



BRIAN HOLMES
ESCAPE THE OVERCODE
ACTIVIST ART IN THE CONTROL SOCIETY

VAN ABBEMUSEUM • WHW 2009

The Affectivist Manifesto

Artistic Critique in the 21st Century



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In the twentieth century, art was judged with respect to the existing state of the medium. What mattered was the kind of rupture it made, the *unexpected* formal elements it brought into play, the way it displaced the conventions of the genre or the tradition. The prize at the end of the evaluative process was a *different sense of what art could be*, a **new realm of possibility** for the aesthetic. Today all that has changed, definitively.

The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular **state of society**. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark out a possible or real shift with respect to the laws,

◀ Dreamtime Village, Wisconsin, 2008

• PHOTO: Claire Pentecost.

the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence.

How does that chance come to be? Expression unleashes affect, and affect is what touches. Presence, gesture and speech transform the quality of contact between people, they create both breaks and junctions; and the expressive techniques of art are able to multiply those immediate changes along a thousand pathways of the mind and the senses. An artistic event does not need an objective judge. You know it has happened when you can bring something else into existence in its wake. Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens up expanding territories. These territories are occupied by the sharing of a double difference: a split from the private self in which each person was formerly enclosed, and from the social order which imposed that particular type of privacy or privation.

When a territory of possibility emerges it changes the social map, like a landslide, a flood or a volcano do in nature. The easiest way for society to protect its existing form is simple denial, pretending the change never happened: and that actually works in the landscape of mentalities. An affective territory disappears if it isn't elaborated, constructed, modulated, differentiated, prolonged by new breakthroughs and conjunctions. There is

no use defending such territories, and even believing in them is only the barest beginning. What they urgently need is to be developed, with forms, rhythms, inventions, discourses, practices, styles, technologies – in short, with cultural codes. An emergent territory is only as good as the codes that sustain it. Every social movement, every shift in the geography of the heart and revolution in the balance of the senses needs its aesthetics, its grammar, its science and its legalisms. Which means that every new territory needs artists, technicians, intellectuals, universities. But the problem is, the expert bodies that already exist are fortresses defending themselves against other fortresses.

Activism has to confront real obstacles: war, poverty, class and racial oppression, creeping fascism, venomous neoliberalism. But what we face is not so much soldiers with guns as cognitive capital: the knowledge society, an excruciatingly complex order. The striking thing from the affective point of view is the zombie-like character of this society, its fallback to automatic pilot, its cybernetic governance. Neoliberal society is densely regulated, heavily overcoded. Since the control systems are all made by disciplines with strictly calibrated access to other disciplines, the origin of any struggle in the fields of knowledge has to be extradisciplinary. It starts outside the hierarchy of disciplines and moves through them transversally, gaining style, content, competence and discursive force along the way. Extradisciplinary critique is the process whereby

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affectively charged ideas – the conceptual arts
– become essential to social change. But it's
vital to maintain the link between the infinitely
communicable idea and the singularly embodied
performance.

World society is the theater of affectivist
art, the stage on which it appears and the
circuit in which it produces transformations.
But how can we define this society in existential
terms? First, it is clear that world society now
exists, with globe-spanning communications,
transport networks, benchmarked educational
systems, standardized technologies, franchised
consumption facilities, global finance,
commercial law and media fashion. That layer
of experience is extensive, but it is thin; it can
only claim part of the lifeworld. To engage with
affectivist art, to critique it and recreate it, you
have to know not only where new territories of
sensibility emerge – in which locale, in which
historical geography – but also at which scale.
Existence in world society is experienced, or
becomes aesthetic, as an interplay of scales.

In addition to the global, there is a regional
or continental scale, based on the aggregation
of populations into economic blocs. You can see
it clearly in Europe, but also in North and South
America, in the Middle East and in the East Asian
network. Make no mistake, there are already
affects at this scale, and social movements, and
new ways of using both gesture and language,
with much more to come in the future. Then
there is the national scale, seemingly familiar,
the scale with the richest sets of institutions

and the deepest historical legacies, where
the theaters of mass representation are
overwhelmingly established and sunk into
fantasmatic inertia. But the national scale in
the twenty-first century is also in a febrile state
of continuous red alert, hotwired to excess and
sometimes even capable of resonating with the
radically new. After this comes the territorial
scale, long considered the most human: the
scale of daily mobilities, the city, the rural
landscape, which are the archetypal dimensions
of sensibility. This is the abode of popular
expression, of the traditional plastic arts, of
public space and of nature as a presence coequal
with humanity: the scale where subjectivity first
expands to meet the unknown.

And so finally we reach the scale of intimacy,
of skin, of shared heartbeats and feelings, the
scale that goes from families and lovers to
people together on a street corner, in a sauna,
a living room or a café. It would seem that
intimacy is irretrievably weighted down in our
time, burdened with data and surveillance
and seduction, crushed with the determining
influence of all the other scales. But intimacy is
still an unpredictable force, a space of gestation
and therefore a wellspring of gesture, the
biological spring from which affect drinks. Only
we can traverse all the scales, becoming other
along the way. From the lovers' bed to the
wild embrace of the crowd to the alien touch
of networks, it may be that intimacy and its
artistic expressions are what will astonish the
twenty-first century. ✕