

Parallel processes and Cultural Ecosystems



Siraj Izhar November 2007

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Processes are the vehicles of change; equally processes are instruments for preventing change. Whilst the image and talk today may be that of a fast changing world, at the structural level, reality is much as it has been: that is, the members of the G8 nations and the Security Council are still the same, the demographics of military and financial power remain as they were, the World Bank still serves the same interests, the balance of trade between rich and poor nations barely shifts, greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise along with the rate of global deforestation, and so forth. At the structural level, change remains the hardest currency and it could be argued that the only forms of change possible are those that augment the present structures.

This paradox of gridlocked structures at a time of heralded change mediated by communications and technology was defined in the 90s by the acronym TINA “There Is No Alternative” (to change). In reality “There Is No Alternative” stood for the paradox of the epoch: the change that is the obverse of change. What is further intriguing is that TINA as a concept began life in a previous generation at the Shell Centre at London's South Bank, the headquarters of Royal Dutch Shell. Here in the 70s, the French executive Pierre Wack instituted a practice of 'scenarios thinking' as a means of generating scenarios in the global marketplace. The art of scenarios thinking drew heavily from Wack's interest in the mystic traditions of India and Japan, above all in the writings of Gurdjieff. Applied to 'contexts of accelerated change, greater complexity and genuine uncertainty' [1] Wack applied a methodology drawn from the historian Fernand Braudel's use of deep systems thinking and of what Braudel called conjunctural history. This mapped combination of movements in history, with short term rhythms and long durations called 'the secular trend' spanning centuries. Within the secular trend, Braudel identified the forces he saw as being unstoppable or undeniable, what he called the 'tendances lourdes'. [2] Pierre Wack's practice of scenarios thinking, dubbed the yoga of perception projected the future pivoted round the 'tendances lourdes' to shape the corporate strategies of Royal Dutch Shell. The practice of scenarios thinking saw its application at a defining moment, just prior to the explosion in the price of crude oil in 1972 and the dawn of the informational age. Through chance or through calculation, Wack's methodology reaped dividends for Shell. With the years the 'tendances lourdes' gelled into the market place as the 3 inseparables 'Globalisation, Liberalisation, Technology' and there-on to an ideological instrument for reshaping society: TINA.

The logic of TINA applied to the arts has in its turn produced the space of the globalised art market. Through the 90s, contemporary art strategies 're-valorised' themselves to parallel the marketplace, through a conflation of private and public institutions, along with a retrenchment into orthodoxies of authorship and commodity. Art as a market became instrumental to the Culture Industry incorporating or recuperating a wide spectrum of social processes. In this conflation, subculture, activism and art now provided content through a single globalised process of a supply and demand chain in a 'representation' market. However as the theorists of the Frankfurt School have pointed out, the Culture Industry's imperatives of total integration and administration simultaneously de-valorised the social autonomy of civil processes; the very thing that serves as the supply-line for marketable content.

The term 'valorisation' extrapolates Marx's theory of the process of *value* creation to describe the causal relationship between the new social dynamics and methods of creating market value in the information age. De-, re-, along with *over*-valorisation - as used by globalisation theorist Saskia Sassen show how the new realities of globalisation are umbilically tied to immense concentrations of wealth in a few key global centres [3]. This dependency on epi-centres applies as much to the representation market as to the labour market. In the accelerating movement of people, new kinds of social segmentation form in deregulated economies of informal zones and flexible labour. This produces a new politics of diversity summarised by a fresh dialectic between a valorised representational market, a de-valorised informal labour market and, an over-valorised art market driven by super-profits with super-curators and blockbuster museums ringed by a circuit of uniform global platforms, biennials and art fairs.

In this value production process, alternative art practices have been faced with their own TINA, either short-circuited or recuperated by the demand for representational content. The Culture Industry now harvests 'oppositional' culture with far greater efficiency for the representation market, with curated orders of 'marketable Others' in the new politics of diversity and informal processes. At the same time a parallel shadow industry burgeons in 'proliferating illegitimacies', in the social processes of the everyday life that lie outside the managerial consciousness of these circuits. The illegitimacy of this parallel industry lies at the level of *lived process*, whereby as Michel De Certeau would put it 'there is a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with and so constitutes the waste products of functionalist administration'. [4]

Amidst this culturally mediated manufacture of 'value' and 'waste', the dimension of ecology applies itself more critically than ever to cultural theatres and not just the natural environment. The publication of Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* in 2000 provided an integrating template for the three interacting and interdependent ecologies of mind, society, and environment. [5] By defining the aesthetic paradigm as an ecological imperative, Guattari provided a methodology of an art process amidst an industrial circuit-driven production of the contemporary; what he termed '*ecosophy*' was presented not as an imaginary, but a necessary imperative, in other words an alternative "There Is No Alternative", now evolving through an entirely different prism of reality.

