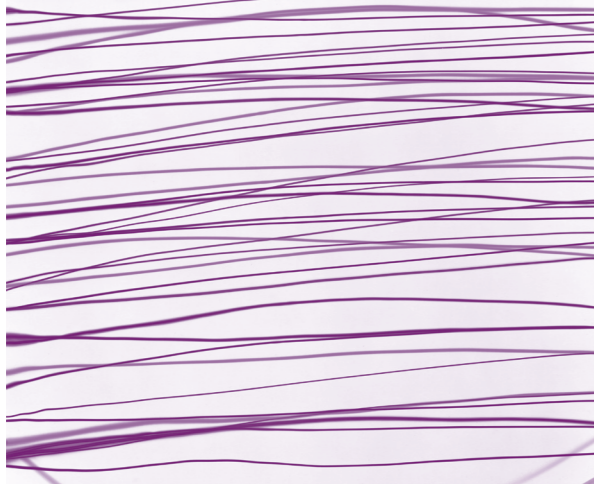# THE 4TH-DIMENSIONAL POLITICS OF RHYTHM

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *Rhythim is Rhythim*, 1999
Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne

Detroit, 1987, Rhythim is Rhythim, *Strings of Life*.

According to its author, Derrick May, *Strings* was the result of 'a complete mistake', something like 'George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator together, with only a Roland 909 to keep them company'. Like all good so-called popular music, the piece is the result of an 'incompossible encounter', a willed accident or collision of antithetical sonic elements, in this case the disjunctive synthesising of the whitest European experimental proto-electronica with Black American funk, aided and abetted by a new rhythm machine. Such a sonic assemblage was inconceivable, was preposterous, and could only have been the product of an aleatory process. But this lack of fit between the elements, the fact that the parts intensively play off and against each other without amounting to an organic unity, is precisely what made the piece move, what made it vibrate, what made it rhythmical. Real rhythm, as opposed to precisely pulsed meter is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, what 'renders duration sonic'. Duration is the détournement of linear, logical time, the rendering pre-posterous of time, where the present is contracted and dilated into the intensive simultaneity of the past and the future of the past, or the future-past of the present; duration is the nonsense of lived time. Detroit Techno was untimely both in this respect and in the sense that it defied

the doxa of 1980s 'postmodernism', wherein art was seen as a thing of the past, characterised by a 'waning of affect', engaged in its ironic meta-critical playing out of the 'crisis of originality in its endgame of appropriation-pastiche'. Detroit Techno eschewed the melancholy of irony and embraced the *humour* of the tenseless 4th dimension of time, producing a palpable sense of a non-teleological futurity disarticulated from the 'failed projects' of the past. It is here that I want to make what might appear to be some rather preposterous claims for the politicality of the pre-posterous: the politics of rhythm exists in its capacity to produce heterogeneous blocs of temporality, rhythmic group subjectivities and becomings-otherwise, *elsewheres*, in out of the here and now. Rhythm is the collective investment in the production of desire-production. This is what art or music does politically that politics cannot.

This is precisely the argument of Franco Berardi 'Bifo' in a recent essay.[1] He deploys Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain, retournel, or rhythm, and demonstrates its vital contemporary politicality through showing how rhythm has the capacity to 'produce an *autonomy* which constitutes the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism'. 'Digital financial capitalism has created a closed reality, he argues, which cannot be overcome using the techniques of politics – of conscious organized voluntary action and government'.

Schizoanalysis, of which the refrain is an instrument, acts in two ways, Berardi argues: 'it diagnoses the infospheric pollution of the psychosphere, but it also provides treatment to the disturbed organism. The *retournel* is the sensitive niche where we can create a cosmos that elaborates chaos'. The refrain can be 'insurrectionary', he continues, 'and helps to withdraw the psychic energies of society from the standardised rhythm of compulsory competition-consumption and create an autonomous collective sphere'. To him, poetry is the 'language of movement' as it deploys a new retournel. Counter to the new modes of standardisation and submission that subjectivity undergoes, produced by network technologies and neo-liberal globalisation, 'refrains are pathways of autonomous subjectivisation', or the production

of new group subjectivities in and through the creation of heterogeneous rhythm. Rhythmic retournels as instruments of schizoanalysis achieve 'a singularisation and sensibilisation of breathing, unchained from the congealed pace of the immaterial assembly line of capitalist production'.

Curious here, however, is Berardi's prioritisation of the poetic, of 'acts of language' as the basis of his retournels. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, explicitly privilege the sonic in their theorisation of the refrain; it is, in fact, their most extensive discussion of music. Can the culture of poetry today actually constitute the social phenomenon that Berardi describes as: 'a chemical environment where culture, sexuality, disease, and desire fight and meet and mix and continuously change the landscape'? Actually, is this not as perfect a description as any of how a contemporary musical scene-Event might work, of how it might feel?

