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The Axiomatic of Capitalism and the Ontology of the Art Assemblage

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to offer an analytical reading of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy and a critical application to the current state of affairs, that is, to the age of contemporaneity, which is marked by the relative immanence of the capitalist axiomatic. The concepts used in such a critical application are event, difference, immanence, force, and affect. Together, they serve as the basis for an ontology or, better yet, a re-ontologization of the art assemblage, a concept that aims to describe the way artworks are made locally and then gain certain global values, which the author calls (trans)individuation, and the potential for a re-politicization (becoming and complicity) of art in the 21st century.

Keywords: art, assemblage, axiomatic, capitalism, re-ontologization, re-politicization

This paper revolves around three basic ideas. First, I wanted to provide a critical and analytical reading of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of art, then to tease out some basic concepts that might pertain to the contemporary condition, and, finally, to try applying those concepts to the contemporary state of affairs. The application could be summed up in a single concept, that of *re-ontologization*. What I mean by re-ontologization is "the return to ontology" in thinking art, society, and the whole "chaosmos" as Deleuze and Guattari would say, that is, the basis of thinking art practice, social reality, and the world as a whole under the concepts of difference and event, as well as the concepts of immanence, force, and affect. In my view, such a "return to ontology" is necessary for an adequate description, understanding, and critical judgement of relations between art, society, and the world. The basic characteristic of the age of contemporaneity, according to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis in *Anti-Oedipus*¹ and *A Thousand Plateaus*,² is the "relative" immanence of capitalism and, as such, it needs to

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London, Continuum, 2004.

be critically analyzed on the basis of the concepts listed above (difference, event, immanence, force, and affect).

I will start with the concepts of difference and event. In explaining these concepts, I will confront Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of difference and event with Derrida's "quasi-concept" of *différance*. The main motive for such a confrontation lies in the fact that besides Badiou's philosophy of event,³ the only remaining "threat" to the Deleuze-Guattarian project of re-ontologization, at least as far as Continental philosophy is concerned, can be Derrida's deconstruction of all forms of metaphysical and ontological discourses. That said, both cases involve a concept of difference, but essentially different understandings of that concept. *Différance*, as a "quasi-concept", that is, as a "quasi-transcendental" structure,⁴ at the same time enables and disables the constitution of ontological concepts and discourses that come into being by connecting those concepts. For example, writing about Heidegger's conception of the ontological difference between Being (Ger. *Sein*, Fr. *l'être*) and being (Ger. *seiende*, Fr. *l'étant*), Derrida says that *différance* is, if not "older", then "faster" than ontological difference,⁵ that is, that *différance* is the condition of the (im)possibility of constituting ontological difference as such, since *différance* is neither Being nor being but a structural condition for the appearance and expression of both. Furthermore, *différance* encompasses and surpasses other concepts of difference as well – it is not a mere contradiction, nor an aporia, nor a diacritical difference,⁶ but their condition or, even better, structure/knot that encompasses and, at the same time, maintains all of them. *Différance* also encompasses other meanings, such as delay and spacing, and these two meanings feature the point of contention between the Deleuze-Guattarian conception of difference and event and Derrida's deconstruction.

Namely, as delay and spacing, *différance* points to the interdependence of space and time, whereby the now is suppressed by that which it is not – the past and future time. The now is also decentred because of its relation with the absolute past and absolute future, due to spacing as the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space.⁷ Exactly because of the relation of the now with that which it is not and because of the interchangeability of time and space, because of their radical undecidability and instability, the event becomes that which is always-already deferred. *Différance* as deferral constitutes the past, which has never been present, the past which serves as the decentring agent in the constitution of the present. But equally, *différance* as deferral constitutes the future, which will never be present – what Derrida calls *à venir* – exactly because of the interval (the not of the now), which is placed into the flow

³ Cf. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999. For responses to Badiou see: Clayton Crockett, *Deleuze beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity, and Event*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013; Jon Roffe, *Badiou's Deleuze*, Durham, Acumen Publishing Limited, 2012.

⁴ Cf. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁵ Daniel Colucciello Barber, "On Post-Heideggerian Difference: Derrida and Deleuze", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 2009, Vol. XLVII, 120.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971, 9.

