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The aesthetics of exodus: Virno and Lyotard on art, timbre, and the general intellect

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ABSTRACT: While the general intellect continues to provide a rich resource for understanding post-Fordism and for theorizing resistance, there remains a neglected aesthetic dimension to the general intellect and the role that art can play in resistance based on it. This article develops the general intellect along these lines by drawing on two theorists who are rarely thought together: Paolo Virno and Jean-François Lyotard. The article begins by introducing the general intellect and Virno's reconceptualization of it as the *general* or *generic* intellect. It then introduces a relationship between art and the general intellect by reading Virno's theory of language, speech, and communication. From here, it goes to his theory of exodus, which is then read back through his linguistic theory in order to draw out the key role that subjective defection plays in the project. Although Virno doesn't spend much time on art, I use this as an entry point to move to Lyotard's writings on music and art, where I flesh out an aesthetic dimension to the general intellect and the project of exodus. I focus on the artistic gesture (the "art" in/of the artwork) and especially timbre as witnesses and eruptions of the potentiality of the general intellect that can never be properly actualized. By analyzing timbre as a fugitive force that desubjectifies those gathered around music, I argue that it provides an example of the opening necessary for the subjective defection that inaugurates exodus. In this way, the aesthetic dimension added to the general intellect is the generic capacity to be affected and disindividuated.

Introduction

Political praxis arises out of, as it responds to and intervenes in, the actual coordinates of contemporary modes of production. For many left theorists today, the hegemonic mode of production is post-Fordism, which emerged in response to the overlapping crises of global capitalism manifested in the most industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s. The crisis entailed both accumulation obstacles internal to capitalism and the national liberation and socialist struggles across the globe, and capital responded to it in several ways, including spatial reorganization, flexibilization, and an intensification and extension of sites for accumulation, extending from the factory to society in general. One of the key resources to understand and respond to this configuration of capital continues to be Marx's concept of the general intellect, as it anticipated in many ways the increasing role that knowledge plays in processes of production, accumulation, and life.

This article develops work on the general intellect in post-Fordist production by focusing on its relationship to art and aesthetics, and the role it can play in resistance through exodus. To do this, I draw on two theorists who are rarely thought together: Paolo Virno and Jean-François Lyotard. The turn to Virno is more linear, as he is one of the most prominent autonomous/post-workerist intellectuals of the day whose work has substantially expanded the general intellect in key ways, identifying how the general

intellect is a common both for capitalist expropriation and communist resistance. The move to Lyotard is more unorthodox, as Lyotard is generally positioned as antagonistic to marxism and the communist project. Yet as I show below, his critique of capitalism explains a good deal about our post-Fordist regime, and his work on art and music provide rich resources for thinking about the aesthetics of resistance under the regime. While I'm interested in the differences in their theorizations, the main point in this co-reading is to build on Virno's conception of the general intellect by adding an aesthetic dimension to it and showing how art provides an opening for the project of exodus.

The article begins with a brief reading of Marx's "fragment on machines," where he introduces the general intellect, and then moves to Virno's reconceptualization, which is significant in that it fully emphasizes the *generality* of the general intellect. Virno, in other words, makes the general intellect indeterminate, such that it's not composed of particular knowledges and thoughts but the potentiality for them. I then introduce a relationship between art and the general intellect by reading Virno's theory of language, speech, and communication. From here, I introduce his theory of exodus, which I then read back through his linguistic theory in order to draw out the key role that subjective deflection plays in the project. Although Virno only mentions performance art as an entry point to discuss the general linguistic faculty (thereby equating art and language), I interpret this to mean that art potentially represents a general relation to the general intellect. At this point, I move to Lyotard's writings on music and art in order to flesh out an aesthetic dimension to the general intellect and the project of exodus. I focus on the artistic gesture (the "art" in/of the artwork) and especially timbre as witnesses and eruptions of the potentiality of the general intellect that can never be fully actualized. By analyzing timbre as a fugitive force that desubjectifies those gathered around music, I argue that it provides an example of opening to the disindividuation required for exodus. I conclude by drawing these elements together in an argument for engaging exodus as children and for childhood.

From the general intellect to the intellect in general

Virno's conception of post-Fordism emerges most directly from his analysis of Marx's general intellect, a concept that organizes a section of the sixth and seventh notebooks of the *Grundrisse* (1993). Collectively and posthumously known as the "fragment on machines," in these 10 or so pages Marx theorizes some of the contradictory aspects of changes in the organic composition of capital (specifically the relationship between living labor and machinery). The basic thrust is that, to increase its productive capacity capitalism depends on the development of knowledge, which it congeals into fixed capital. Together with living labor, capital becomes one large machine system that, "set in motion by automation, a moving power that moves itself; this automation consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as conscious linkages" (1993: 692). Rather than workers deploying skill and knowledge to transform raw materials with tools, under this new configuration agency is shifted to the system as a whole, such that the workers are only relay points in the production process, which is progressively dominated by machinery: "In so far as machinery develops with the accumulation of society's science, of productive force generally, general social labour presents itself not in labour but in capital. The productive

force of society is measured in *fixed capital*, exists there in its objective form” (694). Workers no longer run machines; machines run workers.

