

The Mass Ornament: Nomadology, Ornithology, Photography

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I'll admit: I have long entertained the idea of making an artwork, one fine day (when I'm done writing about art, finally), based on the flocking movement – “the collective motion of a large number of self-propelled entities”, as one online source has it – of birds. Now this would probably be a straightforward video piece, to be projected on a large wall: the soundless recording, some fifteen minutes long, of a huge black cloud of sparrows (ideally: the more pedestrian the bird, the better – and I truly like sparrows) wheeling, whooping, swooping and sweeping in hypnotic, bedazzling unison just above the tree line, a thick, elastic clot of tiny black dots ready to nestle on the shimmering horizon.

The phenomenon – nature at its most aesthetically puzzling – is all too familiar, but no less fascinating and mysterious because of it: how, in God's holy name, do thousands of sparrows 'know' when to move in what exact direction to achieve the seemingly effortless effect of such tight mass choreography as to put even a thousand-strong army of North Korean gymnasts to shame? Who or what, in these flocks of thousands of self-propelling entities, 'decides' when that moment comes, and in what direction it should propel itself? What triggers this seemingly haphazard movement – which nonetheless never becomes chaotic: the birds never bump into each other – and how are its rules and regulations distributed evenly across this enormous malleable body of feathers, air and bones? And why, finally, is this avian mass ornament so damn beautiful? Because it reveals some kind of unconscious intelligence to be collectively at work in these dim-witted beings¹, perhaps (“emergence” and “emergent behavior” are the technical terms in question), rendered beautifully, lyrically literal by the fact of the flock's striking resemblance to a schematic representation, say, of the human brain in the midst of neurotransmitting, synaptic action – or to a bare tree in the dead of winter. [What about shoals of fishes? It would be hard to imagine them inspiring something as hauntingly beautiful as

¹ “Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that *the unconscious itself [is] fundamentally a crowd.*” Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, London: The Athlone Press, 1988, p. 29.

The Return of the Rooks, a painting of a flock of birds nestling in a birch by Alexei Savrasov, now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.]
If not the wisdom, then surely the beauty of crowds.



An extensive quote from Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, a book about nomadism, flocking and bird song (among many other things, see note 1): Elias Canetti, the author of a book titled *Crowds and Power*, "distinguishes two types of multiplicity that are sometimes opposed but at other times interpenetrate: mass ("crowd") multiplicities and pack multiplicities. Among the characteristics of a mass, in Canetti's sense, we should note large quantity, divisibility, and equality of members, concentration, sociability of the aggregate as a whole, one-way hierarchy, organization of territoriality or territorialization, and emission of signs. Among the characteristics of a pack are small or restricted numbers, dispersion, nondecomposable variable distances, qualitative metamorphoses, inequalities as remainders or crossings, impossibility of a fixed totalization or hierarchization, a Brownian variability in directions, lines of deterritorialization, and projection of particles."² This distinction between two types of multiplicities seems to correspond with that which is at the heart of the 21st century's ambitious follow-up to *A Thousand Plateaus*, namely Michael Hardt's & Antonio Negri's *Empire*; among its many dialectical tools is the critical

² Ibid., p. 33. "Brownian motion" refers to the random movement of particles in a liquid or gas – a measure of the fundamental law of entropy that permeates all physical processes, including that of *crows formation*.

difference, precisely, between “the people” and “the multitude”, for which they turn to the writings of the 17th century English political theorist Thomas Hobbes, who asserted that “it is a great hindrance to civil government, especially monarchical, that men distinguish not enough between a people and a multitude. The people is somewhat that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may be attributed; none of these can be properly said of the multitude.” Hardt & Negri then go on to specify, in unmistakably Deleuzian newspeak, that the multitude “is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it. Whereas the multitude is an inconclusive constituent relation, the people is a constituted synthesis that is prepared for sovereignty. The people provides a single will” – is the flock of birds flapping in effortless unison a single will? – “and action that is independent of and often in conflict with the various wills and actions of the multitude. Every nation must make the multitude into a people.”³ Earlier on in the book, they poetically name the plural multitude “the other head of the imperial eagle”, made up of “productive, creative subjectivities of globalization that have learned to sail on the enormous sea. They are in perpetual motion and they form constellations of singularities and events that impose continual global reconfigurations on the system. This perpetual motion can be geographical, but it can also refer to modulations of form and processes of mixture and hybridization.”⁴

