



TO HOLD A WILD BASKET

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The modernist model of heterosexuality is coming to an end. Clearly, this is what is signaled by the current proliferation of discourses and acts constituting alternative genders and sexual orientations. According to Foucault, Federici and other theorists, the model of heterosexuality was invented in Enlightenment Europe at the time of the great confinements in the 16th century, a means to control a population that had exploded exponentially, to harness a budding capitalist workforce. This political, economic, scientific, cultural and sexual molding of bodies honed in on the subject as the main product of the capitalist production machine. In so doing, subjectivity in itself appeared as an all-encompassing horizon, to create the docile body of the worker, of course, but also as a locus of political struggle. In this sense, today's emancipatory horizon, which many argue and fight for through their bodies, can be found in managing what Preciado, after Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, calls the pharmakon that produces today's pharmacopornographic body. Preciado argues that our contemporary society of control has further internalized the disciplinary apparatuses of modernity into biological encoding (hormones as "pharmacopornographic artifacts that can create physical formations which become integrated with vaster political organisms such as our medico-legal institutions, the nation-states, or global networks through which capital circulates").¹ And as such, our agency resides, since there is no outside to this overarching and molecular modeling of subjectivity by capital, in the choice we have of dosage and ingestion of these codes to counter and reverse effects of power. The strategy: building the front of the radical queer avant-garde to reclaim the self-molding of our own bodies and minds.

I do not wish to reduce this model, or the importance and far-reaching effects of embodied political action. What I

want to suggest is that it operates according to an overarching assumption of the private space of bodies, inasmuch as they perform as subjects what is determined of a population, privatizing access to their own truth via the high road of sexuality. This presupposes an entire framework centered on discursivity, expressivity, and the production of signs: it is not surprising that Foucault elaborated a theory of epistemic breaks between specific *discursive* regimes.

In the work of the radical educator Fernand Deligny there is the impulse to move outside of the centrality of signs, to co-exist with bodies existing in different spaces than ours, and with other modes of being embodied and individualized.² Working with autistic, mute children who were external to language, of course Deligny would have looked beyond language.³ But his attempt is also located within philosophical, aesthetic and political currents in the 1960s and 1970s that refused the imperative of communicability and exchangeability. What Deligny does, writes and thinks is an attempt to get to the question from the other side: from where there is no language, no other, where the "we" preexists our cohering into subjects and is still "pre-individual." It is difficult to write about his attempt in the normative language of an essay, and Deligny's films, poetry, prose, critical writings, and maps testify to his attempt to define this other space from within, without the centrality of grammatical constructs of subject, verb and predicate: thus the use of detours in the rational development of his analyses, a great inventiveness of vocabulary, and an idiosyncratic and poetic form.

In 1967, Deligny moved to the mountains of the Cevennes in Central France to lead what he called an "attempt" (*tentative*), experimenting a "network existence" with his wife, his son, and the twelve year old child Janmari who

who had been entrusted to him by his mother after having been diagnosed with “deep encephalopathy,” what was also referred to as autism at the time, and which made the psychiatric institutions consider him incurable and impossible to educate. Deligny’s attempt emerged in the context of existing alternatives in psychiatric, pedagogical and political structures of the late 1960s.⁴ External critiques of mental institutions by historians and sociologist (Foucault, Castel, Goffman) along with internal critiques such as those of “institutional psychotherapy” (Oury and Guattari of *La Borde*, where Deligny had spent two years from 1965 to 1967), the French movement to create local mental health structures outside of the asylum, or Italian and English antipsychiatry, as well as the effects of psychoanalysis, created the possibility of a radical outside to institutional structures. Trends in radical pedagogy, as well as the refusal of the party-form in politics, lead to what Deligny called a “raft,” a libertarian, anti-institutional, momentary and economically precarious attempt at setting up an apparatus of existence for those who were floating on it.

The anti-institutional aspect of the project meant that it was inscribed against what institutes itself, foremost the person, the most basic artifice of all. The human person is for Deligny an ideological lure, since it thinks itself according to what language proclaims of it, in the “global consent in which we all find what each of us is feeling.”⁵ Humanity is bi-polar, thinks Deligny, and language experiences a kind of horror for its other side, which appears “monstrous, or deformed, when it can only be seen as a lack in the circumstances that surrounds it: a lack of language, a lack of intention, and a lack of a coherent subjectivity.”⁶ In a radical inversion of perspectives, Deligny wanted to substitute the “point of seeing” of autistic children to any kind of subjective point of view. If the ethnic and individual human was instituted

by the use of language and via a relation to the other, there was another nature, or “gravity,” specific and common, that existed outside of linguistic space and thus outside of history. The raft that they embarked on, and which lasted about twenty years, was explicitly *without any therapeutic, pedagogical or political project*, because there was no subject to treat, to educate or to mobilize. The point was to live together with the children, to be continuously present to them, yet with no pre-established method, no projected intention, and via this experimentation, to transform their conscious of limiting their own role, the one that they’d been born into as speaking humans. In addition, the raft refused any established principles, hierarchies, was resolutely local (in a barn, or under a straw roof), and did not project itself into the long-term.