The development of capitalism is the progressive subsumption of “the general productive forces of the social brain” (694) to the extent that they appear as capacities of machines (and capital) rather than workers. Machines are, Marx says here, “the power of knowledge, objectified” (706). The more the productivity of machinery grows, the greater “degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*,” and, consequently, the more “the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it” (706). As the organic composition of capital shifts toward fixed capital, the general rate of productivity depends less on socially-necessary labor-time and more on the general social brain; it’s not “the direct labour time spent” in production but “the general state of science” that’s the foundation of wealth (705). As production relies more on the intellect in general, it relies less on exchange-value and the exploitation of individual labor-time. Thus, we have “the material conditions to blow this foundation sky high” (706). Rising productivity *could* reduce necessary labor-time and increase time for “artistic, scientific, etc.” development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them” (706). The general intellect’s command over production enhances the material conditions for communism, although conditions are not guarantees, as the contemporary reader will intuitively understand.

The anthropological and philosophical character of the general intellect and its relation to production today provides the pivot around which Virno’s thought turns. It undergirds both his conception of post-Fordism and his theory of communist praxis, exodus. By threading together Virno’s linguistic theory with his political theory, I make explicit his conception of art as entailing the central mode of being and labor in post-Fordism, and therefore as a potential but undeveloped figure of resistance for exodus.

For Virno, post-Fordism is the total empirical realization of the tendency Marx articulated in the fragment on machines in that today the general intellect provides a primary motor for capital. There are, however, two important caveats with this accomplishment. The first is quite obvious: the realization of the fragment happened without any liberatory bend. The second is theoretically more significant and takes the form of a criticism of Marx: his formulation “neglects the way in which the general intellect manifests itself as living labour” (Virno 2007: 5). Marx located the general intellect with fixed capital—specifically machinery—instead of living workers.¹ The objectification of the general intellect in machinery, technologies, and other elements of fixed capital is surely significant, but an exclusive focus on this limits our ability to grasp the specific characteristics of labor, accumulation, and life under post-Fordism, and therefore the existing resources and strategies of resistance.

Out of the different ways capital reconfigured itself in response to the overlapping crises of global capitalism, as they manifested in the most industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s, Virno focuses on how capital absorbed and redeployed the elements that opposed it. The way in which capital accomplished this is, according to Virno, a “masterpiece,” as capital mobilized the “exit from the factories, indifference to steady employment, familiarity with learning and communication networks” for its own ends (Virno 2004: 99). Post-Fordism, in other words, integrates precarity, instability, and the desire for cooperation and education into its operation. The working life isn’t a

continuous life but one constantly interrupted, subjected to periods of latency, and redirected. Instead of one or a successive series of relatively stable and long-term jobs within the same general field, one has multiple (often overlapping) temporary or short-term and flexible jobs that take place across different sectors. The form of life corresponding to this is one that's engaged in endless learning and reorientation to different and shifting rules, norms, values, and so on. Yet what is sacrificed in every case is pure potentiality and indeterminacy, as periods of latency are immediately periods of training to actualize another potential.

At this point we arrive at Virno's reconception of the general intellect: While the general intellect is composed of *particular* knowledges, ideas, capacities, inclinations, and so on, Virno puts his emphasis on the *generality* of the general intellect. The *particular* manifestations of the general intellect, that is, are less important than the *general* capacities of the intellect. Rather than designating "the aggregate of the knowledge acquired by the species," the concept indicates "the *faculty* of thinking; potential as such, not its countless particular realizations" (66). The resources of the general intellect include "the faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract and relate, and the inclination towards self-reflexivity" (Virno 2007: 6). It is not that these faculties were totally absent in Fordism, of course, but rather that they were mobilized in their specificity as opposed to their generality. That is to say, labor under post-Fordism isn't developed in a unidirectional manner (wherein the worker is trained for one job or career) or even in a multidimensional manner (wherein the worker is trained for several jobs or careers); rather, what matters in the production of labor is labor as potential. However, it is a potential that is only valorized through its actualizations.

Performance art and language under post-Fordism

The general intellect most clearly attaches itself to living labor under post-Fordist production through the paradigmatic role of language and communication, which serve as resources with which to constantly re-engage the potentiality of the general intellect. As such, the communications industry replaces the machine factory to assume the hegemonic role of production under post-Fordism. That an industry is hegemonic under a particular constellation of a mode of production means simply that it "produces machinery and other instruments to be used in the most varied sectors of production" (Virno 2004: 61). Insofar as the determining aspect of the general intellect is its generality, today the communications industry provides the means of production for industry in general, as it produces communicative schemas, systems, and styles that are dispersed to other industries. While the communication industry provides these models and methods, these are the subject of continual renewal and reinvention. Capitalism depends on workers' ability to acquire these models and methods over and over again, as well as to adapt them to different industries; hence, it mobilizes their *general potential* for communication.

Not only is the communication industry hegemonic in terms of the means of production, but, because these means of production are inseparable from the body and life of the worker, it also provides the hegemonic figure of the laborer. In particular, the performance artist is the paradigmatic form of labor-power for Virno. This is principally because of the *virtuosity* of performance art, of which there are two interrelated aspects.

