



*Lion*

## Appendix III

### **Anti-systems, Indeterminacy, and Experimental Cultural Practices**

At this point in the twenty-first century, few observers of experimental arts would object to the notion that there are currently two distinct and functionally autonomous models. The elder of the two is characterized by expertise in a given specialization that manifests as mastery over a fixed set of materials and advanced technical competence. The task for makers is to radically push or reconfigure aesthetic conventions within the specialization without breaching the specialization itself. As the older of the competing models, its bonds with the institutions of distribution and funding lines are much stronger, so much so that it dominates resources. The junior model (now functioning under many names, including tactical media, hacktivism, experimental geographic practices, culture jamming, activism, guerrilla art, interventionism, and cultural activism) is characterized by a nomadic tendency to wander through various specializations to acquire and repurpose materials and processes in order to reconfigure culture into alternative forms of perceiving, thinking, and living.

These two models could exist in relative peace (with perhaps a skirmish here and there over common resources) were it not for the insistence of the younger on systemic reorganization of the status quo. In other words,

while modest cross-specialization can generally be tolerated (as long as the product appears as “art”), one interrelation that cannot be accepted by the dominant model is the one between culture and politics. These two realms must be maintained as separate at all costs, for failure to do so would reveal the financial apparatus that is the primary driver of cultural institutions, divert attention away from creativity and bohemianism, and potentially erode the system that allows them to profit.

### The Call

The idea of what needed to be done, were there to be a sector of cultural experimentalists capable of contributing to resistance against the powers of domination emanating from capitalist political economy, came well before the practice. By the mid-twentieth century, a few key observations and ideas had surfaced. First, the postwar avant-garde as it had been—as a specialization within the specializations of art, literature, theater, and music—had become counterproductive in regard to systemic change. As Roland Barthes famously quipped in *Mythologies*, “What the avant-garde does not tolerate about the bourgeoisie is its language, not its status.” The avant-garde is happy to leave the system intact and profit from it as long as it is free to push the possibilities of expression within the system. The system that maintained the luxury market for art happily agreed to this demand as long as product lines remained consistent and distribution remained in its control.

One key idea that enjoyed relative popularity among those who rejected capitalist society was that culture and politics had to be in harmony for systemic changes to occur. Political critique, strategies, and tactics were not enough; there had to be intentional experiments in how to live everyday life with different systems of exchange and participation. The problem at that time was that these spheres of activity remained separate. In 1967, the Situationist call for unification made an appearance: “The critique of culture presents itself as a *unified* critique in that it dominates the whole of culture, its knowledge as well as its poetry, and in that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. The *unified theoretical critique* goes alone to meet *unified social practice*.”

In 1982, this call was echoed by artist collective Group Material in an underappreciated, pivotal work titled *DA ZI BAOS*. One reason this work is so important is that it was unreadable as a specialized product (a subject we will soon return to). This intervention, or perhaps provocation, was installed

at the S. Klein building at Union Square in New York City, and consisted of a series of large posters with quotes from mostly local people about their perceptions of culture and social relations. Among the quotes is one from Group Material: “Even though it’s easy and fun, we’re sick of being the audience. We want to do something, we want to create our culture instead of just buying it.” While Group Material would go on to create projects that constituted a *tour de force* in the organization of cultural objects for political ends, they could never escape the confines of art distribution and passive participation. They were not alone, as so many politically active artists struggled with the ongoing contradictions of the avant-garde. While the knowledge concerning the necessity of a new model and thoughts about how this model might look had evolved considerably over two decades, the material conditions to support its manifestation had not.

