

Dismantling the Self: Deleuze, Stoicism and Spiritual Exercises

Philosophy as a Way of Life

In Pierre Hadot's influential account of the discipline, a proper understanding of philosophy cannot be separated from an understanding of the history of philosophy. For Hadot, philosophy is not a clearly demarcated and self-consistent field of enquiry, coherent in its aims and scope of operation throughout time, but rather a practice heavily inflected by its historical conditions of production.¹ Hadot divides philosophy into four broad, paradigmatic periods: 1) The Mythical; 2) The Ancient; 3) The Medieval; and 4) The Modern.

In its Mythical phase (1), philosophy (or perhaps more properly proto-philosophy) described the world as a battle among personified entities. The Ancient philosophy (2) that succeeded it refuted any mythopoeic account, proposing instead a rational explanation of the world and human existence. As such, it constituted a decisive epistemological reorientation, a 'milestone in the history of thought.'² For Hadot, however, and contrary to later philosophical notions of abstract rationality, Ancient philosophical logic proceeds from an existential attitude or conviction, such that 'philosophical discourse... originates in a choice of life and an existential option – not vice versa.'³ Hadot specifically attributes to Stoic thought a central distinction between *discourse about* philosophy and *philosophy itself*: 'For the Stoics, the parts of philosophy – physics, ethics, and logic – were not, in fact, parts of philosophy itself, but rather parts of philosophical *discourse*... philosophy itself... is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consist in *living* logic, physics, and ethics.'⁴

¹ Compare Russell's influential essentialist account, with its attempt to clearly demarcate and fix disciplinary distinctions: 'Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science... All definite knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology.' *History of Western Philosophy*, 13.

² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 269-70.

The Medieval account of philosophy (3) that overturns the Ancient proceeds by subordinating philosophy to theology. In Hadot's terms, theology takes over the role of *philosophy itself* (as an existential orientation and way of living), leaving philosophy proper only the role of *discourse about* philosophy. Though Modern philosophy (4) gradually overturns the Medieval period's privileging of theology, it does not, however, manage to recover the full role of *philosophy itself* in the Stoic sense. Rather, it contents itself with ever more subtle elaborations of *discourse about* philosophy: 'modern philosophy is first and foremost a discourse developed in the classroom, and then consigned to books. It is a text which requires exegesis.'⁵

For Hadot then, philosophy is marked by a series of epistemic breaks rather than disciplinary continuities and can be characterised by a narrative of the progressive loss of *philosophy itself* in a rising tide of discourse. Most significantly for us here, Hadot insists on a strongly articulated opposition between the social function of ancient philosophy and the social function of modern philosophy: 'Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists.'⁶ It is a distinction that leaves modern philosophy looking rather academic—in the pejorative sense of being without practical purpose—when compared with ancient philosophy: 'a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life.'⁷ Such transformation was effected in practice by undertaking practical 'spiritual exercises':

By this term ['spiritual exercises'], I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in

⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them.⁸

The adequacy of Hadot's account of the history of philosophy is not what I wish to consider in detail here.⁹ Rather, it is on his attractive recovery and insistence on the full force of Ancient philosophy *as a way of life* that I will focus.¹⁰ Modern philosophy, in discrediting theology but refusing its former status as a guide to everyday life and its challenges, has relinquished the opportunity to offer a non-specialist public any practical counsel. Philosophy today is emphatically not a way of life. As a result, the majority are left for their existential orientation to the questionable resources of commercial technoscience (proffering medical and technological panacea to life's trials at premium rates), the hopelessly reductive maxims of self-help, or else an emerging cadre of suburban shamans promulgating new age religiosity. Although Hadot concedes that certain modern philosophers have managed to move beyond dry academicism, ultimately his conclusion rests: modern philosophy amounts only to *discourse about* philosophy.

In a summary consideration of twentieth century thought and its achievements, Hadot concludes:

[T]he philosophy of Bergson and the phenomenology of Husserl appeared less as systems than as methods for transforming our perception of the world. Finally, the movement of thought inaugurated by Heidegger and carried on by existentialism seeks – in theory and in principle – to engage man's freedom and

⁸ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 6.

⁹ We might, in passing, note Hadot's preference for a Kuhnian model of disciplinary development by epistemic break/paradigm shift and counterpose, as just one possible alternative account, Manuel De Landa's bottom-up model of systems development which refuses any hasty systemic totalization 'Certain institutional forms may indeed proliferate in a population, but even when this leads to the extinction of prior forms this should not be treated as the achievement of a new unified stage of development.', *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, 271.