⁷ "[...] the temporalization of sense is, from the outset, a 'spacing'. As soon as we admit spacing both as 'interval' or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside, for the 'outside' has insinuated itself into the movement by which the inside of the nonspatial, which is called 'time' appears, is constituted, is 'presented'. Space is 'in' time; it is time's pure leaving-itself; it is the outside-itself as the self-relation of time. The externality of space, externality as space, does not overtake time; rather, it opens as pure 'outside' 'within' the movement of temporalization." Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1973, 86.

of time and which interrupts that flow. It is due to these “quasi-transcendental” structures as conditions of impossibility that Derrida understands the concept of event as that which does not come, as that which ultimately cannot come.⁸

In Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, the question of difference is also that of Being and as such, it is a purely ontological question, while in Derrida, it is a question that transcends ontology by superseding ontological difference and is “more originary” than that. In Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, difference as difference, difference by itself as difference that differs from itself by itself, is different/citation.⁹ Differentiation denotes the virtual aspect and virtual relations between a multiplicity of intensive singularities. Differentiation, on the other hand, denotes the actual, quantitative side of Being as difference, that is, the process of the actualization of the virtual (becoming). The virtual is a differentiating and differentiated process whose differentiating movement does not coincide with differentiated actualizations. But even though differentiation and differentiation do not coincide as the virtual and the actual, they make up a whole, while differentiation, intensity, and the virtual constitute the incorporeal side of the real, on the one hand, and differentiation, quantity, and the actual constitute bodies as being, on the other. In order to preserve the continuity of becoming – diachrony – and stop the fragmenting of the wholeness of time into discrete moments – synchrony – Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology requires differentiating between the intensive and the extensive. While the extensive can be partitioned without changing its nature, the intensive cannot. Therefore, intensities play the role of catalysts in the actualization of the virtual, the producer of extensive space, linear time, as well as bodies and their quantities.

These conceptual moves are important both from an epistemological and an ontological standpoint. Becoming cannot be constructed by juxtaposing immobile cuts, that is, by juxtaposing multiple points of the now. The success of this conceptual turn depends on a corresponding theory of time and space, which should allow the introduction of a continuum of non-subjective differential processes. No philosophy of difference can be successful as long as the change is ascribed to a process that is imagined as a simple succession of multiple states of affairs, or multiple successive points in time and space. Deleuze and Guattari’s scheme of becoming goes from the actual state of affairs to virtual potentialities and back and prevents the sequencing of time into blocks that would, in turn, destroy the continuity and interdependence of the virtual and the actual. As far as theory of time goes, even though both Deleuze and Guattari’s and Derrida’s own philosophy involve a concept of the past that has never been present and the future that will never become present, these two concepts play completely different roles. On the one hand, the past that has never been present is the ontological ground of the entire constitution of time, while on the other, the future that will never be present is the ungrounding force of the flow of time. The issue is the wholeness of the flow of time, both from

⁸ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event”, *Critical Inquiry*, 2007, 33, 441–461.

⁹ “Whereas differentiation determines the virtual content of the Idea as problem, differentiation expresses the actualization of this virtual and the constitution of solutions (by local integrations). Differentiation is like the second part of difference, and in order to designate the integrity or the integrality of the object we require the complex notion of different/citation. The *t* and the *c* here are the distinctive feature or the phonological relation of difference in person. Every object is double without it being the case that the two halves resemble one another, one being a virtual image and the other an actual image. They are unequal odd halves. Differentiation itself already has two aspects of its own, corresponding to the varieties of relations and to the singular points dependent upon the values of each variety. However, differentiation in turn has two aspects, one concerning the qualities or diverse species which actualise the varieties, the other concerning number or the distinct parts actualising the singular points.” Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London, Continuum, 2001, 209–210.

the aspect of the ground and that of ungrounding, or in other words, the issue in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is a diachronic conception of time, while Derrida's conception of time is synchronic. The "never has been" and "never will be" do not signify the impossibility, but point to the virtual dimension of the real. The virtual as such is the source of intensities and singularities, which are incessantly actualized in specific states of affairs. Hence, in the here and now of a given state of affairs, there will always be aspects of the "never has been" and the "never will be"; since actualizations of the virtual are played out in accordance with the given situation and its conditions. In other words, it is impossible to actualize all virtualities in a single state of affairs. But the aspect of the absoluteness of virtuality can be thought and that aspect is what grounds Deleuze and Guattari's conception of event as the process of different/ciation.

