



Resisting Death, or, What Made Luca Guzzetti Jump into the Ashtray?

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On coming to the train I was troubled by a sentence, Deleuze's statement that *art is an act of resistance*. I didn't dare to hope that taking the journey would throw some light on that statement. It was a Jump that made me understand a facet of resistance, of what has the *power* to resist, and how.

When our journey had come to its end in Beijing, Luca Guzzetti jumped into the Korean artist Won Suk Han's artwork *Rubbishmuseum* (2005), a huge tray full of maggots in the backroom of a gallery space at Factory 798. The jump was then reproduced twice and the last jump was filmed. The event created a flood of reactions on behalf of conference participants assisting at the scene; anger, shame and mixed negative emotions: 'How dare he enter into the work of an artist who did not give his consent?'; 'Who gave him permission to do it?'; 'Why did we enter the private room and not remain in the gallery?'

When Luca Guzzetti first entered Factory 798 and jumped into the ashtray, it was not an act. It was a reaction to something he saw, felt, and maybe, being an ex-heavy smoker, smelled. It was his private reaction to a work of art which as such (a reaction) created the tangible condition for the emergence of a space for co-acting, a sphere of the *possible*. We do not know why Luca jumped in the first place, and I bet he himself does not know any better. He jumped, something pulled him into the pile of maggots, and this jump triggered another set of 'jumps': a few people in the gallery space started transforming the event into a *performance*. In the backwash from these jumps there was also a certain significant moment when a group of conference participants were watching this videoed moment on a computer screen in a hotel lobby in Beijing, and which then led into a 'problematic discussion' in hotel room 901.

To throw some light on the notion of performance we could refer to Austin's famous speech acts, acts that are in accordance with the act performed, of the type 'I baptise this child Luca'. These acts are generated from a *language* that 'makes acts'. These doings by saying in Austin's terminology are performative acts. If we then think of art, this performativity seems to be ambiguous. An artwork has stopped *saying* 'this is not a pipe', everybody already knows that it isn't, we've got it and we do not need to be more *informed* on the matter of language not being in accordance with the world of

phenomena. The statement about a 'pipe not being a pipe' does not *make* the pipe not be a pipe. The performative power of a contemporary artwork goes beyond its material form or its visibility; it works in another, more material, sensible diagrammatic sphere, beyond the level of meaning; it is a relating element, a dynamic principle of agglutination, like a dot on a line. Its power is to generate spaces where transgressing the private borders of personalities becomes possible: spaces for *relating*.



Luca Guzzetti, *Jump* (2005), an event carried out with Steffen Böhm, Bracha L. Ettinger, and Akseli Virtanen, Beijing, September 20, 2005.
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'I baptise this child Luca' is a performative act in the weak sense of the word. It is part of a repetitive structure that replaces the collective act of performance. Our contemporary societies are full of these kinds of replacements, empty performative acts constructing our practical lives. They are created for a collectivity, but require no *subjective effort* of relating oneself to a collectivity. As Foucault remarks, we are moving away from disciplinary societies that define themselves by the milieu of enclosure towards societies driven by new forms of mechanisms of control, we might think of these empty performative acts, and we might think of them on a very subjective level. Our inner selves, or 'second natures' as Aristotle calls them, are structured by different kinds of laws, judgements, morals etc. that direct our movements. It is good not to kill or not to destroy every piece of art that crosses your path, but the point is that when this happens on the mere level of 'visibility', of empty performativity, and not in the sphere that requires a sensitive subjectivity, these acts are '*gratuits*', so to say. They are *mechanical*, made by no-one, and there is no *human* resistance involved. They simply happen because the structure exists, and therefore there couldn't be anything political or creative about them.