The first is virtuosity's absence of an exterior goal or product. The performance artist produces an ephemeral and singular happening. "At the end of the play, or of the concert," Virno writes, "nothing remains. The pianist or the actor performs an *activity without Work*. Or, if you prefer, the purpose of their activity coincides entirely with its own execution" (Virno 2015: p. 22). There's no identifiable or alienable commodity separable from the act of production that drives the production process. As a consequence—and this is the second defining aspect—the performance artist requires an audience or a public, without which the performance can't be said to have taken place at all. The fugitive labor of performance art requires an exposure before others. Along these lines, performance art takes on the characteristics of political action and becomes a form of praxis, rather than episteme or poiesis.²

The particular praxis of the performance artist is the general form of labor under post-Fordism. "Each one of us is, and has always been, a virtuoso," Virno tells us: "In fact, the fundamental model of virtuosity, the experience which is the base of the concept, is *the activity of the speaker*. This is not the activity of a knowledgeable and erudite locutor, but of *any* locutor" (Virno 2004: 55). Here, through the link with language, we approach the anthropological aspect of the general intellect. Virno begins with Saussure's comparison of language to a symphony to establish the link: "If language is a symphony, the speaker shares the same characteristics as the performing artist. Being contingent and singular, each *speech act* boils down to a virtuoso performance. It does not create an independent object and therefore implies the presence of others" (Virno 2015: 24). This is not to say that the speaker doesn't have extra-linguistic goals, because we of course utilize language to achieve things outside of language. Yet even these extra-linguistic goals are still "achieved *through* language" and "are only conceivable, as such, *on the basis* of language; this is why they are nonetheless the goals *of* language" (25).

Concerned less with particular historical languages (which are only particular manifestations of the general intellect), Virno moves to the linguistic faculty in general. Through this move, we see the relationship between the potentiality of the general intellect and its particular actualizations, for both historical languages and the linguistic faculty are each "fundamental" and "symbiotic but distinctive" aspects of each utterance: First there is "*what we say*, the semantic content expressed by the enunciation thanks to certain phonetic, lexical and syntactic characters," and second there is "*the fact of speaking*, the decision to break the silence, the act of enunciating as such, the speaker's exposure to the eyes of others" (43). The first aspect is a particular actualization, while the second is the pure potentiality of speech. While there are indeed moments when the pure potentiality of speech is brought to the foreground (like small talk), there is one instance when both the content and fact of speech coincide perfectly: "I speak." With "I speak," the content of the enunciation is the act of the enunciation; the particular actualization and the general potential occur simultaneously. In this way, it serves as an *absolute performative* and provides the form for all speech acts that signal the potentiality rather than the actuality of speech.

Because "I speak" is the unity of the actual and potential, it crystallizes the role of the general intellect as the inexhaustible resource of post-Fordist production. The "I speak" serves as the virtuoso's indeterminate script or score in that it makes any particular determination possible but not exhaustible. To put it differently, because post-Fordism is a kind of stable instability, in which precarity, flexibility, and rapid transitions

are the norm, what matters is not a training in a kind of speaking and acting but a training in the indeterminate potential to speak and act. “Forms of life” under post-Fordism don’t “hide the disorientation and the instability of the human animal but, on the contrary, they push the to their extreme and systematically valorize them. Our amorphous potentiality, that is, the persistence of infantile traits... pervades every aspect of even the most banal *routine*” (204). Never before have the demands and contours of the capitalist economy shifted with such frequency and rapidity. This is confirmed in the dominating discourse of the learning society and the prevalence of continuing education, adult learning, and lifelong learning. We are never done learning because we are never done re-training and re-skilling ourselves.³

With an endlessly shifting economic landscape, we are all perpetual learners who must continually be re-educated to continue meeting the demands of the post-Fordist economy. In essence, then, what the post-Fordist mode of production puts to work is the generic indeterminacy and potentiality of life itself. Training for work isn’t the development of specific competencies that would then scale up into an aggregate—in which particular manifestations of the general intellect of intellect scale up into the general intellect—but a certain kind of exposure to potentiality—in which particular manifestations of a particular intellect derive from the infinite wellspring of the general intellect. Capital, of course, doesn’t *produce* the general intellect, but actualizes it repeatedly. Capital puts to work “not only the instability of our species, but also its related need for uninterrupted learning” (197). To put it differently, training involves exposure to flexibility, uncertainty, and change. Thus, from the perspective of capital, when the worker’s job is replaced through automation, the worker immediately re-enters the training grounds as they look for work and try to make ends meet on a daily basis. The workplace and the school are no longer privileged sites for preparation for the working life, but rather the entirety of the social field (and here, again, we can see why this has important implications for value). Society as an evolving totality produces the general intellect, which in turn serves as an unmarked script for the virtuoso proletariat that capital puts to use. Whereas under Fordism the university prepared the student for a career, the university now prepares the student to continue learning; or, alternatively, whereas Fordist schools produced workers, post-Fordist schools produce learners.

The general intellect, exodus, and subjectivity

At the same time as the general intellect is the infinite generic resource for exploitation under post-Fordism for Virno, it also serves as a pathway of transition from capitalism to communism. This possibility depends on two conditions. The first condition is if the general intellect’s “bond to the production of commodities and wage-labour is rescinded,” while the second is that we create “a public sphere outside the state and... a political community that hinges on the general intellect” (2007: 8). We have to delink the general intellect from capitalist production while at the same time forging a new common around and through it. For Virno, this dual project takes place through exodus from capital and the state. This is a path that the Left, to its own detriment, hasn’t yet taken into account, having embraced the (conceptual) border—which is “stable and fixed”—instead of the (conceptual) frontier—which “is an indefinite area in which to proceed” (2005a: 20).

