

Video Assemblages: ‘Machinic Animism’ and ‘Asignifying Semiotics’ in the Work of Melitopoulos and Lazzarato

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We never step outside the flux of participation
or of assemblages.
(Isabelle Stengers)¹

Assemblages

Assemblages (2010) is an hour-long, three channel audio-visual ‘documentary’ installation about the French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, co-created by the artist Angela Melitopoulos and the political philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato. It should be understood as both a work of video art in the tradition of Nam June Paik and Bill Viola as well as, the artists claim, a ‘visual research project’. It was created for an exhibition entitled *Animism*, which explored, through various works of art, the boundaries between matter and life within the belief systems of several Western and non-Western cultures. In this context, it has been shown at Kunsthalle Bern and Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen (2010), the Generali Foundation in Vienna (2011), and the House of World Cultures in Berlin (2012). As a whole, the exhibition has been praised for ‘brilliantly succeeding in opening a new perspective’ in which the concept of ‘animism appears a deeply realistic worldview of everything that surrounds human beings, but in no way as some kind of mystical or exotic magic’.² *Assemblages* is conceived as a video installation constructed with footage from radio interviews, conversations with several friends, colleagues, and Guattari scholars (for example, Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, French philosopher Éric Alliez, French psychoanalyst Jean-Claude Polack, French

anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski, Brazilian philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart, and French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel); it contains archival footage from Guattari’s clinic La Borde, and from institutional psychotherapy documentaries by Fernand Deligny, Renaud Victor and François Pain, as well as new material produced by Melitopoulos and Lazzarato in Brazil during the course of their research. The brilliance of the work lies not only in its value as a documentary about Guattari’s life and practice, but also in the various ways that so many sensorial, medial, cultural, political and conceptual levels are compounded and confounded simultaneously. In this essay, I briefly analyse the video aesthetically and formally before offering some clues that may help in unpacking the incredibly dense conceptual landscape it inhabits, thereby opening up one possible avenue for its reception: that of ‘unnatural participation’. To this end, I focus upon Lazzarato’s appropriation of Guattari and Deleuze’s concepts of ‘machinic animism’ and ‘asignifying semiotics’, which strongly underlie *Assemblages* on several registers.

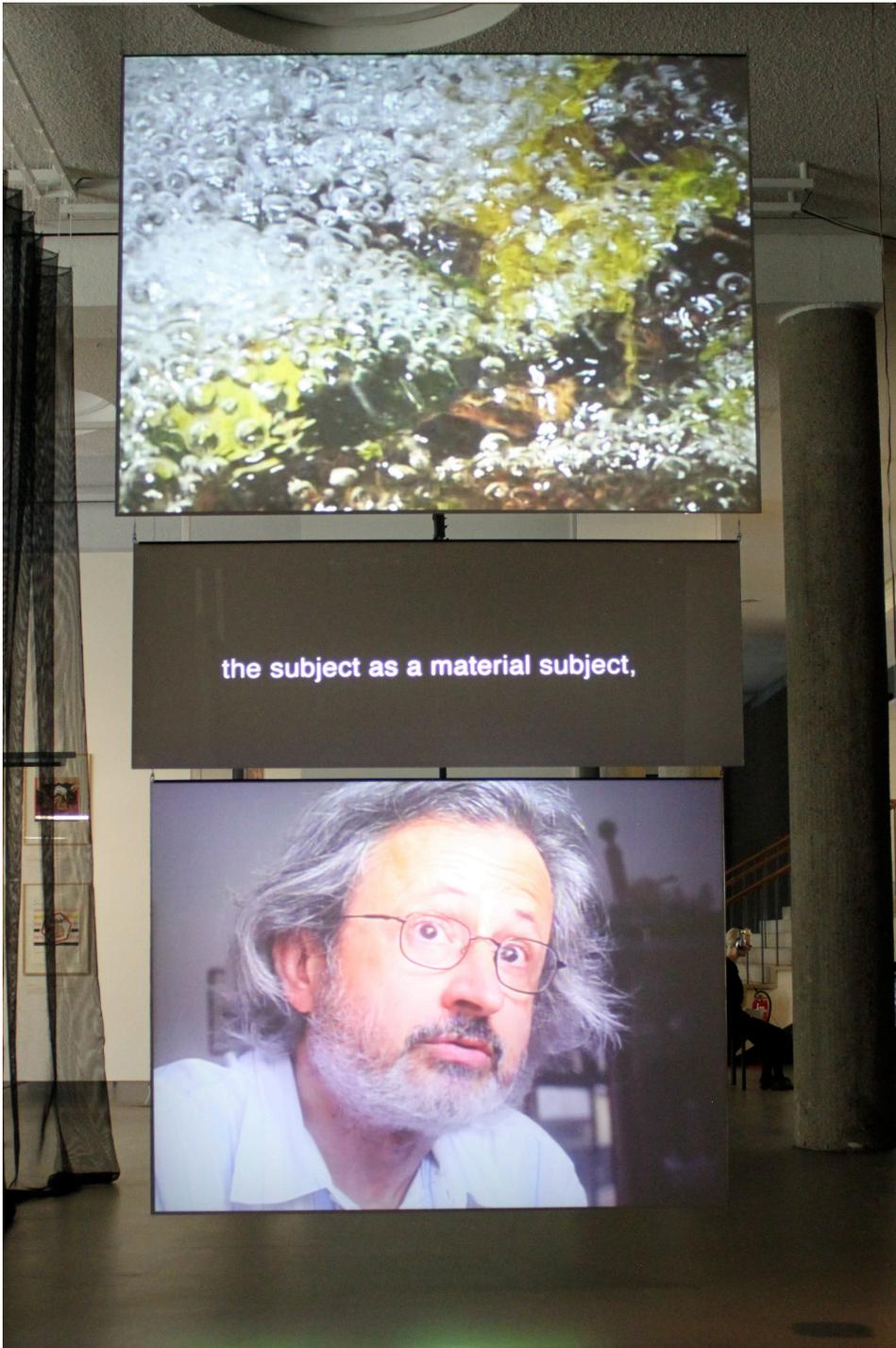
The video unfolds through an abstract non-linear interweaving of sound, image and text in a way that is similar to Melitopoulos’s work of the past decade. These works are multi-channel videos that combine elements somewhat reminiscent of the way in which the films of Marguerite Duras and Trinh Minh-ha employ the disjunction and abstraction of sound, image and text in response to the quite different types of disjunctions and