¹⁰ Hadot's account is the most insistent I have found but Long and Snedley corroborate his basic insight: 'One's choice of philosophical allegiance, it was assumed, would radically affect one's whole outlook on life.' *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2.

action in the philosophical process, although, in the last analysis, it too is primarily a philosophical discourse.¹¹

I want to intervene in this debate and reconsider Hadot's ultimately despondent evaluation of twentieth century philosophy. Must we abandon the idea that modern philosophy might offer us some guidance about how to live? What might be a contemporary 'spiritual exercise'?

Deleuze

I will suggest that Gilles Deleuze's¹² supple thought, renewing important aspects of Stoic teaching, reactivates the force of philosophy as a practical concern, a question of living practice and the practice of living. Deleuze pragmatically addresses himself to the question of what philosophy *is*. In this he anticipates Hadot's incisive challenge: 'Seldom do we reflect upon what philosophy is in itself.'¹³ Deleuze concludes that philosophy is essentially practical: '[T]he time has come for us to ask what philosophy is. We had never stopped asking this question previously, and we already had the answer, which has not changed: philosophy is the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts.¹⁴ He goes on, 'More rigorously, philosophy is the discipline that involves *creating* concepts.'¹⁵ And then elaborates: 'Concepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created...'¹⁶ Philosophy then, for Deleuze, is explicitly a practical art, *techne* rather than *episteme*. Zeno's aphorism defining art, *techne estin hexis hodopoietike* ('art is a habit of roadbuilding'),¹⁷ can

¹¹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 272.

¹² Brian Massumi treats at length the problems of assigning a proper name to Deleuze's protean thought and the related issue of how Félix Guattari's contribution should be acknowledged. See *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, 559, 566.

Here I will adopt the strategy of using Deleuze's proper name throughout, appending Deleuze's own caveat "there is always a collectivity, even when you are alone", *A Thousand Plateaus*, 152.

¹³ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 1. Tellingly, neither the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy nor the Routledge Encyclopaedia lists an entry for 'Philosophy'.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cited and discussed in F.E. Sparshott 'Zeno on Art: Anatomy of a Definition' in *The Stoics*, 281.

equally be applied to Deleuzian philosophy. Deleuzian ‘lines of flight’¹⁸ are nothing if not new routes to travel. Creative work, however, does not stop with the philosopher, Deleuze does not just provide us with a methodology we can follow. Rather, we must ourselves do work with and on Deleuzian concepts if they are to work for us: ‘the only question is “Does it work, and how does it work?” How does it work for you?’¹⁹ As Massumi spells it out:

The Deleuzian text is self-problematizing, always confronting the reader with the question of what it is all about, and what to do with it. The last thing it does is constrain one to follow it in the sense of *believing* in it as a sequential set of verified propositions to be “applied.” It challenges the reader to *do* something with it. It is pragmatic, not dogmatic.²⁰

How then should we set about such work? First we need something we can work with. Let us take a single practical concept from Deleuze’s fertile philosophical project, his model of the self and his practical advice to the individual concerning how it should be (un)made:

Where psychoanalysis says, “Stop, find your self again,” we should say instead “Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self.” Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it.²¹

Dismantling the self, or making a BwO (Body without Organs), is one assignment that Deleuze sets us, and it is no superficial task: ‘[I]t awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation,

¹⁸ ‘Deleuze’s basic principle is that society is always *en fuite* (leaking, fleeing) and may be understood in terms of the manner in which it deals with its *fuites* (leaks, lines of flight).’ Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections*, 11.

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 8.

²⁰ *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, 566.

²¹ Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 151.

already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don't. This is not reassuring, because you can botch it.'²² Despite the risks, let us take up Deleuze at his challenge here and go beyond trying to understand his concept, let us 'find out how to make it.' How, in practice, might we start to dismantle the self? What could be an exercise for self-dismantling?

Before trying to effect such a dismantling we should first examine how Deleuze arrives at his concept of a self that needs dismantling. Such an account will necessarily be incomplete²³ and we will want to proceed to effecting the dismantling rather than discussing it. Ultimately, we seek to focus on a practice rather than a definition ('A concept, as we see it, should express an event rather than an essence'²⁴). However, in examining Deleuze's conception of the self, we do more philosophical work than simply assuming that we already understand the 'self' that we are to dismantle.

