
Of Microperception and Micropolitics

An Interview with Brian Massumi, 15 August 2008¹

Brian Massumi: BM

Joel McKim: JM

JM: The notion of affect has become a key concept in a whole range of current discussions from questions of immaterial labour to theories of new media reception. It's a concept that obviously takes many different forms. Can you explain the particular role that affect plays within your thought?

BM: The notion of affect does take many forms, and you're right to begin by emphasizing that. To get anywhere with the concept, you have to retain the manyness of its forms. It's not something that can be reduced to one thing. Mainly because it's not a thing. It's an event, or a dimension of every event. What interests me in the concept is that if you approach it respecting its variety, you are presented with a field of questioning, a problematic field, where the customary divisions that questions about subjectivity, becoming, or the political are usually couched in do not apply. My starting point is the basic Spinozan definition of affect, which is an "ability to affect or be affected." Right off the bat, this cuts transversally across a persistent division, probably *the* most persistent division. Because the ability to affect and the ability to be affected are two facets of the same event. One face is turned towards what you might be tempted to isolate as an object, the other towards what you might isolate as a subject. Here, they are two sides of the same coin. There is an affectation, and it is happening in-between. You start with the in-betweenness. No need to detour through well-rehearsed questions of philosophical foundations in order to cobble together a unity. You start in the middle, as Deleuze always taught, with the dynamic unity of an event.

There is a second part of the Spinozan definition taken up by Deleuze that is not cited as often. It is that a power to affect and be affected governs a transition,

¹ We would like to thank Joel McKim, Lucia Vodanovic and Jose Ossandon for allowing us to reprint this interview from *Disturbios Culturales: Conversaciones acerca de Cultural y Movilizacion*, ed. Lucia Vodanovic and Jose Ossandon (Santiago : Ediciones Diego Portales, forthcoming)

where a body passes from one state of capacitation to a diminished or augmented state of capacitation. This comes with the corollary that the transition is *felt*. A distinction is asserted between two levels, one of which is feeling and the other capacitation or activation. But the distinction comes in the form of a connection. This separation-connection between feeling and activation situates the account between what we would normally think of as the self on the one hand and the body on the other, in the unrolling of an event that's a becoming of the two together.

This already yields a number of terms that can be put to use and developed. First, the feeling of the transition as the body moves from one power of existence to another has a certain separability from the event it is bound up with, by virtue of its distinction from the capacitation activating the passage. What is felt is the *quality* of the experience. The account of affect will then have to directly address forms of experience, forms of life, on a qualitative register. Second, the felt transition leaves a trace, it constitutes a memory. Consequently, it can't be restricted to that one occurrence. It will return. It has already returned, in some capacity. It was already part of a series of repetitions, to the extent that the body has a past.

That's the third point: the capacitation of the body as it's gearing up for a passage towards a diminished or augmented state is completely bound up with the lived past of the body. That past includes what we think of as subjective elements, such as habits, acquired skills, inclinations, desires, even willings, all of which come in patterns of repetition. This doesn't make the event any less rooted in the body. The past that the body carries forward in serial fashion includes levels we think of as physical and biological, such as genetic inheritance and phylogenesis. So there's a reactivation of the past in passage toward a changed future, cutting transversally across dimensions of time, between past and future, and between pasts of different orders. This in-between time or transversal time is the time of the event. This temporality enables, and requires you to rethink all of these terms – bodily capacitation, felt transition, quality of lived experience, memory, repetition, seriation, inclination—in dynamic relation to each other.

If there is one key term, that's it: relation. When you start in-between, what you're in the middle of is a region of relation. Occurrent relation, because it's all about event. Putting the terms together, you realize straight away that the relational event will play out differently every time. In repeating, it takes up the past differently. In taking up the past differently, it creates new potentials for the future. The region of occurrent relation is a point of potentiation. It is where things begin anew. Where things begin anew is where they were already present in tendency.

If there are two key terms, tendency comes next. The patterns of movement through these affective transitions are weighted for a particular body or particular situations, as more or less accessible, more or less ready to go. There's an activation not only of the body, but of the body's tendencies, as they move into and through situations. In taking account of this, you get a relational complex, a nexus, rather than a particular definition. The base definition – to affect and be affected in a felt passage to a varied power of existence – opens a problematic field rather than ending in a particular solution. You are left with a matrix of variation that forces you to rethink the terms involved each time. You have to regenerate them to use them. It's not a general definition that you can apply. It's not a structure you can presuppose. On the other hand, it's also not the case that you're starting without any presuppositions. To start in the middle is precisely not to perform a phenomenological reduction. It is to accept the challenge to regenerate your terms, and their cohesion to each other, at each repeated step in your thinking through the nexus. Rather than a definition, what you have is a proposition, less in the logical sense than in the sense of an invitation. Starting from affect in this way is an invitation for an indefinitely constructive thinking of embodied, relational becoming. The emphasis on embodiment, variation, and relation gives it an immediately political aspect that also attracted me.

JM: There are two things in your description that stand out to me as being very useful additions to the version of Spinoza's affect that is often referred to, usually via Deleuze. One is this immediately intersubjective element that seems to bring back into the picture Spinoza's idea of "common notions" – agreements between bodies that allow the power of the individual body to be enhanced through the forming of relations. The other interesting addition you make is to include a notion of memory. You suggest that an affective experience, or the feeling of the transition from one power of existence to another, can somehow be reactivated in different series, in different relations. When you say that this memory is housed in the body, you're not necessarily talking about an individual body, you're talking about bodies of relations, of complexes. What happens when we move into a new set of relations? Do we start from scratch or can we bring that affective memory with us?

