

THE BIG DEAL

On urban subjectivities

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Being invited to reflect upon the subject 'urban subjectivity's' I felt a bit embarrassed. As a philosopher I am trained to historically track down and systematically analyze concepts in order to master the specific subject I am occupied with. I am familiar with the subject 'subject'. As my philosophical perspective is both modern German and postmodern French, 'subjectivity' to me has Kantian transcendental and Hegelian idealistic overtones. Their 'subject' presupposed a unified History, was legitimized by Great Narratives, by universal discourses. This modern 'subject' no longer plays an evaluative role in an adequate analysis of human behavior and sociopolitical interactions in postmodern times. During the 20th century and especially after WW II it is historicized and deconstructed.

0. Route touristique

Subjectivity lost its universal grounds: from 1970 on as a result of the ideas of French thinkers of differences like Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari the deconstruction of this pseudotranscendental grid of normality became more radical. The autonomous Subject as the former caretaker of history was identified as the human, western, rational, white, grown up, healthy, virtuous, well disciplined and educated, working, heterosexual, married, monogamous, child producing, automobile man cruising through public space at 120 kilometers an hour, eager to read the message that came out of his recently purchased faxmachine.

Since the sixties normality appeared to be politically, sexually and aesthetically overdetermined. Now we even talk about urban subjectivities. To qualify the plural as urban, this once universalized subject becomes more dynamic. 'Urban' at least suggests that these subjectivities have dynamic vectors. I presume it is no longer opposed to 'rural'. In architectural sense the division between metropolitan areas, provincial cities and rural villages in Holland is highly artificial: every meadow is a park. So I suppose urban stands for daily interactions and transactions in a many folded, but due to intensive globalisation nevertheless homogeneous public space. This urban publicity recently became digitalized and virtualized.

As a result of exponential acceleration, globalization and virtualisation former subjectivity is dispersed, became multiple, processual, a becoming, a narrative with an open end. So we have to talk about shifting processes of virtual and actual subjectivation within a local global dynamics. We have to speak about it because, as loose as this subjectivation might seem, it still is in need of a discourse: as a coherent set of carefully produced behavioral patterns as a 'pouvoir' Foucault would say it demands a coherent set of scientifically acknowledged statements or consensually distributed enunciations in short: it still presupposes a regular discourse to orientate and give sense to its shared physicality in virtual and actual space and time.

During the sixties someone called it 'herrschaftsfreie Kommunikationsgemeinschaft', another called it 'a global village', nowadays some prefer to qualify this as a virtual community. To rephrase this in terms of the Information society: as long as bodies are informed by it virtually or actually subjectivity gains form. But in spite of all virtuality we remain very 'physical'. Despite the euphoric hopes of Hans Moravic and The Extropians it sounds like a rockband the participants of this symposium cannot yet be beamed into the Goethe Institute. Although fully monitored, registered and visually controlled, our bodies still being our main medium resists total transparency.

Let us therefore by way of introduction to the subject explore some actual local urban vectors of loose subjectivities in Rotterdam in order to make an adequate global extrapolation. We'll do a tour touristique, so to say. We flew in by NWA and took the intercity from Schiphol to Rotterdam, we flashed in by Thalys from Paris or with whatever High Velocity Train from whatever metropolitan area. We ended up at Central Station, jetlagged, comfortably dazed, our earthly bodies disorientated by the speed, stroll down the catacombs of the railway station the ideal place to explore the dynamic vectors of urban subjectivities.

They rush by or just hang around. They observe timetables, sell services or dope. Someone comes up to us asking for money. The next moment we are involved in a new transaction: while politely being requested to purchase a Straatkrant, someone else in a whisper inquires about our native country in order to estimate our need for drugs. Out of the blue someone raises his voice and starts a dialogue. Within a split second dozens urban vectorial subjectivities have introduced themselves on the threshold of urbanity: normals and marginals, schizo's and frenzied business persons.

Do they personify the nomadic qualities of urban subjectivities? Are we solely talking about minorities as the opposite of majorities? Does the fact that for instances homeless persons or dopeddealers take the initiative to an interaction or a transaction bare witness of them being an agency an 'agencement' or an arrangement as Brian Massumi once translated this term of Deleuze and Guattari? Are they like the streetsellers autonomous because they deal with their life? Economically, micropolitically although in an affective necessary sense, as Michael Hardt would say? What kind of enunciations do they share with us? Are they, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, agencies of enunciations, an agencement d'énonciations? Or are they just a talkative pain in the ass, too singular to be shared? What's the Big Deal about urban subjectivity?

