

## PLACE IS NOW, TIME IS EVERYWHERE

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When a new wave of interest in local cultural practices arose during the nineties, it was immediately accompanied by a number of critical contradictions, many of which had to do with what retrospectively could be called the 'creative city frenzy' that constituted the focus of many economic and urban policies both in post-industrial territories (and later worldwide). Such policies recognised the potential to make a profit out of the distinctive traits of specific cultures and landscapes, and proactively aimed at stimulating such conditions where there were none. Territorial marketing and cultural management strategies were readily identified by a consistent part of critical practitioners (artists, architects, activists, researchers, etc.) as problematic. Such policies often assumed culture and community as general holistic and a-historical entities; their aims was often ambiguously oscillating between market dogma and social justice jargon. Moreover, public cultural initiatives were at times used to replace more expensive social interventions; and, even more problematically from the point of view of practitioners, successful projects contributed to a new attractiveness of localities that would often quickly turn into an exclusive areas, thus expelling the very protagonists of the local re-vitalisation.

Despite this picture, however, the desire around 'locally engaged practices' has remained consistent and substantial. This notion has mobilised expectations to exit the professional enclaves of discipline-specific institutions, conjuring up rare opportunities to practice in a politically relevant context, the *public*, and promoted an understanding of creativity, participation and community, to cite just three of the key terms in this debate, that is far more sophisticated than what is often meant by the commissioners. In a globalised world, the local started to assume a new importance as the place for democracy, self-organisation and accountability. This sense of possibility and excitement has extended, during the same period, to spaces that have been called translocal, translocalities defining those spaces of agency that are created through the selective connection of actors distributed in different physical locations, and made possible by digital communication platforms and global transportation infrastructures.

## A BUTTERFLY FLAPPING ITS WINGS...

What has changed since then?

The present moment is confronting us with two main 'crisis' of global proportions (hence impacting all locales) almost too well known to mention: the financial crisis and the environmental crisis. A great deal of oversimplification has gone into describing these two phenomena, often producing the effect of hiding the purloined letter on the shelf: both crises have to do with the way people relate to the production cycle. They are crisis with very deep roots in history; they are almost traceable back to the moment in which the word '*oikonomia*' ceased to describe the good care of the

household (and thus of the people and the resources that belonged to it) to signify a paradigm of constant accumulation of symbolic wealth. Corporations provide most of the items of our sensory, intellectual and emotional surrounding: food, health care, clothing, transport, shelter, education, the list is endless. Except that these are not simply goods or services to be purchased, they also constitute the basic human activities that are the vectors of othercultural and social practices. Which brings us to a third dimension of crisis that is becoming acute in the present moment: the crisis of subjectivation, a psychic and existential weakening that is accompanied by a surge of psychotic and depressive forms of behaviour. As described by the late Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Virno and Lazzarato among many other, subject has become the locus of governance to the point that 'subjectivity is forged through multiple mediations, whereas individuals has tended to become rare'<sup>1</sup>. The precarisation of labour has played a major role in shaping this situation, blocking thought and promoting stupidity and conformity. Despite the fact that contemporary scientific and technical knowledges could solve most material needs of humanity, work has been resumed as the prerequisite for social inclusion and self-recognition. The condition of the subject is often paralleled by a homogenization of territories, which are pressed to become specialised productive units able to assume a determined role within global scale economies.

Many of us will recognize all of this. Many of the issues outlined above were already present, although in less urgent terms, in the preoccupations of local cultural interventions of the past two decades. However, the coordinates and reference points that have been used until recently to imagine generative, joyful, and powerful interventions do not seem sufficient any more. It may not be enough to act in the local avoiding both the repetition of modernity or the citation of the past; although these two conditions remain necessary, they are no longer sufficient. On top of this, cultural producers are under more pressure to justify their existence and strongly invited to side with private interests in order to carry on their activities. Will this mean the end of locally attentive initiatives, public art and participatory urban projects? Not necessarily, but it probably means that the lines of contradiction that have traversed the field for some decades now will become more crucial for the definition of a sustainable ethic for the future. In order to understand the possibilities of locality now, we may have to turn our attention to the global scale and see how the contradictions that organise the sensible, which could be once trusted as guidelines for our practices, seem to behave like the Cheshire Cat (Disney version, of course). Tapping into local resources and knowledges, even when in the name of 'greener' communal living, need to be reinterpreted in the light of new trends in governance on many levels. I would like to outline a few of them departing from punctual account written by the CrimethInc. Collective.