BM: I think there is no such thing as starting from scratch. Everything re-begins, in a very crowded, overpopulated world. Even one body alone is pre-populated—by instincts, by inclinations, by teeming feelings and masses of memories, conscious and nonconscious, with all manner of shadings in between. The question is always "how": how to move that crowding into a new constitution, the constitution of a becoming. Calling affect, or that felt moment of bodily moving on, calling that intersubjective is misleading if intersubjective is taken to mean that we start from a world in which there are already subjects that are preconstituted, or a pre-given structure of subject positions ready for subjects to

come occupy. What is in question is precisely the emergence of the subject, its primary constitution, or its reemergence and reconstitution. The subject of an experience emerges from a field of conditions which are not that subject yet, where it is just coming into itself. Those conditions are not yet necessarily even subjective in any normal sense. Before the subject, there's an in-mixing, a field of budding relation too crowded and heterogeneous to call intersubjective. It's not at a level where things have settled into categories like subject and object. It's the level of what William James called pure experience. When I say that it all comes back to the body, I don't mean the body as a thing apart from the self or subject. I mean that the body *is* that region of in-mixing from which subjectivity emerges. It is the coming together of the world, for experience, in a here-and-now prior to any possibility of assigning categories like subject or object. That affective region we were talking about is not in-between in the intersubjective sense. And it's not intentional in the sense of already carrying a subject-object polarity. It's a brewing, the world stirring. It's a coming event, through which such categories will return. Their rearing depends on the event. It's not the event that depends on their already being in place.

JM: Then what precedes the event? What gives rise to it?

BM: Shock. That's what Peirce says. Affect for me is inseparable from the concept of shock. It doesn't have to be a drama. It's really more about micro-shocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives. For example a change in focus, or a rustle at the periphery of vision that draws the gaze toward it. In every shift of attention, there is an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life. The cut can pass unnoticed, striking imperceptibly, with only its effects entering conscious awareness as they unroll. This is the onset of the activation I was referring to earlier. I'd go so far as to say that this onset of experience is by nature imperceptible.

This is one way of understanding "microperception," a concept of great importance to Deleuze and Guattari. Microperception is not smaller perception; it's a perception of a qualitatively different kind. It's something that is felt without registering consciously. It registers only in its effects. According to this notion of shock, there is always a commotion under way, a "something doing" as James would say. There is always a something-doing cutting in, interrupting whatever continuities are in progress. For things to continue, they have to re-continue. They have to re-jig around the interruption. At the instant of re-jigging, the body braces for what will come. It in-braces, in the sense that it returns to its potential for more of life to come, and that potential is immanent to its own arising.

You can sometimes feel the in-bracing itself, most noticeably in startles or frights. Before you can even consciously recognize what you're afraid of, or even feel that it is yourself that is the subject of the feeling, you are catapulted into a

feeling of the frightfulness of the situation. It only dawns on you in the next instant that you'd better figure out what might have done the catapulting, and what you should do about. It is only then that you own the feeling as your own, and recognize it as a content of your life, an episode in your personal history. But in the instant of the affective hit, there is no content yet. All there is is the affective quality, coinciding with the feeling of the interruption, with the kind of felt transition I talked about before. That affective quality is all there is to the world in that instant. It takes over life, fills the world, for an immeasurable instant of shock. Microperception is this purely affective rebeginning of the world.

Microperception is bodily. There is no fright, or any affect for that matter, without an accompanying movement in or of the body. This is the famous James-Lange thesis. In fact, the thesis goes further, so far as to say that this bodily commotion is what an emotion *is*. James calls it emotion, but at this level it is what we're calling affect. The James-Lange thesis has been widely criticized as reductive, but this is to misunderstand it. Because the body, in this eventful rebeginning, carries tendencies reviving the past and already striving toward a future. In its commotion are capacities reactivating, being primed to play out, in a heightening or diminishing of their collective power of existence. The body figures here as a cut in the continuity of relation, filled with potential for re-relating, with a difference. Microperceptual shock is like a re-cueing of our bodily powers of existence. Here, the body is what Peirce calls a "material quality": a coming quality of experience that is being actively lived-in before it's actually lived out. It's lived-in in intensity, in a kind of existential agitation, a poising or posturing for the coming event, a kind of recoil, not to withdraw from the world, but rather to brace for it again, and for how else it will be.

The world in which we live is literally made of these reinaugural microperceptions, cutting in, cueing emergence, priming capacities. Every body is at every instant in thrall to any number of them. A body is a complex of in-bracings playing out complexly and in serial fashion. The tendencies and capacities activated do not necessarily bear fruit. Some will be summoned to the verge of unfolding, only to be left behind, unactualized. But even these will have left their trace. In that moment of interruptive commotion, there's a productive indecision. There's a constructive suspense. Potentials resonate and interfere, and this modulates what actually eventuates. Even what doesn't happen has a modulatory effect. Whitehead had a word for this. He called it "negative prehension." It's a somewhat paradoxical concept. It refers to an unfelt feeling entering positively into the constitution of an experience by dint of its active exclusion from it. The concept of affect is tied to the idea of modulation occurring at a constitutive level where many somethings are doing, most of them unfelt. Or again, felt only in effect. No less real for passing unfelt.

