

# The twilight of the victim: creation quits its pimp, to rejoin resistance<sup>1</sup>

What strategies are artistic practices using to perform their critical function at this time? How are they fostering a reconnection between the powers of creation and resistance, that is to say, between the sentimental and political aesthetic?

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## Paradoxical subjectivity

Subjectivity is the living laboratory where worlds are created and others are dissolved. The politics of subjectivation shift and change, along with their inherent relations to the world's otherness: varied and variable combinations of two different ways of grasping the material world, either as a pattern of form or as a field of force —two modes of apprehension which in turn depend on the activation of different powers of subjectivity.

Understanding the world as form-matter draws on perception, carried out by the sensory organs; but understanding the world as energy-matter draws on sensation, engendered in the encounter between the body and the forces of the world that affect it. That which in the body is affected by these forces is neither its organic, sensorial or erogenous condition; rather it is the condition of flesh shot through with waves of nervous energy, what I will call a «resonating body». Thus the perception of the other introduces his formal presence, through its representation, into our subjectivity; whereas sensation constitutes his living presence. Between these two ways of grasping the world there exists an irresolvable paradox: on the one hand, the new blocks of sensations throbbing within subjectivity as it is affected by other worlds; on the other, the forms through which this subjectivity recognizes and guides itself in the present. The ineluctable disparity between these two ultimately places the current forms in check: they become an obstacle to the integration of the new connections to the world's otherness that have provoked the emergence of a new state of sensation. Thus they cease to be conductors of the process, they are stripped of vitality, they lose meaning. A crisis arises in subjectivity, bringing pressure to bear and producing unease. To respond to this pressure, life is summoned up as a power of resistance and creation. In other words, this unease leads to the creation of a new configuration of existence, a new form of oneself, of the world and of the relations between the two;

and it also requires a fight to bring these new boundaries into existence, to embody them.

The association of these two forces in action grants life its continuity and expansion. The multiple molecular transformations which thereby arise are accumulated and eventually precipitate new forms of society, an ongoing «open work» whose creation is necessarily collective. The paradox in subjectivity and the crisis it provokes thus constitute the individualisation process in its constant becoming-other; they are its trigger. This turns all forms of subjectivation into ephemeral configurations in unstable equilibrium.

The practise or non-practise of these two forms of knowledge and the place each one occupies in relation to the world define modes of subjectivation, each of which in turn defines a politics of the relation to otherness, whose effects are not neutral: they encourage, or conversely, they constrain the processuality of life, its expansion as a power of differentiation which is both a force of invention that decomposes worlds while recomposing others, and simultaneously, a force of resistance that permits change to occur. In other words, the changing politics of relationships with the other are what encourage or constrain life's struggle for resistance. How can we use these terms to conceptualise the prevailing politics of subjectivation within the present context of «integrated world capitalism»?<sup>1</sup>

## Kidnapped invention

Some contemporary writers, especially those close to Toni Negri, claim that from the 1970s or 1980s onward, capitalism has turned the force of invention into its primary source of value, the driving force of the economy itself. How should we view this phenomenon from the viewpoint of the politics of subjectivation underlying it?

Two aspects stand out here, and clash: on the one hand, the knowledge of the world as energy-matter tends to be discredited, and as a result, deactivated; on the other, the

paradoxical link between the virtual blocks of sensations and the current forms of life is brutally intensified, thereby intensifying the tension and the mobilisation of the creative force that this dissonance provokes.

There are many reasons for the intensification of this dissonance. To take just two of the most obvious, let us first look at the fact that the globalised urban existence introduced with capitalism implies that the worlds to which subjectivity is exposed at any point on the globe are increasingly multiplied and vary at an increasingly dizzying speed: in other words, subjectivity is continuously affected by a whirlwind of forces of all kinds. Second is the way that the need to constantly create new market spheres —an inherent necessity of capitalist logic— means that new forms of life have to be produced to give them a subjective consistency while others are swept off the stage, along with entire deactivated sectors of the economy. The combination of these two factors shortens the shelf-life of the forms in use, which become obsolete even before there has been enough time to absorb them. What is more, this combination also imposes the obligation of reformatting oneself rapidly, even before there is time to really feel the sensation to which the change gives rise. One lives in a constant state of tension, on the verge of exasperation; and the result is that the force of invention is invoked very frequently.

