

The Potential Personality

Trans-Subjectivity in the Society of Control

by Brian Holmes

Thought envelops things – between them there is the atmosphere, with Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbonic Gas, Sulfur, Lead, Aluminum, but also particles of thought. These particles break loose from our brain-bodies, in fluxes beyond our control, adhering to objects or other thoughts. They possess powerful magnetic and gravitational fields, which distort and alter images – all the images of things. Thought is essentially charged with plastic potentiality.

Ricardo Basbaum¹

Self-choreography: what could be the meaning of such a word? You can easily imagine the improvisations of a single dancer, twisting, gliding, feinting, twirling, tracing an intricate pattern of the self in space. And you can also imagine the gradual mastery of this pattern, its repetition or retracing as a work, which can then be identified, situated within the larger parameters of a style, authorized by a signature. But what happens if I give the word *choreography* the wider signification of a group interaction, an orchestration of bodies in their movement through space; and if I conceive the action of the *self* as a more complex reflexivity, exercised by a plurality of actors on each other? What kind of self could participate in the creation of a choreography which is at once my own, and that of a larger articulation? What would be the style of such a work, how could it be sketched, retraced, identified? What would become of the distinction between subject and object, between *me* and *you*? And how would intentionality – the projection of possible action into future time and unfamiliar space – come to operate under such conditions?

¹ R. Basbaum, "*What is NBP?*," manifesto, 1990.



The Device

These questions traverse you, impinge on me, within the ambit or overflow of certain physical/discursive environments whose constitution is signed – but seemingly not authorized – by Ricardo Basbaum. In a recent series of proposals² they take the form of specialized gallery or museum installations where your passage is modulated by the presence of what look like miniature iron fences, complete with gridded wire mesh but rising only to about ankle height, marking off but not dividing the volume. These fence-like structures serve as obstacles ("*obs.*"), obliging you to perform the simplest of choreographies: flexing your knee, lifting your foot somewhat higher than normally, stepping over an obstruction too low to be considered a barrier, almost too low to be noticed. My visit to the gallery is punctuated by the rhythm of these almost insignificant movements.

Meanwhile, your attention comes to linger over words that have been written on the wall: *listen to, look at, turn bodily toward, smile at, speak to, express wishes, make*

² The description that follows is based on an installation at A Gentil Carioca Gallery in Rio, in November 2004, and on the plans for the present exhibition.

*bodily contact, ask personal questions, show off, etc.*³ These words describe actions that bring myself into relation with others. Thus the physical space of movement, punctuated by obstacles (and reminiscent, in this, of certain minimalist proposals by Robert Morris in his collaborations with the Judson Dance Theater), is redoubled and echoed by discursive indicators which point to the interactive possibilities of a shared environment – as though coaxing perception into affect, through a linguistic consciousness of the other.

At the same time it becomes possible, from certain positions within the space, to watch images of my activity and yours, transmitted live from a number of unobtrusive micro-cameras which have been connected to a sequencer, so as to present a cycle of roving viewpoints. This is what the artist calls "*system-cinema*": a real-time, closed-circuit television that enhances my perception of the space while also recording images, furnishing material for future proposals and adding a further set of references – technological this time – for the comprehension of the environment you are temporarily inhabiting.

The elements listed above constitute a spatial device that links constrained motion to augmented perception, and surveilled gestures to increased sensibility and heightened reflection, all inviting *me* to consciously refashion my own physical-discursive-affective posture, even while observing and interacting with *you*. And this device, in its turn, is the departure point for an experience where "me" and "you" will simultaneously be objectified and brought into relation, through the changes in identity and position effected by the rules of a game.

