The Oppositional Device

Or, taking matters into *whose* hands?

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I'd like to introduce this subject with a quote that comes from the place where I first began to move away from anything resembling fake neutrality, hidden authority, useless knowledge or cultural competition. Namely, the University of California at Berkeley, where all those things were rampant in the 1980s. But the quote goes back much further. It's from a guy named Mario Savio, the date is December 3, 1964, the place is in front of a pompous university building called Sproul Hall, and the context is the Free Speech Movement:

> "There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!"

The Free Speech Movement was a social process that came together through small-group meetings, private decisions, mimeographed petitions, tables with literature in public places, mass demonstrations, smaller and braver sit-ins, and occasional moments of aesthetic condensation – among which I'd put this quote, which was a declaration to a crowd before it became literature. It's a fabulous piece of public speech and I deliberately left in the part at the end, the part that bothers me. "Freedom" might have been enough to say in in the US in 1964, with cops all around, the Vietnam War heating up, and the "Freedom Rides" of the Civil Rights Movement still fresh in everyone's imagination. Now, when the word freedom is being abused to such extreme degrees in the context of another war, we might do better to ask what kind of freedom, to do what, with whom and why. So the quote can be both the departure point and the horizon of this text.

Theories

What I'm going to call the "oppositional device" is something between a prop and a performance, it's a flow of relations in which distinct objects stand out and take on

momentarily important roles. This combination of objects and flows becomes a social tool: a device to produce or provoke public speech. But society is always about flows within flows, devices versus other devices, machines alongside other machines. So the question of opposition, of what it means and how it works and what its limits are, is going to be the key one.

To start we can recall the meaning of the word "device" as used by Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the device describes the concrete operation of an abstract structure. It refers to the corporeal, technical and symbolic configuration of a particular social relation. The device is what brings people together in a pattern of interaction upheld by some kind of technology and underwritten by some kind of logic or rule. This use of the word device is deterministic, and the most famous of Foucault's devices is the Panopticon, which is a prison architecture where the mere possibility of being seen at any moment makes every prisoner behave as though he or she were always being watched.

But Foucault had a very strange and curious colleague named Félix Guattari, and much of what Guattari and his friend Deleuze actually did in their work is to try to reverse Foucault's coercive structures into processes of emancipation. For example, where Foucault believed that the relations of people caught within a specific device could be described according to a "microphysics of power" – physics being a deterministic science – Guattari, for his part, believed that what was really going on in the same device was actually a "micropolitics of desire." So the reversal, in this case, is complete: from a microphysics of power to a micropolitics of desire.

Still Guattari never forgot or minimized the situations of power from which Foucault began. He and Deleuze used artistic references – to people like Tinguely, or Raymond Roussel, or Duchamp – to develop an idea of the nomadic machine as an oppositional form of organization, subverting the monumental machines of state power. And Guattari himself went on, in a book entitled *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, to map out how such machines configured themselves, in an interconnected mesh that involves existential territories, artistic references, symbolic logics and concrete objects or pieces of technology, all swept along in an energetic flow. For Guattari, what was at

stake was the achievement of a collective enunciation, the articulation of public speech. So I'm going to take inspiration from both Foucault and Guattari and define the oppositional device as *a deliberately abnormal, fictional, satirical, delirious, antagonistic or even violent pattern of behavior that inserts itself into, and distorts, a corporeal, technical and symbolic configuration of normalized social relations, in such a way as to provoke dissenting public speech.*

Interruptions

If you want an example of an oppositional device that comes out of an artistic tradition, an obvious one would be the musical performances of Fluxus, including Nam June Paik, John Cage, and Charlotte Moorman. What they act out is a satirical and delirious opposition to the hierarchical respect and almost sacred silence of the audience before the musical work, in the classical concert setting. So in the Fluxconcert, all kinds of wild and provocative behavior would happen in the effort to break through this frozen social relation, overcome the very notion of authorial control over the artwork, and open up the possibility of speech. Or, in another version, nothing would happen at all, as in John Cage's piece *4'33"*, often referred to as "Silence," which acted to reveal the entire concert hall as a matrix of latent possibilities.

