

**ERIN MANNING AND BRIAN MASSUMI (2014)  
*THOUGHT IN THE ACT: PASSAGES IN THE  
ECOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE. MINNEAPOLIS:  
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Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's new book, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, is concerned with reinvigorating the practice of research-creation in the time of its having become alarmingly subservient to the pulls of neoliberal economy. It is at once a poetic encounter with the works of art presented over the course of the book, and a manual for reaching that productive space where research and creation can be said to truly interpenetrate. Since 2003, when research-creation was first introduced as a new interdisciplinary field of knowledge-based artistic practice, there has been a notable absence of adequate theorizing that could provide a background for understanding its varied modes of operation. Relying on terminology borrowed from other academic fields – the temporary solution to the lack of vocabulary with which to describe the hybrid forms of research-creation – had the result of discriminating against the arts' diverse modalities of expression, and subtracting their most distinctive characteristic: an open-ended and process-based orientation. *Thought in the Act* is a long-awaited book, which not only legitimizes artistic practice as a mode of thinking but also builds a theory around the elusive nature of intermingling between diverse modes of thought co-composing together, such as writing poetry, experiencing architecture, perceiving the everyday, dancing and painting.

In the spirit of the text's emphasis on intermodality, the book consists of two parts that cross-pollinate each other. In 'Passages,' Manning and Massumi practice philosophical writing about art that initiates the reader into the creative processes of poetry, architecture, dance and painting. In 'Propositions,' the strategies

opened up in the discussed artists' works are crystalized into a recipe for activism and for imagining collaborative art practices outside the mechanisms of the market economy. Not surprisingly, the book is infused with the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. It is, however, the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead that breathes most emblematically throughout the volume, challenging the more recent theories of new materialism and object-oriented ontology.

*Thought in the Act's* opening chapter, 'Coming Alive in the World of Texture: for Neurodiversity,' is an encounter with Tito Mukhopadhyay, a poet and writer diagnosed with low-functioning non-verbal autism. Mukhopadhyay's way of relating to the world is 'pure' and neutral, allowing the environment to disclose itself. It is this simultaneous awareness of all states of being, organic and inorganic, and non-hierarchical perception of spatial elements, characteristic of the perceptual space of an autistic individual, that according to Manning and Massumi closely define the space of artistic process, of thinking in the act. As well as arguing in support of neurodiversity, the authors defend diversity across modalities of thought and modes of existence.

Manning and Massumi's poetic exploration of perceptual variations associated with autism is not the first instance of learning a way of relating to the world from those whose states of mind are neurologically altered. Guattari's practice at the anti-psychiatric clinic, *La Borde*, immediately comes to mind. The psychoanalyst's insights received during his participation in the lives of psychotic patients laid down the basis for his work with Deleuze, who worked towards extracting 'deterritorialized' schizophrenia experienced as a creative 'line of flight' (Lotringer & Morris, 2013: 13). It is possible to suggest that Manning and Massumi's project is parallel to that of Deleuze and Guattari: it attempts to pinpoint the 'line of flight' contained within autism. *Thought in the Act* proposes to move away from the logic of reduction towards the encompassing field of experience.

In 'A Perspective of the Universe: Alfred North Whitehead Meets Arakawa and Gins,' the multiplicity that enveloped Mukhopadhyay, allowing him to co-compose with the environment, translating these experiences into the language of poetry, is recreated in the architectural spaces of Arakawa and Gins. The ecologies these artists enable resist conventional figure/ground and subject/object relationships, allowing for continual re-shuffling of the fields' affordances. Manning and Massumi, quite

appropriately, bring to the reader's attention the quote from the Futurist artist, Umberto Boccioni: 'Our body penetrates the sofa on which it sits; and the sofa penetrates our body' (24). The authors refer to this state of becoming with the architectural surrounding, where the body and the site cross the borders of each other's interiorities, as ecological becoming – always in the dynamic relationship with the potentialities of the environment.

The concept of entertainment – 'foregrounding of the immediate field of experience' (8) – is materialized in the architectural spaces created by Arakawa and Gins, where familiar forms are always open to new affordances. Manning and Massumi seek to unlearn the ways of relating to the world engrained through habituation of the mind to the repeating patterns of everyday encounters – a proposition that is central to the theory of defamiliarization proposed by the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Shklovsky et al., 1919: 13). In Arakawa and Gins' work, defamiliarization of the architectural space, such as a house in *Bioscleave House (Life Extending Villa)*, complicates familiar interactions within its parameters and initiates the process of living anew, of continuously re-ordering one's preconceived notions of the field's configurations.

Manning and Massumi open up the idea of what Shklovsky would refer to as the de-habituation of a spatial environment expanded in *Perspectives of the Universe* by looking at defamiliarization of the body and its movements – notably as a technique employed by the choreographer William Forsythe to release movement from its general meaning and to allow its native potentiality to unfold. In *Wolf Phrase* – a movement piece conceived by the Forsythe Company and inspired by the rhythm of language in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* – movement phrases come to existence in the passages from one modality of expression to another. Movement is given agency. Dancers co-create with it. Thinking in the act of movement means to allow the body to embody nothing but itself, to let it speak in subjunctive *what if*, free from habitual interpretations.

One of *Thought in the Act's* most significant claims revolves around the need to allow a creative process to take charge of its own becoming. According to Manning and Massumi, a controlled chaos where the agency of a work of art can be felt is achieved only upon establishing a set of enabling constraints. In the fourth chapter, 'No Title Yet. Bracha Ettinger: Moved by Light,' the authors introduce the work of an artist well aware of the agencies of her creations.

