

An Art of Constitutional Metamorphosis:

Connecting art, education and health through the creation of social art projects

by Robert Waters

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Introduction

What is the connection between our self-awareness and the reflexive nature of artworks? Does the experience and contemplation of art help us in the evaluation of ourselves and our societies? Being the only known species to create art, we as modern humans even classify ourselves by our auto-cognizant nature: *homo sapiens sapiens*, or “man discerning discerning”—as though we were all philosophers by default, considering consideration. I take this as a form of empowerment, for I am but an artist invited here to philosophize. As an artist, the example of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is particularly relevant in helping me to understand the importance of my work as the production of subjectivity; developing and realizing my own subjectivity, but also encouraging the same in others through the art that I make. While I often investigate the relation between materiality and cognition through the creation of objects and images, for this presentation I'm going to focus on my recent shift to create social art projects. While the “Relational Aesthetic” considerations of Nicholas Bourriard and Claire Bishop have helped to generate discussion and awareness of the contemporary practice and understanding of social art in general, the work of Deleuze and Guattari has helped me far more significantly as I reconsider three social art projects of mine in particular; exploring how the elements, contexts and processes of my projects directly relate to their function and affect; artistically and socially in particular, but also ethically and politically. In reconsidering my social art projects with Deleuze and Guattari in mind, the creation and experience of art becomes more evidently related to the practice of education and health in general. The result of this consideration, I will argue, is that **art inherently promotes the capacitation of individuals.**

The three projects of which I will speak—*Teaching Acupuncture to the Mexican Military*, *Conceptual Art Workshop for the Blind*, and *Uncover Recover*—demonstrate art as a shared process of compositional and contextual shifts. In each project, ignorance, openness and instinct were crucial elements of my methodology, and Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of “rhizome” and “line of flight”

help to illuminate the unexpectedly advantageous connections and perspectives that such a curious premise can generate. Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "Body without Organs" also demonstrates how these projects facilitate the regeneration of self by means of decomposing perceived limitations in participants, primarily through their concept of assemblage. **In nurturing a more thorough comprehension of the malleable relationships between materials, contexts, our bodies and our actions, Deleuze and Guattari help to reveal my projects—and art in general, I believe—as an exercise in receptivity that amplifies the understanding, capacity and health of its participants.**

Before diving into philosophical analysis, let me first briefly describe my projects. While borrowing heavily from conceptual art strategies, I consider these projects more of an exploration in contextual art. The artwork, after all, was the development and employment of explicit yet open situations where the composition of specific elements within each choreographed milieu demonstrates an artistic transformation *through* people. While all of the projects utilize a combination of aesthetics and ideas, priority is given to neither. The emphasis was always social, and each project grew out of my desire to affect and be affected by people.

In Teaching Acupuncture to the Mexican Military (Mexico City, 2008), I did just that; I created a life-size human target with all of the acupuncture points clearly marked and presented it to the Mexican Military for use in their shooting range. Instead of aiming at habitual anatomical objectives, soldiers attempted to more precisely hit specific points along the meridians taught in traditional Chinese medicine. However slight, the unwitting absorption of alternative medicine by gunmen demonstrated a contextual transformation from the practice of violence to the practice of health, providing both a counterpoint and a connection between the use and threat of violence in caring for society.

For the Conceptual Art Workshop for the Blind (Mexico City, 2009), I taught the history of Conceptual Art and produced conceptual art projects with a diverse group of visually impaired adults in Mexico City. Focusing on the visual negation inherent to Conceptual Art, and ideas of (in)accessibility, the workshop served as both a critique and a celebration of Conceptual Art and the institutions that have come to champion it. Making a relevant and undiluted artistic discourse available to a public that

is generally excluded from artistic dialogue, the workshop provided its students with creative strategies for developing and expressing artistic, political and philosophical ideas in various forms and contexts.

In uncover RECOVER (Spain, 2011), I used soil obtained from a recently exhumed mass grave from the Spanish Civil War to cultivate 36 species of medicinal plants, which were later adopted by the Spanish public. The project provided a healing environment within a museum while physically demonstrating a simple conversion of death back into life—the metamorphosis of flesh to soil to plant back to flesh. Inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' Spanish translation of "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman, the project combined the disparate fields of history, poetry, philosophy and science (anthropology, botany and medicine) to consider our inevitable connections to nature in life and death.