The decentring or overturning of the subject comes out of poststructuralist intellectual debates in the 1960s. Yet how was this debate itself structured? Most accounts stress the relation of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Deleuze to a modern philosophical and theoretical tradition bounding Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. While these figures are all undoubtedly major philosophical positions against or with which the overturning of the subject is elaborated they are also all well known and well rehearsed. In the scope of this essay I want to do a little work on the more marginal but important role that Stoicism played, specifically for Deleuze's project. Just as Hadot recovers from the Stoics a sense of *philosophy itself*, philosophy as a way of life, so I want to return briefly to the Stoic conception of the self to see how it might enrich our understanding of

²² *Ibid.*, 149.

²³ Necessarily incomplete precisely *because* genealogical: for Deleuze genealogical analysis of a concept neglects the work it is doing in the here and now and the way it is clearing a path into the future 'every concept relates back to other concepts, not only in its history, but in its becomings or its present connections...' Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?*, 19.

²⁴ Deleuze, 'On A Thousand Plateaus' in *Negotiations*, 25.

Deleuze's philosophy and his concept of self-dismantling. To understand Deleuze's notion of the self as inflected by Stoicism we need to briefly consider three related aspects of Stoic doctrine and Deleuze's relationship to them: 1) *Immanence*; 2) *Rationality* and 3) *Living in accordance with Nature*.

1) *Immanence*: Stoicism is a materialist philosophy, all that exists for the Stoics is matter and all matter is embodied. To exist is to be a body. There is however an immanent organising principle operative in the universe, the *spermatikos logos*, also referred to variously as god, fire and pneuma. Matter is permeated by the *spermatikos logos*. Furthermore this permeation is complete and does not consist of admixture (the Stoics here give an analogy to the 'fire' that permeates a red-hot piece of iron, the elements are literally coextensive rather than mixed). God and the world are as one, in immanent relation one to the other: 'Our world, a unique, finite and eternally recurrent organism, is thus itself coextensive with god, and in a way *is* god.'²⁵

2) *Rationality*: Given that matter and its organising principle, god/*spermatikos logos*/fire/pneuma are coextensive, Stoic philosophy stresses the fundamental coherence, providential ordering, rationality and goodness of the universe and of nature. All that is, is organised and organisation is held to be *a priori* rational.²⁶ Furthermore, everything that occurs, occurs because it is fated to by this rational organising principle. Hippolytus summarises this position aptly, preserving a celebrated Stoic analogy:

'They [Zeno and Chrysippus]... affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model. When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and

²⁵ Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 7.

²⁶ Hadot insightfully suggests that belief in the rationality of the universe is a necessary correlate of the Stoic's existential choice: 'The Stoic choice of life both postulates and demands, simultaneously, that the universe be rational. "Is it possible that there could be order in us, but that disorder should reign in the All? Human reason, which seeks logical and dialectical coherence with itself and posits morality, must be based upon a Reason possessed by the All, of which it is only a portion.', *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 129.

follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity, but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too...'²⁷

3) *Living in accordance with Nature*: As the universe is organised by the *spermatikos logos* such that it is both rational and good, so it is assumed to be self-evident that our lives, in as far as we wish them to be good, should be similarly patterned according to nature. Stoic ethics is thus derived from Stoic physics.²⁸ Plutarch captures Chrysippus' foundational insight for us: 'What am I to begin from, and what am I to take as the foundation of proper function and the material of virtue if I pass over nature and what accords with nature?'²⁹ While Diogenes Laertius records an earlier, Zenoian formulation of the doctrine: 'Zeno in his book *On the Nature of Man* was the first to say that living in agreement with nature is the end, which is living in accordance with virtue.'³⁰ All Stoic moral teaching consists of attempting to inculcate an accommodation or willing acceptance of what occurs, precisely because what occurs is what should be. What occurs may often be unpleasant or unwelcome but Stoic ethics require that one develop an indifference to any such externalities beyond one's own control. Such an accommodation requires that the individual shores up the self as a bulwark against the vicissitudes of life. Marcus Aurelius gives the canonical formulations here:

Let no emotions of the flesh, be they of pain or pleasure, affect the supreme and sovereign portion of the soul. See that it never becomes involved with them: it

²⁷ *Refutation of all Heresies*, I.21 cited in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 386.