Say there are a number of bodies indexed to the same cut, primed to the same cue, shocked in concert. What happens is a collective event. It's distributed across those bodies. Since each body will carry a different set of tendencies and capacities, there is no guarantee that they will act in unison even if they are cued in concert. However different their eventual actions, all will have unfolded from the same suspense. They will have been attuned – differentially -- to the same interruptive commotion. "Affective attunement"—a concept from Daniel Stern—is a crucial piece to the affective puzzle. It is a way of approaching affective politics that is much more supple than notions more present in the literature of what's being called the "affective turn," like imitation or contagion, because it finds difference in unison, and concertation in difference. Because of that, it can better reflect the complexity of collective situations, as well as the variability that can eventuate from what might be considered the "same" affect. There is no sameness of affect. There is affective difference in the same event. Reactions to fear, to that classic example again, vary wildly, and even vary significantly at different times in the same individual's life.

JM: How does this relate to politics?

BM: Politics, approached affectively, is an art of emitting the interruptive signs, triggering the cues that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially. Affective politics is inductive. Bodies can be inducted into, or attuned to, certain regions of tendency, futurity, and potential, they can be inducted into inhabiting the same affective environment, even if there is no assurance they will act alike in that environment. A good example is an alarm, a sign of threat or danger. Even if you conclude in the next instant that it's a false alarm, you will have come to that conclusion in an environment that is effectively one of threat. Others who have heard the alarm may well respond differently, but they will be responding differently together, as inhabitants of the same affective environment. Everyone registering the alarm will have been attuned to same threat event, in one way or another. It is the sum total of the different ways of being interpellated by the same event that will define what it will have been politically. The event can't be fully predetermined. It will be as it happens. For there to be uniformity of response, other factors must have been active to pre-channel tendencies. Politics of conformity pivoting on the signaling of threat, like the politics that held sway during the Bush administration, must work on many levels and at many rhythms of bodily priming to ensure a relative success. And again, there will be minor lines that won't be emphasized or come out into relief or be fully enacted but that everyone will have felt in that unfeeling way of negatively prehending. Those are left as a reservoir of political potential. It is a potential that is immediately collective. It's not a mere possibility, it's an active part of the constitution of that situation, it's just one that hasn't been fully developed, that hasn't been fully capacitated for unfolding. This means that there are potential alter-politics at the collectively in-braced heart of

every situation, even the most successfully conformist in its mode of attunement. You can return to that reservoir of real but unexpressed potential, and re-cue it. This would be a politics of microperspective: a micropolitics. The Obama campaign's recuing of fear toward hope might be seen as targeting that micropolitical level, interestingly, through macro-media means.

Even in the most controlled political situation, there's a surplus of unacted-out potential that is collectively felt. If cued into, it can remodulate the situation. As Deleuze and Guattari liked to say, there is no ideology and never was. What they mean by that is no situation is ever fully predetermined by ideological structures or codings. Any account paying exclusive attention to that level is fatally incomplete. No situation simply translates ideological inculcations into action. There's always an event, and the event always includes dimensions that aren't completely actualized, so it's always open to a degree, it's always dynamic and in re-formation. To be in effect, ideological predeterminations have to enter the event and *take* effect. They have to reassert themselves, to make themselves effectively ingredient to the event. Their effectiveness is always an accomplishment, a renewed victory, and what needs to be accomplished can fail. Micropolitics, affective politics, seeks the degrees of openness of any situation, in hopes of priming an alter-accomplishment. Just modulating a situation in a way that amplifies a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility is an alter-accomplishment.

JM: And the question of memory? Can that qualitative change, or change in affective tonality, be remembered and brought into a different context? Can it be transported?

BM: There are different kinds of memory. There's a kind of memory that's directly implicated in any perception, couched in acquired or inbred inclinations and propensities that a body carries forward. This is a past that is not in any subjective representation, it's a past that is only in its activation. It's an enacted past, actively present. It's not in the head, but in the middle, in rearing relationship, in situation. It's as much like a thought as an action.

It's like a thought in the sense that it has a certain generality. A tendency or propensity fuses, or contracts, a great number of past occasions into a readiness for a next. A habit or a skill is acquired through repetition. But once we have contracted it, we don't have the repetitions; we have a capacity to redeploy a sequence of actions, including on-the-fly variations responding instantaneously to particularities of the situation. It's the unfolding of an adaptive potential unfolding for the situation. It comes into the present as an inheritance of the past, but only to the extent that it is readying a future. This kind of memory is what Whitehead calls the immediate past, because it coincides with the immediacy of the present. It's by nature nonconscious. It takes you, before you

have it as your memory. It catapults you into unfolding tendency before any possibility of reflection. It might not be acted out. It might remain behind in the inaugural commotion of the coming event. It might just agitate immanently, in which case it remains what Bergson calls a nascent or incipient action.

On the other hand, it might well catapult you directly into action. In either case the first making of the moment, the inauguration of the event, is that absolute coincidence between the past and the dawning present. Not a subject thinking or being toward the world, but the world reconstituting itself around an actively present germ of the past. There's already, in that immeasurable instant of incipience, an activation of tendencies toward the future. The future has a kind of felt presence, an affective presence, as an attractor. Because each tendency tends toward a certain kind of outcome. It is attracted by its own end. That end point is what James calls a terminus. It's a limit point governing the direction of an unfolding. Again, that's like a thought, if you can consider thinking an effective presence of what isn't actually there. By being effectively present without actually being there I don't mean being consciously projected on the future as a possibility. It's a pulling of the present, already pregnant with pastness, out of itself, from within its own event. It's a force of time acting immanently to the occurrence. It's a real, generative factor of the forming moment. I call it a force because it has a certain kind of efficiency, a formative power. I like to call this formative participation of the future "quasi-causal," because it is more like an attractor in chaos theory than an efficient material cause. Whitehead insists that the future is also always active in the "energizing" of the present by the past that inaugurates a coming event.

