

Le Merle

in Re: Proposal (2012)
Artistic

Mon merle a perdu sa tête.
Oh! Mon merle a perdu sa tête. Oh!
Une tête, deux têtes, trois têtes,
Un oeil, deux yeux, trois yeux,
Un bec, deux bec, trois becs, Marlo
Comment veux-tu ...

It's the same fuckers who moved to the area because they were excited about how full of culture it was that priced and bored me out of it. They were happy to learn that I was a local, but could barely contain their excitement when

they met others less tanned and more culturally unique to La Métropole. By La Métropole, of course, I mean Quebec. The symbol of a once backward European outpost. I am a Montrealer. I'm getting used to marketing this city. But nobody is paying my ass. And I'm one of the lucky ones, because some people, many people, are downright useless to these culture vultures, whereas at least I give the place a certain *cachet*. Because of me, it doesn't look like some forgotten Scandinavian town where they used to assemble Volvos. I could go on and on.

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Re: Proposal - Our Montreal: Cutting Edge Visions
for the Future of the Cultural Metropolis
To: annie.billington@culturemontreal.ca
From: coupla immigrantz
Date: Fri, 31 Aug 2012 16:37:08

FORMAT

Proposal presentation:

Summary of approximately ten lines, in English or
in French.

Presentation of the final text:

- 500 to 2,000 words (about 1 to 4 pages)
- The text must be original and unpublished.
- The text can be written in French or in English.
- The text can be accompanied by a visual component illustrating the project, if desired.

Title: **La culture doit se rapprocher
provient des gens**

Summary of approximately ten lines: Nope.

It's the same fuckers who moved to the area because they were excited about how full of culture it was that priced and bored me out of it. They were happy to learn that I was a local, but could barely contain their excitement when they met others less tanned and more culturally unique to *La Métropole*. By *La Métropole*, of course, it is understood to be that of Quebec. The symbol of a once backward European outpost. I am a Montrealer. I'm getting used to marketing this city. But nobody is paying my ass. And I'm one of the lucky ones, because some people, many people, are downright useless to these culture vultures, whereas at least I give the place a certain *cachet*. Because of me, it doesn't look like some for-

gotten Scandinavian town where they used to assemble Volvos. I could go on and on.

Indeed, Montreal is a piece of shit city like any other city, and anyone who says otherwise has something to gain from their loyalty to Montreal, as the "Cultural Metropolis" that politicians, business leaders, and their jesters, are pushing, particularly through a 10-year "Action Plan" to develop and maintain the status of "Montreal" as a "21st century cultural metropolis that prioritizes creativity, originality and diversity."

The term "Métropole" in Quebec is etymologically bourgeois-nationalist. It fits the interests of those who need to reconcile capital (mainly from Montreal) and votes (mainly from the rest of Quebec). The context having changed, Montreal no longer promises to be a megapolis, and concerns about Quebec and Montreal's competitiveness in increasingly integrated markets has shifted to finding an Edge for Montreal. And what better to sell than that which was for the longest time a premise of exclusion: culture. Of course, everyone has culture, but not everyone has culture that can be sold.

The timing is a little bit off, since homogenisation and conformism have eaten away at us like everyone else, but we had a freebie: French. Applause! How marvelous and special that we can speak a language. One spoken, no less, by only hundreds of millions of people in the world. And, low and behold, a latin language. French is now the angle used to develop an industry or a set of niche markets around the arts and whatever else (design, research, networking, experimentation in high-tech interactive media, live entertainment, systems analysis, urban ecology,

transit systems, marketing). If enough of us didn't speak French here (and it doesn't really matter what we say as long as it's with a smile), then Culture Montreal would not be such an important element of Quebec's economic development strategy. The bosses would have found something else to sell.

Of course, the focus on "culture" on the part of our elites itself acts to bestow credit upon the city as culturally dynamic and loving of art. A liberal heaven. Add a pinch of rooftop gardening and ecological transport and you've got an omelette that tech-boomers would fly across America for. Or drop the transport and add a little street culture for a retro feel. The possibilities are endless. The key is to hit a reliable, well-endowed, and loyal market. But for good measure, the *Quartier des spectacles* will keep us afloat, or at least keep up our (the performers) morale. One thing's for sure, we're not talking about artistic activity that is not, err, good, you know, as in *spectacular* (except the odd curiosity, of course). No, that's not what we're talking about here. We want Montreal to shine, "rayonner" (that good old colonial language again); its art shines beacons of light across the globe, shock and awe (figuratively speaking - after all, we want to attract money, err, people, money people, people money). Amazing lights and music with an edge.