Praxis as Process

To apply an eco-logic to a cultural or representational process, entails the deployment of strategies working across fields of different disciplines and contexts, that is working in *transversal* space. Since its usage in *A Thousand Plateaus*, transversality has always conjured up futuristic images of virtual spaces, Temporary Autonomous Zones, instantaneous global networks but applied to the here and now, the transversal is a messy complicitous process embedded in the real-politics of situated practice. This messiness is true to its roots, the transversal deriving from the exchanges in the mental space of a psychoanalytic process involving unavoidable contagion or

transference.[6]

Applied to the theatre of public space, the transversal implies the construction of process as *emergent process*: process as an end in itself that constitutes 'praxis as process'. But is there a methodology to this praxis and what are the aesthetics of an art of process? In practice constructing such a process implies a method of engagement with parallel threads: cultural processes, economic processes, legal processes, environmental processes.

There-on, three things are critical to a praxis as process: sustainability, continuity, autonomy. The three are interlinked and have no particular order, though sustainability by definition correlates to the self-creation of resources of some form, so that a process can reproduce itself; if this is not addressed a process would either reach a dead-end or surrender its autonomy. The means of production and the means of representation are interwoven in a *single* process – that is, a praxis represents itself through its autonomous sustainability and the way it navigates itself. This distinguishes the art of the process from the modes of artistic practice where a prerequisite is a form of representation in another space, whereby production and representation constitute separate circuits. That would correlate to what the curator Nicholas Bourriaud describes in *Post-Production* whereby the art-work serves as a temporary terminal for a network of interconnected elements. [7] However, given the telos of much of the work that *Post-Production* describes, such a mode of production and consumption in reality fuels a contemporary game, a methodology of recuperation and counter-recuperation, recuperation and counter-recuperation... played out between artist and institution. Each step of a mutually valorising exchange progressively filters the work, as art, as the 'absolute merchandise', Marx's description for 'the actual image of the value'. This value has only one market and reinforces the curating institution as the validating terminus.

An autonomous emergent process is something else. It is usually self-initiated, and whilst there is some affiliation to genres of public art or community art, it has to define its own theatres of operation. Constructing an emergent process as an end in itself requires its sustaining over several years so that it evolves through phases of production, (means of) reproduction and (strategies and tactics) of representation. These feed and grow out of each other; an emergent process need not leave a product.

To illustrate such process as part of my practice, we can consider 3 scenarios as examples:

1 In 1999 I as a member of the ICC, *the Intercontinental Caravan*, organised a march of the 40 Indian peasant farmers we brought to the UK as part of an international 'caravan'. The caravan was a mobile protest against the WTO, Monsanto and the corporatisation of agriculture through increasing dependency on the global seed market. The farmers' March from Brick Lane, in Spitalfields, east London to the Bank of England, in the Corporation of London, the heart of global financial power, was a small part of a larger pan-European project. The march itself did not provide the interpretive frames for its perception, other than the reality or spectacle of 40 peasant farmers, shouting '*WTO murtabad*' (Death to the WTO) surrounded by twice as many policemen on horseback or motorbikes. The farmers carried real estate property placards - culled from the neighbourhood, advertising the real estate around Spitalfields, now requisitioned for new use vilifying the WTO. There was no strategy to *pre-represent* the march for any market, either for artists or activists. The march itself was part of a continuity for the farmers who had not been to the West before; its transversal properties lay in the self-framing potential of an alien environment by subjects at different ends of the geopolitical landscape. [8]

2 *Fashion Street* was a 600 square metre space that I set up in the mid 90s. The space was divided into private: semi-private: public zones shared by artists (working mainly with digital media) and environmental and political activists. The thinking behind Fashion Street coincided with my long association with the physicist David Peat and his understanding of David Bohm's *rheomode*. [9] Bohm's rheomode was an examination of the noun-based structure of our language

and cultural consciousness which in turn structures the way we perceive and act; a noun-based language structure would contrast with the verb-based structure of indigenous cultures like the Inuit which in turn defines their modes of interaction. Fashion Street was a highly active space, and whilst the activity of both the activists and artists was of a high profile, neither of which eclipsed the other, the crossovers and intersections between artists and activists remained discernibly separate. [10] Like the farmers' March where the activity had to be pre-framed for possible reification as art or activism, with the spectrum of activities here, the verbs remained framed in between the nouns so to speak.