These three projects are obviously more complex than just described, and I could easily spend our time allotted describing but one of them. In connecting these projects with the work of Deleuze and Guattari, however - and with that of Jackson and McCullagh, of course - I will simply show what is most relevant to my thesis, display images as I speak, and direct you to my website for more information.

My Professional History - Material Investigation

To better understand the emergence of my social art investigation, it is important look at what I was making beforehand. While practicing in Toronto about 10 years ago my artwork began to focus on the human relation of body and mind employed through an artistic exploration of the connection of physical material and conceptual significance. It was, and continues to be, an exploration of the malleable relation between the physical and the cognitive (or symbolic), or viewed from another angle, an investigation into the connection between traditional (i.e. aesthetic, formal) and conceptual artistic considerations. With McLuhan in mind, and tongue in cheek perhaps, I was experimenting to see if the media really is the message? Does a material inherently and principally inform its artistic conception? How, then, does transforming a material modify its message? We all have shared understanding of significance, based on common or shared experience. Recognition, of course, is necessary for symbols to function. I was interested in investigating this generalized cognitive recognition as a malleable material for artistic transformation, using common, ephemeral materials to represent the human body. Some quick examples: *Getting Back to Nature* (2005), a series made literally with piss and vinegar on paper; *Bad Priests* (2008) a portrait series of priests convicted of sexual abuse, made with pig's blood

on communion wafers; and *Man at Computer* (2005-), a mural series made with brown packing tape applied directly to the gallery wall, cut with a scalpel and peeled away to reveal the wall underneath. There are a lot of other things going on here, pointing towards human nature and our evolution, a consideration of us physical and thinking as animals. When I moved to Mexico in 2007 I began to question the limitation of my investigation. As Deleuze states, “an animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world,”¹ and my literal deterritorialization pushed me farther. I began to wonder if my artistic line of questioning work with people instead of materials? Could artistic significance be generated through social interaction, or the use and transformation of demographics? I decided to tweak my methodology and find out.

Social Art

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs relates fundamentally with my transition to and process of making social art. “Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor.”² I was obviously thinking fairly playfully about materials and their potential beforehand, but the notion of BwO really helps to explod the idea. Their very creation of the term “BwO” comes from a desire to consider and understand the myriad potential relations inherent in physical form and action—human or whatever—and not simply defined by function or limited by subjectivity. This is something that artists struggle with daily in developing images, objects or experiences that obligingly work in tandem with significance, connecting meaning to perceptive reality. As with language, one can control what is said but not what is understood. In *Refracting Health: Deleuze, Guattari and Body/Self*, Nick J. fox channels Derrida to reiterate that “because meanings derive from a conceptual realm independent of the material world it seeks to represent, there are endless possibilities for de- and re-territorialization: language offers the potential for humans to interpret the world with infinite variety.”³ This limitation of control is inherent to the creative process, assured not only in the artistic handling of material, but more obviously in its

¹ DELEUZE, Giles, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, (trans. HURLEY, Robert), San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1988, p. 125.

² DELEUZE, Giles and GUATTARI, Felix, “How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?”, *1000 Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (trans. MASSUMI, Brian). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.160.

³ FOX, Nick J., “Refracting ‘health’. Deleuze, Guattari and Body/Self”, *health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, Vol. 6, 2002, p. 353-4.

perception and interpretation by an Other; the audience. It is through this conjunction with other bodies (or BwOs), however, that significance is created, potential is catalyzed, and the becoming of art is possible. Perception is paramount, and it implies participation.

Becoming, of course, is a process inherent change. Applied to my subjective understanding of “self”, the BwO helps me to consider my awareness of embodied consciousness as something that is continually changing—“the interpenetration of psychic experience with the forces of society and nature”⁴ continually being (re)structured in my mind. This, of course, is what allows one to change their mind, which I now understand is not actually the changing of something pre-set, but rather the redirecting of a mind (or BwO) that is in continual development. As such, the BwO can be understood as a dynamic state or territory, with implied potential to change. The idea of isolation and individuation thus becomes difficult to fathom. As Deleuze and Guattari state in *How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs*, “we are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. It is only there that the BwO reveals itself for what it is: connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities. You have constructed your own little machine, ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines.”⁵ This, in essence, defines my social art projects, where the composition and transformation of physical, cognitive and contextual elements catalyzes a subjective metamorphosis in participants, myself included.

