

Introduction

Art as Abstract Machine

And the question is still what it was then, how to view scholarship from the vantage point of the artist and art from the vantage of life.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

“Art as abstract machine” (ATP, 496/619). This book’s title is not a description but an imperative. It urges an action, an undertaking, a perpetual departure, for wherever we start, it remains to be done. A machine has to be constructed, and art as abstract machine will require an artist adequate to the task: a mechanic. For each machine its mechanic: “The painting machine of an artist-mechanic.”¹ We are already—as always—in the middle of things, a swirling cacophony of questions: A mechanic? A machine? Who? What? When? And given all that, what does this machine produce? And for what reasons? But these questions are the necessary conditions for any construction, for their answers will be the components of new machines that will themselves depart, to test out new directions. The abstract machine is nothing but this unfolding of complexity, a fractal engineering inseparable from life, a blooming of multiplicity.

But let’s step back from this complexity that will nevertheless remain the condition of our investigation. We don’t want to crash and burn, not yet. Let’s try taking one question at a time. If our title is an imperative what does it bid us do? To construct an abstract machine, obviously, but how? And to risk another question, already, what does it do? (We will see how these questions, to immediately step into Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary, will become indiscernible.) Deleuze and Guattari give what seems a straightforward answer: “The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality” (ATP, 142/177). Art as abstract machine’s first principle: it is real and not a representation. Deleuze and Guattari, whether discussing art, philosophy, or anything else, will not stop coming back to this first principle.² And as such, it

immediately implies another—its necessary compliment—that constructing an abstract machine is to construct construction itself. The abstract machine is the vital mechanism of a world always emerging anew, it is the mechanism of creation operating at the level of the real. Here, a new world opens up, a living world in which nothing is given except creation. To open a world, to construct a new type of reality, this is the ontological foundation of the world—of *this* world and of all the others—on an abstract machine guiding its becoming.

The abstract machine creates a new reality, constructs new ways of being, but although inseparable from this innovation of existence, it has no being. The abstract machine is the entirely immanent condition of the new, and thereby receives its Nietzschean definition: its being is becoming. For now we will unfold the implications of this ontology rather rapidly, any beginning must involve a certain reckless plunge . . . The abstract machine doesn't represent anything because nothing exists outside of its action, it is what it does and its immanence is always active. In the middle of things the abstract machine is never an end, it's a means, a vector of creation. But despite the abstract machine having no form, it is inseparable from what happens: it is the "non-outside" living vitality of matter. (But is it an inside? As we shall see the question marks a certain limit to an old and no longer useful topological vocabulary.) As a result, abstract machines are neither ideal identities nor categories of being, and remain entirely unaffected by any transcendent ambitions.

But before we get into the intricacies of this technical philosophical terminology we should remind ourselves that we are speaking of practical matters, of machines and their constructions. Building an abstract machine is more DIY than techno-science, and requires a bit of the mad professor.³ Deleuze and Guattari, mad professors no doubt, adopt the language of the construction site, an earthy directness reflecting the pragmatism required by the job at hand. Machines eat and sleep, they remind us, they shit and fuck. (AO, 1/7) We are, no mistake, machines. "Everything is a machine" (AO, 2/8). Our task—to be done with techno-paranoia—is to turn these machines creative, to liberate their parts in an explosion that remakes the world. The mechanic is, to use another of Deleuze and Guattari's colorful phrases, "the cosmic artisan: a homemade atomic bomb" (ATP, 345/426). "There is a necessary joy in creation," Deleuze says, "art is necessarily a liberation that explodes everything."⁴ But the abstract machine is not an expression implying technophilia either, and is inseparable from a mechanics of the flesh, an example of Deleuze and Guattari's avowed materialism: "The abstract machine is pure Matter-Function" (ATP, 141/176). The world is a plane of matter-force, a material process of experimentation connecting and disconnecting machines. On this plane abstract machines act as guidance mechanisms—

"probe-heads" (*têtes chercheuses*, ATP, 190/232)—steering the world on its "creative flight" (ATP, 190/233). The abstract machine is therefore both vital and material, it exists, Deleuze and Guattari write, as the "life proper to matter as such, a material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable, dissociated by the hylomorphic model" (ATP, 411/512). Hylomorphism is an operation that moulds matter into forms according to an ideal model, an operation by which the world appears as obedient and predictable representations. Once more, the abstract machine *against* representation.

