in which subjectivities, territories, fields of knowledge and action were radically thrown up in the air, and temporarily re-constituted along exciting new lines of flight.

During these weekends, two small but thorny issues for organizers emerged: first, around the naming of sessions; and second, around the question of whether we should really push participants to link concrete planning for forthcoming events to more analytic and reflective sessions. We noticed that some of the working sessions were almost habitually called after the proper names of speakers or facilitators whilst most were called things like 'Protest Lab', 'Free School' or 'Book Block'. Indeed, for one of the first 'Long Weekends', a solution to this disjuncture of the proper name came through a set of posters for the gathering that claimed the participation of various mainstream artists as a ruse that imitated the use of the celebrity to market events and products.⁹ Some sessions at the 'Long Weekends' involved information sharing and reflection on the government White Paper on Education, whilst others focused on the collective making of masks, props, legal bust cards and so on. The different weekends had varying degrees of success in bringing these kinds of activities together in our attempts to imagine the new modes of action, occupation, objects, and performances that could be proposed and developed *from* our analysis of our situation.

One of the many props produced in these months was a large papier maché carrot, a symbol of the promise of paid work and future fulfilment made to those working under conditions of free labour in the cultural sector. A group that was working with this symbol as part of a cultural labour organizing collective, an artist and activist who had been developing enormous street props as part of her individual practice, several students and other interested parties came together to make the object. University studio space was requisitioned for the making, budgets for another project at another arts institution diverted for materials (together with a gallery van for transportation), and the prop was built, then carried almost coffin-like at shoulder height by the many bodies who converged prior to and during the student demonstration against tuition fees in London in November 2010. In a final and unexpected moment of contingent collective action and energy, the prop was crowd-surfed through the recently broken window of the Tory Headquarters in Millbank,

and was broadcast in a frame of a Channel 4 News bulletin for the briefest of seconds. Because of its novelty value as an object and its eventual fate, the carrot prop gained a certain local, temporary notoriety. It was a good story. I certainly thought nothing more about it, until in a recent *Artforum International* interview, anthropologist David Graeber mentioned the same object as part of a discussion about the relationship between art and activism. Reflecting on his contact and friendships with several young female artists who were involved in Occupy Wall Street in New York and in Arts Against Cuts in London, he points out the familiar tensions that exist for many between the practice of individual authorship and the experience of working collectively. Reflecting more specifically on the story above, he writes:

Another artist I know, for example, made a sculpture of a giant carrot used during a protest at Millbank; I think it was actually thrown through the window of Tory headquarters and set on fire. She feels it was her best work, but her collective, which is mostly women, insisted on collective authorship, and she feels unable to attach her name to the work.¹⁰

Setting aside for a moment Graeber's rather muddled understanding of gender issues in this context, this claiming of the prop as a work of art, and following on from that, as something that must therefore be authored (either individually or collectively) is telling. For such a designation of this object excludes a much more complex set of open and contingent relationships, actions and manifestations that composed this specific assemblage of collective political work.

For many involved with this object and in this story, such a claim felt less of an inaccurate description of what happened (although it was surely that), and not even an appropriation (although this too might be the case), but more like an utterance that was somehow out of place, and out of time with the time we thought we had experienced together. This object and its story, which I understood as something closer to a minor assemblage of enunciation arising from a set of experimental transversal encounters, was somehow placed back into a regime of ownership: objects and subjects, authors and audiences, events and spectators.¹¹ Many questions followed. Why would such an object be designated an 'art work' when a book shaped prop in the Book Block, for example, might not? If large demonstration props, or indeed symbols used by certain collectives are to be authored, then are those who use or borrow them, or those who make their own, infringing on some kind of copyrighted protest form? Haven't large props been made for parades and demonstrations for hundreds of years? Describing a collective experience in the way this interview does may be taken as a symptom of the impossibility of making intelligible a whole range of complex events during a time of intense political activity. But it also inevitably has the effect of alienating many of those people who participated in the making of the object and the action. This description of the object raises further questions of whether those who make, or carry, or organize, are separate and lesser than those who 'have ideas'? If there is one author, then is everyone else an assistant or an intern of some kind? In collective political work, are some forms of labour to be more valued than others?