On the concepts of difference *qua* different/ciation, event, and virtuality, Deleuze and Guattari base their ontology of differences, which is at the same time also a radically desubstantializing ontology. Namely, analogy in judgement, identity in the concept, opposition in the predicate, and resemblance in perception constitute the fourfold basis of representation.¹⁰ In order to get to the ontology of difference and thus to absolute immanence, it was necessary to perform an exhaustive (or, more precisely, ungrounding) critique of representation, which would subsume, by way of analogy, identity, opposition, and resemblance, difference as difference under substance, One, and, therefore, transcendence. Deleuze and Guattari's aim was to invent an ontology based on the univocity of Being, but in such a way that the univocity of Being immediately relates to difference. Being is said only in one way – "Being is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said, but that of which it is said differs: it is said of difference itself"¹¹ – and with that there occurs a categorical turn whereby Being is expressed as becoming, identity as difference, and one as multiplicity. Moreover, becoming, difference, and multiplicity constitute absolute immanence, which is a purely virtual plane, the place of impersonal life in general, and is therefore a "matter for the plane of consistency of Body without Organs, in other words, the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified, or destratified body and all its flows: subatomic and submolecular particles, pure intensities, prevital and prephysical free singularities"¹²

But along with absolute immanence or, better yet, within absolute immanence, there is also relative immanence, which is defined as "natural, historical, and social milieu"¹³ and as such, it is essentially the socius defined by the capitalist machine. The socius or social machine is always already defined by the fluxes that constitute it and its basic function is the coding of those fluxes.¹⁴ So, on the one hand, there are processes of coding and recoding (territorialization and reterritorialization) and on the other hand there are processes of decoding or the deterritorialization of those fluxes. Total or absolute deterritorialization/decoding leads to a Body without Organs, that is, to absolute immanence as that which is inorganic, nonvital, virtual, and, ultimately, that on and by which one cannot live since it is the plane before any organization (in the sense of formed matter, organism, and subjectivity). But absolute immanence as the virtual is a necessary ontological condition of creation and politics, given that capitalism constitutes relative immanence in accordance with its own axiomatic. The

¹⁰ Ibid, 262.

¹¹ Ibid, 36.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus...*, op. cit. 49.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, London, Verso, 2009, 197.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia...*, op. cit. 139.

axiomatic of capitalism consists of several basic axioms: isomorphy (states and various state formations are models of the realization of its axiomatic), the axiom of addition/subtraction whereby the axiomatic keeps adding further axioms, which is also the essence of the capitalist axiomatic and the essence of the issue of inventing new forms of living, the axiom of saturation (an immanent axiomatic always faces its own limit, which is, on the other hand, always pushed away by inventing new territories), the axiom of power (the axiomatic possesses more power than its elements, which constitute its models), the axiom of the included middle (the unequal exchange of fluxes), the axiom of denumerability (the quantification of fluxes), and the axiom of undecidable statements (the potentiality for non-denumerability within the axiomatic itself).¹⁵

Contemporary society is thus defined by the relative immanence of capitalism as its ontological condition. In the 1990s, Deleuze and Guattari called that condition the society of control, that is, the post-media age.¹⁶ One of the key attributes of the society of control is the change from discipline (as Foucault described it in his many works) to control. Control is based on “*modulation*, like a self-transmuting molding continually changing from one moment to the next, or like a sieve whose mesh varies from one point to another”.¹⁷ Modulation produces “*dividuals*” as opposed to individuals in disciplinary societies, and masses become data that possess value only within the framework of the capitalist axiomatic.¹⁸ The modulation of dividuals occurs continually and incessantly and there is no clear cut in passing from one (say, working) place to another anymore, but it is always a continual transition (continued education, for example). In other words, there is no possibility of a radical break from the axiomatic. But the task of art lies exactly in trying, with existing means, to create lines of flight, even though, on the other hand, it participates in overcoding and axiomatization.

By using the term *the transindividuation of the art assemblage*, I want to point to the fact that the semiotic model is not sufficient for understanding art practice in the age of contemporaneity (although it is necessary for understanding at least one of the multiple planes of the art assemblage), in other words, that it is not enough to consider only the text (or the work, retaining the interpretative strategy that came before poststructuralism), but that it is necessary, by using a new conceptual apparatus, to include the changed ontological and political status of contemporary art.¹⁹ In that regard, the term *assemblage* denotes the complex relations between different fluxes of forces that inform the composition that we call an artwork or a text,

¹⁵ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus...*, op. cit. 509–522.

¹⁶ For Guattari’s notion of “the post-media age” see: Félix Guattari, “Postmodern Deadlock and Post-Media Transition”, in: *Soft Subversions: Text and Interviews, 1977–1985*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2007, 291–300, and Félix Guattari, “Entering the Post-Media Era”, op. cit. 301–306.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies”, in: *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, 179.

