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Citation: WHITELEY, G. and BRIGHT, G., 2018. ‘For a contemporary counter-cultural partisan practice!’. New Vide’s Journal of Humanity # 8: Counter Culture.

Additional Information:

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Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/37147](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/37147)

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Nieuwe Vide

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Please cite the published version.
For a contemporary counter-cultural partisan practice!

By Geoff Bright and Gillian Whiteley

We are long-time collaborators as political activists, as arts practitioners, and as researchers and teachers. And we can well remember (as teenagers) the foundation of the Whole Earth Catalogue! Since the extraordinary moment of 1968, we have both been involved at various times in direct grass-roots work-based, community and party activism as well as more recognisably counter-cultural activity around art practice, experimental music, group work, alternative education and radical pedagogy. During the last decade or so, our joint work has coalesced into a common inquiry that focuses increasingly on creating a productive space between horizontal forms of ‘micro-politics’ as envisioned by primarily ‘countercultural’ figures such as Félix Guattari (or those now writing out of Guattari, such as Brian Massumi), and those party-based, vertical critical/liberationary activisms still imagined within the legacy of the Third and Fourth Internationals. As activist practitioners, we are concerned that a false binary between these two approaches is dangerously counter-productive, ultimately serving to neutralise the energies of those opposed to the global ravages of neoliberal capitalism and its more recent fragmentation into frighteningly right-wing nationalisms of various hues.

Of course, we are not alone in this. Much work since 1968 has ranged around a debate as to whether the French événements were primarily counter-cultural or political and, significantly, Hardt and Negri’s most recent work, Assembly, explores a very similar problematic to the one that we are highlighting here, with particular reference to movements such as Occupy! While those very general questions will continue to be interrogated, we would like to take the opportunity here to focus on the details of some recent Live Art and experimental improvisation work of ours that tries to enact what Massumi and Erin Manning have called ‘event spaces’. We think such an approach potentially offers a way out of the impasse of an assumed contradiction between counter-cultural and critical-political practice. In terms of Nieuwe Vide’s question as to the continuing relevance of the counter-cultural, we will say an emphatic ‘yes’, but our yes is to a counter-culturalism that is meaningfully partisan for those at the increasingly sharp end of direct resistance to precaritisation, the resurgence of the nation-state, racism, restrictions on movement, and the ruination of the environment.

Firstly, though, let us introduce ourselves through our work. Gillian (aka bricolagekitchen) is a pamphleteer, improviser and Senior Lecturer in Art History at Loughborough University in the UK where she co-ordinates the Politicized Practice Research Group (see https://pparg.net ) For the last twenty years or so, the critical contextualisation and theorisation of historical countercultural practices, in its broadest sense, has been the foundation of her research and activities. For example, she has worked extensively on the activities of countercultural figures such as Jeff Nuttall, the author of Bomb Culture (1968) a cultish idiosyncratic account of international activities leading up to May 1968. Other work has focused on countercultural groups such as the anarchistic Dutch Provo in the Sixties or the work of Welfare State International, an ever-changing collective of artists, musicians,
writers, engineers and various associates established in 1968 which went on to create radical mayhem on a spectacular scale as well as in local community settings until 2006. Her current projects deal with protest memory and materialities of creative, performative dissent and cultural resistance, most recently through an ongoing exploration of historical and contemporary art’s utilisation of the format and radical political traditions of the pamphlet. Her creative identity and online platform, www.bricolagekitchen.com, brings together ideas about art, politics and improvisation and documents a host of past and ongoing activities, events and projects that deal with contemporary cultural and political resonances and legacies of specific historical countercultures. Her work is underlined by the firm commitment that a different social reality is possible, even if it is only provisional and transitory, and that we have to take every opportunity to prefigure it, to make it and re-make it, joyously, in small ways everyday.

