

Parallel processes and Cultural Ecosystems



Siraj Izhar November 2007

Written for [Ambient Information Systems](#)

ed. Luksch, Patel

Published by AIS 2008

ISBN-13: 978-0-9556245-0-6

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 financial power and 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 grid-locked 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 of change 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 a process called 'conjunctural history' that mapped combination of movements in history, with short term rhythms and long durations spanning centuries. Within the long durations, 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, named the yoga of perception conceived a future built round the 'tendances lourdes' to shape the corporate strategies of Royal Dutch Shell at the projected end of one of Braudel's long durations. Historically this coincided, through chance or by calculation, with the explosion in the price of crude oil in 1972, a decade of ensuing recession and the dawn of the informational age. Wack's methodology reaped its dividends. With the years the 'tendances lourdes' translated into the marketplace as the 3 inseparables 'Globalisation, Liberalisation, Technology' and then to become an ideological instrument for restructuring society in its wake: 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 're-valorised' itself in alignment with the market 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 thus provide content through the same globalised process of a supply and demand chain in a buoyant 'representation' market, which ironically de-valorises the very thing that engendered the supply-line for marketable content, the social autonomy of civil processes. The term 'valorisation' extrapolates Marx's theory of the process of *value* production to describe the causal relationship between the new social dynamics and methods of creating market value in the information age. De-, re-, and *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]. The dependency on epi-centres applies as much to a representation market as to a labour market. In the accelerating movement of people, new kinds of social segmentation form in deregulated economies of informal zones and flexible labour. This creates 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', a phrase used by Sassen to describe the speculative yet spectacular nature of globalised business driven by its financial sector. The art market mirrored this with the rising phenomenon of super-curators and blockbuster museums ringed by a supporting circuit of increasingly uniform global platforms, biennales and art fairs.

In this value production spiral, alternative art practices have been faced with their own TINA, either short-circuited or recuperated by the demand for representational content. The global 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 the valorisation circuits. The illegitimacy of a parallel industry grows 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 creation of 'value' and 'waste', the dimension of ecology applies more critically than ever to cultural theatres and not just the natural environment. The publication of Felix 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 intimated a methodology for an art process amidst an industrial circuit-production of contemporariness. 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, perhaps describable in terms of a transversal space. Since its usage by Guattari following *A Thousand Plateaus*, the transversal 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 suggests the construction of processes that operate across conflicting terrain with uncertain outcomes : process as *emergent* process, process as an end in itself. Such processes constitutes the 'praxis as process'. The aesthetics of praxis as process, that is the poiesis of praxis [7], lies in a methodology of producing simultaneous

parallel threads of engagement: threads of cultural process, economic process, legal process, environmental process. These threads connect *through* a praxis as process. The logistics of such praxis necessarily involves three operational factors: sustainability, continuity, autonomy. The three are interlinked, have no particular order, and may be subject to contradictions between themselves but in acting together imply the self-creation of resources of some form to enable the process to reproduce itself over time; if this is not addressed a process would either reach a dead-end or surrender its autonomy. Within a praxis, the means of production and the means of representation are interwoven in a *single* process – that is, a praxis represents itself through its own autonomous sustainability and the way it navigates itself. This distinguishes a praxis of process from the modes of artistic practice whereby a prerequisite is a form of representation in another space. In such instance, production and representation constitute separate circuits that correlate to what the curator Nicholas Bourriaud has described in *Post-Production* whereby the art-work serves as a temporary terminal for a network of interconnected elements. [8] However, the telos of such work, its projected 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 phrase for commodity value pushed to its logical extreme. This value-creation process has only the 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 in terms of a personal practice, 3 scenarios as examples follow:

1 In 1999, as a member of the ICC *the Intercontinental Caravan*, I organised a march of the 40 Indian peasant farmers we brought to the UK as part of the 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 placards - culled from the neighbourhood, advertising the property 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 farmers who had not been to the West before; its transversal properties as a medium lay in the self-framing potential of an alien environment by subjects at different ends of the geopolitical landscape. [9]

2 *Fashion Street* was a 600 square metre space 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 a long association with the physicist David Peat and his understanding of David Bohm's *rheomode*. [10] Bohm's rheomode is 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 ways 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. [11] Like the farmers' march where the activity had to be pre-framed for possible reification as art or activism, with the spectrum of activities at Fashion Street, the verbs stayed firmly in-between the nouns so to speak.

3 In 2000 the former derelict public lavatory outside Nicholas Hawkmoor's Christchurch Spitalfields was converted into a public space called *Public Life*. Public Life had a bar which provided the money flow to underwrite the building works. Through the 1990s, the derelict lavatory had been the base for a chain of sequential art projects lasting several years. This sequence was built around the artist as an author-subject operating in a situationist urban space. By the late nineties 1990s, Spitalfields was subject to intense property speculation in line with what David Harvey identified as cycles of capitalist engagement with the built environment. [12] In the wake of 9/11 and the opening gambit of the 'War on Terror', an underlying struggle intensified within multicultural urban space for possession of strategic turf through distinct agents: the Corporation of London's New Spitalfields Market, the Bangladeshi community's Banglatown, or the neo-conservative Middle Class 'Georgian Heritage Spitalfields'. In that sense, the lavatory site occupied a pivotal position in market force terms, laced by cultural polarities. Through the public lavatory's conversion, the intention was not to capitalise the development as real estate but, to intervene in a contested context as a cultural process, one that amalgamated de-valorised and over-valorised forms of work publicly. Thus all Public Life activity, self-generated and unprogrammed, in mainstream or arcane genres, critically depended on the self-making of an internal labour pool through its cultural activity. operations. Meshing service sector work (which underwrites the art market without visibility) internalised within a community (artists) brought up critical fault lines that were internal to Public Life as a process, whilst opposed to the external conflicts posed by speculative market forces. [13].