Let us proceed our odyssey and taste some more 'couleur locale'. Crossing the square before the station, heading towards the Goethe Institute we come to the hectic crossing of the Kruiskade. Moved by an incomprehensible impulse we, instead of going straight ahead, feel seduced to turn to the right. Strolling on the next two hours, we will experience that the urban incorporates the physical tensions between the global and the local. For people unfamiliar with the global urban vectors of Rotterdam this place usually is characterized as a nogo area. But in broad daylight it is a multibred time space continuum wherein colonial and postcolonial threads are woven into the urban texture by typical Dutch tradesman ship, smoothed by prudential tolerance. Asian, Mediterranean, Caribbean, African and South American colors, sounds, smells, tastes, all kinds of physical interactions prefigure socio economic transactions.

This seemingly chaotic transactions are framed by a leisurely hanging out of all kinds of people. I say 'seemingly' because they are in fact busy doing immaterial labor: they are socializing, taking care of their business. Not killing time, but gaining time by dealing affects, by sharing nomadic qualities. And

again we ask ourselves: does their inviting us to interact and transact bare witness of their agency? Are global qualities inherent to the urban subjectivities we are looking for?

Let's roam a bit further and cross the bridge at the end of this global route and leave behind another region with a high multicultural exposure. We are now heading for the main physical vector of Rotterdam: the river. Down to that traditional inter and transactive area where Rotterdam is still famous for: the harbor with its docks, with its warehousing. We cross the square at the end of our route. At our right hand we see the towers of the local government administration, at our left the highly efficient, totally legalized red light district with its hyperfunctional design for libidinal parking. We wave at the girls and pass by, secretly pondering the question if they too are agencies of enunciations, that is: members of the nomadic family for whom politics, economics and creative solutions are interwoven into a lifestyle where affects are pushed and dealt with.

Turning left through the premises we catch a glimpse of the water. However, no industrious activities are heard, seen nor smelled. After inspection of the nameplates on the huge doors of the warehouses we come to the conclusion that most of the inhabitants are artists, using these former warehouses as studios. Once we reach the river no harbor is to be seen. No docks allowed any longer. We glance at the opposite border. Housing and towering flats, KPN, Hotel New York, recreational buildings, the new Luxor theater, works of art like the emigrant monument of Jeff Wall and right in between these buildings the renovated warehouse called Las Palmas housing the former photo institute, film museum and new media centre V2. Tired of walking we continue our tour touristique on the water, admiring the Erasmus bridge and the skyline. When we get off at the Veerhaven, the chic harbor of gigantic yachts, we are completely exhausted: so we take the tram that finally drops us in front of the Goethe Institute. Welcome to you all.

1 Percept: transaestheticization of daily life

So what is the Big Deal with urban subjectivities? What does urban in the perspective of the Information society imply? Up till now we have dealt with two urban vectors on a material level of reality: physical interactions and transactions, micropolitics and economy. I would like to shift your attention to a third vector I prefer to qualify as 'creations': interventions with an aesthetic quality. A kind of actions we used to ascribe to what we use to call 'visual artists'. Perhaps actions and interventions like Knowbotic researchers are performing or what Krzysztof Wodiczko and the E-lab in Riga has initiated in Xchange.

Postmodern daily life is furnished by and enveloped in art. Public life has incorporated and neutralized former avantgarde aesthetics. Nowadays art seems to be everywhere: as architecture houses, public buildings, bridges, on billboards and digitalized interfaces in public space, on tv programs, indoors as design and outdoors as fashion. To my opinion Internet, Cyberspace and WWW are expressions of the same aesthetization. But on a physical scale too individual bodies are artificially deconstructed and rebuilt. While sauna, Nautilus equipment and health food transform them into a discourse, plastic surgery, genetical engineering and nanotechnology reformulate the very existence of the bodies.

This artificial hyperactivity is a sign of the disappearance of art. As politics and economics art is omnipresent. So art did not disappear because of lack of success, it penetrated every domain as a result of its unrivalled success. Art penetrated daily life in all directions. Like King Midas every bit of

reality it touches, becomes arty. Art as a public affair penetrates urban publicity. That is probably why Jean Baudrillard states that our excessive visual culture has taken on a 'transaesthetic' quality 'trans' indicating the disappearance as a result of excess.