The game-experience is a series of choreographic workshops, what I would propose to call self-choreographies, which begin in the museum and move outward to urban space. The participants wear red and yellow tee-shirts imprinted with the shifting pronouns "me" and "you." But these are detached from the usual play of address, the usual subject-object relation, and redistributed in a moving space of relations. Each

³ Basbaum borrows this list of descriptive terms from the behavioral psychologist Kurt Lewin, "Survey of experimental investigations," chapter VIII of *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1935), pp. 261-64, text available at <http://gestalttheory.net/archive/lewin1935.html>; Lewin discusses the relational "field" of the child's encounter with a stranger.

person is thereby confronted with the relativity of identity-positions – for instance, when clusters of animated "me" spiral around a self-consciousness designated as "you." The artist, also wearing a "me" or "you" shirt, occupies an ostensible threshold, directing and informing the activity from outside, participating and undergoing transformation from within; but this collapsing distinction of inside and outside is in fact the underlying rule of the self-choreographies. They unfold beneath the name of "*superpronoun*": a kind of composite shifter, which can be written *youme* or *meyou*.⁴



The "*superpronoun*" choreographies are very loosely based on a series of generative diagrams, providing patterns that are not so much retraced as extended, altered, and ultimately dissolved in a process of experimentation. These diagrams, presented on the walls of the gallery, are themselves extensions, alterations, dissolutions of earlier diagrams and earlier games, all leading back to a more basic form: a rectangle with truncated corners and a circle in the center. This a-signifying form is the immediately recognizable and memorable logo of the entire permutational process that Ricardo Basbaum has been proposing, in constantly changing guises, for over a decade. The logo also exists as an acronym: NBP, which in turn unfolds as "New Bases for Personality." It is a constructive program for an expanding territory of existence. Exactly the territory that *youme* are now exploring.

⁴ For documentation of a "superpronoun" workshop, see *re-projetando + sistema-cinema + superpronome*, the catalogue of the exhibition at the Cândido Portinari Gallery of the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, August 19 to October 10, 2003.

Channeling Flows

One of the traditional problems of vanguard art has been the frame. The frame is what defines and limits the specialized activity of transformation that our culture designates as "artistic." It is considered necessary to overcome, undermine, transgress, or explode whatever material, conceptual, moral or political boundary that may limit the activity of the artist within a particular definition of art, separating it from the life-world. When the choreographic experiences of "*superpronoun*" uncoil into the urban space, it might seem as if a normative frame has been surpassed, a new outside conquered, in an historical victory over the spatio-temporal limit of the white cube (just as the white cube itself, the void of Yves Klein and the phenomenological space of minimalism, had been an historical victory over the boundaries of modernist painting). Yet this dialectical progress in the conquest of space would be an impoverished understanding of what is at stake in the *meyou* transformations. The containing and limiting frame that Ricardo Basbaum invites us to explore, and to transform into a territory of experience, is no less present in the urban space than it is in the gallery. It is the all-pervasive mesh of the control society, encompassing and permeating the flows of the life-world; and it does not offer any tangible limit that can be exploded, transgressed, undermined or overcome. The framing problems of contemporary art differ fundamentally from those conceived by the twentieth-century vanguards.

The society of control was first defined in a well-known text by Gilles Deleuze, published in French in 1990.⁵ Deleuze foresaw the end of the disciplinary regime that had been exercised over bodies in the enclosed spaces of the school, the barracks, the hospital, the asylum and the factory, and its replacement by ubiquitous procedures of computerized tracking and information gathering, administered by the volatilized hierarchies of the corporation. Moreover, he associated these miniaturized, mobile processes of surveillance with their seeming opposite: the voluntary energy of personal motivation, elicited and channeled by the psychological function of marketing. The escape of formerly subordinated populations from their disciplinary molds, and the corresponding abandonment of generic limits as the symbolic frames

⁵ G. Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992), pp. 3-7. The text is available at various websites and in a number of different anthologies.

of social power, would be matched by the deployment of systems that modulate the flow of experience, "like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point." The control society can be conceived as the punctual, yet quasi-inescapable application of coercive or seductive stimuli that serve to channel the individual's expression at a molecular level, before any ethical posture can be struck, before any intentional decision can be reached. What traditionally philosophy had conceived as the subject of will, or traditional ethics, as the integrity of the whole person, is reduced to *"the code of a 'dividual' material to be controlled."*