We have already sketched—at a speed that no doubt calls out for a subsequent slowness—the underlying structure of this book's diagram. First, not only the echo of Nietzsche in the abstract machine's *against*, but Deleuze and Guattari's mobilization of his ontology of becoming. Second, the necessity of Spinoza to any philosophy of immanence. Spinoza will be the permanent signature of Deleuze and Guattari's immanent machinery, of its expression and construction. Third, a materialism inseparable from a vitalism; in other words, Bergson. These are the abstract co-ordinates of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical machine, and are mapped in the first three chapters of this book. These chapters lay out the basic components of Deleuze and Guattari's ontology, while seeking to show how they work, how they must be put to work in constructing an expression of the living materiality of the world, in constructing an abstract machine. Understanding this ontology will therefore confront us with the immediate necessity of understanding its appearance in and as life, an understanding inseparable from an experience of the new realities that are forever being created. At this point it becomes obvious that the ontology of the abstract machine implies an aesthetic, because its existence is indiscernible from its appearance in and as experience.

What then, to ask the question of aesthetics, are the conditions of this experience? This question calls to account another of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical interlocutors: Kant. Unlike Nietzsche, Spinoza and Bergson however, Kant is less a "fellow traveller" than an adversary, and the site of combat will be the aesthetic. For Deleuze and Guattari aesthetics is not the determination of the objective conditions of any possible experience, nor does it determine the subjective conditions of an actual experience *qua* beautiful. Aesthetics instead involves the determination of real conditions that are no wider than the experience itself, that are, once more, indiscernible from *this* experience. Aesthetics then, is inseparable from ontology, because experience is, for Deleuze and Guattari, irreducibly real. To construct an abstract machine will mean constructing a new experience indissociable from a new reality. The sensible, like the thinkable, is nothing but the temporary conditions

from which an abstract machine departs, following Spinoza's "war cry" (the phrase is Deleuze's) "we don't even know what a body can do" (EPS, 255/234). This introduces another of our constant concerns, how can we create a new body, a new sensibility adequate to a life of ontological innovation? Art emerges here as a privileged site of corporeal experimentation. Art as abstract machine gives a genetic definition of art, one that transforms both its ontological and aesthetic dimensions. "Everything changes once we determine the conditions of real experience," Deleuze writes, "which are not larger than the conditioned and which differ in kind from the categories: [Kant's] two senses of the aesthetic become one, to the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation" (DR, 68/94). An abstract machine determines the real conditions of experience, conditions neither subjective nor objective (they have become abstract), and that can only be experienced in the work of art (in a machine). A work entirely experimental, inasmuch as art is a permanent research on its own conditions, and is always constructing new machines. Feedback loop. Once more, this will be an overarching concern of this book, to understand the necessary and active immanence of abstract and actual, infinite and finite in the machine of art. The work of art understood in this way will give a real experience, an experience of its real conditions, an experience of and as its immanent abstract machine in the process of (re)constructing reality. Which is to say—or what can be said before we say everything else—art is an experience of becoming, an experiential body of becoming, an experimentation producing new realities. The implications are obvious: there is neither an ontology of art nor an aesthetics of art, each in its own realm of competency, each with its own all too serious professors. There are artists constructing abstract machines, mechanics engaged in the pragmatic practice of *onto-aesthetics*. Cosmic artisans everywhere setting off their atom bombs.

Our diagram has already grown quite complex. The co-implication of ontology and aesthetics in art as abstract machine—the onto-aesthetics of art—involves a redefinition of experience by which its objective and subjective conditions are dissolved in the real, the reality of the world as it becomes nothing else than itself. Art in these terms is an autogenesis expressing the world (its real conditions) by constructing experience (its real experience). And what is this experience? A simple question that it will take a whole book (and no doubt not just this one) to answer. Art is, before all else, and as Deleuze and Guattari put it, a sensation. A sensation of this work, but this work, this sensation, it does nothing if it does not restore us to our constitutive infinity by creating the world anew. Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of art as sensation will set off from

Nietzsche's statement serving as the epitaph above, to view scholarship from the vantage of art—it means our investigations only begin when we start to create—and art from the vantage of life—meaning our creations must become alive. Art will be nothing (at least not for us) if it is not this ongoing expression of life in the construction of living machines.

