

A Conversation with Brian Holmes
Rudi Laermans

Brian Holmes is undoubtedly one of the most important advocates of a genuine political practice within the realms of artistic and cultural work. Holmes completed a PhD in literature at the University of Berkeley, lives & works in Paris, and is active as art critic, essayist, and translator. His writings are situated at the junction of political activism and critical theory, direct commentary and theoretical reflection, “the artistic” (or “the aesthetic”) and “the political-economic”. Holmes is a prolific writer, witness his many articles on the website Université Tangente (www.u-tangente.org), which he established in collaboration with the conceptual art group Bureau d’Etudes. Besides more miscellaneous work, the site offers the digital version of Holmes’ previous essay collection *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Art and Politics in a Networked Era* (2003) as well as of his upcoming book *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*.

Holmes is a member of the editorial collective that animates the French magazine and website *Multitudes* (see <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/>), which acts as the leading platform of autonomist & post-Marxist critical thinking, notably developing the concept of ‘cognitive capitalism’. With his fellow travellers within the orbit of *Multitudes*, such as Toni Negri and Maurizio Lazzarato, Holmes shares a profound knowledge of, and respect for, the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari. In their writings, he finds the conceptual tools and theoretical inspiration for his interpretations of the various forms of cultural resistance and immanent politics within and outside the art world. Yet, Holmes is everything but a fashionable ‘Deleuzian’ and regularly digs into less canonized sources, such as the sociological writings of Karl Polanyi, Richard Sennett or Karin Knorr-Cetina.

The talk took place in Brian Holmes’ apartment in Paris in the beginning of May 2006. With the notable exception of the first paragraphs on Holmes’ reflections on his practice as writer-critic and cultural activist, which were actually developed at the end of our talk, the edited version follows the taped conversation. – Rudi Laermans

RL (Rudi Laermans): How would you describe your own practice?

BH (Brian Holmes): Well, I perceive it as a form of resistance, one that I’ve developed somewhat self-reflexively. I actually didn’t intend to become a cultural critic, it just happened because of the possibility to publish or to make one’s thoughts public via the Internet. That possibility rapidly opened up avenues for collaborating with both artists and social movements, and therefore making the critique immediately usable. This marks a different kind of cultural critique than the Olympian one that has become associated with the Adornian melancholic, sees all but can do nothing. Cultural critique can now be directly productive of forms; it can be included in the range of formal production which then serves to catalyse further explorations of social transformation. This kind of critique has been around at least since the 1960’s, and it clearly took on a new vitality in the late 1990’s with the massification of the Internet. In both cases, in the sixties and the nineties, there was a question of access to media that allowed cultural critique to become directly experimental and directly involved in social experiments. And that’s exactly what I experienced in the series of events that lead me to become a writer. I have consciously tried to keep up that position and thus have been able to maintain an in-and-out

movement with respect to institutions. I would never be able to do the things that I do, if I hadn't gone through a PhD programme and produced a PhD. That gave me access to all the specialised sociology and economics that I later got into as a self-taught social theorist. I learnt the codes of that kind of material and how to use it, while at the same time participating in social movements and in underground or autonomous culture that opens you up to a different kind of sensorium, a different kind of habitus, a different way of living in your body with others and of expressing your experience, one that allows you to shake up the disciplines and their functions. I like that kind of cultural critique.

RL: Would you eventually take up Foucault's specific intellectual as a conceptual model for that practice?

BH: No, because I couldn't claim to have the kind of expertise that Foucault was asking for. In a way Foucault was suggesting that the professional intellectual engaged in the service of the state could autonomize him- or herself, and play a role in different kinds of critical endeavours that would emanate from civil society. But he didn't take on board the difficulty for non-academics and non-professionals of manipulating the technical languages that the professional civil servant develops. And that's something that cultural critics do now. I am quite conscious of being an interface between highly elaborate discourses and much more diffuse realms of practice and experience; and this very capacity to negotiate the interface between the technical and the everyday is probably the most important thing one can communicate through cultural critique. That's where you have to be versed both in abstract analysis and in the expressive forms of social unrest, turmoil, fear, desire, enthusiasm...