The vanguard gesture of breaking through the limit could no longer produce a liberating effect, if authoritarian limits to behavior were to be replaced by the elastic fluctuation of continuously monitored environments. What would be required is a counter-fluctuation that twists away from normative dynamics. As Basbaum wrote in 1992: "Long ago vanished the illusory possibility of constructing models that do not incorporate, in their structure, the capacity and necessity of continuous movements, as the very precondition for their existence and perpetuation – models which in this way become veritable strategic constructions, systems that conjugate action and thinking."⁶ At stake here is a strategy of resistance. In the same text, Basbaum indicated four characteristics of artistic practices in the face of the new control procedures:

1. An autopoietic or self-renewing machinic environment, whose autonomy develops at variance with its surroundings;
2. An intervention that consists not in the rupture of generic or disciplinary boundaries, but instead in a deliberately localizing confrontation with diffuse, all-embracing cultural forms;
3. An impersonal status of the artist, who becomes a vector for the theatricalization of a lived environment, through the propagation of an "individual mythology";
4. A new reception of the artistic work, whereby an actively participating spectator adopts an ethical-aesthetic-creative position.

What's surprising is the degree of coherency that these four fundamental presuppositions have retained, some thirteen years later. Today, Basbaum's spatial devices refer with increasing precision to the problematics of control: both illustratively, through the miniaturized wire mesh of the restraining, fence-like structures, placed at an infra-coercive level below any direct confrontation with the

⁶ R. Basbaum, "Quatro características da arte nas sociedades de controle," manuscript of the paper presented in the Curso de Mestrado em Comunicação e Cultura, ECO-UFRJ, 1992.

But important questions remain, with respect to the theoretical program sketched out in 1992. First, what sort of "confrontation" is achieved with the diffuse, all-pervasive forms of contemporary culture? And second, what can now be said of the "ethical-aesthetic-creative position" – that is, of the position of the former spectator?

Towards a Diagram of the Swarm

In his 1990 text, Deleuze remarked that "we are at the beginning of something." Consider the recent developments of the control society. Shortly after the events of September 11, major American data-collecting corporations such as Seisint, ChoicePoint and AxioMetric were approached by federal intelligence services, in a drive to integrate public and private sources of information on the movement of individuals through the United States.⁷ From this emerged a machine which was known, inevitably, as "the Matrix": a network of interlinked databases and search protocols, capable not only of pinpointing individuals from just a few scraps of information – "hair color, a digit or two from a license plate, maybe a history of flying to a certain foreign country" – but also of assembling profiles of their habits, relational maps of their friends and acquaintances, predictive charts of their possible future behaviors. Fortunately, the Matrix program was halted by the US Congress, as was its immediate ancestor, a broader program named "Total Information Awareness," which had been conceived for surveillance at the global level. But there can be little doubt that such techniques are in use by intelligence agencies, and perhaps not only those of the United States.

The effect of such private-public integration is twofold. On the one hand, immense Orwellian bureaucracies (such as the Schengen Information System in Europe) have increasingly seamless access to information on the personal movements, civil records, consumption habits, vital statistics and intimate communications of the millions of citizens who use automated tellers, cell phones, computer networks, private ticketing systems, national health services, etc. On the other, the private corporations that have

⁷ Cf. the radio reportage "No Place to Hide" (2005), by John Biewen and Robert O'Harrow Jr., a production of *American RadioWorks* and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Transcript at <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/noplacetohide>. For information on MATRIX, see www.aclu.org/Privacy/Privacy.cfm?ID=14240&c=130 (American Civil Liberties Union).