All that happens in the cut, in the instant of commotion, microshock, or welling event-suspense. It occurs on the microperceptual level, in an interval smaller than the smallest perceivable, to paraphrase Deleuze. It cannot be consciously perceived. What we perceive is what unfolds from that interpenetration of moments, as the coming event plays itself out. We perceive the trailing into the situation of the past already tending out of that situation toward the future of event's having happened. What we experience is like a doppler effect of the force of time. It is due to this doppler effect that we experience the moment, that is, that we experience a duration, that we feel time to have extension. That duration is our experience straddling those dimensions of time, as much like a thought as in unfolding action. The duration registers with an affective tonality. We have a primarily qualitative experience of time extension. This qualitatively lived time is what William James called the specious present. It's "specious" because it's all coming out of a fissure in time, a cut in time, a shock and suspense. The microshocks don't stop. They come in droves, all in intervals smaller than the smallest perceivable. All cut, all the time, in infinite division. It is only because an affective tonality envelops groupings of them, continues through or around them, that we feel the moment as having extension, rather than feeling it

implode into an infinitely proliferating fractal cut. It is the quality of the experience that makes the moment. The present is held aloft by affect. This is also something that Whitehead insists on: affect is not in time, it makes time, it makes time present, it makes the present moment, it's a creative factor in the emergence of time as we effectively experience it; it's constitutive of lived time.

Conscious memory is quite different from this kind of memory, that of the immediate past that contributes to activating the event of lived experience. Conscious memory is retrospective, going from the present to reactivate the past, whereas active memory moves in the other direction, coming from the past to energize the present. Then there's another kind of memory, a Kierkegaardian memory. Kierkegaard talks about how we "remember forwards, but recall backwards." Recalling backwards is conscious remembering. Remembering forwards is the feeling of the attractor, the end point or terminus, it's making itself felt as the limit-point of a tendency contracted in the past, and now reactivated. The attractor is a futurity, but it's memory-like in that it only has futurity by virtue of contracting pastness. It pulls a contracted past through the crucible of the present, towards itself, the not-yet of this event. I think this idea of the terminus can be linked to what Whitehead calls an "eternal object" (a misnomer if there ever was one, because it isn't an object but a potential, and it isn't eternal in the sense of enduring through time, but rather in the sense that it enters actively into the constitution of every moment).

So there are at least those three kinds of memory: a memory of the present, which is the past actively contracted into the cut of the present instant (what I call the "here-and-now" to differentiate it from the specious present); a memory of the past, which is a rearview of the past from the perspective of the consciously experienced specious present of lived duration; and a memory of the future, which is the quasicausal force of tendency, as governed recursively by the futurity of the terminus toward which it tends.

For the question of whether the qualitative change registering in affective tonality is transportable, the answer would have to be no, not strictly speaking. Everything we have talked about are generative factors of an event. Affect is one creative factor entering in the constitution of events, even if it is a very special one. It is not a content that can be transported from one event to another. Like all event factors, it can be repeated, reactivated, it can rearise, but always anew. The logic of affect is entirely bound up with the logic of serial repetition and difference that applies to events. It's an event logic, not a logic of transmission or communication.

JM: Part of what made me interested in unfolding a little bit these different variations of memory is a notion you brought forward at the beginning of your comments, the idea that the affective shift into a different power of being

carries with it a memory. A memory that also then becomes potentially reactivated or could change the experience of the body in another situation. You mentioned that these shocks occur at a microperceptual level and that there's an after-the-fact conscious duration that we experience and we hold with us that is actually quite different than the original microperceptual shock experience. Could the memory that this affective qualitative change carries with it be described as a becoming sensitive to those microperceptual shocks? So can we begin to become more aware of these affective shocks that are obviously influencing us or having an impact on us continuously? Is that part of the potential process?

BM: Yes, that's definitely part of the potential process. It's a way of acquiring new propensities, which if they become embedded in our everyday life, are habits. As they repeat themselves, we become aware *that* they function, even if we are not aware of them *as* they function. That secondary awareness easily wears out. Habits are ways of not attending-to, while still acting according-to. Their nonconsciousness functioning is self-repeating, an iterative process that can end up becoming a caricature of itself. A habit can habituate to itself. By that I meant that it can end up not attending to the newness or difference in the situations triggering it. When this happens, it has a tendency to make the coming event conform to past events. It loses its powers of adaptation, its power to renew itself, becoming a mere reflex.

The opposite can also happen. Habit can rebecome a creative force for the acquisition of new propensities, because it makes capacities available for enaction, and something can vary in the course of that making-available, and then be added to a body's repertory. To mobilize habit in this rebecoming way, the body, as you say, has to become sensitive to what's coming. It has to feel the priming, as a formative force, before it bears fruit. Perversely, this is a kind of preemptive power. It is a preemptive power that is creative of a moreness to life, what I call an ontopower. I say it's perverse because I am convinced that it is the same power mobilized by the contemporary military machine. In some of the most affect- and perception-savvy recent texts in military theory, they call this rebecoming-creative of habit "non-recognition-based priming" and "sampling the future." It's part of a colonization of the microperceptual by the war machine that deserves serious study.

