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SOUND ART AND THE ECOSOPHICAL OBJECT: SOME AESTHETICO-ONTOLOGICAL REMARKS ON MACHINIC PRODUCTIVITY

Introduction

L'œuvre d'art, pour ceux qui en ont l'usage, est une entreprise de décadage, de rupture de sens, de prolifération baroque ou d'appauvrissement extrême, qui entraîne le sujet vers une récréation et une réinvention de lui-même. Sur elle, un nouvel étayage existentiel oscillera selon un double registre de reterritorialisation (fonction de ritournelle) et de resingularisation. L'événement de sa rencontre peut dater irréversiblement le cours d'une existence et générer des champs de possible "loin des équilibres" de la quotidienneté.¹

¹ Guattari, Félix (1992). *Chaosmose*. Paris: Galilée, 181.

Throughout the vast work of Félix Guattari, art is understood as a space of resistance and a machine of and for the future.² The production of aesthetico-existential consistency, ultimately the production of subjectivity —and vice versa—, is the only truly possible metamodelization in a late-capitalist context marked by a growing, by inherent, subjective homogenization. For this biopolitical force, as Guattari said, operates within the interiority of subjects, arranging the mechanisms of control within each individual, miniaturizing their logistics.

However, art shows us precisely in this sense a positive correlation, or rather, possibility: to internalize a positive chaos, associating ourselves with other, positive, joyful, productive mechanisms, far from capital, manipulating the machine against the machinery of capital, internalizing mechanisms against the miniaturization of domination, letting the apparatus in precisely to save ourselves from external intrusion.

In Guattari, thinking from and with the affects —as art does— without concepts, is necessarily a space of resistance. Faced with the processes of increasing subjective homogenization of late capitalism, art could help us in the production of new subjective consistencies, the construction of a new life.

One of the problems that most insistently appears in his work, and that we will address in this text, is the relationship between chaos and meaning, with all its delights and all its horrors. This is frequently ignored or too quickly noted: both Guattari and Deleuze -for different

² I would like to express my deep gratitude to fellow Guattarian Christian Alonso both for organizing the *Mutating Ecologies in Contemporary Art* symposia (in whose fourth edition, “Machinic Capitalism, Molecularized Selves & Subsistential Territories”, I presented an earlier version of this text) and for his generous comments.

reasons, both theoretical and biographical- warn us against the dangers of an absolute deterritorialization, insisting on various processes of passive synthesis as the genesis of this pre-egoic order. This is the meaning of the Guattarian expression that we have quoted at the beginning of this text: art supposes a radical *unframing* of our subjectivity. And subjectivity was precisely at the very centre of the ecosophical project of Guattari throughout the eighties, when he “aimed at regenerating depleted existential territories and making them newly inhabitable”.³ The founding principle of this whole venture was to reflect on capitalism and its limits in order to “promote *resingularizing* subjectivations”.⁴

Consistency, chaos, and composition in late Guattari’s aesthetics

At the core of all this, we find the question of the relationship between chaos and meaning, something that appears constantly in Guattari, and particularly in his last works. We could even say Guattarian aesthetics starts from here, from the assumption that art emerges from the composition of chaos.⁵ We should note, however, that the notion of *chaos* -central to Guattari, for whom it represents the force that feeds the fundamental tension of thought, the raw material of virtuality, the infinite reserve of determination- is as important here as that of *composition*, since it is always a question of formlessness, determination and will —doubtless, in a very Nietzschean sense.

³ Genosko, Gary. (2018). *The Reinvention of Social Practices: Essays on Félix Guattari*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 88.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rodríguez-Mouriño, Matías (2016). Chaos and Composition in Félix Guattari. *philosophy@LISBON* (5), 95-101.