This story however, points us to more important questions about the insidious, micropolitical functioning of contemporary cognitive and ‘creative’ capitalism, and the forms of resistance available to challenge such micropolitical functioning. It confronts us with the possibility that in the face of the precarity resulting from the economic upheavals of the past years, turning to alienated regimes of capitalist individuated authorship presents itself as the only form of agency available. Certainly, in the aftermath of an intense period of political activity, there is often a relay between the failures and disappointments of collective political action and individual feelings of mistrust, burn out, fear and betrayal. By the end of 2011 in London, when the intensity and euphoria of this period of rebellion was beginning to abate and when police attacks and repression were finally grinding down many involved in the movement, one could almost hear people scurrying back to their corners. Exhaustion and euphoria was replaced by a nervous panic at the time lost on this or that book project, film production, degree programme, or an ill friend. I heard in my own head and elsewhere, many desperate and nervous thoughts: ‘I need to get back to my work’; ‘I can’t do this and everything else at the same time’; ‘I have to make a living somehow’; ‘I have to keep my job!’ Time spent building social movements and participating in events and political activities is directly pitted against time spent making a living, taking care or looking after your own individual trajectory. Individual and collective trajectories although deeply connected, appear as separate, almost incommensurate in such pressured contexts. At moments of precarity and deep uncertainty, security presents itself in the form of a retreat into more familiar forms of subjectivity that ultimately erode social solidarity. But the retreat into regimes of ownership and authorship at such moments is surely symptomatic of a much broader set of precarious economic and micropolitical forces; the same forces that work to block transversal movements of emancipation, often in the most banal and everyday ways.

Where do these demands for authorship come from and how are they internalized and reproduced? Over the last decade in the worlds of art and activism that I have been part of, I have noticed an increasing pressure on those involved in creative practices and social movements – those who distribute their time and lives across various fields – to identify and ‘professionalize’ much more strictly. Within the field of culture as elsewhere, such pressures are at their most intense when we need to make some kind of sustainable living from this work. The quest for such a sustainable living may come at a certain time in life, or when ‘the work we do for money’ becomes highly precarious and/or leaves less and less so-called free time. It seems that those who might have more easily moved between scenes, economies and disciplines ten or fifteen years ago, are increasingly compelled to produce themselves more rigidly as professional artists, academics, researchers, curators, organizers, NGO managers and so on. And it is partly in these workplaces that our desires and ‘what we do’ are converted either directly into a wage, or indirectly into forms of cultural capital that produce the carrot of one day making a living from your work. However, it is important to point out that the demand for authorship that comes from such work environments is also in many cases eagerly or even preemptively answered.

Take the young academic for example, who spends evenings and weekends in the library fast tracking a book on social movements about which he cares deeply and wants to broaden his understanding. He is also desperate for it to be published quickly to earn him the university research points that will see his teaching contract renewed for the following year. It is likely that the same academic is losing touch with the very movements he writes about, and is no longer participating in their work because he is exhausted and the book takes time to write no matter how fast he works. On publication of the book, his work is validated professionally; he gets the university contract and is invited to sit on many panels in public institutions about contemporary social movements. In this hypothetical case, it is clear that the young academic's work has become detached from the movements he now writes and talks *about*, and he no doubt sees this. But there is good compensation for this uneasiness in the form of lots of professional validation, invitations that flatter, and most importantly, the end of the cycle of hourly paid or precarious nine-month university contracts. In this example, authorship is both demanded and pre-empted. For as Suely Rolnik has pointed out, it is our individual desires to read, to make, to produce and to figure out singular articulations of the world, and ourselves that are pimped mercilessly by contemporary modes of micropolitical governance. These are modes of governance that alienate and divide us while simultaneously appearing to offer us salvation from alienation through the promise of success, of feeling special and of overcoming our circumstances.¹² But the authoring of texts, artworks or projects in the context of social movements comes at a cost: it is often experienced as profoundly patronizing and alienating for those involved in collective work, functioning as an appropriation of collective knowledge and creating divisive hierarchical splits between those who 'do', and those who write *about*, make work *about* and so on. And as I will go on to discuss, this text also falls prey to these problems. It appears today that older questions of authorship raised by Roland Barthes, Foucault and others, along with the still robust myth of individual artistic or intellectual genius have converged with contemporary techniques of micropolitical power, to produce some of the most stubborn and insidious blockages to collective practices of creative dissent.¹³

To unpack the implications of the forces at stake in the anecdotes above, this essay will now take up a couple of aspects of the problem of authorship from the perspective of the art field: firstly, in relation to micropolitics and modes of what Brian Holmes calls 'extra-disciplinary' research between and outwith this field; and secondly, in relation to the much more institutionalized and defined debates about practices of collaboration and social engagement, namely of 'relational aesthetics', as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud in the late 1990s and debated ever since.¹⁴ In doing so, I will look at how regimes of authorship either open up or close down processes of transversality in practices of creative dissent. For as I will go on to argue, when transversality is present in these practices, new territories that exceed the pre-defined realms of art and activism can be forged, and new subjectivities emerge that are not caught in the endless negotiation of emancipation versus protection, complicity versus exodus, individuation versus collectivity, or indeed authorship versus communal sacrifice.