abstractions inherent in cross-cultural displacement. For example, Melitopoulos's *Passing Drama* (1999) is a video essay inspired by the oral recollections of political refugees, including members of Melitopoulos's own family, who were deported from Asia Minor to northern Greece in 1923. The lacunas of remembering, forgetting and recitation are rendered through the experimental montage of image, text and sound to create a highly rhythmic, abstract, and hauntingly beautiful work concerning various layers of collective and individual memory, border crossing, trauma, the construction of perpetually migrating and minoritarian identities, and the impossibility of representing them politically or aesthetically. Maurizio Lazzarato has claimed that the abstraction in this work sometimes reaches a level that alludes to the type of amodal, pre-verbal, and 'dehumanised' transsubjectivity described by the psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger as a 'matrixial borderspace'.³ It is therefore no surprise that Lazzarato has stated elsewhere that his concept of *videophilosophy*, which I will discuss below, is 'the result of my encounter with Angela Melitopoulos's work. Her method of filming, editing and contemplating the relationship between the image and the world inspired me to write an "ontology" of video. [...] In Angela Melitopoulos's video *Passing Drama* you can "see" this ontology instead of laboriously reading about it'.⁴

Assemblages is aesthetically quite similar to *Passing Drama*, with the added qualification by the artists that both the logic of montage employed and the formal layout should be understood through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblage*, which is, of course, the main theme of the work as well. The installation is presented as a triptych of differently sized screens that are stacked vertically. Each screen is meant to highlight a different modality of reception: seeing, hearing and reading. This verticality takes its cue, the artists maintain, from the cartographic element of animistic art, as well as from the visual structure of East Asian art.

More generally, it 'alludes to a "movement of sense" falling downward from above and rising upward from below. [...] The interplay between the three projections enables the images and sounds to coincide or fall apart; it triggers a direction of movement of the gaze that, as a vectorial force of sense, addresses different modes of perception'.⁵ They conceive of the installation as an assemblage in the technical sense that it is a diversely constructed 'diagonal cross section' of the source material. It presents this material by way of a unique form of indexing that is not chronological, historical, technical nor grammatical. To construct such a diagonal cross section of material means, for Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 'to think now in the vertical plane (layering and accumulation of the material, acoustic space), now in the horizontal one (sequencing, narrative)'. The horizontal axis of sequencing is further articulated by the artists through the psychoanalyst François Tosquelles's concepts of geopsychiatry and psychomotricity – concepts essential to the development of Guattari's own schizoanalytic cartography – in which the category of movement is understood as migration and vagabondage, and is intimately linked to the dynamisms, rhythms, and physicality of the voice more than to its linguistic or purely narrative content. All of these features make the work an assemblage, which is defined – precisely along horizontal and vertical axes by Deleuze and Guattari – as a multiplicity of objects, affects, expressions, and (de)territorialisations that come together for an indefinite period of time, in order to enable a new productive or machinic function. 'Assemblage' is the usual English rendering of the French *agencement*, which refers to the processes of arranging and organising heterogeneous elements.

At the level of content, *Assemblages* presents Guattari's own migrations to Brazil and Japan in the 1980s. He firmly believed that in order to 'decolonise' our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving, the West needed 'to go back to [...] an animist



Assemblages, installation view. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2012. © 2010 Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato

conception of subjectivity', which should be understood as completely distinct from 'a simple return to irrationalism'.⁶ That is, the West needs to break open the neurotic, post-Enlightenment tradition which compulsively separates subject and object, nature and culture, man and animal, matter and soul, individual and collective, as well as a whole host of other dualisms that lie at the root of most of the political, ecological, scientific, and aesthetic problems of our contemporary moment. Guattari looked specifically to Brazil and Japan as model cultures that, in different ways, have held on to their pre-modern, animist cosmologies while maintaining a forward-looking relation to development and technology. He further argued that, as such, these two cultures have provided unique conditions for developing 'prototypical models of new capitalist subjectivities'.⁷

Traveling in Japan, he saw how the attempt to think animist traditions in conjunction with hypermodern technologies enabled the emergence of new and complex models of subjectification. In a world defined by standardization and homogenization, animist cosmologies in Brazil present forms of resistance against capitalist subjectification. [...] Guattari spoke of the emergence of these resistances; associated with alternative lifestyles, they come into being in particular where postcolonial systems are retreating. A decentered, animist subjectivity that positions the 'other, i.e., things, animals, plants, planets, etc., as a vehicle of dimensions of shared subjectivity' – examples exist in 'psychosis, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena' – does not share the view that our psyche is structured like human language. Subjectivity, Guattari argued, is 'distributed in different degrees across nature, machines, the cosmos, the social, or the economy'.⁸

Guattari traveled to Brazil and Japan numerous times and extensively studied the various types of cultural, artistic, psychiatric and political practices that were taking place there in order to translate

and incorporate some of them into his own critical and clinical milieu at La Borde. Additionally, this appropriation of certain elements from Brazilian and Japanese cultures should be seen as strongly informing Guattari's intellectual trajectory during the 1980s, leading up to his final statements on ecology (*The Three Ecologies*, 1989); philosophy (*What is Philosophy?*, 1991, with Gilles Deleuze), and especially what he called the 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' (*Chaosmosis*, 1992) of constructing new forms of subjectivity in the age of immaterial labour and semiocapitalism.

