

ATTEMPTS ON SHARED EXPERIENCE AND AUTONOMY

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INTRODUCTION

This being an essay (“An attempt, endeavor.”¹) I will try to accomplish several things: explore some recurring issues in my own practice; investigate how other artists—whose practice I find adjacent to mine—relate to the issues that I have experienced; elaborate on ideas concerning autonomy and sharing of experience; draw an outline for future work through the experience gained so far.

PART ONE: SHARED EXPERIENCE? AUTONOMY?

The work and concepts of a group of artists: Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Victor Grippo, Alberto Greco and—in this quintet quite alien and notably younger—Heath Bunting is hard to collect under a common term, but this is not even desirable as it would tame, undermine and maybe even extinguish the very core of their practices. I will, however, try to examine some common characteristics of these artists’ practices, the clearest of which is their individual ambitions for collective work—for proposing “unfinished, ‘open’ works”² and participatory processes rather than *closed* works (finished by the artist in the studio and put on display for an *interpassive*³ audience). This in particular is what interests me the most. Another shared characteristic is found in the “many implications for the future interrelationship of art and life”⁴ in their works and a mutual seeping of one of these into the other—as in “the yin-yang disc [where] the lozenge of dark contains a seed of light, and vice versa”⁵. A space where *experimental* processes can find a (temporary) refuge. I find this is something which is often ignored and/or frowned upon as a contamination of the *pure*, something I see as an illusion incubated by a strong (Western) belief in Dualism⁶ (*good and evil, light and dark, art and life etc.*), while the following takes place behind the smokescreen of Dualism: “from Chaos comes the ‘myriad things’, like the seeds in a gourd or the chopped-up goodies in a won-ton”⁷ as each individual experience of the process is incorporated and “the water in a spillover-vessel which flows out, letting each stream find its own channel, fertilizing the earth, bringing everything into becoming.” A first breath of the *new air* is drawn and at once fills the lungs of the collective work. This is effectively demonstrated, both literally and metaphorically, in Clark’s *Air and Stone* (“not an art object but a proposal: simply inflate an ordinary plastic bag, seal it, place the stone in one corner and squeeze the bag between your hands”⁸).

The interplay of solid mass and empty space, of weight and lightness, sums up the whole of sculptural history, yet the object is analogous to a body, breathing between our hands and sustained by our gestures. ‘We are the mould: the breath inside the mould is yours: the meaning of our existence.’⁹

Growing up as *white, lower middle class* and *male* in a small but quite wealthy town in southwestern Sweden effectively screened me from any existing *organized* search for autonomy. But regardless of that I always felt in opposition to claims of authority and moral absolutism. Provoked by hierarchies around me and the requirement to position myself inside these I searched for autonomy in everything around me. Usually I ended up feeling that the autonomy I found was not much more than a façade in front of a brick wall of authority, but nonetheless one, I observed, which was full of small cracks through which something shone from just behind the bricks. When I came into contact with political parties whom with I shared some viewpoints I was often repelled by their togetherness—I could for some reason not imagine myself in any such band of brothers. Instead, some years later I found myself on the verge of adulthood in the nearest city, Gothenburg. During this time I also first encountered the concept of psychogeography, stumbling upon Guy Debord’s *Théorie de la dérive* in some corner of the internet (originally published in *Internationale Situationiste #2* Paris, December 1958). I was unemployed at that time and occupied myself with activities something like those the *drifting* Debord wrote of many years earlier; exploring corners, pathways and hidden *islands* in between the *used* spaces of the city. I was also occupied with creative writing for my own pleasure, inspired by the lyrics and poetry of Saul Williams, Sufi masters (Hafiz, Rumi) and the *beat generation* (Kerouac, Ginsberg etc.) The synthesis of creative writing (as a window to imaginary spaces) and music (as enchantment and pathway to bodily movement) was interesting to me, but was not close to me in a direct way e.g. in jamming, musical composition and/or writing lyrics. Instead I found myself working with words, drawn imagery and temporal *unauthorized* installations here and there—often in the same *islands* I had earlier been *drifting* among—something which had become a sort of quasi drifting-scouting-crafting-documenting activity. This specific synthesis of activities and the continuous search for *spaces* to operate within seems close to what Hakim Bey writes about the in *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, of being in search of “‘spaces’ (geographic, social, cultural, imaginal) with potential to flower as autonomous zones.”¹⁰

