

Today, it seems interesting to me to go back to what I would call an animist conception of subjectivity, if need be through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena. How does subjectivity locate on the side of the subject and on the side of the object? How can it simultaneously singularize an individual, a group of individuals, and also be assembled to space, architecture and all other cosmic assemblages?

– Félix Guattari

Angela Melitopoulos and
Maurizio Lazzarato

Assemblages: Félix Guattari and Machinic Animism

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato
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1. Animism and Psychosis

Jean Claude Polack: A body, whatever it is, can defend its limit; it can refuse a particle from the outside, whatever it is.

Among psychotic people, and notably among schizophrenics, this practically daily commerce with particles of the self or perhaps with non-living bodies, or bodies outside the self, does not pose a problem at all. It's like a natural exercise. And if you don't understand it, a schizophrenic might think of you as a bonehead: "Oh really, you don't get it?"

Maurizio Lazzarato: That is what you prove in your work in the clinic.

Jean Claude Polack: Yes, of course. There is a certain very particular "animist" sensibility that one could call delirium. Of course it is a delirium by our standards; it is something that cuts psychotics off from a social reality that is completely dominated by language – that is, from social relations – thus effectively separating them from the world. But this brings them closer to the other world from which we are totally cut off. It is for this reason that Félix maintained this laudatory view of animism – a praise of animism. And obviously this leads us to speak about art. For Félix, art was the strongest means of putting something such as the Chaosmos into practice.

Barbara Glowczewski: It has been an obsession throughout the history of thought to define what is natural and what is not, to the point where people think that if there is no spoken language, then we are dealing with something necessarily animal. Thus people have forbade children who grow up without speech to continue to express themselves with signs, including deaf people. For 100 years the Vatican forbade the use of sign language, even though it is a language par excellence. It is not animal. It is constructed and thus defines a form of culture among the deaf. On this question of what is human, throughout occidental history we have always categorized gestural movement as animal even though it can be very coded – and this is



Installation view of *Assemblages*. Three channel video work by Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato.

true also for dance and for all bodily practices. And it became true for all the peoples that we encountered during colonization. We assumed that their languages were not languages because they contained “animal” sounds. This is what the first anthropological texts are about. It was unthinkable that languages could exist that were not Latinate. For early anthropologists, where there was no writing, there was no syntax. But these languages proved themselves to be very rich. Even today there are nearly eight thousand languages in the world and six thousand of them are spoken only by aboriginals, meaning by peoples without a state.

The trace is the only proof we have that an action took place. So it's the truth par excellence. We are beyond any symbolic system, beyond a system of positions between signifier and signified. We are in the truth of action. Obviously there are a thousand ways to interpret it, but the fact is that the aboriginals read the earth through its traces. This constitutes their culture: reading the trace like a detective, searching for clues. So when Deleuze spoke about becoming animal in the way he developed the idea with Guattari, he meant it in this sense of sitting on watch. It's not only the predation – the fact of trying to catch prey or to be aware of not being caught. It's also about knowing how to read traces.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: What interests me is the possibility of reintroducing the past of the subject, which doesn't have to be idealistic, but a materialistic theory of the subject – the subject as a material subject. This way of thinking about animism is similar to that of the native Amazonians, a people I know well. They believe that the human and non-human share a common base in humanity, whereas we believe that they share a common base in non-humanity. We believe, for example, that what people have in common with animals is material: a body. Among the native myths always begin with a time when every living being was human. But in the end the aim is to explain how certain beings stopped being human. These beings left humanity to become animals or objects. With our myths, it's exactly the opposite. In the beginning we were all animals or pure material. Certain of us then became humanized. So we have the heroic tales of humanity conquering nature, which is an alterity from the point of view of culture: culture as modern soul, something that distinguishes us from the rest of creation. Whereas among the Amazon Indians, it's exactly the opposite. In their view, we are all in the world. Humans merely have a particular materiality. What makes us human as such is our body, not our soul. Our soul is the most common thing in the world. Everything is animated, you see: animism.

In animism, the soul is the seat of otherness. It is what connects us, brings us together with the rest of the world. It is precisely through the soul that we are connected, that we speak to each other, literally, whereas distinction comes through the body. You have to create a body. This is very important in the world of the Amazon Indians. All the techniques used to form a body: adornment, makeup, tattoos, incision, painting – all of this is to make a body that is different enough from the general base of humanity or soul, which raises the possibility that all entities in the world can communicate.

Erik Alliez: For Félix, the notions of nature and culture, while reuniting and growing together, take away the essential. And the essential is the signifier that can only think in machinic terms. It is here that spiritualization is relieved by deterritorialism, and this deterritorialism is necessarily machinic. But what I want to say is that to enter the world of Félix is to accept in the beginning, as in the middle, that one does not really know what either animism or the machinic is.