Although exodus has the same score as post-Fordism (the excessive potentiality of the general intellect) through it we mobilize and express this surplus antagonistically. One way to do this, I suggest, is by mobilizing potentiality that's freed from the demand to immediately actualize. Exodus isn't a path of development beyond but rather an innovative and affirmative withdrawal from post-Fordism through the production of new forms of belonging. That is, instead of a march past the limits of capital it's an internal reconfiguration and disabling of capital. What I want to do now is articulate some of the central themes of exodus, and then, by returning to "I speak," to introduce the importance of desubjectification as a breach that makes exodus possible because it returns us to the generic indeterminacy of the general intellect.

Exodus begins from contemporary conditions, constraints and all. Yet rather than oppose, protest, or negate these constraints, through the movement of defection it reworks and reshapes them. The former set of options accepts the present "as an irremovable horizon" and "deals with the problem by choosing one or another of the alternative solutions already on offer," but defection "changes the context within which a problem arises" and "changes the rules of the game and disorients the enemy" (Virno 1996b: 199). As an example, he offers the defections from factory life in 1970s Italy, because the factory exits refused to accept factory life or strike to improve it, and instead created a new form of life. The soviets give institutional form to defection and antagonize the state, emptying out the power of the state as the soviets incorporate its operations, from wealth distribution and education to urban planning and media: "the Soviets elaborate actions that are paradigmatic and capable of blossoming into new combinations of knowledge, ethical propensities, technologies, and desires" (203). The soviets give the general intellect a common space outside of the state. That the soviets are *paradigmatic* means they operate not through transposition but through the example: "The example is not the empirical application of a universal concept, but it has the singularity and the qualitative completeness that, normally, when we speak of the 'life of the mind,' we attribute to an *idea*" (203-204). Reproducing through the example is what is supposed to prevent the soviets from congealing and unifying into a state.

Key to exodus is a different approach to the general intellect as it relates to potentiality and subjectivity. We can see this difference by returning to "I speak" and focusing on its role in individuation. As an absolute performative, "I speak" does nothing except communicate the ability to communicate; it's a particular utterance that happens in a certain moment but expresses the universal generic basis of utterance. This, Virno says,

is appropriate—and actually desirable—every time our lived experience is forced to retrace the essential steps of our becoming human. That is, every time that a danger, a doubt, a possible confusion can be dispelled only by reenacting, within the specific forms of human life, the travails of *anthropogenesis*. (60)

When the child begins to speak, they initiate the absolute performative through different expressions of repetition, fabulation, and announcement. Whereas developmental psychology focuses on the content of these repetitions—which they call "egocentric," Virno argues that their enactments as the absolute performative are what really matter. Whereas Vygotsky held that egocentric language dissipated into the adult's internal linguistic acts, in which words are thought by not enunciated, Virno argues that

egocentric language routinely reappears in adult life. This happens when the grown human utters sentences or fragments to themselves, such as “What did I come into this room for?” “All right, keep going” or “Take it easy.” These examples take the “implicit” form of “I speak” in that “their ultimate meaning is ‘to say: “I say”” (72). What this shows is that the “I” is not a presupposition and that the process of becoming an “I” isn’t linear or final. Instead, the “I” is the *result* of an individuation, a process that repeatedly occurs. In other words, the common pre-exists the singular, as the subject continually re-emerges from the generic or universal.

When I express myself, I only do so because of my access to the generic linguistic faculty. The individual is ultimately a particular actualization of the potentiality of the general intellect, which is “a One which, far from being something conclusive, might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation” (Virno 2004: 25). This inverts the relationship between the singular and the common, or the individual and the public. From the perspective of the state, the individual is the beginning of sociality or of public, common existence. The state’s role is, as a result, to produce a public sphere by uniting different individuals through representation. We could thus view exodus as beginning with a subjective defection from the state, a disindividuation that doesn’t reject the individual by asserting a common, but that reconfigures the landscape of being. The subjective project of exodus takes the dominant conception of individuality and undermines it by opening it to a relation with the generic. The soviets, then, are bodies that allow and facilitate the recursive movement of disindividuation and individuation through the general intellect.

Potentiality in Virno’s post-Fordism and Lyotard’s system

Virno doesn't provide an in-depth treatment of art and aesthetics, as he moves quickly and almost abruptly from the virtuosity of the performance artist to that of the speaker. On my reading, this move isn’t so much an eschewing of art as it is another move from the specific to the general that shows that performance art isn’t a discrete and privileged domain but rather a generic relation to the general intellect. Nonetheless, there remains room for a further exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of the general intellect and the role of art in the project of exodus. It’s here that Lyotard’s thinking on art can be useful for Virno’s project. The move to Lyotard might seem unusual, as Lyotard is often positioned as antagonistic to marxism and the communist project and is therefore written off or, in most cases, altogether ignored. Yet his critique of capitalism (or “the system”) explains a good deal about our post-Fordist regime, and a major thread throughout his writings is a concern for that which capitalism represses or seeks to eliminate. Moreover, we could understand the combination of Virno and Lyotard as stemming from Virno’s own intellection trajectory. As Pietro Bianchi (2011) notes, Virno stands out in his own tradition as “the most unscrupulous about inserting non-orthodox references” (39).

