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The Arts of the Street: Sense Perception, Creativity and Resistance in Everyday Urban Life

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine questions concerning space, perception, everyday creativity, and the social ordering of the senses, and go on to describe a class of creative urban practices that I name *the arts of the street*. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, street performance (busking), street art in the usual sense (graffiti, murals, postering, etc.), punk, hip hop culture, and skateboarding (street skating). As disparate as they may seem, all of these practices share certain key characteristics: they are forms of everyday creativity that claim space according to their own intentions, in opposition to the dominant socio-political order. They are forms of minor resistance that suggest other ways of understanding, experiencing, and (re)producing the shared spaces of everyday life. Although concerned with concrete everyday practices and forms of knowledge, this work is primarily a theoretical investigation; as such, I construct a basis for my claims by putting the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in conversation with Henri Lefebvre's critical analyses of space and everyday life in the context of late-stage capitalism. Additionally, I engage with a wide range of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature to argue that these diverse *arts*, which are directly tied to the concept of 'the street'—itself a transitory and undetermined space of possibility—offer opportunities to enact other spaces of encounter and exchange, and that they exemplify a fundamental creative capacity that exceeds the managerial logic of capitalism. I show that these everyday arts represent the minor practices of *bricolage*, of the amateur, and of a collective sense of creativity that is fundamental to our perceptual experience but that never assumes formal properties, never acquires an identity. The arts of the street draw upon the common human abilities of curiosity, do-it-yourself experimentation, and of ordinary speech, and can draw our attention *to* a pre-reflexive corporeal presence that binds us to the world and each other. They thus demonstrate that it is possible to perceive, conceive, and live (in) urban space in different, possibly more equitable, ways.

Keywords

Public space, everyday life, politics of the senses, bricolage, DIY, amateur, multitude, virtuosity, collective creativity, Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, perceptual faith, distribution of the sensible, busking, street performance, punk, street skating, hip hop, street art.

Summary for Lay Audience

In this dissertation, I examine theoretical questions concerning social space, sense perception, everyday creativity, and how the senses are conceived of according to changing social and historical conditions. I look to a range of philosophical, anthropological, sociological and other literature to show that there is a certain collective sense of being that generally escapes our conscious attention in our everyday lives, but that we can still have access to. I go on to describe a class of creative urban practices that I name *the arts of the street*. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, street performance (busking), street art in the usual sense (graffiti, murals, postering, stenciling, etc.), punk, hip hop culture, and skateboarding (street skating). As different as they may seem from each other, they share certain essential characteristics: they all engage with public space in ways that it was not designed for; and, they are tied directly to the concept of ‘the street,’ as a transitory space of possibility. They thus act as forms of creative resistance by demonstrating other ways of conceiving of and using shared urban spaces. Moreover, these ‘arts’ express a collective sense of being that is tied to the common human abilities of curiosity, do-it-yourself experimentation, and of ordinary speech. In this way, they draw our attention to a pre-reflexive (or pre-conscious) bodily self-awareness that binds us to the world and to each other. The arts of the street thus demonstrate that it is possible to perceive, conceive, and live (in) urban space in different, possibly more equitable, ways.

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Dedication

For Dominique,

After wandering long in a shadowy wood, I struggled through a tangled thicket of briars and doubt, to emerge into your sunlit clearing.

Thank you for keeping the clearing open.

Mon coeur déborde de joie.

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Introduction

0 General Introduction

This dissertation works towards an understanding of a loose grouping of creative urban practices that, tied directly to the spatial and socio-sensorial realities of modern urban life, act as forms of resistance that can enable different ways of understanding and using urban public space. By extension, these practices can challenge the routinized and largely unrecognized (in our daily lives) socio-corporeal norms and habits that help support the political and economic order of late-stage capitalism. I call this class of practices *the arts of the street*, although they do not all necessarily conform to what is often considered ‘art’ in the usual vernacular sense. Rather, as will be seen, they constitute arts in a wider sense of being creative *techne*—that is: cohesions of material technologies and associated mental-corporeal dispositions and operations—that can instill in both practitioner and casual witness (the passerby in the street) an awareness of the potential for difference and the new that inhere in the world and in our everyday intercorporeal relations.

The research that informs this text began as an investigation into how certain forms of popular (as pertains to a general sense of ‘the people’) artistic practices that are specifically linked to the concepts of *the street* and the *life of the streets* might affect the ways in which public and semi-public urban spaces are produced and experienced in a broad socio-corporeal sense—how they are *perceived, conceived, and lived*, in the terminology of the French Marxian philosopher and sociological thinker Henri Lefebvre.¹ Busking (street performance of any kind) first suggested itself to me as an *art of the street*—by which I mean a loose set of creative practices that can initiate improvised moments of encounter and exchange outside of, or alongside, the planned use of public space. As I demonstrated in my previous research with buskers in the Montreal metro system, busking does not conform to the idea of a profession, however unorthodox, but appears instead as general way of practicing an art that resists simple categorization and offers an entry-point into a different way of experiencing space, for both practitioner and