Expression and construction are the doubled dimensions of art as abstract machine. The abstract machine expresses the autogenetic and infinite processuality of its real conditions (the infinite, a cosmic world), which appear as the construction of *this* reality, *this* art-work. But, once more, doubled, the abstract machine expresses the infinite, but also constructs it, right here right now: "The field of immanence or plane of consistency must be constructed." Deleuze and Guattari write: "It is constructed piece by piece, and the places, conditions, and techniques are irreducible to one another. The question, rather, is whether the pieces fit together, and at what price. Inevitably there will be monstrous cross-breeds" (ATP, 157/195). To express an infinite world in constructing a finite art-work, to make art in other words, is a process by which the becoming of the world is expressed in a construction which works upon its own conditions, which operates at the level of its constitutive mechanism. Any construction of art then, any sensation, emerges through an abstract machine to express an infinite plane by way of an actual becoming whose very specificity and precision involves or infolds a change in its real conditions. The world is this genetic plane of immanence, a Bergsonian multiplicity, which in being expressed in a finite construction, an art-work, a sensation, changes in nature. At this point it is not a question of distinguishing expression and construction as two dimensions or moments of sensation, because they have become indiscernible on the single multiplied plane of onto-aesthetics. All that remains is to affirm their identity, construction=expression.⁵

This affirmation will be another theme of this book, echoing in its different terminologies. It appears as Nietzsche's interpretation and evaluation of will to power, as Spinoza's affects of joy and beatitude in God/Nature, as the actual and the virtual dimensions of duration in a Bergsonian cinema, as traits of content and expression in the abstract machine, and finally as the affect and the percept in sensation itself. In all these cases it is the affirmation of becoming that puts immanence to work in a feedback loop of construction and expression, making becoming the being of a work of art that, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "wants to create the finite that restores the infinite" (WP, 197/186).

We could well ask, as some already have, whether Deleuze and Guattari are offering us a modern version of Romanticism here, whether onto-aesthetics is simply art expressing nature. Certainly Deleuze and Guattari pass through Romanticism, and although they find a stopping place in the inhuman rupture

of the sublime—a rupture and rapture—they do so only by changing its Nature. A change that rejects the sublime's Kantian conditions, removing art from any romantic analogy with the divine, and placing it back among the animals. All this will be developed later of course, but I mention it here as the first qualification of what is the necessary correlate of the construction=expression equation, an "atheistic mysticism." This is a phrase employed by Deleuze to describe Spinoza's philosophy of immanence, and is the only way to understand Deleuze and Guattari's ironic deification of Spinoza as the "Christ of philosophers" (WP, 60/59). Spinoza is the philosopher who thought the "best" plane of immanence, the "best" God, because through the attributes the plane's (God/Nature) expression in the joy of affectual assemblages is nothing but the ongoing construction of an infinite and divine *here and now*: God yes, but *Deus sive natura*. Spinoza's revolutionary formula introduces an atheist God to philosophy—an atheism inseparable from a true philosophy of immanence—because reason is the way to express God/Nature constructing itself, and immanence achieves nothing without this identity of expression and construction. To put it simply, Spinoza overcomes transcendence because, as Deleuze puts it, "expression is not simply manifestation, but is also the constitution of God himself. Life, that is, expressivity, is carried into the absolute" (EPS, 80–1/70).

This strange atheism that in Spinoza never stops speaking of God, and in Deleuze and Guattari never stops seeking to become adequate to becoming itself, will be the consistent aim of a *practical philosophy*. Philosophy, like art, is a construction site, a workshop producing abstract machines with cosmic ambition. Deleuze and Guattari are continually coming back to this mystical practice, the production of what Michel de Certeau has called, "the infinity of a local singularity."⁶ From the Nietzschean simulacrum as the superior form of everything that is to the seed/universe of the cinematic crystal image, from the visions of cinema's seer to Bacon's BwO, from Goethe's differential color theory to Leibniz's imperceptible waves infolding perception in the ocean of experience, Deleuze and Guattari describe the atheistic mysticism of a philosophy of immanence, the construction and expression by an abstract machine of a "*local absolute*" (ATP, 382/474). This vision of a mystical Deleuze and Guattari is, I am well aware, regarded with suspicion by many commentators.⁷ Nevertheless, with the important addition of its atheist condition, this seems to me the best way to approach the profusion of mystical formulations in Deleuze and Guattari's work, and their consistent attempts to find our real conditions on a cosmic plane of production.