But what is this "edge"? The bosses, their minions, aspiring artists - many of whom, saps, are our friends - are all trying to hit this one on the nail. It's a fucking gold rush. Hence Culture Montréal's call for proposals that are "unique, innovative and straight-out [I would hope so!] spectacular." The only rule of thumb is to be bold... I'll spare you

the exclamation. Here's my proposal: suck a duck. During the F1 weekend, I was moved (literally, that is) when I saw the riot cops escort the VIPs in and out of *L'Arsenal*, Montreal's new "art complex" that aims to "serve contemporary art by gathering new audiences in a space committed to its appreciation." You don't say. In the middle of a soon-to-be-once-working class, immigrant neighborhood, of course. If we're looking for what is "hidden in the subconscious of the city" in order to gorge on the precarious labour that now has to also come up with brilliant ideas for "the future of the cultural metropolis," I'd suggest we start here. Although it's going to take a really good psychoanalyst for this one. Death drive. There, I said it. Smile and wave to the kids as you run.

On Indirect Action: Twitter, Protest and Presence

Kirsty Robertson

What does it mean to participate in a protest from afar? In the past, I've argued, quite strongly, that a protest is only an event in the moment, that its importance resides *within* those participating, for its recording somehow diminishes its

presence and vitality, leaving it open to easy misinterpretation, dissection, repurposing and, most often, vigorous dismissal. It has also always seemed to me that underlying the trenchant and lengthy debates within activist movements over the use of direct action, is a disagreement over how to experience the moment of protest. Though such debates often characterize themselves as being about drawing attention to issues: how best to intervene in systems of power without replicating them and so on, what seems equally important to all sides is how to be there, to actually be there, in front of the police, or at the site, or in front of the cameras, and what to do with one's body in that time and space.

I'm glossing and parsing here, because obviously there's more to it – there's more to building a movement than the visible flowerings of protest from the roots of long months of organization. But it is still these moments, these outbursts, that draw media attention, although increasingly this is not the case (one need look at the mainstream media silence at the start of Occupy Wall Street). Sometimes I think, though, that we've overstated the importance of the media; that it doesn't really matter what is or is not covered in the press. One of the things that certainly came out of the Maple Spring was the cross-generational, cross-class reports of unfettered joy at having been a part of the march on May 22nd or the Casseroles, at having gathered and walked with others and danced and made noise together through the streets. Though a number of short films tried to capture the specialness of these moments, that specialness was obvious but could not be shared with those of us who weren't there. Nevertheless, the sense of community and possibility that came out of those actions was arguably much more important than the way the intervention of the clanging pots and pans echoed across mainstream and social media. And if the actions could be dismissed or criticized for not having halted Bill 78, perhaps that's

just a way of missing the point – that something altogether important and potentially more lasting happened in those moments.

Back to my original point: what does it mean to participate in a protest from afar? I wanted to be in Montreal. I wanted to support students and be a part of the actions in the Spring of 2012.¹ But I wasn't and I couldn't, and while I did what I could in my hometown, this paper is really about whether that "altogether more important" moment can stretch out of the geographically bounded space of the actual action. For the 1500 words of this thought piece I'm actually largely setting aside the issues, about access to education and the right to organize, which have and should have resonance in all other provinces and beyond Canadian borders. They deserve their own analysis, and I'm using these few words to get at the more ephemeral (but hopefully lasting) links that were built when people took to the streets. I wonder if it is possible to be a part of that celebratory resistance from afar.

There has been a lot written lately about the importance (or lack thereof) of social media to activist movements. One of the most oft quoted articles is Malcolm Gladwell's takedown of Internet "slacktivism" in the *New Yorker*. Gladwell starts with a description of the February 1960 sit-in, by four black students, of the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. He writes about how the protest spread, drawing hundreds to the sit-in and resulting in numerous copycat actions across the southern United States, despite threats of violence and persecution. But now, he suggests, we are to believe that "the new tools of social media have reinvented social activism. With Facebook and Twitter and the like, the traditional relationship between political authority and popular will has been upended, making it easier for

1 I should note that I lived in Montreal from 2001–2007 and participated in numerous actions and protests in my time there, including the 2005 student protests.

the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns.”² Gladwell is not positive about this change. Though he explores the role of Twitter in protests against the Communist government of Moldova, of social media in protests in Iran, and suggestions of new forms of activism made possible by the instant spread of social media, “Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools,” he writes.³ Gladwell was writing before Tahrir Square – before the Arab Spring, surely the epitome of a social-media led revolution. Perhaps his opinion has since changed, but his points are worth analyzing nonetheless. Gladwell contrasts the strong ties of activist movements – of friends and family members also willing to put their bodies on the line – with what he calls the weak ties of social media activism. While social media is good for distributing information about activist causes, “weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism.”⁴ Gladwell also argues that the networked dispersion and weak ties of online activism demand low commitment and little sacrifice. While I’m less inclined to accept his point that successful activist movements tend to be organized hierarchically (the alter-globalization movement clearly showed the opposite), his point that a million likes on Facebook does not equal a movement, or even an intervention, is a pointed one.⁵

Nevertheless, what Gladwell is talking about is the organization of a movement, and its consequent publicization or spread. The passing-on of a cause by liking it

2 Malcolm Gladwell. “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted.” *New Yorker* October 4, 2010. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell

3 See, in the same article, Gladwell’s critique of the very idea that actions in Moldova and Iran were brought about by Twitter and blogging.