¹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*.

passerby.² From this, three general questions subsequently emerged—questions that initiated and have driven this present work. The first of these asks: *are there other types of creative practices that share key characteristics with busking, as an art of the street; and if so, what are they?* A second line of questioning, even broader in scope, considers: *what key characteristics link such practices, insofar as they are associated with the life of the streets (and are, as such, both marginal and resistant) and can instigate different ways of understanding and engaging with our everyday environments?* And, following on this, a further question: *What is the deeper theoretical significance of how these arts operate, and what do they suggest, in terms of perception, everyday creativity, and the possibilities for other ways of experiencing—and sharing in—the world?*

In these pages, I discuss a collection of practices that have assembled themselves under the umbrella term of the arts of the street. These are, in addition to busking: street art, in the more common sense of the word (graffiti art, stenciling, posterizing, etc.), punk, hip hop culture, and skateboarding (specifically: street skating). This list is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive. I explore these examples as they all involve various forms of creativity that play with the possible in urban space and everyday life while exceeding the logic of capitalist planning. As disparate as they may seem from each other, these practices share certain essential characteristics revolving around the body and how we interact with the built environment on a quotidian basis—an environment that is, for the most part, designed and constructed in the interests of efficiency, productivity, and rational management. By fomenting transitory counter-spaces within the common everydayness of urban public space, the arts of the street challenge notions of private property and the hierarchized politics of the sensible of global capitalism. But if these ‘arts’ propose a form of politics, it is not one that delineates a formal program or defines itself within the context of existing political institutions. Rather, the arts of the street are political insofar as they propose other ways of understanding and experiencing our bodies and our interactions with space and with each other such that we may reorient our perceptual trajectories, thus opening ourselves up to other ways of sensing and of being—

² Wees, “Expériences et pratiques,” “Improvised Performances.”

ways that do not answer, perhaps, to the demands of formal planning and private property.

The arts of the streets are by their very nature never fixed; they never achieve cohesive closure but exist only as activities-in-the-doing, as transient projects that claim a space, propose an altered common experience, and move on without establishing defined properties of their own. However, as lofty as these considerations may seem, in keeping with my basic contention that all interrogation always begins within particular conditions, I must first account for the conditions within which this text was produced—conditions that both completely derailed what seemed like a sound research plan *and* confirmed my underlying claim that thinking—and thus, research itself—derives from, and is ultimately inseparable from, our embodied presence in the world.

0.1 Research Approaches and Reorientations

It is my basic contention that any form of research—indeed the very act of mental interrogation—is always already firmly grounded in the perceptual world. That is: we cannot fully separate the question from the conditions of its formulation, no matter how general the question may be. As such, my primary approach can be characterized as phenomenological insofar as I take the body and sense perception as both object and method of study. Moreover, I would characterize this as a *critical* phenomenology, as I likewise understand both subjective experience and social practice as being situated within historical and material forces that invariably help shape the approach taken in any form of research. Sometime those forces seem to take the lead, in the actual implementation of a research project.

I had planned to follow up on my previous research with metro buskers by carrying out ethnographic fieldwork with other street performers as well as street artists, providing a broader context within which to explore the questions I had raised. My intention was to build up some amount of empirical evidence as I explored my core research questions. This would supplement the larger theoretical considerations I laid out (in which I would also briefly touch on punk, hip hop, and street skating), all the while keeping in mind that *how and what we think* is closely tied to *where* we are—to the spatial, sensorial and

affective possibilities present in our environment. And so it was that, in the late winter of 2020, the environment in which my research was unfolding was suddenly and dramatically altered with the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Street performers disappeared from the street, as did nearly everyone else. Travel possibilities were severely restricted. Fieldwork came to halt, and finally, given multiple other external constraints, had to be completely abandoned as designed. Where I thought I would be engaging in a more active and participatory sense of public space, I, along with countless others all over the world, retreated inward—physically, staying home and avoiding interactions with others, and mentally, left with little to do but immerse myself further in the texts that helped shape this present work. I muddled my way through, improvising solutions as I went, in a way that—as I came to see—expresses one of the central points elucidated in these pages. That is, I relied on a basic ability to ‘feel my way,’ to (re)orient myself—and my research—without having a defined strategy in place: a basic ability that is immanent in our everyday lives and that, as I will argue, link us all to a common ground of perceptual experience.

However, while the accent of this dissertation shifted as a result of the changed urban landscape, becoming a more purely theoretical text, my focus on sensation and embodiment—including my own corporeality—has informed this work through to the end. In addition to considering my own perceptual experience here and there, I include, in the final chapter, some more detailed passages derived from notes taken during field observations, as a point of entry into a more critical analysis. These observations took place in late February to early March, 2020, and then intermittently from late June through September, of that same year. The few (and very limited) conversations I had with street performers took place prior to August 30, 2020.³ In the end, this work is almost purely theoretical, yet the decision to pursue this course was made less for theoretical reasons than out of practical necessity. Indeed, as I argue in these pages—

³ In October 2019 I received approval from Western University’s Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) to proceed with my original ethnographic fieldwork (NMREB project ID 114245).

whether we think this in terms of everyday life or of academic research—it is the body that leads way.