To aggravate the situation, this entire process occurs in a subjectivity blind to the world's forces of otherness, dissociated from the resonating body and, consequently, left without access to the new blocks of sensations that summon up its power of invention; left without the bodily compass that orients the creation of territories, so that they can operate as the existential actualisation of those sensations. A wellspring of inventive force is released, without any possibility to appropriate it and to build singular worlds in consonance with what the life process requires. This wellspring of «free» invention power is what contemporary capitalism has discovered as a virgin resource,

an untapped vein of value to be exploited; a phenomenon which Toni Negri and his collaborators can be credited with discerning and describing.

In order to extract maximum profitability from this invention power, capitalism pushes it even further than it would be by its own internal logic, but only to make an ever more perverse use of it: like a pimp, it exploits the force of invention at the service of an accumulation of surplus value, taking advantage of it and thus reiterating its alienation with respect to the life process that engendered it —an alienation that separates it from the force of resistance. On the one hand you have turbo-charged inventive power freed of its relation to resistance, and on the other, a tension aggravated by an experience of the world's otherness disassociated from its grasp as energy-matter by the resonating body. This is what defines capitalism's mode of subjectivation in the present.

Accelerated and liberated of its association with resistance, the power of invention is captured by capital to serve in creating template-territories that configure the right types of subjectivity for each new sphere that is invented. These are homogenised territories of existence whose very formation is organised by the principle of the production of surplus value, which overlays and overcodes the entire process. Easy-to-assimilate «ready-to-wear identities» are accompanied by a powerful marketing operation concocted and distributed by the media, so as to make us believe that identifying with these idiotic images and consuming them is the only way to succeed in reconfiguring a territory, and even more, that this is the only channel by which one can belong to the sought-after territory of a «luxury subjectivity». And that is no trivial matter, for outside such a territory one runs the risk of social death, by exclusion, humiliation, destitution, or even the risk of literally dying – the risk of falling into the sewer of the «trash subjectivities», with their horror scenarios made up of war, slums, drug traffic,

kidnapping, hospital queues, undernourished children, the homeless, the landless, the shirtless, the paperless, the people who can only be less, an ever-expanding territory. If trash subjectivity continuously experiences the distressing humiliation of an existence without value, luxury subjectivity for its part continuously experiences the threat of falling outside, into the sewer-territory, a fall which may be irreversible. The prospect terrifies it and leaves it agitated and anxious, desperately seeking recognition.

The process is completed when capitalism takes advantage of the heightened tension in order to create an environment that is ripe for pressing advances by the media, selling its promises of pacification backed up by the instantaneous reconfiguration that the consumption of the commodified template-territories is supposed to provide. An operation that injects into the weakened subjectivity increasingly large doses of hope that the tension can be alleviated, and keeps it alienated from the forces of the world that are demanding to get through.

In the vertigo of this constantly accelerating process, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to get to know the living reality of the world as energy-matter (to «know» in the sense of leaving oneself vulnerable to its resonance); there are fewer and fewer opportunities to escape to this dissociation. It is impossible not to surrender to the constant onslaught of the stimuli; otherwise one will cease to exist and fall into the pit of the trash-subjectivities. Fear has now taken the stage.

However, as those close to Negri also tell us, if contemporary capitalism has stimulated invention power in order to live off it like a pimp, at the same time the mobilisation of that force throughout all of social life has created the conditions for a vital force of resistance, a power of variation that is probably without equal in any other period of Western history. Here is the root of a

constitutive ambiguity of capitalism, its Achilles' heel. Through the breach of that vulnerability, other scenarios are building momentum, governed by other principles.

What are the strategies of subjectivation that unblock the access to the resonating body, reconnect the power of creation to the power of resistance, and free it of its pimp? To answer that question we need to place ourselves in an area where politics and art are intertwined, where the resistant force of politics and the creative forces of art mutually affect each other, blurring the frontiers between them. I propose we try placing ourselves in that hybrid zone — first on the side of politics contaminated by its proximity to art, then on the side of art contaminated by its proximity to politics — in order to try to discern strategies of this kind.

#### Politics of resistance: «the Lula event»

I will take Lula's recent victory in the presidential election in Brazil as an example of strategies which, in the area of politics, tend to release the creative force from submission to its pimp and to reconnect it to the force of resistance. Beyond the tangible fact of the election, a veritable event seems to have taken place during the campaign: the figure of Lula has embodied the dissolution of the Brazilian version of trash-subjectivity, itself the result of a 500-year politics of colonial, slave-owning, dictatorial and capitalist subjectivation; a historical legacy superimposing the different regimes of exclusion and segmentation that have led the country to its first-ranking place on the world scale of inequality. The Lula event is the desertion of the place of trash-subjectivity, and of its position as victim.