Mystical atheism is the real condition of Deleuze and Guattari's pragmatic philosophy. Mysticism is the experience of immanence, of the construction/ex-

pression of the at once infinite and finite material plane on which everything happens. Thus, mysticism as an experience of immanence is necessarily atheist, because it cannot involve transcendence of any kind (where to?). Atheist mysticism replaces transcendence with construction/expression, first of all as a construction of the body—atheism *against* asceticism. Mysticism is a physical practice: how do you make yourself a body without organs? Furthermore, mysticism is a creative process that, whether in the realm of philosophy, art, or somewhere else, is inseparable from affirmation. Deleuze and Guattari identify the same philosophers as philosophers of affirmation as they did the philosophers of immanence, the holy trinity: Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Bergson. It's no accident of course, as in each case it is by affirming the immanence of a fundamentally creative life that the joy proper to mysticism will explode on its lines of flight, all the way to infinity. Deleuze reads Nietzsche's affirmation of will to power, the affirmation of affirmation as he puts it, as the practical mechanism of overcoming, the door through which we eternally return. Similarly, it is the Spinozian affect of joy that constructs the rhizomatic compositions of power constituting the ever increasing All, and culminating in the mystical affect of beatitude, the love by which God/Nature loves itself. In Bergson Deleuze finds in the intuition of the *élan vital*, an intuition Bergson associates with artists and mystics, an affirmation capable of entering into the creative process itself. "If man accedes to the open creative totality," Deleuze writes of Bergson, "it is therefore by acting, by creating rather than by contemplating" (B, 111/118). Deleuze suggests as a slogan, and it's a joke, but perhaps only half a joke, "It's all good, but really."⁸

Affirmation is the mechanism of immanence, the means by which to construct a joyful expression. No doubt Deleuze's affirmation of affirmation also has a serious philosophical function as the antidote to that other notable philosophical double-banger, the negation of negation (just as overcoming in this context is the overcoming of *Aufhebung*). But it is also the guiding thread of Deleuze and Guattari's work in a practical sense, for they very rarely discuss artwork, at least, which they do not *like*. (And in a wider sense this would be the rational behind Deleuze's refusal to specifically deal with the philosophy of Hegel.) But behind this seemingly banal observation lies an important new element to Deleuze and Guattari's abstract machine, and that is its ethical dimension. Affirmation is an ethical choice, a choice for the creative energies of life, first of all our own. This will be an ethics that will immediately appear in our first chapter on Nietzsche, where affirmation returns will to power eternally, a return that will be our own overcoming. Here affirmation takes on a critical function, because a true affirmation of immanence will involve the destruction of nihilism, of all the resentful negations defining the human, all too human. As

Nietzsche said, and it is a slogan that will accompany us through the course of this book: no creation without destruction. A motto for the artist first of all. Affirmation, and the mystical onto-aesthetics it enables, is nothing if not critical. It is, in fact, the creative process of critique, and involves violence and cruelty, and their correlate: pain. Just like nature. Any creation worth its name will therefore encompass the destructions necessary to set it free, an explosion that destroys negation and propels its liberated matter into the new. Affirmation is therefore like a leap of faith, a leap into the chaos of the world in order to bring something back, in order to construct something that expresses life beyond its sad negation. And how could it be anything else? Because from our subjective perspective, from within its narrow and blinkered vision, the life of matter, the cosmic infinity of our here and now is what cannot be experienced or thought, at least not without some recourse to mollifying images of a transcendent beyond. This unthought of thought, the insensible in sensation, this is the impossible aim of Deleuze and Guattari's project. Not, once more, to transcend the world, but to discover it as it is, to create a thought, a sensation, a life that participates in the world's joyful birth of itself: a dancing star. This, Deleuze writes, "is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. [. . .] Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears" (C2, 172/223).

To reconnect man to what he sees and hears, this is nothing less than the project of art. A critical project for sure, because art has been overcoded with so many merely human ambitions, so many representational limitations. Let us not forget: "No art and no sensation have ever been representational" (WP, 193/182). First, we need a machine to clear the canvas (or the screen, the page, the compact disc) of all the clichés which prevent a creation. Second, we need an affirmation that is strong enough to actually create something, because a constant risk of destruction is that nothing new will emerge from it. Nothing is sadder than a void, nothing so ugly as a black hole. And art can just as easily be these things, a soporific or worse, a poison. Art as abstract machine therefore involves an ethical choice, a selection and conjugation of those matter-flows which are in the process of escaping from themselves, it must affirm only what is the most deterritorialised. Art must be critical enough to divert its contents and expressions back to the plane of consistency, to achieve an absolute deterritorialisation. But then, something must happen, something must emerge, the creative life of this plane must be expressed in a sensation. And sensations must be created, as any artist knows, for the machine to work.

