

Plastic Island Revisited

Ariane Müller, 2017

I met Felix Guattari in 1992, when I invited him to a symposium conceived by the filmmaker Penelope Georgiou. Times and means were different then in 1992, and I remember myself, anxiously waiting for a connection in the upstairs telephone booth at the Café de Flore, anxiously because I was altogether not too sure about my French and not too sure about the telephone number either. I was connected, and, although the bad connection quality until today resonates in my head and my stammering as well, and though this telephone call must have come rather unexpectedly for him into this rainy February evening with nothing but a small introduction letter I had written a few weeks earlier, I was given a date and time to meet him at his house, in a small street next to rue St. Denis on one of the following days.

My task was to interest him to participate in an upcoming symposium titled Ethics and Aesthetics, which was set in a somewhat theatrical atmosphere where he would be one of the invitées besides Karl Lagerfeld and Spike Lee (whom to invite I was pushing still into a dreaded future). Not having been part of the discussions on the theme, I had a somehow diffuse understanding of the topic and a not too small contempt for the broadness, unpoliticality and spectacularity of the whole endeavour, but in preparation I spent the days up to the meeting reading *Anti-Oedipus*, and trying to get as much French conversation as possible, chatting up people in coffee shops, trying to speak about the book I unfortunately only had in its German translation.

The small side street of rue St. Denis in those times still had an open sewer in the middle of the street and the general medievalism of this part of Paris was enforced by the inclining 15th-century houses you can find in some streets of the inner city until today. The house had an impressive staircase, and I remember the strong smell of floor wax and the massive hand railing. He, who Gilles Deleuze had described as the most beautiful person he had ever met, opened the door and we were invited to sit in a small side room. We were three, I had brought my best Paris friend to help me with explaining, and as it turned out to also prevent me from dragging *Anti-Oedipus* out of my handbag, while we waited for Guattari who was preparing tea, by hinting out that as this had been written in 1968, there might be some more recent books, I then demonstratively would have missed. Mr. Guattari seated himself with a table on his right side and us opposite on chairs and I started with the explanation of a concept to which I had not really been giving any thought but perhaps for a day, and in retrospect would have difficulties explaining today as well. Remembering us I wonder that it was in those days still considered normal politeness that one would try to speak French and not change into more convenient English. In the end, he accepted to come and participate in the symposium. And I remember when I stepped into the street, and we decided to celebrate the victory by having lunch at a nearby restaurant, how excited I was, and how happily I said to my friend: "And imagine, he actually listened to me!" To which he answered: "After all he is a psychiatrist."

But before we left, Mr. Guattari, having found out that we were artists, showed us his art collection, especially some new prints, he had acquired just a week ago. Being in these times a fierce conceptionalist I felt somehow superior to what I, when asked about it later, used to describe as Yugoslavian Surrealism, and which I would

now wish to remember better. And then he gave me his most recent book, asking before whether I already knew it, which I didn't, excusing myself by saying it was not translated (and quite relieved that I had not produced the old *Anti-Oedipus*). I forgot to ask him for a signature, – imagine!, but perhaps this was also due to the strange feeling of equality that he so readily emitted, and which, remembering the situation, I guess, was one of the traits that made for the beauty of his persona.

He died in August 1992. The symposium in October took place without him. The book he gave me was *Chaosmosis*, the last of his books to be published during his lifetime. It remained untranslated into German, like many of his books do until today, until 2014 (though I did translate some of it earlier for A.N.Y.P, the Berlin magazine). *Chaosmosis* is about subjectivity, how as the cover text reads "to produce it, to keep it, to enrich it, to reinvent it to a permanence in the way of making it compatible with a world of changing values." While I translate this from the cover, it jumps to my eyes how many words from French can just be taken and turned into English words, englifying them. It seems as if this literality is the best way to translate their meaning. Meanwhile I don't really know what I do, when I write this text or any other in English. I am not a native speaker, and even more, I have never spent more than a month in an English speaking country. I write it in a hearsay way. Does it sound? is one of the main criteria I try to fit my English into. The meanings of the words skip me, not the momentary meanings, not the notion that meaning for example translates into Meinung and that wherever I would use it, I would mean exactly this concept, but the deep embedded historical meanings. In writing I can never be sure, if these words are still used, who would use them, and what sociological or political context they would open up for a native speaker. Every word, it seems, is a discursive risk, may turn me into a 70ies hippie writer, a dull academic or else a Surrealist. The only thing I can refer to is the sound. I seldom look up words in the dictionary. It doesn't really help, not even the small comments (like fam. for familiar or indications about geographical contexts like where words are used). If I need a word, I just wait for a word to appear on my inner writing screen. I then sometimes look it up, sometimes I again just trust the sound of it, which also led to once writing to my UN-HABITAT colleagues (where I used to work) that someone we wanted to get in contact with "eloped with the orange revolution", which I wanted to use as a sort of vanished into, and made their day.

