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Strategies of (In)visibility Numerous

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Contemporary artists and grassroots political activists have recently taken up what I would call invisible strategies to carry out their actions. These strategies include secret, anonymous, covert or clandestine tactics. They appear to have four aims:
- To ensure that their actions are effective
- To safeguard the activists or the artists identities from those in power
- To remain recognisable to each other
- To undermine the processes of representation and commodification.

Recent examples of these strategies include graffiti work, guerrilla gardening (from tree planting projects to impromptu farming), culture jamming (subversion of mainstream media messages), independent web networks (for ex. Indymedia), impromptu stand-ins (when somebody pretends to act as a temporary replacement), sit-ins, when activists occupy a building or public place and refuse to leave until their demands have been met or negotiated, etc. Considering this new direction amongst artists and activists, I would like to propose two starting points to begin analysing these strategies. The first one is to challenge the usual us/them divide between artists and activists on the one hand and the institution or

the global market on the other. The second starting point is to allow oneself to maintain a strictly romantic approach to these strategies. The first starting point is the idea that an activity that has to remain invisible or clandestine in order to be effective should no longer be seen within a binary economy of inside / outside, clandestine / institutionalised, etc. To opt for a strategy of (in)visibility (note here the importance of the brackets) is not to work in relation to a spatial organisation: me, here, under privileged, working underground and you, there, in institutions, in power, preventing me from having an identity or realising a goal. An (in)visible strategy is one that operates, on the contrary in relation to a temporal organisation. The idea is to position this strategy in relation to what is to-come. In other words, when one says that one operates in a clandestine fashion, that one has to retain a certain amount of secrecy in order for an action to be effective, one is not positioning oneself in relation to the other (however this other is defined), but in relation to time and more precisely in relation to a future time, that is to another form of otherness. The explanation for this is simple. Outside of the intended effect, all strategies, visible and invisible, imply disclosure. There is no escaping disclosure or exposure, i.e. the moment the activity ceases to be personal, clandestine or invisible and enters the quick-fading realm of visibility (Ill come back to that in a minute). To equate visible and invisible strategies is not to undermine clandestine strategies and recuperate them within the realm of the norm, within institutionalised strategies. This is simply a fact that is at the core of any strategy or action. When one fights against the IMF or the World Bank, whether in an artistic or activist context, the struggle can only end with the exposure of the struggle: when a certain public has been reached or the media reports the protest or the exhibition and people finally take notice. Articulating a strategy of (in)visibility not around a spatial divide (us/them,

inside/outside, clandestine/institutionalised), but around a temporal one of disclosure (invisible(visible), has ultimately two aims:The first one is to acknowledge the fact that there is no such thing as something visible, a horizon of intelligibility where language is exposed in full view. This does not mean that we can only lie in obscurity or that there is only invisibility. To put forward the idea that there is no horizon of intelligibility where language is exposed in full view is to put forward the following two ideas. The first one, and most succinctly, is that there can only be an aurora of visibility or invisibility, that is, a hesitant state between two absolutes, between something radically past or future and something that can only expose itself in chiaroscuro. A state of absolute visibility or invisibility is beyond linguistic categories. Not unlike death, the visible or the invisible can only be figured with a trope or with a deconstructive gesture that can only expose the abyss created by the terms themselves. Consequently, to say that there is no such thing as something visible, is to say that that there is only half-light, a state neither quite visible nor invisible. The second idea is to indicate a variation or a gradation between our various faiths in the world, between our levels of investments in what this aurora of visibility is to bring to the world. The politician (and this includes the spokespersons of the anti-globalisation movement such as George Monbiot or Naomi Klein to take only well-known western names) working in the public arena believes that political change can only take place in absolute visibility, in parliament and in the media. The politician believes in public life. He or she believes in his or her role in History. In a way, politicians are blinded by their faith in language, by their faith in the sense of the world, visible actors of dramatic events and well-known authors of important legislations. By contrast, the clandestine practitioner, the activist or the artist positions him or herself in a situation where visibility is not taken for granted. This