First, it is important to begin by sketching some of the micropolitical dimensions at work in the relationships between art and activism in recent years. Suely Rolnik has done much work in re-framing the concepts of micropolitics and transversality in the context of contemporary art practice in her recent writings. Rolnik speaks of the importance of understanding the new relationships between the macro and the micropolitical in the context of contemporary art since the mid-1990s.¹⁵ For Rolnik, art has traditionally been thought of as the domain of the micropolitical, concerned with sensibility, affect, aesthetic forces and so on. By contrast, social and political practices found in many forms of activism have been framed in terms of the domain of macropolitics: practices that intervene in the tensions that arise ‘in the visible, stratified reality, involving struggles against the distribution of places established by the dominant regime within a given social context, and the construction of conscious demands’.¹⁶ Rolnik argues that these two domains, whilst inter-dependent and never entirely separate, have become imbricated in new ways in contemporary forms of neo-liberalism and post-Fordist production in overdeveloped countries.¹⁷ But to what aspects of neo-liberalism and post-Fordist production does she refer? Rolnik speaks of the by now well-known use of culture for marketing and whitewashing both corporations and the ‘creative city’, and of the total saturation of the ‘imagosphere’ with pre-formatted images of desire in the form of advertising and hyper-branding.¹⁸ However, in line with much post-autonomist thinking, she also refers to the processes through which post-Fordist forms of production draw ever more intensely on the micropolitical registers of affect, desire, communication and sensibility. As Franco Berardi (Bifo) has said, desire and the terrains of the imaginary and the affective, which once lead to the abandonment of work, have been transformed ‘into the privileged moment in the production of value’.¹⁹ Contemporary models of ‘human capital’ bring psychic, cognitive, affective powers into the heart of the labour process. What is more, this thorough mobilization of the self that has been typically associated with the work of the artist becomes a much more generalized feature of post-Fordist production.

It is important to note that in these debates, the traditional romantic figure of the artist as someone outside of or somehow beyond capitalist production is radically called into question. What is less clear however, is what is meant by the notion of artistic labour. There are certainly overlaps between notions of immaterial labour proposed by Maurizio Lazzarato amongst others since the 1970s, and aspects of artistic production.²⁰ The generation of language, of signs and images, the production of information, opinion and taste all associated with forms of immaterial labour are common to the competences and processes of production of many artists.²¹ But the overlaps between contemporary precarious post-Fordist labour regimes and artistic labour are perhaps more direct in many cases. In the UK, the almost complete withdrawal of the state from direct cultural funding to artists, the rising cost of living and of studio and housing rents, the criminalization of squatting and the move from welfare to workfare has meant that many non-commercially successful artists cannot piece together a living to support themselves and the production of their art work in the way they used to, even five to ten years ago. A recent NESTA report showed that most cultural workers hold ‘second jobs’ in service, education or health sectors.²² In other words, aside from looking at the more intrinsic nature of production processes involved in the making of art and of

immaterial labour, there are many more basic and material correspondences between the spread of low paid precarious work and models of self-employment across the British workforce and how most artists live and make a living today. For this reason it has become common practice in the UK at least, to always problematize the separation of what some artists refer to as ‘their real work’ from the ‘work they do for money’, and to refer instead to artists as cultural workers as an attempt to leave this subject category open to the realities of their hyphenated working lives: artist-teachers; artist-cleaner-carer; artist-administrator; artist-barista-lap dancer and so on.²³

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the modes of subjectivation associated with forms of immaterial labour – the imperative to be creative, flexible and self-reliant – and the mobilization of language, affect and social relations for the economy, betray a renewed and intense field of micropolitical struggle at the centre of contemporary life. This struggle brings profound paradoxes and ambivalences. For example, proliferating forms of self-employment and the malleability of the working day often pose as a release from the discipline of the factory or the office and the regime of the nine-to-five: it can appear as a kind of freedom that an earlier generation of workers didn’t have. Yet models of self-employment can also, as Maurizio Lazzarato has observed, produce a strange schizophrenia in the subject who on the one hand sells their labour, and on the other, becomes a kind of shareholder in the thing that exploits them. He observes that as an ‘entrepreneur of yourself [...] you are at the same time exploited and interested in exploitation.’²⁴ Like the artist who claims the collective prop as an artwork to forge some cultural capital, or the young academic who withdraws from participation in social movements in order to write a book about them and secure a permanent university job, precarious subjects become embedded in deeply paradoxical and problematic contradictions: in attempting to escape from precarity and exploitation, they can end up reinforcing it on a much deeper level. Under the banner of self-employment and flexibility such paradoxes are presented as individual choices: career choices, lifestyle choices or even ethical choices. Yet, as we have seen in Suely Rolnik’s analysis, it is precisely this notion of freedom and of choice that is cathected or ‘pimped’ by neoliberalism.²⁵ And it is this pimping that becomes a crucial technique in what both Foucault and Guattari recognised as one of the central problems of political struggle and political philosophy in the late 1960s; namely, the submission of desire to its own servitude.²⁶