The figure of the victim belongs to a politics of the relation to life's inherent cruelty, a politics that consists in denying it. Cruelty, the tragic condition of life, establishes itself as a vital necessity, linked to the ineluctable disparity between the grasp of the world as form-matter and as energy-matter. When this disparity reaches a certain threshold, cruelty has to be

exercised to get rid of a world that no longer makes sense: it constitutes the inexorable character of the vital movement, its «positive» or «active» violence. It is exercised through the power of creation that invents other forms of existence and, coextensively, through the power of resistance, the struggle for the construction and defence of these new worlds. Without this, life cannot go on.

In a subjectivity segregated from the living reality of the world as energy-matter — as is currently the case under capitalism — we have seen that the power of resistance and the power of creation split. Restricted to a knowledge of the world as form-matter and, therefore, to the map of the current form with its figures and its conflicts of interests, subjectivity is unable to recognise the cruelty of life itself as the cause of its unease. It is thus overcome by fear and disarray and seeks release by projecting the cause of its fear onto the other, attributing life's cruelty to him. Summoned up by the experience of cruelty as it appears through the filter of this interpretation, the force of resistance does not move toward the affirmation and defence of the new forms of life that have become necessary, but directs itself *against* the other instead. It is then captured by the dialectical matrix and channelled into a struggle between opposites: subjectivities reified into identity-figures whose struggle revolves exclusively around power. Yet whoever the winner, in terms of the politics of desire what triumphs in this case is the force of conservatism that defends the current form and therefore resists in the negative sense, denying the germinating difference that seeks to break through, and impeding the creation of a form of life that is necessary for that difference to be embodied and actualised.

In this politics of reactive resistance, the multiplicity of forces at play is silenced and reframed in just two subjective figures: victim and/or oppressor, two sides of a single coin. For the oppressor, the aim of the struggle

is to subjugate the other, so that, taken as an object, he can be instrumentalised in the service of the oppressor's own preservation and expansion as such. This is a perverse politics of the exercise of resistance in its negative version, which adopts the form of evil and is confused with it: violence as reactively exercised, ranging from explicit outbursts — physical or moral — to the implicit violence of a «peaceful» form which consists of a politically correct respect, seasoned with a pity that anchors the other in a fixed identity position. While in the oppressor, this «negative violence» is explicitly assumed, in the victim it is justified as a reaction to the violence of the other, who is confined within the figure of the «enemy». It is exercised either implicitly, in a plaintive style, in the form of resentment and/or melancholic self-pity which seeks to destroy the other with guilt; or explicitly, in a style of rage, in vengeful and/or paranoid form. Resentment and vengeance: politics of the victim's resistance that reflect in a mirror the very thing they seek to combat — the logic of evil, the reactive violence that such a politics voluptuously nourishes.

This logic of reactive resistance is hegemonic in our contemporary societies: violence always tends to be reduced to its negative version, a conception broadly propagated by integrated world capitalism, which uses it to cultivate fear and disarray, and thus, to feed the mode of subjectivation that gives it existential consistency. The media are the major vehicle of this propagation, whose strategies are increasingly more refined, clever and effective. Today, the representation of a war on the scale of the one in Iraq passes through a single world filter: CNN, which ignores the negative violence of the aggressor — in this case, the United States and the allied forces of integrated world capitalism. Not a single image of this violence is transmitted and the war is interpreted as vengeance for the supposed violence of the other, the «Arab». In the case of Brazil this micropolitics of capitalism was established under the military dictatorship, and continues today.

The figures of victim and oppressor are both sustained by the belief in luxury-subjectivity and trash-subjectivity, in the hierarchy that marks their relationship, and thus, in the superior value of luxury-subjectivity, the ideal reference for both. In the victim, luxury-subjectivity summons up admiration, identification and envy — what psychoanalysts call «identification with the aggressor». Beneath both its resentful demands and the vengeful attack, there is really a demand addressed to luxury-subjectivity seen as a model, a demand for social rank, for recognition, for belonging — in other words, a demand for love addressed to the aggressor.