Geoff (aka oneoftheroughs) is a Research Fellow at the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University and an improvising performer. With a long background in anti-capitalist politics (the year-long UK Miners’ Strike of 1984-85 was his key involvement) and an active role in social research, he seeks to enact a unifying radical practice that links improvisation in performance; improvisation as a collective, militant research methodology; and improvisatory forms of political action. Geoff also has a substantial work background in teaching philosophy and sociology in the UK trade union, adult, and community education sectors. His academic research grows out of a lifelong relationship to mining communities and ideas of independent working class and radical education and he has recently completed his fourth funded project which uses arts-based methods and the idea of a ‘social haunting’ to work with activists of the British community trade union Unite Community to re-imagine and co-produce possible futures for such communities. In his performance practice, he performs as an improvising musician playing saxophones, as an experimental vocalist and as an all-round provocateur, and is associated with the following projects and collectives (among others): Gated Community; Oppositional Defiance Disorder; Dividual Machine; the mass anti-choir Juxtavoices, and the sax collective Hornweb.

Geoff’s most recent community-facing projects have developed novel community based workshops called Ghost Labs, which are essentially “participatory art-philosophy-political event-spaces”, in Brian Massumi’s words. The Ghost Labs work with difficult affective meanings carried into the present from contested pasts, allowing activist participants to reflect on the histories and values that they bring to their activism rather than simply continually ‘doing stuff’ and being at risk of burn-out. The details and scope of these projects can be seen on the project website (see https://www.socialhaunting.com) but the relevant point here is that, as in our collaborative work, the focus is on the micro-political energies of affect (the ‘personal’ in the old binary of personal and political) as a collective force for re-energising the organizational effectiveness of campaigning and protest (the ‘political’, in that former division). The arts-based approaches used – collective poetry, cartooning, object-based work, community radio, and ‘ghost’ games such as the ‘Community Tarot’ (all on the website) – emphasise the open, experimental milieu characteristic of the counter culture as being vital to organizationally coherence collective action. In design terms, this approach owes a lot to our collaborative work. So, let’s have a
look at three examples of that, bringing us right up to our most recent (and still current) project.

Alchemy/Schmalchemy

The key vehicle for our collaborative practice has, for the last ten years or so, been **Alchemy/Schmalchemy (A/S)**, which we curate jointly with performance artist Walt Shaw. A/S is a performance ensemble that operates with a set of practices and activities that play about with the idea of alchemy (as ‘authentic’ transformation) and schmalchemy (as transformation’s possibly fraudulent promise). Adding the pre-fix ‘schm’ to alchemy therefore intentionally conjures a disruptive and mischievous performance space that simultaneously adheres to and repudiates conventional ambitions of performance. Using an uncomfortable creative collision of improvisational forms in working with image, text and objects through physical movement and sound, each live manifestation consciously parodies notions of authenticity and artifice. Musical instruments are combined with ramshackle low-tech sound-producing equipment and manifestations have an emphasis in one moment on intensity and in the next on minimality – a field of tension where an event-space is created and effects and affects flow serendipitously and contrarily between performers participants and spectators. In sum, each A/S performance operates as part of an ongoing performative inquiry into the autonomous ‘excess’ of the event as a potentially transformative and disruptive micro-political energy of assemblages of ‘stuff’. See Alchemy/Schmalchemy.

Node/Flow/Mass (Disaster Box)

Six years ago, **Alchemy/Schmalchemy** (with the addition of Matt Harling) curated the ‘sonic provocation’ **Node/Flow/Mass (Disaster Box)** (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5_oeOygZI8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5_oeOygZI8)). This performance brought together 50-plus players/vocal improvisers mainly from the two UK ‘metal bashing’ areas of South Yorkshire and the West Midlands in an attempt to concretely challenge the concept of ‘heritage’ around the massive and spectacular post-industrial heritage project, **Magna**, sited in a former steel works between Sheffield and Rotherham. Fundamentally, the piece worked with the idea of living social flows through time and space, as individuals gathered in groups, congregated as large collectives, and dispersed once again. Using sonic improvisation and performance art, it explored the psychogeography of evacuating a work place that was inspired by a ‘found object’: the original 1970s steelworks’ ‘Disaster Box’ containing plans, maps and procedures for evacuation in the event of catastrophic explosion of the arc furnaces, hence the title of the piece.

