

Liverpool Biennial

The Unexpected Guest

Art, writing and thinking on hospitality

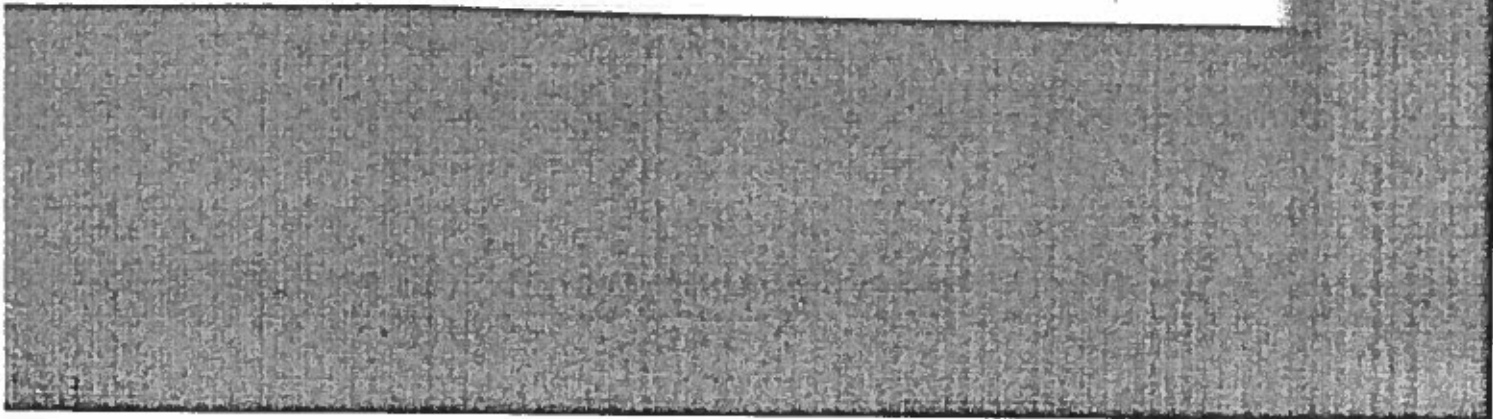
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Edited by Sally Tallant and Paul Domela

ART/BOOKS



Rosi Braidotti
Powers of affirmations

The world can be an inhospitable place for critical thinkers. A tradition stretching way back to Hegel and Marx connects the task of critique with oppositional consciousness, which relates to its social and environmental contexts through dialectical struggle. Thus, critical theory banks on negativity and, in a perverse way, even requires it. This results in a paradoxical relationship between critical thinkers and their civic and natural environments: how to be at home in the world while subjecting it to critical scrutiny? Does not the analytical gaze of the critical theorist betray somehow our deep bond of intimacy with the world, which makes it feel like home to us?

Affirmative politics seeks to redress this paradox. It seeks to resist the present, more specifically the injustice, violence and vulgarity of the times, while being worthy of our times, as Deleuze puts it. A balancing act is needed so as to engage with the present in a productive manner, while upholding an oppositional and critical stance. This engagement entails the creation of sustainable alternatives geared to the construction of social horizons of hope. It connects this creative effort with the enduring task of resistance that is at the heart of critical theory. The question of how to make the world a more hospitable place for critical thinkers, and thus make critical thought more at home in this world, implies the creation of new social, inter- and transpersonal relations, as well as new conceptual spaces. Affirmative politics engenders a new covenant between the incisive powers of rational judgment (*potestas*) and the generative powers of the imagination (*potentia*).

I have addressed this issue through the figuration of nomadic subjectivity.¹ Nomadic subjects are non-unitary – that is, they are open, multi-layered and relational at their very core. The rather unappealing term 'ontological relationality' is often used to describe this vision of a subject that clashes both with the established notion of liberal individualism and with the transcendental idea of consciousness. Nomadic subjects are embodied and embedded in a multiplicity of locations; rooted but flowing, they are very much part of this world. They are complex and relational, but not structure-less, nor adrift in a relativistic state of flux. Being a critical nomadic subject does not make you homeless, but rather capable of multiple modes of belonging and complex forms of both resistance and loyalty.² Nomadic subjects are prone to encounters with a multitude of human and non-human others. They consequently enlist a wide range of cognitive, emotional and ethical faculties. Their defining feature is their capacity to affect and to be affected by others, and this relational core entrusts the powers of the imagination, as well as more rational resources. For nomadic subjects, the point is not to 'reason', but rather to 'rhizome'.

