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School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Finland

Plasticity and performance: the production of subjectivity in a post-industrial town of Bytom

Introduction

The concepts of contamination, sponge and plasticity are here used to approach schizoanalytic practice as a method for artistic research. They are singular to my research on the amalgamation of performance, subjectivity and contemporary forms of capitalism. My argument is based on the theoretical thinking and practical works of Félix Guattari. The concept of ‘sponge’ is in relation with Guattari’s concept of chaosmosis and plasticity, which has been reworked from its Hegelian comprehension by Catherine Malabou.

I am conducting articulation for the complexity of an event experienced by performing subjectivity. What are the qualities that subjectivity is immersed in as a performer and are these qualities commensurable with other contexts of contemporary political situations? What is the particular locus of performance art or other practices, which do not possess explicit borders between audience, performer, site or durations?

Bytom is a former mining town in Upper Silesia, Poland. This area is famous for mining industry, which, however, has almost disappeared during the past twenty years of economic transformation. Bytom is an exemplary of the transformation, which neo-liberal politics produces. In 2012 I was invited by the curator Stanisław Ruksza from CSW Kronika to do a project in Bytom, and thus visited this city in several occasions. These visits were composed of workshops, interviews, field trips and other events, which produced source material for a performance as an affective interpretation of the situation. The final works were presented at the Kronika from the end of November 2012 to the end of January 2013 were a scripted performance, installation and a video piece.

The Schizoanalysis of Félix Guattari

The concept of schizoanalysis was developed by Félix Guattari and Jean Oury at the clinique La Borde, and has its origin in the radical “anti-psychiatric” movement of the late sixties and early seventies in Italy, France and England. (Genosko 2002, 8-36) So far it has been rarely used in artistic practice, but some recent examples of the appropriation include practice of the Ueinzz Theatre Group in São Paulo and the performance group Plastique Fantastique by Simon O’Sullivan and David Burrows in the UK¹.

What I am trying to do, is to argument the use of schizoanalysis on artistic practice, and appropriation of schizoanalysis as a working method. What is significantly similar between artistic practice and therapy is the production of subjectivity in both instances, and how this production can be approached by schizoanalysis. The event of performance produces a site for actualizing the potential. Infinite actualization of potential is never possible, but the capitalist paradigm aims to simulate the actualization of infinite possibilities. (O’Sullivan 2012, 22) Schizoanalysis is not a manual for full potentiality, but an analysis of the subjectivization process accommodating such promise of infinity by capitalism.

Félix Guattari made a diagram, describing: ”the four domains of the Plane of Consistency or plane of immanence” for mapping the unconscious and subjectivity. (Watson 2009, 123)

The four domains are following, with four distinct functions. In the lower right, there is the existential territory (T) of subjectivity, which is the realm of dominant and minor refrains.

Territory is the nondiscursive and real but only virtual; it is ‘life as it seems’ – my

‘apprehension’ of the world. (Watson 2009, 133) In the lower left, there is the realm of

material fluxes (F): intensities of play, joy, sadness and semiotics. These fluxes, which are

actual and real, are reterritorializing by function. On top of them, there is actual and potential

Phylum (Φ) of machines: blueprints, plans, rules, and regulations. These machines do not

¹ See <http://www.plastiquefantastique.org>

only regulate and organize the flows, but are in essence creative. (Watson 2009, 126) The realm of incorporeal universes (U) is non-signified and non-discursive domain of virtual content, unformed matter and the realm of potentiality. Janell Watson writes on Guattari's domains following:

”Concrete, oniric, pathological, or aesthetic [...] universe[s] [are] constellation[s] of values, of nondiscursive references, of virtual possibility, not real and not actualized, and yet necessary to any process of actualization and realization. Crystals of singularization.” (Watson 2009, 124/129)

Guattari defines the relationships between the different domains as such, that:

“the Phyla [of machines] supply the plans and diagrams, which must be realized in the matter and energy of the Flows. [...] The full cycle of assemblages is not complete until the Universes and Territories also become involved, incorporating both machinic proto-subjectivity and human experience.” (Watson 2009, 131)

The question of non-discursive matter is essential, aside from the discursive signification. In addition to the horizontal division between real and potential, Guattari's map is divided vertically, where the vertical division responds to the division between objective and subjective: the left side deals with the 'given' while right side is the domain of the 'logic of body without organs'. (Watson 2009, 125) Artistic processes dealing only with semiotic significations, deals with power and language and consequently produces more signification. In turn, artistic practice cannot reside only in the domain of potential Territories and Universes, since it requires machines, in other words significations and material flows of the real. In order to produce changes and transformations both in the singular, existential territory or 'how life seems' and between the organizing power of machines and material fluxes practice should consider both signification and asigned potentials.