4 Ibid.

5 Gladwell was also writing long before the whole Kony fiasco. Nevertheless, the fallout of the Stop Kony campaign did seem to beautifully illustrate his points with regard to the limits of online social movements.

on Facebook, posting articles and write-ups and so on, is different from watching it unfold in real time: something that did happen on social media in Tahrir Square, and later with Occupy and the student and Bill 78 protests in Quebec. What I'm thinking of is somewhat different even from live press coverage, which tends to frame protest from the vantage point of a single camera and is often guided by or accompanied with commentary. Rather, what I'm referring to is the Twitter feed – multiple comments and perspectives, video clips, sound bites, and pictures all rolled into a constantly moving scroll of information and images across the screen. This is how I experienced the May 22nd protests in Montreal, and this is, I suggest, a new and potentially active form of engagement, despite the apparent passivity of watching action unfold from a distance. I suggest this tentatively and with some qualms. However, if what is important about a protest is the actions that it may encourage in the aftermath – the slow forms of organization and everyday decisions that make a movement – then yes, I do think that the protest can, through social media, have an impact beyond its bounded geography.

Both performance theorist Richard Schechner and activist John Jordan contend that the geographic layout⁶ of the protest/carnival/festival sets it apart from official entertainment. While official festivals are arranged in

6 According to Tim Jordan, protest is composed of an instantly recognizable performative ritual. "The scenes are familiar. Crowds of people are waving placards, chanting, taking over streets normally dominated by cars. The mass of wandering people are differentiated by banners, flags, sounds and dress. They are nearly always accompanied, if not surrounded, by police who march at the front and sides and can often be seen waiting, in groups, in side streets. If we cut to a related set of familiar images, we see a motley collection of young (mainly) men throwing bottles, hurling tear-gas canisters and yelling in a state of turmoil; they are confronted by black- and blue- uniformed, frequently armed police charging and retreating, carrying some of the motley crew off to waiting vans. There are other images that we have seen time and again: small boats with flags dodging around large tankers, great crowds of cross-dressing men and women celebrating their pride. Someone is dragged from up a tree or down a tunnel; someone knocks on the door and hands in a petition...." (Tim Jordan. *Activism! Direct Action, Hactivism and the Future of Society*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002, p. 8).

straight lines and rectangles (for example, military or civilian parades), the street protest is “vortexed, whirling; people dance on anything, climb lampposts, move in every direction: an uncontrollable state of creative chaos. The street party breaks a cultural obsession with linearity, order and tidiness, epitomised by roads and cars...”.⁷ Schechner argues that since the Middle Ages, carnivals, through their reclamation of public space and parodic reversal of systems of power, have playfully and blasphemously exposed official culture’s “claims to authority, stability, sobriety, immutability, and immortality”.⁸

On February 13, 2012, Quebec students voted in favour of a general strike to draw attention to the provincial government’s refusal to listen to student demands. While the media tended to boil the strike down to a proposed tuition increase, the issues were actually much more complicated and tied up with larger questions of austerity, neoliberalism and Quebec culture.⁹ Through the Spring of 2012 the strike grew, occasionally joining with groups active against other (often connected) issues (for example climate change). Finally, in May 2012 the “emergency” Bill 78 was passed, granting draconian rights to police bodies, criminalizing and effectively prohibiting protest. Student groups and their supporters called for an action on May 22 in opposition to the Bill, but refused to reveal the march route (thus rendering it “illegal” under the new legislation).

May 22nd came. At the start of the day I remember feeling unsure that anyone would turn up. For days, threats of violence and arrest had been growing. The

7 John Jordan. “The Art of Necessity: the Subversive Imagination of Anti-Road Protest and Reclaim the Streets.” In *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*. George McKay, ed. London and New York: Verso, 1998, p. 142; Richard Schechner. *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 46.

8 Schechner 1993, 46–48.

9 See the special issue of *Theory and Event* 15.3 (2012) on the Maple Spring.

powers of Bill 78 suggested that anyone attending the “illegal” march could be arrested, tear-gassed or beaten with immunity. Protesters who had greeted the passage of the Bill into law on May 18, 2012 had faced rubber bullets, tear gas and arrests.¹⁰ Comments on (largely unsympathetic) coverage in the English language media seemed almost entirely hostile. But a few people came. And then more. Thousands of them. Tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands filled the streets in costume, wearing masks (which had been declared illegal), singing and marching.