does not mean that he or she knows that there is no such a thing as visibility, this only means that the strategy evades the possibility of believing in visibility. If I decide to organise an impromptu planting project on Parliament Square in central London, the preparation will be invisible, but the end-result will be there for all to see. A planting project (especially cannabis) will obviously not last long. Such an action therefore implies that the clandestine practitioner is more interested in the action itself and its immediate impact than to establish visible and durable laws. It shows that he or she knows that language is not something reliable or durable; that absolute visibility is not necessarily effective. Hence the fact that the most a clandestine practitioner can hope for is to reach a local street audience or to do front page news, that is, to be allowed to provoke or participate briefly in a public conversation from which he or she is or feels excluded. In this context, what the secretive strategist is also saying is that language can remain in its performative dimension, right at the stage of utterance or protest, without necessarily constituting an archive. He or she tells us that one can maintain language in a permanent state of disclosure, exposure or formulation without falling into the traps of commodification, institutionalisation or written law. After all, we are now in a world of post-production, where we no longer need to pretend that we can produce something new. We now know that we can only reformulate or reiterate what has already been produced, what is already contained in the archive and that these disruptions are acts of creation in themselves. The idea I am therefore proposing is to see the aim of these strategies, in half-light, as an attempt to maintain the struggle at the stage of struggle, of keeping the strategy between the invisible and the visible, right when it opens itself to the other, an other understood here in its temporal sense. This leads me to the second aim of temporal focus: that of acknowledging the fact that the true

purpose of these strategies of (in)visibility is not to reach an ideal world, but to perform the world as ideal. To articulate a political strategy through a temporal and not a spatial axis (and therefore follow a strict Hegelian or Marxist model) knows today one major set-back that has affected all leftist political work since the fall of the Berlin Wall and what was called then the death of ideologies. This set-back is this: it is no longer possible to situate any form of political ideal in the future. It is no longer possible to put forward the idea of the political on the basis of an end-of-men promise or a promise of a future parousia of presence for all. If one is conscious of this set-back that has been plaguing us since the 1990s, one has therefore no choice, but to rethink the relationship between the political and time. Unfortunately, I do not have time today to explore in any detail the anthropological and ontological subtleties of this particular relationship. The only thing I can do is to simply propose to focus on the pressing issue of this set-back and ask the question: what political praxis can one propose in a situation where there is no longer an ideal in the future? Perhaps, the only answer to this question is to propose to recuperate this future ideal (justice, liberation, egalitarianism, the proletarian state, absolute knowledge) from its state of always-being-yet-to-come and to place it centrally and in all peripheries of human activities. In other words, and in a reversal of Hegelian or Marxist logic, the idea is to perceive the ideal as occurring everywhere and at all times, right at the moment of action (however this action is defined and however its results). The ideal, understood here as the only possible performance of the world or the only performance that the world knows, is no longer lying dormant somewhere in the future, but is concretely acted out or taking place here and now with every human gesture. To give one example: equality is no longer a goal to be attained, but becomes a presupposition that is always in need of constant verification. Conceived in this way, all forms of political

prognosis, projection, hope, etc. (and I include here the hopes of someone like Osama Bin Laden), that in the past used to be directed towards a time to come, expand, extend, therefore expose themselves as occurring here and there, in all cases at a time that is no other time, but the present time. Political activism therefore becomes not the pursuit of political or social ends, but the measurement of ideality itself, one that is not dependent upon the coming of the future, but upon the performance of the world today, that is, what occurs here and now and this whatever form it takes, famine, wars, corporate greed and religious fanaticism included. Conceived in this way, one can indeed say that there will never be a better time, there can only be an act of differentiation, an act that will make a difference, therefore a measurement of ideality; that is, an act of political creation (that can also be a creative act of destruction). The true aim of these strategies of (in)visibility is therefore not to propose a new world order, but to participate in (therefore perform) what Jean-Luc Nancy understands by the infinite creation of the world[1]. The word creation is understood by Nancy as the growth without reason of this space-time that we call the world. Consequently, the word world is neither the international community nor humanity as such; it is the polymorphous spacing of our existence, the heterogeneous exposure of our being-together. To participate in the infinite creation of the world, is therefore not to put forward a world as an object of positivistic knowledge or of programmatic rationality, but to put forward a world that thinks itself. In other words, this means to not put forward the sense of the world, but the world as sense. Free of the imposition of an ideal lying ahead in the future, a political engagement is therefore a creative act that shapes that which is to-come, the multifaceted and contradictory world that activists, politicians, artists or philosophers are busily working on. This creative act consists in realising ourselves as