My drifting-scouting-crafting-documenting eventually morphed—through the photographic/documentary part of the activity—into working with *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (the title of a Thames & Hudson book I read around this time). I became a student on an advanced vocational education and training in photography and performed a sort of dance during this time—distancing myself from the previous activity, into *pure* photography and then going closer to the first multi-faceted activity again. After about two years I began distancing *the work* from *being* photography, something which ran parallel to studies at the School of Photography (HFF) at Gothenburg University for a Bachelor of Fine Art in Photography. I continued to distance myself from the photographic image as core of my practice and applied for a transfer to Malmö Art Academy (KHM) as I felt my work would

benefit more from the framework of *fine art* (in Swedish *fri konst* which literally translates as *free art*: to me more liberating). In this *liberation* of the photograph as essential to my work I rediscovered my interest in the ideas of the Situationists, something which has been continuously interesting to me. It is perhaps not a shock to hear that I also encountered Fluxus now and then, but it did not really hold my interest very well even though the ideas of the *event* often seemed close—something which has repeatedly been pointed out to me by others.

It now seems logical that I would at some point be reading material published by Autonomedia (a publisher of books concerning anarchism, autonomy, cyberfeminism etc.) Recommended by Joachim Koester I started to read Hakim Bey's *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, in which Bey draws from the praxis of the pirates (not modern day piracy – Somalia or copyright infringement – but the 18th century's swashbuckling kind) and from the history of attempts at autonomy in the 19th-20th century. Early in that text his point of view felt strangely familiar; he writes in the introduction to the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ):

I have deliberately refrained from defining the TAZ—I circle around the subject, firing off exploratory beams. In the end the TAZ is almost self-explanatory. If the phrase became current it would be understood without difficulty ... understood in action.¹¹

It seemed to me Bey was not interested in absolute truths and I continued to explore with him how a TAZ could be started and how it would inevitably vanish “leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because indefinable in terms of the Spectacle”¹² as soon as it had become “named (represented, mediated)”¹³. The core difference between Bey's TAZs and other attempts to reach the (anarchist) dreams of a free culture lies in its invisibility, making it utterly effective and ensuring that “the State cannot recognize it because History has no definition of it.”¹⁴ The reference to Debord's *spectacle* made me curious and I soon found out that what had brought me to this text was obviously the events in Paris around 1968 and specifically the notion of how the use of poetry effectively forms the basis of revolutions¹⁵. Wherever I go I seem to return to being interested in poetry (in both a literary and very broad definition) as potent motor and even as change agent. I wouldn't call it the sole source of my view of poetry, I remember sometime during my growth encountering, through a newspaper article concerning some demonstration or *black/red/green* political rally, a piece of anonymous graffiti (remediated as printed text) from Paris sometime during the uprisings in 1968: *Sous les pavés, la plage!* which can be translated as *Beneath the paving stones—the beach!*

My search for autonomous *spaces* was very much my *everyday life* and was also my *daily work* (without of course earning any money for it and trying to live cheap, hosted by my patient father and extended family for a while until I could get an *income* from the government's grant/

loan for students). Creative writing (or what I reluctantly would call *poetry*) became for me a potent agent for channeling my need for poetic–political–philosophical stimuli.

I secretly allied myself with the beat generation, the Situationists, drifters, municipal workers, squatters and as a matter of fact anyone doing anything (that I encountered while drifting through the city). Perhaps it was precisely my lack of *forced* work tasks that made me interested in *voluntary* and *autonomous* ones. The attraction I felt towards these actions generated a sort of quasi-occupation where I would simply carry out tasks in public spaces which were not ordered by anyone but myself. Had I become a self-employed and autonomous nomad-voluntary-worker-poet-vandal-philosopher-artist? Perhaps it was a sort of “psychic nomadism”¹⁶?

These nomads practice the *razzia*, they are the corsairs, they are the viruses; they have both need and desire for TAZs, camps of black tents under the desert stars, interzones hidden fortified oases along secret caravan routes, ‘liberated’ bits of jungle and bad-land, no-go areas, black markets, and underground bazaars.¹⁷

The experience of these actions was always between that of vandal and voluntary community worker, with a tingling feeling in my stomach sometimes and a proud feeling of doing good things before disappearing from the *scene* into the masses or shaded corners of the city. Bey suggest the act of *disappearance* as a very logical radical option for our time:

[not as a nihilistic *death for the radical project*, but] to *mine* it for useful strategies in the always-ongoing ‘revolution of everyday life’: the struggle that cannot cease even with the last failure of political or social revolution because nothing except the end of the world can bring an end to everyday life, nor to our aspirations for the *good things*, for the Marvelous. And as Nietzsche said, if the world *could* come to an end, logically it would have done so; it has not, so it *does not*.¹⁸