Machinic animism

For Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage consists of heterogeneous elements of all kinds that relate by 'contagion' or 'unnatural participation', which come together neither as an organic totality – in which parts are described as forming seamless wholes (Hegel) or structures (Lacan) – nor as a lifeless, extensive set (Badiou). Instead, an assemblage is qualified as 'machinic' in a very special sense. First, it is defined by its functional or pragmatic capacity to affect or be affected by other assemblages rather than any 'truth' value. This aspect of the machinic quality of assemblages is clearly illustrated through a now familiar example used by Deleuze and Guattari:

A racehorse is more different from a workhorse than a workhorse is from an ox. [...] It is not a member of a species but an element or individual in a machinic assemblage [...] defined by a list of active and passive affects.... These affects circulate and are transformed within the assemblage: what a horse 'can do'.⁹

Second, an assemblage should be understood not as an axiomatic set but, following the radical empiricism of William James, as a kind of temporary collection of 'plural facts' as well as the 'conjunctive and disjunctive relations' between them, including facts and relations that might normally be occluded from everyday perception but are nonetheless

experienced in altered states of consciousness.¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari even take the principles of radical empiricism one step further. While James levels the playing field between elements and their relations – in an attempt to correct the overly pessimistic disconnection of discrete elements in Humean empiricism – Deleuze and Guattari *elevate* relations above elements. So, while they do agree with James's move beyond Hume – 'Substitute the AND for IS. A *and* B. The AND is not even a specific relation or conjunction, it is that which subtends all relations [...] empiricism has never had another secret'¹¹ – they also move beyond James to the degree that, in an assemblage, 'what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is "between" a set of relations which are not separate from each other'.¹² That is, the machinic quality of assemblages forces us to favour relations – and thus the capacities to affect and be affected that they enable – above individual elements. This allows us to comprehend an assemblage in its differential emergence, or becoming, rather than as a set of given objects that themselves determine their relations in space-time. 'The machine has something more than structure [...] in that it does not limit itself to a game of interactions which develop in space and time between its component parts.'¹³ This second aspect of the machinic quality of assemblages – that relations are external to their elements, a logic that ensures continual emergence, becoming, and (de)territorialisation – is illustrated by another example frequently employed by Deleuze and Guattari:

A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two [...] it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility [...] a nonlocalizable *relation* sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other. [...] The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialization: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid's reproductive system, but also of

the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction.¹⁴

Another important aspect of machinic assemblages is that there is an intimate imbrication between material and semiotic registers, a 'new relation between content and expression'.¹⁵ That is, a machine is simultaneously an 'assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another' and an 'assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies'.¹⁶ This imbrication between bodies and signs is understood through an entirely unique theory of semiotics, which I will come back to at length in the next section. For now, it is enough to say that what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'horizontal axis' of machinic assemblages – precisely this imbrication of the material and the semiotic – might be best described as a kind of onto-aesthetic plane, so long as the term aesthetic is understood, following Guattari's reading of Mikhail Bakhtin, as referring to material signs of all sorts, including, especially, 'assignifying' particles of sensible affects. The 'vertical axis' of machinic assemblages – where we find the movements of de- and re-territorialisation or, more generally, the capacity to create the new – consists, at the macro-level, in what Guattari calls in his last writings the 'ethico-aesthetic', a category which helps us grasp the necessarily ethical and ultimately political aspect of machinic assemblages. Ethics in this context refers first of all to practices of subjectification, which might be broadly characterised by thinking about Foucault's idea of the care of the self through the logic of (de)territorialisation practices which Guattari himself qualifies as '*ethicopolitical*'.¹⁷ Taken together, these two axes – which of course cannot be so easily demarcated – present a clear picture of the 'permanent renewal of the assemblage, a verification of its capacity to welcome assignifying singularities [...] and a constant readjustment of its transversalist opening onto the outside world'.¹⁸ The concept of machinic assemblages is thus a powerful

one that is central to Deleuze and Guattari's thought since it gives consistency to their views on ontology, aesthetics, semiotics, ethics, and politics.

Before moving on to animism, I should further explain the logic of the machine. It should be acknowledged at the outset that well before Bernard Stiegler published the first volume of his important *Technics and Time* series, Guattari's concept of the machine already sought to displace the false boundary between nature and artifice. Just before his untimely death, Guattari wrote a short but important essay on this concept where he states that technological machines – 'the mechanist vision of the machine' – are but one instance of the machine, which should be understood as a much broader category.¹⁹ He also mentions social, economic, aesthetic, linguistic, biological, cosmic and ecological machines, as well as the type of abstract machine he conceptualised with Gilles Deleuze some twenty years earlier. His main argument is that in the face of new ecological challenges brought on by late capitalist development, perhaps a new definition of the machine is needed in order to 'break down the iron wall' between nature and technology by constructing a transversal relation between them. And here we can see that the idea of animism already appears:

We are currently at an unavoidable crossroads, where the machine is treated as anathema, and where there prevails the idea that technology is leading us to a situation of inhumanity and of rupture with any kind of ethical project. Moreover, contemporary history actually reinforces this view of the machine as catastrophic, causing ecological damage and so on. We might therefore be tempted to look backwards as a reaction to the machinic age, so as to begin again from who knows what kind of primitive territoriality. [...] In order to overcome this fascination with technology and the deathly dimension it sometimes takes, we have to re-apprehend and re-conceptualize the machine in a different way. [...] I am not advocating that we go

back to an animistic way of thinking, but nevertheless, I would propose that we attempt to consider that in the machine, and at the machinic interface, there exists something that would not quite be of the order of the soul, human or animal, *anima*, but of the order of a proto-subjectivity.²⁰

What Guattari is attempting to do here is nothing less than replace the philosophical concept of *techne*, which Heidegger appropriated from the Greeks, with that of the more abstract and encompassing one of the machine.