subjects without object and above all without objective. This creative act without a face takes place every time a human being engages him or herself, in a passive or active, constructive or destructive way, in the general invention of the world, that is in the creation of a world that no longer allows itself to be represented, that no longer has sense, but is sense in the process of making sense.[2] The idea is therefore to turn a political strategy from a spatial economy of antagonism or agonism, to a temporal economy of performance where the political activist works, advocates and struggles not in a sterile self-referential spin, but in and for the advent of creation itself. In other words, there is only one struggle, that of maintaining the struggle in order not to reach an after the struggle, but as Nancy remarks, the insatiable and infinitely finite exercise that is the being in act of the world as world.[3] The second starting point I would like to propose is that of allowing oneself to acknowledge and maintain a strictly romantic approach to these strategies of (in)visibility. I take here the word romantic not in its common literary sense (i.e. everything from excessive passion to unbridled idealism), but in its original sense, that developed during the Athenaeum period by Friedrich Schlegel in Jena, Germany at the end of the eighteen century. Before exploring this argument, a few precautions are necessary. The first one is that to highlight the importance of the early Romantic period is not to adhere to the somewhat awkward political claims for radical democracy put forward by Friedrich Schlegel. Quick practical political solutions to epochal events (in Schlegel's case, the French Revolution) are in a way, the necessary correlative to any thinking of the political and cannot be avoided (think, for example of Georges Bataille's misuse of the Marshall Plan in The Accursed Share). The aim is therefore not to examine the odd trajectories of Schlegel's life and work or the practical solutions he proposed, but to acknowledge the political debt to this other side

(this underside) of the Enlightenment, the early Athenaeum theories. The second one is not to reclaim either the idea of romanticism as an irrational counter-current to the project of rationalism put forward by the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the Romantic idea as defined by Friedrich Schlegel should not be seen, as Habermas suggested, as antagonistic to rationalism and progress, but as the necessary underpinning structure of rationality and progress, a structure in which irrationality, as I will try to argue later on through the prism of fragmentation, maintains all forms of political strategies. Finally, third precaution, the idea is also not to ignore, evade or discard the cacophony of post-modern or post-structuralist argumentation. On the contrary, the idea, in a Deleuzian or Derridean sense, is to heighten or intensify this inheritance in order to proceed to whatever comes next. In other words, I am not proposing here to return to or to call for an idealised or aestheticised world (the mythical ideal at the centre of romanticism), but to realise the imperative of what constitutes the fundamental structure of our being in the world as conceived in the Enlightenment and specifically in the metaphysical (and/or literary) theories developed by Schlegel during the early Romantic period in Germany. My argument is that when it comes to the metaphysical and political dimension of our modernity, we still belong to the Enlightenment and specifically to the romantic period; a period that defines us even through (and because of) the logic of (re)petition and that of (re)iteration. In terms of temporality, Deleuze, Derrida and Lvinas, to take only three examples, have all attempted to surpass Hegels end of history by offering notions such as multiplicity, differance and the irreducibility of the face[4]. And yet, besides these extraordinary repetitions/reiterations, the Enlightenment and specifically the romantic period is still oddly upon us. However much repetition and/or reiteration is a movement towards the possibility of something else; however