Guy Debord claims that spectacle is the common language of separation. Spectacle is the principle that separates us from our *own* power for compassionate co-acting. Morals, judgements, laws, most rules maintaining social cohesion etc. are spectacular in this sense, and they make the process of separation work on two levels that complement each other. Separating us from our own sensitive being, which is the point of departure for any subjective valuation, and which is the only real basis that enables us to connect with the collective sphere of relating to other(s), spectacle separates us from reality. We are talking about 'machines' in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense as social assemblages, but this constellation also has its form on the individual level; we are reproducing the social machine with our own individual bodies by carrying out empty performatives and repeating a form of self-exploitation through obedience to the spectacular social forms.

The negative reactions to the jump scene were spectacular in this sense. They arose from the fear of transgression and of shareable border spaces. The event was about to become a repetition of the *group's original trauma of transgression and exclusion* experienced in the train,¹ and this is exactly the principle of the functioning of the spectacular machine: a form of *mechanical* repetition. The separation, the experience of the individual being cut off from the world creates a field of negative emotions that in their turn maintain the machine that creates spectacular realities. Getting connected to the movement of life requires a conscious effort of letting go of the private notion of the self, recognising that we are a duality, and that there is a powerful part of us that does not 'belong' to us. Our power to act is not 'ours', but is generated out of our power to be affected, and therefore out of something that is not our property, but which is *given* to us. In our individualistically driven realities this is a principle that is difficult to accept. We are powerful through something that is not ours; our power is not a fixed quality of Me, but a possibility given to us that appears in us by action taken in co-emergence with

1 Ettinger L, B. email message, Tue 27/09/2005, 8.11pm.

other subjectivities, other vectors of life.² It is this that *Capturing the Moving Mind* was trying to capture, and it is this that entered into our immediate experience at Factory 798. And it also revealed all the difficulties the group had in letting borderlines be crossed and border spaces shared.

So, let's get back to the train, because there are strings to be pulled between the train, art, action, exclusion, performance, Moscow railway station, the gallery space at Factory 798 and the hotel lobby in Beijing, where Guzzetti's jump started creating another set of backwash.

In this movement of the train one of the conference participants was excluded from the group because of his atypical, transgressive behaviour, (drinking, losing his papers, being absent-minded and rather full of himself) and finally had to stop his journey in Russia. One person being condemned to detachment from the group left a mark on the collective skin of the group. This 'act' of exclusion was a mechanical – and as such a repetitive – reaction based on a simulation of a judgement, and as such *called* for a counter-act.

The context for carrying this traumatic event on into a healing process was offered at Factory 798 when Luca Guzzetti jumped into the artworld. His first jump and the reactions prompted by it generated a crossroads situation, a moment of choice, when there was the *friction* required for transforming and activating the collective sphere. A few people in the gallery space sensed the *possible* in the situation, and started transforming Luca's jump into a performance. On the video³ we see these people setting up the scene, encouraging Luca to jump, joyfully playing with each other, with a certain scent of danger in the air. In the moment, they must have known that they were transgressing the apparent border lines, but they anyhow felt the need to experiment, to actualise the potential reconciling power that they must have sensed in the moment, of which, however, they could not have foreseen the result. There was a collective instinct, or intuition, expressing itself in action.

There is a counter-force that works against the general alienating processes that we all go through in different degrees. Wrapping our sensible selves in plastic and slowly detaching ourselves from our natural point of departure, our sensible sharing of the world, we invent for ourselves personalities that coincide with the outer (imaginary) conditions, and act in our place. By nature we are powerful, but employing this power requires an act of *relating*. We could talk about power *in* the world and power *over* the world. Power in the world implies a certain support from a structure (an empty or mechanical performative act), and this generates acts that *look* like generic acts. Power in the world does not necessitate singularity or subjectivity, and therefore it does not necessitate action, which alone can empower us.

2 This is what Bracha L. Ettinger calls the matrixial copoiesis whereby a joint trans-subjectivity seizes a potentiality and allows the growth of a gesture into something else, the transformation of a gesture into an artistic counter-event. See her essay 'Copoiesis' in this issue.