Is this again symptomatic of the persistence of a particular philosophical suspicion of popular music? But perhaps the problem is the persistence of the term 'popular' itself, and the framing of discussions of so-called 'popular' culture in terms of a dialectic of 'High' culture and 'low' or popular culture. Guattari, one of the very few modern philosophers to have anything positive to say about 'popular' music, is surely correct to state that 'today there is no such thing as High or low culture; there is only capitalist culture'. There is a timely and self-identical capitalist culture of the perpetual repetition of the same – fashion, conventional pop, much art – and there is a capitalist culture that constitutes the repetition of the production pre-posterous retournels of difference in and out of the terrain of semiocapitalism as instances of a *non-dialectical* negation. The politics of Detroit Techno did not exist in its 'oppositionality'; it did not fall into the trap of being captured by what it opposed – the problem of Institutional Critique and 'Kontext Kunst', for example. Rather than secretly willing the persistence of the existence of its opponent, it actively and affirmatively created active lines of flight-escape; 'there is nothing more active than flight', argued Deleuze and Guatari.

The refrain is a theory of how music works, of how it acts in and on the world. A refrain does more than just *occupy* space, it constitutes a 'crystal' of heterogeneous space-time and a 'territorial assemblage' as a form of transformational agency; it is an active form of composition-construction. The refrain, or rhythm, or good music, enacts three things simultaneously: it creates a sonic territory constructed out of 'sonic bricks', a soundscape as scene-Event that simultaneously deterritorialises the refrain and the coordinates of the territory it acts upon. It achieves this by opening the refrain onto chaos, the chaotic flux of unformed sonic matter that is the constitutive 'outside' of good music. Good music is therefore always outside of itself, is always ex-centric, is always in the 'intermezzo'. This is why it makes no sense to think of music and/as art as 'interdisciplinary'. New music and art – as opposed to academic art or music – are simply not 'disciplines'; they are always in the process of escaping themselves, are non-self-identical. Interdisciplinarity undermines art and music's self-differential specificity and, as such, it can only be a conservative phenomenon. Good 'popular' music does not require the prefix 'Art' – as in 'Art Rock', or 'Art Pop' – in order to justify its intelligence.

The chapter, or plateau, 'Of the Refrain' opens with the description of a child humming a tune, a 'little ditty', in the midst of midnight forest in order to create for itself a reassuring sonic shield.[2] We can think of this as an analogue for conventional pop as a kind of territorialised, reassuring return of the self-identical same in the form of regular metrical patterns. This is the opposite of rhythm. 'There is nothing less rhythmical than a military marching band' say Deleuze and Guattari. Rhythm is established by opening onto chaos; good music places a permeable frame, *filter* or *sieve* over chaos in order to harness its forces without disappearing completely into the 'black hole' of chaos. Rhythm exists in the fold between chaos and ordered composition – what Deleuze and Guattari, borrowing from James Joyce, call the 'Chaosmos'. Rhythm is the result of improvisation, 'which is to meld with the world', with the constitutive outside. Rhythm is 'consistency' or intensity.

Good music de-territorialises the refrain, and it achieves this by rendering it pre-posterous. Detroit Techno, and another example, Krautrock – perhaps two of the most important and influential resources for the most interesting musical production today – achieve this through the literal spacing out of the conventional song form. Both eschew conventional, linear chord progressions, melodic formats and narrative structures of the song, in favour of gradually evolving rhythmic cycles and folding and unfolding, overlapping and staggered, sampled loops. Both abandon the timely chorus-verse structure of a pop song in favour of spaced-out improvisations around a repeated metrical armature. Krautrocker Irmin Schmidt of the band Can, spoke of the ways in which their music sought to transform a conventional metrical structure into a 'groove', into something that 'moved'. It achieves this through the 'untimely' looping, twisting and folding of time; logical linear time is intensified and rendered pre-posterous to become the lived time of the repetition of the difference of duration, the no longer and not yet that never arrives at the cathartic structural conclusion of the 3-minute pop song. Many of Can's live improvisations went on literally for hours, whereas Techno tracks are mixed into an open-ended continuous sequence.

Can, as their guitarist Michael Karoli stated, 'were never interested in self-expression'; they rejected the authority of the voice of the 'I' – how many conventional pop songs begin with 'I…'. Nonetheless their music is obviously powerfully expressive. But of whom or what is it expressive? 'It' is expressive of the chaotic, 'chemical' event itself – the collective, 4th-personal investment in the going for 'it'. Many musicians speak of the experience of improvisation when it works as being 'in the zone', where an invisible, additional member takes over and 'it' begins to happen. This is no longer subjective expression; individual egos are lost in the collective process of becoming-other, of going with the motion-flow of the pre-posterous event. There is an ethics here, an ethics of an alterity not of the petrifying Face of the Other, but of the Other as rhythmic event. There can be no ethical relation without rhythm – hence Guattari's theorisation of the chaosmos as an

'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' which forms the basis for what he refers to as the politics of 'it'. This is a non-totalising politics which consists of the post-human, 'subjectless action' of the collective going for 'it', in and out of the here and now.[3] This is the production of a rhythmic collectivity that exists as a microcosm of the emergence of a broader scene-Event. This is what we might think of as a 'chemical' micro-politics. Such a scene-Event is something happening, like a sort of intensive buzz or vibe or *rhythm* immanent within a city, something only amenable to sense that does not exist outside of its expression either in music or in art.