In speaking at this level, we have to be careful. If we say, "I contract habits and then habits rule me," or "We can remobilize habit for futurity," we are positing a subject, us or me, prior to and separate from the process of event formation habit is so central to. "I" do not contract habits. Habits contract to form me. That's taking "me" to be the relational matrix of reactivation that my body carries forward—that *is* my body as I defined it before. "My" comes before "me." Leibniz insisted on that being *is* in the possessive, not the first person. "My"

comes before “me”; repetition comes before identity. And repeated difference, Deleuze adds, always trumps identity.

JM: So, shock mastery is not what we’re after.

BM: Shock mastery is not at all what we’re after, I don’t think. How can “we” master what forms us? And reforms us at each instant, before we know it? But that is not to say that we’re impotent before ontopower. Quite the contrary, our lives are capacitated by it. We live it; the power of existence that we are expresses it.

JM: How do you respond to the criticism that’s been widely held since critical theory that affective politics is inherently fascistic?

BM: I agree that the potential is there, but I don’t agree that it’s inherent to affective politics. The mistrust of affect seems to come from seeing affect as a primitive stimulus-response system. I connect it instead to priming, which does not have the linear cause-effect structure of stimulus-response, but has to do instead with modulation, which has to do with interference and resonance, which are nonlinear. Stimulus-response is a limit case. It’s that case of a habit that has become a reflex, lost its adaptive power, its powers of variation, its force of futurity, that has ceased to be the slightest surprised by the world. It’s a tired habit that has come as close to being an efficient cause as a power of repetition can get. It has let go of the “quasi” in its causality. There is also a sense in the critiques of affective politics as fascist that nonconscious process is an absence of thought. I follow Deleuze and Guattari in saying that nonconscious process is the birth of thought. It is germinal thought, moved by the force of time to express powers of existence in coming action.

From the critical theory point of view, I just compound the sin, because I think that advocating affective politics is advocating aesthetic politics. Aesthetic politics is often also thought to be synonymous with fascism. I think about the connection between affective politics and aesthetic politics in terms of Whitehead’s idea of “contrast.” Contrasts are tendential unfoldings that are held together in the same situation. They are alternate termini that come together in the instant, even though their actual unfoldings are mutually exclusive. Their mutual exclusiveness is a kind of creative tension. It is the contrasts between termini that interfere and resonate, and modulate what comes. The specious present is the drop of experience that is one with that unfolding. It is the feeling of the resolution of the tension, as the event plays itself out, for the process to then start all over again. If thought is the effective presence of what is not actually present, a terminus is an element of thought. Then multiple termini together are an intensification of thought. The specious present feels this intensity of thinking pass into action. Normally the intensity itself is overshadowed by the

effectiveness of the action it passes into. Whitehead defines the aesthetic in terms of this intensity of contrasts. An aesthetic act brings this contrastive intensity out from under the shadow of action's instrumentality or functional aim. It brings the contrastive intensity of active potential into the specious present as such, to stand alone, with no other value than itself. The aesthetic act extends the creative tension of contrast that characterizes the emergence of every action. It prolongs the suspension of the cut, the commotion of interference and resonance, gives it duration, so that it passes the threshold of perceptibility and is consciously felt as potential. This prevents terminus from being an automatic feed forward to the end, like a reflex response to a stimulus. Resolution is suspended. The termini in play remain virtual ends. Their mutual exclusivity is still informing the situation, contributing to what it might be, but the tension doesn't have to resolve itself to be consciously felt and thought. Aesthetic politics is irresolute. It's the thinking-feeling of the virtual incompleteness of definitive action.

JM: In what way is this political?

BM: It might not sound political, at least in the way it's usually meant. But it is, because the virtuality is of an event to come, and as we saw before the event always has the potential to affectively attune a multiplicity of bodies to its happening, differentially. Aesthetic politics brings the collectivity of shared events to the fore, as differential, a multiple bodily potential for what might come. Difference is built into this account. Affective politics, understood as aesthetic politics, is dissensual, in the sense that it holds contrasting alternatives together without immediately demanding that one alternative eventuates and the others evaporate. It makes thought-felt different capacities for existence, different life potentials, different forms of life, without immediately imposing a choice between them. The political question, then, is not how to find a resolution. It's not how to impose a solution. It's how to keep the intensity in what comes next. The only way is through actual differentiation. Different lines of unfolding bring the contrast into actuality, between them. The political question is then what Isabelle Stengers calls an "ecology of practices." How do you tend this proliferation of differentiation? How can the lines not clash and destroy each other? How do they live together? The "solution" is not to resolve the tension through a choice, but to modulate it into a symbiosis: a cross-fertilization of capacitations that live out to the fullest the intensity of the event of their coming together.

JM: It's more usual to speak of politics in terms of the need for a common language.

BM: I just don't think that the possibility of a common language exists anymore, if it ever did. And if it did, I wouldn't want it. I don't think I'd be alone. That in itself uncommons it. It would have to be imposed. It would necessitate an exercise of

power-over, very different from empowerment, the power-to of ontopower. I wouldn't want it because in my way of thinking it would be inaesthetic. It would be de-intensifying. It would flatten affect by standardizing response. It would put politics back on the uncreative road to reflex. Consensus is always the product of a power-over. It is a habituation to it, even if it's a soft form of it. I can't imagine a "common language" that is not consensus building in a de-intensifying way.