The problem of *techne* would now only be a subsidiary part of a much wider machine problematic. Since the machine is opened out towards its machinic environment and maintains all sorts of relationships with social constituents and individual subjectivities, the concept of technological machine should therefore be broadened to that of *machinic assemblages*.²¹

Here, the concept of the machine points to a logic of the continuous deterritorialisation of elements at the service of particular functions and relations of alterity. It can be understood as 'machinic' in the sense that an assemblage can unplug from a particular arrangement of elements – whether linguistic, political, aesthetic, or technical – and plug into another, more appropriate one, depending upon the needs of a given problem. Importantly, a machine can readily connect to different orders of being by cutting across the artificial dualities, at least in Guattari's view, between nature and artifice, object and subject. This is because, again, 'the machine is defined by an *ensemble of interrelations* [...] independently of the components themselves'.²² Guattari relies upon two thinkers in order to think through the concept of the machine: Gottfried Leibniz and Francisco Varela.

First, he alludes to Leibniz's distinction between natural and artificial machines adding the remark that the former – also described by Leibniz as organisms

or 'infinitely articulated machines' – would 'qualify today as fractal' since these natural machines plug into 'other machines which are themselves made up of infinite machinic elements'.²³ Of course, Deleuze and Guattari's extended critiques of the organism must be recalled here as should Deleuze's own uses of Leibniz and calculus. In *Difference and Repetition* and elsewhere, Deleuze employs calculus to help articulate a logic of disjunctive differentiation where differential relations (for example, dx/dy) 'no longer depend on their terms', which in this case are the infinitesimal quantities dx and dy .²⁴ Although this topic is well beyond the scope of the present essay, one important thing to note about Deleuze's investment in calculus is that he uses it in a way that pre-emptively dodges Alain Badiou's largely misguided critique of Deleuze, even as it pre-emptively dismisses Badiou's own ontology of axiomatic sets. For Deleuze, the ontology of mathematics cannot be reducible to axiomatics alone, but must be understood much more broadly in terms of a tension between axiomatics and what he calls problematics, which, as he clearly demonstrates, in the history of mathematics has tended to focus on the infinitesimal. This has direct political consequences since, as we shall see, Deleuze and Guattari claim that capitalism itself functions on the basis of axiomatisation and, more generally, of 'capturing' much more recalcitrant problematics. In his essay on machines, Guattari also says that he prefers an affective, pre-signifying mode of thought rather than one 'which claims to give a scientific, axiomatic description'.²⁵ Here we should note that in Lazzarato's own article on 'The Machine' he argues, after Deleuze and Guattari, that 'capitalism is neither a mode of production nor a system' but rather 'a series of devices for machinic enslavement' that operates by 'mobilizing and modulating pre-individual, pre-cognitive, and pre-verbal components of subjectivity, forcing affects, percepts, and unindividuated sensations [...] to function like the cogs and components in a machine'.²⁶ We will come back to this point. In addition, while Deleuze

refers to the 'inorganic' logic of calculus in order to problematise his supposed relation to vitalism, Guattari, in his solo work, does almost the reverse. Instead of talking at length about organisms, or even fractal Leibnizian machines, Guattari injects Francisco Varela's theory of biological autopoiesis into machinic nature itself. That is, the theory of autopoiesis – or the spontaneous and continually self-productive ontogenesis of living beings – is liberated from the biological domain and is used to help illustrate the character of any type of machine whatsoever. He explains that Varela

opposes *autopoiesis*, which he essentially attributes to living biological beings, to *allopoiesis* in which the machine will search for its components outside of itself. Within this concept of *allopoiesis*, Varela arranges social systems, technical machines and, finally, all machinic systems which are not living systems. This concept of *autopoiesis* to me seems both interesting and fruitful. However, I think that we should go beyond Varela's position and establish a relation between allo- and autopoietic machines. Since allopoietic machines are always to be found adjacent to autopoietic ones, we should therefore attempt to take into account the assemblages which make them live together. [...] This machinic core, which in some respects can be qualified as proto-subjective and proto-biological, possesses characteristics Varela has not completely taken into account.²⁷

For Guattari, it is precisely this autopoietic quality of machines that differentiates them from structures or closed sets. Coherent structures imply feedback loops that give rise to interiorisation and totalisation. With the machine, however, emergence 'is doubled with breakdown, catastrophe'. A machine 'always depends on exterior elements in order to be able to exist as such [...] it is itself in a relation of alterity with other virtual or actual machines'.²⁸ Guattari finishes his short essay on machines by drawing out the linguistic, aesthetic, and ethico-political consequences of the logic of machinic assemblages,

especially through the concepts of 'pre-signifying or symbolic semiologies' and 'pathic relationships', concepts to which I will turn in the next section.²⁹ For now, it is important to note that Guattari does so by continually referring to 'archaic' and 'animist' societies.³⁰

The idea of animism – which figures heavily in Lazzarato and Melitopoulos's video – can be found scattered across Guattari's later work, especially in the context of his 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm', in which he discusses the need to construct alternate forms of subjectivity in the face of the particularly rampant and rabid type of contemporary political economy he calls Integrated World Capitalism. And although he developed a new conception of the machine to displace the worn-out philosophical idea of *techné*, the question concerning technology itself is still a pertinent one in this regard. The 'exponential development of the technico-scientific dimension' of contemporary semio-capitalism – which Lazzarato has famously qualified with the term 'immaterial labor' – is equally culpable for the apparent attenuation of modes of subjectification. It is within this framework that the imperative for a critical 'return' to animism reaches a crescendo:

It seems essential to understand how subjectivity can participate in the invariants of scale. In other words, how can it be simultaneously singular, singularizing an individual, a group of individuals, but also supported by the assemblages of space, architectural and plastic assemblages, and all other cosmic assemblages? [...] I am more inclined to propose a model of the unconscious akin to that of a Mexican Cuandero or of a Bororo, starting with the idea that spirits populate things, landscapes, groups, and that there are all sorts of becomings, of *haecceities* everywhere and thus, a sort of objective subjectivity, if I may, which finds itself bundled together, broken apart, and shuffled at the whims of assemblages. The best unveiling among them would be found, obviously, in archaic thought.³¹

But this idea of animist subjectivity should not be understood as historically or anthropologically specific; that is, it would be incorrect to dismiss Guattari as some kind of Romantic or Orientalist. Rather, and especially through his clinical experience with psychotics, he claims to have demonstrated that although animism may indeed characterise 'primitive' societies without a state, we can find traces of it in 'developed' capitalistic societies as well: 'aspects of this kind of polysemic, animistic, transindividual subjectivity can equally be found in the worlds of infancy, madness, amorous passion, and artistic creation'.³² It should be clear that what Guattari means by animism is not some kind of pantheistic cult religion but rather something that points to an elaborate ontology, which is the logical conclusion of his conception of machinic assemblages. Animism points to a world populated not by magical spirits, but by proto-subjective, autopoietic *haecceities* of all kinds that transversally interact with each other across the artificial divides between nature and culture, subject and object. In one of the interviews shown in Lazzarato and Melitopoulos's *Assemblages*, French psychoanalyst Jean-Claude Polack describes the world of schizophrenics in which there is a 'daily commerce with particles of the self or perhaps with non-living bodies, of bodies outside the self, which does not pose a problem at all. It's like a natural exercise. And if you don't understand it, a schizophrenic might think of you as a moron. [...] There is a certain very particular "animist" sensibility that one could call delirium.'³³ This is how we should understand Deleuze and Guattari's repeated, and seemingly naive appeals to not only schizophrenia but also the 'semiotics of primitive peoples'.³⁴ The ethico-aesthetic imperative is not to become mad or to become a dancing hippy in the forest, but to experiment with different forms of subjectivity, through different technologies of the self, in order to attempt to plug into this machinic world of animist, asignifying 'particles,' which escape the axiomatisation of contemporary

capitalism. Guattari firmly believed that ‘the serial production and massive exportation of the white, conscious, male adult subject has always been correlated with the disciplining of intensive multiplicities that essentially escape from all centralization, from all signifying arborescence’.³⁵ This is how we can contextualise the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s provocative claim, in the final interview of *Assemblages*, that ‘animism is the ontology of societies against the state’.³⁶ This is obviously a reference to the work of Pierre Clastres, who Deleuze and Guattari rely upon in their conception of the war *machine* against the State.³⁷ Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise here – as Isabelle Stengers does in an article written for the *Animism* exhibition – that the word animism ‘can hardly be disentangled from pejorative colonialist associations’.³⁸ What she calls ‘reclaiming animism’ therefore means not *returning* to a more authentic or ‘true’ state of being before the advent of modern technology, but rather *reactivating*, in a pragmatic manner, the potentiality of a ‘more than human world’. This is quite simply, Stengers argues with a nod to William James, the ‘capacity to honor experience’. Furthermore, she suggests that ‘such a recovery [...] can be helped [...] by the Deleuzo-Guattarian idea of “assemblage”’, since this idea allows us to think transversally beyond the reductive and outdated concepts of the ‘natural’ and the ‘symbolic’.³⁹ Finally, she seems to be saying something similar to Viveiros de Castro when she claims that, understood in this way, the assemblage is a concept of ‘ecological anarchy’:⁴⁰

One is never animist ‘in general,’ but always in the terms of an assemblage that produces or enhances metamorphic transformation in our capacity to affect and be affected – that is also to feel, think, and imagine. Animism may, however, be a name for reclaiming these assemblages because it lures us into feeling that their efficacy is not ours to claim. Against the insistent poisoned passion of dismembering

and demystifying, it affirms what they require us to acknowledge in order not to devour ourselves: that we are not alone in the world.⁴¹

Asignifying semiotics

There can be no romantic return to an original nature because nature is itself populated by a motley anarchy of machinic assemblages in which ‘objectivities-subjectivities are led to work for themselves, to incarnate themselves as an animist nucleus; they overlap each other and invade each other to become collective entities: half-thing half-soul, half-man half-beast, machine and flux, matter and sign’.⁴² There can only be a continual, future-oriented, machinic participation in and with these assemblages. This point cannot be overemphasised: the concept of the machine in Deleuze and Guattari disallows any recourse to a naively ‘vitalist’ conception of nature. The theory of machinic assemblages is more concerned with the pragmatic matter of what affective and enunciative capacities they bear. ‘For every type of machine we will pose a question, not about its vital autonomy – it’s not an animal – but about its singular power of enunciation’.⁴³ Every machinic assemblage is a slice of ‘signaletic matter’ for which being and expression are intimately intertwined.⁴⁴ Assemblages are ‘proto-subjective’ *haecceities* or singularities in precisely this sense and not because they exhibit qualities that can be defined as either strictly vitalist, strictly biological, or strictly human. Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato rightly note that such a move has important consequences that challenge the assumptions of the entire Western philosophical tradition since Aristotle, in which only humans exhibit the propensity for semiotic enunciation. One of Guattari’s most original contributions to the history of thought was to develop a new system of semiotics that takes into account a much broader range of possible expressions than those delineated by the Saussurean system, which not only separates the human from the non-human, but also encourages the hierarchisation of different sorts of

human expression itself. His interest in animism was motivated by the fact that, through it, such hierarchisation seems to break down. As Lazzarato and Melitopoulos argue, ‘trans-individual polysemic animist subjectivity uncovers the possibility of producing and enriching [...] semiotic symbols of the body, dance, postures, and gestures [...] as well as asignifying semiotics such as rhythms, music, and so on’.⁴⁵