3 In 2000 I converted the former derelict Public Lavatory outside Nicholas Hawkmoor's Christchurch Spitalfields into a public space called *Public Life*. Public Life had a bar which provided the money flow to underwrite the building works. I had previously, in the mid-nineties, used the derelict lavatory to create a chain of sequential art projects over several years. This sequence was built around the artist as an author-subject operating in a situationist urban space. In the late nineties Spitalfields was subject to intense property speculation in line with what David Harvey identified as cycles of capitalist engagement with the built environment. [11] At the same time in the wake of 9/11 and the opening gambit of the War on Terror, there was an underlying struggle in a multicultural urban space as to who the strategic turf belonged to: the Corporate City's *New Spitalfields Market*, or the Bangladeshi community's *Banglatown* or the genteel Middle Class '*Georgian Heritage Spitalfields*'. In that sense, the lavatory site occupied a pivotal position in market force terms underwritten by cultural polarities. Through the public lavatory's conversion, the intention was not to capitalise the development as real estate but to capitalise it as a cultural process, one that dovetailed de-valorised and over-valorised forms of work publicly without any prior programming. Thus while all Public Life activity was self-generated, the process entailed creating an internal labour pool through the cultural activity. Meshing service sector work (which underwrites the art market without visibility) internalised within a community (artists) brought up critical conflicts that were internal to Public Life as opposed to the external conflicts posed by speculative market forces. [12]

This essay is not the place to analyse these projects individually but to distinguish the three in terms of a praxis as process: the public march has a singularity, a single process which converges multiple social forces through a single action; Fashion Street served as a structured container for 2 distinct processes threaded through it at the same time, whilst at Public Life, a public process condensed conflicting threads of valorisation into a tiny capsule on the street pavement. Common to each of the autonomous processes was the construction of scenarios or spaces with contestations internal to each. An emergent process in its course generates such *new* spaces both internal and external; these have to be spanned solely through the means and imperatives of the praxis itself, by the way it propels, sustains and reproduces itself. An autonomous process has recourse to no other frames or appeal; its aesthetic sensibility is linked to its own trajectory, its autonomy and there by its transversal potential. An useful concept in considering this autonomy is provided by what Guattari referred to as '*the coefficient of transversality*' which he illustrated by imagining a field full of horses wearing adjustable blinkers whereby the "coefficient of transversality" could be precisely controlled by the adjustment of the blinkers. [13] To sustain the continuity of a process over a length of time, the coefficient of transversality has to be weighed against the coefficient of (consume-able) visibility. The two things – as transversal-perception and spectator-visibility – are entirely different entities and tools. How a process navigates between them defines how it shapes itself over time and intensifies or, otherwise how it channels into given frames of representation (for example as art) or circuits of contestation (as activism). To further extrapolate, if a process dispenses with the need for its representation, it does not mean that it dissipates into nothingness but that it is only recoverable in terms of the visualisation of a cultural ecosystem; an ecosophic

totality which requires a different aesthetic undertaking, means of apprehension and yardsticks of measure.

Circulation Modules and Cultural Quanta

In *Energy and Equity* Ivan Illich describes how high levels of energy (consumption) degrade social relations just as inevitably as they destroy the physical environment; to quote "if a society opts for high energy consumption, its social relations must be dictated by a technocracy and huge public expenditures and increased social control; both rationalize the emergence of a computerized Leviathan". [14]

For Equity to have correspondence or representational equivalence, Illich uses concepts of '*per capita quanta*' and '*socially optimal energy quanta*'. As our everyday lives are increasingly mediated by capital-intensive forms of representation and communication, quanta as a concept is useful in the understanding of an ecological dimension to the cultural production. However, quanta is an amorphous entity; it implies use-value and exchange value (in that it must circulate in society) but it has no given form. The form can only derive from its application in a live social context, a theatre of operation. The task is to visualise such *theatres*, create the *means* of circulation, invent the working tools. Giving material form to the idea of *cultural quanta* leads to creating new dimensions of social *currency*, virtual or material, which operate in a parallel social space to that of normative cultural production. Implementation progressively conceives its own theatres of operation using a multiple means, collective and individual, material and virtual, to initiate autonomous circulation threads across conflicting entities, social and cultural.