RL: What I like a lot in your writing is the reactivity vis-à-vis of what is happening 'outside': Seattle and the movement against global neo-liberalism, 9/11, or more recently the turmoil in the French *banlieues*. The writing is punctuated by the rhythm of a geo-political environment, but at the same time there is the rhythm of your readings. One can see new books coming in, like for instance Polanyi. You work some time with an author and then somebody else comes in. Notwithstanding the overall anchoring of your writings in, for instance, Foucault or Deleuze & Guattari, your central authors and conceptual tools tend to shift over time. I like that play of 'difference and repetition'.

BH: Yes, I try to do that... I don't always read the same authors, even though Foucault and Guattari seem to be a more long-term presence. I like to take a specific body of work, particularly by sociologists or economists, and see what can be done in a situation that seems to require their way of thinking. These situations are indeed events, they are relationships transformed by acts and gestures, which the media tend to portray as violent, meaningless accidents, crimes or destinies where you have no imaginable role. Cultural critique can also be thought of a slower and deeper journalism: it is made to be public, it is made to contain a vitality of the present, but at the same time it should reveal the technical underpinnings, the stakes as seen from very different perspectives. It should open up a longer and broader vista within the rhythm of actuality, which is very much a rhythm of control. The modulation of mediated experience is the way we are guided and channelled today, so that's another way of describing what cultural critique can be: creating a temporality where one is able to embrace the event and yet go beyond it, both towards the past and the future. This is where cultural critique is different from academic

analysis, which generally doesn't take the future on board, or see the past as a reservoir of transformatory potentials.

RL: I like to think of your writing as an embodied link, an interface between on the one hand events that are happening now and opening up new possibilities of action and non-action, and on the other hand a much slower time of the archive, of a tradition of critical thinking. But what I particularly like is that one can feel that it is an embodied interface, not just a neutral connection of two regimes coming into contact with each other... A singular text is *this* moment connecting with *this* kind of memory and *this* kind of archive...

BH: If one maintains a dialogue with people operating in a resistant way outside of career positions and institutions, those people will continually draw you back to *who* you are, and *where* you are, because you only speak from the place of your own possibilities and potentials. There is an ethic to that kind of reminder, and it's extremely useful. I am continually radicalised by people around me, because the ones who make critique into experimentation and action have my first interest. This ethic of embodiment is really a way of collectively helping one another against the constant pressure to simply affirm the status quo, which is there as an invitation and an injunction all the time. Affirm and you will be rewarded.

RL: In your recent writings, there is the idea that artistic or cultural practices can be coupled to struggles for collective expression, for the articulation of devices for collective speech or the creation of new social machines. In this way, art could become something like a social laboratory...

BH: Basically I am interested in how groups of people can create tension, conflict and sheer experimentation within the general organisation of the devices that articulate collective speech. We are linked to other people in society through various kinds of organisational devices, which are not just limited to networks or to classical institutions. The forms of linkage and the general conditions that structure our relations within each of these devices has great influence on what we actually say and do. Quite characteristic of contemporary capitalism is the linkage between artistic production and the advanced forms of reflexivity carried out in universities. Together they make up a kind of theater for the codification of innovations in subjectivity. This is a gigantic device that has become one of the central features of what can be termed "cognitive capitalism". To keep from simply reiterating the basic proposals of this device is the challenge of politically engaged artistic practice. It's actually quite difficult because cognitive capitalism has reached a very high level of sophistication, which allows it to integrate the desires and aspirations of the most well educated and therefore the most capable people, among the populations of practically all the countries on this earth. This particular kind of normalisation does not involve standardisation, but rather a controlled and guided differentiation of the individual's productivity. Under the basic managerial paradigms of neo-liberalism, this leads to the production of forms of intellectual property. Art is very important in this general productive device of cognitive capitalism, because it's a kind of model of innovation in the absolute sense, and also because it's a quite ancient technique for the orientation of desire and aspiration, for the configuration of the sensorium, which is what allows us to communicate with each other and to have the feeling that we are

sharing something. Sharing a process of becoming, of evolving, of changing in time. Our society needs all these sorts of dynamics to continue reproducing itself just the way it is – a way which I think is increasingly disastrous. We are at a pinnacle of sophistication which is accompanied by a sort of dramatic blindness to the consequences of exactly what we are producing; and art production, cultural production of all kinds, is just one aspect of this sophisticated blindness. Since what we know as the beginning of post-modernism, it has been very difficult for intellectuals and artists to regain a critical position in which they can be confident that their production is not simply adding to and perfecting the very system that they feel it urgent to critique and reorient. So this is where the work becomes something more than just the happy theorising of a nomadic Dionysian war machine – to abuse a Deleuzo-Guattarian term – because in fact, we live in a crosshatch of such machinic processes, and our possible movements are initially very small, and eminently susceptible of being analyzed from above, modeled into computer simulations and integrated into a predictable pattern, which can then be altered by a little intervention on any one of its component elements. I think the real difficulty is to find ways in which the experimentation can become de-normalised and effect some kind of break with what can now be recognised as the institutions of cognitive capitalism.