As we’ve seen, the net of exploitation and dispossession couldn’t be any wider, which is why the communist struggle for Virno is a reconfiguration of space, time, and labor; a combined defensive and offensive struggle of exodus, or the utilization of the surplus of the general intellect that “impedes the transfer” of this surplus into the power of state administration, impedes its configuration as productive resource of the capitalist enterprise” (Virno 2004: 71). Capital’s infinite powers of subsumption are revealed most

succinctly in one of Virno's succinct formulations: "Post-Fordism is the 'communism of capital' (111). Capitalism has taken the demands of communism as new energies to reinvigorate itself. Lyotard's conception of capitalism helps explain this phenomenon, especially in his writings around and in the wake of the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc socialist countries, in which the capitalism proliferated rapidly and frighteningly without any competitor. Contrary to assertions that Lyotard's accepted the inevitability and permanence of capitalism or that his later works are less political than his earlier ones (e.g., Williams, 2000), I maintain that it's in his later works that Lyotard offers some of his most political formulations, ones that the communist project would do well to consider. In the face of an unopposed capitalism, a unipolar imperialism, Lyotard advances formulations, proposals, and speculations that can be engaged as artistic defections from post-Fordism.

Lyotard attributes the victory of capitalism in the Cold War not to any military, economic, or political superiority that vanquishes opposition, but to capitalism's general openness to differences, critiques, and disagreements, all of which serve its primary principle of development. For capitalism *is* development; it "*develops* everything, but this development is not necessarily the progress of freedom. This development complicates the relations between the elements of a system in such a way that the system finds itself performing better" (Lyotard 2009: 38). Through increasing differentiation and complexification, the system's ratio of inputs to outputs is improved; the greater the quantity of differences the better the rate of performativity. Every barrier is only something to overcome, every divergence is something to incorporate. In what sounds like a strikingly Marxist phrasing in a short piece that's critical of Marxism as a political trend and mode of critique, Lyotard writes that "the very obstacles that are opposed to it push the system to become more complex and more open, to promote new enterprises" (1997: 69). Critique, after all, is intended "to pinpoint and denounce every failure of the system with regard to emancipation. But what is remarkable is that the presupposition behind this task is that emancipation is from now on the charge of the system itself, and critiques of whatever nature they may be are demanded by the system in order to carry out this charge more efficiently" (70). The response is not to resign to the system, but to seek out and find those elements and forces that continually escape from and resist the system. Throughout his writings Lyotard figures these in different ways (with dissensus and differend being the most well known). There are things, for Lyotard, that the system can't tolerate because they can't directly enter into its circuits of exchange and development. This isn't to say that they are sufficient for resistance or that the system can't *relate* to them in such a way as to capture their effects. But in order for this to happen, they would have to be transformed and ultimately reduced. To take a familiar example, the differend (the irreducible difference between two parties) can be transformed into a litigation. The system requires this litigation to deal with the differend, but this litigation requires a reduction of the differend, which is *irreducible*. Thus, what Lyotard wants to do is to "reserve" those elements that the system's incessant development "hurries, and crushes:" "the unharmonizable" (Lyotard 1991: 4). This is similar to Virno's take on post-Fordism, which can never capture the *pure potentiality* of the general intellect; it can only force it into different actualizations. In both instances, there is a dialectic of sorts at work, in which an irreducible potentiality can be the source of both exploitation and resistance. Yet where Lyotard wants to "reserve" and "bear

witness” to potentiality, Virno wants to both preserve and mobilize it for a committed project of exodus. What I’m after, then, is an appropriation of Lyotard’s aesthetics for exodus.

Timbre and gesture as openings for exodus

In one of his later pieces on music, “Music, Mute,” Lyotard (1997) writes that what is art in or of a work of art resists all categorization or periodization. The works themselves can be placed in any number of contexts—political, economic, historical, geographic, and so on. Even though they can condition their emergence or even explain their “function,” none of these contexts can contain or make intelligible the artwork’s *art*. This is so because art proper “is always a gesture of space-time-matter, the art of the musical score, a gesture of space-time-sound” (1997: 217). Art, that is, is always a movement—a *gesture*—that points to a beyond of cognition and the individual subject as a sort of passing charge. As a gesture, art is ephemeral, yet the artwork might persist, in which case the ephemerality isn’t a singular but a potentially recurring event. Art, as such, not only defies contexts but also form and content—in sum, it defies the actual material. It’s not only *performance* art that’s virtuous in its fugitivity, but art in general.

From this one might extrapolate that art is a transcendental power that’s independent of human being. After all, if the transitory disturbance of art is separable from all concrete manifestations—be they objects or performances—then it could follow that this gesture is its own sovereign ecosystem (its own foundation) or even the foundation of other ecosystems. While understandably enticing, Lyotard cautions against such an extrapolation: “The implication seems suspect, a metaphysical proposition, and pretty hazy. The idea of such an element may have a certain poetic value; it’s not clear that the philosopher can grant it any credit whatsoever” (220). This is a fairly consistent caution of Lyotard’s that extends beyond his writings on art and aesthetics. Consequently, there is a persistent tension at work in Lyotard, or at work through Lyotard, one that’s no less political than it is aesthetic: Art is independent of form and content, and yet it can’t but make an appearance through form and content. This is the “defining paradox of art,” for Lyotard (2009: 41): it is within and beyond form, within and beyond the body. Even though art is independent of its form, it only comes through some kind of form, no matter how deconstructed it is. In the same way that the enunciation contains within it the specific content and the generic potential to speak, the artwork contains both form and gesture. Lyotard defines the artistic gesture as one “of space-time-matter” to keep it firmly outside of metaphysics.