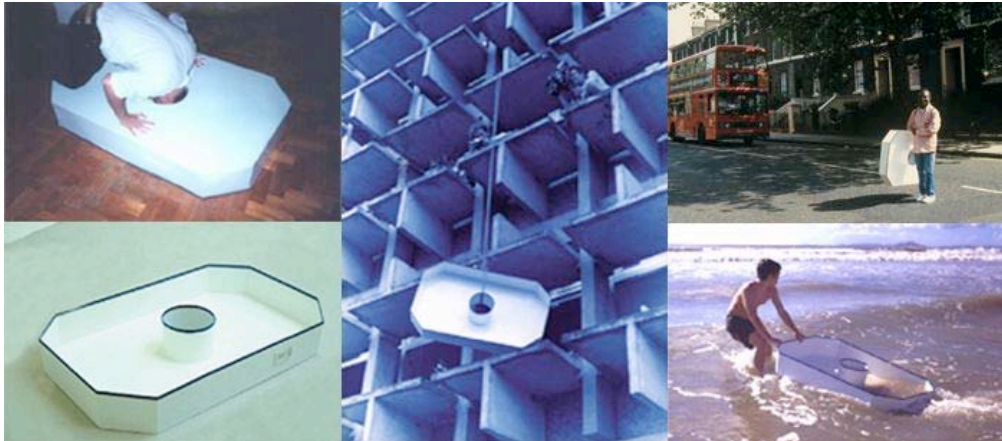
developed these surveillance systems have acquired a vastly augmented capacity to statistically model and predict the behavior of populations, and therefore to more effectively shape not only the seductive figures of advertising (which is adapted with increasing precision to individual drives and tastes), but also the built form and imaginary content of cultural-informational environments (public spaces, computer interfaces, commercial/entertainment zones, transport systems). The urban environment itself, like an immense TV set in three dimensions, can be continuously reprogrammed to channel the behavior of the citizen-consumer. What results from this double development of the control society is an all-embracing system of identification/incitation, bypassing the cumbersome ideologies and displays of force that were characteristic of former authoritarian societies. Accompanying this trend is the diffuse consciousness that if we are all being watched, then unbridled opportunism – or a chance to be at the controls of the new system – is a far better outcome for *me*. The result is a pliant, continuously available individualism, a willingness to find one's personal advantage through constant adaptation to arbitrarily changing rules. The pathology of domination/submission that I have analyzed as "the flexible personality" is now fully installed in the Western societies.⁸

The role of technology in the new behavioral regime has led recent explorations of subjectivity to insist on the form of the network. Basbaum himself has carefully followed the far-flung circuits of artistic experimentation with the Internet, collaborating, among others, with Jordan Crandall, who since the mid-1990s has produced one of the most consistently insightful bodies of work devoted to subjectivation processes at the interface between man and machine.⁹ But where the American artist has primarily sought to bring the normative forms of this relation to the light of knowledge, using the tools of cultural studies and philosophical critique, the Brazilian has tried to develop its non-dialectical other: dynamic patterns of self-organizing relations, which do not chart the trajectories of identifiable bodies and establish the profiles of predictable desires, but attempt instead to redistribute the rhythms of collective intensifications and dispersions generated through the intermingling of perceptual experience, intellectual discourse and affective exchange.

⁸ B. Holmes, "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique," in *Hieroglyphs of the Future* (Zagreb: Arkzin/WHW, 2002), text available at www.u-tangente.org.

⁹ For Jordan Crandall's work, see the extensive documentation at www.jordancrandall.com.

The evolution toward what I would call *trans-subjectivity* is at the heart of the NBP project, which functions as "that field of meaning which considers it impossible to develop a singular subject without the other's intensive presence."¹⁰ In the face of the new identification/incitation regime, with its pliantly opportunistic individualism, the confrontational principle of NBP might then be described as "collective heterogenesis."