Are postmodern urban 'subjectivities' excluded from this transaestheticization? Or are subjects like cities, images and bodies also built, dealt and managed? According to Michel Foucault this is the case. He problematized the transcendental subject as a product of strategic interactions between discourses (savoir) and micropolitical power relations (pouvoir): a process of subjectivation (assujettissement). He goes even further in his conclusions: subjectivation is 'a work of art' that he in his last books proposes to qualify as an "aesthetics of existence", sometimes even a 'lifestyle'. However, the process of subjectivation presupposes a resistant medium that can be formed and informed: in Foucault's work this is the body.

2 Art and technology

For critics of the postmodern condition like Jürgen Habermas Foucault's critique on subjectivity leads to a disturbing conclusion: not only the quality of the beautiful, but also that of the good and true life is for sale. Propagating an aesthetics of existence as lifestyle to him implies reducing subjectivity to a sheer artifact or a commodity, only affluent citizens can purchase. In short, subjectivity is commodified. To my opinion this is too premature a conclusion.

We can find a more subtle and adventurous analysis in the philosophical, aesthetic and political texts of Jean François Lyotard. He criticizes both the artificiality of postmodern life and the economization of all values. As the Grand Narratives of Kant, Hegel and Marx he criticizes the so called neutral pragmatic performances of global capitalism, especially its efforts to rephrase every genre of discourse politics, erotics, aesthetics into economic terms. Although he agrees with Habermas that the all encompassing aestheticization is partly instigated by an 'inhuman' system global capitalism he nevertheless admits that the 'foundation' of individual existence remains an ethicoaesthetic impulse that is embedded in our affectivity. But the affects, the intensities that transverse our bodies, resist a definitive identification and subjectivation.

This ethical and aesthetic dimension is implied in his reanimation of Kant's problematique of the Sublime. As an overwhelming experience that lacks any image or representation and can only be captured in retrospect as an earthquake or tornado it is only imaginable by its devastating effects we survived the Sublime stands for the 'unrepresentable'. "But as far as we know" Lyotard states in *Postmodern Fables*, "the problem of the sublime is not a burning question on Wall Street or at Nasa".

As result of the above mentioned transaestheticization together with avantgarde art the 'unrepresentable' seems to have disappeared as well if one can use such a paradoxical turn of phrase. Or it has changed into precisely that entity that Lyotard criticizes: the inhuman System no individual can imagine. I have rephrased discourse and power in terms of the Information society: information and formation or styling and designing. Lyotard's 'unrepresentable' can be rephrased as well: as that which can not be informed: the unrepresentable then is in proper French 'informe' or formless.

My question and this is a real question I would later on like to elaborate on what is the 'formless' as a source of resistance and therefore to use the last word of Michael Hardt's essay for this symposium for liberation in an Information society? How does this source or substance relate to subjectivation? Is it

for instance the recently much debated senseless violence that has to be analysed and stylized, that is: informed and disciplined? Is it the flesh outside cyberspace, the undisciplined, all those marginal persons we meet during our tour touristique? Is, after the digitalized translation of knowledge and visions to information, after the reduction of texts, images and sounds to bits, is the informed or formless sheer, indifferent data: an unimaginable and unrepresentable given? Or is it as Arthur Kroker proposes data flesh: the body immersed in the Net, the bodies of the hypergeeks that according to Kroker, "are critics IN the Net, not OF it"(156).

3 Sensibility and materialism: Les Immatériaux

We can come to this point later. First I will further elaborate the idea of the affects in order to be able to question Michael Hardt liberating potential of affective labor. Lyotard with in the of his mind the Sublime as the unrepresentable draws our attention to a specific 'postmodern' sensibility that constitutes social interactions and makes subjectivation possible. At the end of *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) he describes this as a capacity to endure that what can not be translated into economic values: 'incommensurable', that what has no exchange value. In my words: the formless that cannot be informed nor formed. Lyotard sees his philosophy as "the search for the limit between the tolerable and the intolerable by way of moves lacking any model". According to him avantgarde art has always explored this tension of the incommensurable. Works of art Lyotard refers for instance to Marcel Duchamp and Daniel Buren have sensibilized their audiences for the intolerable.

Within Lyotard's post avantgarde philosophy this sensibility undermines the materialist tendencies of the global economic (art)system by giving voice to uncertainty. Phrased in the outdated terminology of an 'Ideologiekritik': Duchamp art 'unmasks' the hidden conditions of production of a repressive system. The former marxist Lyotard has transformed his dialectical and historical materialism into a materialism that incorporates an aesthetic avantgarde sensibility.