RL: You use the notion of ‘devices for collective speech’ but also of ‘a machine of affectivity’. It seems to me that you want to avoid a former way of thinking in terms of dominant discourses. What you are aiming at is not just an anti-hegemonic politics, or a practice of re-signification and the production of counter-representations. Or is it possible to link such a practice with your stress on the necessity of a kind of a productive breaking up, of a becoming that produces new lines of sociality, speech, communication... - of a genuinely active social practice?

BH: Well, yes, the point is not to struggle for dominance, or to replace one hegemony with another. But I do think that the notion of domination, and therefore the corresponding notion that there could be anti-hegemonic formations, is really important. The difficult thing is regaining a way to say such things so that they have an effective meaning. I have recently been reading some work which takes up the problematic of a transnational capitalist class. If this were successfully analysed, we would be in a much better position to see what kinds of transformations we are involved in, in terms of practice, in terms of institutionalisation, in terms of the relationship to markets, and therefore ultimately in terms of the way that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are configured. If we had a better understanding of how to describe the mechanisms of domination by a transnational capitalist class, we would have much better ideas of how to reshape our practices, of how to use what we produce. The whole issue of domination has effectively been lost since post-modernism shifted all attention to the infinity of individual difference. So the question is: how to make it an issue again, without falling back into a simplistic language that doesn’t pertain to any specific relationship in society?

RL: We have indeed to think in terms of dominance, but at the same time to rethink the practice of domination: we cannot just think it in terms of a simple antagonism between rulers and ruled. Yet, what seems also implied by your recent writings on art as a device for collective speech or a social laboratory, is that collective speech is not just synonymous with communication or discourse in the ongoing sense, but is immanently linked to desire and the sensible.

BH: Of course! This has been the great thing that marked the switch between the disciplinary form of capitalist production, or the Fordist social organisation that we knew in the mid-twentieth century, and the conditions that have been developing over the past twenty years. There is a clear recognition all throughout the contemporary western societies of the importance of the aesthetic and the affective in organising people, in the way that people's everyday lives unfold. Artists and critics often think they are discovering this, but it is the very condition under which the hyper-differentiated social world has been evolving since the 1980s. So one must be conscious that all complex forms of cooperation contain an aesthetic and affective dimension which decisively orients how those projects are going to unfold. That's why I think the interesting art or aesthetic projects are somewhere between a theatre and a laboratory. A theatre, because this evokes both an aesthetic side and the intersubjective side, with the reflexivity that the processes of staging bring about. A laboratory, because that evokes the technoscientific side that is determinant for all the conditions in everyday life, which is now so highly artificialised. Everyday life always unfolds in relation to complex machines, and these machines are always evolving through the capitalist process of technoscience, that is, through the production and dissemination of technical objects in the workplace, in government and on the consumer markets. We should be much more conscious of this double relation between the ethical-aesthetic forms of our intersubjective worlds, and their connection to the specific toolkits of contemporary technoscience. That's where some quite fascinating experimentation can take place, which potentially gives rise to the creation of a new critical distance, even to a new political antagonism, with respect to the more-or-less regular process of increasingly disastrous social development that we are all embroiled in...

RL: What would you consider to be a good example or a practice illustrating these ideas?