The world is too complex to hold to that as a model. The fragmentation of nations into sub-communities, the accompanying increase in the number of nation-states formed from these communities, the destructuring effects of movements of capital, the way these unchained capital flows enable or force a constant movement of people, goods, ideas, and information across borders—all of this has created a hyper-complex situation of flow and variation over which there's no effective oversight. There's no vantage point from which you could encompass it all; there's no shared perspective from which to find a common language or build a consensus or share a rationality. The situation is constitutively dissensual. Rather than going back to the failed project of finding a common language, purpose, or rationality, it would seem that the complexity of that dissensus should be the starting point for politics. Why accept as the starting point a reduction of difference, a channeling into tired habit? That's to start with defeat. Taking complexity for a starting point, broadly speaking, is what "ecological" means. I see affective intensity and an aesthetics of varying life potential as the elements of an ecology of practices of the symbiotic kind called for by Stengers, and before her by Guattari. From this symbiotic perspective, an anti-capitalist politics begins by affirming the variability and potential for forms of life unleashed by capitalism itself. It continues the differentiation of forms of life already under way, but by other means, governed by other constellations of termini and embodying other values.

JM: We've begun a discussion of the micropolitical and maybe this is a good point to discuss some of the ways the micropolitical and a politics of affect can be materialized. One example is the creative, aesthetico-political events that you and Erin Manning are organizing through the Sense Lab in Montreal. Could you speak about these?

BM: Although the "micro" of micropolitical is not synonymous with small, and although the modulations that might be effected at that level can be widely distributed, there is no better place to start than the local context in which you live and work every day. Macropolitical positioning operates under the illusion that there is a neutral, higher-level vantage point allowing you to stand outside and judge, while standing pure, correct, and unsullied. Critique, practiced in this way, does double duty. It opposes too simplistically, I would argue. But it also shields. To judge from outside is to ensconce yourself in an unassailable position.

Micropolitically, critique has to come from within, in the thick of things, and that means getting your hands dirty. There is no situation of being outside a situation. And no situation is subject to mastery. It is only by recognizing the bonds of complicity and the limitations that come with the situation that you can succeed in modulating those constraints at the constitutive level, where they reemerge and seriate. This is immanent "critique." It is active, participatory critique. For me, micropolitical action involves this kind of immanent critique that actively alters conditions of emergence. It engages becoming, rather than judging what is.

Erin and I are both professors, so the university is the day-to-day situation we start from, or more precisely the academic institution including its extended milieu of publishing, workshopping, and conferencing. Erin is also in a fine arts department, so we operate between the art and academic institutions. In both cases there's an imperative to produce and create what is increasingly being called, importing corporate vocabulary, a "deliverable" -- a valorizable product, like a gallery-ready artwork or an article publishable in a standardized ("peer-reviewed") disciplinary journal. The emphasis is on packageable content for transmission. Increasingly, in this environment process itself becomes product, as when creative platforms developed by artists are seen as research contributions feeding product development for the "culture industries." IP is the new creativity. There are very strong pressures in this direction in Canada and elsewhere, where art has become "research-creation" subject, like all academic activity, to productivity assessment. We wanted to see how far we could go, within the art and academic institutions, toward freeing creative and collaborative process from this tendency, while still continuing to survive within that environment, which is the one that feeds us—we can't deny our participation in it and our dependence on it—and which is overall is not going to change any time soon.

A lot of the impetus for what we're doing came from some very intense conversations we had with Isabelle Stengers, who explained that her criteria for a successful intellectual event was precisely that – that it be an event. For something to happen that wouldn't have happened otherwise. If heaven, according to an old Talking Heads song, is where nothing ever happens, then the conference is surely academic heaven. When was the last time you had a truly new thought at a conference? When was the last time that you saw an opinion changed by an academic discussion or debate? On the art side, the equivalent heavens are the artists talk and the standard gallery exhibition. Isabelle also emphasized that it is not a question of "freedom," in the sense of simply lifting constraints. Nothing happens most where there are no constraints, because anything goes, and anything going is just nothing carried to a higher power, heaven to the nth degree. You might avoid the conference, but where does that get you if you end up with the kind of free-floating, free-associating discussion you might enjoy late at night in a dormitory room? Without constraints there are no stakes.

Our point of departure is what we call “enabling constraints”—sets of designed constraints that are meant to create specific conditions for creative interaction where something is set to happen, but there is no preconceived notion of exactly what the outcome will be or should be. No deliverable. All process. We started practicing what we thought of as event design, design for alternative format art-academic events. The stakes aren’t defined so much by issues or content or definable outcome. The stakes are the event happening or not, seeing what can be done to open up new ground for exploration and invention that reenergizes people and makes their lives in and around the institutions in which they function at the same time more livable and more intense.

It was Erin who initially started the Sense Lab, which I then joined as a collaborator. Looking at the milieus we were in, and between the art and academic institutions, we thought that there are things each side could offer the other—seeds of symbiosis. From the academic side, what could be brought into the art world is a tendency or propensity toward rigorous verbal expression. On the art side is a complementary propensity to invest in an object or system or interaction an intensity that rigorously exceeds language, at least standard denotative or referential uses of language. We wanted to bring together those two tendencies: bringing concepts to rigorous verbal expression, and intensifying perception and experience.