²⁸ As the universe is monistic and its organising principle immanent, so all branches of philosophy for the Stoics are completely interrelated, however they may be divided for the purposes of philosophical discourse: 'They [the Stoics] say that philosophical discourse has three parts, one of these being physical, another ethical, another logical... They make a... comparison to an egg: logic is the outside, ethics what comes next, and physics the innermost parts...'
Diogenes Laertius, 7.39-41, cited in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 158.

²⁹ Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1069E cited in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 359.

³⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 7.87-9 cited in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 359.

must limit itself to its own domain, and keep the feelings confined to their proper sphere.³¹

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.³²

Remember that your higher Self becomes invincible once it withdraws into itself and calmly refuses to act against its will, even though such resistance may be wholly irrational. How much more, then, when its decision is based on reason and circumspection! Thus a mind that is free from passion is a very citadel; man has no stronger fortress in which to seek shelter and defy every assault.³³

Though Aurelius recognises the inherent flux of the world and intimates man's inability to escape it ('In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his senses a dim rush light, his body a prey of worms...'),³⁴ the bulwark of the self is retained and justified as a form of rational moral fortitude and pragmatic reassurance, a comfort blanket of the self ('To be a philosopher is to keep unsullied and unscathed the divine spirit... and... wait with a good grace for death').³⁵ For Hadot, '[T]his delimitation of the self is, in the last analysis, *the fundamental exercise of Stoicism*. It implies a complete transformation of our self-consciousness, of our relation toward our body and toward external goods, and of our attitude toward the past and present.'³⁶

³¹ *Ibid.*, V, 26.

³² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VIII, 47.

³³ *Ibid.*, VIII, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 120. My emphasis.

How then does Deleuze's concept of dismantling the self relate to Stoic philosophy? There would seem to be an absolute incompatibility between a notion of making the self an inner citadel (as Aurelius suggests) and dismantling the self (as Deleuze consistently agitates for). Bracketing out for the purposes of this essay all other philosophical and theoretical engagements on Deleuze's part, we can see how his concept of the self can be mapped back against the Stoic system, and in so doing trace their affinities and divergences.

Deleuze inherits the philosophical materialism of Stoicism as well as its insistence on an immanent generative principle:

There is a continuum of all of the attributes or genres of intensity under a single substance, and a continuum of the intensities of a certain genus under a single type or attribute. A continuum of all substances in intensity and of all intensities in substance. The uninterrupted continuum of the BwO. BwO, immanence, immanent limit.³⁷

He even goes as far as to explicitly evoke the '*logos spermaticos*.'³⁸

Where Deleuze signally departs from Stoicism is in its notion of the organism and the rationality that guarantees its coherence (or the coherence which guarantees its rationality—for Stoicism, as we have seen, the terms of the proposition can be inverted with no logical contradiction. Deleuze, in contrast, rejects rationality as organising principle.³⁹ The bounded organism becomes

³⁷ Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 154.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁹ It is important to note here that while Deleuze does partake in the critique of post-Enlightenment instrumental rationality pursued by other poststructural thinkers, this is not the same as his rejection of Stoic objective reason. We should not make the same mistake as Hadot when he sweepingly asserts 'according to a more or less universal tendency of modern thought, which is perhaps more instinctive than reflective, the ideas of "universal reason" and

illegitimate, that which must be fought against. Deleuze rejects the bounded, whether that concept is manifested at the level of a coherent cosmological principle (“The One is not the transcendent that might contain immanence but the immanent contained within a transcendental field”)⁴⁰ or the organism (“The organism is not at all the body, the BwO; rather, it is a stratum on the BwO, in other words a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation...”)⁴¹

However, Deleuze returns to the Stoic ideal of ‘living according to nature’ by way of his critique of objective rationality. Having dismantled rationality there can be no simple order of things to be discerned in the world. The self no longer has anything self-coherent to be bounded by. Nature starts to take on an entirely different, self-differing, *stratified* character: The strata are phenomena of thickening on the body of the earth... The strata are extremely mobile. One stratum is always capable of serving as the substratum of another, or of colliding with another, independently of any evolutionary order... Stratification is like the creation of the world from chaos, a continual, renewed creation.⁴² Faced with a new conception of nature, and in order to live according to it, we must do much more fundamental work on the self than attempting to prop it up. The question becomes ‘What can I be, with what folds can I surround myself or how can I produce myself as a subject?’⁴³ Nature is immanent becoming and deterritorialization, rationality is dismantled, the self must be made as Aurelius’ ‘incessant flux.’