I thus work straight against Plato's text critique, against what he describes as the discursive insecurity into which each text is written, insofar as the writer can never be totally assured, as in oral communication, that whatever he or she writes (even when "she" was not Plato's concern for sure) is understood by the reader in the intention in which it was written. Therefore Plato opts for an obscurantism concerning the most important or "holy" parts of the message, which can only be safely transmitted in oral communication. An advice everyone has become too familiar with since electronic communication, even when Plato was not thinking about this either. This empty inner part of the written message is born out of a clear distrust of intersubjective means of communicating via the written word. An inability of its signifying part to move the reader in the right direction. So opposing to this, and in the clear uncanny knowledge that I don't really know what I write, I try to trust the sound, the ups and downs of vowels, the shortness or else the overflow of sentences, to make clear in what mood the text should be understood. Relying on the sound I trust the reader more than I do my words. With this sound I try to convey this inner *Auslassungsstelle*, the point of omission, Plato declares to be the core of every written text.

When this text is finished, I will hand it over to an English editor. She (and it is a she) will try to straighten it out, and I will try to fight her. She seemingly knows more about you, the reader, as she is already one of you. I know more about the intention of the text. She in the end will get to know more of me and my intentions, through the editing process, than you will have the chance to. What we will produce is generally accepted as a compromise between a readership and an author, by adding, through editing, more subjectivities into the text. It could also be called in Guattari's terms the reterritorialisation of subjectivity, my subjectivity. We will accept it, we are not all psychiatrists, and I think it needs a long training to come up with this egalitarian communication context Félix Guattari had built up around him, in which stutters, word cascades, repetitions, and redundancies are part of a message. Meanwhile a text editor will throw out the second appearance of the word appearance, and with meticulous eagerness will try to come up with a word, that says appearance but is constructed out of other letters. Materialisation, manifestation, happening, whatever.

In the same way as the beforementioned meeting in Paris is connected with floorwax and a telephone booth and its dimly lit atmosphere and the waiters pushing past on their way to the kitchen, I can also place the moment when I heard about Guattari's death. It was the opening of the then newly built Kunsthalle Wien. It opened with a performance of Marina Abramović. And while she was elevated to the cross, as the last picture of her biographical piece, and a large crowd, invisible as singular individuals, since it was dark and only graspable as a dark multitude, was standing in the yet unfurnished space and looking in the direction of the happening, I was approached from the side by one of the organisers of abovementioned symposium, who added to the dark picture by saying: It seems that our invited guests kick the bucket before they make it here. Which didn't really make me get what had happened, but made me immediately understand that she didn't like me. Which in the end is, what intersubjectivity is about.

But today is another day. A bright and sunny November day, with blue skies and low sun, and I am not sure whether I am going to finish that story about disguised malevolence that left me offended then, and pondering now, since offended shades my momentary life too often. It seems middle-aged existence is to a large extent about feeling, or being, offended and dealing with it. I heard the first time about it, when I was interviewing Martin Kippenberger. He was not middle-aged then, young more so, from my point of view now, but it was already the last decade of his life. He said; since I am so touchy these days, and I asked; offended? And he said; offended may come in. And he added; since I am all about harmony, and laughed, but then said; he sometimes wondered whatever became of this small morsel of thankfulness. The recognition of the effort. And I may understand him wrongly but it rings a bell now, and connects me not so much through a common endeavour, but through a shared weakness, which is that we all drink too much, which makes it harder, to, what Guattari said to be the core of subjectivity, stand controversy and antagonisms. I have to add that I always felt slightly intimidated in Kippenberger's company, not at ease. His was not the egalitarian conversation space, but he was a very egalitarian dancer who made his partners look good, and even when it is boring as hell to talk with intimidated people, which it must have been for him, he let us parasite on his energy, making up for (for him) fruitless conversation through stand-up comedy.

Since I wrote these first pages I went through Guattari's book, the *Three Ecologies*, because it actually started my thinking about our rencontre, and therefore started this text. I had mistakenly thought that it was this book he had given me then, and I wanted in the first concept of this text to connect it with Guy Debord's last writings that were posthumously made into his book; *La Planète malade*.