Some thousand kilometers away, I turned on the computer and opened two screens, one the CUTV (Concordia Television) site, which had been providing coverage of the ongoing student strike and which included a twitter feed on the action, the second Storify.com, the Global News twitter feed and site, which provided a much lighter, primarily English language feed. Tweets poured in, hopeful as participants counted the growing numbers and then celebratory as a photo from the roof of a nearby building was circulated, showing a bird’s eye view of the growing crowd. Videos were posted (though as the day progressed and communications systems were overloaded, this became more difficult). At times the rush of posts was so fast it was impossible to keep up, but the action ebbed and flowed, reports poured in and were followed up, sound files were posted. In all, a fragmented image of the action appeared – samba bands here, a picture of masked faces there, the police lining the street here, hundreds of views of the enormous seemingly unending crowd marching up Rue Berri. It was muted, definitely, it was not like being there. But being a part (apart) of what was happening and not knowing what was coming gave a much more complete experience of the protest than what is suggested by Gladwell’s notion

10 Caley Sorochan. “The Quebec Student Strike: A Chronology.” *Theory and Event* 15.3 (2012), np.

of the weak ties of online activism. This is where I think his argument fades in that there are additional capabilities beyond merely pushing like buttons or shunting a cause on to the next person.

I don't think for a minute that *watching* a protest unfold online is akin to being there. Obviously an action wouldn't work if everyone were watching. But I do think that in that moment of overwhelming stimulus apparent particularly on the CUTV site, Schechner's vortexed and swirling crowd was mimicked in virtual space. What remained was a sense of dissatisfaction, a sense of restlessness. And in that restlessness is the impetus for the kind of political action that Gladwell argues is only made possible through strong ties – through family and friends, but here made possible in a post-geographic scenario, subtended by the weakest of weak ties.

Spokes bent, rim cracked, 22 May 2012, Montréal

Cecilia Chen

The driver revved his engine behind us, the tail end of a demonstration. I didn't turn around. But I did stop walking and stood my ground in the road, bicycle to the side. The driver steered the car forward and into me. He hit my bike first. The back tire

bent and collapsed beneath the hood of the car. Catharsis upon impact? There was yelling, but no bruising, no blood. No one word was memorable. Only the incoherence of road rage stays with me. But the gesture was articulate. Hostility has a definite shape. The road was wide. He could have steered around. The driver wanted to hit me. Not me, the person, but my modest incarnation of a protestor.

Since that day, I have heard of similar assaults by car. Protesters, on foot and armed with dissent, disrupt a public space usually occupied by vehicular traffic. Individuals, in metal and plastic carapaces, deliberately press their left foot to the gas pedal and advance into soft clothing-clad bodies from behind.

This has been done with some care as no one has yet died. Although, many have been injured. Too often, the instigators of this not-so-random violence then just drive away. What did they want others to understand?

I also know rage. It is distressingly blunt – a communication without nuance that denies conversation – political or otherwise. Protests, politics and spectacle all use (the threat and thrilling immediacy of) violence in their manipulations. Adjectives like “striking” and “stunning” are aesthetic metaphors of brute force. But, as long as I may, I refuse to hit and run. I’ll walk, write and speak – and stay to listen for a response. I’ll alter the ground by standing on it – an inarticulate gesture that nonetheless enables discussion – if my collocutors will also stay to engage.

For the Blackbird

Radical Education Research Collective (RERC)

I was thinking of you and of fulfilment of Heather Davis's invitation to contribute to *Le Merle*. I thought: 20 lines each for the publication.

It has been used before in times of writerly immobility, to force out sentences on days when one shies from or dreads the blank page or white screen. Let me offer too, as encouragement to an

overall structure for a collective Merle piece: a short passage from American poet and pedagogue Charles Bernstein: “Paratactical writing, thinking by association, is no less cogent than hypotactic exposition, with its demands that one thought be subordinated to the next.” In the example of 20 lines that I’m thinking of, by Harry Mathews, Mathews presents himself in the picture, and place (a country house in France), and the everyday. While writing it he, if I remember correctly, turns from the everyday rural thoughts to write on the singular death of his friend Italo Calvino (who, recall, Matthew Ghoulish quotes from in the Goat Island book – quick-ness, lightness, consistency, etc. – qualities for the next millennium, which is our present one). I wish I had a quote here about the personal and the universal, but let me just say that these 20 lines are a letter to you, as well as a description of some mid-summer, mid-August now, Collective feelings, with on one hand thoughts on our updates that began taking over the meetings, but also on my own obligations like syllabus building for my fall stint at the art college. Here are some thoughts: How do we write together? When something is coauthored, how it is coauthored usually remains mysterious. Should it remain mysterious to us? We’ve never written to each other before, so how will we do it for a public?

This is a brief record of our summer apart. I write this from my bicycle crossing the Glen Cedar footbridge, and from a handmade raft floating past the Island into Lake Ontario, from the unreality of an uptown basement. – It was from Stendhal: “Twenty lines a day, genius or not.”