You could also take many precise and no doubt more significant examples of the oppositional device from outside the artistic traditions. I'm thinking, for instance, of the anarchical school, Summerhill, which elevated the very season of vacation and play as the exemplary model of how to use that long period of youthful life when kids are supposed to be educated. I'm also thinking of Laborde Clinic, which Guattari helped to found. This anti-asylum, or alter-asylum, is based on the idea that if the patient is sick, it's also because of the doctor, and the interns, and the kitchen personnel, and the cleaning people, and the village around, so that all these people had to be "cured" or to cure each other before the patients could ever become healthy. A third historical example would the Free Speech Movement itself, which opposed the clean, neutralized, academic behavior of the debating society by taking rhetoric out into public space and infusing it with utopian expectation, but also with aggressivity and political antagonism.

Closer to today there is the oppositional device of the counter-summit, which has broken open the cloistered secrecy of elite international meetings with a demand for public voice. The reversal is particularly clear if you think first of the icy isolation of the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, and then of the infinitely warmer World Social Forum, which is held annually in a city of the Southern Hemisphere, such as Porto Alegre, Brazil, or Mumbai, India. Or, of course, we could also think of a more precise artist-activist device, like the Power Point lectures of the Yes Men, who overidentify with their adversaries and subvert the usual bland businessman's language with a grotesque excess of corporate truth. Whether it is the WSF or the Yes Men, part of the meaning of these events or performances lies in the tension they establish with a form of power, in this case, with corporate discipline.

And finally, consider the extraordinary oppositional device recently invented by the American citizen Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in the Iraq war. She was faced with the most powerful man in the world, George Bush, who constantly speaks to the American people as though he were their father or their friend. He speaks through the television set, entering into the private space of people's homes, and he acts like nothing so much as a preacher, exercising what Foucault calls "pastoral power," which is the power to direct the conscience and the emotions of the Christian flock. Basically, he thinks we're all a bunch of sheep. When he met Cindy Sheehan for official condolences, he never called her Mrs. Sheehan, he called her "Mom." She was outraged. But what she did – the brilliant thing – was not just to go march on Washington, but to go to Crawford, Texas, where Bush was on vacation, and to ask to speak *to him*, the Emperor, the President of the World, in *his* private family space – which was a reversal that he couldn't accept, and was unable to respond to, and completely failed to master. And this brilliant oppositional device of holding a protest on some tiny scrap of residual public land out there in privatized Texas, calling it "Camp Casey" and using the religious language of candles and all-night vigils in order to ask to talk with the president about people dying in Iraq, is what finally made it possible for ordinary Americans to do the same thing and to start protesting against the war, despite all the media patriotism after September 11.

Now, these things I'm talking about are sophisticated, they use lots of aesthetic resources, they carry out conceptual reversals, and they touch people in their daily lives, just as so much contemporary art desires to do. These are all performances, not just with costumes and props, but within specific and tightly constraining situations. You can see these oppositional devices as constructed situations. The famous situationist definition goes like this: "A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a play of events." Of course, the situationists were influenced by their reading of Henri Lefebvre and his book, *The Critique of Everyday Life*; and so, for this entire oppositional tradition, there is a fundamental relation between everyday life, the critical device, and collective speech, or what Michel de Certeau called *la prise de parole*, "the taking of speech." For me, the whole question is there. Who takes speech? Who takes up that fundamentally performative speech act that can change daily life? And then who tries to take over that public speech, to take it into their own hands?