I find my own work to be continually looping back into and operating within borderlands between *western* dualities. For the exhibition *Information Wants to Be Free* my practice consisted of “leaving everyday objects, carefully composed according to a complex set of binaries and word pairs”¹⁹, my attempt was to source pre-existing objects from all over *everyday life* and simultaneously organize these (and their specific sites, specifics of installation etc.) according to a quasi-taxonomic practice and create a chaotic self-destructive field of objects that are “stubbornly defying fixed meaning.”²⁰ A poster was presented in the space of Platform One Gallery with photographs depicting the objects installed and their environments overlaid with (con)textual material: council bylaws, notes concerning the selection and strategy for specific items and their placement, a text describing Abraham Maslow’s *Law of The Instrument*, practical information of Wandsworth Common Railway

Station, an alchemical poem, an article concerning *The Philosopher's Stone*, notes concerning three important strategical decisions for the project etc. My efforts to counteract the expected process of *creating* a work (physically, conceptually, politically) was a way of taking actions to a point where sense and nonsense fused into something which wouldn't fit into a Dualist world (thus proving it false, an *illusion*).

For a long time my practice was dependent on a mind-over-matter attitude where the realization of autonomy, or anything else for that matter, depended on the ability to use a self-actualizing mantra which transforms virtual into actual. This *now-realized* (ex-virtual) state is not a strategy for bringing about actual change (at least not in the common sense meaning), but to reap the benefits of such a change *before* it has actually been carried out. Bey suggests leaving one *exhausted* temporary space for another more beneficial one *before resistance is met*²¹. It is a sort of *surgical stealth strike* probably used for as long as there has been a system to operate within, something which is of course nothing new (looking at capitalist entrepreneurs, assassins, civil-rights activists etc.), but yet a very potent strategy similar to a self-treatment with placebo medicines²²; a realization of how everything floats, how everything is in a constant flux where only disbelief can dispel it²³—and even “adverse effects reported after administration of a placebo”²⁴ supports the argument of the strategy as a potent one (the result of a disbeliever practicing mind-over-matter with a *destructive* or *negative* outcome).

The transformation of virtual into actual was for me, until recently, a *solo* activity—now changed into a participatory one: I came to a realization that the sharing of actual experience was essential to my practice, something which I had severely neglected for a long time. I was at the beginning of working with a project concerning autonomous seating and was in contact with an artist named Lina Issa. She was currently in a residency at IASPIS working on her project *What if, if I take your place?*. Issa writes about her work that it “explores issues of place, otherness, personal histories and relations (psychosocial cartographies)”²⁵ and this specific work was both very clear and simple, yet with promises of an infinite depth and width: to replace someone, to take someone's place in a certain situation “for an hour, a day, a month...”²⁶ Her openness to the project appealed to me and therefore I contacted her to see whether she was interested in trying to explore a recurring issue in my practice: searching for autonomy and shared personal experience. I suggested exploring this issue through her replacing me as the performer of my preconceived (or perhaps even *scripted*) events. She was positive and our discussions headed towards what I now know was the inevitable outcome: the realization that I wouldn't solve this issue by simply outsourcing its execution to someone else (enabling me to direct, observe and document them, making them *a subject*) but what was really of importance was a mutual sharing of experiences gained through a certain event. This evaluation of two or more individual experiences within a given spatial and temporal framework was what my practice had been lacking for a few years, working with something I

didn't want to call *performance*, masquerading in the form of photographic works, text works, traces of events or promises of events-to-come in the form of objects and so on.

Thus far my recent discovery has *only* resulted in a shared experiment and interviewing (on location with a *porta*(-ble) audio recording device) that other part and vice versa. This interchange of notions, inquiries and outlooks with the other(s) involved has for me promises of something unique: jointly discovering new meanings using the two thought spaces resulting in a sort of montage of outlooks. This is of course nothing unique seen in a larger perspective, but certainly something to me very pleasant and positive to work with. This interchange is interesting in relation to my previous work (and frustrations in the process of its *production*): a participatory practice which can be for example a single collision of thought between two individuals over a glass of tea or something like a larger space for joint experimentation reaching over a longer period of time. At the School of Photography I remember one particular *turning point* of frustration and ambition during a *talk* with artist-photographer Anna Kleberg. We discussed a proposal I had made to host a *tea party* in the lobby of the school. I had high ambitions for this cautious *festal* activity ²⁷ but it has remained an unexecuted proposal for reasons which had for me until recently been unknown. The problem was in the format of the work, or perhaps even my outlook on *art*, where the strong dichotomy of *user/author* hindered both myself and others (co-supervisors/co-subjects/co-observers of joint experiments) from actualizing the work:

Art in the World of Art has become a commodity; but deeper than that lies the problem of *re-presentation* itself, and the refusal of all *mediation*. In the TAZ art as a commodity will simply become impossible; it will instead be a condition of life. Mediation is harder to overcome, but the removal of all barriers between artists and 'users' of art will tend toward a condition in which (as A.K. Coomaraswamy described it) 'the artist is not a special sort of person, but every person is a special sort of artist.'²⁸

PART TWO: SHARED EXPERIENCE, AUTONOMY!

Let's try this modest proposal: The venturing to jointly investigate a specific (but not necessarily clear, verbal or distinct) notion resulting in events similar to field trips, tea parties, lunches, workshops and classes with a lack of hierarchy or what might be called an *open structure*.

In these *spaces* everyone uses himself or herself as a test subject and takes turns in interviewing and being interviewed, a practice which will hopefully result in fruitful discussions concerning the experiences of a specific event (from a specific point of view,

physical locality and time). These experience can be recorded using a plethora of different techniques: as individual accounts or group discussions and recorded as audio, video, written accounts, still photography, drawing, bodily reenactments etc. The event is already past, the experience of it remains: its source has vanished before it could be seen, while the resulting experience of it is irreversible. One *space* is exhausted, yet an infinite of possible future ones remains, granting whoever wishes to “a way of *always occupying an autonomous zone*”²⁹, climbing from one step to another as they disappear behind one’s feet.

Oiticica suggests two different modes of proposing a collective art: “to throw individual productions into contact with the public in the streets (naturally, productions created for this, not conventional productions adapted)”³⁰ or “to propose creative activities to this public, in the actual creation of the work.”³¹

Now for something you might not have expected, but which I find closely connected to concepts of performance, autonomy and shared experience: a specific outlook of the Clown as performer and change agent. The fundament of the Clown’s practice is love and care for its audience. The wearing of a mask is not to protect the one behind it from responsibility, humiliation and shame but is instead assuming a state of vulnerability—as a strategy for being able to face one’s audience with a great honesty, to access a communication which has the sincerity of the young child in which all subjects (even those which are taboo) become accessible and *actual*. Wearing a mask enables the Clown to pass through social barriers, this transgression infuses the audience’s gaze with that of the child, making them all transparent. The Clown is naïve and cannot understand social conventions and it is therefore not really to be blamed for breaking them. However, with this freedom from responsibility in the Clown comes the need for another, new and transparent responsibility for the one behind the Mask: to achieve trust in, and to care for, both the Audience and the Clown’s own actions.

'Cause we represent a truth, son, that changes by the hour
 And when you open to it, vulnerability is power
 And in that shifting form you'll find a truth that doesn't change
 And that truth is living proof of the fact that God is strange³²

Could the Clown be used as an agent for instituting the Temporary Autonomous Zone? Could the *Parangolés* of Oiticica have a similar function as the mask of the Clown? And are they both a sort of personal micro-TAZs? Regardless, where and how can the TAZ be located and initiated? Bey believes “[the] TAZ as a conscious radical tactic”³³ will emerge only under a few conditions: when we “realize (make real) the moments and spaces in which freedom is not only possible but *actual*”³⁴; when the counter-Net (the illicit web woven in between the intersections of the existing Net/infrastructure) contains a more significant amount of information on “concrete goods and services necessary for the autonomous life”³⁵; when the “apparatus of

Control—the ‘State’³⁶ continues toward making its power *disappear* by simultaneously solidifying and liquefying “in which hysterical rigidity comes more and more to mask a vacuity, an abyss of power.”³⁷

But out of chaos comes order
 Out of chaos comes order, out of chaos comes order
 Out of chaos comes order, out of chaos comes order
 Out of chaos comes order, out of chaos comes
 Fake niggas run for the border³⁸

Out of borders comes chaos, repeat the mantra *the land lays open, bare, there is no border* until the land lays open, bare, there is no border. Study this transformation, for here grows a strange plant: “an aesthetic of the borderland between chaos and order, the margin, the area of ‘catastrophe’ where the breakdown of a system can equal enlightenment.”³⁹ It is clear to me that the works of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Victor Grippo, Alberto Greco and Heath Bunting “will either infiltrate the media and subvert ‘it’ from within—or else never be ‘seen’ at all.”⁴⁰