Suely Rolnik and Brian Holmes have argued that recent conditions of cultural production under post-Fordism and neo-liberalism in Europe, North America and Brazil often provoke artists to search for forms of extradisciplinary exodus, ‘where other means of artistic production and also other territories of life can be created’.²⁷ Writing from the late 1990s into the 2000s Rolnik spoke of the increasing tendency she observed in these places toward the macropolitical activity of organizing into collectives, the setting up of independent spaces and gathering around common aims in the cultural or political terrain in groups such as *Yo Mango*, *Bureau d’Études*, *Precarias a la deriva*, *Mergulho*, *16 Beaver*, *Bernadette Corporation*. Throughout history, artists have of course often collaborated and set up collectives, but Rolnik and Holmes became interested in what was driving these proliferating forms of exodus at

this time. Motivated less by a desire to produce a new avant-garde or even proto-utopian communities, such groups represent a collective search for ways to exit the reproduction of contemporary forms of neo-liberal culture, working instead on building social contexts and forms of practice that can *operate politically* in ways that discrete ‘political content’ curated for marketised institutions never can. For Rolnik, it is this organizational dimension of contemporary collective art practices that brings such practices closer to social movements. From the side of political activism, she argues that many activists and those involved in social movements also acknowledge that in the new conditions, economic domination and exploitation are predicated more than ever on the micropolitical manipulation of subjectivity. The micropolitical dimensions of power become impossible for such groups and movements to ignore. Rolnik’s elaboration of the relationship between the micro and the macropolitical sheds interesting light on the processes underpinning many of the socially and politically engaged art practices and collectives that have emerged in the last ten years. For her, it is not just the issues at stake that bring the realms of art and activism closer, but also their mutual experimentation with macropolitical strategies and forms of organization. Rather than read recent collaborative and collective practices as a trend or ‘social turn’ as critics such as Claire Bishop have done, or as an attempt to reactivate old forms of vanguardism, or as totalising symptoms of contemporary economic and political regimes, Rolnik instead interprets the collaborations between artists and activists as ‘a necessity that imposes itself’ in the present time, ‘a precondition for the work of critical intervention that each field undertakes’.²⁸

How are such movements and practices viewed from the perspective of more institutionally defined debates about practices of collaboration and social engagement? From the point of view of many art critics, curators and theorists, forms of extradisciplinary exodus as described by Rolnik and Holmes are for the most part simply invisible or dismissed as irrelevant to the discourses of art. This may be partly two-way, as many groups operating across the fields of art and activism have long lost interest in gaining recognition from neo-liberal cultural institutions and are willing to forego the ever-diminishing sources of income that once came with them. However, the inability of the more mainstream circuits of artistic recognition: the curators, art journals and art institutions, to look for or see what is happening macropolitically and at the edges of their field, represents several problems. It is this myopia that partly limits the engagement of the art field to those politically oriented groups that squarely serve themselves up as art practices; individuals and groups that do not question or play to any degree with the contemporary political economy of that category. More significantly however, this institutional myopia is symptomatic of the incapacity or unwillingness of such institutions and players to confront the macropolitical conditions of their own field. Limiting questions of politics to the content of discrete art works and practices, institutions can appear as if they are addressing important issues, while in fact they are largely ignoring their own macropolitical economies and structural complicities, and the work of artists and groups who also wish to address them.²⁹ In another kind of outsourcing, critical content is subcontracted exclusively to the artists work or a panel of talking heads, while the institution’s role in passing down government cutbacks to unpaid interns and artists and to outsourced cleaning and security companies paying poverty

wages, remains unchallenged – along with their continued renewal of highly problematic sponsorship deals. The demand to promote institutional branding, to market, to tightly control press releases, and to control and design the curatorial and institutional message, leaves no time to deal with the complexities of groups who don't neatly fit in, no space to respond contingently to political developments, and no time or inclination to consider what is happening to their own sector and to fight back.³⁰ For the legitimacy of the thoroughly marketised, brand obsessed public-private institution that is the mainstay of the neo-liberal cultural sector in the UK, is grounded in its responsibility to a brand-market and its sponsors, and not to the public, not the arts communities, not to the social movements artists are part of, or the issues they seek to address.

The tendency in recent and contemporary practices of art and activism toward the macropolitical activities of organizing and working with social movements can therefore be understood as mostly invisible when primarily examined from *within* the terms and pre-existent knowledge framework of the art field. But these terms and frameworks are not only exclusionary. They are also crucial to preserving on the one hand, the idea of art as something inherently progressive, and on the other, as we have seen, this institutional inertia and denial in the face of their ever-intensifying macropolitical complicity. The narrowly framed debates around questions of collaboration, political and social engagement in contemporary art have been exemplified in the debates around Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics from the late 1990s.³¹ To recount briefly Bourriaud's argument: *Relational Aesthetics* begins by comparing the specific forms of sociability produced in the places of art, such as the ability to comment on and discuss work as we are viewing it, to what he deems to be the individual, private spaces of consumption produced by theatre, cinema and literature. Contemporary relational art practices, for Bourriaud, move from a form that incidentally causes this special sociability to a form that is explicitly and exclusively focussed on producing such forms of conviviality.³² These forms of sociality are celebrated and valorised through the naming of a new genre of artwork: Relational Aesthetics. Bourriaud, adopting Guy Debord's language of the *Society of the Spectacle*, speaks of a contemporary 'society of extras' who can only have contact through reified social relations in coffee shop chains or on superhighways. He opposes imposed 'communication zones' – by which he means the 'dystopian technologies' of automatic public toilets, cash machines, and the automated telephone wake up call – to the free areas and contrasting rhythms of the art exhibition.³³ Bourriaud argues that the space of current relations is the space most affected by 'general reification' and that the machines that carry out the most elementary social functions have replaced opportunities for 'exchanges, pleasure and squabbling'.³⁴ This allows him to subsequently claim that 'contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue'.³⁵

Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics appears at first as an extension and modification of critiques of the autonomous work of art, as defined through the act of individual contemplation present in the discourses of art history since the 1950s. However, in presenting relational art's specific concern for social bonds and human relationships through its use of what he calls interactive, user-friendly concepts,

Bourriaud tends to present these artworks as *de facto* cures for social alienation, or as an artistic ‘stitching’ that will re-connect what he calls the communicational divide. This claim is based on a double move: first, Bourriaud needs to rely heavily on concepts of alienation and reification that are rooted in modernist notions of production and rational communication. And second, he has to assume that art has an inherently progressive, almost redemptive character. In a modernist paradigm, idle chitchat and convivial forms of communication have often been understood as symptoms of human alienation. In Harold Pinter’s plays, for instance, characters manifest their condition of alienation in seemingly endless, pointless questions, idle chitchat and phatic communication in a vain attempt to establish ‘social bonds’.³⁶ It is significant, however, that idle talk and chitchat become forms of sociality that are subsequently valorised in contemporary modes of production. In discussions of post-Fordist immaterial and affective labour, for instance, it is this same mode of communication that is often invoked as an essential skill for the contemporary workplace. In sales, marketing and managerial discourses, and in social and care work this form of communication is seen as the very kind of ‘small talk’ communications skill required for the ‘new’ economy. Paolo Virno, in a re-thinking of Heidegger’s category of ‘idle talk’ in *Being and Time*, argues that idle talk might actually be central to ‘contemporary production in which the act of communication dominates’.³⁷ Against Heidegger’s suggestion that idle talk acts as a diversion from work or the carrying out of a particular task, Virno contends that idle talk signals instead post-Fordism’s appropriation of conversation into the workplace. Rather than displaying a symptom of the alienated modern subject suffering under some kind of communicational lack or void, Virno argues that idle talk and phatic communication are a significant component of the very fabric of post-Fordist production.³⁸

What becomes clear is that relational forms of art practice as described by Bourriaud, and new forms of communicative, immaterial labour are deeply imbricated. In this context, holding onto an older notion of alienation under industrial capitalism can actually serve to legitimate contemporary productive regimes by making them appear, as we have seen, simply more free and informal than the previous industrial forms. As a consequence, idle talk and phatic communication are convincingly presented as a cure for social isolation, and as a counter to older models of Fordist discipline. It is not the case that Bourriaud’s description of the contemporary conditions of social alienation associated with private forms of communication and consumption are necessarily incorrect, it is rather that he fails to grasp how we live in what Félix Guattari calls, a ‘paradoxical cocktail of hyper-segregation *and* generalised communication’.³⁹ He fails to recognise that it is ‘not silence, but uninterrupted noise... a cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act that is the alienation of our times.’⁴⁰ If Bourriaud’s delineation of recent and contemporary relational art’s sphere of utility bears a striking resemblance to contemporary managerial discourses of communication as freedom or cure as described above, then how exactly can art ‘develop a political project through turning the relational realm into an issue’? For Bourriaud, the conviviality and sociability of relational artworks are not tied to production, and can magically rescue communication from its alienated conditions. No answer is provided as to why art should have this capacity. It would therefore

seem that the mere definition of these activities *as art* is what enables this capacity for de-alienation and distinguishes them from any other form of relational activity. In addition, the designation of the ‘inter-subjective space’ created through relational artworks as the medium of a new genre, preserves intact the syntax of the artist who masters or manipulates a medium to produce an artwork. By effectively relying on the figure of the artist and the category of art as inherently un-alienated, in part through resorting to a modernist notion of art as a separate autonomous sphere, separate from production and with an inherently transformative capacity, Bourriaud elides this relationship between relational art and contemporary modes of post-Fordist production, ensuring all of the given terms and frameworks stay intact.

