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The Transversal and the Invisible

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The title of this paper points to some discussions that seem to have pre-occupied the beginnings at least of the republicart project – the notion of transversality and how the relationships between political and artistic activities have been re-organised in Europe over the last 5-10 years. I also invoke in the title however, Marcel Duchamp's question, a question often repeated by Sarat Maharaj: that is: 'how do you make a work of art, that's not a work of art?' In putting these issues together I am attempting to flag an anxiety that stays with me despite the work carried out not only in the context of republicart, but also several years now of very visible politically and socially engaged art practices. That is, an anxiety about how despite the purported de-territorialising actions of transversal practices, what we have ended up with, or is now 'visible' is more often than not, an ever-expanded category of (relational, socially engaged) art. In fact, one could say, that it has become nigh impossible to make a work of art that is not a work of art.

So the question I am trying to raise in a sense is, how does this issue of visibility relate to the production of new so-called transversal or constituent practices that cross the field and institutions of art? To what degree do regimes of legibility and the

forms into which practices are constituted in order to render themselves recognisable as this or that, limit or foreclose what is possible for such new practices? And finally, what are the strategies and dynamics involved in working across situations, institutions and discourses without becoming identified with them, or subsumed to them? (And immediately here, I am generalising the term visibility to also mean recognisability and legibility.)

To continue then with a by now much quoted thesis on contemporary art by Alain Badiou: Badiou writes: 'It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent.'[1] Here Badiou negatively connotes a condition or state of visibility, within a regime of Empire. The invention of already known or recognisable forms is deemed pointless. In the context of this paper I would like to connect this statement to Maharaj after Duchamp's question (how do you make a work of art that's not a work of art?) by supposing 'the work of art' to be the recognisable, visible form laid bare to management and containment by Empire. In other words I am suggesting that the grand inclusion or identification of all kinds of transversal practices, practices of self-organisation, practices in which it is never clear where the art ends and the politics begins, into expanded categories of art ('relational', socially engaged etc) needs to be met with suspicion The suggestion is therefore - that for transversal practices to retain a critical relation to 'Empire', it is important that they remain what Sarat Maharaj has called 'doggedly eye-proof'.[2] I would argue that designations of certain practices as artworks, or restrictions of particular activities and forms to the 'art field' can limit and even foreclose their potential.

Now what are these practices and what is meant by transversality in this context? One might summarise much of what has been at

work in art aswell as political practices over the last 10 years (at least) is a simultaneous questioning of the representational structures of the political party operating within the corporate ethos of the nation state, and the genres of traditional community-based and public art which correspond with these structures of political representation. This questioning of the structures underpinning the political is borne out in the significance to contemporary social movements of Zapatismo and 'new anarchist' experimentation with direct democracy through different forms of organisation. The often-collaborative artistic and political practices to which I refer also refuse to speak for minor constituencies, instead developing modalities that support other kinds of collective praxis. Gerald Raunig has argued that the renewed interest in public, participatory, community and interventionist art in the 1990s in Europe has taken on a newly politicised character this very connection 'with heterogeneous activities against economic globalisation'. This work, often collaborative and concerned with issues of public and social space, the freedom of movement and of knowledge, takes on multiple forms and often works across many different sites. Common to new cultural and activist practices is a focus on experimentation rather than representation, a focus on means: on activity that brings into proximity the why and the *how* of coming together. Practices such as those initiated by *Routes*, Belfast, *No One is Illegal* and Florian Schneider, *16Beaver*, *Ultra-Red*, involve producing situations, sets of tools and procedures that can be moved in and out of by various constituencies. Such practices might be said to use artistic modalities, as opposed to representations or even expressions, creatively producing new organisational forms, constellations and situations as they move through physical and social spaces.

Now, such practices might also be characterised as transversal, or rather to produce transversals? (the grammar always gets very difficult when dealing with the transversal). The term transversal is often associated with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, it was first developed by Guattari at La Borde clinic in France as a tool for the re-organisation of institutional practices of psychiatry, that were conventionally based on processes of transference between the analyst and the analysand. Guattari sought to displace the transferential processes that produce what he called institutional objects and introduce open collective practices that worked *across* the confines of the institution itself. Broadly speaking, Guattari used the term transversality as a conceptual tool to open hitherto closed logics and hierarchies and to experiment with relations of interdependency in order to produce new assemblages and alliances. In his activist work, Guattari used transversality as a critique and a rupture with inherited forms of political organisation such as 'the party'. In his later work and in his collaborations with A/Traverso and Radio Alice however, Guattari focused less on the psychoanalytic 'scaffolding' of the term and more on how modes of transversality might produce different forms of (collective) subjectivity that break down oppositions between the individual and the group.[3]