In order to distinguish artistic practice from the overall knowledge production of capitalism, in my predication it should concentrate on mutations and variations. There is no identical actualization of the potentiality, but only interpretations and variations. However, the knowledge production of capitalism creates predominant refrains², *motifs*, which are based on the promise and obstructions of alternative articulations of potentiality. (O'Sullivan 2007, 4) The dominant articulations organize the subjectivity in the present conditions of neoliberal and post-industrial semio-capitalism to produce a 'home' or 'nest', where only specific interpretations of the potential are nurtured, while minor are being reduced to repetition with the same.

Plasticity and Chaosis

Plasticity as a concept is closely related with fine arts and theatre, since it carries within an idea of giving or receiving form – mould and impression, as being predicated by Plato in the third book of Republic (1997, 1022-1052) and Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/2008). Hegel reserves the use of this concept for the sculptural and ethical ability to give form and mould subjectivity, which is applied on the modification and transformation on subjectivity. (Clemens 2010) The appropriation of moulding type by National Socialism has been criticized by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in their essay "The Nazi Myth" (1990) They do not consider the aspect of annihilation as being part of the plasticity, when they criticize moulding the 'types' of subjectivity", since it is third aspect, which is the innovation of Catherine Malabou first presented in her dissertation in 1996³, and later on in several of her books. She distinguishes three aspect of plasticity in the following way:

² Guattari on refrains: "I would say that the refrain does not rest on the elements of form, material, or ordinary signification, but on the detachment of an existential "motif" (or leitmotif) instituted as an "attractor" in the midst of sensible and signification chaos." (Genosko 1996, 200)

³ L'Avenir de Hegel, plasticité, temporalité, dialectique from 1996. It was published in English in 2005 titled The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic.

"[Plasticity] means at once the capacity to receive form (clay is called 'plastic,' for example) and the capacity to give form (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery). [...] plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create. [...] to receive and to create his or her own form does not depend on any pre-established form; the original model or standard is, in a way, progressively erased." (Malabou 2008, 5-6)

Annihilation of subjectivity may be caused by a psychological or physical trauma – an accident or disaster, which will change the subjectivity interminably. Accident is a term, which is machinic and has been used in relation with the development of modern industry. (Schivelbusch 1986, 131) Prior to that, accident was related to natural effect, and thus the concept of trauma is industrial, as well. It was only in the industrial period, when the potentiality of an accident become ever present. (Schivelbusch 1986, 130) Accident is a cut, which will separate the subjectivity from the past. The French noun *plastique* or verb *plastiquer* refers to plastic explosive substances, such as Semtex. (Malabou 2008, 5) What follows is that plasticity is not reserved for moulding types or identities, in other words to perform normatively, but that there is an implicit potentiality for annihilation or rupture; constant presence of an accident looming over subjectivity. The materiality of our existence is not referred to clay but fluid and plastic polymers, which in contrast with marble or ceramic are flexible, mouldable and elastic. The twenty-first century subjectivity is akin to plastic polymers; it is *sponge* subjectivity.

I have appropriated concept of plasticity in relation with performance or performing subjectivity to produce a concept of sponge subjectivity. Sponge has a form, which is able to absorb affects and information. Sponge subjectivity is able to mix and use information without losing its form; it is resilient and flexible like plastic, balanced with rigidity and suppleness — thus it has a memory and resistance for change. While it is supple and flexible, it is inclined towards the return of the same rather than repetition with difference. Sponge is

prone for control, since the function of a sponge is directly linked with appropriate amount of wetness absorbed in the pores of a sponge. It is a subject, which self-controls itself in the way as it is described by Deleuze in the *Postscript on the societies of control* (1990) or how Foucault analyzes the development of *homo oeconomicus* in neoliberal governing in his series of lectures on biopolitics. (Foucault 2008). Like an alcoholic, who meticulously controls the right amount of intake, sponge maintains his or her material and virtual intake, as well.⁴

The pertinence of potential plasticity is valuable for creative processes, social, mental and political aspects of subjectivity. The three aspects of plasticity are inherently potential and not actual: potential forms are taken, given or destroyed. It is the potential annihilation, which is constituent producing repetition with a difference. In a manner of speaking, sponge has a shadow of unwanted flows in abiding potentiality of annihilation. It is not the presence of death, but the presence of irreversible change, which lies in the shadow of a sponge. Flexibility and elasticity are attributes requested from a subject in contemporary capitalism, and he or she is like a sponge: absorbing, flexible and elastic. (Malabou 2008, 71-72)

Post-industrial town of Bytom and sponge subjectivity

In one of the first workshops in Bytom my questions were connected with the metamodelization of Guattari and I asked people to describe the areas linked with flows, refrains, abstractions, affects and their existential territory. They would draw and write down how the city seems for them and if there are certain territories, which would seem to function smoothly, and if another places made them nervous. After the descriptions, we would visit the places, which they had described in relation with flows, affects and refrains. Next day I would make a private trip and return to site, photograph it, and make my own notes and recollections of what I felt and how the place affected me.