In his interview for *Assemblages*, the French philosopher Éric Alliez argues that the enigmatic idea of an ‘asignifying semiotics’ is ‘surely *the* fundamental category of Félix Guattari’, a category which plunges us ‘literally into an animist world’.⁴⁶ As we have seen, the ‘horizontal axis’ of assemblages is defined by the imbrication of the material and the semiotic. This idea can be traced back to Deleuze’s early work the *Logic of Sense* as well as Guattari’s interest in the semiotic system of Louis Hjelmslev. In fact, Alliez argues that it is precisely with the appropriation of Hjelmslev’s idea that there is ‘no real distinction between content and expression’ – giving rise to ‘a semiotics of intensities’ – that we enter the animist world in which the ‘fluctuation of signs is like the fluctuation of material things’.⁴⁷ As Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly argue, Saussurean semiotics is not abstract enough. In their system, on the contrary, there is a primacy of machinic enunciation over language and words, which only appear as the thinnest surface layer of a vast and complex machine that incorporates many different types of signs. It should be noted that here ‘abstract’ doesn’t mean less reified since, in fact, it is only with the representational semiotics of everyday linguistics that signs become cut off from their direct connection to matter. For the sake of convenience, Lazzarato names four main semiotic registers in the Deleuzo-Guattarian system: natural asemiotic encodings like DNA or crystalline structures; symbolic (or pre-signifying) semiologies that include bodily gestures and the rituals of archaic societies; the representational, signifying semiology

of Saussure, and asignifying (or post-signifying) semiologies, which include mathematical formulas, stock quotes, and computer languages, but also the rhythms, durations, and intensities of music, art, and film.⁴⁸ Already in this short description we can begin to see the importance of asignifying semiotics, especially in the era of what Lazzarato calls immaterial labour. Indeed, this register of machinic enunciation seems to be *the* field upon and through which a critical contemporary battle is waged: art against empire.⁴⁹ Because asignifying signs plug in directly to material flows without mediation through signification, denotation, or representation – and because they indeed *are* simultaneously both material and semiotic – they are the elements of an assemblage that we can most confidently qualify as machinic.

Lazzarato also broadly conflates the categories of signifying and asignifying semiotics with Deleuze’s differentiation between the respective logics of ‘disciplinary’ and ‘control’ societies. He does this by reading these logics through Guattari’s idea that capitalism operates not simply on the economic register, but is in fact a ‘semantic operator’ that fundamentally informs all levels of production and power. Briefly, signifying semiotics operate through everyday discourse, representation, and the production of meaning in order to give rise to the speaking subject by implicating it into the *molar* categories of identity, gender, nationality, and class. This process is what Guattari calls ‘social subjection’ and, Lazzarato argues, it corresponds to Foucault’s disciplinary ‘concept of government by individualisation’.⁵⁰ On the contrary, asignifying semiotics operate through ‘machinic enslavement’, a much more insidious, *molecular* process that captures and activates the pre-subjective and trans-subjective elements of percepts and affects in order to force them to ‘function like components or cogs in the semiotic machine of capital’.⁵¹ This asignifying, molecular level should be understood as being inhabited by pre-discursive rhythms, intensities,



Assemblages, installation view. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, 2010. © 2010 Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato

colours and sounds that shape the very *conditions* of image, word, and therefore of subjectivity itself. As such Lazzarato calls it, following William James, a ‘world of “pure experience”’.⁵² This is the source of its power and potential. And indeed Guattari refers to the elements of asignifying semiotics – recalling in the same sentence artistic, religious, and shamanic practices – as ‘power signs’.⁵³ These signs are understood as material particles that do not pass through linguistic chains, but rather plug into the body directly through pre-conscious affects, perceptions, desires and emotions. They don’t produce signification, they don’t speak, but function machinically through ‘a direct, unmediated impact on the real’, which triggers ‘an action, a reaction, a behavior, an attitude, a posture’.⁵⁴ Lazzarato argues that the importance of asignifying semiotics – which he notes is one of the most fundamental and original contributions by Deleuze and Guattari – for the analysis of contemporary capitalism cannot be overemphasised. Although it is ignored by:

most linguistic and political theories, it constitutes the pivotal point of new forms of capitalist government. [...] Linguistic theories and analytical philosophy fail to understand the existence of these semiotics and how they operate; they assume that the production and circulation of signs and words is an essentially human affair, one of semiotic ‘exchange’ between humans. They employ a logocentric conception of enunciation whereas a growing proportion of enunciations and circulating signs are being produced and shaped by machinic devices (television, cinema, radio, internet, etc.).⁵⁵

This last parenthesis is more important than it first seems since Lazzarato has developed an entire *videophilosophy* in order to work through these issues. Building upon the ideas of Deleuze, Guattari and Benjamin on cinema, he focuses upon video, which he refers to as a ‘machine that crystalizes time’. His main thesis is that video art grants us access to the ontology – precisely the

onto-aesthetics of asignifying semiotics – inherent to ‘the new nature of capitalism’.⁵⁶ His wager is that we can therefore utilise this technology to somehow help us escape the clutches of contemporary control society and develop new ‘practices of freedom and processes of individual and collective subjectification’.⁵⁷ By way of conclusion, I would like to briefly explore Lazzarato’s ideas about videophilosophy before offering a suggestion on how we might, in light of *Assemblages*, make theoretical and pragmatic sense of this seemingly romantic claim.