Musically, sonorous matter is something audible that gives way to the inaudible, something we can and can’t hear. This matter is a charge that’s not so much formless as it is *on the other side* of form. Or, to put it differently and just as difficultly, it’s a singular charge that emerges from repetition. Repetition, after all, escapes itself. When we repeat a work of music, we necessarily perform it differently. There are, actually, two different kinds of repetition: determined/determining and “free” (Lyotard disavows the term quickly by noting that it’s Kant’s). The first kind of repetition “fixes sonorous matter into distinctive properties for acoustic knowledge” and “is guided by an Idea (in the Platonic sense) of a self (the sound) according to its exclusive identity” (Lyotard 1991: 154). The determined/determining repetition is cognitive, absorbing sonorous matter into

information, data, techniques, tone, pitch, gradation, rhythm, and so on. “Free” repetition, by contrast, isn’t cognitive but aesthetic in that it “accepts [that] variation and transposition is ‘only’ made up of analogy” (154). While the intentions and structures of the repetitions are different, in the last instance all repetition is repetition with singularity: “Even what is aptly called the ‘rehearsal’ [*répétition*] of a work by a performer or a group of performers cannot manage to control the timbre or the nuance which will take place, singularly, on the night of the concert” (155). A rehearsal is a kind of repetition, and yet as anyone who has been part of a rehearsal will admit easily and without hesitation, every rehearsal is uncontrollably and inescapably different.

This singularity within repetition, however, calls into question the very distinction between the two varieties of repetition, as no determined/determining rehearsal can succeed in a purely cognitive repetition. This is so because of the singularity of timbre, or “the nuance of a sound or a set of sounds” (155). Timbre is a sonorous event, an eruption of sonorous matter within the material, one that can’t be forecasted or recounted. We can’t know when the timbre will pass through us and we can’t recall it when it leaves. Of course, we can try to name and discuss it, to compare and contrast it with others, comparing the performance tonight with that of last night. However, this only changes “the present nuance... into a nuance reported, retained, deferred, so that it becomes a different nuance” (156). Timbre can be put to work for capital in the sense that tickets to the performance can be sold, critics can’t write and publish their commentaries, financiers can invest in musicians, own labels, even speculate on musical futures, and so on. It is in this sense that timbre, for Lyotard, resists absorption within the circuits of capital: the aforementioned examples aren’t a commodification of timbre itself; they rather entail representing and articulating—and therefore reducing and ultimately disavowing—timbre. My claim (which is consistent with Lyotard’s) is not that timbre is a magical sound that unlocks communism or is even inherently anti-capitalist. In fact, in the same way that the general intellect is an infinite potentiality that capital can exploit infinitely but never totally capture, one could rightly argue that timbre, as an unarticulated potential, can serve to mobilize new forces of capital to repeatedly reduce and transform it. Yet what’s important for my argument is that timbre stands as a sonorous *example* of an aesthetic defection from actualization. If the general intellect serves as the score from which the musical composition emerges as an actualization, then timbre is a defection from that actualized form back to potentiality. The artistic gesture isn’t exodus in itself, but it is a potential *opening* for exodus.

Timbre thus isn’t an act but an event. This is signaled by what Lyotard (2006: 33) terms the consistent inconsistency of the statement: this is art. The sentence’s inconsistency revolves around the referent ‘this,’ which is necessarily incomplete and indeterminate. “This is art” is of a different kind of order than “x is a work of art” in that the latter has a clearly defined object. The “this” in “this is art” is an infinite potentiality without concept and category, since it refers to an event that is in the moment, that marks the passage between a now and a then, but that can never be synthesized into a before and after. “This” is therefore impossible to subject to cognition and knowledge through representation. To enter into the order of knowledge, the ‘this’ must be subjected to and placed within a certain classification. Yet at this moment the charge of art of the art object and its passing through the subject would have ceased, and what would be referred to would be the timbre deferred. The mind that is open to the art event has a certain

temporality that “is remarkable for its discontinuity and discreteness. It is a sort of spasm in which what has been done does not govern what is yet to be done” (345). The poetic mind through which the art charge passes is a mind suspended, a disordered mind that Lyotard calls “passibility: a disseizure” (346). The disseized mind is one deprived of interest, cognition, preference, taste, and the ability to synthesize, or to place anything into a temporal order. Along these lines, the “this” in “this is art,” the artistic gesture of space-time-matter, can provide an opening for the subjective defection necessary for exodus. The artwork evidences both a particular expression of the general intellect and the generality of the general intellect, although it points less to the potentiality for thoughts and more to the potentiality of feelings and affects.

Aesthetic routes to subjective defection

The disseizure of the artistic gesture means that the fugitivity associated with nuance cuts all ways: timbre comes and goes, but so too does the subject. We can’t name the nuance because, at the moment of its passing through, the subject is in a state of suspension: “If there is no subject to refer to itself, i.e. to its power of synthesis, the sensory forms and conceptual operators, so as to refer to *this* nuance, the reason is that sonorous matter which *is* this nuance is there only to the extent that then and there, the subject is not there” (Lyotard 1991: 157). And here we arrive at another side of the paradox of art: The “gesture” that is art isn’t the product of an agent, is “not the doing, or not *simply* the doing, of a conscious subject, namely, the composer” (Lyotard 1997: 218, emphasis added). Timbre isn’t a vector of subjectification, emanating from and to a subject, but a vector of desubjectification:

It is necessary to repeat: the act is not performed by the composer—it expresses no subjectivity... Because the ‘presence’ of the act in the presentation of the form leads to the unraveling of the syntheses on which subjectivity is constructed. Its time, its space, the materiality of the sensations that affect it are suspended. The ‘presence’ is not itself sensed since it does not satisfy the conditions of place, of time and of sensorium which are those of subjective sensibility. (Lyotard 2009: 41)

That the sonic gesture of timbre isn’t an expression means that the subject doesn’t will it, but that it’s a presence means that it isn’t a metaphysical power. To give this clarity and a materialist basis, we could say that the gesture signals the presence of the general intellect and establishes a link between it and the subject through desubjectification.