0.2 Overview of Significant Literature

This dissertation draws on a wide range of literature, from multiple disciplines and, especially, work that moves across disciplinary boundaries. In terms of fundamental assumptions and positions, I begin by putting two major figures of 20th century French thought in conversation with each other: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Lefebvre. Merleau-Ponty's detailed analysis of perceptual experience and the body, particularly in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, provides a basic framework from which I develop my arguments concerning creativity, everyday perception, and intersubjective awareness. I look to some of his other texts, especially sections of *The Visible and the Invisible*, in further considering our sensorial embroilment in the world and with each other.

Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty the body can only be understood as situated, as tied to the wider world just as consciousness is tied to the body. The body, *a* body, is always a body in-and-of space. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes that “our body is not primarily in space but is rather of space.”⁴ Merleau-Ponty's influence can also be felt in much of the other theoretical and more anthropological and sociological literature that I draw upon—in terms of the latter's description of embodiment and of perception as a *gestalt* experience by which we integrate (or attempt to integrate) ourselves into our environment.

For Henri Lefebvre, body and space are also mutually productive; but, unlike Merleau-Ponty, Lefebvre develops his analysis from within an explicitly Marxist and post-Marxist perspective, linking the sense of fragmentation and alienation experienced in everyday life to the conditions of global capitalism and to its historical development. I draw heavily on Lefebvre's critical treatment of space and everyday life, with reference in particular to *The Production of Space* and the three volume *Critique of Everyday Life*, as well as his not-fully worked out theory of rhythmanalysis.⁵ By tying our everyday experiences to the wider social, political, and economic forces at work, and by showing

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 149.

⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

that the material-historical conditions that give rise to the crises of modernity are not inevitable, not determined in advance, this Lefebvrian analysis shows that another world *is* possible, that things can be other than as they are. For here is another underlying assumption of this dissertation: there are multiple socio-economic inequities in the world, to which we may all be exposed in one way or another in our everyday lives; and, much of the material basis of such inequities can be linked directly to the mode of social and material reproduction that we call capitalism. I employ, in the coming chapters, the term ‘late-stage capitalism’—sometimes with the prefix ‘global’ or ‘globalized.’ Although I hesitate to speak of *late capitalism* as it may be premature to think that we are transitioning into some completely different arrangement of socio-economic relations of production, it seems clear that we have seen significant enough changes in these relations to acknowledge a transition away from industrial capitalism. Late-stage capitalism, or “post-Fordist capitalism” for autonomist and post-autonomist theorists,⁶ is characterized by the distribution of productive activity into all realms of life, both globally (the mobility of capital and the forced mobility of labour) and individually (subjective experience turned into product and productive activity, deracinated commodity and perpetual labour). But, while the logic of capital seems to infiltrate every crevice of our lives, the unstable and processual nature of space and everyday experience is such that, as Lefebvre argues, there remain moments of possibility in the everyday.⁷

In addition to his important philosophical and sociological output, Lefebvre is one of the most influential thinkers in the realms of urban geography and urban studies. I cite a range of such authors who have been influenced by Lefebvre’s work, including Tim Edensor (movement, the body, and everyday spatial experience), Paul Simpson (street performance), and Iain Borden (skateboarding). Michel de Certeau is another important French thinker whose ideas appear scattered throughout these pages. His discussions of everyday practices, of strategies and tactics, of the “ordinary practitioners of the city,” of the productivity of speech, and of the creative murmurings of the crowd,⁸ all provide key

⁶ See Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labour”; Virno, “General Intellect”, *Grammar of the Multitude*.

⁷ See in particular Lefebvre’s “theory of moments,” *Critique II*, 340 ff.

⁸ *Practice of Everyday Life, Culture in the Plural*.

elements in linking up various threads pursued in this dissertation. De Certeau's work, in many respects, complements that of Lefebvre and of Merleau-Ponty, but does so by adding particular nuances and imparting a helpful vocabulary. This is also the case in terms of other authors that I refer to, who adopt what can be characterized as an ecological perspective of perception. This perspective is represented in particular by the American psychologist James G. Gibson and the British anthropologist Tim Ingold (who is himself indebted to Gibson),⁹ who argue for a model of perception that is situational and relational, in which the individual (or 'organism') seeks out what is afforded to it within its environment. Much like Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, this ecological anthropology understands the senses as an integral system that is nonetheless subject to changing conditions. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a major figure in anthropological theory, also provides a concept that is of particular importance for my purposes: the idea of the *bricoleur*,¹⁰ which is also important for other theorists that I draw on (notably de Certeau).