Stewart Martin has commented on how many of the critics of relational aesthetics do not look at the political economy of social exchange implied in Bourriaud’s text. Martin asks us to consider instead the contemporary ideological function of art presented as a ‘free space’.⁴¹ Within the discourses and economies of creativity in the UK, particularly under New Labour, this ideological function was clear enough. Who could be against the privatization of culture and public space, the flexibilization and precarization of labour, ever-creeping intellectual property regimes, and the replacement of redistributive economic systems based on principles of equality to models of social inclusion, if it is all encompassed under the broad church of creativity and culture for all?⁴² It is impossible to produce a claim for the production of an unalienated sociality through contemporary art when considering the broader macropolitical forces that frame, direct and capture such practices. But the ideological function of art presented as a free space, and by extension, the artist as a free agent elucidates two important issues: first, it shows how one influential discourse around contemporary art elides the complex imbrication of art and late capitalist forms of production; and second, it sheds light on the micropolitical forces that further reify the subjectivity of the artist by making that subjectivity somehow the ontological ‘guarantee’ that certain forms of activity will indeed constitute art. In a kind of twisted extension of the Duchampian operation of the readymade, it becomes possible to claim that if ‘an artist’ forms a marching band, the marching band is art; if an artist serves pizza or makes a speech on a street corner, this too is art and so on. In drawing attention to these paradoxes and contradictions, I am not interested in participating in the production of anxiety around questions of artistic legitimacy and aesthetic criteria that preoccupy so many critics, especially critics of relational aesthetics. Rather, I am pointing to the complex set of elisions and manoeuvres that work to shore up this figure of the artist, the stakes that are involved in this designation, and how it fundamentally maintains stability in the field. In a double move, the discourse on relational aesthetics both produces and relies on a particular notion of the artist to claim certain practices as political, and in turn, to ensure that those practices can be legitimised within the terms of contemporary art.

To return briefly to our papier maché carrot: were the object in question understood through the straightforward syntax of an artwork with an author (and some assistants), it could easily be described as a relational art project and inserted into the appropriate circuits of cultural capital. Had it not been destroyed, for instance,

it could easily have been shown in an exhibition the following year about student protests and social movements that address precarious labour conditions. In settling easily into these categories and modes of organization, the object and the artist would be straightforwardly validated, while the institution could appear progressive while continuing its drive to proliferate political thematics without meaningful self-reflection or consequence. While it is possible to recognise that in the field of contemporary art the individual claiming of ideas, the authoring of collective experiences, and the insertion of all of this into circuits of cultural capital, results from a complex set of material conditions, interpellations and identifications, it is also important to look at how these are often the very acts that block and limit practices of transversality. For practices of transversality work to build other kinds of relationships; new assemblages that can confront and transform the conditions and frameworks of the fields that subject us. The question moves therefore to one of *how* we go about making these changes. How do we build other structures of value and social solidarity and experiment with other modes of subjectivation that will allow us to live and work differently?

Transversality entails a double move: the disruption of given terms and modes of operation *and* the careful construction and institution of another set of relations that begin to reassemble subjectivities, fields and actions along different transversal lines. In the practices that operate across the fields of art and the social movements for instance, it would involve the simultaneous taking apart of the serialized, individuated subject who declares ‘but that was my idea!’ *and* the careful work of composing new subject groups and collective forms-of-life. It is important to remember that the concept of transversality was first developed by Guattari in his clinical work at *La Borde* in France in the 1960s, as a tool for the re-organization of institutional practices of psychiatry, conventionally based on processes of transference between the analyst and the analysand.⁴³ Guattari emphasised that a transversal is never ‘there’ as a given; it is never a form into which a pre-constituted subject can step. It involves at its core, the simultaneous disassembling and reassembling of subjectivity in and through the production of new organizational and social structures in the institution, the hospital and elsewhere. In Guattari’s thought it is *impossible* to construct practices of transversality without challenging the form of pre-constituted subject formation that coincides with the ‘capitalist imprint’ of the individual.⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, one of Deleuze and Guattari’s most central observations, one of their fundamental problems with political philosophy, is the fact that desire is forever involved in its own ‘involuntary servitude’.⁴⁵ Desire, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not some instinctual energy, but rather an active force that directly invests the social field, producing ‘connections, investments and intensive states within and between bodies’.⁴⁶ They argue that one of the key ways in which desire gets caught up in its own servitude is prior to its investment in the relations of production, when it becomes reified and submitted to systems of individuation, such as familial and social hierarchy. Deleuze and Guattari declare: ‘I am a man, I am a woman, I am a son etc. No sooner does someone say I am this or that, that desire is strangled’.⁴⁷ Desire in the first instance gets caught in the impasse of private fantasy, in the formation of a subjectivity that coincides with the imprint of the individual.