Concentration (bad!) versus dispersion (good!), “the” people versus “a” multitude, territorialization versus deterritorialization, identity versus multiplicity... It becomes immediately clear here why both books, *A Thousand Plateaus* even more so than *Empire*, have placed such enormous philosophical (and, ultimately, political) trust in the emblematic figure of the exile, the migrant, the refugee – the nomad. The human counterpart, in short, to the migratory birds whose flight was so enthusiastically recorded by Viktor Hasselblad, his photographs compiled and published in a book titled “The Flight of Migratory Birds”

³ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 103. The Hobbes quote is taken from his *De Cive*, published in the 1640s.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

in the mid-thirties – at a time, that is, when the strengthening grip of Nazi power in Germany led to a mass exodus (in not so orderly a fashion) of the country's artists, intellectuals, scientists, writers. And as it so happens, I am writing this very sentence in my apartment in Berlin, just down the road from where Susanne Kriemann lives; the streets of my neighbourhood in the former East are littered, quite literally, with reminders of the drama that was played out here more than sixty years ago – a drama of forced exile, of narrow escapes, of deportation, and finally of mass extermination. Which perhaps helps to explain why, uniquely among world cities of its stature and size, Berlin's population figures still have not been restored to their pre-war levels: an estimated 4,3 million people lived here at the outbreak of WWII, a mere 3,4 million live in Berlin today. In these circumstances, it is naturally tempting to fancy ourselves the humble heirs of the great army of creative minds that once walked these very streets. Now I work in Antwerp, to where I continue to commute, but have chosen to move here, like so many people who are active in the arts, as either artists, critics, curators or pedagogues (Susanne, for her part, regularly commutes to Rotterdam), for a variety of admittedly frivolous reasons: we are what some people, with a slight tone of condescension in their voice perhaps, refer to as "Wahlberliner", Berliners, or migrants by choice. Those, in other words, for whom migration or exile is, more or less (by virtue of their activities as 'workers' in that which is appropriately called the culture industry), a luxury lifestyle option, not a painful necessity forced upon us by "bare" living conditions: thus we read about ourselves in various "treatises on nomadology", rather than in the reports issued by the Office of the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees. ['Real' refugees probably don't read about themselves in the first place: they are interested in escaping the experience of flight rather than reliving it through discursive contemplation.] Better still, we ourselves can transform the experience of migration into an aesthetic one – we can aestheticize and glamorize the ordeal of migration in ways and manners quite unthinkable (and possibly obscene) to those who actively suffer it. Lastly, as high-flying migratory birds – where would the globalized international art world and its myriad biennials and businesses be without the recent boom in cheap air travel? – we mostly travel alone or in compact, "avant-garde" squadrons, imperious eagle-like creatures that soar at great heights, far above the humdrum business of the little birds and the crowds of

lemmings down below. The artist's disinterested view of the phenomenon of mass migration, whether this concerns birds or people – disinterested in the sense that it does not directly affect his or her living conditions: the phenomenon of mass migration is strictly defined as a subject of artistic research, not as an actual working context – thus continues along the established lines of a modern, Baudelairian demographic philosophy: the artist is the lone observer in the crowd, who can just as easily and happily submerge him- or herself in the multitude as pull away from it in splendid, Olympian isolation.