In order to explain what this other gravity could be, one radically *without the other*, Deligny described a scene that he had filmed in one of the camps in the network of the Cevennes. Two young girls, Isabelle and Anne, are crouching down, face-to-face, near a pool of water. Neither of the two girls uses language, Deligny tells us, but they nevertheless belong, more or less, to the two different gravities he evokes. Anne is taking rocks, dipping them in the water, and placing them along the pool. Isabelle is watching, and eventually, she takes the rocks, tries to hand them over, splash or bother the other girl. But Anne is not playing. For her, there are no roles, there is no play-acting, and there is no other that she could imitate because for her the other does not exist. It is not lacking; it simply does not exist. And yet Deligny maintains that she is not alone, for the doing that is occurring through her hands is quite common to most of the children in the network⁷. It would be wrong to say that *she* had acted, or that such doing had occurred to *her*, as if Anne had cohered into a subject, but nonetheless,

there was *doing* evidenced in the moving of the rocks.

Deligny wanted to offer another future to the children than the institution. There, the children would have spent days repeatedly hitting their head against the walls, or maybe strapped down, or medicated to subdue their sudden, violent outbursts. Or they could also have rocked endlessly in place, caught in a cycle of great anxiety and distress, violated by the imposition to make sense, or to be useful. By wanting to make someone act, you resuscitate the subject, and block the doing, writes Deligny. In the network, however, they could, in the example of Anne, continually pile up dishes in a basket until the dishes composing such a precarious and endless tower would break into a thousand pieces as they fell to the ground.⁸ Or they could shout, like Isabelle, who did not call to the adults to signal her existence, but whose shouts were like something to be looked at as if looking at a flower.⁹ Janmari, doing the dishes and wholly swept up in that doing, could scour a metal pan until a hole peeked through the metal. When there was no place for fucking up, no tolerance for making the adults go crazy by beginning to play the role but always out of whack, they didn't. Not leaving any place for fucking up meant a strict adherence to the material, "following the thread of things."¹⁰ This was a materialist practice pushed to its logical conclusions. The life that took place on the raft was an elemental, material form of life, as close to objects and bare necessities as possible, a form of Paleolithic life, or life of the species: cooking, baking bread, constructing a hut for protection from summer storms, building the camp, making a fire. None of the children's doings were intentional acts in view of any functional purpose. On the contrary, they were freed of that compulsion: a child might take a basket, not to carry something, but to hang it on a hand, and keep it there for hours, on one hand the basket, on the other side a heavy hand, both organs of

what was already a "we" prior to being individualized in the child. This "we" needed objects, a territory, and a network of references to solidify. Deligny called such baskets wild, meaning emancipated, delivered, freed from being only what they were for those who would ascribe some fixed purpose to them. At times the children might find themselves entering into functional acts as an extension of these doings, handing a potato over to an adult who was peeling and cutting them for dinner, for example. But function was never Deligny's purpose. He was trying to find "the *detours of acting* that could allow *doing* to exist other than as a simple add-on," to be excluded and pathologized.¹¹

Deligny's position of exteriority was an attempt to exist outside of any form of exchange. Capitalism, socialism and humanism, he wrote, all carried war along with them, which arose as soon as man traced a border between something and something else, even words and things, or a sign that could only be a sign once detached. This started a process of a "mode of feeling that, in order to be true, thought as such, required the recourse to the unanimous, the caution of truth that must expand, conquer in order to convince."¹² The subject only settled in with the murder of the individual.

In order not to speak about the children, or try to understand them, Deligny had suggested that the adults draw maps on which they would trace their movements. This was meant to establish what space represented for the autistic child, and for the adults, not to "transmit" anything, but to be able to see what had remained invisible to them because of their reliance on communication. It was discovered that the children did not venture outside of a certain territory, and that in that space, an "us" cohered. Some of the children's strange behaviors could also be traced to a material cause: staying immobile at the spot where there had been a fire the spot

where there had been a fire the winter before, and of which no visible trace remained. It was as if the children, beings without history, could not perceive that other human form of subjectivity, the he/she, but were searching for something to cohere, searching for the forms with which to solidify the “us”... If we exist in time, thought Deligny, they existed in space, and the forms they saw belonged outside of the linear progression of history: water, fire, elemental realities of the species. The raft was an attempt to try to find the forms missing for the “us” to materialize, that “primordial all that persists in prelude, outside of all wanting and all power, for NOTHING, immutable, just like Ideology on the opposite pole.”¹³ The children did not *have* any common sense, but they had *senses* of the common, *organs* of the common, that could cohere if there was space for that. And if we *have* bodies, they do not: although our bodies and theirs are the same, theirs are not possessed.