I dragged myself a bit through the *Three Ecologies*, since what I had was firstly a pretty bad translation (which it has in common with a lot of his books, and may be a sort of bad historical joke, since he, together with Deleuze in *Anti-Oedipus*, wanted to write philosophy in a more commonplace and colloquial language), and my mind kept following the paths that opened up by the choice of words the translator had decided upon. He had started a sentence with the words: In deed and truth (In Tat und Wahrheit) which is a decidedly Swiss German expression (it is noted in the Wikipedia list of Helvetisms – words that are only used in Switzerland), he once used "grad", and not the more standardized word "gerade" (for straight), which made him an Austrian, or again a Swiss, and at one point he used "knallhart" – perhaps bad-ass or tough enough, as the film by the same title was translated, which turned this word into a 90ies comic phrase. I wondered what could have been the French original for that.

Secondly I had the impression of an obvious impatience that shone through the text and made it hard to follow. I know this impatience from my own texts, it evolves, when you already want to come to your next argument, but realise that you have not really laid the grounds for the reader, to passage there from the last thought. So you, as writer, give it a bit of additional text, but these additional phrases would not be necessary for yourself, so it is mostly not very elegantly written. Normally you find these passages yourself when you read the text again, and since one mostly has forgotten what one had been thinking when writing, the writer senses the impatience as the reader would, and tries to flatten out the section. Guattari seems to have been an à-la-prima writer, as far as I can distinguish from this book, writing out of a necessity, or what in current discourse is called an urgency. This urgency was directed at someone or a discursive field it seems, and due again to the strange translation of "le monde psy" into "die PSY-Welt", which only gave way to a correct understanding (at least mine) in the middle of the text, I got this quite late – until then I had thought, wondering, if he meant something esoteric, like the PSY-factor, while Guattari actually used it as a pejorative noun for everything connected to psychology. So it took me some time to understand that he was directing it to his colleagues in psychiatry, and more so to behavioural science. By then I had already decided to read the book in a more subconscious way, trusting my perceptiveness to grasp the content out of the sound and the keywords, while still disciplining myself, when I felt my immediate thinking drifting to the exhibition I was conceiving at the moment, or to this text I wanted to write, and then I had to go back in the book to the last sentences I consciously remembered. One of the main arguments was that it would be better to take *what* subjectivity had actually produced, in poetry, in music or in visual art – even when he mostly cited poetry – to see *how* it is produced, and to understand the necessity of the antagonism between nature and culture, than to refer to the secondary books scientists had been putting together about the hows and whys of the forming of subjectivity (and this again he addressed directly to psychological science), while he admitted that the best of these meta-texts, and there he named Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, could be read as an astonishing sort of modern novel.

It was through a such secondary book though, Guattari's book, a very a-Platonic book, because, reading it, you sense that he doesn't deliberately leave out or endarken anything, that he doesn't hint at some veiled, secret

meaning, but tries to write as clearly as he can – making it incomprehensible at many points – at least for me – but at the same time radiating a subjectivity (or perhaps only the wish to write a modern novel as well), that I was reminded of the occasions I had, during that day, cited poems, had been using poems in everyday talk. I counted three times, including a silly poem about the killing of a fly. And I started to wonder why you would use these manifestations of other subjectivities as an intersubjective vehicle, conveying a message from another subjectivity, the poet's, to reinforce your own argument, or moreso to give a sort of sound to a situation, making it resonate through different times and places. Speaking in tongues, so to say. And it is somehow clear that it must be so, because another subjectivity touches yours, folding you into something that may be – again in Guattaris terms – that may be called a supportive environment, or what Benjamin called "the protective colouring of the planet". Meaning that it speaks your language, too. *Cette planète malade*. But I didn't read this, Debord's, book.

I also never met him. I wanted to though, and so I walked into the Gerard Lébovici bookstore in Paris, which was the closest address I could get from the Debord experts I knew. This bookstore took me by wonder, and though the elegantly dressed lady discouraged us (again we were two), advising that we leave whatever letters we had there, and that no further address was to be obtained, since it wouldn't be our choice to meet him or not, I was happy to have seen it. In shelves up to the ceiling, the ten or twelve books of the situationists covered the walls, each one in hundreds of copies occupying one shelf, changing the bookstore into a sort of colour field painting installation.