A movement or mode of transversality explicitly sets out to de-territorialise the disciplines, fields and institutions it works across. Recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as critics such as Gerald Raunig have used the term to describe new terrains of open co-operation between different activist, artistic, social and political practices. For Raunig in particular, these modes of co-operation are not forms of 'solidarity' between actors or areas of 'inter-disciplinarity' between fields, but rather signal a non-representational and additive form of alliance. The co-ordinating

conjunction 'and' is not an inclusion mechanism, a random stringing together, or a series of contextual filiations. It is rather a modality of the between that produces temporary alliances between practices and 'fields': forms of alliance that are appropriate to their collective actions. Crucially, they cannot leave intact the fields that they have worked across. The transversal is an organisational form that does not separate the how and the why of collective activities. Guattari intended the work of transversality to rupture inherited forms of political organisation that create institutional objects or what he called 'deathly organisational reproduction'. And so, transversality cannot be seen as 'there' as a given. It is not a form into which one steps, but is rather continuously constituted through events, acts of alliance and temporary organisation. Since the transversal is in a permanent condition of taking place and cannot be defined as a positive thing or entity, but rather a production that retains organisational structures in a state of becoming, it is also crucially linked to production – the production of subjectivity and what Guattari calls self-engendering practices that seek to create their own signifiers and systems of value.

As such, transversal practices are often not recognisable as traditional activist campaigns or 'art practices' and are disinterested in debates that impose what Sarat Maharaj has called 'nominal closure' on their activities. They are also often involved in intervening not only in the structures of artistic representation but also the institutional structures that produce and reproduce objects and encounters.

Now, much of what goes on within the practices named above involves bringing different people together, creating sometimes temporary, sometimes not, social spaces for interaction. For example, the Los Angeles-based group Ultra-Red (which consists of a fluid group of those who would otherwise be identified as

residents, community organisers, activists, artists and musicians) based in the Pico Aliso district of Los Angeles explicitly describe their multiple activities through a practice of organising. Their activities began and to a certain extent continue to centre on demands for housing and labour rights in this area of Los Angeles. By employing different strategies of collaboratively produced audio works, campaigning, organising social events as well as actions in collaboration with other residents and workers in the neighbourhood, Ultra-Red, in the words of one member, work on a collectively produced space.[4] Such a mode of practice and organisation is not based on a mutual identification or a single set of aims, yet the desire and the pragmatic need to work and practice together is shared. The 'group's' structures guard against overt hierarchies, and the ways in which it locates its various practices for the most part ensures that it traverses different fields, institutions and recognisable forms of practice, throwing each into relief as it they do so.

Such a practice and many of the terms used above however, might also sound familiar to another discourse: that of relational aesthetics. For critic Nicholas Bourriaud, such social spaces of interaction came to constitute actual artworks in the 1990s. Bourriaud began his study of by comparing the specific sociability produced in the places of art (the ability to comment on and discuss work 'live' in its presence) to what he deems to be the individual, private spaces of consumption produced by theatre, cinema and literature. Art for Bourriaud moves from a form that produces this special sociability to a form explicitly and exclusively focussed on producing such forms of conviviality. Bourriaud describes relational art as 'art that takes as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space'. This

concept seemingly extends and modifies critiques of the autonomous work of art present in the discourses of art history since the 1960s. However, in presenting relational art's specific concern for social bonds and human relationships through its use of interactive, user-friendly concepts, Bourriaud tends to present these artworks as cures for social alienation or as an artistic stitching that will re-connect what he calls the communicational divide. He opposes imposed 'communication zones' (and various dystopian images of automatic public toilets, cash machines, and the automated telephone wake up call) to the free areas and contrasting rhythms of the art exhibition. This allows him to subsequently claim that 'contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue'.[5]

Bourriaud however relies on concepts of alienation and reification based on modernist notions of production and rational communication and counter-poses to them an older autonomous and romantic concept of art. In addition, as many critics have pointed out Bourriaud's delineation of recent and contemporary relational art's sphere of utility bears a striking resemblance to contemporary managerial discourses. Bourriaud never explains *how* exactly, art develops a political project through turning the relational realm into an issue? His account of relational art is based on the premise of the alienated subject who is incapable of 'real' communication under capitalist conditions. Under post-fordism Paulo Virno and others have argued however, communication and co-operation have become the very fabric of capitalist production. Yet for Bourriaud the conviviality and sociability of relational artworks can magically rescue communication from its alienated conditions. No answer is provided as to why art should have this capacity. It would therefore seem that the mere definition of these

activities as art is what enables this capacity for de-alienation and distinguishes them from any other form of relational activity.

A curious reversal can then take place and we can see this in many more obvious examples in recent 'socially-engaged' or relational art practices of how the mere calling on the category of art and the artist automatically deems an activity radical. For example recent manifestations of 'Artist's Marching Band' and an 'An Artist's Football Team', or a series of other activities such as artists serving coffee, is supposed to make the activity somehow political and/or radical. And so, where does this leave us? By effectively resorting to a modernist notion of art as a separate autonomous sphere, with an inherently transformative capacity, a discourse of relational art elides the relationship between art and the political.