The «Lula event» is the dissolution of the figure of the victim. A body speaking from somewhere else: the place where one can grasp the living reality of the world as energy-matter, presenting itself in subjectivity as sensation. Because its speech is produced from that other place, it is the bearer of the necessity and of the freedom to problematise the present configuration of the world as form-matter. A type of understanding that cannot be learnt at school, nor in the best universities, but through a true exposure to the other as a field of forces which affect the resonating body, which convulse and agitate subjectivity, requiring it to create new maps of existence — such as a political project for a country. In this way Lula shifts away from a position that reduces the understanding of the world to its form, and at the same time, from a politics of desire that naturalises the existing form and the hierarchy of social value and knowledge that it implies. In his speech there is no longer any resentful lament, nor any vengeful attack: luxury-subjectivity entirely loses its power as a reference point. Hence the serenity of Lula's presence: it has nothing to do with the marketing image that seeks to forge a sanitised figure of «peace and love» to appease the elite, as his opponents would have it.<sup>2</sup> This quality of presence is what gradually mobilised a broad following, because the shift in the politics

of desire that it expresses has a contagious effect on the subjectivity of the Brazilians, especially the trash-subjectivities that make up 90% of the population. This shift is authorised, propagated and leads to victory: fear dissolves, a living speech begins to circulate, and a collective intelligence sets itself into motion. In his despair at the perspective of defeat, the opposing candidate insisted aggressively on the value of university training and tried to summon up the fear of being governed by someone without such knowledge; but these arguments had lost all their seductive power. Obviously, this is not a process that began with Lula; and even if we consider his figure to be an important force in the genealogy of this historical shift, it was not something that began with the recent electoral campaign.<sup>3</sup>

If we reflect that all societies imply a specific politics of desire and subjectivity, then it appears that we are now on the threshold of an irreversible passage from one world to another, even if there may be — and there certainly will be — many waverings back and forth. It is a significant historical moment, not only because of the joy of victory for the left, nor only because it involves a candidate combining various categories of trash-subjectivity: an immigrant from the North-East living on the outskirts of São Paulo, a metalworker with a missing finger that he lost while operating a lathe, and above all, a Brazilian who does not speak «proper» Portuguese. For this is just the most obvious and even naive aspect of this joy, and even the most dangerous since it might be confused with hope, a sad affect that feeds messianic movements, populism and a wide range of ideals of a fusional world without differences, and therefore without otherness, without cruelty, without resistance and without creation — without life, in short. Truly vital is the joy over the signals of an exhaustion of the colonial-slaver-dictatorial-capitalist unconscious, which has held Brazilians hostage to a hierarchy that anchors them in a position of trash-subjectivity, victims of a supposedly transcendental destiny.

If the world is looking to Brazil right now, it is because the dissolution of the figure of the victim speaks of a need that goes beyond the national stage. One of the left's long-held vices is to embody this figure of the victim, which means maintaining a subjectivity limited to a knowledge of the world as form-matter, fearing the positive violence of cruelty inherent to life and for this reason denying it, projecting its cause outward and exercising a reactive violence against the other. This vice transforms the cruelty of the vital movement into human evil and separating life of its powers of creation and resistance.

The formula that the «Lula event» proposes for treating this damaging vice consists in activating the access to the resonant body which allows subjectivity to discover the other as the field of forces of a world that is different from one's own, a world that affects subjectivity and can cause it to desire the risk of self-exposure. It is a formula which consists in incarnating the cruelty of life, in liberating the power of creation from dissociation with the body and from capture by capital, but also in liberating the power of resistance from its interpretation by the dialectical matrix that leads to its transmutation into evil. What comes together here are the conditions for a politics of desire in which resistance and creation meet again in a body that opens up to the forces of the world. Isn't this the long-awaited «opening» which, since the years of the dictatorship, Brazilians have described as «democratic»?

Recalling that the victim is an unproductive presence in cultural practices too, and particularly in practices of an explicitly political character, we should ask ourselves several questions. Could this figure be vanishing from the cultural scene as well? How can artistic creation, in its interfaces with resistance, escape the eroticisation of the victim? And more: how can it actively participate in a divestment from this harmful figure, extending throughout the social body? Or in an even broader sense: how do

creation and resistance come together in the artistic practices of the present, if we place ourselves in the zone where politics and art intermingle, where their forces affect each other, making their borders indistinguishable?

### The politics of creation: artistic practices in the present

If we reflect that artistic practice consists in actualising sensations, in making them visible and speakable, in producing cartographies of meaning; and further, if we reflect that sensation is the living presence in the body of the forces of the world's otherness seeking their passage, shattering the current forms of existence, then we can assert that actualising these forces means «socialising the sensations»<sup>4</sup>, communicating to a group the new compositions of forces that affect it and make it drift toward new configurations.

To say that the power of invention is not only mobilised, but actively celebrated and intensified throughout the entire social field means that the exercise of creation is no longer confined to as a specific sphere of human activity. This situation brings new problems for art and demands new strategies. Through which strategies are artistic practices carrying out their critical function in the current moment? How are they promoting the reconnection of the powers of creation and resistance, of the aesthetic and political affects?