To participate in the creation of a subculture was once a great break with the normative prescription of the nuclear family values and the predicament of the

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Guattari, Remaking Social Practices, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9710/msg00015.html>

mass consumerist society, its fixed career path and life scripts. Now subcultures are the core of cognitive capital accumulation cycle. They are monitored, studied, and then sold as brands or fashionable lifestyles.

To self-organise was once a strategy of resistance in the face of the omnipresent bureaucratisation of workplaces and public institutions alike. Now self-organisation is encouraged within new productive units that nevertheless fit perfectly well in the outsourcing model of global scale corporations, feeding the precarisation and deregulation of labour.

To dedicate oneself to a process of common creation, such as peer-to-peer software production, was once the guarantee of a knowledge that would stay common, valorising the communities that fuelled its generation. Now new managerial paradigms such as crowdsourcing and crowdcreation are turning the willingness of people to cooperate into a free labour that leaves creators poorer and isolated, while saving enormous amounts of money for companies.

To engage in volunteer initiatives was once a way to refuse a life dedicated purely to professional career. Now forced voluntarism (such as internships and enforced community service) is the new predicament of a workfare state that is left to manage the spiralling crisis of a jobless society.

To produce one's own media was once an act of rebellion face the passivity of media consumption and the monopoly of attention detained by state controlled and, later, privately owned broadcasting conglomerates. Now even the most conservative journal has a bloggers' section on its webpage; spectators can decide what programmes to watch on their on-demand satellite TVs; and kids are playing interactive videogames that they can customise in almost every aspect.

To give away things for free was once a radical proposal against a total economy that interprets everything as private property and demands profit to be maximised at every opportunity. Now free distribution is one of the most widespread commercial strategies on the street.

To communicate personal ideas and news on the internet was once a mark of the growing decentralisation of informational outputs, a tendency towards greater democratisation in a virtual world where all, big and small, could have the same voice volume. Now Compete (a society that performs web analysis in the USA) reports that while the ten most visited webpages account for 75% of internet traffic (they held 31% in 2001).<sup>2</sup>

To squat a building or a piece of land, to organise a concert or a party there, was once the unequivocal birth of a temporary autonomous zone. Now, landlords are happy to invite artists to use and decorate their vacant properties as a protection against abusive occupier and as a measure to maintain the property value.

To put it in CrimethInc.'s own words, the key issue seems to be that many of our wishes 'have been granted in form, but not in content' and that

*'perhaps the central contradiction of our age is that  
the new technologies and social forms horizontalise*

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<sup>2</sup>Data reported by Michael Wolff in Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff, "The Web Is Dead. Long Live the Internet", Wired September 2010.

*production and distribution of information, yet make us more dependent on corporate products*<sup>3</sup>

## THE NEXT CRAFTMAN'S SECRETS

The picture sketched above implies a slippery position for cultural organisers. Their gestures can easily produce the same affects and effects of management, reinforcing dominant modalities of subjectivation and lending value to the same politics they wish to discredit. In the midst of such hostile and slippery environment, it is hard to make grand claims about possibilities. However, I believe that there are at least two trends, two areas of ferment that seem to be coming forward refracted in the intuitions of a myriad local practices, out of the collective intelligence that we all participate in. One, so to speak, is situated more towards the 'internal', the other close to the external outlines of what we commonly consider situated practices. The first one has to do with a budding sensitivity towards the composition of co-presence in collective situations; the second one concerns a rising more mature understanding of the mechanisms of valorisation disseminated through the interplay of dominant economic relations.