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 host space containing 2 distinct processes, arguably self-segregating, threaded through at the same time; 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: live spaces with conflicts internal to each. An emergent process in its course generates such *new* spaces both internal and external; these have to be resolved 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 thereby its transversal potential. A useful concept in the consideration of this autonomy is provided by Guattari's '*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. [14] To sustain the continuity of an autonomous process over a length of time, the coefficient of transversality has to be weighed against the coefficient of (consume-able) visibility. The two things – transversal-perception and spectator-visibility – are entirely different entities and tools. How a process navigates between them in a live theatre over time defines how it shapes itself in time and so 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 that requires a different aesthetic undertaking, and a different notion of cultural circulation and exchange.

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". [15]

For Equity to have correspondence or representational value, Illich uses concepts of '*per capita quanta*' and '*socially optimal energy quanta*'. As our everyday lives are increasingly defined by capital-intensive forms of representation and communication, quanta as a concept is useful for the visualisation of an ecological dimension to culture. Illich uses the concept as a tool to figure a balancing equivalence process bridging fundamentally different entities within one ecologic frame. Quanta are equally a means of adding *new* dimensional possibilities to the theatre of cultural production and transposing them onto existing structures of social reality. Deleuze and Guattari, in *Micropolitics and Segmentarity*, [6] uses the notion of quantum flow as a means of overcoming the binary opposition that existing structures of 'segmented' reality derive from. Quantum flows 'reshuffle and stir up' rigid instituted segments through connection and conjugation across the extremes of scales, time and space, cycles of macro-history and micro-history, macropolitical and micropolitical. In such terms, a quantum flow fathoms new circuits and circulation but without a prescribed form. The form derives from the specific application within a particular context, a defined theatre of operation. The potential challenge is to visualise such *theatres* in living social contexts. Giving material form to the idea of *cultural quanta* leads to the production of new dimensions of social circulation, with use-value and exchange value, which operate in spaces parallel to that of normative consumer space. The appliance of '*per capita quanta*' implies its own theatres of cultural operation through multiple means, collective and individual, virtual and material, that initiate circulation threads in living contexts.

To suggest possibilities, my proposal for the *Living Memorial to Ken Saro Wiwa* in 2005 began with corresponding the circulation of self-generated bicycle-powered 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 evolve with time. The living memorial would work as a 'scenarios engine' in public space, not in the service of corporate strategists but of civil processes. The 'scenarios engine' as a communications network would progressively be appropriated by the public. As the proposal developed, the LED light 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 based on the circulation of a single kilowatt of energy, the proposed memorial constructed a self-reproducing energy and communication loop. The circulation of 'quanta' in this loop and its scale of economies depended on the potential space defined by public appropriation of the loop; that is, the loop could theoretically up-scale, down-scale or multiply in correspondence with its use in the networked nature of globalised public space and the new dynamics of dispersal and centralisation. [16]

Another process using the circulation of matter as mass rather than information and light was initiated in 2003 involved twenty 7-cubic metre waste containers (or skips as they are called in England). The skips collected waste around North-east London, mainly in the borough of Newham, the most multicultural corner of London. The process outlined a map, both a physical and cultural reach, whose territory was bound by 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. Whilst the environment today is increasingly valorised in the marketing of a *green* economy, 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 produce the new formations of London's civil society.

In both of these instances, a circulation process as a praxis is constructed over time which by its everyday working continuity, penetrates and propels itself and so creates its working

landscape. Through the practical imperatives of its *continuity*, the circulation 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 intuitively correspond different strands of reality and communication – distinguished by Bateson, in terms of 'language and meta-language', to differentiate between text, speech, gesture, affectation and the multiple ways in which exchanges of meaning take place. Through its failure to correspond and correlate, the doublebind sustains a sense of understanding and perception riven with gaps, a containing structure of reality trapped within the production of communication. [17] In an analogous way, the doublebind describes the social 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 seeing and acting. 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 stated 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.



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 Guattari, *The 3 Ecologies* (2000) Continuum

6 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) Continuum

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 Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1973) condensed the conflict between *praxis* (as action) and *poiesis* (as creation and production) through their hybrid term *autopoiesis* which Varela described as the 'autonomy proper to living systems'.

Quoted from Felix Guattari, Gary Genosko, *The 3 Ecologies* (2000) Continuum

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

9 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

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

11 The Fashion Street experiment ended in 2000 in sync 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.

12 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

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

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

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

16 Scheduled for construction in London at various sites in 2008

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

<http://www.remembersarowiwa.com/>

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