To illustrate, my proposal for the *Living Memorial to Ken Saro Wiwa* in 2005 began with corresponding the circulation of bicycle-powered self-generated energy with a visual output (using LED lights) and a communication network (using sms). The 3 working together would be the start of a self-organising cycle for a living memorial that would change with time. The living memorial would work as a 'scenarios engine' though not prospecting for the corporate market place but in the service of civil processes. As the proposal developed, the LED modules scaled-up as large 6 metre spheres structured as carbon C60 molecules to float in the city's skyline through carbon-fibre tensile cables (in discussions with the structural engineer Mark Whitby). Whilst using less than 1 kilowatt of self-generated energy, the proposed memorial worked as a self generating energy and communication loop in public space. The circulation of 'quanta' in this matrix and its the scale of economies depended on the potential scale of public participation; that is, it could theoretically up-scale, down-scale or multiply in correspondance to use, in the elastic nature of globalised space and the new geographies of dispersal and centralisation. [15]

Another process I set up and initiated in 2003 involved twenty 7-cubic metre waste skips, which collected waste around north-east London, mainly in the borough of Newham the most multicultural corner of London. This outlined a map and cultural reach, whilst the territory of the project was bound by the economies of scale on 2 fronts: by the logistics of the tonnage mass of waste, dead weight, moving around a territory and the mobility of the labour involved in the recycling of this mass, an informal sector. Today the environment as a concept is valorised in the marketing of a *green* economy, though the labour it depends on is predictably de-valorised. In an ongoing project dealing with metaphoric cultural debris, several parallel forms of social and material quanta intersect in circulation routines that silently produces the new formations of London's civil society.

In both of these instances, a circulation process is constructed. Once set in motion, the process, by its everyday working continuity, penetrates and propels itself and so creates its working landscape. Through the practical imperatives of its *continuity*, a process inter-relates

segregated strands in the landscape, strands that Guattari referred to as the segregated ecologies of environmental, mental and social worlds.

In *'Steps to an Ecology of Mind'*, Gregory Bateson describes the mental state he called the doublebind as a state of conflicting demands that incapacitate the subject, disabling a possibility of resolution through action. The double bind arises through a failure to correspond different strands of reality and communication. As a consequence, the doublebind sustains the illusion of understanding and perception, but the structure of consciousness itself is stuck amidst the production of visibility and communication. [16] In effect, the doublebind reflects the function of the injunction 'There is No Alternative', TINA. Both disable the connective link between perception and commensurate action. Both create a 'stop', an unbridgeable space between perception and action. It is this space that a praxis as process entangles with as a means of contesting the status quo in the here and now. As I have said before this is a messy complicitous undertaking embedded in the real-politics of situated practice, and often distant from the managed spaces sanctioned for art.



Image: s_i skips and waste recycling 2005

Notes and References

- 1 Pierre Wack, *Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead* (1985) Harvard Business Review
Publications by Pierre Wack are largely out of print though there are numerous references online. Shell's website www.shell.com devotes several pages to scenarios thinking.
- 2 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, vol 3 *The Perspective of the World* (1979) Harper and Row
- 3 Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*, (1998) The New Press
- 4 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) University of California Press

The quotations here are liberally interpreted from the chapter on 'Walking in the City'.

5 Felix Guatarri, *The 3 Ecologies* (2000) Athlone

6 Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus* (1988) Athlone

In the context of this essay it should be noted that the title *A thousand plateaus* itself drew from Gregory Bateson's 'plateau of intensity' as a means of resolving a double bind impasse. Deleuze and Guattari described it as "a continuous, self-vibrating region ... whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end...."

7 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Post-Production* (2002) Lukas & Sternberg

8 One account of the activities of the farmer's caravan whilst in the UK is provided by Katherine Ainger, *Life is Not Business: the intercontinental caravan in We are Everywhere, the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism*, (2003) Verso

9 David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980) Routledge and Kegan Paul

10 The Fashion Street experiment ended in 2000 in sink with the regeneration of Spitalfields which saw the disappearance of a complex network of artist-led spaces and a thriving micro-entrepreneurial scene; inevitably this was paralleled by the redevelopment or emergence of large institutional spaces and new strategies of engagement through community out-reach projects.

11 David Harvey, *The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A framework for analysis* (1978) from *The Blackwell City Reader* ed. Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson, (2002) Blackwell Publishing

12 Further information on Public Life may be found at www.publiclife.org including press-cuttings and essays.

13 Gary Gensenko, *Life and Work of Guattari, From Transversality to Ecosophy* (2000) Athlone

14 Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity, Ideas in Progress* (1974) Marion Boyars

15 Scheduled for construction in London at various sites in 2008

www.stalk.net/LivingMemorial in association with the Remember Saro-Wiwa coalition
www.remembersarowiwa.com

16 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) University of Chicago Press