Other thinkers of note whose work has some bearing on the formulation of, and the conclusions reached by, this dissertation include Alfred Schütz for his more sociologically applied phenomenology, Marcel Mauss for his foundational analysis of the "techniques of the body"¹¹ and Georg Simmel, for his descriptions of the sensory fragmentation and social and affective estrangement that are the result of the rationalizing logic of the money economy. I also draw on some of the work of Jacques Rancière, invoking two concepts that prove useful for my purposes: his description of the "distribution of the sensible" and his analysis of critical art, all of which will be elucidated in due course. Throughout this entire dissertation, I invoke multiple sources to explore questions and substantiate the arguments put forward: these are too many and too varied to mention here, but I will note that, although making only a few appearances in these pages, the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza nonetheless makes himself felt in terms of certain key ideas concerning the body, knowledge, and the emotions.

⁹ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*.

¹⁰ *Savage Mind*.

¹¹ "Techniques."

0.3 Outline of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 1 delves into questions of perception, space, and everyday experience by working through some of the key ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Lefebvre. Although there are important differences between these two thinkers, what interests me here are the areas where their perspectives on space and the body are largely complementary. From this, I begin to develop an understanding of the everyday as simultaneously mundane and unreflexive *and* as opening onto moments of creative possibility. In this chapter I also introduce some concepts and considerations from Gibson, Ingold, and de Certeau amongst others, that will reappear in later chapters. I begin the chapter with an exploration of the co-constitution of body and space and the “perceptual faith” that, according to Merleau-Ponty, guides us and allows us to negotiate the apparent contradictions in our perceptions and in the world around us. From there, I move through some of Lefebvre’s work on space and everyday life, discussing the relationship between capitalism, everyday experience and the (re)production of space, to show that the everyday simultaneously suggests stultifying repetition—the workaday habits and routines that fill much of our days—and speaks of possibility and difference and of a common ground of experience. I show that there is a fundamental element of creativity at play in the everyday and argue that this creative potential can also act as a form of resistance insofar as it represents an opportunity to produce something outside of the planned use of space. This is important to my overall project, as it establishes the ideas of everyday creativity and a common ground of experience that may (potentially) be accessible to all. I introduce the concept of *bricolage*, taken from Lévi-Strauss, and connect this to the modern notion of doing-it-yourself, or DIY, which will become important later in my discussion of the arts of the street (punk, in particular). I also emphasize that the everyday creativity of bricolage, as outlined herein, is not a call for something that *might* be—as a proscription for a program of social transformation—but is a description of a basic capacity that inheres in our very being because it is already present in the world, from the moment that we are in the world. I introduce the related concepts of resonance and rhythm in this chapter, as they are relevant to both acoustic phenomena and as descriptors in discussing the spatial and affective relations that help structure our daily lives. These two related concepts reappear, independently and

together, in subsequent pages. I close the chapter by elaborating on the ideas of *affordances*, *orientations*, and of *projects (in the world)*, primarily as general concepts but with some discussion of how these apply specifically to my research project. In doing so, I also introduce and integrate some concepts from Spinoza that are relevant to my discussion. Chapter 1 emphasizes the idea that our very being might be understood as movement and activity—activities whereby we are *projected* into the world, as we engage in projects in the world within which we find ourselves. This is significant for my argument concerning interrogation and critique as rooted in and emerging from practical activity.

Chapter 2 covers some of the same ground as the previous chapter but from a different angle—one that is grounded in more practical considerations and that positions my approach within a more anthropological and sociological framework. Throughout a substantial portion of this chapter, I work through Marcel Mauss' essay "Techniques of the Body" in conversation with other work, drawing on and critiquing some of these sources as well as the original text. I thus outline my own understanding of the simultaneously social and material qualities of the senses and of everyday experience—specifically within the context of late-stage urban capitalism. I then move to a discussion of the 'life of the emotions' as pertains to perception and social experience, introducing ideas from Georg Simmel in conversation with some more recent literature on the senses, affect, and emotion. I go on to outline what Jacques Rancière terms the "distribution of the sensible"¹²—a way of describing and analyzing the relationship between the sensible and the political¹²—as part of a discussion of the emotions in both collective and subjective experience. I discuss the ways in which "the politics of the sensible," in François Laplantine's terminology,¹³ have been and continue to often be regimented within an ocularcentric hierarchy of the senses. I touch on the role played by architecture in everyday experience, within a broader discussion of technology and the *technological affordances* of modernity—in terms of how these help shape our perceptual experiences, both constraining the possible and simultaneously offering new tools for creativity and

¹² Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents, Politics of Aesthetics*.

¹³ Laplantine, *Life of the Senses*.

action. I close the chapter by questioning some common assumptions about vision and our perception of the world, and explore how these relate to certain aspects of modernity and of European intellectual history. The primary goal of this chapter is to demonstrate both the constructed and productive nature of the everyday sensorium, and to link the perceptual affordances of everyday life to the operations of global late-stage capitalism—to the rationalizing logic of the money economy and the material and affective estrangement of modernity described by Simmel. Yet, as will be seen, this does not lead to a total closure and the elimination of creativity, critique, and action. This chapter largely completes the theoretical groundwork, begun in the previous chapter, for what follows: a detailed description and exploration of the arts of the street.