After the late sixties, his discovery of Hjelmslev is a constant leitmotif. There is no real distinction between content and expression. We have to think in terms of the substance of expression. The fluctuation of signs is like the fluctuation of material things. “I want to imagine” – I quote from memory – “a molecular passage through signs.” If we aren't Hjelmslev specialists, the only way to grasp his ideas is to understand that if there is no real distinction between expression and content, and if we have to think in terms of the substance of expression, we are literally in an animist world. Suddenly, that was it, that was really the way Félix functioned. He understood the explicit echoes, if you like, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and this is really the thing for Félix. The idea that is most real is the place, where the most abstract and the most concrete come together. Immediately we are there (in this constellation). That means that if there is no real distinction between expression and content, we are in a semiotics of intensities. And surely *the* fundamental category of Félix is the idea of an a-signifying semiotics. From that point, you also understand how he can both frontally attack the animist structure and totally disengage himself from any kind of structuralist formalism, while establishing the concept of the machinic.

2. Beyond Occidental Subjects

Jean-Jacques Lebel: In this scene the participants are living the other part of the Self, the free psyche (one can say the unconscious, Gilles and Félix's mechanic unconsciousness). Here a ritual action – being a collective

engagement of enunciation, like a happening or the game of Kadabriski shown here – permits the others, speaking in the Nietzschean sense, to merge, to express themselves freely and not to be held off or sedated. But to display oneself and then: tiredness, repose, and a return to the other half of the Self. It is a schizophrenic exercise. It shows artists, characters, humans trying to use their bodies as a living laboratory. That means that their ideas and beliefs, their discourse, language, and activity are not constructed through a pre-established ideology, but through a sensory experience of the real.

3. The Right to Madness, or, The Clinic of La Borde

Erik Alliez: That is *La Borde*! It is a domain of experimentation. It means that we should not play with words, but take them seriously. It means that experimentation brings an entire politics into play. And this policy of taking words seriously comes back to dealing with the signifier. The people in the film are in a bad condition that is probably getting worse. Signifiers won't heal them, that's for sure. Because in the best-case scenario we can produce a totally formalized interpretation of a symptomatic causality. But they, what did they do? Nothing! Because they lack the capacity for thinking. They're not just neurotic, they're real psychotics.

Peter Pelbart: *La Borde* was a polyphonic laboratory. And it's true: someone who suffers from psychosis is completely deterritorialized from the subject, immediately. In other words, the subjectivities and the subjectivations have absolutely nothing to do with the identity of the subject before us. As if this allows all sorts of entities from elsewhere to proliferate.

Jean Claude Polack: Within deterritorialism, what allows you to see clearly is not a mode of identification, but rather a mode of palpable experience, a pathic mode. As the phenomenologists say, there are these "becoming others": "becoming machinic," "becoming animal," "becoming imperceptible." These becomings do not involve a fusion but rather a gradient exchange, an exchange between subjectivity and other parcels of nature. Maybe that is what can be called world subjectivity. That does not mean that everything is globalized and the same, but it says that you can find there, in this process, the possibility evoked by the philosophers: that man and nature are not two opposing poles, one against the other in conflict. It is maybe in this vein that Marx said: we have to vanquish nature, to overcome nature, allow mastery of the possible. And there is another way to think of it, along the lines of Félix's ecologism. His three ecologies say that

no, there is also a sort of permanent exchange, the capacity of making micro- and macro-cosmic experience of nature in its different aspects: mineral, vegetal, animal, and so forth. So this has something to do with animism, and if this permanent exchange is possible, then this interaction is possible. That's not really a term Félix uses, but if it is possible, it is possible in all directions. That means you have to accord to trees the capacity to do something to us, to work on us. We have to accord to animals the capacity to delude us, to modify us, to seduce us, to conquer us.

Peter Pelbart: When this pathic non-discursive logic exists, we are connected with something else. There are these mental objects that Félix speaks about. He says that in part Freud discovered them, but enclosed them immediately inside the oedipal triangle and submitted them to the structural logic and despotism of signification, and all this has to be re-liberated. And when it is liberated, it makes a sort of ungovernable profusion. It proliferates everywhere and populates the world in another way. I guess it creates other possible worlds.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: If I understand what you're saying, and if I understand Guattari, the first thing to do is to cut off the relation between the subject and the human. Thus subjectivity is not a synonym of humanity. The subject is a thing, the human is another thing. The subject is an objective function that one can find deposited on the surface of everything. It is not a kind of special object – the subject is a way to describe the action of a thing. That is how it is for Amazonians. For them, the subject is a way to describe the behavior and attitude of things, just as for us, objectivation is a way to describe things in this sense. We imagine science being scientific when it is able to empty the world of all intentionality. The scientific description of the world is a world where everything is describable in terms of material interaction between two particles. For Amazonian societies it is exactly the contrary. The question always is *who* and never *what*. Because all things have intention – generally very bad intention. It is the theory of great suspicion, greater than the suspicion of Nietzsche or Bourdieu ... So there are more subjects than humans. Subjectivity is a fusion of multiplicity, not of unity. It produces not a unity of consciousness or a function of integration. It is a function of dispersion. Subjectivity is not a transcendental synthesis but rather – to use someone else's words – a disjunctive synthesis. And for me this is animism. It's a world which at its root is anti-monotheistic. It opposes everything that belongs to monotheism, meaning mono-atropism, mono-subjectivism, and the idea that ONE is the form that being must



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assume in order to be of valuable.