Again it is a sunny day, now in January, and in between I read *La Planète malade*, or *Sick Planet*, as it is translated. The last sentence is: *Revolution makes the sunshine*. The sentence before it is: *Alieniated industrial production makes the rain*. The sentence before that has become famous. Since the last two sentences in my copy (which was translated by Donald Nicholson Smith, the October editor of their Situationist publications, and published supported by the French Embassy in India, where those books are sold by drug-addicted five year olds in the street, or at least this was where I got my beautiful copy of the Walter Benjamin transcripts, paying the amount printed on its original Verso cover, some nine cheap Pounds, in Rupee, which made them suddenly become the excited and happy children they seemingly could be as well, since it was by far more than they would ever get on a sold book normally) – alas, since the aforementioned last two sentences are printed on another page, the page ends, and the book could just as well end with: *When it rains, when there are clouds of smog over Paris, let us never forget that it is the government's fault*.

I had always taken that sentence as the inclusive sort of political message, a sentence like: "*It was murder in any case*", a sentence that hints at the necessity to not forget the landscape or the political structure in which an event is set, when discussing a detail of daily political live. But, as Debord writes, the sentence is actually based on empirical data. The sun was shining in May 68, it was unusually smog-free, because, due to the General Strike, there was a fuel-shortage, so few cars were on the street, and because of the barricades and the fighting, people tried not to move their cars anyway. Hence the revolution made the sun come through.

La Planète malade is not a book, but actually the last of four essays, compiled in a book, with which it shares the name. The essay is short, and my shying away from opening up another ecology book, and hence the two months

it took me to finish this text, was actually quite unnecessary. It is a short and direct essay. Debord in this book doesn't write in a Platonic way either. He doesn't obscure his message in its core (or did he, and I didn't get it?), maybe because he trusts us, the readers, which I doubt, or maybe because he trusts language, which is possible, given the time it was published, which held some esteem for the un conveyed political language, or maybe he was just too sick to hold back, or use whatever diplomacy would be advisable when talking to people. But then again, even if *La Planète malade* is a published article, he doesn't seem to be talking to people, or attempting to, it seems as if he is writing this text to position himself in times to come, in the future. Like something you put on a tombstone or in a bottle. And it is his last published text.

So in *La Planète malade* he writes: "*Revolution or death! is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt: rather, it is the last word of the scientific thought of our century*". Because everything is known, and when Nikola Dietrich in this Starship issue puts plastic particles as signifiers, one could just as well put VW's diesel fumes, or the deeply cynical and selfish words of the BP manager after the Bluewater Horizon oil spill, "I want my old job back" in the same place. It must have been somehow bitter for Debord to admit to having discerned so late the nature-culture dichotomy, which he could have found much earlier in Marx's writings (translations of which comprise huge parts of the Situationist International) as the one scientifically foolproof argument for a battle cry that had been used before by various people to challenge class-inequality, colonialism, feminism, and the spectacle (even though he, Debord, tries to write all of the former into the latter). The text hints at some feeling of the like. It was the same for the people I used to work with in the beginning of the nineties. Being so uncomfortable in using an argument that developed out of a reality in which: *Admirably accurate measurements and projections are continually being made concerning the rapid increase in the chemical pollution of the breathable atmosphere, as of rivers, streams and, already, oceans; the irreversible accumulation of radioactive waste attending the development of nuclear power for so-called peaceful purposes; the effects of noise; the pervasion of space by plastic junk that threatens to turn it into an everlasting refuse dump, etc. ,*

resulted out of the fact, that it had been taken up by reform and its spokespeople, and not by revolt. (Even when I do remember that part of the No-Future movement and its cultural expressions in the 80ies talked violently against a society that didn't give a shit about trees, Punks, and any deviant young people alike – the argument being that it included the trees!). But generally and later, this *détournement* of valid arguments by people Debord calls *waffling gas-bags* made this topic toxic because it breathed reform, revisionism, and conservatism. This was before Judith Butler made her claim to defend reform against revolt, argued on a potentially revolutionary point, a sort of denial of biological arguments related to gender issues. So what would nature in a post-Kantian thinking then be anyway. And what in that time could it have been for feminist thinking which was angered by recurring reminders to Flaubert's denial of women becoming Dandies, since their being nature, and natural by gender was opposed to the strict refusal of any naturalism Dandies claimed. A nature definition that must have sounded strange for his contemporaries that spent their lives in corsets undergoing the mindblowing rituals of having to please (and how very natural one is then!?!). But it being repeated through generations fuelled a general dislike for nature amongst people described as being part of it. So, as I would argue on the naked beaches of Berlin, having to chose between nature and culture I would always go for culture. And this feeling of a too small habitat for what was in a somehow thoughtless way being described as women was expressed in Donna Haraways writings, that were available around that time as well. So one had the feeling that old men's last

thoughts about a general failure by recognizing that in their lifetime despite any other victories (you can't bring Paris to revolt twice!) the planet had become a life-threatening dump site, showed a general sentimentality for life. But one felt that this would have been so in any case.