### The composition of co-presence

In an essay on the idea of a local economy, Wendell Berry suggested that one of the marks of the event of locality from a cultural standpoint is the recuperation of the vocational principle as part of economic and political life<sup>4</sup>. To speak of vocation in this context means to retain the principle of justice that it implies, echoing the slogan popularised by Marx 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need'<sup>5</sup>, but also to problematise its assumptions. Less transcendental (not as something God would call us to do) and less *natural*, this understanding of vocation appears a kind of attention paid to individual specificities without psychologising them. It entails the invention (or adoption) of expedients that allow all actors to shift their positionality within a process, to occupy different roles, according to expertise, commitment, energy levels and desires, and to be able to negotiate them reciprocally. In fact, as Isabelle Stengers suggested, it is important to understand subjectivity as a becoming that we never carry out alone, but always *with* and *through* others, *with* and *through* the networks of relations that we manage to create and sustain<sup>6</sup>. The local is a prime scale for the facilitation of this micropolitical mutualities. According to the formulations of George H. Mead and Axel Honneth, the formatting of socialisation through games, which presuppose a number of set procedures usually aimed at

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<sup>3</sup> CrimethInc., Fighting in a New Terrain, <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2010/08/23/fighting-in-the-new-terrain/>

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common-Place*, p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875.

<sup>6</sup> Stengers, Isabelle, cited by David Vercauteren during the workshop "Micropolitics of Groups", *Summer Drafts*, Bolzano, July 2010.

engaging a presumed subject, should shrink in favour of a sociability of play able to foster modes of reciprocal perception and sympathetic recognition<sup>7</sup>.

A number of practices are signalling a growing interest in this sense.

For instance, some activists connected with the Euromayday network in Germany have been experimenting with a peculiar 'welcoming' session for precarious people approaching their group. Newcomers are invited to get drunk in the company of the collective while narrating their experience of unstable working conditions and personal frustrations to the others. The convivial atmosphere is a way to bypass the performance of coherency and self-sufficiency that is often conjured up in self-presentations of this kind.

With the Micropolitcs Research Group of which I am also part, we have tried a similar approach during the years 2008/09. During a number of months the group held regular meetings that were led in turns by one or two participants. Each person would propose an issue for the session that related with her or his current preoccupations. The group would then read and discuss together trying to unpack the various questions raised by the issue, in an effort to provide a space for thinking together and use theory in a pragmatic sense.

During his residency at the Centre for Possible Studies, the artist Hiwa K. has recently assembled a revival band playing music that was popular in the Middle East region during the 1970s. The members of the band are residents of the Edgware Road neighborhood in London, many of which come from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Their performances are followed by open discussion around the history and the current situation of the region.

Many more examples come to mind that cannot be listed here. In re-actualising the legacy of feminism, alternative therapy and informal pedagogy, similar approaches are important because they invite to take a closer look to the 'common' from the perspective of subjectivity.

### Thresholds of valorisation

As we have seen, today we are facing a situation where the possibility to fail lies more with the appropriation of certain vital and productive energies, rather than in their suppression. This may be true, but capital's flexibility is always only up to a point. The core of its mechanism is completely sclerotised into a fixed set of axioms: at a certain point within any given process, valorisation needs to occur; and at some other point, this value needs to become profitable, that is, turned into hard cash. These two events do not necessarily coincide in the production cycle, but to map and be aware of where and how they take place is a necessary step to understand how our individual and collective actions participate in a greater power dynamics. The second trajectory that I see emerging is a new carefulness towards the different thresholds of valorisation that frame all kinds of possible contexts of intervention. They become discernable if we consider such contexts as

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<sup>7</sup>In many European languages the Greek-Latin concept of *simpathia* still carries the idea of personal value when is stripped from functional value.

ecosystem. This does not mean a return to ideas of the organic community, but a concrete translation of ecosophical principles into practice. Felix Guattari proposed ecosophy as a framework to grasp the interconnections between social, environmental and mental systems, all of which are entangled with the system of capital accumulation. Following this framework, some cultural practices have been developing what I like to call 'antibodies functions', that is to say, devices to prevent a locality to start behaving according to logics that will destroy it.