⁴ I want give thanks professor Esa Kirkkopelto on this notion .

In the actual writing process these refrains, flows and affects which originated from the maps, discussions and tours with the participants became the material for the performance. They were the minor nodes of a folding temporality of the people living in Bytom; the landscape of a memory from these people. My process would start from these rather mundane visits, and lead to immersion into particular histories of the place. Participants would give historical details of the sites. Radosław “Radek” Cwięłag, who was my assistant and main source, would for instance describe the area of Bobrek which still has a functioning mine and a coke plant:

“Was your father working here?” (myself)

“No, my father was working there, there is a mine. This mine has tunnels everywhere, so here is just the office part. There was a steel work, but now you have only chimney. It's like that people are buying only chimneys, to renting it for senders.”

“Mobile phone antennas.” (myself)

“What more refrains. Lot of refrains actually, moving here, you have lot of sounds, and in the past it was really much more. And those chimneys over there are from old powerplant, will go there later. So, it is like one circle, network of connecting one to other. And it was like that, in the shaft you have the circles [Wheel for mining-lift], when they are moving, it means that people are going up. So people who were living here, it was like a refrain everyday. At each day, at the same time it was working. If you saw that it was not working at the right time, it was meaning that maybe there was some kind of accident, and my husband don't come back from mines, or something had happened there.”

In the episteme of post-industrialism each particular context is contaminated with heterogeneous, but localized refrains. These refrains can be found in other locales and contexts, but in each singular location, these relationships between dominant and minor refrains have utmost significance. Radek's story has a major refrain of transformation from the industrial labour to post-fordism and neoliberal economics in Poland. However, this is not the affective link, which would pass on in my performance practice. In other words, there would be a dominating coding of industrialism present in the material, which is the most discernible refrain. Following this refrain, the practice would have clearly signified route with repetition of the same abstract machines, not unlike the capitalist capture itself. However, there are refrains in the discursive level of Radek's story, such as a chimney, antenna, the wheel, death, labour, family, and so on, which are not fully overcoded with the same abstract machine of capitalism. One of the ways for me to approach these minor refrains present in the story was to use physical incorporation of the memory; how the story was told and how I was distracted with my own machines of coding. In a way, the physical practice and the modulations of the narrative preserve the potentiality of the minor refrains, in other words, it does not overcode the narrative of Radek. The specificity of Bytom, and in this case the suburb of Bobrek in Bytom is not an example, but an assemblage of refrains – for which I should try to produce enunciation not based on capturing signification. The final work of performance should keep some of the loose ends of the seemingly major refrain of industrialism, which are particular only in the case of Bytom, and to which only the people of Bytom as witnesses of the performance may tie their folding narratives.

Instead of rational Fordist-Keynesian organization, contemporary sponge subjectivity finds itself amidst a mess of heterogeneous refrains. Mess confuses and exhausts the sponge, and instead of command, there is only maintenance and modulation of subjectivity.

“Cerebral organization and socio-political organization are collided in the individuation process of subjectivity, in the daily experience of life, in the potential or annihilation aspect of subjectivity.” (Malabou 2008, 49)

In the mess, subjectivity performs only to adjust his or her delocalized performance in the ever-changing conditions. Yet, it is not the survival or the fittest, *per se*, but a mode of self-regulation. In the mess, there is a need to build rhizomatic structures, since each link may collapse or corrupt in any instant. Sponges are not side by side, but confusedly in a mess; dislocated like depressed or ill. Contagious refrains of the neoliberal capitalism are producing explicit maladies of cerebral and physical nature. When Taylorism was based on rational and scientific organization by regulations and obstructions then neoliberal power organizes performance of subjectivity through the excess amount of refrains. The product of neoliberal capitalism is subjectivity, which is compatible with a mess. It is subjectivity, which is supple and employable, yet, often capricious. (Malabou 2008, 68) Supple and flexible sponge subjectivity is able to maintain its form and perform in the conditions required by the neoliberal apparatus.⁵ In the effluvium of the neoliberal mess of refrains the function does not take place through clear signs, but a mess is a productive force. Performance of sponge is located in these perturbed conditions, where adjustments and elaborations and the functioning of the apparatus are not executed as disciplinary, but as controlling modifications. It is the capitalist abstract machine of abstractions, which approximates the standard and creates a mess of details; a homogenizing process. Guattari writes on the power of abstract machine of capitalism that it: “must unceasingly recreate the void, reproduce the