Chapter 3 arrives at the heart of this dissertation. In this chapter I delineate precisely what the arts of the street *are* and how they function—and why this matters. I begin the chapter with a discussion of Rancière’s conception of critical art, and explore the relationship between aesthetics and politics—where the first of these terms refers to socio-corporeally organized sense experience, while the second is concerned with the basic questions of how we, as a collectivity, are to live together. While not being uncritical of Rancière myself, I find his account of critical art to be compelling on certain levels, and I show that some of the key characteristics that Rancière identifies are also expressed in the arts of the street. But, there is a fundamental distinction here. While Rancière’s critical art ultimately finds its home—its *proper* place—in the institution of the gallery, the arts of the street are precisely always *of the street* and as such they possess an exuberant excess that cannot be fully be recuperated by the forces of productivity and value creation. *The street*, as I will detail, is to be understood in a broad sense—not simply actual roadways, though these too, but sidewalks and public squares, back alleys and vacant lots, the fringes of shopping malls and city parks. But it is more than just a physical location: it also represents a realm of social encounter, of habituated daily practices and routinized *dispositions* (in a mental and a corporeal sense of the word). The street, as I will argue, is a liminal space: the fragmented, unstable realm in between public and private. Under the spatio-economic regime of late capitalism, the street is today all be completely absorbed into, on the one hand, the functionalism of ‘progressive’ urban planning, and on the other, an unending spectacle of growth and

consumption—a grand parade of packaged desires. Yet, by its very nature, the street retains an indeterminacy, an ambiguity and excess that opens upon a sense of possibility and the common creativity that inheres in the everyday. I thus tie this concept of the street to our perceptual presence in the world and the improvisational skills of bricolage already discussed.

The arts of the street organize themselves around practical concerns. Consequently, I construct my argument with multiple concrete examples that illustrate specific points concerning these varied sets of practices. I discuss examples of street performance and, to a lesser degree, street art, punk, hip hop culture, and street skateboarding. These practices are all ‘arts’ in a conceptual sense of *techne*, which I discuss as a combination of diverse material technologies and sets of related practices and dispositions. And, while these sets of practices may become habituated such that they alter one’s usual everyday ways of doing and being, they never assume formal properties but remain ‘minor arts’ that claim a space of their own and reappropriate a remainder from capitalist planning before moving on. Busking provides my primary source in supporting my argument, but I treat each of these arts singly and together, with some extra emphasis on punk and street skating. I identify four essential characteristics that tie these different creative urban practices to the transformative potential that Rancière attributes to critical art. Firstly, the arts of the street express a plurality of motives, practices, and self-conceptions. They are concerned less with accepted categories, media, or technical procedures of art than with the resulting effects—the social and corporeal relations that are put into play. Secondly, they employ themes and materials from everyday life, working in the style of the *bricoleur* with whatever débris and detritus is afforded. This is most obviously true of punk which is explicitly characterized by do-it-yourself aesthetics, but all of the arts of the street rely on a sense of improvisational play that draws inspiration from the everyday and the common creativity of bricolage. Thirdly, the arts of the street distinguish themselves from their quotidian surroundings while simultaneously threatening to eliminate themselves as ‘arts’ by being subsumed in the endless circulation of commodities. They are always subject to capitalist recuperation—commodification—yet they also always posit an excess, a uselessness that escapes the logic of value and measure. Finally, they may open up spaces of encounter and exchange that suggest a reconfiguration of existing spatial and sensorial

relations, if only temporarily. In this way, the arts of the street show themselves to have a creative potential that acts as a form of critique: they demonstrate that it is possible to have a different politics of the sensible by expressing other ways of relating to and engaging with the everyday urban environment and with each other.

The arts of the street are, then, political in the sense that they manifest different ways of perceiving, conceiving, and living everyday urban space. It is this point that I argue in the final chapter of this dissertation. There, I bring together and elaborate upon the central arguments put forward in the previous chapters. It is also in this final chapter that I include a more self-reflexive subjective element, drawing on some of my field observations. In this way, I ground my overarching argument in the pragmatic concerns of everyday practices, as captured in phenomenological ethnographic research designs, while also contextualizing both my own project and the questions behind it within wider social and historical forces. This includes a brief discussion of the effects on public space caused by the SARS-CoV-2 global pandemic. In this chapter, I draw on the post-autonomist Marxist theorist Paolo Virno to introduce the concepts of the *General Intellect* and an everyday virtuosity that speaks of a common creative capacity: a capacity that binds us all to a pre-subjective perceptual sense of the body. I explore the idea of the crowd—of the public, or publics, of the mass and the many—and link the concept of *the multitude*, in Virno's thought, to the common creativity of bricolage, largely by way of Michel de Certeau. Finally, I show that while the colonizing logic of rational calculation and private property has a seemingly endless capacity for reinvention (of its own terms) and appropriation (of all it encounters), there is nonetheless a counter-logic of excess—of the useless, of the negative—in the amateur virtuosity of the arts of the street that resists the logic of capital. These arts—as distillations of the creativity that resides in everyday space and in the shared spaces of modern urban life—demonstrate that this capacity (i.e. the general do-it-yourself logic of bricolage) is a common trait that we all share with each other.