3 See the videos by Steffen Böhm at <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/conference/framework/jump.htm>

Luca's jump did necessitate an *act* to prevent it from having a determined repressive outcome. It created the condition where *relating* in action became possible, when people setting up the second and the third jump were transforming the first jump into a performative event, taking the jump beyond its original private framework, and bringing it to the level of, and making it *for*, the group; like a gift it was brought into the public sphere where it could be processed and shared, and where it could *affect* individuals. But giving a gift requires certain conditions. If we have nothing, we do not give gifts. On the level of empty performatives we *have* nothing, we are being exposed and used by the outer conditions that think us, feel us and decide upon our actions. When Luca started the jump, standing still, he was already in *there*, in the movement. As was everybody else in the room. The movement *exists* whether we are disposed to perceive it or not, and the only way to have power over it is by relating to the power of the other(s), by becoming able to be affected.

In the train the main mode was the movement, the ever-ongoing outer cinema that penetrated into the travellers. We were 'consciously' (it was so obvious) in the movement, talking about it, about how our thoughts were constructed differently because of the movement and in the movement, trying to go to sleep, but finding ourselves in an insomnia with a head full of thoughts that wouldn't stop. I started noticing a peculiar thing:⁴ the movement of the train created another level, a *simulation* of the movement, like a parallel reality. Perceiving all the moving forms created a certain feeling of *uncertainty* regarding the environment, and at the same time a peculiar feeling of action, as if we had become part of an action, actors, just by gazing out at the scenery through the screen of the window. It was as if we were interiorizing the *image* of the outer movement, as if our moving minds were being captured and fixed by it, painted on a canvas. An image can be an object. I see a lady walking her dog on a street, and what I see, the perception of this happening, can be an *object*. If I am affected by this perception and sensible to it, it can be something else, a related element, and if not, it is an *object* for me in the sense that it does not, literally, touch me. The fact that the image on the level of *visual* perception is moving, does not mean that it is not still on the level of my inner perception, whether I am aware of this or not.

The most intense moments of anxiety and '*mal-à-l'aise*' were lived through when the train was standing on the border zones, and we in the train were prevented from watching the outer cinema. 'How long do we still have to sit here?' seems an absurd question after having sat in the train for four or five days already. Anyhow, the question arose, and it is an important one because it reveals our problematic relation to the *movement* surrounding us, and to ourselves in action. If our actions are based on inner, still images that are separated from the movement, we are not acting in the actual sense of the word, but reproducing images in the form of 'act-simulations'.

Let's reflect a moment on the question of art, as we are reading and writing in the context of an art review. Gilles Deleuze said in one of his lectures at the Parisian film school Femis⁵, without really clearly explicating the further meaning of his words (and

4 Thanks to a comment made by Bert de Muijnck I started elaborating this train of thought.

5 Deleuze, G. (1990) *Avoir une idée en cinéma. A propos du cinéma des Straub-Huillet in Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet. Hölderlin, Cézanne*. Éditions Antigone, 74.

it is precisely here that the genius of his forms of expression lies), that art is an *act of resistance* connected to counter-information. An act of resistance.

A window could be compared to an art object. It has a shape, we can see the elements that it has been constructed out of, our attention can be drawn to faults or scratches on it. We can see its physical dimensions: the frames, its depth and width. It is an object, but it opens up another world, serving as a passage into a vision. It frames our experience, locating the focal point of perception, with an ever-changing scenery. And it challenges us to see *through* it, just like the movement behind it challenges us to capture it instead of being captured by it.

For Deleuze, art is not an *object* of communication. There are, however, affinities between an artwork and an act of resistance. Art is not counter-information, but counter-information becomes effective when it becomes (and it is so by nature) an *act of resistance*. Deleuze creates a liaison with Malraux's definition of art: "Art is what resists death".⁶ Spinoza, when talking about adequate and inadequate ideas, considers that the passage from the latter to the former happens through the growth of our power to exist and to act, and that the power to exist and act corresponds to the power of being affected.⁷ I would marry counter-information with the power to be affected, and note that the power to be affected necessitates relating to the power of other(s).