Ettinger knows how to listen to what her paintings whisper. The enabling constraints in Bracha Ettinger's series of paintings, *Eurydice*, are set in motion by the operation of the Xerox machine used by the artist to give a new beginning to the found images. Ettinger imbues her work with agency by removing her subjectivity, by 'suspending her authorial will' (60) in the act of stopping the copying process prior to its completion, leaving its results to chance. Manning and Massumi's emphasis on the almost machinic way Ettinger applies her brush strokes, removed from consciously judging the outcomes of her actions, is reminiscent of the surrealist technique of automatism – a practice intended to release the process of art making from the confines of rational thought. Whereas surrealists tended to attribute the results of the automatic drawing and writing to the workings of the unconscious (Breton, 1969: 10), Manning and Massumi propose that automatism in Ettinger's work allows the work itself to co-create with her author.

Artistic techniques and philosophical concepts discussed in *Passages* find their reflections in the second part of the book, titled *Propositions*, which opens up with a manifesto-like algorithm of actions meant to initiate the process of thinking-feeling. In 2004 Erin Manning established SenseLab at Concordia University – a laboratory for experimentation with practicing thought in action. Within the parameters of SenseLab, Manning and Massumi orchestrated *Dancing the Virtual* (2005), *Housing the Body; Dressing the Environment* (2007), *Society of Molecules* (2009) and *Generating the Impossible* (2011) – self-organizing, controlled-chaos events intended as collaborative platforms for triggering open-ended creative processes capable of subsequent re-beginnings. As a way to 'curdle research-creation's annexation to neoliberal economy' (87), participants of the aforementioned events worked through the concept of gift as it was traditionally understood by the First Nations peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast practicing the ceremony of Potlatch. The authors define the gift-giving ceremony of Potlatch as destabilizing harmony and enabling formations of new relationships through excess and destruction of objects of exchange. Manning and Massumi relied on the concept of gift as a way to acknowledge that what connects a social group 'is the sharing of the more-than of their individual subjectivities in the context of a ritual technique of hospitality and event-based generosity' (128).

In *Gift*, the sociologist Marcel Mauss famously describes Potlatch in North-West America as the monster child of the gift system (1967: 41). Characterized by the obligation to give and obligation to return

gifts, this ceremony allowed establishing political rank within the tribes practicing Potlatch, leading to the enslavement of those unable to repay the given gift (4). Not surprisingly, Mauss contends, the activity of such tribes was marked by the spirit of rivalry and antagonism. It appears that the gift economy of North West tribes could hardly be associated with hospitality and generosity – the qualities that Manning and Massumi vested their projects with. Even though the gift giving as it is practiced in Potlatch ceremonies is opposed to the prime directives of capitalism – that of accumulation and instant gratification – it is yet to be clarified how the Potlatch's mechanism of establishing power relations and societal hierarchy corresponds to the SenseLab's decentralized system of operation and disregard for social status.

*Thought in the Act's* project to resuscitate art's open-endedness and its process-based experimental aspects comes at a time when neoliberalism's insistence on profitability forces art practitioners to pursue marketability by delivering a polished, finalized product pulled out of the rhizomatic structure which nourished its becoming. Manning and Massumi are not the first to comment and act upon the changing conditions of cultural production. However, what makes *Thought in the Act* particularly relevant is the fact that its authors practice philosophy and art unrestrained by any political agenda. The only bias Manning and Massumi adhere to is against economic control of creative motivation and expression. It is the limitation of many politically inclined artists to submit their voices in favor of a common political agenda, joining the choir of those singing in unison. It is this harmony understood as a 'diversity of parts subordinated to a unified functioning' (2014: 117) that the authors of *Thought in the Act* identify as the most harmful for organic unfolding of creative processes. To preserve their potentialities, one needs to perpetuate the moment before artistic expression becomes crystalized into a prescriptive model.

The will to sustain individual expression and reinvent artistic language while attempting to subvert cultural hegemony aligns *Thought in the Act's* propositions with those of the avant-gardes. This makes one wonder if writing an avant-garde text without ever using the word 'avant-garde' was one of the enabling constraints set by the authors of *Thought in the Act*. Manning and Massumi's ideas are not only coherent and practical but also contagious, making one hope that the day will come when the words of the French socialist theorist, Henri de Saint-Simon, will finally become materialized: 'New meditations have proved to me that things should move ahead

with the artists in the lead, followed by scientists, and that the industrialists should come after these two classes' (Calinescu, 1987: 102). How can SenseLab and the ideas explored in *Thought in the Act* assist in bringing forward approaches to practice and thinking that resist the logic of post-industrial economy? Manning and Massumi define SenseLab's successes in whether it is able to generate 'outside prolongations of its activity that ripple into distant pools of potential' (151). Without question, SenseLab's collaborations with twelve universities and twenty community arts partners in North America, Europe, and Australia speak of SenseLab propositions' fruitful contagiousness. However, a valid question to ask is whether its ripples can reach the pools nearby. Can it run interference with the institution which hosts its activities, while simultaneously striving to avoid becoming an institution itself? Is it capable of successfully spreading its spores within the obstinate university culture? It could be too early to make such judgments, as tough institutional skin takes longer to penetrate. Nonetheless, SenseLab's mere existence hints at a rather plausible possibility that the process of curdling institutional practices has already been set in motion.

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