We set it up at a community-based electronic art institution, the Society for Art and Technology, that is located between the Montreal universities in an urban space where Montreal’s different language communities intermix, and where academics, university-based artists, and community-based independent artists can come together. We tried to think of how to create events that would bring people together, not on a blank slate, not even on even ground, but rather from a creative bias, from the angle of what most moved them, what moved their work, what made it work. The first thing we did was to forbid anyone from bringing completed work. We wanted them to bring not the work, but what made the work – the tendencies, skills, obsessions, attractions, inclinations that drove it from within. We set up a situation that for some would be interpreted as an artistic exhibition, for others as a conference. But it was neither. No one was going to show anything or deliver anything. The situation wasn’t recognizable, which we knew could be disturbing and might intimidate. We had to have a certain estrangement, but that wasn’t the point. It was just one of the enablements. We wanted to bring people together at their work’s constitutive level, whereas they are used to being asked to come with it already constituted, so to enable the event we had to disable certain kinds of expectations. Suspend. Like a shock, but not in the macro sense, just enough to give pause and toggle out of default settings. We thought hard—by we I mean a very dedicated collective involving students and others committed to the project—

about what kinds of spatial setup would work best, how to modulate expectations as people entered the space, and how to break expectations but in a gentle and inviting way. We started thinking in terms of hospitality. That became our model. How do we create enabling constraints so that the situation is one of hospitality, not a test and not a show-and-tell. We tried to find very small, concrete ways of doing that, trying to anticipate the roadblocks that traditional events throw up. The moment of entry is crucial. How people enter an event implants all kinds of dynamics. Once they're in, group dynamics becomes the next challenge. Take for example the plenary. You want some whole-group interaction, otherwise the event feels dispersed and no one leaves with a sense that anything happened. But plenaries are deadly. People zone out. A few people dominate. Others don't feel empowered to speak. Discussions get too general, with the same words being used with different connotations, and no one really connecting with what anyone else is saying. It's deadly. But if you have small groups, how do you form them, and what do they do so that they are not just plenaries in miniature? And if something really happens in a small group, which is where things are most likely to happen, how do you convey that to the other groups, or the group as a whole? These were the kinds of questions we asked.

In answer to the question of how to form small groups, we found affective mechanisms. For example, in the first event we organized we had a number of pieces of fabric that were very furry and soft with beautiful colours and patterns. To divide them into groups, we simply asked people to pick the pieces that most attracted them, and then to use the fabric to make the space for their interaction—by sitting on it or around it or by wrapping themselves in it, whatever moved them. So before the first word was exchanged in the group or the first task begun, people were already in a little affinity-based world that had the feel of an ephemeral home. We furred them into groups. In response to the question of how to move from small groups to whole-group interaction, we laid down the enabling constraint that each group had to share, but what they had to share was their process, so that it was forbidden to report. You couldn't describe what happened as from an outside perspective. You had to find a way to perform it again, but in a way that was adapted to the larger numbers. You couldn't report or even translate, you had to transduce. Inventing or improvising these transitions became a big part of the event. It's like the event's content was becoming its form, or vice versa. Nothing was going to happen unless everyone helped make it happen. So everybody owned the results. Everyone was actively implicated in making the event. They didn't deliver, and neither did we. Without the participants' active involvement, nothing would have happened. Since there was nothing on offer, there was nothing to be had, except what the group collectively made happen. What we were reaching for was what Guattari calls a "subject-group." As with all groups of that kind, what had happened wasn't immediately clear, because there was no assessable product separable from

the process. What was clear at the time was only that the experience had been intense, and collective. Afterwards, things did develop—collaborations grew that had been seeded at the event. Some are still going, three years later. Processual seeds were sown that germinated on other soil. That led us to a second model, of processual dissemination, which we're also still working on.

The group furring and performed transition mechanisms are little examples of what we call "techniques of relation." The challenge for each event is to find the enabling constraints and techniques of relation that tailor the event to what's singular about that particular coming together. To do that you need to know something about what moves the people who will come. So there are pre-event techniques for relation that have to be in place to prepare the ground. And the post-event collaborative developments are crucial to network, because that is where what happened in the event really eventuates.

For us it's very important that what transpires be gathered in language. We're both writers. We both think of what we do as philosophy. So we always try to create a real, effective presence of philosophy. But not as a master discipline that judges other kinds of practice. We see it as a symbiosis, where practices that are not primarily linguistic are seen to bear active conceptual force that can be brought to explicit verbal expression, and by being brought into language can cycle back into the practice from which they develop to spur it further. Conversely, we approach philosophy as Deleuze and Guattari define it, as the creation of concepts. So philosophy is seen as a creative practice in its own right, with its own material and medium, which is language. Another challenge: other techniques of relation have to be invented to foster this reciprocity between modes of creative activity favoring different media. A great deal of our thinking about and experimenting with event design is concerned with this, not only in our special events but in the regular day-to-day functioning of the Sense Lab group, locally as well as remote, through an internet group hub.

A lot of the thinking about what we're calling techniques of relation has been done before in social movements, particularly starting in the 1960s, and in artistic movements. We have a sense that it is something that people all over the world are again feeling a hunger for, and taking up again on their own, in their own home bases, in different ways, sometimes consciously in connection with movements like the anti-globalization movement, sometimes within the smaller confines of their own institution, with a view to making it more livable and sustaining. There is a lot of thought and experimentation going on, many techniques that have already been invented, many more on the way. We see ourselves as connecting to that wider movement, just creating one more forum for that kind of activity. It's not something we feel we've invented or in any way own. It's in continuity with a discontinuous tradition—a set of practices and orientations that rise and subside, but always seem to rearise, because the

hunger is always there, the need to revivify habituated, reflex-tending forms of life. We look forward to the connections between different approaches to participatory art-academic-political event design growing more dense and networked and expanded.