For Guattari, one of the crucial ways to liberate desire from the production of the self is precisely through the development of practices of transversality, practices which involve the creation of these new structures within which desire can flow differently, which can re-assemble the relationship between the subject and the group. Guattari states that ‘the self is yet one more thing we ought to dissolve, under the combined assault of political and analytic forces’.⁴⁸

This subject, individuated and caught in the impasse of private fantasy and the endless paradoxes of involuntary servitude, is the subject that is produced with ever-greater intensity in the economies and governmental techniques of neo-liberalism today. In contemporary forms of post-Fordism, Franco Berardi argues that our ‘desiring energy is increasingly caught in the trick of self-enterprise’.⁴⁹ For as we have seen, and as Guattari noted thirty years prior, capitalism does not just exploit labour capacity, but also insinuates itself into the ‘desiring system of those it exploits’.⁵⁰ It followed for Guattari and others in the late 1960s, that the survival of capitalism did not just depend on its ideological enforcement, but also on the subject’s internalization of the values of capitalism through this very construction of subjectivity. Taking on board the centrality of the production of subjectivity in the creation of paradoxes of contemporary post-Fordist production and as a key technique of power, it becomes clear that the ways in which artists identify and claim certain subject positions is deeply political. This complex micropolitical terrain is too often elided, taken as a given, or left to precarious and often isolated individuals to negotiate.

Practices of transversality at their most useful, work to break down oppositions between the individual and the group, between the inside and the outside of the institution, or of the discursive field.⁵¹ Guattari insists that transversality as a constituent practice must assemble a continuous line connecting these micropolitical processes of subjectivation through to macropolitical fields, institutions and economic systems, mobilising desire to create what he calls ‘points of proliferation at the centre of constituted systems’.⁵² Such transversal practices are not interested in the undoing of the subject, or the taking apart of the institutions for their own sake, or in the name of a potential that is always and forever deferred. Instead, they involve a series of slow, organized, deliberate processes that work to produce another consistency. The term consistency connotes something that is regular, repeated and constant, as well as describing the texture, thickness or density of a substance. Consistency for Félix Guattari ‘affirms the coherence, the consistency of a *process* not expressible in hard and fast propositions or rational theologies’.⁵³ In the absence of clear answers or paths out of the impasses of neoliberal institutional life and the intense micropolitical struggles in the fields of subjectivity today, such consistencies might begin to weave a terrain on which we can build new relationships and possibilities of working otherwise. In the institutional spaces where we meet, sometimes make our living and at other times occupy, transversality today might entail experimenting through the slogan adopted by the intermittent movement in Paris: ‘neither inside nor outside.’ This slogan which suggests itself as a technique for organization, signifies for Lazzarato ‘being radically external to the institution, that is to say, neither in complete discrepancy nor in interiority’.⁵⁴ Lazzarato admits however, that as a political positioning, this is incredibly difficult to hold onto: it is something that has to be defined in each instance

according to specific situations. Perhaps it is through the slow micropolitical work of developing new consistencies around these precarious positions, that we can begin to address the contemporary paradoxes of subjectivation, confront the mechanisms that reproduce us and our work in ways that ultimately manipulate our interests, and displace the blockages that occur in practices of creative dissent.

Epilogue

This text sits as a symptom of the issues I discuss above. The relationship between the proper name, social movements and collective processes is also fraught here. In authoring this text there is no way to avoid the fact that I have at least partially appropriated some of that collective knowledge, and created a strange division in myself between someone who does, and someone who makes and writes *about*. Without detracting from my genuine concern with the political issues and theoretical questions in this essay, my decision to write this emanates in great part from my own material and institutional conditions. It is telling that in order to maintain a relatively secure position in the UK University today, it is precisely this use of the proper name and this splitting of the self that is demanded. For in this context, maintaining satisfactory job performance appraisals, continued employment and status as researcher, depends in part on being willing to capture, name and claim shared experiences and analyses. The proliferation of those who write *about*, make work *about*, but seem to have little time to get involved *in* acts of creative dissent and social struggle, is surely connected to these conditions. Holding a position that is neither inside nor outside is an incredibly difficult thing to do.

Notes

¹ Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux Journal*, 21 (2010) <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/> > [01/06/2011].

² See for example the Occupy Wall St Arts and Labour group in New York or the Arts Against Cuts group in London.

³ Gary Genosko, *Félix Guattari: An Aberrant Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.47.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p.70.

⁵ Gerald Raunig, 'Transversal Multitudes', *Transversal*, (2002) <<http://cipcp.net/transversal/0303/raunig/en> > [01/10/2002].

⁶ See the practices of groups such as UltraRed, Platforma 9.81, Park Fiction, Platform London, and events such as the Fadiat Borderline Academy in Tarifa, 2004.

⁷ Four 'Long' or 'Direct' Weekends took place at the Slade College of Art, Goldsmiths Students Union, Camberwell College of Art and the University of London Union in 2010 and 2011.