Quite simple in its performative concept, **Node/Flow/Mass (NFM)** began with nodes of 10-15 improvisers clustered in each of the 4 pavilions of the site: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. At a fixed time and under the guidance of a ‘marshal’ (in the spirit of the actual disaster plan) each cluster began a procession along a designated route to the central ‘Face of Steel’ gallery, improvising with voice and/or mobile acoustic instruments/devices along the way. With performers then massed at the centre of the site a collective improvisation was led by two invited conductors employing a small number of basic conducting signals to structure a sonic interplay between individuals, small units and the full collective. Instrumentalists
respond by working with a simple graphic score and vocalists with a libretto of single words and a single sentence text taken from the evacuation instructions found in the Disaster Box. See Node/Flow/Mass (Disaster Box)

With a view to problematising the tendency of ‘heritage’ to pacify and ‘smooth over’ the space of industrial ruins, turning them into sites of private, neo-liberal, cultural consumption, NFM drew on some ideas about space, aesthetics and materiality in industrial ruins developed in cultural geography and linked them to the specific, conflicted labour history of the site as a ‘ghosted site of insubordination’. Our specific political intention was to raise, instead, the spectre of hidden massification that lurks in a site like Magna, allowing the aesthetic dimension to arise as an unpredictable excess.

*Rhodiacéta (Re-)Response - For a counter-cultural partisan practice!*

Much more recently, *Rhodiacéta (Re-)Response* was a live, freely improvised sonic performance and discussion generated by *Alchemy/Schmalchemy* at Loughborough University on 17 October 2018 (listen to ‘OoooO-Oooooo Medvedkine’ on https://soundcloud.com/user-747158634). This manifestation was in ‘(re-)response’ to one of the exhibits in the *Re-Imagining Citizenship* exhibition, part of an ongoing international project brought together by members of the Politicized Practice, Anarchist and Theatre and Performance Research Groups at the university. In designing our performance, we took our cue from a set of six collective drawings contributed to the exhibition by Contrat Social - a research group of art students and staff from Institute Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Besançon, in France - using them as visual scores. Contrat Social’s intervention had itself been initiated by the group’s wish to respond to Chris Marker’s original 1967 documentary film, *A bientôt j’éspère*, about the major strike at the Rhodiacéta textile factory in Besançon during that year. Contrat Social conducted their own archive research, gathered audio footage and interviewed former strikers in what was essentially a re-visiting and re-laying of the film as a response to the 1967 struggle from the current contemporary French context.

Our particular aim was to lay another, sonic, layer over some of the visual materials that Contrat Social produced and run it against the visual background of Marker’s film (hence the title *Rhodiacéta (Re)Response*) in our own attempt to devise a kind of non-representational partisan anthem that might have a nomadic micro-political energy of its own - looping out of *Re-Imagining Citizenship* and Contrat Social and back to Besançon, where film/audio of our performance has been sent in the hope of a further ‘re-(re-) response’ coming back to us.

The selection you can hear at the link above uses the sixth of the Contrat Social collective drawings as a score for the final section of the sonic performance (a forty-minute discussion also followed). The name “OoooO-Oooooo Medvedkine” is ours, and responds to the graffiti-like inscription on the drawing which, for us, encompasses the political/aesthetic energy available in bringing together the grand partisan imaginary of the past (Medvedkine was a soviet revolutionary film maker who inspired the 1967 Rhodiacéta strikers to a film of their own) and the more dispersed, rhizomatic affective flows of becoming (“OoooO-Oooooo”) that were so much the province of the counter culture of the 1960s.
Why? Well, given the flagrant manipulation of affect in contemporary politics, we believe – and this runs through all our work – that it is vital that any (micro) politics of affect that we develop out of our counter cultural instincts also somehow has to re-sound the urgent partisan voice of the first half of the Twentieth Century, bringing the counter cultural and critical/political anti-capitalist forces together. *Alchemy/Schmalchemy, Node/Flow/Mass (Disaster Box)* and *Rhodiacéta (Re-)Response* are examples of a small-scale practice that calls for a contemporary counter-cultural partisan practice as a means of doing just that.

For further information on *Alchemy/Schmalchemy, Node/Flow/Mass (Disaster Box)* and *Rhodiacéta (Re-)Response* see www.bricolagekitchen.com