* * *

Five days have passed since the twenty lines above were emailed to the group. Five days of virtual silence from the group in response. If anything has remained

consistent over the more than four years of our existence – besides our unflagging fascination with education and our determination to decorate every meeting with an array of snacks and treats – it is our erratic commitment to activities other than meetings. It is our lackadaisical handling of attachments. They do not get opened until the last minute. Or it takes a little while for us to get to them. Although we are eager to say, “Yes! Let’s do this writing piece!”, we are busy people. We are parents. We are teachers. We are scholars. We own homes. We are looking for work. We travel. We find it hard to get to those attachments.

I am nine lines in and not sure what to write next except that today I have been thinking a lot about change. What were we at the beginning? At the beginning we were a group of enthusiastic collaborative researchers. We took turns learning about various projects and schools (e.g. Deep Springs College, Black Mountain College, Sudbury School, the Edible Schoolyard, etc.) and presenting our research to the collective. At a certain point we felt the desire for our reading and talking to progress to the realm of creation, of “doing”, but were frustrated by our inability to do so. Why were we unable? What stopped us from making a school? Also, why are reading and talking not considered a form of doing? And can we, the group, be our own audience, the subjects of our experiments?

So, where are we now? Have we grown forwards/backwards? How would you draw our change over the years? Would it appear as a straight line bulging here and there? As a spiral continually extending outwards? A ball expanding and contracting? A series of holes?

* * *

A ball expanding and contracting is exactly how, when I forced myself to commit concisely to a single image, I

imagined the universe. It was my last year of high school. I thought it was necessary, or at the very least important, to have a visual representation of the universe I could wrap my head around in art class. Mrs. Jill Branham East brought tuna and crackers to class, for us students that got too little food at home, to concentrate. I pictured a sphere that was ever expanding, within it another that was ever shrinking, or collapsing, defying limitations of matter and thought. I pictured it a little like breathing, where simultaneity was possible if you looked long enough and it occurred to me the universe and I were perhaps related.

Mapping the movement of simultaneity became a means to enrich the dualisms and otherness which seemed to pepper my non-art classes that used mostly words – except math class, where I was lost save when we talked about triangles.

When we build projects that are universes unto themselves, some as humourous exercises, we posit that an idea, like a food, can be produced for nourishment or enjoyment, and play is a form of re-mystification; the idea collapses initially both upon itself then ripples outward becoming the stone that is lost, and next the wave – running nodes of interference and compounding interest. Simultaneous movements in and out are our collective thoughts, emerging and converging. A group effort to overcome the subordination of the next, since progress is really just packaging, and it's all right under our noses, the everyday a breath in the always.

* * *

Attachments are hard to open, it's true – or maybe you could say it's hard to open yourself to attachment. Somehow, through a few years of meeting, talking and eating, we have stayed attached to this idea of an educational collective, one that is somehow radical and somehow

oriented toward research. Why are we still attached to this form of being together, when we also occasionally berate ourselves for not really “doing” much of anything, including research? What is so radical about gathering to feast and give each other updates on our projects and our educational lives?

I know about a year ago I felt like quitting RERC – we had lost a few founding members to jobs and school abroad, and new members were just getting their feet wet. Toronto is a city of work, not of casual conviviality: even squeezing in a brunch every month or two starts to seem like a burdensome distraction from productivity. If we are trying to shake off our subordination to progress, or to explore a gentle anachronism – baked goods, slow thinking – we are also surely trying to carve out a space away from the imperative to produce. Staking out a place and time where we don’t have to produce much of anything feels a little decadent sometimes. It has that utopian shimmer: we claim the right to be lazy, to kick ideas around, to experiment together, to read something (or not), and see where our conversation ends up. And our conversation is generally a real pleasure.

Shared pleasure, conviviality, feasting, conversation: all of this might be radical, in the old sense of radix, getting to the root of things – in this case to the root of sociability and being-in-common. RERC might be a bit like the lowly radish, which shoots up some bitter greens and sends down a little exploratory root that might grow into something delicious. Or not. Still, I am attached to these conversations, these soundings, these little immersions in our collective everyday.

* * *

As I look back on this summer, which I have spent traveling in India, building a deck with my parents, getting married, and honeymooning in Europe, I think about

lessons learned by simply doing and being. Having the luxury of an extended mental vacation to allow thoughts to percolate in my brain, these ideas bubbled to the surface:

- 1 My window on the universe is a pinhole and I will never understand human nature or why human beings frustratingly perpetuate inequity so great that it cannot be comprehended.
- 2 Studs on a deck should be placed every 16" and deck boards should be cut in 4', 8' and 12' lengths.
- 3 Climbing a mountain is difficult, especially when carrying 40lbs on your back, but if you have a partner who is willing to go along with your crazy mountain-climbing, wild-camping inclinations, you're doing alright.
- 4 The best things in life are unnamed, found down twisted unmarked paths, and might take three times longer than expected to appreciate.

As others have mentioned, we are all busy people, living in a busy city. And while it would be wonderful for RERC to have some lofty goals of creating a school, organizing a conference, or even writing something on the topic of art, education, and protest, the real value in RERC is in:

- 1 The time spent sharing our discoveries in life and trying our best to expand our pinhole views of the universe.
- 2 Building things together (tangible or not), and understanding how they are built.