The implications are far-reaching: oppositional consciousness and political subjectivity do not require negativity; negativity is not a structural element of political struggle and agency or of critical thought. Critical theory becomes instead about strategies and relations of affirmation,³ and political subjectivity consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world. The shift from negativity to affirmation is far from automatic or spontaneous; rather, it demands pragmatic implementation or praxis, through concrete actualizations.⁴

To posit the politics of affirmation does not entail the denial of either the existence or the function of negativity, but changes its location within critical thought and

practice. After Foucault, we are familiar with the paradoxical resonance between the power conditions that one rejects and the importance of both critiquing and resisting them. The task of critical thought and practice need not be an aporetic double bind. Negativity is only one moment – and a potentially productive one – in a material and discursive process that fundamentally aims at overturning the conditions that produced it in the first place. The rejection of the circumstances or premises that are considered oppressive and unjust – on either ethical or political grounds – is not a necessary climax, just the precondition for their critique. This means that the negative instance is a just a point, and not a foundational breaking point, in a sequence that leads not only elsewhere, but to an open and non-teleological horizon. The post-structuralist generation should be given credit for loosening up the binary scheme of dialectical thought and confronting the issue of negativity and power in a more multi-directional, embodied and embedded manner.⁵

The world-historical experience of social and political movements such as feminism, anti-racism, post-colonialism and environmentalism (to name but a few) pioneered concrete forms of the affirmative kind of politics that philosophers merely theorized. These movements provided original insights into otherwise abstract theoretical schemes, and also produced new radical understandings of the multiple ways in which critical thought can balance its creative force with the necessary dose of oppositional consciousness. Feminists and anti-racists have analysed power not as a given historical structure, but rather as a fluid and self-organizing daily process of assigning entitlements and prerogatives. This notion of power entails a double hermeneutics of suspicion: on the one hand of the universalist utopian elements of the Hegelian-Marxist legacy, and on the other of the equally universalistic assumptions of humanism and the primacy of consciousness and reason. The politics of affirmation stress instead the need for a change of scale, to unveil power relations where they are most effective and invisible, namely in the specific locations of one's own institutional and social practices. One has to start from micro-instances of embodied and embedded self and the complex web of social relations that compose that self.

Such an approach results in subtler and more effective analyses of how power works in and through the body, and it leads to an increased awareness of the vulnerability of embodied subjects. This double emphasis on both the vulnerable subject and the ubiquity of power relations is crucial to a nomadic approach to the political. Political activism consists in connecting critical theory not so much with '*la politique*' – organized or majoritarian politics – as with '*le politique*' – the political movement in its diffuse, nomadic and rhizomic forms of becoming.⁶ I propose to refer to the former as the civic governance of the present and the latter as transformative praxis. This distinction is of crucial importance and resonates with Foucault's double axis of power as restrictive or coercive (*potestas*) and as empowering and productive (*potentia*). The former focuses on the governance of society and its institutions; the latter, on the experimentation with new arts of existence and ethical relations. Civic governance can produce at best progressive emancipatory measures predicated on chronological continuity, whereas transformative praxis requires an auto-poietic economy of reciprocal or relational self-styling that rests on a non-linear vision of time. Both aspects are necessary for effective political agency.

Affirmative politics sets both the desire for transformations or becomings and the issue of time at the centre of the agenda. According to Deleuze and Guattari,

the civic governance of the present is postulated on *Chronos* – the necessarily linear time of institutional deployment of norms and protocols.⁷ It is a reactive and majority-bound enterprise that is often made of flat repetitions and predictable reversals that may alter the balance but leave the structures of power basically untouched. Transformative praxis, on the other hand, is postulated on the axis of *Aion* – the non-linear or zigzagging time of becoming and of affirmative critical practice. It is a minoritarian mode that rests on a complex and multi-layered relationality. The ethical good consists in cultivating the relations that empower us to act and to sustain the transformative effort that aims at producing affirmation. According to Constantin Boundas, affirmative politics consists of 'active counter-actualization of the current state of affairs', through the project of transforming negative into positive relations, encounters and passions.⁸

Based on the principle that we do not know what a body can do, the transformative praxis of becoming-political ultimately aims at the very structures of subjectivity. It is about engendering and sustaining processes of 'becoming-minoritarian'. The critical and creative aspects of this practice combine with a profound form of asceticism – that is to say, with an ethics of non-profit that builds upon micro-instances of political activism, avoiding the temptation of metadiscourse or overarching generalizations.