I end this dissertation with a short conclusion where, after summarizing the main points raised throughout, I consider some of the broader implications of my principal argument—in particular, the sense of possibility in the notion of amateur virtuosity, and

in the productive play of everyday bricolage that is encapsulated in the arts of the street. Finally, I argue that despite capitalism's seemingly endless recuperative capacities, there is an excess in the world that always presupposes another, possible, world. The arts of the street demonstrate this excess.

Chapter 1

1 Perception, Space and Everyday Life

This chapter works through the larger theoretical concepts that inform this project. I aim, here, for a general description of the processes and practices that allow us to carry on in our everyday lives without giving much thought to *how* we actually negotiate the innumerable quotidian micro-decisions that our environment demands of us. I explore how, in our experience of ourselves and others in the world, we maintain a cohesive sense of self despite the ambiguity of our perceptions, as we attempt to ‘fit’ into the world around us—*as though* ‘self’ and ‘world’ are autonomous, independently definable terms. In a very broad sense the question is: how it is that, for the most part, ‘things hold together’? That is: we generally expect the everyday world to function *more-or-less* predictably, and we navigate the *more-or-less* familiar terrain of our daily lives without giving it much thought. Yet, as we will see, upon closer examination the familiar world may become strange to us as we become disoriented in our environment. Most of the time, however, the familiar holds: habitual routine prevails over novelty, risk, innovation.

Not only *how it is* that we get to work, take care of children, procure nourishment, and attend to the myriad mundane, and intermittently unfamiliar or surprising tasks and occasions that make up the quotidian, but *that we do* all these things in complexly coordinated relations with a multiplicity of other agents—human or otherwise—rests upon an implicit and generally unexamined corporeal faith that integrates our activities into the world while simultaneously obscuring the contradictions both within our perceptions and in society at large. In the *natural attitude* I tend to assume, at least at a pre-reflexive level, that my own perceptions are essentially correct and that there is a stable continuity in my everyday experience of the world; and, I surmise that this is so for others, as well. I go about my day with the assumption that the world will continue to function today as it did yesterday: the buses will run more or less on time, there will be food on the grocery store shelves, and the other people I encounter will behave in ways that conform to my general expectations. All this seems to happen seamlessly, naturally—unless some event radically disrupts my perceptions of myself and the world

around me. In such an event, I may find myself disoriented, unable to find my perceptual bearings. As disturbing or at times as debilitating as such crises can be, they may also in some circumstances offer new possibilities in terms of our perceptual capacities and, following from this, our relationship with others and with our environment. However, this is a potential that can just as easily collapse back into the habitual maintenance of the existing relations of social and material reproduction that underlie the everyday.

In the subsequent chapters of this work, I delve into more concrete detail to discuss my central concern: the creative and critical capacities contained in our everyday activities; how these capacities are formulated within public urban space in the context of late-stage capitalism; and, how the *arts of the street*, which encapsulate these capacities, may initiate the transformative potential that inheres in the everyday but may, equally, simply normalize and reproduce the social-sensorial relations that underpin the politics of the sensible of late global capitalism. In those later pages, I move from a primarily conceptual description of the questions explored herein to a more applied perspective, using concrete examples that illustrate my argument and ground it more firmly in the corporeality of experience. In this chapter, I focus on working out a more theoretical—or general—understanding of perception and everyday life, and the place of critique, creativity, and action in the realm of quotidian experience. I begin with a general consideration of perception and the co-constitution of body and world—or organism and environment—by way of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” alongside an ecological model of perception and action. This leads to a discussion of what Merleau-Ponty calls *the perceptual faith*, which, I argue, is largely consonant with the way that we operate in *everyday life*, as theorized by Henri Lefebvre. Both describe processes that naturalize socio-corporeal practices and attitudes while simultaneously offering us an entryway into critique and—potentially—creative action.

In my treatment of everyday life, I draw in particular on Lefebvre’s work and continue to do so in the discussion of space that follows. In the context of global capitalism, how space is experienced, what it ‘means,’ and how it forms our everyday experience involves an ongoing tension between the dominant forces of social and economic reproduction and a deep-seated improvisational impulse that is as persistent as it is protean. This creative—

and utopic—aspect to the everyday, I argue, can be understood as expressing the common skills of the generalist, the amateur, the *bricoleur*, in a way that connects us all to the pre-reflective corporeal awareness of perceptual faith. I also, in this chapter, touch on the subject of sound and of acoustic experience, and introduce the concepts of rhythm and resonance which will reappear in the subsequent chapters. Beyond their import in acoustic phenomena, both resonance and rhythm serve as useful concepts in better understanding and describing the interrelational and processual nature of perception as a distributed activity amongst multiple agents operating within a dynamic environment. This chapter ends by returning to some of the points made thus far, positioning my overarching argument within a detailed theoretical framework that draws on multiple sources.