Trans-subjectivity has been developed from the outset, for instance in the proposal of 1994, *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* [*Você gostaria de participar de uma experiência artística?*] For a month at a time, participants borrow a large, enameled steel object corresponding to the NBP diagram, creating and documenting what may as well be called "usage-works," whose authorship is divided, doubled, multiplied, to the point where it can no longer be precisely attributed. Trans-subjectivity can also be experienced in a museum, in the form of the *Capsules*, initially presented at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in 2000: four different wire-mesh "containers," each conceived for two reclining individuals, with personal spaces that can be strictly divided, partially communicating, or entirely open to each other, depending on the configuration of object – and above all, on what you do with it. This kind of proposal is highly referential: the variations on the forms of individual containment and coupling can easily evoke the work of Foucault; the relational diagram presented on the wall can appear as a prolongation of Guattari's complexity-mapping project in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*. But the same

¹⁰ R. Basbaum, "Differences between *us* and *them*," http://www.static-ops.org/archive/october/essay_12.htm

vocabulary can be developed in intuitively popular terms, within a space of everyday experience. The installation *Transcrossing* [*Transatravessamento*], presented at the São Paulo Biennial in 2002, consisted of three wire-mesh structures: an entry module, a *system-cinema* viewing room and an L-shaped soccer space, furnished with multiple balls, uncertain rules and a large-scale relational diagram. The cacophony of rebounding balls, videotaped dribbles and feints, intersecting cultural levels and conflicting opinions about the proper decorum within a museum offered expanded opportunities for self-reflection processes within a concrete, predictable institutional frame.

This principle of spiraling variations around a structural framework is presented explicitly in a proposal like *Nós Nós* (2002), an "affirmative all-inclusive manifesto" which associates the Portuguese word for "we" (*nós*) with its homonym meaning "nodes" or "knots." What it suggests is a networked form of social tie that expands not through the simple aggregation of identities, but instead through the scalar redistribution of relational forms. Each person is a singular node, but also a knot in a human mesh; and each group in turn becomes a node-knot in a wider mesh and circuit. As Basbaum remarks: "If the group is conceived of as circuit, each node is not a single individual, but another group in itself – the fractal structure is evident."¹¹ Trans-subjectivity acquires such a fractal structure, constituting relations not through the coercive analysis of the individual into dividual elements (the typical procedure of the control society), but rather through the dispersion and reconfiguration of preindividual particles of signification and affect, at scales ranging from the micro to the macro. "The interesting thing is to assume that survival techniques completely depend on the process of joining successively more nodes and knots," continues the artist. The spectator then becomes both the substance and the vector of a self-organizing process, a networked choreography. But the knots of power have not been forgotten here.

¹¹ Ibid.



It's no accident that the *Nós Nós* proposal also refers to "*coletivo formigueiro*," a group of Brazilian artists and cultural workers dedicated to media activism. The desire to transform the field of everyday culture into a space of politics is perhaps the broadest response to the onset of the control society. In the late eighties and early nineties, not just in Brazil but around the world, a generation of artists sought the conceptual and affective potentials of new collective practices, able to fold the highly individualizing power structures of the control society back upon themselves, giving rise to trans-subjective territories of resistance. This path has involved innumerable experiments with the dissolution of the classical subject-object relation, or more precisely, with the multiplication of self-reflexive processes through the fractally organized nodes – the *meyou* particles – of an expanded relational field. The experiments are neither conclusive, nor exclusive. Yet it is clear that in recent years they have contributed to a new kind of social formation, a new intentionality, increasingly capable of self-organization through transindividual processes that cannot be easily identified or targeted, that have found a constitutive principle in dispersion. Here is a choreography of the multiple self, a contemporary territory of existence.

When I look up from a cultural landscape traversed by thousands of singular, locally intensive, restlessly crisscrossing projects and adventures, at times I see a new figure hanging in the air, multitudinous, diaphanous, evanescent, continually coalescing and dispersing into the wind. You have helped me to perceive its movements, to sense its potential. We might call it a diagram of the swarm.