So, what is this counter-relating, or *counter-organization*, that could empower us to resist death? A friend of mine was looking, one early morning, at Lake Baikal out of the window of the Trans-Siberian train, and, touched by this early moment passing by, he spontaneously said: 'That is just so amazingly beautiful'. A man standing next to him, seeing the same scenery responded in the same tone: 'Listen, why stay there, why not go further, go beyond that?'

"Perhaps we are trying to avoid (beauty) much more than aspiring to arrive at (it), because the beautiful, as Rilke says, is but the beginning of the horrible in which – in this dawning – we can hardly stand."⁸ Beauty is not a visible form, a 'visibility', but the vertigo of approaching the inevitable death, the death of the private self. Death in this context is like an action space resulting from transgressing the personality's private space. And what Deleuze calls counter-information requires this transgression, because counter-information is not receivable without experiencing death; counter-information is already an act, an art of dying.

When talking about the joyful passions, Spinoza claims that they are always inadequate, because they are generated by an external cause.⁹ This external cause could be anything: a human being, the weather, an emotion, an object. "Therefore we must, to increase the

6 *Ibid.*, 74-75.

7 Hardt, M. (1991) 'L'art de l'organisation: Agencements politiques chez Spinoza', *Futur Antérieur*, 7: 3

8 Ettinger, B. L. (1999) 'Trauma and Beauty', in K.R. Soleim (ed.) *Fatal Women*, 11, and (2000) 'Art as a Transport Station of Trauma', in *Artworking 1985-1999*. Ludion: Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

9 Hardt, M. (1991) 'L'art de l'organisation: Agencements politiques chez Spinoza', *Futur Antérieur*, 7: 5.

joyful passions, form an idea of what there is in common with the external body and the one that is ours. For only this idea of what is in common, is adequate.”¹⁰ And, I might add, can resist death. These inadequate passions of Spinoza’s carry in themselves the seeds of the adequate, because they provide the *friction* that is needed for forming an adequate idea or the notion of what is in common, they offer the pre-condition for the perception of what we consider as the exterior. No friction, no fire, this people have known ever since the first spark was struck by a human hand. Resisting death does not mean overcoming it, but living it through in order to see what resists it and can be transformed by it, what has the power of not dying. We are all afraid of death because we rarely have the *confidence* to believe that there is something in us that survives death. This fear of death is a genuinely inadequate idea. So perhaps we are trying to avoid beauty much more than aspiring to arrive at it.

Seeing the jump video in a hotel lobby with a group of people who had been involved in the moment when Luca Guzzetti jumped into art was peculiar. What I saw there, among these people, was a moment of *suspension*. It reminded me of all the ‘essentialities’ of art, of why and for what we have this mode of expression. A moment when you are given the possibility to halt on your own image, so that something can touch you.

In the discussion that this moment generated in room 901 there was a second moment of negative reaction, which was worked through with the intention (conscious or not) of creating *public meaning* for the performance carried out. The arguments against the constellation of the jump revealed us to be at a *common* point of friction: between ourselves and the exterior forms that make us think, reflect, transform, suffer and enjoy, live. An artwork defines itself in every moment of history through the figure of freedom that it incarnates.¹¹ And in that moment, we were questioning the figure of freedom in ourselves.

When I was flying back from Beijing to Finland, I saw Lake Baikal as a small, immobile spot on a huge canvas. And I didn’t have the sensation of being in motion, even though my body was flying through the air at a speed far faster than any train could ever reach. And I thought to myself that what I saw was the idea of a lake, since I had the knowledge that the spot was one. Otherwise, there was nothing that would have qualified as lake-like in its appearance, according to my experience. And I thought that the speed making the movement imperceptible to me, also made my *place* disappear. I was there, of course, but looking at the world beneath me as a beautiful far-away idea. And suddenly I had the urge to stop – or to jump.

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10 Deleuze, G. (1981) *Spinoza. Philosophie pratique*. Éditions de Minuit, 262.

11 Mondzain, M.J. (2002) *L’image peut-elle tuer?* Bayard Éditions, 63.