4. Animism and Resistance

Suely Rolnik: If one thinks about an animist or a postcolonial or precolonial subjectivity, one is not centered on a “self” and can no longer talk about a subject, because the idea of the subject means a modern subject governed by identitarian principles and reduced to such potentials. But if we activate other capacities of the body and of subjectivity during processes of subjectivation, this is no longer anthropocentric nor logocentric, and we cannot talk about an object and a subject. In his early writings, Freud said that life is a kind of “germinative plasm.” One can translate that differently and say that “germinative plasm” means that life is basically the power of differentiation, the power of creation. This capacity is what allows us to invent and think reality, to continuously find ways in which life can take shape and actualize itself and fight the reactive forces that impede this process. It is exactly this ability that existed in many cultures that have been repressed by Western Europe, which include of course all indigenous cultures of Africa and Latin America, as well as the Hasidic Jewish culture before the inquisition, meaning the main thread of Jewish philosophy in Jewish Hasidic culture. Even though there are different lines of thought here, we should follow Spinoza and remove the idea of a monotheistic and transcendental God, and restore our ability to think in and look through immanence. All of these cultures had this capacity. African cultures were suppressed by three centuries of slavery, indigenous cultures have been basically destroyed, and the Mediterranean Jewish culture was destroyed during the three centuries of Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. So from a visible and macropolitical point of view there is the repression and censorship of these cultures, and from a micropolitical point of view there is an inhibition of potentialities and of vital power, an inhibition of experiencing the world through affect, an inhibition of accessing sensation in order to put thought at the service of the process of actualization. All this remains under repression. I call this kind of repression colonial repression. I think about this problem from a micropolitical point of view and I think that Félix has helped tremendously to make this connection. Perhaps he is the philosopher who has helped us most because he was both an activist philosopher and clinician. So the problem is then to activate this power and capacity in ourselves.

Animism is a mode of apprehending the world, a mode of conducting existence and thought. This ethics of thought is a fundamental task of thought, from an ethical, political,

clinical, and aesthetic perspective in life. This is what colonialism represses par excellence, thus resistance occurs on the micropolitical plane.

Rosangela Costa Araujo: Capoeira and candomblé mutually comprehend each other. Capoeira was considered the armed resistance wing of candomblé, and candomblé as capoeira’s invisible hand. This is because, in the social imaginary of the time, capoeiristas also possessed the magic power of casting spells. When we work with Capoeira Angola, the challenge is to historically situate its roots in an Africa that is not the one brought into existence by slavery. We thus work with free men and women as our referents. When we reinvent this Africa, we search for African myths that allow us to compose a new history. Capoeira’s process of formation is a process of autonomization. Autonomy depends on the recognition of different or opposite natures. These ancestral practices of resistance bring people back to the sacred, through the return to the body. It is inside the body that God lives, not outside. For the African peoples, God is inside the body, and it manifests with different Orishas, with energies that everyone carries with their own ancestral heritage.

Suely Rolnik: African traditions developed in Brazil for five centuries and still exist today. If we think of the trance rituals, it is said that in the trance we receive the “entities,” the Orishas, the deities. But everybody has several deities, the main deity and six others in hierarchical order. Through initiation we meet them gradually, one after the other. Everyone’s Orisha – mine is called Oshosi – is a bundle of singular power. In these modes of subjectivation, what I articulate is how to give body and substance to the affects of the world that pass through me. What I express is not myself but a collective assemblage of enunciation, which is sensed through my body and which creates friction between sensations and my potentialities. And so what I express does not come from an individual enunciation. It always comes from a collective assemblage of enunciation. And that’s why what I express brings forth this collective assemblage, and as such it has an effective power of contamination, of contagion, and of gathering those who share the same environment, empowering them to express themselves from this singular starting point, from this collective assemblage of enunciation.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: For me, anthropology is in fact the theory – to sound a bit like Trotsky – the theory of a permanent decolonization. A permanent decolonization of thought. That is anthropology for me. It is not a question of decolonizing society, but of decolonizing thought. How to decolonize

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thought? And how to do it permanently? Because thinking is constantly recolonized and reterritorialized. I have always thought that the notion of “a society against the state” is a profound notion and it has to be deepened. And this goes along with the idea of a society without interiority. This means that, finally, interiority is the state. I still like the wordplay: “the state is the self.” Thus a society without a state is a society without the self, without interiority in this sense. This is animism, the idea that the subject is outside. It is everywhere. And that society is not a guard, that the state is neither guarding nor a guard, meaning that the society does not coincide with the state. That is the idea against the state. Against the state means a society without interiority, which only recognizes itself while being outside of itself. This is the idea of a society without a state. What does it mean to live in a society without a state, against the state? We don’t have any idea. You have to live there to see how things happen in a world without a state. In a society that is not only lacking the state but, as Clastres thought, is against the state because it is constituted precisely on the absence of the state. Not because of the lack of a state, but upon the absence of the state, so that the state cannot come into existence. And animism has to do with that. Animism is the ontology of societies against the state.

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