1.1 Organism and Environment

The conceptual tools and analytic approaches that we adopt are inevitably derived from experience, from the world—a world that both precedes us and that is continually reformulated by our participation in it. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no *a priori* omniscient perspective upon the field of experience that would make of it an object for us; we proceed by way of experience toward knowledge. As such, “there remains only to study what the world and truth and being are, in terms of the complicity that we have with them.”¹⁴ It is the world as we come to know it that establishes the conditions of possibility for any form of inquiry. To critically interrogate phenomenal experience—to ask: What is there? What is the truth of my perception? And: might there be other sensoria, different ways of engaging with the world—we must first have concepts of the world, of *a* world and we cannot find these in a purely self-reflective, non-sensing cogito. We must first experience the world; and, insofar as we experience anything, we do so through sense perception, through and with our bodies. From Merleau-Ponty, I understand sensation as providing the ground within which perceptions take shape, as perceptual awareness coheres in the body—a body that is an arrangement of integrated perceptual modes, that is already in the world of which I become aware in my activities.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 107.

This perceptual awareness precedes and allows for my conscious reflections yet also exceeds my critical judgement, reaching into the objective (i.e. pre-subjective) body of sensation.

I walk along the sidewalk, cross the street during a break in the automobile traffic, enter some building—a library, grocery store, movie theatre, my home—that beckons to me, invites certain bodily movements and dispositions according to its construction, according to the possibilities it affords me, *and* according to my mental and corporeal dispositions, conscious and non-conscious. I exit and once again cross a street. As I near the opposite curb I hear the screech of a car's breaks. Although I immediately know that the sound source is at some distance from me and that I am in no imminent danger, my head has already turned, my muscles tensed: my body is ahead of me, it would seem. The raw sensation of my environment that informs my perceptual being—and thus provides the foundation for conscious reflection—animates my body such that I possess (or, perhaps more accurately: I am possessed by) a pre-reflexive corporeal awareness that allows me, in Merleau-Ponty's phrasing, to *gear into* the world. In the moment that I reflect on some sensation, I am already implicated in the world. I come to know the world through my everyday activities, and it is by way of my body that I find myself positioned in relation to others and my surroundings. "The thing and the world are given with the parts of my body" in the same way as "the living connection that exists among the parts of my body itself," writes Merleau-Ponty.¹⁵ Before I conceive of an *I* who reflects, who is engaged in such and such an activity, there exists some mutual correspondence between my body and the world. In the act of sensing the world, the world also senses me, as it were: a concordance between the flesh of my body and "the flesh of the world," an intertwining of the sensing and the sensible, for it is "the flesh of things that speaks to us of our own flesh, and that speaks to us of the flesh of the other."¹⁶

For the organism in its environment, there is a pre-established mutuality, a relational co-constitution between self and world. That we identify a given entity (be it individual

¹⁵ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 193.

organism or species, material object or social process) depends upon its position within a broader environment that becomes *its* environment insofar as that environment makes available—affords—certain possible courses of action. Conversely, any organism is a participatory agent in its environment—which it shares with other like and unlike organisms—such that its activities modify future possibilities. To inquire into possible forms of action residing in the everyday involves understanding what the psychologist James J. Gibson, who draws widely from biological, ecological and cognitive sciences, names *affordances*. This term is introduced in his influential *The Senses Considered As Perceptual Systems* and later refined in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, where he writes that “the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.”¹⁷ Unlike a mechanistic understanding of the world as being composed of passive objects and self-contained active organisms, in Gibson’s ecological model the concept of affordances “implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.”¹⁸ Already, I am in the world and my perception finds itself within a pre-established relation between my body and the world.

I pause to note that in my use of the word *world*, I mean firstly the sum of all that is perceptible in some respect (i.e. the ‘natural world,’ including what might only be detected by complex technologies such as powerful telescopes or electron microscopes), as well as all that might be inferred, all that we might suspect but do not know (whether derived from scientific calculation, artistic imagination, or mythological understanding). The world is, in this sense, also the possible world: the totality of all that is and that might be, beyond our own individual human perceptual and cognitive capacities. I also employ the word ‘world’ in various places in a more specifically vernacular sense—as in: *the modern world*, or *the world of high art*, or again in a more precise sense such as *the world of urban everyday life*. These more specific instances refer strictly to the world of human experience. The distinctions should be clear, from the context in which the word appears. When I speak of an *environment*, I mean a locale that is historically and materially

¹⁷ Gibson, *Ecological Approach*, 128.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

specific, that encompasses a host of relations that work together along with the organisms and ‘things’ within that environment in an ongoing process of auto-reproduction. An environment has porous borders if it has borders at all; but, it refers to the specifics of a local area with its own particular integrated conglomeration of organic and inorganic materials. Such ecological arrangements, which may range from the relatively small (such as a pond) to the expansive (such as the northern boreal forest), also include what we may describe as the social, material, economic, political, and technological forms and relations that comprise the world of human experience.¹⁹ Thus, the modern city of late-stage capitalism can be thought alongside the so-called natural world without a sharp divide between the two, without essentializing or romanticizing either but understanding them as approximate realms, arbitrarily delineated, within the world in the very broadest sense of the word. The urban environment may be drastically unlike a forest but both can be thought of as aggregates of things and relations, of movements and materiality that afford different possibilities to the various organisms within those particular environments. We might say that, although an environment has a horizon, any demarcation line will necessarily be vague, permeable, and transitory. On the other hand, the world, in a general abstract sense, seems unbounded—or its limits are ever-shifting, always expanding, and can never be grasped.

