

Some simple thoughts without any wish to make them more profound*

by Anne-Laure Oberson

On pages 95 and 96 of Gilles Deleuze's *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, the French philosopher discusses how philosophy brings to an absolute the relative deterritorialization (*déterritorialisation*) of capital, abolishes it as an interior limit, turns it against itself, and calls for a new land, a new people, thus getting closer in concept to what Adorno called "negative dialectic" and the Frankfurt School designated as "utopia."¹ For Deleuze, it is utopia that makes the link (*jonction*) between philosophy and its time (*époque*). Utopia allows philosophy to become political and heightens the critique of its time. He goes on to explain that the word used by the utopist Samuel Butler "Erewhon" does not refer only to "No-where", (*ou-topos*) or nowhere (*nulle-part*) but to "Now-here", (*eu-topos*) or the here and now (*ici-maintenant*). So what is relevant is not the difference between a utopian or a scientific socialism, but the diverse types of utopia, revolution being one of them. He concludes this development by stating that utopia designates this "conjunction of philosophy or of the concept with the present environment: the political philosophy." This gives us a reading of the word "utopia" that is grounded in the here and now, that is about a connection with what is most real. Thus can we ask ourselves what is this inverted *nowhere here and now? A somewhere there tomorrow? A distant location in the future?*

This brief theoretical introduction is a lead to grasp some considerations of the present state of the art world in different localities, while acknowledging the unequivocal attraction to displacements, in reference to specific recent experiences and thoughts. The form, therefore, will be informal; will zap from articles to links to first-hand discussions and encounters. An essay, as in *essayer* (to try), to outline an ambient malaise, a growing feeling of dissatisfaction.

[...] Do you really inhabit the place you are currently living in? This seems like a silly question but think twice about it. Aren't we all our own little utopias, always connected to somewhere else, on the go—if not physically, then virtually, never actually being where we are — in a constant projection, in between places?

[...] This struck me as I passed by a man walking his dogs on the street, when he said out loud (to me?): "She must go from sadness to anger." Speaking, presumably in a hidden ear-set connected to his mobile phone, to someone else — but to me, somewhere else. Strangely I could have taken his words to be addressed to me; they fit momentarily, in an uncanny way, regardless of his intention. Not so long ago witnessing someone talking out loud on his or her own, the first thought would have been, "Here is a crazy person." There was known to be a few in town — usually loud talkers, loonies. Strangely they seem to have disappeared with the new breed of *teelonies*, who now sound perfectly normal to us, and not the least bit delusional. Or they might have blended in with the mass of loud talking so well that no one pays attention anymore. What feels like centuries ago, this man and I would have courteously exchanged greetings. Living in the same neighborhood, we might even have become acquainted (what an old-fashioned sounding word). Today I can foretell that we will never address a word to each other. No matter how many times our routes cross. The more we are connected, the more we are isolated.

[...] Back at home, I am in another kind of displacement, already somewhere else online, which incidentally makes me think that we might be more present in those so-called non-places than in the comfort of our sofas. We are only truly there... in the distance always. Hence a feeling of lack of something fulfilling, that drives us to always accomplish more. Physicality is not a guarantee of presence any longer.

[...] The cell phone episode echoes in my mind with some other thoughts I had about the title of this year's Sao Paulo biennial, *How to live together*. "How," as a question, implies a previous intention: we want to live together, we need to find out how—or a precedent condition: we live together, albeit not so well, so let's think how else. Incidentally, none of the works that I saw attempted to outline an answer. Most, if not all, pointed at a sad fact: we don't live together. Less and less, if at all, despite our intention to seek change, I doubt we truly want to live together. When it occurs, we live next to each other, and that seems to be more than we can handle already.

[...] On a resume of one of the selected artist of Saatchi's new YourGallery website for the Guardian exhibition, I read the following: "Lives and works in London and Berlin, and New York, Madrid and Los Angeles." Well? Is this for real or what's with the existential crisis? After an initial "Yeah right, me too!" reaction, I decided not to be so judgmental and wrote an email to said artist kindly requesting that s/he shared with me, for the sake of research information for this article, what exactly was it like to live in five cities? I got a reply quite a few days after my initial request proposing to meet in Berlin to discuss the question. Well, Berlin not currently being on my roadmap, I declined the invitation but insisted to continue sharing information over emails. Yet to be answered... One of my questions was whether it is a necessity as an artist today to reside in several places or whether one could achieve the same goals by living and working in only one place. Inevitably, one could never be at the right place at the right time, and would always be missing something in either place while presumably being part of more events.