BH: Well I think there are many... One could start with something that's obviously a social machine, which is the EuroMayday project. It's quite a complex device for the articulation of public speech, and it's now being carried out at the level of the European Union, with projects unfolding in twenty cities at once. Projects which are at once discursive, aesthetic, organisational... and which engage the sensibility of everyone involved, on the basis of an antagonism that does all that it can to not become sterile, univocal or ideological. So you have carnivalesque parades which are conceived as vehicles of an analysis of flexible labour conditions, and more broadly, of the precariousness of social life under the current form of transnational capitalism that confronts us everyday both as consumers and as producers, as reproducers of our selves, whenever we try to unfold the consequences of living beyond the next short-term contract. The EuroMayday activists try to analyse that situation, but they also try to create forms of sociability that will allow this sort of analysis to have a deeper currency in everyday life than can be gained from just simply reading an article in a newspaper or a book. This analysis might somehow resemble an intellectual's former idea of a policy paper, but policy papers don't seem to have any effect anymore, not if they come from the Left anyway... The way to operate as a critical intellectual now seems to be through the stimulation of, and participation in, social movements, where as an intellectual your discursive contribution is neither more or less important than aesthetic contributions which can come from the domains of music, of dance, or of the staging of events in urban

space. All these things come together in what I think is a very complex machine because of the number of people that cooperate on it, and also because of the relatively subtle nature of what is being dealt with. We are talking about trying to analyse something like the human ecology of this ultra-fast, rapidly mutating manifold of productive relations that usually keep people preoccupied with just keeping abreast of the changes which are happening every day. And that's the hardest thing to analyse, the hardest situation to transform. So that's why I prefer to start with an example like that.

RL: As you often stress yourself in your writings, from the point of view of the dominant art discourse a street parade wouldn't be considered art. So it makes indeed sense to name it an aesthetic practice. At the same time, it may be interesting to name these kinds of happenings genuine artistic events, not the least because of their evident link with the kind of activities that were organized within the by-now canonised avant-garde of the 1920's, or within the neo-avant-garde of the 1960's.

BH: This is basically what I have done in all of the essays that I've gathered into a forthcoming book, called *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*. It's the basic proposal of the book: to see how the avant-garde experiments at bringing concentrated aesthetic forms over into everyday life have actually functioned in our time, when people use them as catalysts of social processes rather than just contemplating them as heroic culminations of a singular creative adventure. In this respect, we live in a time of post-vanguard experiments, because this capacity to use aesthetic resources, to catalyse and qualify social processes, is now something very widespread and no longer the specialised contribution of artists. We see these sorts of processes happening around free software, for example, with quite important results. But we still don't have a very strong way of lending value to these processes, despite the extraordinary work of people from Cage to Guattari. If you are coming from an art perspective, you can compare that to conceptual art, to performance art, video art, mail art and so forth, as I've tried to do, in hopes of finally dissolving the distinctions and arriving at socially active forms of processual creativity. Now I'd like to consider that territory to have been gained, and move on to some more complex problems within the field of post-vanguard social experimentation.

RL: Okay, but you also stress again and again that these social laboratories should have a clear political edge and are not just a feast or a neo-dadaist happening. So it seems as if you take up a line which is Deleuzian, but supplement it with a line that is overtly political.

BH: There are unfortunately a lot of really virtuoso uses of Deleuze, which I think fit very well into the general semiotic mill of cognitive capitalism. But the most interesting forms of process art have always left open this relation to the political. It's maybe something essential, because it's hard to abstract the transformation of one's aesthetic relations from the transformation of one's relations with other human beings, and therefore, it's hard to abstract artistic experience from actual social conditions. In our society, those conditions are marked by unstated, covered-up class hierarchies and also by ecological problems, problems of our mental ecology. How tightly we are hemmed in by the forms of normalisation that Guattari called overcoding, by the ways of integrating our sensible and expressive capacities back into a very tightly articulated production machine... So the political is always inherent to process art, as opposed to framed

artworks which do achieve some degree of abstraction from society. If you look at an artist like John Cage, who did his best to avoid ideology of any stripe, you will see that all of his work was quite political, because it brought out the limitations of contemporary social relations. Of course, the things I'm involved with are much more explicitly political, because I think there is a received good taste in the art world that is always going to prefer the deliberately non-ideological character of the work of somebody like Cage, to the point where that preference or judgement of taste becomes a new way of recreating the separation of art and life. Museum catalogues are full of clean formalised interpretations of process art, insisting on the criteria that make for a specifically artistic work. I don't think that's really the point...

RL: Let me go back to the notion of the post-vanguard and its relation to politics... If I would play a little bit the devil's advocate, I would say that *you* as a critic takes up for instance the EuroMaydays and other forms of collective activities in terms of a possible articulation of collective speech, thus putting them in a vanguard role.

