

I RECENTLY HEARD A STORY THAT REMINDS ME OF REBECCA BAUMANN'S WORK.

It comes from a friend who grew up in Dresden in East Germany during the final stages of the Cold War. The wall came down when she was six, meaning that she doesn't remember much of her life under communism, but one thing she does remember is the first and only time she visited West Berlin. She encountered the extravagance of capitalism's excess and was bombarded by colour, objects and variety unknown to her on the other side, and she remembers being driven to tears by the experience.

There are two ways to interpret this anecdote.

The first way is the way that I prefer, which is a disavowal of the idea that capitalism and its products, especially its excesses, are always-already emotionally and meaningfully bankrupt. In the anecdote, capitalist excesses have the ability to be genuinely moving because of the effect of their visual properties on the body and psyche. They put my friend, Anja, in touch with her human senses by overwhelming them, and they produce a real, spontaneous human response. Capitalism reinvigorates the human, and thereby is itself reinvigorated as a vector of humanity, rather than, or perhaps in addition to, being an engine of empty signifiers ensuring humanity's corruption.

The second way to interpret the anecdote is the more traditional Marxist way, in that it shows hegemony at work, producing desire and making the capitalist subject complicit in her own subjectification. This interpretation is vouchsafed by an extra piece of information I elided in its initial telling. The reason Anja cried was not (or at least, was not only) because she was overwhelmed by capitalism's spectacle of colour. Rather, it was because her mother wouldn't buy any of the products that she could see. In this interpretation, her tears are not the tears of someone moved by the wonders of the visual; they are the tears of a child who is not able to fulfil a desire created by capitalist visual production.

This interpretation affirms an approach to thinking about capitalism that I wish to disavow. Capitalism is presented as value-less manipulator encroaching on its subjects with disastrous effects – daughter is alienated from mother, desire is taken over and artificially enlarged by the market, and emotional well-being is forestalled for the sake of material accumulation.

Rebecca's work faces the same dilemma as Anja's anecdote. Her materials are the most superficial of capitalist excesses – party decorations, as well as machines of comfort, convenience, and industry – and she uses them in order to enact discussions of happiness, spectacle, time and autonomy. This practice was hinted at during her study at Curtin University of Technology, where she invented an eponymous persona that branded a series of fictitious self-help books satirising the commercialisation of the pursuit of happiness. This idea had the unintentional effect of deriding users of self-help texts, and was eventually abandoned. Rebecca revisited happiness in 2007's *New Disorder* at The Old Berlin, which featured her work *Confetti International*. This installation aimed to create a perpetual confetti machine by inviting audiences to dump piles of confetti onto a conveyor belt, which would then transport the piles onto the face of the fan, which

would blow the confetti into the air. Rather than exploring happiness by making static artefacts satirising its pursuit, *Confetti International* sought to actively immerse its viewer in a state of happiness. It was conceived out of a whim when Rebecca bought a bag of confetti at a newsagent, started throwing it around herself in her bedroom and thought, "Wouldn't you be happy if you had confetti falling around you all the time?"

The success of that installation inaugurated a body of work that mines similar techniques and themes, and continues in Rebecca's work for *Rounds*. In *Rounds*, she has created spectacles of fans, streamers, tinsel, piñatas and walkways, all toying in some way with our culture's interest in perpetual happiness. But where creating ironic self-help books at university forwarded a fixed, unambiguous derision of industrialised, commercialised notions of happiness, Rebecca's subsequent work is more ambiguous. It shifts from the objective distance of the contemplative gaze to an all-around immersion, and replaces irony with spectacle. This is a deliberate move, she says, because she does not wish to deride any person's particular technique of coping with a lack of happiness, and her only other explicit aim in the work that launched her subsequent oeuvre was to produce a feeling of happiness in the viewer. The question is, to what end? Is there an artistic expression or discussion going on in her work, or is it pure affect?

In fact, "affect" itself provides a key to undoing this ambiguity. Deleuze and Guattari write about affect in *What is Philosophy?*, where they describe affects as, along with percepts, making up the "bloc of sensations"¹ that is the transcendental characteristic of art. Their concept of sensation is difficult to pin down because it seems to contradict scientific and cultural studies understandings of how humans experience the world, but I will attempt to summarise it as clearly and unobnoxiously as I can.

Instead of the Lacanian approach to meaning, which suggests that virtually nothing of the world or the subject can be understood without being mediated by language, Deleuze and Guattari argue that art targets the body before the self, and so is beyond language, is something approaching the experience of non-linguistic animals², what Lacan might call "the real". Art accomplishes this by disembodying percepts and affects, the sensory information we receive from art and the feelings that it provokes³, from perceptions and affections. Art gives them their own ontological status by locating them within, for example, the lines and colours of a painting, Van Gogh's yellow, or Virginia Woolf's dense packing of experience into time. Sensation is an ephemeral force that is not produced by the materials of composition of a work of

1. G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994, p. 164.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

3. C Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 21-22.

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art, but works through materials, colours, characters, etc. The “force” of sensation works through these elements of art to bypass the brain and act directly on the body via the nervous system⁴. When viewed, art acts as a vector through which sensation acts on the subject who views them. By working in the art rather than in the viewer, and working directly on the body, they are free to produce sensations outside of the frame of subjectivity, and its entire attendant psychoanalytic, ideological and discursive infrastructure. And yet, though they are independent of the subject, they become implicated in the subject. They constitute the subject’s relation to the artwork, the external, the Other. They erupt from a “zone of indeterminacy”⁵ between the viewer and the work, the subject and object, and as such provide the conditions for becoming-other, a state which celebrates the irreconcilable difference between the self and the other. When we become-other, we reject the imperative to preserve the autonomy and coherence of our selves and instead give ourselves over to the processes of exchange and the obligations that exist between, and indeed constitute the categories of, self and other. Deleuze and Guattari write that becoming “is not the transformation of one into the other [...] but something passing from one to the other. This something can only be specified as sensation”⁶.

I would argue that Rebecca’s work is acutely aware of the manner in which sensation causes us to rethink subjectivity. The happiness that her machines wish to manufacture is the happiness of the subject delighting in its process of becoming-other. Not only that, but insofar as happiness is the sensation associated with her work, the happiness of viewers of and participants in her work is becoming-other itself. Her work intensifies bodies by thrilling them with the play of colour and the presence of these objects of play, celebration and spectacle, and these intensities, by operating outside of the linguistic systems that structure the subject, bestow upon us an animal state, or rather enter us into a process of becoming-animal. This function is distinct from a Rousseauian “return to nature”; it does not privilege or guide us toward a lost, “primitive” state of humanity. Rather, it deconstructs notions of humanity as such, and aligns us along a continuum with the animal. It does not produce binaries; it blurs the distinction between them. It is not political, but by pursuing states of becoming-other it disturbs the boundaries of the subject on and through which power operates. It is “politics continued by other means”⁷.

Opposite page: *Welcome to the Wonderful World of Emotion and Impact*, 2008
7x exploding balloons, detonated on opening night
Dimensions variable
Exhibited at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, for *Linden1968*, Nov 2008
Photos: Marc Morel

4. E Grosz, “Sensation: The Earth, a People, Art”, *Gilles Deleuze: Image and Text*, London, Continuum, 2009, p. 86.
5. G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994, p. 84.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
7. E Grosz, “Sensation: The Earth, a People, Art”, *Gilles Deleuze: Image and Text*, London, Continuum, 2009, p. 86.