To return then to a pragmatics, how might this be achieved? Deleuze offers us some general advice:

“universal nature” do not have much meaning any more. It was therefore convenient to “bracket” them.’ Deleuze explicitly treats the notion of universal or objective reason as it operated in the ancient world, i.e. as an objective and normative designator of what ought to be, inherent in reality itself and perceivable by the human subject.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 30.

⁴¹ Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 159.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 502.

⁴³ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 114-5.

This is how it should be done: lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential moments of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment...⁴⁴

We will try and find a simple, modern ‘spiritual exercise’ by which we might practice Deleuzian philosophy as it treats the concept of the self.

Spiritual Exercises: Philosophy as Art Brut

How might we dismantle the self? Where should we look for a suitable exercise for self-dismantling? It is widely held that artists are free from the conventional social constraints of personal correctness and professional protocol (‘the bourgeois cliché of the artist as by turns subversive and infantile’).⁴⁵ Artistic production might seem therefore a plausible domain in which to start our search for techniques of self-dismantling. I will suggest that contemplating a particular work of *art brut*—Jean Dubuffet’s *L’Arbre de fluides* in the Tate Modern—can serve as a suitable ‘spiritual exercise’ by which we can begin to dismantle the self. In a secular society, the museum visit has taken on a ritual character, as Jack Burnham, recalling Bataille,⁴⁶ pithily remarks: ‘museums in capitalist society traditionally function as secular temples.’⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 161.

⁴⁵ Foster, *Recordings*, 40.

⁴⁶ ‘A museum is like a lung of a great city; each Sunday the crowd flows like blood into the museum and emerges purified and fresh.’ Georges Bataille, ‘Museum’, *October* 36, 25.

⁴⁷ Burnham, *Great Western Salt Works*, 64.

Why *art brut*? Intriguingly, Deleuze makes passing reference to his own philosophy as ‘producing a kind of *art brut*.’⁴⁸ What did he mean by this assertion? The Tate glosses *art brut* concisely as follows:

Art Brut (‘raw art’) is a term invented by the French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe art made outside the tradition of fine art, dominated by academic training, which he referred to as ‘art culturel’ - cultural art. Art Brut included graffiti, and the work of the insane, prisoners, children, and naïve or primitive artists. What Dubuffet valued in this material was the raw expression of a vision or emotions, untrammelled by convention. These qualities he attempted to incorporate into his own art, to which the term Art Brut is also sometimes applied.⁴⁹

Art brut, then, is art outside of, and traditionally dismissed by, the academy. Much as Dubuffet incorporated the raw energy and expression of outsider art in his own practice, so Deleuze gathers together the philosophically marginalised and/or anticanonical in order to see what work they can do, what productive concepts they might generate. In so doing he deliberately transgresses the bounds of the proper: ‘The history of philosophy plays a patently repressive role in philosophy, it’s philosophy’s own version of the Oedipus complex... I myself “did” history of philosophy for a long time... But I compensated in various ways: by concentrating, in the first place, on authors who challenged the rationalist tradition in this history...’⁵⁰

Art brut, in posing the question to disciplinarity, offers a practical approach for going about dismantling the disciplined, unitary self. The same processes of containment operate at the level of

⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 89.

⁴⁹ Retrieved April 24, 2005, from <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=25>, cons

⁵⁰ Deleuze, ‘Letter to a Harsh Critic’ in *Negotiations*, 5-6.

the individual subject and the cultural field. Deleuzean schizoanalysis seeks to decentre both. His anti-Oedipal approach strives to provide ways in which we might actively think apparently bounded entities (organisms, academic disciplines, ourselves) as multiple.

In contrast to Deleuze's approach, Dubuffet's *art brut* has predominantly been approached by Art Historians precisely in relation to psychoanalytic theories of the Other. As such, Dubuffet has suffered predictable attacks on the purported naivety of his modernist conception of an 'absolute alterity to culture'⁵¹ and his negligent ethics vis-à-vis fetishizing cultural Others. Hal Foster takes just such a critical line but strays across something more interesting in making his case: 'Dubuffet evokes a schizophrenic sense of literal self-dislocation, which is far from the "completely pure artistic operation" that he otherwise wished to project onto the art of the mentally ill.'⁵²