BH: What I'm trying to get at by talking about post-vanguard art is the real meaning of the ambition for art to go beyond itself, with which the word vanguard is historically associated. I see this self-overcoming, not in the usual anarchist way as the abolition of representation, but instead as a kind of rhythmically recurrent process. I don't think that representation as such is durably overcome, but rather it points beyond itself, or outside the limits that it creates between the representation and the person or thing that is represented. And so you have a process-work, which is able to catalyse or stimulate the unfolding of experiences by interjecting certain kinds of self-overcoming representations. If you like, this is the very process of representation: the way in which the interaction of people's diverse expressions continually changes the coordinates, and even the logic, on which their initial dynamic was predicated. And so when I talk about the articulation of "speech" I really mean expression, which is broader than semantics or discourse and which involves the body, the direct expression of bodily intensities, as well as all the complex and concentrated works of which we are capable. Now, when such processes of expression are political, then they engage another meaning of the word vanguard, which has to do with the leading edge of a struggle. In the word, it is presumed that the "van" has an army behind it; and this is not exactly always the case, perhaps it is only a virtual army... The two meanings were conflated in the 1920's and have left quite a durable mark on our vocabulary. And yet they often seem to confuse the issue.

RL: I'll try another phrasing of the question... If we speak of a vanguard, certainly in the political sense, there is a kind of utopian dimension implied. There may be a real army or network behind you, but the decisive point of a vanguard is that it is referring to structural possibilities opened up within capitalism at a very precise historical moment that point towards a new future. Your previous book is called *Hieroglyphs of the Future*, an expression inspired by Jacques Rancière which seems to imply that certain critical aesthetic practices do have this kind of finger-pointing 'futuristic' or utopian function.

BH: Yes, I do think that is true, I just resist the word vanguard because it is exactly what is specialisable by the status quo of the artistic institutions. Art is celebrated, in retrospect, as the finger that pointed ahead. But what's interesting is both to point the finger and follow where it leads. And where it leads is never to the future but always

towards an unfolding of the present that tends to dissolve the unity of the pointing finger into the more complex process of the realisation and concurrent transformation of a representation functioning as a catalyst. Just think of the effect of a gesture in the crowd. A gesture often has no effect whatsoever, but if it is perceived and taken up by people, its effect is then transformed and actually taken away from the person who made it. It becomes appropriated by the crowd in a complex way that has also to do with the sum total or disconnect of the wills and desires of the different people. I think this is true of all kinds of representations: even the highly complex ones that have been crystallised into works which you can spend an infinite amount of time interpreting are also elements that can be shared and transformed in a collective process. This is really what Felix Guattari understood very well in this whole attempt at a cartography of the relations between people when they are engaged in some kind of self-transforming process. I like very much the place he assigns to art, which is not a place on a wall or in a book, but in our mnemonic experience. Guattari understands works of all kinds – musical, visual, literary, poetic and so on – as recurring refrains, as fragments of a sensible experience that can't be totalised or stopped or pinned down as a work. Seemingly static works have their effects as motivators, catalysers, unleasers, which only exist as such within our experience. Works exist beyond themselves, in ways which the author and the authorised interpretations do not control. Guattari's description adds a better understanding of what it means for art to become life. It doesn't mean that the art disappears, but it means that what we do with art is to make it into part of the cartography, of the set of the coordinates – at once ethical, aesthetic, discursive or even rational – that we share with others, in the attempt to configure a recognisable process that we co-direct and use to create events. That is to say: to create new gestures, new fingers, new hieroglyphs if you will, that suggest the possibility of yet other groups or other articulations of a dynamic or a continuing process. Of course, this is more a general anthropology of art in society than it is a specialist 'reading of and ranking' of constituted works. The anthropological approach points to the influence of utopian representations in society. The use of the aesthetic by the complicated beings that we are should really be the focus of our institutions, not the attribution of exclusive genealogies and hierarchical values to specific authors and works.

RL: Perhaps one can speak then of the social uses of a singular art work in terms of its potentiality to construct, sustain, elicit... a social world.