- 3 Having a group of seriously smart and creative friends willing to go along with crazy ideas, climbing mountains or otherwise.

- 4 Wandering down paths that might lead us nowhere or might lead us to a lunch of tuna and crackers (or in some cases, a delicious 4 hour long slow food lunch of tuna carpaccio, wild capers, pickled seaweed and smoked fish soup on the shore of the Adriatic).

That is to say, while we sit here pondering RERC and the future of our breakfast club, I believe that the best way forward is to stay the course, even if we don't have a compass and we have no idea where we are going and we still haven't opened that attachment.

* * *

In the course of searching for my tiny green notebook, taken to many RERC gatherings over the years, I found:

- Three tennis balls in unopened packaging
- One Saudi princess' cell phone number
- A RERC guest speaker's forgotten watch (I thought I returned that)
- A Panasonic cassette walkman
- High School II the documentary by Fredrick Wiseman still wrapped in original blue/grey present ribbon
- A VHS copy of *The Way Things Go* by Peter Fischli and David Weiss
- Pinup girl matches
- Lens cleaner

Green notebook found

First RERC meeting potential topics/areas of interest: free schools, memorization, Edible Schoolyard Project, slow school movement, unknown modernist schools, avant-garde poetry, experimental gallery education, Summerhill, mentorship, play/theatre, Arrow-smith, Debra Meiers, Sudbury Valley, sustainability of an alternative school model, open schools, “city as school” CUP, student/teacher relationship, educational theorists, neuroplasticity, adult education, theatre of the mind, Renaissance techniques of memorization, Black Mountain College, Deep Spring

Next meeting Saturday February 21 (Nicole’s)
10:30am–12:30pm (Amber, Malcolm, and Nicole presenting)

* * *

It’s 11:35pm, 25 minutes to the submission deadline given to RERC members by Amber. It’s 25 minutes to my bed time and 17 hours since I had a moment to myself (to think). I sit here wondering how best to use this last sliver of the day. I sit here trying to visualize RERC. We are a ball. A steel, rust covered, glittering, gentle and resilient ball which folds out into a lotus flower. This ball carves out an existence among gentle waves. It carves out time where none exists. It carves out mindfulness and expands with our collective effort, energies and enthusiasm. It’s been 4.5 years since the inception of RERC. I know this because my body was growing a human when we met for our first meeting. That tiny being can now walk, talk, speak, and think. RERC’s lifetime has been long when I parallel it with my wee one’s development. Long enough to introduce me to alternative programming, art education, conscious space, design, discussions with no goal, exercises with no purpose, and time to think. For me our gatherings are a time to

stop and reflect on the pedagogy I believe in: to fantasize about a dream school, to see through the fog of the environments that exist and see edible schoolyards, classroom farms and pickle gardens. My summer has been quiet without RERC. Well, my mind has been quiet. I see a new school year beginning, and with it a revival of gatherings. It's 12:01. Past Deadline. May the radical continue...

RERC is made up of educators and people interested in education, who work in a variety of settings and with a range of age groups in and outside of classrooms. We meet every three or four weeks around a tableful of food and conduct and share research into alternative and creative education practices. RERC is Deanna Bowlby, Micah Donovan, David Field, Nicole Klement, Gabriel Levine, Leslie McBeth, Velvet Schein, Malcolm Sutton, and Amber Yared.

Beyond Any Measure: surface and limit in Aernout Mik's *Osmosis and Excess*

Christoph Brunner

Grains of metal, rubber, plastic, and powder flit across the screen like a limit surface. They appear not as forms but as dynamic event contours – bare activity at work.¹

1 I take the notion of bare activity from Brian Massumi's adoption of William James. Massumi defines bare activity as "a life [that] is *formatively* barely there, tensely poised for what comes next. In that measureless instant, a life is intensely barely there, re-gathering in an immediacy of its capabilities" (Massumi 2010).

Their mattering vibration is echoed by the long, slow pans across canyons filled with dumped vehicles, and then later pharmaceutical scenes, in Aernout Mik's *Osmosis and Excess*.

The video-installation consists of two sets of images juxtaposed around the circulation of materials: abandoned vehicles and medicine in pharmacies. The materials' singular presence resonates with the borders, bodies, and matters they circulate with. The two scenes take place in and around Tijuana, Mexico. The work arose in the context of a series of interventions entitled *inSite_05: Interventions and Scenarios* located in "San Diego-Tijuana" (Sánchez/Conwell 2006, 7). The aim of the series was to investigate border spaces not as "absolute territories" but as "spaces that are constituted by, as well as constituted of, social relations and practices" (Conwell 2006, 9). Mik's installation takes the form of a high-definition panoramic screen hung in spaces of passing-through; for *inSite* it was located in an underground parking lot, and the work has appeared at the front desk of the MoMA. The work generates a surface "embodying the time-lapse during which the situation gets out of hand": children hitting piñatas next to the junkyard, sheep running through the abandoned vehicles, and muddy broken up floors in the pharmacy where children play cars with medicine boxes (Sánchez 2011, 117). But these social scenes are in some sense incidental: it is the surface and matter that count in this work.