Even as the subject doesn’t produce timbre and can’t receive it in an ordered fashion, it is at the same time the subject that tries to let timbre appear through forms and that tries to listen for it, to wait for it. That timbre can’t be forecast, then, doesn’t mean that we can’t anticipate it. As an event, timbre “strikes the ear,” which is “prepared for being unprepared, like an event. Not because it emerges unexpectedly, since on the contrary it will have been awaited and violently wished for” (Lyotard 1997: 218-219). One attends to art precisely in hopes of such a charge. This attending entails a kind of waiting for the unexpected, a training for what can’t be trained for. Yet the subject tries to prepare for disseizure and passibility “in expectation of their end result. Something is

wished for in this expectation” (Lyotard 2006: 346). What waits for the charge of timbre isn’t a sovereign and completed individual but a subject in the ongoing dynamic of individuation between the generic and particular. The artistic gesture is possible because beings are open to affectation, because they are passible.

On the side of production, the artist prepares, repeats, rehearses not for the determined/determining content, but for the timbre that emerges from there. It’s a profession of trying to make appear that which you can’t make appear. While this all might seem philosophically suspect or hazy, as Matthew Mendez writes, it’s actually “eminently pragmatic, geared to working within the inescapable confines of re-presentation” (2013: 178). To show this pragmatism, he contrasts Lyotard and John Cage’s philosophy of music. While Cage wants to hear “sounds in themselves” Lyotard wants “to delay the comprehension and exchange of unplanned singularities, to preserve the event’s precarious instantaneousness” (174). Cage, in other words, falls prey to the transcendence of sound and music and the possibility of its pure presentation and immediacy that could be subject to “total perceptual indifference” (177). It is for this reason that timbre *suspends* rather than *obliterates* the subject. Pierre Boulez’s method of musical production resonated much more with Lyotard’s thinking. He writes that Boulez takes the opposite approach from Cage: “we must over-articulate all the elements of musical language in order to extract from it its inaudible sound matter” (2009: 42). Although both Boulez and Cage shared the same intention—“to liberate this [sonorous] matter from its conventional formal envelope”—Boulez rejected Cage’s spontaneity in favor “sonorous paradoxes” (42). This paradox is that the inaudible can only come through the audible, the invisible through the visible, the art through the artwork. Artistic labor is the labor of making appear that which *one* can’t *make* appear.

If Virno generalizes art by moving from the performance artist to the speaker, Lyotard does the same by moving from speaking to the sonorous gesture. Lyotard’s “Music, Mute” is an appropriation of Pascal Quingard’s writings on language, an appropriation made possible because both language and music are matters of sonority. Lyotard draws three lessons from Quingard, all of which center on the breath exhaled during speech. This is a *mute breath* that is “beneath the audible but never covered over by it, this breath does not speak, it moans, it mutters” (1997: 224). As such, the mute breath still makes a sound, but an empty inarticulable sound. Further, the mute breath is the inaudible sound of dread and is “mute, henceforth, inasmuch as it is not address and remains unaware of the other and the self” (225). The mute breath is a dreadful common shared by all beings, human and otherwise: “it inhabits their commerce but as a fraud. It disavows persons, pronouns and nouns, questions and answers, responsibilities. It prohibits us from ‘the belief in our originality’” (225). The gesture of music—and indeed of all art for Lyotard—impossibly strives to make the mute breath audible. “Aesthetics,” he says, “is phobic, it *arises* from anesthesia, belonging to it, recovering from it. You sing *for* not hearing, you paint *for* not seeing, you dance *for* being paralyzed” (232). As mute breath enables the act of speech it also accompanies the content as its enunciated. It remains an unarticulated timbre within each actualization of speech that connects the individuated subject to the common of all possible individuations. We can interpret this linking of the artistic gesture with the generic faculty of speaking as a dramatic demonstration of the regularity of the incessant cycle between desubjectification and individuation.

Aesthetic production and engagement entail a concerted and active effort of defection from the individual-form given by capital and the state. Both are reversals of the processes of individuation, not as defiance against the individual in the name of the generic or common, but as decompositions and suspensions that reveal and accentuate the *individuation* of the individual. The individual can't will desubjectification into being, which isn't to say the individual can't prepare for it. Virno ends an essay on exodus by appropriating an unexpected notion from Hannah Arendt that can help make this paradox a bit more legible: the miracle. For Arendt, action is miraculous because it initiates an unanticipated and ineffable beginning in a way that can't be forecasted. The miraculous character of exodus isn't something totally enigmatic, however, because it occurs in the domain of the general intellect. The miracle of exodus, he says, is "*awaited but unexpected...* or the exhibition of a necessary incompleteness" (1996b: 209). Timbre, as an artistic gesture in the sonic artwork, is miraculous in the same way: it can't be predicted or willed by the composer, artist, or listener, and in signaling to the beyond of sound it enacts the unavoidable gap in being, the passageways between the individual and the general intellect; but those gathered around music never stop awaiting its arrival.