JM: One of the things that I think is interesting about the approach is that it is both concerned with the creative limitations required for producing an event, and also concerned with how various events resonate with each other and amplify each other. This seems to bring us back to the problem we discussed earlier regarding how an affective politics may have a global presence, or work up to a scale larger than a single event.

BM: Yes, a micropolitical event can have broad range. What qualifies it as micropolitical is the way it happens, not the dimensions it takes. By micropolitical we mean returning to the generative moment of experience, at the dawning of an event, to produce a modulatory commotion internal to the constitution of the event. It's a question of reconnecting processually with what's germinal in your living, with the conditions of emergence of the situations you live. The idea is then to find a mechanism to pass that reconnection forward. Not impose it, not even suggest it as a general model. Rather, to give it as a gift, a gift of self-renewing process. This question of event-propagation, of processual seeding as part of a gift economy of revivifying experience, is the problem of a large-scale micropolitics. The process itself has to be self-valorizing. It has to have a value in itself because the situation of the world, Obama notwithstanding, is not overall one of hope. The situation of the world is desperate. There's no rational ground for hope. If you look at things rationally, if you look at the increasing disparities of wealth and health in the world, if you look at the spreading environmental destruction, if you look at the looming disasters in the foundations of the economy, if you look at the the energy crisis and the food crises affecting the globe, and especially if you look at the way they interrelate, if you look at the virulence of renascent nationalist sentiment and of the culture of war, there is no hope. So the micropolitical question is how to live more intensely, live more fully, with augmented powers of existence, within the limits of that desperate situation, while finding ways to continue nevertheless, chipping away at the macro problems.

There's a certain incompleteness to any micropolitical event, like the events I was talking about. A lot of things that you feel were on the verge of taking shape didn't quite happen. Potentials that you could just glimpse didn't come into focus. The goal is not to overcome the incompleteness. It's to make it compelling. Compelling enough that you are moved to do it again, differently, bringing out another set of potentials, some more formed and focused, others that were clearly expressed before now backgrounded. That creates a small, moveable environment of potential. The goal is to live in that moveable

environment of potential. If you manage to, you will avoid the paralysis of hopelessness. Neither hope nor hopelessness—a pragmatics of potential. You have to live it at every level. In the way you relate to your partner, and even your cat. The way you teach a class if you're a professor. The way you create and present your art if you're an artist. If you participate in more punctual events like the ones I was describing, this will provide a continuous background for what comes of those events to disseminate into and diffuse through. A symbiosis of the special event and the day-to-day, in creative connivance.

This is not to say that operating in a more macro, top-down manner, is wrong or should not be undertaken. It's just to say that if it's done to the exclusion of micropolitical activity it's mortifying, even when it's done for survival's sake. Sometimes there is no alternative but to centrally impose certain enabling constraints. For example, I'd be very happy if the transition to a renewable energy future or a global redistribution of wealth or a non-growth paradigm were imposed on the capitalist system. But high-level solutions of that kind are only part of the political equation, and it's not the part that the affective politics we've been talking about specifically addresses. Micropolitics is not programmatic. It doesn't construct and impose global solutions. But it would be naïve to think that is separate from that kind of macro-activity. Anything that augments powers of existence creates conditions for micropolitical flourishings. No body flourishes without enough food and without health care. Micropolitical interventions need macro solutions. But success at the macropolitical level is at best partial without a complementary micropolitical flourishing. Without it, the tendency is toward standardization. Since macropolitical solutions are generally applicable by definition, by definition they act to curtail the variety and exuberance of forms of life. Macropolitical intervention targets minimal conditions of survival. Micropolitics complements that by fostering an excess of conditions of emergence. That inventiveness is where new solutions start to crystallize. The potentials produced at the micropolitical level feed up, climbing the slope that macropolitics descends. Micropolitical and macropolitical go together. One is never without the other. They are processual reciprocals. They aliment each other. At their best, they are mutually corrective. Even macro solutions designed to curtail micropolitical activity often end up feeding it by making it a necessity to invent new ways of getting by and getting around. Creative variation is the only real constant of politics. Deleuze and Guattari often made this point, for example in their slogan that that the State is built on what escapes it.

It has become a commonplace recently to say that we are in a situation where the end of the world is now imaginable—but the end of capitalism isn't. That is definitely one "solution" that is not likely to come programmatically, top-down—given who's on top. The dismantling of capitalism is a "corrective" that will only come from a breaking of the reciprocity I was just talking about between the

macro- and micropolitical. The prevailing operating conditions of macro/micropolitical reciprocity should not be taken to imply that the symmetry is never broken, that a bifurcation can never occur. The complementarity can be broken in both directions. When macrostructures miniaturize themselves and work to usurp the ground of the micropolitical with scaled-down versions of the dominant generalities, that is fascism. When micropolitical flourishings proliferate to produce a singularity, in the sense of a systemic tipping point, that's revolution. The ultimate vocation of micropolitics is this: enacting the unimaginable. The symmetry-breaking point, the point at which the unimaginable eventuates, is but a cut, "smaller" than the smallest historically perceivable interval. That is to say, qualitatively different. A moment of a different color, one you never see coming, that comes when it's least expected. Inevitably, a next micro/macro complementarity will quickly settle in. But it will take a form that could not have been predicted, but is now suddenly doable and thinkable. Micropolitics is what makes the unimaginable practicable. It's the potential that makes possible.