BH: Yes, and even though an art work never creates a social world all on its own, still its use values can have many lives... Take a novel like *Don Quixote*, or closer to us, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: these are not just mirrors of an individual artistic genius, but dialogic records of multiple voices, formalised as an orchestration of refrains to be appropriated by each of the readers. This is what Cervantes did explicitly: to orchestrate the popular *refranes* or folk sayings of sixteenth-century Spanish culture, as expressed by Sancho Panza. Cervantes wove those refrains into a very complex interweave of voices and discourses, whose fragments, observations or witty remarks are still recalled and re-used even today. Flaubert did the same, in a more critical way which establishes the reader's simultaneous distance from and implication in cultural clichés. I think that in contemporary times where machines are so important, a performative device, for example, an art installation or a self-reflexive piece of interaction design, is able to make a lot of material available for the experience of this sort of recurrence of fragmentary elements, which are put

together into a field of possibility for groups of people who might like to re-use such objects, to appropriate them...

RL: In your writings, you often stress that what happens in art institutions in the form of exhibitions, or whatever kind of presentation, can only acquire some importance when it is linked to an 'outside', to a social movement. Do you still stick to that position in the light of what we have just discussed?

BH: Of course. The contemporary art institution tends to articulate the conversation and mobility of a certain kind of people – the kind one meets at openings and museum cafes. Contemporary aesthetic production comprises what the Italian autonomists call the classical forms of immaterial labour, which are fashion, photography, audio-visual production, music, ambiance production, interaction design and so on. The people whom you find at museums work in these sectors. They create the aesthetic environments which we purchase, with our euros or our votes. If I were trying to make a living by writing articles in a style magazine – which of course I am, to a certain extent – I would go to museum openings both to see the art and to see the people seeing the art, and to talk with them about what sort of inventions they are taking out into other circuits and other cities. So we have these institutions which are producing massive effects, but quite normalised ones, where the possibility of inserting oneself into a market is really the determining factor. One's individual tastes, desires, aspirations and so on, reach up to fill the range of possibilities that are offered for insertion into a market. Personally I feel constricted in that futile circuit, I get bored at museum openings. Participation in a social movement is one way to achieve distance, to seek other effects. For instance, the effect of regaining some institutional space for non-market oriented research and elaboration, and therefore, for the creation of culture which is not encompassed within the productive circuit of the classic immaterial professions. I think that's vastly important. The more the neoliberalisation of the universities progresses, the more it stresses the individual quest for intellectual property over the creation of public knowledge, the more the entire apparatus that our societies have developed for reflecting on themselves becomes actually incapable of even perceiving the basic coordinates that determine its orientation. This is the capacity we have been losing, as cultural and scientific institutions are broken down into modules that can only ensure their continued activity by marketing their results. I think it's a real problem...

RL: Am I right when I say that your position towards arts institutions that do offer alternative niches is highly ambiguous? For you say that on the one hand, we need these institutions and niches, we have to fight for a place within them, we have to put them under pressure so that we can have an access to them on our own terms; and on the other hand, you sometimes suggest that the fight is not of that much importance: let's stick to the alternatives, such as viable social networks, critical spaces in the Internet, social movements and their own institutions...

BH: In my experience, what seems to produce results is basically something like the occupation of institutions, in the same way as you squat a building that's being kept out of the circuit of use values by the speculative interests of its owners. A building lies vacant because the owner expects to turn a profit a few years later when the real estate values are higher: one breaks the door and starts to use it illegally, illegitimately. In fact,

it seems today the orientation of most social institutions is such that what's really productive in a democratic or utopian sense is usually against the rules. I just had an experience like that the day before yesterday at the so-called 'Free Class' of one of the state universities in Copenhagen, which is being conducted by an artist who is also involved in what is called the Copenhagen Free University. The Free Class was able to generate one of the most interesting debates I have been in recently, around the issues of the use of the aesthetics, the 'what for?' of aesthetic invention and experimentation today. And that kind of debate typically takes place in a zone of real struggle with the institutional norms. I don't expect that contemporary institutions are going to become self-reflective because an inspired director arrives who is going to transform the Pompidou Centre into a museum that actually corresponds to the utopia of an egalitarian society – I just don't see it happening. What I see happening is this creation of tension and struggles within institutions, through relations with an outside. The value of social movements lies in their excess over the normalised and channelled structures that institutions offer. But that kind of position is easily romanticised. Also, social movements are very much subject to the ebb and flow of their conditions of possibility. There is a lot of latency in between the peaks of social movements. One also has to have other arenas of action in society. So your observation is right, my attitude is ambiguous.