As we have said, Guattari's later work seems to give free reign to chaos, which was a consistent obsession of his. We find references to this in articles, books, diary entries, and even literary pieces, throughout his last years. Be that as it may, this presence and ambiguous fascination with chaos and dissolution casts a shadow that was already evident, however, in his early work. In a way, the radical Lacanian "speedy-Guatt", as they called it, of the fifties is not that different from the aesthetics theoretician who wrote *Chaosmosis*.

Of course, in Guattari, rather than the old confrontation between so-called Order and so-called Disorder, chaos is not defined by mere disorganization, but by its velocity: chaos "is" an infinite speed which dissipates any form that emerges therein, a void. Deleuze and Guattari say in *What is Philosophy?*, "that is not a nothingness but a *virtual*, containing all possible particles and drawing out all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence. Chaos is an infinite speed of birth and disappearance".⁶

There is a feeling of excess, of something which not only exceeds it all, but which is firstly characterized by this very aversion to control. There is also a sort of dizziness in the face of the seemingly absolute powers of chaos, powers which at same time remain somehow attractive. For dissolution is the enemy of thought, but, at the same time, chaos is the very *form* which allows for the possibility of thinking to even emerge. But which is the link between the two? *Composition*, creation, the

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 118.

metamodeling of bringing something into the realm of existence by turning over the ground.

“Composition”, they say, “is the sole definition of art. Composition is aesthetic, and what is not composed is not a work of art”.⁷ If the artist is the composer of chaos -someone who is able to build something out of chaos-, then the primordial sense of both art and architecture reveals itself: “Art begins not with flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of the arts.”⁸

This is why aesthetico-existential production allow us to build planes of consistency *without* losing the very infinitude out of which art is materialized, and why aesthetic creation allows us to build bridges -or, indeed, constituting those very bridges- over the ontological tension between the dissolution of meaning and its structural and phantasmatic redundancy without which life is just not possible, not liveable.

This is the meaning of art as chaosmic metamodelization, as well as the core of the danger in Deleuze’s warning in *Difference and Repetition*: turning over this ground is “the most dangerous occupation”, but also “the most tempting in the stupefied moments of an obtuse will”.⁹ And what “will” could be more obtuse, what existence more stupefied and homogenized, than that of our capitalist contemporaneity?

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 191.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 186.

⁹ Deleuze, Gilles (2014). *Difference and Repetition*. London / New York: Bloomsbury, 152.

Some lines along sound art

I. Ontological tensions. If an artist is someone who reminds us that this groundless ground never leaves us, someone who reminds us that chaos never runs out, contemporary sound art is one of the most interesting spaces for the formulation of an ecosophical aesthetics, for it is in this field where this fundamental ontological tension between the dissolution of all meaning and its phantasmatic-structural redundancy most violently occurs, thus revealing itself as a joyous affirmation of subjectivity as chaosmic metamodelization, that is, as heterogeneous production of new forms of life, whether human or not.

By turning off the light of totalizing consciousness, the thousand tingling lights of collective enunciation, irreducible to any ego, are turned on. The plurivocity of the machinic phylum exceeds all Subject-synthesis. In the diversity of its forms, sound art places us in front of this very problem. The blind activity of intensive depth, of the body without organs, of this groundless ground, is indeed the very *ground* of sound. The sound plane, as an a-signifying phylum, is constantly reminding us of this fragile equilibrium: neither is there such a thing as a quiet place outside of us, nor is there such a thing as an identity within.

If desire exists before the subject/object and representation/production come into the picture and oppose themselves, then playing with sound is a privileged way of stirring and turning over this ground. The points of subjectivation, the names, are of little importance here: the relevance belongs to the multiplicities that create -constitute!- populations *between those lines*.

II. Sonic proliferation. The proliferation of sound is, by itself, a collective organization of a-signifying semiotics. Its desiring economy knows

neither subject nor object. It is not a different, unknown language, for it is simply not a language in any human all too human sense.