Modulation and Channeling

The devices I've described are aesthetic, and that's important. The aesthetic goes beyond knowledge or prescription, to touch you where you live, in your body, with others. Why then is there such a tension with the institutions of art? Why does one see so many artists who basically want to give it up, to become activists or to redefine their art as activism, with considerable changes in what it looks like and what it produces, in how it can be experienced and by whom? In a sense, this question needs no answer. If the way society functions today seems good enough to you, fine; I just disagree and protest. However, one might ask, why not then seize the institutions of art and use them to change what's unbearable in society? Isn't that what the institutions are for? Where does the obstacle lie?

In former times, the fundamental stumbling-block was artistic discipline: the definitions of art, the genre system, the normative models, the sources of authority. Vanguard art, particularly of the dadaist kind, rose up to challenge those things. Performance poetics was the great oppositional device against generic discipline, against modernist rationality, all the way to a movement like Fluxus, then on to more radical projects like The Living Theater. I think it was quite liberating. However,

performance poetics has been integrated into the programming of contemporary liberal societies, which exert a new form of control, which you might paradoxically describe as control by freedom – a massively paranoid-sounding concept, I know, but one which does have a meaning. The keywords here are "modulation" and "channeling." Artists need to recognize how this works, if they want to be lucid about what they are doing.

How does order arise in the cacophony of liberal society, where each person constantly makes their own decisions? One of the ways that control is exerted in open environments is by creating specific patterns of stimulation, particularly audiovisual ones, which can be strategically positioned in urban space or beamed through the airwaves to every location, in the attempt to capture people's attention. This has been theorized (principally by Deleuze, Brian Massumi and Maurizio Lazzarato) as the process of *modulation*, in reference to the wave-form of audiovisual transmission, but also in order to emphasize the rhythmic, temporal aspect of contemporary control devices, which engage us and hold our attention precisely because we have chosen them, because we have selected their particular contents and rhythms, and because we play with them through the form of our reception and use. The current fascination with portable mp3 and camera-phone devices is a classic example. But it is surprising, and perhaps very important, to discover that the basic principles of what now appears as a consumerist relation to culture were first stated by an artist, and a dadaist at that, Tristan Tzara, in the "Note aux Bourgeois" accompanying the transcription of the *poème simultan* that he performed with Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janko at Cabaret Voltaire on March 31, 1916. Tzara describes various transformations of poetry, from Mallarmé to Apollinaire via the theorist Barzun, who sought "a closer relation between the polyrhythmic symphony and the poem." But as Tzara explains, "I wanted to carry out a poem based on other principles. Which consist in the possibility I give to each listener to link up the appropriate associations. He choses the characteristic elements for his personality, mixes them, fragments them, etc., remaining nonetheless in the direction that the author has channeled."

The title of Tzara's simultaneous poem is "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (The Admiral is Looking for a House to Rent). It consisted of raucous vocal effects and

absurdist text recited in three languages, French, German and English – the languages of the war that was raging all over Europe. The poem, and indeed, the dadaist movement as a whole, was a way to exit from the war, to keep the admiral from settling into *your* house, by a finding a personal pathway somewhere else, a moving abode *between* the national languages of propaganda. By creating a cacophony of noises and absurd juxtapositions of phrases, Tzara and his friends made any single identification of meaning impossible, and thereby opened up the spectrum of choices. But, as Tzara stresses, only within the range of possibilities that the author had channeled.

This is the procedure that has increasingly been adopted by liberal modes of governance, in order to resolve the contradictions between social control and democratic freedom. Control, in hyper-individualist societies, is a function of the way your attention is modulated by the content you freely select; but it's also a function of the direction into which your behavior is guided by the larger devices in which you participate. Direct censorship, of the kind faced by the Free Speech Movement, does still exist; but it fades in importance before the new procedures. It is a tribute to our lack of lucidity that one of the most precise descriptions of this kind of control should come from Foucault's course on *Naissance de la biopolitique*, almost thirty years ago. I translate from the lecture of March 21, 1979:

> "...on the horizon of such an analysis, what appears is not at all the ideal or the project of an exhaustively disciplinary society in which the legal network, wrapped tightly around individuals, would be relayed and prolonged internally by what we could call normative mechanisms. Nor is it a society in which the mechanism of general normalization and the exclusion of the non-normalizable would be required. On the contrary, what we have on the horizon is the image or idea or thematic program of a society in which there would be an optimization of the systems of difference, in which the field would be left open for oscillatory processes, in which a tolerance would be accorded to individuals and minority practices, in which there would be an action not on the players of the game, but on the rules of the game, and finally, in which the intervention would not be one of the internalized subjection of individuals, but an environmental type of intervention."