"Potentials haunt the surface" of the screen and emergent contours modulate them into modes of existence (Deleuze 2004, 118). The image of a peaceful landscape distorted by debris does not work as a reference. Signification does not reach out from it. There is no exteriority to these images, the film's rhythm. On the contrary, the screen is a vortex consuming its milieu and simultaneously creating an emergent and metastable space-time. The film is a surface across which intensities

run – a membrane, a converter of energy. Matter in the form of debris, chemical substances and soil become the ungrounding limit along which colour, movement, and time compose the ephemeral expression of filmed images. These images, their references and associations are conventionally attributed to political, critical or socially aware interpretations (Sánchez 2011, 118; Conwell 2006, 13). What the screen as surface and membrane enables, however, is a point of entry into a folded and complex zone where matter and movement rework habitualized accounts of supposedly “critical” or “political” art. This process evolves less through means of exhibiting the work in a public parking lot, than through techniques of folding matter on a par with time’s polyrhythm apparent in the visual slowness of the images and the change of scenery. The images pass by tranquilized, yet temporally splintering. The perception of time precedes spatial (signifying) capture. The video-installation expresses a politics heralding perception as open-range emergence where the multiplicity of potential can be felt and worked with. From this point of view it calls forth a constructive perspective beyond pre-defined categories dear to critical assessment, classification and order. Matter, the main focus of the work, escapes its instrumentalization as an agent in a human assertion. On the contrary, it puts itself on a par with time’s rhythmic undoing of the grid of clearly defined signifiers. By doing so, matter puts itself right at the heart of the overall concern, the border of San Diego-Tijuana – not as a symbolic divide but as a moving ground from which all sorts of enclosures and openings arise.

One possible understanding of the border is as great symbolic divide, creating two worlds that clash and separate in politically unbearable conditions. Another possibility is to consider it as a *diagram* contracting multiplicities of matter and their flows into geographical, social, political and ecological topologies. The border becomes

a thick line, a membrane, and limit whose edges, confinements, and enclosures are constantly in the process of capture and its undoing. On a formal or foundational level, commodities might define the scope of *Osmosis and Excess*. Cars of American origin are abandoned in the junkyards around Tijuana and medicines are stashed and exported to the US. Pills and cars cross political, social and/or cultural borders. Their flow and circulation into and around bodies creates a reciprocal web of connections and signifying chains. But something goes astray in *Osmosis and Excess*. Slowness, repetition and absurdness are the forces at work. The primary surface of clearly defined categories is constantly suspended toward another perceptual shock across the plane of the screen. These shocks of perception create resonances between body, milieu and screen that move through and abstract matter. The shocks are not points in time but movements that “frequent the surface” in an “untimely” manner (Deleuze 2004, 119, 1983, 109). They are expressions constitutive of a microphysics where “micro ... means mobile and non-localizeable connections” (Deleuze 1988, 74). The physical border of San Diego-Tijuana is a frequented surface as much as the screen across which matter, bodies and forces pass. Both the screen and the border are not mere lines that are traversed but define a contour of a diagrammatic quality.

Let's start extending the line: “I draw a chalk line on the board. This discontinuity is one of those brute acts by which alone the original vagueness could have made a step toward definiteness. There is a certain element of continuity in this line. Where did the continuity come from? It is nothing but the original continuity of the black board which makes everything upon it continuous. What I have really drawn there is an oval line. For this white chalk-mark is not a *line*, it is a plane figure in Euclid's sense – a *surface*, and the only line that is there is the line which forms the *limit* between the black surface and

the white surface. This discontinuity can only be produced upon that blackboard by the reaction between two continuous surfaces into which it is separated, the white surface and the black surface" (Peirce 1992, 262).

Peirce's example illustrates the interplay between surface and movement as diagrammatic. The ground of the blackboard gives a first determination while the line itself is extensive. Both board and line do not exist without the interstice or interval between them, not as a connection but as their incubator. The diagram is determination, expression, and changes constantly, working anew through the middle of its existence and across its surface: determined indetermination. The situation of a border separating two countries, imposing rigid enforcements of power, violence, law, and order is another diagrammatic ecology, an example of how the line between the two countries emerges simultaneously with these countries. The line of the border only appears by way of a specifically rigid and stratified diagram of law, judgment of rules, and subjection. The bare activity of life pulsing along this supposed line is harnessed into a structural frame of immobile positions: a wall, an observation tower, a machine gun mounted on an SUV. But, bare activity, or movement as the base-layer of existence, is immutable and unstoppable. What keeps on moving in *Osmosis and Excess* is a diagram of matter in circulation, entering and leaving bodies. The assumed line of a border is co-extensive with the diagram of matter it rests upon. They shape-shift with their dynamic event contours.²

Extending the borderline into a diagrammatic movement of multiplicities *Osmosis and Excess* actively experiments with different matter, times, and their perceptual lures to enable an effective variation on continuing.