much mimesis involves rupture and a differentiation from itself, we are still dependent from the temporal and metaphysical organisation devised during the Enlightenment. The core of this inheritance, one which characterises the foundational structure of our modernity and which is seen repeated so many times in art, philosophy and politics, is the denial of our time. This denial is not a clear-cut negativity, but the structure of negativity itself, that is, the shaping of the world, the shaping here and now of the originary effraction of the trace. In other words, this denial is not a gratuitous nihilism or an empty return, but the perpetual search for and creation of what is always-already upon us (Hegels idealism, Marxs communism, Deleuze's absolute deterritorialisation, Derrida's absolute hospitality or Levinas' radical other, to take only a few well-known examples). In a way, we have never left the world of the Subject, of Being or the Absolute, even if you call them event, trace or immanence, and this simply because our starting point is always a radical and interminable critique of the present, a critique as the movement of an experience open to the future of whatever is coming. The idea is that however haunted we are by différance, by rhizomatic structures, by multiplicity and by communities and collective practices, we are also haunted by the fact that there is a crisis; that something has to be done here, now, immediately. In another context and to put a different spin on this, no matter what text we read or what position we take, there will always be that which is always-already upon us, a new text or a new position, a new (re)invention or a (re)iteration (call it Nancy, Agamben or Badiou) that becomes immediately operative; in other words, that forces us to deny and reinvent our present. Today, in terms of the temporality of politics, this denial, which is also an act of creation is self-evident not only in the language of politicians and multi-national corporations and their ever increasing desire to own the world, but also in the rhetoric of the anti-globalisation

movement and specifically of grassroots and net activists. This denial comes across with the feeling that there is never enough time; that one is always running out of time, that markets and countries have to be conquered or that political actions have to take place immediately in order to save the world. This feeling of urgency is not, contrary to what Reinhart Koselleck has argued, due to any acceleration of time.[5] This feeling of urgency is a very simple and very human reaction, that of refusing to acknowledge the advent of our own spatiality. It is this refusal that makes us feel as if we are always running out of time. There is unfortunately no time (sic) to explore especially within a Heideggerian framework the ontological reasons for this refusal. Suffice it to say here, that this refusal has a crucial political dimension. The consequence of this is that, in this world, in our world where the future has finally been cleansed of all forms of future figurality, the fact of denying our time, that is, the fact of creating our time has taken on a new turn: that of elevating the performativity of the world over the achievement of the world. Today, there is no time to elaborate complex visions of the future, there is only time to act upon the world. This sense of having no time is an act of creation par excellence, because since there is no time to figure an ideal, the only thing that one can do is to invent or create as we go along, so to speak. Indeed, no matter how one positions oneself in the great swarm of possibilities and dead-ends that constitute our contemporary world, one is always necessarily in a position of productivity and of expenditure, over the edge of the abyss of deconstruction, in the hollow of the Deleuzian fold, at the heart of the creation or invention of language. In other words, we are still in a situation of having to acknowledge or resolve a crisis, of engaging ourselves against or with a hegemonic structure, all in the simple process of inventing protocols (ethical or otherwise) that serve to actualise concepts in the field of the sensible. The fact that

we still belong to the Enlightenment and specifically to the Romantic period does not imply that we cannot work around the aporia of this period. Similarly, the fact that our future has been cleansed of all forms of figurality does not mean that there is no longer any future. By intensifying this inheritance, by acknowledging the process of denial and creation, we are in fact allowing for the very possibility of the movement that opens us up to the future of whatever is coming. In other words, by being conscious of the process of denial and creation or mimesis and reiteration that structures our being in the world, we open up for the possibility of something else in a way that takes over and upholds the process itself, in a way that allows for the performance of the world to be felt as performance and not as projection, or accomplishment. The key to this realisation is to accept the necessary temporal fragmentation of our relationship to time and specifically to the future. Indeed, free of the singularity of figuration, our opening onto the future or onto the other is no longer single and authentic, but is an opening where what is coming comes only in streamers, shimmers and arches of light, incoherent fragments and unsustainable contradictions. After all, wasn't it Schlegel himself who insisted that things always come in small disconnected waves, that things are always insufficient to form a whole or serve a satisfactory purpose? As the early romantic period has taught us and as Nancy also clearly remarked in his own study of this period, what perhaps we should begin to understand, is that what is to-come is always fragmentary[6]. The consequence of this inevitably fragmented coming is that political gestures, these responses (poetic or political) to this unknown and disjointed future can only inevitably be structured as a series (ironic) fragmentations that have no other aim than to carry on with the process of denial/invention that characterises our modernity. In other words, there are no possibilities of escaping or evading the to