A classical example of what I mean by this would be the 'share-alike' clause in Creative Commons licences, which prevents the incorporation of CC material within copyrighted work. Its basic mechanism has recently been expanded by other initiatives, such as gComm(o)n, an online platform for open-process cooperation among academics or OpenWear (a collaborative clothing network and copyleft meta-brand)

Another classic but less oft-quoted instance is the 6th principle of the International Co-operative Alliance's review of the original Rochdale principles of cooperation of 1937:

*"All co-operative organizations, in order to best serve the interests of their members and their communities should actively co-operate in every practical way with other co-operatives at local, national and international levels."*<sup>8</sup>

This rather simple tenet has in fact a great function in order to maintain the cooperative movement's health. Its implementation not only involves a proactive approach to the formation of new relationships at multiple levels, but it also actively subtracts potential trade partners to profit driven units of production. These not only exist as a 'dominant alternative' to cooperatives, but they constitute a context that by its own rules needs continuous expansion; it constitutes an aggressive context. And trading is precisely the plane where contacts between the two systems occur, leaving the weaker party, well, even weaker.

More recently, the Movement for Justice in El Barrio has put forward another 'antibody' praxis. This is a movement of residents of the quarter of East Harlem in New York struggling against eviction and gentrification. As a major practice of the movement had to do with raising public awareness through media interventions and presentations around the experience, the group identified as a point of valorisation the visibility of some of its members. Those who could speak fluent English, had better communicative skills and a valid passport to travel risked becoming identified as spokespersons of an otherwise collective process. In order to contrast the outside tendency to look for heroes, El Barrio citizens decided to operate according to rotation: each member of the movement in turn has to release interviews or give presentations. Those who did not have the skills to confidently do so, are supported by others in developing their rhetoric and communicational abilities. In this way, valorisation is given back to the entire collective through a learning process that engages all, rather than replicating the stardom model required by mediated and academic valorisation.

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<sup>8</sup>International Co-operative Alliance's review of the original Rochdale principles of cooperation of 1937, 1966. <http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles-revisions.html>

## FEEL GOOD FINALE

The above are just a few examples inspired by recent encounters and conversations, anecdotes listened to and stories told. Without any pretention to constitute a research or a reasoned list of recommendations, they wish to trace on paper the contour of an emerging awareness around co-presence and valorisation, which appear as the most urgent challenges in the current hostile climate. It is hard to tell whether they sketch a tendency that will become actualised, or they are symptoms of the desires and preoccupation of myself and the people with whom I am in conversation. The one presented here wishes to be taken as local knowledge in the best way. From where I stand, the most generative input that cultural initiatives can contribute to (trans)localities are models to think about the local as ontogenesis (self-organisation, proliferation of desire, construction of war machines – all are necessary components of this). They offer a different kind of experience from other forms of engagement provided by arts, viral marketing, experience economy, or state propagandas or even traditional left culture.

They implicate a three-fold process:

A reflection on how the behaviours of those participating in a common project can replicate the beliefs and assumptions that such community stands against.

A reflection around the ways in which the community produces values that can be re-appropriated into capitalist governance and around the devices to make this appropriation impossible or at least more difficult.

A reflection about the limits of the localised activity and the implementation of a choice process about which issues may need to scale up to full confrontations and which solidarity lines may exist with the elsewhere.

What they have to teach us is not teachable through the other formats, as the experience will be about a different way of desiring, even before a different desire. As desires can be sold back to you; a different way of desiring belongs to subjects and the relationships between them alone. As Elicio Pantaleo writes, the multitude changes the present<sup>9</sup>. The place is now, the time is everywhere.

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9 Elicio Pantaleo, Accélération Vertigineuses, 21.08.2005  
[http://seminaire.samizdat.net/Accelerations-vertigineuses.html?var\\_recherche=Elicio%20Pantaleo&lang=fr](http://seminaire.samizdat.net/Accelerations-vertigineuses.html?var_recherche=Elicio%20Pantaleo&lang=fr)