2 In addition to the movement of matter co-extensive with human circulations across borders, artist Riikka Tauriainen reminded me of the migration of animals across borders as another way of looking at systems of reference and their values different from the human scope.

The habitual mode of continuing operates by stratifying statements and actions which insist upon the border as a divide. Indeed, the divide is a diagram in its own right but it is not detachable from the shifting and varying field of a dynamic event contour. From this point of view, the video considers the border as diagrammatic movement: the trafficking of material and substances, their circulation, and the economies attached to them (cheap medicine and old car disposal). In this, there is no moralistic stance. The slowness of the two, incoherent, mingling scenes forces the perceiver to feel time differently through sensation across an immense surface/screen. *Osmosis and Excess* is not a representation, it does not render matter into a speaking object, on the contrary, it strips an overcoded landscape bare of its cast and invites an experiential, perceptual re-activation through bare activity's dance.

Architect and urban activist Teddy Cruz acts in a similar way, when he traces the flow of materials along and across the diagram of the borderline. Abandoned bungalows hauled south and mounted on metal framings become new housing constructions. Walls are made out of used car tires or lightweight scaffolding produced in Tijuana for the American market are the flows of matter Cruz is following and drawing into new diagrams. Diagrammatic thought takes the process of abstraction and attributes it to an entire ecological field. The process of abstraction is not a process of transcending bare matter of fact. On the contrary, the process of abstraction means reinserting instances of mattering into diagrammatic movement. Matter in its activity is constantly self-abstracting into diagrams. Thing and thought are not separated in this instance of experience. Abstraction is the conversion, the relaying of diagrams one into another without the necessity for resemblance. If Cruz considers debris along the borderline as a suitable lure for abstraction he mobilizes the potential of constantly overlooked

forces of matter. From this point of view neither Cruz nor Mik create works of art or architecture; their activities do not pertain to conventional critique inherent to most “critical” accounts of the US-Mexico border. Their practices sketch out a “pragmatics of the multiple” (Deleuze 1988, 84) where “the experiences of tendency are sufficient to act upon” (James 1996, 69). The diagram in this case becomes a constant pragmatic point of entry for problematizing, that is, for asking how the movement of different forces gives way to a multiplicity of interlacing diagrams. This diagram calls for a second step, one which asks us to experiment with techniques for modulating the diagrammatic field by means of inserting, following, and bringing in resonances of different forces. Only then do modes of expression, the infoldings of times and spaces, the shifting of materials and their expressions take on their active role of “a life that is larger, more active, more affirmative and richer in possibilities” – a life beyond any measure (Deleuze 1988, 84).

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In *Decision Points*, I re-write George W. Bush's presidential biography of the same title. Through breaking down Bush's text on a sentence level, copying the sentences and then reassembling them in a specifically curated order, I have created a new text in which Bush's authorial "I" is responsible for a number extremist actions and sentiments in response to having witnessed the moral and economic collapse of his homeland. The "I" who carries out the actions in my *Decision Points* exists in a parallel world while at all times remaining in the same language as the "I" who carries out the actions the ex-President recollects in his memoir.

The following text is excerpted from the complete work.

— M.

Decision Points

Michael Nardone

*Dad loved to tell jokes to us kids:
"Have you ever heard the one about
the airplane? Never mind, it's over
your head."*

— George W. Bush

We were in the early years
of a long struggle.

Our way of life, our very
freedom, had come
under attack.

Who did this?

The group held extremist views and considered it their duty to kill anyone who stood in their way.

I heard people yelling my name.

I looked at the faces of all the children in front of me.

I was determined not to let them down.

I had an obligation to do what was necessary to protect the country.

I pressed for action.

I was not looking for a career.

I had been praying that God would show me how to better reflect His will.

I was drinking routinely, with an occasional bender thrown in.

I can get carried away.

I was appalled by the way the ideas that inspired the Revolution were cast aside when all power was concentrated in the hands of a few.

I felt powerless to help them.

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

I looked out on an abandoned, locked down Washington.

I was so amazed to see how a country with such a rich history could be so bleak.

Had I ordered the death of those innocent Americans?

I fought back tears.

I was troubled by the fact that there was no apparent way
forward.

I had a philosophy I wanted to advance.

Was I willing to forgo my anonymity forever?

I took a look at the list of techniques.

My blood was boiling.

I have a message to you, and to all who serve our
country.

I knew a war would bring death and sorrow.

I thought of the lyrics from one of my favorite hymns,
“God of Grace and God of Glory.”

I felt the plane bank hard to the west.

There would be time later to mourn.

I hugged the flight attendants and told them it would
be okay.

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