Despite having fairly specific goals and elements in mind, it was paramount that I be aware of flux and that my projects be open to change from the onset. As I was exploring new territory with a new methodology, this was inevitable, especially since I was entering into situations where I had little control. This is what made the projects interesting for me, though, as control was never the objective; affect was. As such, being aware of circumstance and its potential—my potential to change it and its potential to change me—became grounded in developing assemblages with other people. Eliminating the “authority” of an artwork by having more than one author is a common strategy used in creating

⁴ FOX, Nick J.. “Refracting ‘health’. Deleuze, Guattari and Body/Self”, *health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, Vol. 6, 2002, p. 351-2.

⁵ DELEUZE, Giles and GUATTARI, Felix, “How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?”, *1000 Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (trans. MASSUMI, Brian), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.161.

conceptual art—a strategy that Deleuze and Guattari use to great effect. Perhaps the most radical proposal by conceptual art, though, is taking away the artist’s ability to alter the course of an artwork once the idea is developed and the project is started. In his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, Sol LeWitt defines the term: “I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. (In other forms of art the concept may be changed in the process of execution.) When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art...”⁶ While this adaptive inflexibility demonstrated a very striking counterpoint to traditional creative methodology and uncovered a path towards an abundant and invigorating vanguard—one of continual and strong influence in contemporary practice—this negation of intuition and improvisation was something that I could not afford. Embracing flux needed to be an essential aspect of my methodology if I were to attain my objective of affecting social change.

Artistic Transformation, Capacitation and Health

In returning to my thesis and relating my projects (and art in general) to capacitation and health, we must first consider the achievement of potential of both the artwork and the participant who experiences it, and then the evaluation inherent in aesthetic experience. This of course implies the latent possibility of transformation and development; a reciprocal affect in the encounter and experience of object and subject, be it conscious or unconscious. As Cameron Duff explains in *Towards a Developmental Ethology: Exploring Deleuze’s Contribution to the Study of Health and Human Development*, “affect is more than a feeling or an emotion it is also a potential for action, a dispositional orientation to the world. In each sense, affects are an inevitable by-product of encounters, in that every encounter subtly transforms a body’s affective capacities.”⁷ In my social projects, the combination of subject and object—using people as an artistic material—simply compounds this transformation of affective capacity, where the capacitation of individuals becomes the actual artwork. In *Teaching Acupuncture to the Mexican Military*, the artistic transformation is a subtle shift in ideology disguised as a more challenging alternative to the human-target norm. Designed as a politically motivated investigation into the relation of health, safety and violence, this artistic infiltration is perhaps best understood as a pedagogical provocation. In the *Conceptual Art Workshop*

⁶ LEWITT, Sol. “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum* 5, Summer 1967, p. 80.

⁷ DUFF, Cameron. “Towards a Developmental Ethology: Exploring Deleuze’s Contribution to the Study of Health and Human Development”, *Health* 14(6), November 2010, p. 627.

for the Blind, capacitation was primarily achieved through the provision of non-existent resources and experience. It will come as no surprise that the *Visual Art* section in libraries for the blind are rather spare, so I recorded CDs of my friends reading Conceptual Art texts for my students. To further facilitate the likelihood of discussion I explored the language of art by connecting the elements of visual design with non-visual senses. (For example, rhythm was taught with sound, texture with taste, balance with kinaesthetic perception, colour with poetry, etc.). More than anything, though, student empowerment was achieved through the creation of their own art projects. While we started off mimicking important conceptual artworks (Erased DeKooning Drawing (Rauschenberg), Instruction Paintings (Ono), 4'33" (Cage), etc.) the students later developed their own projects, the most notable of which were public interventions. In *Olfactory Intervention*, students marked specific public spaces with perfume of a conceptually relevant name. (For example, *Eternity* in a graveyard). In *Braille Flyer Intervention*, students created phrases related to notions of blindness and inaccessibility, printed them on flyers in Braille, and handed them out in public. (For example, "The abyss is right in front of you – watch your step" or "Redeem this coupon immediately for a free erotic massage."). The inability of the sighted public to understand Braille turned the tables on a typical form of exclusion that the blind experience daily. While this sort of personal growth is common to pedagogical structures, I consider this project to be a conceptual artwork in itself; appropriating an existing system to critique established structures of power through the artistic transformation of disability into ability. Finally, in my project *Uncover Recover*, capacitation was facilitated through the visualization of decomposition and re-growth. In using decomposed flesh to grow Ginkgo Biloba, for example—a medicinal plant that increases memory in humans—participants were presented with an ancestral communion and material afterlife, where the dead metamorphose to stimulate their own remembrance. One of the biggest problems related to the difficult and ongoing transition from fascism to democracy in Spain is the inability to speak openly about the Spanish Civil War. My project provided that opportunity, using symbolic optimism within a space of tolerance (the art museum) to encourage discussion and dialogue.