Lyotard has been occupied with new media as well. In 1985 he cocurates the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in Centre Pompidou in Paris. The creative and affirmative aspects of postmodern technologies are subtly explored in a postavantgarde setting. Works of (post) avantgarde artists are installed in a hi-tech environment. All senses of the walkman wearing recipients are activated in order to trigger the above mentioned sensibility and the incommensurable intensities. The exposition is a labyrinth of sixty sites or 'zones'. Cruising and crossing these hardly defined sites the visitors are affected by irreducible differences and nonidentifiable 'singularities'. They 'sense' the differential tension or differends between artistic and technological media and between a diversity of disciplines.

Sensibility turns out to be more than a psychological notion. Lyotard focuses on a 'faculty' that enables the 'subject' to be moved and touched by events of the unrepresentable without anticipating beforehand its exchange value for future things to happen. This sensibility for uncertainty is characterized as a pathos, eventually as affectivity, that Lyotard, following Levinas, coins as 'passibilité'. Passibility however, must not be confused with passivity: "passivity is opposed to activity", Lyotard remarks, "but not passibility. Even further, this active/passive opposition presupposes passibility".

Before being an active autonomous subject an agency one is always passible, but not passive. Passibility as experience appears to be the site of unsolvable conflicts, of differend as Lyotard terms them. We have knowledge of this sensibility, but this is not discursive knowledge, no discourse. How can an affect be discursive? Do we know what we feel the very moment we are affected? Or can this reflection have another medial specificity? How does a painter know, how does a dancer know, a philosopher? They are informed by means of their specific medium. They reflect in their medium. Passibility is like a pathetic reflectivity.

Lyotard calls the tension between being moved or touched and knowing, this pathetic reflectivity 'tautegorical': "a term by which I designate the remarkable fact that pleasure and displeasure are at once both a 'state' of the soul and the 'information' collected by the soul relative to its state". I stress of course his term 'information'. Information is both affective ("for thought, to be informed of its state is to feel this state to be affected") and reflective: "Pure reflection is first and foremost the ability of thought to be immediately informed of its state by this state and without other means of measure than feeling itself". Giorgio Agamben perhaps visions something like this or: whatever you want when he speaks about "communication, emptied of all content, that "is able" to communicate itself."(154).

Can one say that through the media the mind 'matters'. That the mind matters in the media. "The matter I'm talking about", Lyotard states, "is 'immaterial', unobjectable, because it can only 'take place' or find its occasion at the price of suspending the active powers of the mind". The nomadic bodies of the recipients in *Les Immatériaux* are informed and formed by the creations of the media. They are not yet Kroker's data flesh, but they are experiencing on an affective level mediality. Not what the media say is the issue although recipients always try to extract information out of them but the very fact that media create communication is the crucial point. In the words of Marshall McLuhan: the medium is the message. Media install the body as the mind. They tense en sensibilize this relation that Kan, Hegel and Marx still labelled subjectivity: the media are sensed as inbetween.

4 Affectivity as interesse

What does this all mean? Does the hypothesis that we live in a transaestheticized hyperreality combined with the acceptance of the end of art that is: the sterility of a legitimization in modern avantgarde terms lead to the conclusion that we no longer have access to a sensibility for the formless? And does this anaesthesia or indifference reduce subjectivation to only a double information: discourse and design? Is to use a more Heideggerian turn urban Dasein reduced to design? Have the massmedia and new media installed a new 'normality': can urbans like us only experience subjectivation and autonomy when they are informed on how, when en where to interact, to transact and to create? Is it this medial surveillance that Deleuze aims at at the end of his book *Negotiations* as the follow up of disciplining Foucault spoke about? Within the transaestheticized culture of the information society 'information' has at least a twofolded sense: selfreflection (information) and autonomy (formation) are still small scale options within the postmodern condition. But where is the informe, the formless? Are marginal groups the informe, the formless or the deformed, the disabled? Or do we have to look at other places to find it?

I think rather gloomy vision holds as long as we accept Lyotard's still slightly postavantgardist perspective. We have to extend his position in order to explore the experience of the media, the media as an experience as a milieu that not only mediates our behavior and consciousness, our body

and brain but facilitates the ever uninformed, the formless relation between them. The informe now becomes the inter, the milieu, the inbetween that in itself cannot be imagined and represented but nevertheless constitutes every relation.

One could say that Derrida calls this experience “a différance”. Différance is “in being with itself of the present”. As with Lyotard this quasi transcendental operative force Derrida remarks in 1968 “remains undecided between the active and the passive”. It is “an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject or an object ...”. Derrida himself calls this a medium, a middle voice or path, a nonpassage, a site.