⁵ Dispositif; device or apparatus is “a strategic nature, which means assuming that it is a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilising them, utilising them, etc.” and more “that what I call and apparatus is a much more general case of the episteme; or rather, that the episteme is a specifically discursive apparatus, whereas the apparatus in its general form is both discursive and non-discursive, its elements being much more heterogeneous” (Foucault 1980, 196-197).

splitting and isolation of an individuated subject in relation to assemblages of enunciation,” and it is “an active system of neutralization and recuperation of machinic indexes and lines of flight.” (Guattari 2011, 52-53) The sense of mess is not a sense of density, but void, where localized and minor refrains are transformed into the talk of the capitalist machinery. It is a cool identity, which lingers in the void – which in turn has the capacity to annihilate. In practice these moments of cool and indifference are doubled with the sense of despair, loneliness and aggression. I know that I am into something, but I cannot perceive, articulate or signify that. There are no means of articulation, but only a way to probe and leave these elements hanging on and to accept the presence of a shadow, similar to nondiscursive trauma. In my predication, this is what a performance can *do*, about this nondiscursive matter of potentials – destructive or emerging, like holding them on my fingertips and articulate the void around them. The existential territory is a mess of quotidian virtual not yet captured. New, accident or shadow - or in turn the coolness of a transformed subjectivity – have no symbolic articulation. Therefore, it brings forth the danger of event as annihilation potential of plasticity. Such practice, which I have been taken upon as schizoanalytic practice works with the accident, and in this way, "The Real can only occur by chance, *without any machination*", as Malabou refers to Lacan's idea of trauma being only possible by an accident. (Malabou 2012a, 135) Void, like trauma evades full symbolic articulations, but transforms subjectivity. The controlling techniques appropriated by the neoliberal capitalism function in similitude with trauma, by damaging subjectivity's relation with the other and Real and cerebral dimensions. It creates “isolation” and “neutralization”; transform time, space, and relations with perception, interests and performance. (Malabou 2012a, 148) (Deleuze 1992)

Sponge subjectivity is nothing but a complex amalgamate of contagious refrains affecting the three aspects of plasticity; giving, receiving and annihilating form. The other side of the virtuoso sponge of neoliberal capitalism is the shadow, nondiscursive and virtual potentiality. The nondiscursive, minor refrains are consecutively formed through the capturing machines of the Real, but the minor potentialities alter existential Territory of a subject or a group. Abstract machine of capitalism aims to capture the full potentiality of our everyday existence, and contaminate the subjectivity by producing types, which in subdued manner are considerable similar from the types of totalitarian plasticity, criticized by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy.⁶

I have shortly described an artistic process, which moves around the minute and often nondiscursive matters. It may seem to some extent as a failure, cultivation of disaster, or may appear that the aspiration of these projects would to conjure up ridicule and destructive annihilation. When the discursive nature of artistic practice incorporates the dual nature of nondiscursive potentiality including annihilation – of being exploited or revered as an actuation of the new with difference – it is expressly a political task. It is an articulation of the contemporary political subjectivity.

A subjectivity of indifference, coolness and impossibility for transference is being produced not only in relation with others, but in relation with the potentiality, memory and history, as well. A fundamentally new subjectivity is not a new articulation of a matter reconstructed

⁶ “With the idea that the nature and the finality of myth, or of the dream, is to incarnate itself in a figure, or in a type. Myth and type are indissociable. For the type is the realization of the singular identity conveyed by the dream. It is both the model of identity and its present, effective, formed reality. One attains, in this way, an essential sequence in the construction of myth: [Alfred] Rosenberg declares: "Freedom of the soul . . . is always Gestalt." ("Gestalt" means form, figure, configuration, which is to say that this liberty has nothing abstract or general about it; it is the capacity to put-into-figure, to embody.) "The Gestalt is always plastically limited." (Its essence is to have a form, to differentiate itself; the "limit," here, is the limit that detaches a figure from a background, which isolates and distinguishes a type.) "This limitation is racially conditioned." (Thus one attains the content of the myth: a race is the identity of a formative power, of a singular type; a race is the bearer of a myth.) "Race is the outward image of a determined soul" (M[yth of the Twentieth Century], p. 331; p. 559). This last trait is a leitmotif in Rosenberg and is also found, more or less explicitly, throughout Hitler's writing: a race is a soul, and in certain cases, a genial soul, [Mein Kampf (1925/1940), translated by Alvin Johnson et al., New York, pp. 403-4] in the sense that German romanticism gave to the word, within which individual differences remain, as well as individual geniuses, who better express and form the type.” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nanci 1990, 306)

from the remains of preceding subjectivity, but it is irreversibly and incomprehensibly new: an event. In this project I approached these questions with aesthetic and theoretical apparatuses, with intention to produce an aesthetic device of resilience and resistance for neoliberal engulfing of subjectivity.

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