RL: There is one possibility that you don't seem to explore – and maybe you have a good reason for not doing so. You say that the core public of the circuit for contemporary art consists of immaterial labourers, such as designers, people working within the advertisement and the so-called culture industries. What is absent in most of the existing analyses of immaterial labour is the possibility of forms of resistance, of a counter-productivity within the realms of fashion, popular music, audio visual production... Yet, I do observe counter-practices. Which raises the question if you envisage the possibility of building up transversal links between artistic or aesthetic counter-practices and alternative 'ways of doing' within the just mentioned fields, besides links with social movements as such?

BH: I do see that possibility, though not from the 'ways of doing' perspective that was introduced by Michel De Certeau and taken up by the Cultural Studies analysts, whose main concern was to affirm the possibilities of difference in a homogenizing society. I'm more interested in the possibilities of resistance in a differentializing society. If you take an example like EuroMayday, it is actually made by the classic immaterial professions, the ones working on the production of consciousness and on what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the cultural content of the commodity. It is when such people go outside their market-oriented role and begin to produce questions of value for different kinds of publics or users, that you get these sorts of experimental machines which are not just reform movements arising out of an almost mechanical socio-economic necessity. The process has been described quite well by Lazzarato in his last book, *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme*, which is inspired by the experience of the "intermittents du spectacle" in France, who work on a temporary project basis within the world of the cinema and the performing arts. To be sure, the "intermittents" would not have achieved this articulation if they hadn't been the objects of a specific form of social violence, which was the attempt to throw at least a third of them out of a relatively favourable unemployment regime. That's the departure point from which they began to conceive of addressing of what is actually a much wider problem in society, namely the question of social

protection under a regime of flexible labour. The “intermittents” really prefigured and explored the dimensions of a coming social crisis on a national level. I should add that the movement couldn’t have happened and sustained itself over a period of three years without the input of different kinds of intellectuals, artists, and also of other social movements. So this is a very interesting and innovative kind of experiment in the use of the different capacities of the immaterial professions as political means. That teaches us something that was absent from the former interpretations of the political dimension of cultural production.

RL: But could you imagine that your writing practice would not be embedded in a very ambivalent way within the contemporary art world, but in for instance the music or fashion scene?

BH: But of course – cultural critique has been done in those realms by many people. However, fashion is a very tough nut to crack; it’s very deeply embedded in the marketing of subjectivity and has a strong hold on people’s hearts and minds. Subversive fashion is quite difficult to generate as such, but then again fashion is also part of the whole articulation of desire through music, and that environment is a little more malleable. Music clearly constituted a kind of danger in the 1960’s when it was explicitly politicised, but it has received a lot of attention from managers after the emergence of pop-cultural markets. Since then we have seen a whole spectrum of failed attempts to use music as a mass distribution medium of subversive ideas, attempts which have been actively encouraged by capitalist enterprises for their own profit, to the point where pop music has become one of the motors of cognitive capitalism. Given the panoply of co-optation techniques, intellectual analysis becomes very important for any kind of cultural activism. It must include a way whereby the people involved can predict the moves that will attempt to reintegrate them to a market-based, career-oriented practice. So the story you tell yourself about the meaning of what you are doing has to be a bit complex, because it involves an analysis of the very economy in which we live, and of the way this economy becomes productive of our most intimate subjectivity. That’s why I think that the nexus between art, communication technologies and social movements has been the most interesting place to work since the emergence of the Internet. I guess you could say art or fashion or music or cinema. You could come at it from any one of those points, many people do – and sometimes it works. Maybe art has been particularly productive because of the role of aesthetic objects and processes in social movements. Music has been less productive because the techniques for bringing music back into that normalised form of social practice are so strong...

RL: Although you can give examples like...

BH: ...like the diversion of techno music into political practice, which was fundamental for the antiglobalization movement. It took a real effort and, of course, the main destiny of techno music was still the creation of these all-night clubs that you find all over Europe, where you take ecstasy and dance to a star DJ. Nonetheless, techno made possible the whole form of the performative carnivalesque demonstration, as soon as it was associated with an intellectual analysis of society in general and the economy in particular – and as soon as it was repressed by the police!

RL: Okay, we agree that we cannot stick to an Adorno-like position and say that art as an autonomous sphere of communication can claim a privileged cultural and political role vis-à-vis popular cultural forms. Still, there are differences... Art archives its own history quite well – there are institutions for it –, which also means that it archives again and again spurs of its own past to which you may come back in critical practice. Also, in comparison with other forms of immaterial labour or aesthetic production, art is highly self-reflexive and has a tradition of critical thinking that is incorporated in the making of singular works.