I always have a slight nauseating feeling when I look at extra-terrestrial pictures of the earth. It started in my physics class at school when we were first told about the universe. I think that it must be a tough decision for physics teachers, when to tear the safe ground one walked on away from some thirty ten year olds, but I don't remember anyone giving a single wince. But perhaps the shock was too deep. Thomas Locher in this Starship issue also associated the photos sent by Rosetta from the comet it is just visiting with the Plastic Island theme. Endless huge fields of rubble and rocks, places we know, under some strange sun, that comes out every four months, and nothing to let the eye make any comparison of size. The nauseating feeling is mixed with a tender feeling for the earth (making it still more nauseating, because the tender feeling is placed in the stomach as well), when it then comes into sight on one of the photos. The astronauts gave us the concept for this. Telling us again and again that it is beautiful. I am incoherent here, calling my own feeling tender, whilst denouncing Guattaris and Debords care as being sentimental. Perhaps they all root in the same feeling of, that it (the earth) speaks your language, too. But even if a friendly and serious ten year old (my brother) might come home from a school hiking day with his rucksack filled with collected plastic garbage, I can't make the step of caring or fighting for it (the earth) in a text.

Then everything developed rapidly. In one summer some five years ago I noticed the blackbird in the garden. I noticed that it saw me, and I noticed that it (in German you would write she, which makes everything, also the space vehicle Rosetta, which would be a she too, more personal) was also very curious. They are very territorial, showing it by something that is called singing, which they do in the morning and afternoon, whilst the rest of the day seemingly looking for food, but it found time in between to watch me from quite nearby for long periods of time when I was reading. While I noticed this over the summer Donna Harraways book about her dog was published. It was called *When Species meet*, and the title was a better trigger for ideas than was the content, which was mostly about how she and her dog manage a sort of dog triathlon together. The documenta in the following year shifted the idea to a new approach in ecology, following speculative realism, introduced by theoreticians, whom until now I believe to be American spies placed at American Universities in the Middle East under the disguise of philosophy professors. I had heard about or from this new realists first by a reading one of them gave on a small roof terrace in Bombay. Speaking about the third table. It opened into a proposal of respective realities that exist in only small parts overlapping but generally untouched by each other, hence also not thinkable or conceivable in our reality (as we are not in theirs), and untouched by our concept of subjectivity. One may remember the bits on strawberries in their own right Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was bringing up in interviews in the forerun of documenta, that were widely read as surrealistic épater sentences, but touched the core of a deeply insulted image of the world (– they don't really care about us!). It was an ecology that stood in sharp contrast to Guattaris thoughts of an ecology that could be enforced by allowing more, and principally uncountable subjectivities to construct it. Which would make it become sustainable. Its sustainability being threatened by something like the canon, or a defining narrative based on a comprising, men-eating overall subjectivity – e.g. the green party member, or the ecologist. And obviously it stands in contrast to my thinking of

the bird as watching me curiously. And my thinking that there are some subjectivities of people out there that share theirs with one or the other strawberry. Or did I read a novel about that?

Guattari points out a thought Isabelle Stengers, a nobel-prize winner in Biology (together with Ilya Prigogine) and Merve author, proposed. She thinks it indispensable to introduce a narrative element into Physics "in [die] Theoriebildung der Evolution in Termini der Irreversibilität" (in *Entre le temps et l'éternité*). Which may in other words be described as Science Fiction (more accurately Science Fiction read by physicists – which I guess happens). Yes, Starship also started to think about Sci-Fi. I am not an avid reader of Science Fiction, but Mark von Schlegell and Jacob Kolding introduced me.

Guattari further thinks that this (creating images, texts, narrations) will be done in the future increasingly by machines, and further reading this Starship issue, you find a film script by Bernadette corporation full of subjectivities but written by a machine, while Ed Steck's subjectivity emulates a machine text. Guattari thinks these narrations should be claimed from machines by subjectivities, and I am not sure if I follow him into their being oppositional, but it would be a narrow subjective range if it was only done by machines. Not so many people invent machines after all. But I would follow him into that these narratives should stutter or shout or be redundant or meandering, but alas, this, I guess, shows in this text.