Unnatural participation

Lazzarato roughly follows Deleuze’s Bergsonian film-philosophy by arguing that cinema reveals the world as a flow of images. But he claims that video technology enables a further deterritorialisation of these flows by expressing not only images in movement, but also the very conditions of the image itself, the ‘time-matter’ of electromagnetic waves that lie at the heart of both the video image as well as the physical world itself: ‘Video technology is a mechanical assemblage that establishes a relationship between asignifying flows (waves) and signifying flows (images). It is the first technical means of producing images that reflects the general decoding of the flows.’⁵⁸ The genetic element of cinema is still the photograph. And while montage adds a temporal element, ‘it does not yet employ the endless variety of asignifying signs’.⁵⁹ Instead of words or even symbols, video acts as a kind of ‘electronic paintbrush’ in order to create and express ‘point-signs’ beyond signification, which are themselves the genetic conditions of images, sounds, and words.

Rather than capturing images, the video camera captures waves that constitute those images, composing and decomposing them by means of modulation. The production and transmission of an image is in reality the result of a modulation of vibrations, of electric waves, of “visual dust,” to use Bergson’s beautiful image.⁶⁰

Although film does not express the 'endless variety' of asignifying signs associated with the electronic deconstruction of the image – the visual dust of video – it is still a complex assemblage since it offers the possibility to commune with multiple semiotic registers simultaneously – 'images, sounds, words spoken and written (subtitling), movements, postures, colors, rhythms' – in 'much the same way that "mana" circulates in animistic societies'.⁶¹ Here Lazzarato presents an entire taxonomy of signs that we encounter in video art, which should be understood as adding to the intrinsic qualities of cinema: spoken language (signifying), sound and music (asignifying), pure visibility (symbolic and asignifying), human gestures (symbolic), the rhythms and durations of montage (asemiotic intensities). While the film industry has, of course, learned to manipulate and capitalise on this motley assemblage of different signs, Lazzarato, following Guattari, believes that ultimately, these signs cannot be completely policed and overcoded. Some non-recuperable excess remains, which can help 'produce desubjectification and disindividuation effects, much like drugs, dreaming, passionate feeling, creation, or delirium; and it can strip the subject of his identity and social functions'.⁶² Herein lies the ethico-aesthetic power of cinema and especially video, which again is immediately connected to the themes of animism and ecological anarchy:

As in archaic societies, images (symbolic semiotics) and intensities, movements, intervals, temporalities, speeds (asignifying semiotics) reintroduce some indistinctness, some uncertainty, some wavering in denotation and signification. Expression once again becomes polyvocal, multidimensional and multireferential. [Quoting Guattari:] 'The semiotic components of film keep shifting in relation to one another, never settling or stabilizing in some deep syntax of latent contents, or in transformational systems that yield manifest contents back on the surface.'⁶³

Finally, I would like to suggest that Guattari's

ethico-aesthetic paradigm – especially when we consider more specifically the supporting concepts of machinic animism and asignifying semiotics – opens up the possibility for new forms of participation with individual artworks like *Assemblages*, forms of participation that go beyond the 'relational aesthetics' of Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud in fact concludes his book *Relational Aesthetics* with a long section on Guattari, which should be read as nothing more than a gross misappropriation that brings Guattari's radical and *dissensual* micropolitics back into the fold of trendy neo-liberal museum speak. Éric Alliez has stated quite forcefully that, in this book, Guattari's 'schizo-ontology, defined as a politics of being or a machinics of being, whose proto-aesthetic heart beats [...] in the process of non-discursive or asignifying semiotization' is reduced to 'an aesthetic marked by the category of consensus, restoring the lost meaning of a common world by replacing the fissures in the social bond [...] revisiting the spaces of conviviality, groping about for forms of sustainable development and consumption'.⁶⁴ With the concepts of machinic animism and asignifying semiotics, Guattari seems to completely pre-empt such a move by Bourriaud. Participation – in animist societies or at a good film – happens not simply through the clear, politically correct language of pre-formed subjects but rather circulates affectively 'through contagion not cognition'.⁶⁵ As Guattari says, 'we go to the movies to suspend our usual modes of communication for a while'.⁶⁶ This mode of pre-personal and asignifying participation is sometimes described by Guattari, using the language of psychoanalysis, as 'pathic transference',⁶⁷ and in this regard it can be productively compared, as Lazzarato himself does, with Bracha Ettinger's concept of the transferential borderspace of an artwork.⁶⁸ But Deleuze and Guattari also appropriate the language of anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl when they talk about 'unnatural participation' as the 'circulation of affects within the machinic assemblage'.⁶⁹ This is the level at which a kind of affective glue

connects us – through the animist *mana* of asignifying semiotics – to ourselves, to each other, and to nature, which all come together disjunctively in an ecological anarchy of machinic assemblages. For Lazzarato, such unnatural participation, however vague it first appears, is ultimately one of the most appropriate types of *political* action to be developed in our era of immaterial labour, since asignifying semiotics both plays ‘a central and decisive role in contemporary capitalism and creates the conditions for its political critique’.⁷⁰

These behaviors appear and disappear in public space following logics that escape the rules of ‘representation’. [...] Their objectives are not representations or the seizure of power, but rather the transversal and molecular constitution of new social relations and new sensibilities.⁷¹

The aesthetic and formal arrangement of *Assemblages*, as described in the first section of this essay, may itself help us learn how to tune into these new asignifying, machinic relations and sensibilities by coaxing us to participate with its various images, sounds, and textures ‘unnaturally’.