Deligny wondered at these children’s radical ineptitude at exploiting others. For those of us caught in usefulness, can we even conceive of an innocence that would extend to ineptitude, not to say welcome it? The raft of the Cévennes remains almost incomprehensible, because it tried to place itself outside rational and linguistic structures. Its space of existence was constantly in danger of sinking in the semiotic sea all around. It had no fixed funding structures. The small communities, adults and children, did not make any money, because that would imply that they’d be making money off the kids. They received Deligny’s royalties, or lived off donations (from Françoise Dolto, the Emmaüs companions, and even the Pink Floyd apparently).¹⁴ Furthermore, the adults working with the kids were nomadic, people temporarily looking of a job, who needed something to do for a while, a structure that could welcome them. So they would come in and then move on. But the raft was always tottering on

the brink of dissolution also because the customary of forms that could cohere an us was always in danger of tipping back into projected similarity and repetition, and then would lose itself into signs.

What could this mean for those of us “condemned” to using language, those of us who exist within the gravity field of the subject, in the regime of exchangeability? Must we limit ourselves to code switching in a war zone? Of course there is a gradient of subjectivity. Maybe our failures, whatever remains invisible, the times when we can’t act can tempt us to unhook the private individual such as the one speaking to you here. A different notion of freedom emerges from Deligny’s attempt, one that is not necessarily useful, but we can guess what he would think of the term. For us historical humans, our freedom is dependent on doing what we want. It implies an “I” determined by a set of social, historical, economic and material conditions, the emancipation of which relies on its desire. As we all know, capitalism has become adept at latching onto this. But even from within the emancipatory horizon of desiring subjectivities, such a political strategy can become a series of imperatives: express yourself, have fun, be cool, have sex... All obligations, even positive, can become taxing in the end. Deligny thought that the very fact of giving people all possible freedom meant to link them to a pact. The other kind of freedom would be to act without any wanting at all. It wouldn’t be an imperative but an infinitive.

Images

Footnotes

1. Banner Image: Philippe and Anne's wanderlines in the kitchen. The movements of the adults are traced in orange, the movements of the children in black. November 13, 1976. (from *Maps and Wanderlines*, p. 273).
2. Figure 1: A picture of one of the encampments. There is no information about who is in the picture in the original caption, but instead, a poem by Deligny: "an old shelter/ which will be/fallen apart/a shelter/is something/almost/ someone/presence/there are cathedrals/and/there is that shelter there/N is not A." N refers to the primordial we, "Nous," A to the other, "Autre." (from *Au défaut du langage*, p. 48).
3. Figure 2: Drawn in the center is the action of the adult, with the corresponding doing around it. (Map traced by Gisèle Durand, *Les détours de l'agir*, p. 87).
4. Figure 3: A map of Janmari's "wander ring" and movements traced by Jean Lin, June 12-13, 1975. For a detailed explanation of this map, please refer to p. 251 of *Maps and Wanderlines*. (from *Maps and Wanderlines*, p. 252).

1. Beatriz Preciado, *Techno Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013) 191
2. Deligny was quite well known during the time of this attempt. His book *Graine de crapule* had regularly been reprinted since 1946 and was read by generations of educators. In addition to a number of theoretical texts and novels, he organized three issues of *Recherches*, the research journal of the Cerfi (the Center for the Study and Research of Institutional Formation) founded by Felix Guattari. After a period of relative obscurity, in 2007, the publishing company L'Arachnéen (The Arachnid, after a concept of Deligny's) published a compendium of Deligny's works as their first project. An exhibition of maps drafted by participants of the Cevennes raft was organized in 2012 during *The Imminence of Poetics*, the 30^e Biennale of Sao Paulo, which then travelled to the *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris and to the *Palacio das Artes*, in Belo Horizonte in 2013. In the summer of 2013, a symposium on Deligny was organized for the 30th anniversary of the *Collège International de Philosophie* in Paris.
3. He also mentions these children had no attraction toward the sexual, which puts them outside of what Foucault theorizes as the historical construction of sexuality's privileged mode of access to truth.
4. I am indebted to the detailed historical and conceptual analysis of Deligny's attempt by Igor Krtolica in "La 'tentative' des Cevennes," *Chimères*, "Clinique & Politique," no. 72 (2009): 73-97.
5. Deligny, *Les détours de l'agir ou le moindre geste* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 56.
6. *Ibid.*, 124.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. I am reminded here of an eight-foot tall "endless column" that Robert Morris mentions as the initiation of his artistic life, when he and a childhood friend, as an anti-assignment for a bad shop class, has glued together a tower of drawing boards. As punishment, they had to stay late on Friday afternoons to sand all the picture frames that could be found in the school basement.
9. For Deligny, even to understand autistic children was to do violence to them.
10. Deligny, *Les détours de l'agir*, 47.
11. *Ibid.*, 310.
12. *Ibid.*, 59.
13. Fernand Deligny, "Au défaut du langage," *Cahiers de l'Immuable* 3, *Recherches*, no. 24 (1976): 18.
14. *Cartes et lignes d'erre/Maps and Wander Lines: traces du réseau de Fernand Deligny, 1969-1979*, (Paris: L'Arachnéen, 2013), 6.