### **The Turning Point**

In the 1990s, conditions began to change. Notably, the first generation raised with the benefits of the educational reforms won in the 1960s and early '70s had matured and was entering the cultural field. Within these more progressive curricula and models of pedagogy, a sufficient number came to understand the crisis in the production and organization of knowledge. One central problem was that the Enlightenment model of managing the exponential growth of knowledge through ever-increasing specialization within the division of labor was inherently alienating. People were left floating within their hyperspecialized bubbles, unable to connect with other spheres that could advance their area of knowledge or with those who would be consequential recipients. An additional set of intellectual and creative classes needed to be created that could work across disciplines in order to function as bridges between them. By the late 1980s, the first interdisciplinary generation was beginning to establish a beachhead in the universities and the less profitable or prestigious cultural institutions. What these makers brought to the table was a new sense of what experimentation could be. They identified a new box from which they needed to escape: the boundaries of specialization.

Robert Wilson, one of the great avant-gardists of the theater, provides an excellent point of contrast to these newer models of experimentalism in regard to specialization. Wilson states that his practice began and continues with one simple question: “What is it?” (aesthetic indeterminacy). Anyone who has witnessed a Wilson production knows that he does live by this question. Wilson’s productions are semiotic riots bursting with wave

after relentless wave of unstructured meaning open for endless possibilities of interpretation—and, for Wilson, all the interpretive variations are valid and desirable. He actively invites audience members to collaborate with him by completing the meaning of the visual field (a technique very popular with many avant-gardists). For some, this type of theater can be boring or incomprehensible, or simply not worth the labor, but for those who have developed a taste for co-writing, it's the most satisfying form of art. However, Wilson abandons his question completely in one place: the macro frame of the work is completely stable. Everyone knows they are at a Robert Wilson theater production. The specialization of theater is not challenged, even though its conventions are pushed to breaking points.

In the 1990s, the avant-garde model inverted with the interdisciplinarians—they used common conventions for purposes of readability, but removed the frame. For those who desired to move beyond the limits of specialization in order to interconnect nodes of knowledge and invention, the key signifiers that grounded a given specialization became the point of disruption.

Marcel Duchamp had made the discovery of how to undermine specialized discourse in the second decade of the twentieth century with the invention of readymades and reciprocal readymades. An object could be elevated from the mundane to the privileged by connecting it to the appropriate signifiers that are key to a given specialization. In the case of art, the signifiers included a specific architecture, conventional art object presentation (for example, sculpture should be on a pedestal), and an artist's signature. Even more significant was the theory of the reciprocal readymade, in which a privileged object could be stripped of its key signifiers and thereby reduced to a mundane object (i.e., the use of a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board). Group Material's *DA ZI BAOS* used this reverse method to invert the model of the "readerly" strategy of the avant-garde. While the messages contained within the posters were clearly and reliably readable (conventional), the project itself was unreadable. What is it? A political campaign ad, a billboard, a design project, or just a fragment of the pastiche of wheatpasted trash that litters the walls and fences of every urban center? Within this chaotic anti-frame, with all the key signifiers of "art" removed, art and politics could work together without drawing the usual charges of "impurity," "compromise," or "didacticism" that would make the work easily dismissible within the specialization. This lesson is true not only for art and politics, but also for any other multidisciplinary constellation. The audience can frame such

projects in ways that are meaningful to them, and perhaps even more importantly, in ways that the work becomes significant to them. For the interdisciplinary generations, the question “What is art?” is pointless. They have no castle to defend, and are running away from enclosures into open fields.

### The Digital Turn

The politicized proponents of interdisciplinary method, resting in a weak network of cultural institutions in the late 1980s and early '90s, did not constitute enough support for a complete split. A technical apparatus was needed that could accelerate the evolution of the model and the network(s). The digital revolution in information and communications technologies (ICT) was a co-development that dovetailed perfectly with the refusal of specialization. In the beginning, this new technical foundation was primarily logistical, having two major consequences. The first, and perhaps most important, was that the new ICT supported the creation of a critical mass of objectors. While finding like-minded people on a local or regional basis could be extremely difficult for a movement in its infancy, having a multi-continental pool of people made networks possible that were impossible before. Through the use of listservs, bulletin boards, websites, and email, ideas could be exchanged at a very healthy rate, and virtual scenes and coalitions were formed. The second factor was that most of this could be done for free or at an acceptable cost. (These traits and activities also partially explain why tactical media, a movement open to all forms of cultural production, primarily appeals to those interested in digital culture.)