In this way the abstract machine operates at the interstice between finite and infinite, it deterritorialises the concrete world, breaking matter out of its overcoded forms, to put it back into contact with its vitality, with its living flows, its inhuman and inorganic nature. This is art's infinite material dimension, and

here, absolutely deterritorialised, the machine begins to work, "flush with the real" as Deleuze and Guattari put it, constructing flows of matter-force into expressive sensations. This is the bacchanal of art, immersed in the real, affirming its own creative ecstasies. Deleuze is a laughing Dionysus: "Yes, the essence of art is a kind of joy," he affirms, "and this is the very point of art."⁹

Here art will become a politics of lived experience, a realm of experimentation that opens life up to alternative modes of being, affirming new realities, new communities, and new methods of self-organisation. Art becomes a kind of bio-politics, an experimentation with life as it is lived, a contestation in the realm of experience with everything that seeks to prevent us from affirming our power of composition. Art is a mechanism to increase our power, to liberate ourselves from the limits of representation (and the political operation of these limits is a constant subtext of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion). Art is the freedom to experiment on our conditions of existence, and is the ethical condition of any revolution. Art as ethics, and as bio-politics, serves to emphasise the fact that art is always concerned with very practical problems. In this sense Deleuze and Guattari offer a philosophy of art-work, and it only begins—for real—when we put it to work for *and against* ourselves.

Finally we have arrived at what has no doubt been a puzzling absence to this introduction. Art, I mean art as it is normally understood, pictures and things. Of course it was never absent, because the path so far taken was necessary in order to open the question of what art means for Deleuze and Guattari, ontologically, aesthetically and ethically. It is the question to which this book will try to provide some answers. But nevertheless, and following Deleuze and Guattari, much of this book will talk very specifically about art, about artists, their work, and about how art works. Each chapter—with the exception of the second on Spinoza, where the introduction of art examples to a discussion of a thinker who barely mentions art at all seems a little far-fetched—contains a more or less lengthy discussion of an art-work, an artist's work, or an art movement. In each case the general philosophical argument of the chapter is taken up in an example appropriate to it: Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series in relation to the Nietzschean simulacrum (Chapter One); cinema in terms of Bergson's ontology of time (Chapter Three); Venetian Renaissance painting as an abstract machine (Chapter Four); Jackson Pollock's "middle" period as a diagram for Abstraction opposed to his American modernist champions (Chapter Four); the readymades of Marcel Duchamp as machines of chaosmosis (Chapter Five); and the work of Francis Bacon (Chapter Six). In each case the aim is to show how it is meaningless to isolate Deleuze and Guattari's discussions of art from their wider philosophical concerns, and further that their discussion of art can only be fully understood within this wider context. This is to

say that Deleuze and Guattari offer us an onto-aesthetics, but more importantly it is to show it in action, to get close to the explosions it ignites, its destruction of inherited opinions about aesthetics and art, and the joyful affirmations it offers in their place.

This is finally simply to follow what I have outlined above, a Deleuzo-Guattarian *practice*, a practice in which life is both expressed and constructed, and by which art restores the finite to its infinite dimension. It means that in attempting to understand art as abstract machine we will have to understand its onto-aesthetics, its mystical and yet utterly actual processes of creation. This, as Guattari put it, will be our, and art's "dance of chaos and complexity" (Chaos, 88/123).

Chapter One

The Artist-Philosopher: Deleuze, Nietzsche, and the Critical Art of Affirmation

The notion of a "beyond" is the death of life.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*.

It is not without profound sorrow that one admits to oneself that in their highest flights the artists of all ages have raised to heavenly transfiguration precisely those conceptions which we now recognise as false: they are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of mankind.

—Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*.

Our religion, morality and philosophy are decadent forms of man. The *countermovement*: art.

—Nietzsche, *Will to Power*.

NIETZSCHE, DELEUZE AND THE NEW

Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche is in the spirit of Zarathustra's words to his disciples: "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil."¹ Nietzsche does not want followers, he wants those capable of creating something new. He wants to produce, in other words, artists. Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche is therefore artistic; in the spirit of Nietzsche he creates a new Nietzsche. This practice of creative interpretation affirms an important element of Nietzsche's aesthetics, that art is not representational, but is an experimental process by which the form of representation is overcome, and through which something new emerges. The emergence of the new is, for Nietzsche as for Deleuze, nothing less than the movement of life, the genetic process of life expressing itself. Consequently, Nietzsche's aesthetic is inseparable from the ontology that animates it. The creative movement of life is "entirely different," Deleuze writes, "from the imaginary movement of representation or the abstract