III. A-signifying semiotics. Signifying semiotics, in the Guattarian sense, correlates with systems of mediation which *represent* intensive multiplicities, subjecting them insofar as they force them to shape form-substance couples. These strata of double articulation are inherent to any signifying semiotic consistency. Signifying machines are based on a representational system, that is to say, the kind of semiotic redundancies which know nothing more than icons. Negativity, identity, analogy, opposition, resemblance... Out of this modelling, anything else -such as real multiplicity- is out of the picture.

A-signifying semiotics, on the other hand, knows no possible "signification". Whether they are mathematical, economical, or artistic, this kind of a-signifying machines function independently of any meaning they could represent or constitute to anyone. Those sorts of machines still need signifying semiotics as a kind of ground for it is true that any semiotic architecture depends on a signifying language in order to function, but this very signification is nothing more than a tool of semiotic deterritorialization, as a condition for new connections to be established with the most deterritorialized material flows.

A-signifying semiotics simply implode the overcoding functioning of representative semiotics. In this world, signs and things purely arrange one another regardless of any subjective seizing of individuated agents of enunciation. Collective assemblages of enunciation depose speech as an imaginary support of the world and, with that, the illusion of a specific

enunciation of the human individual, an adjacent effect of utterances produced and manipulated by socio-economic systems.

In the end, to disabuse ourselves of the humanist illusions around individual subjection means also to get out of the constant subjugation of the world, a world that was not made in our image.

Here, *collective* does not (only) mean part of any group, but constituted by flows of every kind, whether technical, ideal, aesthetic... Sound proliferation is, in and of itself, a collective organization of a-signifying semiotics. Sound *precedes* any subject and any object. Likewise, the desiring economy of sound, as desire itself, knows no *subject*, for it is of no representative condition. *Signification* -and all the “interpreters” that come with it- is thus abandoned. We are not dealing with a different language, not even with a very differently structured language: it simply is not a language in any human, all too human sense.

Machinic plane of consistency: access to an ever-new land where abstract machinisms, preceding any actualization of diagrammatic conjunctions between signs and matter, live and proliferate beyond our little world of social phantasies. Abstract machines crystallize deterritorialization upon the machinic plane of consistency. Such a consistency, such deterritorialized mutations through machinic phyla, are as irreversible as they are not human. If representation forces any semiotic machine to constrain, to adapt, to fit in with ready-made economies they have nothing to do with, intensive, a-signifying machines, have their own system of encoding, they need no verifier, no thesaurus, no policing. Sound could save us from humanity. It goes. *They go.*

IV. Subjectless action. As Guattari said, “one can always replace any pronoun with ‘it’”,

which covers all pronominality, be it personal, demonstrative, possessive, interrogative or indefinite, whether it refers to verbs or adjectives. “It” represents the potential articulation of those linked elements of expression whose contents are the least formalized, and therefore the most susceptible of being rearranged to produce the maximum of occurrences. “It” does not represent a subject; it diagrammatizes an agency. It does not over-encode utterances, or transcend them as do the various modalities of the subject of the utterance; it prevents their falling under the tyranny of semiological constellations whose only function is to evoke the presence of a transcendent uttering process; it is the a-signifying semiological matrix of utterances —the subject *par excellence* of the utterances— in so far as these succeed in freeing themselves from the sway of the dominant personal and sexual significations and entering into conjunction with machinic agencies of utterance. One can always understand an I-ego underlying any pronominal function.¹⁰

Intensities, when trapped into the logic of representation, fade away into echoes, for their connections come apart, simply getting lost in the midst.

¹⁰ Guattari, Félix. (1984). *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*. Hammondsworth: Penguin, 135.