This development also changed funding. While no one location had the financial resources for continuous politically charged experimental research, project development and deployment, or peer exchange, many could find a small bit of investment. When networked, new experimentalists could move to where the resources were. Costs could be distributed so that in addition to the established beachhead, there was a nomadic territory in which the movement could grow stronger. Whether a person was working in Bangalore, Budapest, Rotterdam, Barcelona, Beirut, Seattle, or in the middle of nowhere did not matter. There were no more cultural capitals within this sphere of cultural production. This development was liberating in the sense that while traditional cultural capitals and the institutions they contained could still be used and be useful, they were no longer *necessary*. Everywhere was a site of and for cultural intervention. Legitimation through association with geographic territory began to horizontalize.

As ICT continued to rapidly develop in the twenty-first century, the news was mostly good in terms of supporting the autonomy of this second model. (The bad news, of course, was that ICT mapped even more efficiently onto the most predatory and oppressive forms of imperial global capitalism.) Greater access to archives and databases, better tools for organization and mobilization, relative freedom from censorship, and cheaper and more powerful software, hardware, and bandwidth all contributed to freedom from the constraints of traditional limitations. This, in turn, supported independent research and amateur explorations into any field. Alternative voices and those that contrasted with the mainstream could perhaps be drowned out, but they couldn't be shut out, or stopped. Ubiquitous computing begat ubiquitous research, and this allowed the new experimentalists to move into content areas that were once forbidden by specialization (such as science, social science, and engineering), and to speak to and about these disciplines with some authority.

### **Indeterminacy**

As noted, the avant-garde is no stranger to aesthetic indeterminacy. The avant-garde tendency is to search out and explore the extremes of a medium or genre. The extremes along the continuum between overdetermined structure and open-ended randomness have been favored locations for decades. In the case of indeterminacy, the push to interrupt production with random elements—whether mechanical, natural, or social in origin—traveled to a point where aesthetic process was absent of human contribution, and lived as an ongoing process that could be called into existence by anyone at any time. Emblematic of this moment is the work of John Cage, who finally managed to eliminate composers and musicians from music. As he stated, “Music is all around us; if only we had ears . . .” The important point for this essay is that when the disciplinary morph of rejecting specialization occurred in the 1990s, key (un)structuring principles changed as well. Interest in aesthetic indeterminacy shifted to an interest in social and political indeterminacy.

The long-running battle for those coupling culture and politics in more militant ways is explaining the power of these projects to critics and skeptics, while at the same time being involuntarily freighted with the requirement of generating market value. While the geniuses of the avant-garde created tremendous financial and prestige values through singular creative gestures, the experimentalists in the social and political sphere cannot claim to generate much if any political or social capital through our projects. The

accusation of failure is ubiquitous, because, seemingly, nothing changes. Of course anyone involved in any type of activism knows that no singular cultural or political activity is going to produce political capital. This form of power can only be accumulated by the many over long periods of time. No one expects that signing a petition or attending a demonstration will result in the instantaneous solution to a major political or social problem. The redistribution of power in its many forms is a long, slow, historical process. This redistribution is not a simple matter of individualized accumulation, as with money and fame, but a long-term collective process in which the whole must be reconfigured.

The question then becomes: How can we organize social relations and territories and arrange semiotic flows in a manner that compels social change? At the time of the bifurcation of the experimental field in the 1990s, suspicion about centralized (and, to a lesser extent, decentralized) platforms was in the air. Concerns about how movements turn into bureaucracies, and how activist arrangements can become oppressive and more reflective of a military order than a liberational one became a preoccupation for those trying to rethink the social relations of resistance. How could the process and aims better align?