Evaluation

My openness to spontaneity and use of intuition while executing these social artworks stimulates a dynamic evaluation of the overall projects as they continue to develop over time. As Guattari states in *The Three Ecologies*, "Process, which I here conterpose to system and structure, seeks to grasp existence in the very act of its constitution, definition, and deterritorialization; it is a process of 'setting into being', instituted by sub-sets of expressive ensembles which break with their totalizing

frame and set to work on their own account, gradually superseding the referential totality from which they emerge, and manifesting themselves finally as their own existential index, processual lines of flight...’⁸ In relation to my social art projects, Guattari here shows them slipping through my fingers, coming into their own and becoming all the stronger for it. For example, in escaping a liberal altruistic reading, *Teaching Acupuncture to the Mexican Military* can easily be seen as an exercise to create more effective killers. While my intention was more ethically and politically inclined towards a questioning of the necessity of violence in our society, being able to view the opposite angle through this project ensures that violence is demonstrated as an inherent element of health. In the *Conceptual Art Workshop for the Blind*, my overall intention of critique—both of Conceptual Art and art institutions—quickly collapsed into celebration. “Using” the blind as the perfect control group in my study of inaccessibility—both their own and that of Conceptual Art—does carry the unethical tone of human “objectification”. Doing so, though, by providing accessibility, disintegrated the possibility and level of critique I was hoping for, demonstrating instead the power and even humour of an art based in language and on ideas. My hope of undermining art institutions was equally dashed in their enthusiastic embrace of my project and the blind, demonstrating that the institutional critique by the conceptual artists of the 60’s and 70’s really has had an effect and changed the system. Never has my failure felt so good. Finally, in *Uncover Recover*, my provocation to eat medicinal plants grown from the soil of “the dead” can easily be seen with disgust—an invitation to accept the “bitter medicine” of personal and national history. This internalizing of negativity, however, is perhaps a necessary stage of acceptance in recovering from the horrors and long shadows of civil war.

The evaluation of these social art projects by participants inevitably includes an affirmation of self. In thinking about these projects more broadly, which continue to exist in and through people, its exciting for me to think about the affect that continues to transform the world. As Cameron Duff muses in *Towards a Developmental Ethology*, “Spinoza insists that a body’s ‘power of action (is) the same as (its) capacity to be affected’ (cited in Deleuze, 1992: 225). This finally reveals something of the nature of affect in terms of its transitions and effects. Spinoza understands affect as a modulation or quantum of a body’s power of action; or its capacity to affect the diverse bodies, both human and non-human, that it encounters. This power determines a body’s capacity to affect the world, to manipulate the circumstances or conditions of its environment and to shape the behaviour and/or intentions of other

⁸ GUATTARI, Felix, *The Three Ecologies*, (trans. TURNER, Chris), London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 1989, p. 136.

bodies.”⁹ This speaks almost directly of the artist’s ability to transform his world—be it material, contextual or conceptual—but it reminds me even more of the expression “respecting others is respecting yourself”. It also point towards how I think that art—both its creation and reception—can be seen to promote the understanding, capacity and health of its participants. As Guattari states in *Chaosmosis*, "The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself."¹⁰ Whether one assesses an artwork as being good or bad, or a positive or negative experience, the evaluation of art presupposes that one first be receptive. Through art, reception then becomes a form of affection that affirms the *becoming* of Self.

⁹ DUFF, Cameron. “Towards a Developmental Ethology: Exploring Deleuze’s Contribution to the Study of Health and Human Development”, *Health* 14(6), November 2010, p.626.

¹⁰ GUATTARI, Felix, *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, (trans. PEFANIS, Julian, and BAINS, Paul), Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 131.