[...] In a recent article, Danah Boyd, a social media researcher who studies patterns of behaviors in online social networking sites, remarks that "MySpace had become an electronic version of the local mall or park. [...] These sites act as digital public spaces."² The article further explains that the need for such places is even more acute today, as traditional real-world public spaces have disappeared... But have they, or do we no longer know how to make use of them? When is the last time you sat on a bench next to a stranger and picked up a conversation? Has flesh and blood reality, unprotected from the sheer screens of our computers, become way too real? Or is it that we have unlearned to live unmediated new experiences? While paradoxical, today, "one of the metrics of success is how much attention you get regardless of for what" and the more exposed you are the better.³

[...] My friend, Paula Boettcher, wrote a courageous open-letter when she closed down her gallery in November 2003. I have kept this letter since, and I stumbled on it the other day. As much as I wish it could be reproduced here in its entirety, I will quote just a few lines:

The successful post-modern artist is not identified with the depth and content of his message but with the efficiency of his narcissistic gestures in terms of media and consumer effectiveness. The more easily the artist's gestures can be consumed and the more spectacular they appear, the better the chance for the artist's success. His work becomes a commodity, his name a brand. [...] But it is a problem if an artist defines himself solely by way of his media and consumer effectiveness and when he comes to terms with the scene. Marches along uniformed. Celebrates the spectacle with a smug smile. To be part of it is all that matters.

[...] This attitude of the loud gesture on behalf of the artists, and of all the other actors in an art scene, often leads to a lot of void and ill-adapted solutions because they are gimmicks, mimics and not based on pertinent local issues. Athens is not London. Geneva is not Paris. If there are no borders, or if art abolishes borders, then "global" should not rhyme with *Equal*.⁴ What we should be in search of instead is diversity of voices, of approaches; and along the way, recognize one's own characteristics, accept and play with them. And keep in mind: it is not how bad your game is, it's how well you play it.

[...] Utopia was often a way for exclusion rather than inclusion, i.e. small communities keeping to themselves to ascertain the success of the innovative structure. I think that if we invent new types of utopias we must ensure that as individuals carrying in ourselves such potentialities, we bridge them and enclose diversity. The key in connectedness is not homogenization but poly-culturalism.

[...] If indeed art communities are not evolving in tandem, if there are still strong particularities to be found across the globe — as this magazine is attempting (and I hope achieving) to make the point — we must aim to preserve and present them, rather than obliterate them. How do we engage with our community, or should I say communities, when we are everywhere at once? Personally I can already witness that as I have reduced the time and regularity of my stays in Athens, I am growing slowly but surely out of touch. Does that mean that I am now less entitled to participate in a local discourse and would instead risk applying general considerations like an all-purpose balm? No, it does not have to. Utopias, remember, carry critical and innovative capacities. But it means that I have to make double or triple the efforts to be aware and stay connected by means of close collaboration with people involved locally. The difference—the bird's eye view—that I can bring as an outsider is only so good as it does not flatten out the folds but strikes a raking light on them. Our personal utopia should mean that since we are connected, we must not be isolated. **BP**

1. Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1991
2. Graham Bowley, "The high priestess of internet friendship," in *FT WEEKEND* (London), Saturday October 28 Sunday October 29 2006, p. 3.
3. Philosophers and psychoanalysts recently coined this shift in our attitude to privacy as "publicity" (*extimité*). The French term is proposed by Serge Tisseron in *L'intimité surexposée*, Paris: Ramsay, 2001. Although the notion of *extime* is recognized in Jacques Lacan's seminar *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (1981) by Jacques-Alain Miller in *Extimité* (1985-1986), in his course *L'orientation lacanienne*, unpublished. The English term "publicity" is attributed to Herbert Marshall McLuhan. It is uncertain which precedes the other or if they appeared simultaneously in parallel.
4. The play on the common adjective and the brand name by use of a capital and italics, allows me to qualify, in an extreme shortcut manner (I shall certainly have to elaborate at another occasion), today's global art production as an ersatz for the real stuff that certainly does not make you gain weight.

* This title is taken from the subtitle of Alexei Shulgin's article *Art, Power, and Communication* published in *Parachute* 85, 1997. To read his article and for more info on Alexei Shulgin refer to www.easylife.org