¹⁸ Expanding on the notion of dividuality within the capitalist axiomatic, Brian Massumi writes that the dividual consists of both microeconomic and infra-economic levels: “The individual subject of interest forming the fundamental unit of capitalist society is internally differentiated, containing its own population of ‘minority practices’ of contrasting affective tone and tenor, in a zone of indistinction between rational calculation and affectivity.” Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014, 20. The infra-economic level is the level of *moods*, which are in perpetual intra-action and, furthermore, “they are immediately liked variations, held in tension, resonating together in immediate proximity. Their oscillatory co-motion expresses itself at the level of the individual, where it is marked by fluctuating indicators, just as the actions of individual economic actors express themselves on the systemic level in fluctuating indicators such as prices.” Ibidem.

¹⁹ Cf. Teri Smit, *Savremena umetnost i savremenost*, Belgrade, Orion Art, 2014.

depending on the theoretical platform from which we approach the phenomenon in question. The term *transindividuation* denotes the relations of the perpetually folding and unfolding interior and exterior forces of the assemblage with the *outside*, and the modes of individuation of the art assemblage that encompass both the aspect of individuality and that of collectivity. Transindividuation also denotes the processes of double articulation. On the one hand, there is the becoming of a singular work of art in a specific place and space, its qualitative becoming, and on the other there are processes or fluxes of forces that permeate that singularity for the purposes of quantification, that is, for the purposes of including it in the abstract axiomatic of capitalism on the global scale, whereby that singularity gains certain artistic, cultural, social, and other values.²⁰

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between two axes of assemblage in general and thereby of art assemblages as well – horizontal and vertical axes. On the horizontal axis, an assemblage consists of content and expression. Content consists of machinic assemblages of bodies, their actions and passions, the mixing of bodies that effect each other. Expression is made of collective assemblages of expression, acts, and statements, incorporeal transformations ascribed to bodies. On the vertical axis, an assemblage possesses territorial sides, which stabilize and reterritorialize it, as well as limits of deterritorialization, which disperse it.²¹ Considering the simultaneity of the (re)territorializing and deterritorializing side on the vertical axis and the distinctness of content and expression, one needs to redefine the positioning of the art assemblage in relation to the social, economic, and political sphere. I would call the specific placement of the art assemblage *becoming* and *complicity*. Becoming is defined by the aspect of deterritorialization, the creation of lines of flight in the event of an encounter between the assemblage and bodies in a sensation that breaks the sensory schemes set up by habit and memory. Complicity, on the other hand, is defined by the aspect of (re)territorialization, by the fact that the process of deterritorialization is always temporary, lines of flight short-term, and the content and expression in correspondence and mutually defined. In other words, there is no absolute breaking with the immanence of capitalism, within which the art assemblage is (trans)individuated and within which it is becoming.

If one were to single out the basic ethical and aesthetic demands posed by the problem of the becoming of the art assemblage in the age of contemporaneity, those would be: the invention of new forms of living (and life), the invention of new forms of organization, and the invention of new forms of relating to time.²² The specificity of an art assemblage as *art* is based on the production of sensation in the encounter with the body (affect). As such, an art assemblage has to be an event that introduces some kind of break in the sensory scheme of habit and memory of the body as organism and forces it to confront the future as the ungrounding ground of a cracked subject, or more precisely, it forces the body to think in an encounter with the (in)actual. In that regard, the art assemblage points toward “people to come”, it brings with it the utopian horizon of the potentially new and different, that is, the horizon of what is un-contemporary and what resists the actual (“*we lack resistance to the present*”).²³ Art assemblage,

²⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the art assemblage and its transindividuation as it relates to a concrete work of art, cf. Andrija Filipović, “*Musica Inhumana: Towards the Posthumanistic Ethical and Aesthetical Paradigm in Music*”, *New Sound: International Magazine for Music*, 2003, Vol. XLII, No. 2, 86–101.

²¹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus...*, op. cit. 97–98.

²² Cf. Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge Industries of Creativity*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2013, 148–159.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?...*, op. cit. 108, emphasis in the original. And further: “Philosophy takes the relative deterritorialization of capital to the absolute; it makes it pass over the plane of immanence as movement of the infinite and suppresses it as internal limit, *turns it back against itself so as to*

as the concept for what becomes through transindividuation, for the multiplicity of singular forces folded to produce an artwork, enables the description of the modalities of ways whereby an artwork forms relations with culture and society in general, as well as the ways whereby it knits itself with the fluxes of culture and society, more precisely, the analysis of the folds of an art assemblage and society, and sets the demands for a re-politicization of art in the age of contemporaneity on the basis of the ontology of difference and event.

summon forth a new earth, a new peoples... Utopia does not split off from infinite movement: etymologically it stands for absolute deterritorialization but always at the critical point at which it is connected with the present relative milieu, and especially with the forces stifled by this milieu." Ibid, 99–100.