It is this rhythmic, chemical collectivity that we see rendered visible in Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs of the 1990s, that depict such a community-in-process, in a state between resolution and dissolution. This is not so much a 'community to come', but a collective group subject who's becoming-in-common revolves around a shared set of attitudes, gestures, atmospheres and postures. These images might be seen as perfect instances of the kind of 'politics of aesthetics' described by Jacques Rancière, in which art renders visible-sensible a constituency that is invisible within the prevailing sensorium. But Tillmans' 'abstract' work, along with a great deal of 'abstract' work by other contemporary artists, might be seen to go beyond this by rendering visible the intensive energetics, the immanent buzz, vibe, or rhythm that produces such a collectivity in the first place. Tillmans' is a kind of 'chemical abstraction' that is a product of the opening onto a chemical process beyond the control of an ego; they are the result visually of the same kind of improvisatory process as that deployed sonically by the musicians discussed above, a process of opening on to the chaotic outside of form. Such an 'abstraction' that we also see in the work of artists such as Wade Guyton, Christopher Wool, Albert Oehlen, Mary Heilmann, Franz West and Raoul De Keyser (rhythm is not the exclusive property of youth) to name just a few, is not at all a formalism, nor is it a practice of pure improvisation or chance either. To reiterate, rhythm produces a 'plane of consistency', consistency is intensity, and consistency is composed chaos. Rhythm, in both music

and art exists in the fold between the chaos of unformed matter and ordered composition. Neither can ever be formal*isms*; rhythm is *against* form, rhythm opens onto the outside of 'good form'. There's always something preposterous about abstract rhythm, something 'incomprehensible', as Gerhard Richter put it. This is because such an abstraction occupies the non-sensical time of duration, in which the time of the image is folded into the past and the future of the past – an image that seems to have both simply happened *and* is happen*ing*. This is a rendering visible of rhythm as the no longer and not yet of becoming, or the pre-posterous fourth dimension of the image. This dimension is ultimately neither really abstract nor figurative; 'it' is the image's incommensurable outside that is irreducible to representation; 'it' is the de-territorialisation of the image, the 'de-facing' of the image. 'It' is neither abstract nor figurative but figur*al*.

The de-territorialised musical refrain that I described at the outset is a territorial assemblage made out of the non-formalistic composition of diverging and clashing, disjunctively-synthesised fragments. Like all good so-called 'popular' music, it is the untimely and mutant offspring of an illegitimate coupling that has gone on to induce further such couplings. This ongoing process is the 'history' of good 'popular' music as something that is always de-territorialising itself, always escaping itself, always starting in the middle, in the pre-posterous intermezzo. This is the infinite process of the production of desire-production. To most contemporary schools of critical thought the political claims I have made for this might sound romantic. However, the kinds of thinking that would see the musical or artistic work of/as the fragment would see it in terms of it being an allegorical fragment of something irretrievably lost or something infinitely 'to come'; the no longer and not yet of becoming would be conceived as the too-early or too-lateness of the 'missed encounter' with the 'impossible', 'lost' object. In fact, such ways of thinking exist in a direct line of descent from the Romantic irony of Jena in the late 18th century. Such thought simply cannot account for the rhythmic Event-encounter, cannot get 'it' and how it works in and on the

world; they can only ever be practices of mourning. We can compare this with the theory of the fragment that has underpinned my claims in this text:

'*We live today in a world of part-objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that are like pieces of an antique statue, one merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they can all be glued back together to form a unity… we no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final unity that awaits us at some future date*'.[4]

To Deleuze and Guattari, fragments are rhythmic and constitute machines that are productive of an intensive and positive desire. A further quote might offer us a perfect description of how this works:

'*In desiring machines everything functions at the same time, but amid hiatuses and ruptures (breakdowns and failures, stallings and short circuits, glitches, distances and fragmentations) within a sum that never succeeds in bringing its parts together to form a whole. Breaks in the process are productive and are reassembling in themselves. Disjunctions, by the very fact that they are disjunctions are inclusive. This is a way to pose the problem of the fragment as a machine that is productive not reflective, how to think about fragments whose sole relationship is sheer difference – fragments that are related to each other only in that each of them is different – without ever having recourse either to any sort of original totality (not even one that has been lost, or to any subsequent totality that may not yet have come about). This amounts to an affirmation that is irreducible to any sort of unity.*'

To many, affirmation is the passive opposite of critical negativity. However, affirmation does much more than negate or criticise: rhythm takes what it resists and renders it pre-posterous – rhythm produces singular multiplicities. What forms of 'abstract negativity' can possibly produce chemical communities? 'There is no tragedy

in music', said Deleuze, 'only pure joy', and there is nothing romantic about affirmation. The affirmation of the going for 'it' is what rhythm does politically in ways that are beyond the imagination of what currently passes for a 'politics'.

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1. Franco Berardi 'Bifo', http://www.e-flux.com/journal/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century/

2. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Of the Refrain', in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, (NYC: Athlone Press), 1987, 311-350.

3. See Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, (Indiana University Press), 1995.

4. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, (NYC: Athlone Press), 1977, 42-43.