To simply remain in the ghetto of «art» as the separate sphere to which the power of creation was confined in the earlier regime is to run the risk of keeping it dissociated from the power of resistance, and limiting it to being a source of value, off which its pimp, capital, can make an easy living. It is the risk of being reduced, as an artist, to the function of a supplier of hard drugs in the form of ready-made identities, completely outfitted with their glamour-drenched cartographies of meaning, to be pushed by dealers on the growth-market of subjectivities suffering the syndrome of abstinence from sense, and even from their own

silhouettes. Taken to the limit, this position results in the cynicism of certain artists whose creation is oriented by the desire to belong to this glamorised scene, and who offer themselves voluptuously for exploitation by the pimp.

On the other hand, it's useless to go on singing the same old song about the need to reconnect art and life, in exactly the way this question was treated during the modern period. Because if art and life are still divided, it's no longer because of the deactivation of creation in the broad sweep of social life and its confinement to the artistic ghetto. That situation has already been resolved by capitalism, much more effectively than it ever was by art. If there exists a dissociation —and there obviously does— it has clearly shifted, and at the same time it has become much more subtle and perverse. At issue here is an operation of great complexity that can intervene at different stages in the process of creation, and not only at the end. Its effect at that point is just more obvious, because it coincides with the moment when the dissociation makes itself felt on art's products, reifying them in two ways: either transforming them into «art objects» separated from the vital process whereby the creation was carried out, or treating them as sources of a surplus glamour-value, attached to the logos of businesses and even of cities, like Bilbao, for instance. In this case, the glamour pumps up the logo's seductive power, and thus the business's or the city's capacity to summon up identification and desire for consumption, which increases its commercial success.

At present, certain artistic practices seem to be particularly effective in dealing with these problems. Their strategy consists of precise and subtle insertions at certain points where the social structure is unravelling, where tension is pulsating due to the pressure of a new composition of forces seeking passage. It is a mode of insertion mobilised by the desire to expose oneself to the other and

to run the risk of such an exposure, instead of opting for the guarantee of a politically correct position that confines the other to a representation and protects subjectivity from any affective contagion. The «work» consists in bringing the forces and the tension they provoke into existence, which entails the connection of the power of creation to a piece of the world grasped as energy-matter by the resonant body of the artist; and it consists at the same time in activating of the power of resistance. What is invented in this way are «spatio-temporal *dispositifs* of being-together»<sup>5</sup>. The living presence of this embodied attitude in an artistic practice has a power of contamination and propagation in the milieu where it is inserted, directly and indirectly. Mobilised in this milieu like everywhere else, the power of creation, having been allowed to reconnect with the world as energy-matter and to exercise itself in association with the power of resistance, gains an opportunity to free itself of the perverse destiny that strips it of the capacity to invent singular maps that can actualise the mutations of sensation currently underway. The work, strictly speaking, is in this case an event. What other artistic strategies are confronting the problems that we have observed? What other problems are being raised by the dissociation of resistance and creation within artistic practices? And within other social practices, how does one see a reactivation and intermingling of the political and the aesthetic affects —those essential powers for vital health in any human activity? Finding directions for answering these questions is a task that cannot be performed by any single individual. Such an undertaking depends on the accumulation of infinitesimal experiments throughout the weave of collective life.



- 1 Text based upon a conference at *São Paulo S.A. Situação #1 COPAN*, curated by **Catherine David** (São Paulo, 23-27 November, 2002).
- 2 «Integrated World Capitalism» (IWC) is a term coined by **Félix Guattari** in the late 1960s, as an alternative to the term «globalisation» which is generic and which serves to hide the fundamentally economic, and more specifically capitalist, sense of the phenomenon of internationalisation in its current form.
- 3 Faced with **Lula's** serenity in his public appearances during the election campaign, his adversaries and the majority of the press pejoratively described him as «Luhlina paz e amor» (peace-and-love Lula).
- 4 **Lula** comes out of the trade-union movement. In his first candidacy he lost the election to **Franco Montoro**, who stood for the PSBD, **Fernando Henrique Cardoso's** party. In his second attempt in 1986, Lula ran for the position of federal representative, winning the election with the highest number of votes for any candidate. He then ran four times for president, in 1989 (the first presidential elections after the dictatorship), then again in 1994, 1998 and finally in 2002, when he was elected with a significant majority of the vote.
- 5 Cf. Gabriel Tarde by **Maurizio Lazzarato**.
- 6 In «Esthétique et politique. Un lien à repenser» («Estética y política. Un vínculo para replantear»), unpublished seminar directed by **Jacques Rancière** at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. MACBA. Barcelona, 13 to 17 May 2002.