and fro of fragmentation. Fragmentation, as Schlegel intended it, is what lacks reason or objective and completes itself in the incompleteness of its own infinity. Fragmentation therefore not only prevents us from constituting any form of rational or unified world, it also helps us to fight against hegemonic structures and dictators all over the world for no other reason than keeping the world going as world. This does not mean that fragmentation or a fragmented world is the only solution to a world dominated by excessive capitalism and fundamentalisms. This only means that fragmentation constitutes what keeps us performing the world in the only possible way; it is what allows us to fight for justice, equality and freedom even if (and because) we cannot assign a singular definition to these words. Fragmentation, a world devoid of object, objective, ontological determination or teleological finality, is effectively our saving grace or the perpetual last judgement to use a Benjaminian terminology. This long-forgotten fragmentation conceived before the myth of progress devised by Hegel, is the dimension of ideality itself or of the performance of the world, it is that which is operative here or there, but always now, in unconnected fragmentations (visible or invisible), never quite achieved, never quite resolved or absolved. Now, inevitably, the main problem with this Schlegelian idea of fragmentation is that it could be seen to appear to repeat or reiterate, yet again the same old premise of dissemination, differance and becoming that have been devised throughout the last forty years as replacements for Hegels or Marxs end of history. However, this is only an appearance, for Schlegelian fragmentation does not posit the question of origin or destination, opening or closure, for these are always-already fragmented and de-territorialised. Fragmentation, in the way that Schlegel understood it before Hegel, is a totality that totalises itself in its own incompleteness. One can only live in and through a permanent state of fragmentation. This does not mean

that we can only go from chaos to chaos in a Deleuzian sense, this only means that we can only be supported by fragmentation as the upholding principle of our own (and the worlds) trajectory. This does not leave us either in a psychotic or chaotic state of absolute instability or permanent civil unrest, this does not leave us in the abyss of undecidability or the permanent disturbance of the event, but with our only imperative, that is, that of upholding the fragmentation as fragmentation or that of upholding our world as world. This upholding, which is neither a preservation nor a safeguarding, but a creative continuation of the struggle, does not imply the principle of figuration, that is, of projecting in the future an ideal figure of a world upheld that would in return provide the means or the method of upholding the world. On the contrary, within a temporality devoid of future figurality, this upholding can only be a fiction. The word fiction (or literature), which is at the centre of all metaphysical and poetical theories at the time of the Athenaeum is understood here in its Greek or Schlegelian sense, that of fashioning, shaping or modelling. Our imperative to uphold the world is therefore an imperative to realise (i.e. to fiction) our own communality. Fragmentation can only come upheld as a fictional unfolding. In other words, the fragmented dimension of the political is fictionality, that which shapes itself in the hollow of the fold otherwise that of undecidability, that which allows here or there, creative obstructions of (or intrusion into) hegemonic structures in order to guarantee the maintenance of the world as world. There is no other imperative for these strategies of invisibility. For it is only with a fictional, and not figured, idea of how we perceive ourselves as a we or as world that we can act upon the world that is, that we can fashion or shape the performance of the world.

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[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, La creation du monde ou la mondialisation, Galile, Paris, 2002, p. 53, my translation.

[2] See Ignaas Devischs analysis of Nancy's understanding of the word world in Being mondaine: Jean-Luc Nancys Enumerations of the World, in Cultural Values, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2002, p. 383-394.

[3] For how the world is sense making sense of itself, see Jean-Luc Nancy, The Compearance: From Existence of Communism to the Community of Existence, in Political Theory, 1992, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 371-98

[4] Nancy, La creation du monde ou la mondialisation, p. 64, my translation.

[5] The problem with Kosselecks idea of a time accelerating can be summarised with one simple question that would be impossible to answer: How to understand a self-accelerating temporality without stepping outside of this temporality and noticing the speed at which it is going? Reinhart Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, translated by Keith Tribe, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004

[6] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, L'absolute litteraire: Theorie de la litterature du romantisme allemand, Seuil, Paris, 1978, p. 423, my translation.