Notes

1. Isabelle Stengers, ‘Reclaiming Animism’ in *Animism: Modernity through the Looking Glass*, ed. by Anselm Franke (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2011), p. 191.
2. Burkhard Meltzer, ‘Animism’, *Frieze* 134 (October 2010), p. 248.
3. Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Digitale Montage und das Weben: Eine Ökologie des Gehirns für Maschinen Subjektivitäten’, in *Private Affairs* (Dresden: Kunsthaus Dresden, 2002), no pagination.
4. Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Video, Flows, and Real Time’, in *Art and the Moving Image*, ed. by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), p. 283.
5. Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Assemblages’, in *Animism: Modernity through the Looking Glass*, ed. by Anselm Franke (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2011), p. 141.
6. Guattari quoted in Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Machinic Animism’, *Deleuze Studies* 6.2 (May 2012), p. 240.
7. Félix Guattari, ‘Regimes, Pathways, Subjects’ trans. by Brian Massumi in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. by Gary Genosko (London: Blackwell, 1996), p. 105.
8. Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, ‘Assemblages’, pp. 137–38.
9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 257.
10. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 22-3.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 57.
12. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, p. viii.
13. Félix Guattari, ‘On Machines,’ *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* 6 (1995), p. 10.
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 293.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 504.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
17. Guattari, ‘Regimes, Pathways, Subjects’, p. 104.
18. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 71.
19. Guattari, ‘On Machines’, p. 9.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
24. Gilles Deleuze, ‘Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze: Spinoza 17/02/1981’ <<http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=38&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>> [Accessed 07 April 2014].
25. Guattari, ‘On Machines’, p. 8.
26. Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘The Machine’, trans. by Mary O’Neill <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lazzarato/en>> [Accessed 07 April 2014].
27. Guattari, ‘On Machines’, p. 10.
28. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 37.

29. Guattari, 'On Machines', p. 11.
30. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
31. Guattari quoted in Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 'Machinic Animism', p. 240.
32. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 101. The connection between the affective worlds of the infant and the artist has been made by the psychoanalyst Daniel Stern, whose work Guattari often cites. See, for example, Raymond Bellour, 'Going to the Cinema with Félix Guattari and Daniel Stern', trans. by Paul Fileri and Adrian Martin, in *The Guattari Effect*, ed. by Éric Alliez and Andrew Goffey (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 220–34.
33. Jean-Claude Polack in Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Assemblages*, 2010 (video).
34. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 188.
35. Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, trans. by Taylor Adkins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2010), p. 157. Or again: 'Archaic societies are better equipped than white, male, capitalistic subjectivities to produce a cartography of this multivalence of alterity.' Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 45.
36. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Assemblages*, 2010 (video).
37. The war machine is *machinic* precisely because it is characterised by relations of exteriority. as well as by continuous deterritorialisation in a 'smooth' space it creates itself through differential movement that defies axiomatisation. It therefore refers to whatever escapes the state's capture.
38. Stengers, 'Reclaiming Animism', p. 183.
39. Ibid., pp. 189-90.
40. Ibid., p. 185.
41. Ibid., p. 192.
42. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 102.
43. Ibid., p. 34.
44. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 33.
45. Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 'Machinic Animism', p. 246.
46. Éric Alliez in Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Assemblages*, 2010 (video).
47. Ibid.
48. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Existing Language, Semiotic Systems, and the Production of Subjectivity in Félix Guattari', in *Cognitive Architecture. From Bio-politics to Noo-politics*, ed. by Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Neidich (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010), p. 512.
49. See Alberto Toscano, 'Art Against Empire: On Alliez and Negri's "Peace and War"', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, 2 (2003), pp. 103-08.
50. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Semiotic Pluralism and the New Government of Signs: Homage to Félix Guattari', trans. by Mary O'Neill <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0107/lazzarato/en>> [Accessed 07 April 2014].
51. Lazzarato, 'Semiotic Pluralism'.
52. Ibid.
53. Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 127.
54. Lazzarato, 'Semiotic Pluralism'.
55. Ibid.
56. Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie* (unpublished French manuscript), p. 11.
57. Lazzarato, 'Semiotic Pluralism'.
58. Lazzarato, 'Video, Flows, and Real Time', p. 283. Translation modified.
59. Ibid.
60. Lazzarato, 'Semiotic Pluralism.' Again, this reference to Bergson is primarily mediated by Deleuze. But Guattari also conflates the non-discursive, intensive world of affect with 'the Bergsonian concept of duration'. Félix Guattari, 'Ritornellos and Existential Affects', trans. by Juliana Schiesari and Georges van den Abbeele in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. by Gary Genosko (London: Blackwell, 1996), p. 159.
61. Lazzarato, 'Existing Language', p. 515.
62. Ibid., p. 519.
63. Ibid., p. 519.
64. Éric Alliez, 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia and Consensus: On Relational Aesthetics' in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 92, 88.

65. Lazzarato, 'Existing Language', p. 515.
66. Guattari quoted in Lazzarato, 'Existing Language', p. 518.
67. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 14.
68. Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
69. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 260.
70. Lazzarato, 'Existing Language,' p. 512.
71. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'What Possibilities Presently Exist in the Public Sphere?' trans. by Nate Holdren <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fplazzarato4.htm>> [Accessed 07 April 2014].

Biography

Jay Hetrick is an Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at the American University in Dubai. He has published in the fields of 20th century art, continental aesthetics, and critical theory. He has edited and translated, with Gary Genosko, a book entitled *Machinic Eros: Félix Guattari's Writings on Japan*. He is currently preparing his PhD thesis - entitled *Cine-aesthetics: A Critique of Judgment after Deleuze and Michaux* - for publication and is translating Maurizio Lazzarato's book *Videophilosophy* into English.