The ability to move *rootlessly*, to be a *psychic nomad*, to be able to freely move “from philosophy to tribal myth, from natural science to Taoism”⁴¹ seems to me an essential part of the search for an ever-fleeting autonomy, for *the war machine* must surely have wheels (or at least feet). I propose using a conscious strategy in which multiple individual experiences and the sharing of that experience form a collective work, thus enabling each and every one of us “to see for the first time through the eyes like some golden insect’s, each facet giving a view of an entirely other world.”⁴²

1. "essay, n.5" The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press, retrieved 14 March, 2010, <dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50078118>.

2. Oiticica, H. *Hélio Oiticica: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, February 22-April 26, 1992; Galerie nationale du jeu de paume, Paris, June 8-August 23, 1992; Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, October 1-December 6, 1992; Centro de Arte Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa, January 20-March 20, 1993; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, October 31, 1993-February 20, 1994., Witte de With, Rotterdam, 1992, pp. 119.*

3. “interpassivity, in its opposition to interactivity (not in the standard sense of interacting with the medium, but in the sense of another doing it for me, in my place)“, S Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1998, retrieved 14 March, 2010, <homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/interpassive.pdf>, pp. 11.

4. Brett, G, 'Life Strategies: Overview and Selection—Buenos Aires / London / Rio de Janeiro / Santiago de Chile 1960-1980' in P Schimmel (ed.), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1998, pp. 204.

5. H Bey, 'The Temporary Autonomous Zone' in H Bey (ed.), T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism, Autonomedia, New York, 2004, pp. 141.

6. "the areas are not separated by the straight line of Dualism, but rather by the snaky, sinuous, and ambiguous line of dyadic movement. Western dialectics analyze in order to synthesize, whereas Taoist dialectics begins with the synthesis in order to analyze", Bey, pp. 141.
7. Bey, H, pp. 138-139.
8. Brett, pp. 204.
9. Brett, pp. 204.
10. Bey, pp. 101.
11. Bey, pp. 97.
12. Bey, pp. 99.
13. Bey, pp. 99.
14. Bey, pp. 99.
15. Concerning the beliefs of Kurt Eisner (martyred founder of the Bavarian Soviet Republic), Bey, pp. 125.
16. On what Bey compares to "the war machine" of Deleuze & Guattari, Bey, pp. 105.
17. Bey, pp. 105.
18. Bey, pp. 126.
19. Hellberg, F, *Information Wants to be Free*, press release, retrieved 15 March, 2010, <iloapp.malmoartacademy.se/blog/www?ShowFile&doc=1252650655.pdf>.
20. Hellberg.
21. "because the TAZ is a microcosm of that 'anarchist dream' of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now.", Bey, pp. 99.
22. "placebo, n.4", "A drug, medicine, therapy, etc., prescribed more for the psychological benefit to the patient of being given treatment than for any direct physiological effect; esp. one with no specific therapeutic effect on a patient's condition, but believed by the patient to be therapeutic (and sometimes therefore effective)", OED Online, March 2010, Oxford University Press, retrieved 15 March, 2010, <dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50180494>.
23. "dispel, n.2", "To become dissipated or scattered, as a cloud or the like" The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press, retrieved 15 March, 2010, <dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50066552>.
24. "nocebo, n", "A detrimental effect on health produced by psychological or psychosomatic factors such as negative expectations of treatment or prognosis, cultural beliefs about illness, personality traits, etc.; spec. adverse effects reported after administration of a placebo.", OED Online, September 2009, Oxford University Press, retrieved 15 March, 2010, <dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00325565>.
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26. Issa.
27. Concerning an image by Stephen Pearl Andrews "of anarchist society, the *dinner party*, in which all structure of authority dissolves in conviviality and celebration", Bey, pp. 102.

28. Bey, pp. 130.
29. Bey, pp. 122.
30. Oiticica, pp. 118.
31. Oiticica, pp. 118.
32. Williams, S, *Talk to Strangers*, Audio CD, Fader Label, New York, 2004.
33. Bey, pp. 130.
34. Bey, pp. 130.
35. Bey, pp. 131.
36. Bey, pp. 131.
37. Bey, pp. 131.
38. Williams, S.
39. Bey, pp. 128.
40. Bey, pp. 130.
41. Bey, pp. 104.
42. Bey, pp. 104.

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