The childish general intellect

At this point, I'd like to offer one final formulation that brings Virno and Lyotard together on a project of exodus. It begins and ends with the child, a figure to which both philosophers want us to go. If post-Fordism is the coincidence of the mode of production with the generic capacity for communication, then it makes sense to go to childhood, which Virno defines as a period in which one learns language. He conceptualizes human development as "the progressive passage from the mute sensible life to articulate discourse" (2005b: 11). Through the acquisition of language, the child is separated from their surroundings through individuation; hence the significance of "I speak." By learning language, we encounter the disjuncture between the world and ourselves because we discover that we can change the world and that the world can change us. For these reasons, Virno links "our amorphous potentiality" to "the persistence of infantile traits" (Virno 2015: 204). The linguistic faculty, the score of the general intellect, and the individuated individual can never be exhausted by the speech act.

As a recursive state, childhood in post-Fordism is the return to potentiality in order to actualize differently. "Childhood," he says, "lives on in the hypothetical language in which possibilities other than the present state of things come to surface" (Virno 2005b: 12). With the instability of post-Fordism, its precarity and ever-changing contours, we are what the sociologists despair us as: "eternal students" (12). We're always learning again and again, but within the contours of the capitalist state. Virno, then, takes it one step further: we are—or we should become—"eternal children" (12). As children, we become open to the world beyond its current configuration, and we're capable of—or more accurately, species bound—to learn again and again, differently each time.

Childhood is also a state of openness and indeterminacy for Lyotard. In fact, the subject that awaits the timbre of music and the mute breath of speech, is the infant. The waiting and the wishing comes from a desubjectified subject. What this means is simply that the "one" who waits for timbre is an inhuman child, an infant open beyond the

ordered regimes of cognition, preference, and taste. The infant is the subject seized by the phrase-affect, a necessarily unarticulated phrase that's incapable of the articulation that discourse demands. As a phrase-affect, timbre can't be linked with other rules within any discursive genre, as "it appears on the contrary only to be able to suspend or interrupt the linkages, whatever they are" (Lyotard 2001: 235). There aren't levels of articulation with the phrase-affect nor, as we have seen, are there receivers and referents. Childhood is thus divorced from any developmental narratives. The phrase-affect of timbre happens *now*, is freed of diachrony, in that the *now* of the phrase-affect doesn't take place *between* a past and future and isn't "framed by the *already gone* and the *not yet* of the temporalising consciousness... It appears and disappears as a whole instant... it is ageless" (237). Yet the phrase-affect nonetheless appears *within* a phrase universe. The infant is ageless and appears within the human adult when the adult returns to the generic common. Yet he also troubles the Virno's anthropocentric take on the general intellect, or his focus on living labor rather than all beings: "affection is what animals do... Animality is pathic. To be affectable is to be passible" (1997: 227). This opens the indeterminacy of the general intellect beyond what we know as the human, and it is why Lyotard links the inhuman with the infant. As such, the general intellect isn't only "the faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract and relate, and the inclination towards self-reflexivity" (Virno 2007: 6); it's also the potential to be affected, which is crucial to desubjectification.

We can see childhood as an aesthetic education in that the child accesses and performs the indeterminate score of the general intellect in a state of pure potentiality. When the child mimicks speech, repeats phrases, and so on, they articulate words without determined ends. Exodus is, then, a project of reclaiming childhood from capital and the state. Under post-Fordism, the formless child is inaugurated into the adult form of labor-power for capital and into the representable citizen for the state. It mobilizes the persistence of childhood to reform the adult again and again to correspond to transformations in the capitalist landscape and reconfigurations of the state. The child is a perpetual learner driven by the demand to actualize. Yet through its mobilization of childhood, post-Fordism ultimately reduces the child by making the child into a *not-yet-adult*. Exodus reclaims childhood for itself. The generic potentiality of childhood is protected by the soviets, which exist as spaces to maintain its fluid and dynamic state, as institutions that facilitate the existence of *eternal children*, indeterminate beings that are open to different human and inhuman individuations and disindividuations. Exodus subverts the dominant ideology of individuality by posing childhood as a project that connects the individual back to the general intellect in its *potentiality* rather than its potential actualizations. The absolute performative and the artistic gesture serve as potential lines of departure to exodus, lines that necessarily begin in post-Fordism but need not end there, if we can defend the potentiality of the general intellect from capital and the state.

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¹ This isn't actually much of a criticism given that machines themselves are the *products* of living labor. Tony Smith shows that this is clear if we read Marx's chapter on machinery from the first volume of *Capital*. There, we get a general account of how "technological changes will also be due to a creative interplay between scientific-technical labourers in the narrow sense and experienced workers with significant informal and tacit knowledge of the labour process" (2013: 249). Smith shows that capital always depends on immeasurable "free gifts" from nature and society to argue against Virno's claim that the labor theory of value is no longer operative. This is an important debate, but I think the real crux of the matter is that for Virno the embodiment of the general intellect in machinery is still important, but is less determinant than the enactment of the general intellect through the communication of laboring people (and to the extent that the results of this communication relate to the need for technological advances is another matter altogether).

² Virno's of course acknowledges that physical commodities—end products—are produced in post-Fordism, but the *value* of these commodities are increasingly determined by the immaterial labor that goes into their production, distribution, sale, and consumption (Ford 2013).

³ For more on education, the learning society, and capitalism, see Lewis (2013), Ford (2018), and Backer and Lewis (2015).