The corollary of transformative praxis is that the same conditions that create the negative moment – the experience of oppression, marginality, injury or trauma – are also the preconditions for their overturning. The damaging and negative material is also that which engenders positive resistance, counteraction or even transcendence of the oppressive conditions.⁹ In feminism and race theory, for instance, the process of consciousness-raising is crucial to the project of resisting and possibly overturning or 'overcoding' the negative instances in both the public and the private realms. What triggers and at the same time sustains this process of resistance is the pragmatic project of affirmative politics as counter-actualization. This process consequently clears the ground for the ethical transformation that sustains political action and foregrounds the creative or affirmative elements.¹⁰

Affirmative politics rejects dualistic oppositions and instead supports philosophical monism – that is to say, the belief that there is only one, intelligent, sentient and self-organizing matter. This view entails complexity and stresses the recognition of an ethical and affective component of subjectivity; it is thus both an anti-dualistic and an anti-rationalist position that emphasizes dynamic inter-relations with others. A nomadic subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality so much as the effects of power (as repressive – *potestas* – and positive – *potentia*) that his/her actions are likely to have upon the world.¹¹ This position is affirmative in that it actively works towards the creation of alternatives by working through the negative instance and by cultivating the relations that are conducive to their ethical transmutation into empowering relational values.

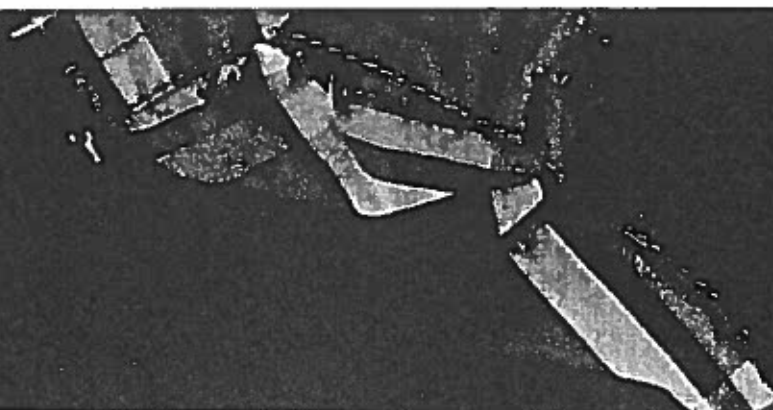
What this means practically is that the conditions for political and ethical agency are not dependent on the current state of the terrain. They are not oppositional and thus not tied to the present by negation; instead they are affirmative and geared to creating possible futures. Affirmative relations create possible – and possibly more hospitable – worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. The work of critique must therefore focus on creating the conditions for the overturning of negativity precisely because they

are not immediately available in the present. Moving beyond the negative scheme of thought means abandoning oppositional thinking, so as to index activity in the present upon the task of creating sustainable futures. The sustainability of the future, however, is the responsibility of the present – a present in which critical thinkers are uncomfortably situated as both belonging and resisting subjects. Affirmation therefore rests on our ability to mobilize, actualize and deploy – here and now – cognitive, affective, imaginative and ethical forces that had not been activated so far. These driving forces are concretized in actual, material relations, which constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others. To think critically means to create new conceptual and perceptive tools that may enable us both to come to terms with and to actively interact in an empowering manner with others.¹² The ethical gesture is the actualization of our increased ability to act and interact in the world.

To disengage the process of critical thought from negativity and attach it to affirmation means that reciprocity is redefined not as mutual recognition but rather as mutual definition or specification. This vital political economy of becoming is both trans-subjective in structure and transhuman in force, as I argued earlier.¹³ Such an affirmative vision of the subject, moreover, does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces. The emphasis on non-human ethical relations produces a geopolitics or an eco-philosophy, in that it values one's reliance on and relation to the environment in the broadest sense of the term: it is a political physics.¹⁴ Félix Guattari's idea of the three ecologies – the social, the psychic and the environmental – is central to this discussion.¹⁵ Considering the extent of our technological development, emphasis on the eco-philosophical aspects is not to be mistaken for biological determinism. It rather posits a nature-culture continuum within which subjects cultivate and construct multiple ethical relations.¹⁶

This affirmative approach is a crucial factor in making the world into a more hospitable place for critical thinkers, who are repositioned as both belonging to and resisting aspects of their context and historicity. The challenge is to work collectively, in an embodied and embedded manner, to create the possibility of actualizing social, economic and ethical alternatives through radical forms of empirical pragmatism. This is the transformative praxis that I see as essential to the political, as opposed to the civic governance of the status quo. Clearly, the grounds for this transformative praxis do not coincide with present conditions, but rather with the social construction of events still to come – they are virtual, or 'incorporeal', to use Deleuze's language. These virtual events are abstract possibilities, which call for actualization into concrete projects here and now, but never just coincide with them. Here you see the advantages of adopting a monistic approach that assumes one, self-organizing matter: because this matter is intelligent, its potential is immense. This means that the sum total of virtual possibilities is always greater than our capacity to actualize them into pragmatic projects – the Earth and the cosmos are infinite data-banks of virtual possibilities.

Historically, this positive aspect of Spinoza's monism has been criticized by Hegel and the post-Hegelians as being overoptimistic or even downright naive. I do not share in this cynical view, but take instead the emphasis on the virtual as another term to describe the self-ordering and emergence-producing capacity of



projects that – in a parallel line that involves science, philosophy and the arts in equal parts – can nurture and sustain critical thought and practice.