A short parenthesis on the subject of war – as the most common cause, effectively, of mass migration in the human animal – and its relationship to the subject of photography – as the direct subject, in the guise of Viktor Hasselblad's achievement, of Susanne Kriemann's project (as well as its medium): it's not a terribly original remark to make (anymore?), but well worth remembering, of course, that the history of the mechanical arts – based on the principles of mechanical reproduction, thus contributing to the establishment of a truly democratic culture, to the democratization of culture even, and enabling the masses' participation in the production of art – and that of military technology and modern warfare, of the type that has seen the indiscriminate, mechanized mass slaughter of civilians become an integral, strategic part of war, have long been intertwined. This convergence and occasional complicity – as attested by Viktor Hasselblad's own life-story, for instance – forms the subject of *Guerre et cinéma* (War and Cinema), a book by French philosopher Paul Virilio: "in 1874 the Frenchman Jules Janssen took inspiration from the multi-chambered Colt (patented in 1832) to invent an astronomical revolving unit that could take a series of photographs. On the basis of this idea, Etienne-Jules Marey then perfected his chronophotographic rifle, which allowed its user to aim at and photograph an object moving through space"⁵ – an early stepping-stone towards the development of a full-fledged moving image technology. Furthermore, it isn't just any type of warfare or military technology that has been so instrumental in this regard – pride of place must go to aerial warfare, to that type

⁵ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, London & New York: Verso, 1989, All subsequent quotes are taken from pages 11 to 20, the chapter titled "Cinema Isn't I see, It's I Fly".

of warfare that dreams of birdlike flight, and of the possibility of absolute overview it, like the camera, affords; as Virilio notes, "at the turn of the century, cinema and aviation seemed to form a single moment. By 1914, aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records; it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of seeing. In fact, contrary to what is generally thought, the air arm grew out of the reconnaissance services, its military value having initially been questioned by the general staffs." Another, much more recent example of the same feedback dynamic is described in the following terms: "By 1967 the US Air Force had the whole of South-East Asia covered, and pilotless aircraft would fly over Laos and send their data back to IBM centres in Thailand or South Vietnam. Direct vision was now a thing of the past: in the space of a hundred and fifty years, the target area had become a cinema 'location', the battlefield a film set out of bounds to civilians." Not so much (or no longer) war and cinema, therefore, but the following formula: war is cinema. Finally, Virilio in turn reverts to a famous quote by Soviet film pioneer Dziga Vertov, one of many filmmakers who survived the war to effortlessly move from the military battlefield to that of the production of newsreels or propaganda features (and finally also art films): "I am the camera's eye. I am the machine which shows you the world as I alone see it. Starting from today, I am forever free of human immobility. I am in perpetual movement. I approach and draw away from things – I crawl under them – I climb on them – I am on the head of a galloping horse – I burst at full speed into a crowd – I run before running soldiers – I throw myself down on my back – I rise up with the aeroplanes – I fall and I fly at one with the bodies falling or rising through the air". [One of the great treasures out there (or is it in there?), in the bottomless treasure chest of moving imagery that is youtube, is a video clip of a song by Fatboy Slim, "Bird of Prey", playing on, and appropriately depicting, the exhilarating dizziness felt by the solitary fighter pilot as his jet leaves the terrestrial realm of gravity behind – the sublime rapture of the raptor.] Above, all the relationship between war and photo/cinematography is grounded in the much older historical entanglement of technologies of looking and seeing – "techniques of the observer", as Jonathan Crary has named them – and technologies of (crowd) control, a

project of political power which has obviously benefited greatly from the mechanization of looking, seeing and viewing that both photography and cinematography have come to represent. And evidently, all such political power ultimately rests with power held over the crowd – with the numerical reduction, made so much more manageable through the advent of various techniques of mechanical reproduction, of people to cattle, or (more appropriately in this case) to poultry: the quintessentially modern process of quantification and visualization that we call biopolitics.

Through a happy turn of events and circumstances (given the scattering of themes of the current essay, that is), I've been able to finish writing this text in the great Spanish pilgrimage city of Santiago de Compostela in the province of Galicia – the phenomenon of pilgrimage being one of the historical predecessors of the modern-day business of tourism as a type of Brownian motion ('travel') that is blissfully distinct from migration: it is largely self-imposed, a matter of choice and whim that is mostly private in nature (if not execution).⁶ Similarly, the historical tradition of the Way of Saint James – the quest to reach the burial site of the apostle James upon which, according to Christian lore, the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela was erected – could be thought of as an early medieval blueprint (not unlike the crusades, which were likewise motivated by both economic and military rationales) for the migratory dynamic that would much later help to shape the fact of globalization as one of the defining features of 'our' late capitalism: there can be no pilgrimage without trade, no odysseys without exchanges, and no economy proper without migration – the mass movement of people (aleatory) as well as goods (choreographed – by people). And this leads me to ponder the true meaning of the title of Susanne Kriemann's project, "Romantic Capitalism", a formula which I like very much for a phenomenon I believe we are both – artist and writer alike – an integral part of. The processes of aestheticization and sublimation I have described before – reinventing the harsh political facts of diaspora and exile as the luxury, life-style choice of