BH: But you also have strong sub-cultural practices, for instance in music, that have gotten a lot better with archiving and reflectivity. Vanguard art has probably been the model for all of those, which is another good reason to no longer restrict oneself to a fixation on its vanguard aspect. We must rather see how these models have spread and reinforced each other mutually in their attempt to keep each other alive in the face of integration to market-oriented practices or, conversely, to specialised production for national and, increasingly, transnational institutions, precisely the ones that neutralize and ossify the history of the so-called vanguards. I think that all of my work tries to contribute to the vitality of an outside, which could in theory be called civil society – if civil society were allowed to exist. But despite all the talk about civil society, everything possible is done to make sure that there is no outside position from which one could exert any kind of social reflexivity. In that respect, the complaints about a totally administrated society simply need to be updated and made more sophisticated, at the same time as one removes the totalising gloom that was associated with the Frankfurt school. The work of Foucault and then Deleuze, with the idea that resistance is primary, has given us a way to get out of that totalising analysis. It's a good theoretical standpoint from which to begin, but you have to take the resistance seriously, and few people do. I find myself confronted with the frustration of aesthetic crap and spineless administration all the time, but there are also a lot of people who share those feelings and seek their fulfilment elsewhere. And that has given rise to an increasingly rich field of experimentation and critique in contemporary societies.

RL: There is one institution or institutional context that you don't mention often, although it is a very important one for the reproduction of the arts regime or system. I'm referring to the domain of arts education, in which a certain reflexivity and criticality is made visible and active, but also institutionalised...

BH: Yes, that's true... I always talk about the gallery-magazine-museum system, but art schools are equally important. I have had such... how would you say... depressing experiences in art schools, which seem to be afflicted with such a deep paralysis, that recently I have been wondering if it results from the gap between the student's ambitions to do something that really satisfies their desire for experimentation, and the knowledge that every gesture, no matter how experimental, ultimately takes place in the hierarchical context of the star-system and the transnational marketplace. That's the only explanation I can find for this extraordinary passivity and paralysis. In France it's particularly bad, because the state puts so much money into managing culture in order to neutralise the disruptive potential that had existed all the way up through the 1970's. Ironically it was the socialists who created a whole new range of art institutions which, from my viewpoint, have become a massive capture device, a way of stifling collective speech. It

leaves the students not knowing where to turn, especially given that despite the huge inflation of institutions, there is still far from enough money to go around. The art market is quite weakly developed in France and there isn't much chance of just striking out on your own, so the student can only look forward to satisfying an institutional Mom and Pop who will say what is good, what's in good taste and what's not. The picture doesn't seem to be as uniform in the rest of Europe... And it is also true that in the United States, the universities remain one of the only sites where much dissident and curious artistic practice can be developed. My recent work is directly concerned with the university. No doubt education is one of the places where you can do something, but there are real problems (*laughs*)...Don't you think?

RL: Yes, there are real problems, also in the academic world since neo-liberalism has taken over. In universities, it has become very difficult to sustain a niche in which you can have, over a longer period of time, something like... I wouldn't say an articulation of collective speech, but the possibility of collective thinking and intellectual dialogue. My experiences within art schools are mixed. I regularly teach in a school for contemporary dance, which is a strikingly collaborative discipline that to a certain extent lacks the individualistic ethic that predominates in the fine arts world and most fine art schools. Students rapidly start to collaborate on an informal basis, within and outside the official school hours, and the collaboration involves a whole range of intellectual, bodily and sensual experiences. Of course, it all happens within a kind of cocoon context. Nevertheless, I do see chances within art schools to work on the articulation of collective speech forms and develop on a temporary basis collective expressive practices.

BH: Maybe these things have to be investigated a lot more, because actually, experimentation in society is difficult. You have to make an effort, you have to engage in a kind of extraordinary behaviour to make something happen. And if you are as convinced as I am that culture needs to take on a political dimension, a dimension of political antagonism, then this difficulty of doing something, this need for a risk taking form of resistance becomes somehow obvious and apparent. But I would say that it doesn't exactly seem to be the common sense of our time... (*more laughter*)

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