The infinite structure and speed of virtual possibilities are both a threat and a resource to this critical effort. Transformative praxis therefore needs to strike a balance between the infinite and some sort of consistency. Concrete actualization of projects can be realized by establishing, for instance, the kind of social relations that are bent on affirmative transformation. The same goal is achieved by the invention of conceptual personae and the creation of concepts, which can be proposed by both philosophy and art practices. In this respect, nomadic critical theory can be described as an ethics of virtual creativity.¹⁷

Affirmative politics is a pragmatic instigation to empower positively the difference that nomadic subjects can make. It aims for a shift of conceptual grounds, or a change of critical rhythms and affective colouring. Resonances, harmonies and hues intermingle to paint an altogether different landscape of a monistic self that, not being One, functions as a relay-point for many sets of intensive intersections and encounters with multiple others. Moreover, such a nomadic subject can envisage forms of resistance and political agency that are multi-layered and complex. Nomadic political subjects sustain and materially frame an empirical transcendental site of transformative becoming. They are enfleshed subjects who actually yearn for qualitative ethical changes, wanting to feel at home in the world while resisting it. Not happy with accommodation, and well beyond the libidinal economy of compensation, these subjects, which are not One, actively desire processes of metamorphosis of the self and of society and its modes of cultural and political representation. Affirmative politics replaces oppositional consciousness and negativity with open relationality, which entails the recognition of the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilizes and engenders affirmative actualizations of virtual potentials. These are by definition not contained in the present conditions and cannot emerge only from them. They have to be brought about or generated creatively by a qualitative leap of the collective imaginary. As Adrienne Rich put it in her recent essays, the critical thinker has to act 'in spite of the times' and hence 'out of my time', thus creating the analytics – the conditions of possibility – of the future.¹⁸ Critical theory occurs somewhere between the no longer and the not yet, not looking for easy reassurances but rather for a deep relational bond to a shared and hospitable world, alongside multiple others who are animated by the same passions.

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11 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, London and New York: The Athlone Press, 2000.

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The idea of Europe as gift and hospitality

Europe is at a crossroads; Europe is in crisis. Wherever we turn we hear the story of decline and decay, stories of doom and destruction. Yet the idea of Europe being at a crossroads or in crisis is not new or unprecedented. Europe is a crossroads. The name and idea of Europe were inventions of people in the Mediterranean around the Aegean Sea. Some claim the etymological root of Europe is the ancient Sumerian and Semitic *ereb*, the darkness after word Europe is the Greek Ionians, who lived in what we now call Asia Minor. The Greek Ionians, who lived in what we now call Asia Minor, were the first to call the lands on the western shores of the Aegean (Greece and the west), where the sun sets, Europe.

If we turn to mythology, Europa, the beautiful daughter of a Phoenician king, was born in the city of Tyre, now in the Lebanon. She was abducted and raped by Zeus, the king of gods, metamorphosed into a bull, who took her to Crete. The origin of Europe's name is thus non-European, Phoenician. But not only that, Europe was united politically for the first time in the Roman empire and through its Christianization into a holy Roman empire. The founder of Rome, Aeneas, a wandering exile from Troy, Jesus was a Jewish prophet. Europe, the creation of non-European travellers, wanderers and mystics. They all came to the Mediterranean, the *Mesogeios* in Greek, literally the centre of the Earth, a sea surrounded by lands, the world's navel.

The Mediterranean lands, a hospitable haven for immigrants, were a place of departures. The European boats of discovery, conquest and colonization departed from its ports, on the Greco-Latino-Iberian shores. As Paul Valéry puts it, the same ships carried merchandise and goods, ideas and methods. The Mediterranean has been a machine for making and spreading commerce and civilization. On its shores, spirit, culture and trade came together. In 1831, the philosopher Hegel called the sea the centre of world history.¹ In 1960, the French geographer Fernand Braudel called it the 'radiant centre' of the entire globe, 'whose light as one moves away from it, without one's being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade.'² If the Mediterranean is the middle of the Earth, she is also the heart and begetter of Europe.

And yet, the European nations are sick, Europe itself in a critical condition. How the German philosopher Edmund Husserl opened his famous *Vier lectures on the Idea of Europe* in 1935.³ Husserl, a Jew, had already been expelled from Freiburg University. His death, in 1935, spared him the experience of war and the Holocaust. But in his 1935 lectures, he diagnosed the present sickness as a temporary deviation from the idea of Europe.

For Husserl, the idea of Europe represents truth and the universal, which transcends local and parochial attachments and commitments. The purpose of European history, Husserl argued, is to seek truth behind appearances and opinions. Its spiritual birthplace was Greece. Greek philosophy and science created a disinterested view of the world and explored the universal unit