⁶ I found out during this trip that the modern history of Galicia (like much of rural Europe, of course) is shaped in no small measure by the Gaussian curves of mass migration, mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: so many Galician families sought to start a new life in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, for instance, that Spaniards are often simply referred to as "Gallegos" in present-day Argentina.

nomadology – are crucial to the workings of a properly romantic capitalism: the genius of this brand of capitalism, so well attuned to the romantic cravings of the art crowd, resides in the fact that it has seduced us into romanticizing the bitter legacy of global capitalism as a possible site for the production of aesthetic attitudes. The romantic fantasy of the nomad may look like it belongs to artistic discourse – but it is really a new type of capitalism speaking through art and its discourses so as to make itself not just acceptable, but, distressingly and disconcertingly, desirable too: the nomad aesthetically reproduces (and thereby ultimately also legitimates) the original trauma of migration and exile (now transformed into an aesthetic concern) as a desirable possibility of contemporary life. This, of course, is the exact reason why art is so highly valued in today's unilaterally capitalist world, and why art has become an integral ideological component of a world order that is mistakenly called post-ideological: it is lodged at the heart of global neo-capitalist propaganda.

In an illuminating lecture given by Liam Gillick in the Dutch town of Den Bosch just last november, the British artist (long known for his keen understanding of the nature of capitalism's encroachment upon, and infiltration of, the culture industry) noted that the ultimate challenge faced by "chaotic-opportunistic-capitalist globalization" in this day and age – and by capitalism proper in every day and age – is the sobering fact that "people in general don't want to work", whereas the success of capitalism, the core business of which is the unending process of the commodification of everything, is obviously dependent on the total and continual activation and mobilization of labour power – not just in the so-called work force, but in the population in general (another principle of the biopolitical).⁷ It is probably true that, while the human animal is not especially lazy, he is always looking to avoid having to work: he will call in sick, invent robots to do his menial tasks in his stead, and much rather devote his time to self-actualization

⁷ Liam Gillick, *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?* 's Hertogenbosch: Hermes Lecture Foundation, 2008. In his lecture, Gillick sought to theorize the "discursive model of praxis that has developed within the critical art context over the last twenty years" and its social aspects and implications: "the discursive is linked to the question of leisure and time management. We have to address the promise of increasing leisure as a marker in the post-war era and its actual subsequent reduction. My grandfather always wondered what I would do with all the leisure I would have. And the question now is: how do you know how much leisure you are having? Control of time was traditionally the dominant managerial tool and as such it was rightly challenged. Self-management has subsequently become generalized in a post-industrial environment. (...) It is essentially better to manage your own time within a framework that involves limitless amounts of work and no concrete barrier without working and non-working. This is something that the discursive frame of art context underscores."