“Utterances”, Guattari says, “no longer refer to anything but themselves and the formalization of the dominant discourse”. Thus he follows:

The sign can no longer be linked directly with what it refers to, but must have to refer to the semiologies of the power machines, with their particular syntagmatic and paradigmatic coordinates, if it is to produce any effect at all upon reality.¹¹

I have always found that the most interesting thing about sound art is its perennial constitution of collective assemblages, which in turn reminds us of what a collective enunciation means: it is not only about groups, about sets, but about the proliferation of flows of any type, whether technical, ideal, aesthetic... It goes. They go. Again, “it’ does not represent a subject; it diagrammatizes an agency”.¹² In the paradigmatic case of the modular synthesizer, we see that it is the very logic of its operation: connecting, flowing, dissolving, becoming. Chaos and composition. We can control the device, but only up to a certain point; we can “know” the device, but only up to a certain point, and it is precisely in this dynamic that everything is played out. The modular synthesizer, a true Deleuzo-Guattarian machine, is also a Nietzschean machine, emitting the myriad tingling lights of collective enunciation, irreducible, alien to all ego. Going through the forest, Robert Walser became “wave and wet”, for he was as flowing as the forest itself; he was, indeed, “forest itself”, “everything”.¹³

¹¹ Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, 136.

¹² Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, 135.

¹³ “Der Wald fließt, er ist ein grünes, tiefes Davonfließen, Davonlaufen, seine Zweige sind seine Wellen, das Grün ist das liebe feuchte Naß, ich sterbe und fliehe mit dem Naß, mit den Wellen. Ich bin jetzt Welle und Naß, bin Fließen, bin Wald, bin Wald selber, bin alles, bin alles, was ich je sein und erreichen kann.” Walser, Robert (1972). *Fritz Kochers Aufsätze*. Geneva / Hamburg: Helmut Kossodo, 100.

V. Micrologies, life.— The micrological question is particularly interesting in regard to all of this. In installations like those of Rie Nakajima we see a fantastic machinic proliferation whose improvisational correspondence is present throughout the international scene with a strength that perhaps did not have in the past in the context of sound art. More and more diversified machines, over which the artist intervenes only up to a certain point. Machines have their own life. Thus Nakajima says:

Accidents, chances, success and failure in my work do not belong to me, they belong to the objects. Of course they are my work, my materials, but I don't want to possess their ideas, gestures and behaviours. I expected to be the same to me. In a way I'm also owned by them but my idea is mine and I'm responsible for my behaviour. We are equal in this sense.¹⁴

For its part, this machinic proliferation, this Nietzschean health of the multiplicity of the surface, forces those of us who confront it to question our own methods. We should always remember Goethe: "If we would arrive, to some degree, at a vital intuition of Nature, we must strive to keep ourselves as flexible and pliable as the example she herself provides".¹⁵ This, as Goethe obviously knew, is equally necessary in relation to art.

Les lignes de fuite machiniques, du côté des multiplicités intensives, tendent à déterritorialiser les processus

¹⁴ Bliss, Abi (2015). Form & Function. *The Wire*, 371, 12, 12.

¹⁵ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von (1952). *Goethe's Botanical Writings*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 24.

sémiotiques, à les ouvrir, à les connecter sur d'autres matières d'expression, tandis que les encodages stratifiés, du côté de l'ordre des "choses", du côté des mondanités dominantes, tendent à les syntaxiser et à les couper de toute prise sur le réel intensif. Sur le premier versant, le désir, perpétuellement à l'état naissant, suit sa propre ligne sans respect des stratifications sémiologiques; sur le second versant, il se met à tourner en rond dans les structures de pouvoir, dans cet "ordre muet" dont Michel Foucault nous dit qu'il nous assujettit à une grille antérieure aux grilles linguistiques, perceptives et pratiques dans la mesure où elle les *neutralise* en les *doublant*.¹⁶

It is therefore important to always remember this vital correlate of resistance and health. For deterritorialization also means *losing the anchor*. Many of these artists do precisely that: they compose a sea, just to then proceed to lose themselves in it, in the becoming-flow of the world, in the becoming-ocean of themselves, in the becoming-imperceptible of everyone and everything.

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