For further details, see Precarious Workers Brigade, 'Fragments Toward an Understanding of a Week that Changed Everything...', *e-flux Journal*, 24 (2011) <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/fragments-toward-an-understanding-of-a-week-that-changed-everything%E2%80%A6/> >

⁸ See Arts Against Cuts flyers at: <<http://artsagainstcuts.wordpress.com/2011/03/22/march-26-posters-print-post-hand-out/> >; <<http://artsagainstcuts.wordpress.com/2010/12/02/arts-against-cuts-the-long-weekend/> >; <<http://artsagainstcuts.wordpress.com/2010/12/03/arts-against-cuts-the-long-weekend-flyer/> >

⁹ See Arts Against Cuts flyer where Marina Abramovic and Ai Weiwei are listed alongside others who were actually going to be there: <<http://sladeoccupation.wordpress.com/2010/12/04/long-weekend-at-goldsmiths-underway/> >

¹⁰ 'Another World: Michelle Kuo Talks with David Graeber', *Artforum International*, Summer 2012, p.270.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari's concept of an assemblage of enunciation insists that language and the

moment of enunciation cannot be separated from the collective formation that utters it. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.79.

¹² Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping', trans. Brian Holmes, *Transversal* (2006) <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en>> [18/01/2007].

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.142–148.

¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presse du Réel, 1998).

¹⁵ Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping'

¹⁶ Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping'

¹⁷ Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping'

¹⁸ Suely Rolnik, 'The Body's Contagious Memory: Lygia Clark's Return to the Museum', trans. Rodrigo Nunes, *Transversal* (2007) <<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/en>> [29/05/2008].

¹⁹ Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2009), p.32.

²⁰ Maurizio Lazzarato 'Immaterial Labour', trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory, in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp.132–146.

²¹ For further discussion of the overlaps between notions of cultural labour and immaterial labour see Stefano Harney, 'Programming Immaterial Labour' <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fc_immateriallabour6.htm> [01/09/2012].

²² Kate Oakley, Brooke Sperry and Andy Pratt, *The Art of Innovation: How Fine Arts Graduates Contribute to Innovation*, ed. Hasan Bakhshi (NESTA, 2008).

²³ For discussion of the artist as entrepreneur see: Marion von Osten, 'Unpredictable Outcomes/Unpredictable Outcasts: A Reflection After Some Years of Debates on Creativity and Creative Industries', *Transform*, (2007) <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/vonosten/en>> [14/3/2008] and Brian Holmes, 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique', *Transversal*, (2001) <<http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>> [01/12/2003].

²⁴ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, 'Grasping the Political in the Event: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato', *Inflexions*, 3 (2009) <http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume_4/n3_lazzaratohtml.html> [10/03/2012].

²⁵ Suely Rolnik, 'The Body's Contagious Memory'.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984), p.29.

²⁷ Suely Rolnik, 'The Body's Contagious Memory'

²⁸ Suely Rolnik, 'The Body's Contagious Memory'

²⁹ Take for example the ICA who curated their *Season of Dissent* in the midst of the explosion of student demonstration right outside it's doorstep in 2010 without reference to or solidarity with those events, or to the major turmoil of de-funding and staff cuts happening within its own four walls at the time.

³⁰ Consider the slogan 'Cut us, don't kill us' used in a Mark Tichner poster commissioned by the Save the Arts campaign in 2010 <<http://savethearts-uk.blogspot.co.uk/>>

³¹ See Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (2004), pp.51–79; Liam Gillick's response to Clare Bishop's 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, XLIV 6 (2006), pp.178–183 and Grant Kester, 'Lessons in Futility: Francis Alys and the Legacy of May '68', *Third Text*, 23.4 (2009), pp.407–420.

³² Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.16.

³³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.8.

³⁴ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, pp.16–17.

³⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.17.

³⁶ See for example, Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

³⁷ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp.89–92.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p.35.

³⁹ Gary Genesko (ed.), *The Guattari Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.120 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work*, p.108.

⁴¹ Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text*, 21 (2007), p.370.

⁴² For discussion see: Andy Pratt and Paul Jeffcut (eds.), *Creativity, Innovation and the Cultural Economy*, (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴³ Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

⁴⁴ Félix Guattari, 'Discursive Interlude: Institutional Practice and Politics', p.112.

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.29.

⁴⁶ Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.71.

⁴⁷ Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy, Texts and Interviews 1972–1977*, trans. David L. Sweet, Jarred Becker, and Taylor Adkins and ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p.152.

⁴⁸ Félix Guattari as quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, trans. Michael Taormina and ed. David Lapoujade (Los Angeles and London: Semiotext(e), 2004), p.193.

⁴⁹ See Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work* and Paolo Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude*.

⁵⁰ Guattari, *Molecular Revolution, Psychiatry and Politics*, pp.63–83.

⁵¹ Gary Genosko, *Félix Guattari*, p.124.

⁵² Félix Guattari, ‘Discursive Interlude: Institutional Practice and Politics’, in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.11

⁵³ Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, p.132.

⁵⁴ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, ‘Grasping the Political in the Event: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato’ *Inflexions*, 3 (2009) <<http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/>> [10/03/2012]

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