through all kinds of actions and activities that may perhaps look like work (sports, intellectual endeavours, exercise) but really aren't – at least that is what we think. And this deluded state of confusion is precisely where a new type of capitalism steps in: it has responded to the aforementioned behavioral phenomenon of evasion with the truly genius measure of transforming everything we do into work regardless – without us even noticing it, or at least without us being prepared to admit that this transformation has taken place. (Such an admission would be tantamount to acknowledging that there is no such thing as freedom or free will – that we can never hope to escape the workplace.) This masterful magic trick is of course especially familiar to anyone working in the creative industry and the general field of cultural production – such as myself, for instance: I like writing, I like to think of it as much more than mere 'work', it is a life-long passion that allows me to play (or what I think constitutes playing) rather than work (or what I think does not constitute work), and, most importantly, still get paid for it – like now, for example. Which is exactly why I am still writing, here and now: on a saturday evening in a hotel in Santiago de Compostella, of all places. Obviously, merely writing down the conditions of this (mercenary) act of writing tells me in no uncertain terms that I'm really working, while I've been fooling myself all along into believing that I wasn't working, but just "having fun" and "doing my own thing" instead. I believe that this is one of the essential qualities of Romantic Capitalism: it is a type of capitalism that has succeeded in turning play (art, culture, entertainment) into a source of profit and into work, a transformative process that is systematically obscured by our romantic investment in the ideal of play. My work, Susanne's work – and we weren't even looking.⁸

⁸ This circumstance is evidently complicated even further by the fact that I work *for* Susanne Kriemann: our 'working' relationship, despite appearing purely 'cultural' in its conception and realization, thus already reproduces the age-old principle of wage labour. It obviously helps the writer, who writes *for* the artist, to see things a little more clearly than the artist, who may not have as uncluttered an idea as to what or whom he or she is 'working' for when making art. Artists working in film and photography in particular may be said to be working for a dominant culture that is deeply dependent on various forms and regimes of visualisation – see our previous remarks concerning the complicity of technologies of seeing (artistic technologies among them) and technologies of domination and control. If digital photography, for example, has achieved one strictly biopolitical goal, it is the following: it has armed vast numbers of the world population with relatively cheap means to endlessly photograph (record, register) each other and themselves, thus contributing invaluable support to the big business of crowd control and surveillance. For instance, nowhere in the world is the mythical "man in the crowd" photographed and filmed more often than in London, the city that first gave the crowd its modern meaning. In addition to the development of digital photography, we should also highlight the importance of the ceaseless refining of *mobile* technologies – technologies such as

This seemingly depressing Althusserian analysis of contemporary culture and its relationship with the recuperative powers of global capitalism – let us be reminded here that, at the moment of writing, the global credit crunch has still not made a discernible impact on the economy of the art world: the latter continues to function as global capitalism’s untouchable vanguard – presents us with the typical aporias of critical theory: the ruthless, indefatigable refinement and subtlety of its thinking can do nothing but remind us (these are the small comforts of criticality) of the ultimate powerlessness of such thought in the face of the world. One thing we can do, however (or rather, one important step we can take), to at least unmask this “Romantic Capitalism” as an absurdly efficient perversion of a system that was once much easier identified as a hostile force, is not just to admit or accept that art is work – and a type of work, precisely, that has been instrumental in the global acceptance of this perversion – but also ‘own’ and actively appropriate this alienating insight, and to become, in a sense, a worker again. And discursive, research-heavy art practices – such as Susanne Kriemann’s – are eminently equipped to facilitate this critical act of appropriation, of “owning one’s own alienation” as Miwon Kwom has put it.⁹ If the history of migration, which is one of the primary concerns touched upon in Susanne Kriemann’s project *Migratory Birds: Romantic Capitalism*, is really a history of changing (geo-political) relationships between work forces and the means of production – the history of labour – then any form of artistic research into these histories must both be regarded and think of itself as labour itself: only then will the high-flying artist sat in a helicopter scanning the migrant neighbourhoods of Stockholm truly become a migrant herself – and a nomad no longer.

Published in *One Time One Million*, ROMA publications 123, 2009

netbooks, mobile phones and laptops that allow us to take our work with us wherever we go. (Is it at all appropriate to say we take our work with us? Or does work simply insinuate itself into our body armour? The characterization of mobile technologies such as wireless telephony in *prosthetic* terms is rooted in this assumption.) These technological developments are of course inextricably linked to the plight of migration and its aesthetic sublimation in the ‘genre’ of nomadology – there can exist no frequent-flying curator class, for instances, without the aforementioned gadgets, the tools of their trade that both enable and monitor the continuous transformation of ‘play’ into ‘work’.

⁹ Cfr. *A Prior Magazine # 18: The New York Conversations*, 2008-2009.