During that same period Deleuze and Guattari start inventing a diversity of concepts to circumscribe this formless inbetween. This results in A Thousand Plateaus in the concept of the ‘rhizome’. A rhizome is made out of plateaus and a plateau, Deleuze and Guattari explain, “is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end”. This ‘middle’ or ‘milieu’ is an ‘inter’(entre):

“The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between (entre) things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to another and again, but a perpendicular (heel steil, loodrecht op) direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away ...”

Like Lyotard's passibility the ‘inter’, if spoken of in ontological terms, ‘exists’ ‘before’ the articulated antipodes of an opposition. The inter as it were crosses (out) the opposition by acceleration. Baudrillard qualifies this as the excess that overturns every position.

Within their perspective the inbetween or inter is thought of as a medium, a milieu. This medium is not a substantial thing as something inbetween two positions. To phrase it more trendy: it is the experience of or sensibility for the flow that connects them. It is the taking place of their relation as an event. Every intervention in the medium aimed at freeing this sensibility is a creation. The being of the inter is literally *interesse*.

Experience, sensibility all suggest a non discursive plan: a directed pathos, a passibility. And it is this passion that in terms of labor makes things work. From a experiential point of view media as experience it does not matter whether this interesse is entertainment or purely interest. Interesse is beyond culture or economy. These domains are already to use another Deleuzian term territorializations. The inter has already been valued.¹

The ‘inter’ is the passibility for this evaluation: it is the informe of information and formation. Affect is as valuable as it is worthless. Precisely this double bind of capitalism is analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari in Anti Oedipus. It is also the double face of the schizo: the pityfull psychopathological entity and the revolutionary nomad.

So we ended up asking ourselves what the productive relationship between affect and value could be. Does a value orientate affects or do affect evaluate because they are interesse? Isn't every affect not already a relation? Does it imply that in being affected or affect others every subject is already at

¹ economy article George Soros “The crisis of global capitalism” Soros: value reflectivity and fallibility: the faculty to fail. Comparable to Lyotard’s uncertainty and the sensibility to fail ; see also Harvard Business review, July 1998: Welcome to the experience economy, Gilmore and Pine on lifestyle.

least two, a group, a herd or a hunting party. An affect is never a quality of an individual. It is a vector of a group. Perhaps this is what Michael Hardt means when he ends his article, speaking about the relation between value and affect, with a reference to “circuits of valorization”.² Beside this computational influenced networking service industry, Michael Hardt discerns another immaterial form of labor he calls ‘affective’ labor. Hardt differentiates affective labor into affectively necessary labor - addicted to ..? workaholic – and necessary affective labor. These are supposed to produce “circuits of valorization” and Hardt adds to it as the finishing touch of his article “perhaps liberation”. And there the story begins again. Liberated from what en in order to realize what? Still the Marxist’s story? Do new media still have liberating potentials? Do they owe this to their artistic and creative round of their users? Do we have to beware of the affectively necessary laborers, the addicts, the Enemy?

In his book titled *The Coming Community* Giorgio Agamben writes about ‘whatever’: “Quolibet ens is not ‘being, it does not matter which’ but rather “being such that it always matters”. (1) Empty or formal value production is the presupposition of physical interesse. But we still have to work for this interesse. It does not come by itself, although it is everywhere. That is why Michael Hardt’s thesis on affective labor is interesting. Is affective labor a “(net)working towards a community?” Are these virtual communities or subjects? The final question for me is: what kind of work is immaterial, affective work when it is more than caretaking, nursing or entrepreneurial networking? How can this work politically be effectuated without being absorbed and disciplined by the System in order to increase its output.

(Example: is singulier, omdat het in zijn particularity blijft bestaan en toch andere onder zich verenigd, universeel is. Beispiel, Paradeigma: showed alongside. “The proper place of the exemple is beside itself in the empty space in which its undefinable and unforgettable life unfolds”(10). It has reflectivity because it is reflected in a discourse, in language, in being called, if necessary even a liar)

8 Immaterial labour: group subjects and minorities

It is true: if affectivity makes things work, than affective labor is a substantial potential for urban subjectivation. But does this mean that all affective labor can be quantified, taxed? Does it make the system more efficient and performative? Or does it create new subjectivities the effects of which we yet cannot imagen? Urban subjectivities and new media. Is the process of urban subjectivation constituted by the sensibility to endure the inter? And can we learn to endure and expand this sensibility by interacting with interfaces?

² ‘Immaterial labor’ is a concept coined by Maurizio Lazzarato.