Why do we have such extensive institutional programs for contemporary art, in which so few people ultimately participate? One reason, which has received increasing attention in recent years, is undoubtedly that contemporary art serves as a reservoir for the kinds of creativity that are required to produce the "oscillatory processes"

which Foucault mentions, and which we see all around us in the plethoric offer of hyper-individualized stimulations that make up the fabric, or the wave-pattern, of contemporary culture. The canon of 1960s and 70s art – including pop, neodada, performance and conceptual art – was established in the 1980s with the rise of contemporary art institutions, just before those same practices were rediscovered by institutionally trained artists in the 1990s, and adapted for use with the new electronic toolkits. The "tolerance" of minority approaches, as long as they do not overstep basic rules of the game, is highly evident in contemporary societies, where in fact we are all encouraged to "optimize differences," precisely as artists do, particularly through the practice of remixing media (recently celebrated in a small book by Nicolas Bourriaud). All this contributes to the impression of unlimited freedom.

However, what Foucault calls an "environmental type of intervention" goes much further. The institutional device of contemporary art is not only a school or training ground for the production of individualized content; it is also provides a circuit, a calendar, a format, an economy, a range of standards and a set of subtly competitive relations, all of which act to channel the times, places and even qualities of expression. The art circuit takes what matters to you into its welcoming hands. The rarity of direct censorship within this circuit (where censorship is, and rightly so, a kind of blasphemy) is unfortunately in inverse proportion to the high degree of predictability in terms of the kinds of audiences and the kinds of collaboration that are possible. Today we even see a trend toward the re-privatization of conceptual and performance art, with the notion of the "performative installation" that is being promoted by Angelika Nollert of the Siemens Art Foundation. This is an attempt to strictly define the content and limits of the interactive environments that artists create, thus illustrating the close attention that both corporations and governments pay to the "environmental type of intervention" (precisely what the Siemens company specializes in, as a maker of control technologies). At the same time, of course, the rules of axiomatic neutrality that apply to publicly funded institutions render it difficult to get very far with any collaborations which could be deemed "political"; yet even these are tolerated in their early stages, before they become disruptive. The overall effect seems to be that of a capture-device: a comfortable circuit which insures that artists will

create as few interruptions as possible, but still contribute to the endless multiplication of personal paths leading elsewhere – while the war rages on, at a safe distance.

The above, I am aware, could easily be interpreted as yet another scathing critique of "the institutions." But that is not the most interesting thing. Rather, if one is lucid about the art world and does not overestimate either its virtues, or its drawbacks, then it becomes possible to use its circuit, calendar, format and economy, without being overly affected by its standards of axiomatic neutrality or its competitive relations. The point is to decide on your own use of time, to modulate your own activity and collaborations. The choice to create oppositional devices which cut through the wave-pattern and open up the possibility for moments of public speech – when the plugs come out of people's ears – is a choice one has to make in the absence of any immediate recompense or stimulation. What I have been proposing, over the last few years, is that the rhythms and valuations of the art circuit be simply subordinated to a kind of emulation that arises between people producing public acts, which after all, are the essential foundation of that "civil society" to which liberal theory constantly appeals as the guarantor of good government, and even of freedom. The fact that under current conditions, the operation of most oppositional devices – and therefore, the production of most public speech – is considered illegal and therefore cannot be condoned by public institutions, does not in any way lessen my admiration for those who continue to do it.