To complicate matters further, there were also nonrational considerations that were having an impact on choices made. Where was pleasure in this type of participation? Political activism was and perhaps is a type of service—a sacrifice one makes in order to ensure the rewards that come when the greater good is considered first. A person has to attend the endless meetings, join the picket lines, accept the abuse that follows civil disobedience, join associations and committees, and provide logistical support. The consequence is burnout. Lifelong activists are rare breeds. Those wanting to rethink the social relations of resistance wondered if there was a way to make this category of action more pleasurable and thereby sustainable. Why do we have to replicate the painful social order that we want to escape or even eliminate?

In light of these concerns and questions, it is no wonder that the writings of Félix Guattari began to make so much sense. He knew that the complexity of the social field was too vast to be sorted through the category of quantity. Scale was not a relevant concept—small could be big and big could be small. What was of value was the creation of flowing arrangements or machines that facilitate becoming. Within this field of shifting vectors, outcomes became irrelevant as there is only continuance and flux.



Accumulation and territory were also dispensed with. In this dynamic and distributed social sphere, active participants need only to dart about as particles making new connections where they can in order to increase potential and possibility.

These actions, done without a master plan or final end, took the form of a gamble. Drawing on the avant-garde tradition, going back to Stéphane Mallarmé's roll of the dice, some cultural activists believed that liberational emergent processes could occur even in the face of the failure of a grand multiplicity of single projects in and of themselves. The power of chaos could produce the functional contradiction of a slow revolution. As this had happened on the aesthetic plane with a Dada text-sound piece or a William Burroughs cut-up novel, indeterminacy could function as a tool for an unknown machine that resisted intelligibility in its complexity, but that at the very least could produce leaderless, productive forms of social organization, and at best could change the face of the world.

It was an oddly mystical moment to think that the power of the indeterminate could neutralize so many methodological problems while at the same time being a potential source for public good and social justice. The fear of centralization and in turn bureaucratization as a means to recuperate militant activities began to fade. Deferring to indeterminacy appeared to be a means to eliminate all movement-building mechanisms of the past that had become such a drain on the energy of individuals, and in many cases counterproductive, as with party formation. Now people could follow their own desires as to how they would intervene in culture and politics without having to conform to a master plan. No more meetings, associations, picket lines, or abusive confrontations unless those were the tactics chosen. Acceptance of the indeterminate freed experimentalists to try what may work rather than replicating alienating methods of the past. The new orientation was toward future possibility, which is essential to actual experimentation. In so doing, rigid order and discipline transformed into a gentler system in which rewards were distributed as actions progressed rather than all being directed toward the elusive single reward of final victory. Pleasure could replace sacrifice as individuals could engage social problems and conflicts as holistic entities rather than as resources for a greater cause.

Of course, it's impossible to know if this anti-system worked as well as was hoped. Certainly the political and economic landscape has gotten worse, but we can't know whether the situation would be any better had those involved stuck to more traditional activism. But once this extreme point of

distributed organization was reached, a slow reconciliation between various types of resistant forms of organization could begin—that is, between distributed forms (cells, collectives, or affinity groups that share a common perspective but act independently), decentralized forms (coalitions) and resistant centralized forms (commons). Indeterminacy continued to be primarily a feature of distributed networks; however, CAE would like to note that one very radical experiment occurred that brought indeterminacy together with more centralized forms of organization: Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Here, Guattari shook hands with Hardt and Negri.

Occupy's opening gesture was to establish a commons—to show that it could be done, and could be maintained. Once this territory was established, experiments in social relations could begin. How would exchange work? What was the relationship to accumulation? How would the commons regulate itself? How would systems of communication be repurposed and applied? New experiments in biopolitics began to emerge. What were the relationships to sustenance, to temperature, to waste, and even to population regulation? So many of the answers were emergent; discovered in that time and place by the participants. This grand public experiment in social relations was available for all to participate in or to passively watch. The lesson that we don't need politicians, financiers, lawyers, police, or other professionals to govern us was on lengthy display, and ultimately why the movement had to be crushed. OWS vandalized the myth that people are incapable of governing themselves, and once again demonstrated the power of the amateur to find solutions to problems that, in this case, were presented as impossible or too conflicted to solve.