Foster here signally neglects the fact that *art brut* was self-avowedly never simply to be elided with the art of the mentally ill, rather it sought out the works of 'obscure personalities'⁵³ of all sorts: 'works which the artist has entirely devised (orientation and manner of expression) from his own sources, from his own impulses and humours, without regard for the rules, without regard for current convention.'⁵⁴ Furthermore, Foster does not reflect on exactly what happens when Dubuffet—always already, and knowingly, compromised by 'culturel' status—*emulates* the art of the insane (as opposed to merely appropriating and displaying it). Dubuffet's work does not simply reinforce the *art brut*/*art culturel* binary⁵⁵ but rather opens a schizoid line of flight between them, disturbing both terms in the process. As Peiry summarises, 'His objective was to challenge the

⁵¹ Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 193.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵³ Dubuffet, 'Letter to Charles Ladame, August 9, 1945' cited in Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, 11.

⁵⁴ Dubuffet, 'Notice sur la compagnie de l'Art Brut' cited in Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, 11.

⁵⁵ '[E]ven as he seeks to undo the opposition between normal and abnormal... Dubuffet affirms an opposition between brut and culturel, between civilised and noncivilised. In this way his transgression might come to support the very law that it purports to contest.' Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 204.

tribunal of artistic taste, the one that determines art history and its hierarchies.⁵⁶ By means of the ‘sheer brutality’⁵⁷ of his technique, Dubuffet sought to force transversal paths across discrepant cultural practices.

As sophisticated a theorist as he is, Foster himself unconsciously affirms the ‘law’ he seeks to undermine. As Lippard describes it, ‘artefacts that embody marginality slowly but surely become mainstream, eventually acquiring the status of high art even though they were initially valued because they had nothing to do with its conventions.’⁵⁸ This process does not simply happen but rather is produced by the culture industry, including Art historians working on their own ways to inflect the canon.

I want to suspend any hasty neutralization of Dubuffet’s challenge. Let us look at *L’Arbre de fluides* [1]. Let us see what work it still does:

A rough, matt surface, like baked earth. A gritty flatbed fresco. The ground marked by thick, angular daubs. The female figure delineated by a broken outline. Breasts collapse into the centre of her chest, arms dangle anatomically from the collarbone, buttocks sag. The flesh an expanse of pink, yellow and blue tones, like an enormous bruise raised from the canvas by rough painterly attention. The face of the woman crudely drawn but expressive, a look of contentment about the eyes reinforced by spindly arms locked in tight self-caress. Viscid rivulets of colour flow everywhere, alternately pooling and diverging, branching tributaries with multiple sources. Generative flows from the nipples, the stomach, the vulva, the anus. A body generated out of itself. Egress and ingress of matter. Fluidity and fixity, being and becoming. The canvas opens up to envelop us, folding us into its crusted colour fields. Rough love. An invitation to lose

⁵⁶ Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, 8.

⁵⁷ Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, 41.

⁵⁸ Lippard, ‘Crossing into Uncommon Grounds’ in *The Artist Outsider*, 10.

ourselves in the pleasures of the flesh. Maternal flesh, sexual flesh, other flesh. A desire to cleave to the plane, to distribute our subjectivity across the picture. Our self merging with another. The ascent of the ground enveloping us. The implacable call to becoming other.

In Dubuffet's direct challenge to the disciplinary regulation of the art world we can also find a puncturing of the stable boundaries of the self. In contemplating *L'Arbre de fluides* we observe an exercise that brings Deleuze's philosophy off the page and into the realm of living practice. Contemplating the picture we experience the challenges of Deleuzian thought:

The concept of the Other Person as expression of a possible world in a perceptual field leads us to consider the components of this field for itself in a new way. No longer being either subject of the field or object in the field, the other person will become the condition under which not only subject and object are redistributed but also figure and ground, margins and centre, moving object and reference point, transitive and substantial, length and depth. The Other Person is always perceived as an other, but in its concept it is the condition of all perception, for others as for ourselves.⁵⁹

Philosophy as *art brut*, *art brut* as philosophy. A practical invitation to dismantle the self and see where this might lead us: 'If there is progress in art it is because art can live only by creating new percepts and affects as so many detours, returns, dividing lines, changes of level and scale.'⁶⁰ As for art, so for philosophy, we must proceed along new lines of flight. We have to make *philosophy itself* in the present. Deleuze, following Stoic example, shows us that philosophy might still offer a way of life, or at the very least furnish us with spiritual exercises appropriate to the development of a modern subjectivity.

⁵⁹ Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?*, 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

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