This elision is a good example of how a recent and influential critical paradigm that ostensibly seeks to value and open out new realms of practice, and articulate the relationship between art, community and the political differently, is limited by its containment of a whole series of practices within an already recognisable category of art. Within a discourse of relational aesthetics, not only do a whole range of activities get mysteriously named art, but their political 'effects' are reduced to a list of romantic assumptions of art's transformative capacities. It is through a whole series of curatorial procedures, often with the willing participation of practitioners, starting from the seemingly minor gesture of referring to a series of activities or their detritus as 'a piece', that a rendering of such practices as art takes place. And so, in rendering relational practices and practices of organisation as art Bourriaud makes these practices legible to contemporary systems of value, cultural and symbolic capital (which Alain Badiou defines as Empire in the quotation above).

There seems to me to be a world of difference between this kind of 'artification' of entire practices, and the locating of one of Ultra Red's events in a gallery, or a temporary 'No One is Illegal' HQ at Documenta, or one of Platforma 981's temporary gallery installations for example. The latter projects proliferate public platforms, questioning and throwing each into relief as they pass through, while the former tend to submit to the rules, procedures and behaviours of art. Transversal practices often work across and through different fields, starting out not from given spaces for negotiation and approved ways of doing things, but through the simultaneous invention of actions and procedures. By retaining active and mobile relationships to known fields and systems of value, transversal practices can remain vigilant toward regimes of knowledge, disciplinary and institutional power that might limit their activities through a naming and containment within given definitions or new expanded 'forms' of art. In doing so, they run the risk of falling out of visibility, being illegible as art or anything other form, but also gain the capacity to push against and even re-organise the institutional and political structures of artistic recognition and production -- rather than play within them, making small barters for cultural capital instead. This is dynamic that Brian Holmes has described so well.

Put another way, and to refer back to Badiou, when such activities are made visible *as art*, as the conjunction 'as' suggests, we put them 'in the form of' what we already know and can account for. I would argue that for practices operating transversally, it is important *not* to solidify into such recognisable forms, but to attempt instead to render themselves in a particular consistency. The term consistency connotes both the regularity of an activity, and the level of thickness of a substance (think of cookery lessons). Deleuze and Guattari have used the term consistency to describe a

plane of immanence that can never 'pre-exist the becomings that compose it' and that resists re-constitution into forms or subjects of depth. [6] Consistency refers to a movement and a material substance that holds heterogeneities together without resorting to a structure that would impose a form upon matter. Agamben has also used the term suggestively to describe a state in which the condition of potentiality must suspend itself in order to remain between the virtual and the actual.[7] A practice might be said to retain a certain potentiality through this consistency. And so in these terms, the attempt to retain practices in a certain consistency crucially works to open out different, as yet unknown futures for the ideas, concepts and activities described.

So, to conclude: 'transversal practices' must often negotiate a double and sometimes paradoxical move. A logic of refusal – of resisting visibility, or taking on recognisable forms. This refusal while running serious risks of invisibility, marginalisation, or inoperability, however also becomes a condition for an opening out of another logic, or system of *valorisation*. This is what I take to be the proposition of the work of art, that's *really* not a work of art. And so, as Maurizio Lazzarato has argued, in such a situation one should recognise and work with the paradox that in order to defend something you might also need to displace it, and its categorisation at the same time.

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[1] Alain Badiou, '*Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*', unpublished but available online at several sources including: http://www.16beavergroup.org/journalisms/archives/000633.php [accessed September 2004]

[2] Sarat Maharaj, 'Xeno-epistemics: Makeshift Kit for Sounding Visual Art as Knowledge Production and the Retinal Regimes" in *Documenta XI: The Catalogue*, Okwui Enwezor et al (eds.), London: Hatje Cantz, 2002 p.83

This quest is related to Sarat Maharaj's repeated question, after Duchamp, of how to make a work of art that is not a work of art?

[3] See in particular Félix Guattari 'Transversality' in *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, (trans. Rosemary Sheed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984, Félix Guattari *Chaosmosis*, (trans. Paul Baines and Julian Pefanis), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. For a good overview of the term transversality in Guattari's work, see Gary Genosko, *Félix Guattari: An Aberrant Introduction*, London: Continuum, 2004.

[4] Ultra Red have been relatively successful in preventing the demolition of several housing projects in the neighbourhood and in securing additional funding from the city of Los Angeles for local education programmes etc. Proceeds from sales of their CDs (the most recent of which is titled 'Structural Adjustments'), released mostly on Independent label *Milles Plateaux*, also partly fund their activities.

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: les presses du réel 2002, 14-17

[6] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (trans. Brian Massumi), London: Athlone Press, 1988, p.270

[7] Georgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p.45