This alone would be a great legacy, but participants were constantly asked (particularly by the old centralist parties, NGOs, and media sources): "What do you want? What is the goal?" There were no programmatic goals, no predetermined outcomes—just continuance. The activity in and of itself was enough. Determination was unequivocally rejected. This disavowal is what separated OWS from Arab Spring and other occupation movements. While the latter had final goals, stopping points, and limits, OWS had none (except those imposed by the police). This is not in any way a criticism of other manifestations worldwide. Occupation movements that topple governments speak for themselves. CAE is only pointing out how historically odd OWS was. In a rather stunning moment of recombinant politics, anarchistic and social democratic principles were cobbled together in a way that has not been seen before or since. Politics without goals had made its visible debut in the over-economy.

Whether it is back in the underground for good is unpredictable, but by sheer example, it put the discourse of inequality into mass visibility, and increased the potential that something might be done about it without putting a limit (which are what demands often amount to) on what that something might be, also indicating a healthy distrust of reform.

### **Militancy and Recuperation**

The bifurcation of experimental cultural production discussed in this essay, including the more anarchistic models and the broader recombinant models of today, has not gone unnoticed by profit-oriented cultural institutions. As one would expect, from the point of view of dominant cultural forms, now that the recombinant cultural option has become autonomous, it needs to be brought back into the fold. This requires that several transformational goals be accomplished. The first is to retrofit the competing model back in with the avant-garde. This is done by claiming that this is not a new model at all, but merely a new material (the social fabric) for artists to use and master in order to bring about fresh aesthetic experiences. This reduction to formalist principles allows for the exploitation of a fully politicized cultural model by stacking the system with “artists” who are willing to decouple from politics and scrub cultural action of all militancy. This decoupling and scrubbing is the second development that must occur. In the final phase, strategies to make salable products out of “social practice” and then to market them are developed. Unfortunately, all of this process is well underway. Beginning with “relational aesthetics” through to the twee disaster that is “social practice,” we are seeing a process of recuperation that could end with the actions of the resistant being framed by institutionally friendly brands, dragging us back into the black hole of aesthetics.

### **Hope and Hopelessness**

When describing such bifurcations, an author always runs the risk of presenting a dichotomy stemming from a purity of value that insists that one expression is “good” and the other expression is “bad” in some inherent or transcendental sense. What CAE is trying to offer is a grounded context for the value assertions contained in this essay. In terms of pushing the parameters of expression, we applaud the avant-garde and other associated specialists. Who is not happy that there are Burroughs novels, Richter paintings, Oliveros compositions, or Herzog films? We appreciate them as much as the next art lover. However, if one’s focus is the production of culture in order to resist the imperatives of neoliberalism and to develop

some alternative to it, then the newly emergent transdisciplinary model is superior in that it has the anarchistic capacity and potential for more contrast, diversity, and independence than ever before (which is not to say that these possibilities will be fully realized). In addition, any optimism about this development also has specific limits. While we are quite amazed that this model exists and continues to evolve at all, that it has some institutional (strategic) support, that it is resistant to elimination via technological means, and that culture and politics can explicitly mix in minoritarian forms, we do not believe that we alone possess the tool that will generate the defeat of global capitalism. This model and its varied applications are a small star cluster in the vast black void of corrupt empire. Sadly, we will not be surrendering our pessimistic sensibility concerning the general condition of global political economy; but we will happily take the small victory that those who stand against the current system have a robust beginning for productive explorations in another area of social relations that we did not have before.