Rhizomes, Machines, Multiplicities and Maps
Notes Toward an Expanded Art Practice (Beyond Representation)

Rhizomes

Context-Investment

For many readers *A Thousand Plateaus* is a notoriously difficult volume, full of strange jargon, unfamiliar terminology and bizarre cross fertilisations. For others it is a surprisingly easy and exciting read, in spite of, and in some cases perhaps because of, the above. Indeed, it is almost as if one has already to be in a certain space in order to understand, or rather utilise, this complex and unusual collaborative work, which is to say that the most striking effect of reading *A Thousand Plateaus* is that it encapsulates a certain attitude, or one might say style, of intellectual work and indeed of life in general. It is a style that is at odds with much academic writing, especially that utilised by art theory, inasmuch as its *modus operandi* is affirmation and creation rather than negation and critique. Equally important, and as Brian Massumi points out in the translator’s foreword, is to remember that *A Thousand Plateaus* is very much a pragmatic work.¹ To read it as a purely scholarly text, to read it simply for *meaning*, is to position it always already within that field that it writes against – representation.

How then to approach this strange book that the authors argue is not a book? Again, Massumi suggests that you treat it as you would a record. Some tracks will leave you cold, others you will want to keep returning to (*ATP* xiii–xiv). For you these latter tracks ‘work’, they activate something. The possibility of a different kind of thought perhaps? Certainly for myself ‘Rhizomes’, the first plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, had just

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¹ S. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* © Simon O’Sullivan 2006
such an effect – although not at first. I first read *A Thousand Plateaus* back in the 1980s whilst immersed in a reading programme of Critical and poststructuralist theory. At that time it made no sense to me whatsoever. I was reading Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and those writers that wrote on them – ‘signifier enthusiasts’ as Deleuze and Guattari might call the latter – and thinking about how this broadly deconstructive model might be ‘applied’ to art and to art history. Compared with these writers Deleuze and Guattari seemed hopelessly chaotic and anarchic. Indeed, this was the general attitude within literary and art theory at the time, that Deleuze and Guattari had abandoned, in fact had possibly never been involved in, a left-wing oppositional practice. Put bluntly, Deleuze and Guattari did not seem to offer anything to ideological critique (and at that time deconstruction, along with Lacanian psychoanalysis, was allied with Frankfurt School Critical Theory in what might be called an expanded critique of ideology).²

There is much that could be said here about Deleuze and Guattari’s specific context of writing (post-1968 France), and the changing notion of what, for them, constituted political strategy; about Deleuze’s own philosophical non-representational project (the monographs he wrote on that ‘bastard line’ of philosophers that are his precursors) and not least about the speed, and order, in which his books, and his collaborations, appeared in English translation. Guattari’s own context is equally relevant – his practice within psychoanalysis (the break with Lacan), and his own involvement with radical politics and questions to do with the production of subjectivity. And then there was my own context, working as I was within the hegemony of deconstruction and ideological critique of the Academy with my own investments in what I subsequently recognised as projects of negative critique (and indeed the production of a certain kind of neurotic subjectivity).

Instead I want to jump forward to the writing of my doctoral thesis, a project which lasted six years, and one in which I wrote myself into, and then out of, a cul de sac. My project was a reading, and deconstruction, of various discourses on art, from traditional aesthetic theory through to the Social History of Art. To cut a long project short, I produced a map of some of the terrain of representation. Each chapter of the thesis considered a particular model for thinking the art object and although some of the chapters were affirmative and creative, in general I conducted a negative critique, through close readings, on the texts I thought important to, in fact that philosophically ‘underpinned’, typical art history and theory. My argument back then was that these theories of representation tended always to be in crisis. They would posit a system – of