Thus, at the most rudimentary level, to *be* means to *be in an environment*. Experience is always, in the first instance, grounded. The organism hollows out a space within which *it is*; it is delineated by its space and expresses the possibilities that lie therein. Following from this, we can state that space and subject, environment and organism, are mutually constitutive. A given environment presents multiple but not unlimited, nor completely random, affordances: these are the conditions that define the range of possible activities open to an organism, the rough pathways already established in the tissue (social, biological, psychic, as may be the case) of that particular environment, which mould the

¹⁹ And, quite possibly so for many non-human worlds as well. But that question lies well beyond the subject at hand.

interests and desires of diverse organisms.²⁰ At the same time, it is an environment in flux, in constant self-reproduction, and the organisms that inhabit it are the agents of that productive activity; they thus both sustain and modify their supporting environment. There is a generative correspondence between the sensing body and the world: a mutual *resonance* that expresses our enmeshment—or our “complicity,” in Merleau-Ponty’s words—in the world of experience.²¹ Although I note some points of interest concerning acoustic perception and the role of sound in everyday life at various points throughout these pages, resonance should not be thought of as a strictly sonic phenomenon. Rather, it describes, in a more general way, a co-constitutive relationship between organisms and their environment, as well as between seemingly inert objects and material assemblages. Indeed, according to Gibson, the dynamic flux that characterizes the organism-environment relation can be understood as a form of “resonance, that is contact with the environment” that expresses a mutual attunement between stimulus and perception.²² The perception of resonance is the perception of the expression of particular affordances in an environment, in the present of their actualization.

Resonance, as material phenomenon and as perception, happens ‘all at once’ and is indicative of a pre-established agreement between organism and environment, and the seemingly discrete things that are encountered in the world. When we say that something resonates with something else, we understand there to be a consonance between them, a “concordance between the exciting frequency and the object put into vibration”²³ that would imply some pre-existing characteristic or capacity in the resonant agents, such that they are *already* receptive to such a relationship. Resonance describes a form of mimetic relation that is not strictly or simply reproductive but one that is creative, generative, that

²⁰ I understand *desire*, here, as being a bio-psychic force akin to the more practical-immediate and seemingly transparent (to both actor and observer) *interest*. Both desire and interest operate at the formative levels of individual organisms—in the most basic sense of giving form to the organism’s activities (its survival strategies, for example).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 107.

²² Gibson, *Senses Considered*, 276.

²³ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 99.

adds to and modifies the fabric of the lived world.²⁴ Acoustically, to speak of a resonant force is to describe a movement of energy between a source of activity and a receptive agent that is enlisted into the unfolding activity. For example, a tuning fork is struck, causing it to ring, and is brought within a few inches of a second tuning fork that is tuned to the same frequency: the vibrational waves emitted by the first tuning fork cause the second one to also vibrate and sound out.²⁵ This is similar to the process of ‘entrainment,’ whereby pendulum clocks in operation together will synchronize themselves over time if sharing a resonant surface.²⁶ That is, in both cases, there is a tendency toward consonance, toward mutual attunement. As we will later see, this can also be true of crowds in motion in certain kinds of public space.

The concept of resonance, as per Gibson, is helpful in imagining the pre-established set of possibilities—the affordances—present in every activity: there is a latent resonance in every moment. The organism (and I explicitly mean to include *us* in this concept: *Homo sapiens* as species, and the individual subject: you, me) is fully attuned to—or, in tune with—its space when it inhabits the world to its utmost, in the fullest expression of what it is afforded in that moment. The organism fulfills itself in its niche: “we feel pleasure and protection,” writes architect Juhani Pallasmaa, “when the body discovers its resonance in space.”²⁷ We can also think of the emotions as being forms of resonances that operate between people on the level of the body (though this might be characterized as much by dissonance as by consonance). Although I leave the subject of the emotions aside for the moment I note, here, that the affective resonances between individuals that are formulated as emotion are indicative of a corporeal mutuality that exceeds the individual self or body—an excess that ties us to each other and to our shared environment. And, while I am not concerned solely with the sonic properties of resonance, paying closer attention to sound and acoustic experience is helpful in understanding the porous boundaries between sensory modes and between the sensing

²⁴ Wees, “Reverberation as Mimetic Replication.” Cf. Mühlhoff, “Affective Resonance”; Librandi-Rocha, “Becoming Natives of Literature.”

²⁵ O’Callaghan, *Sounds*, 79.

²⁶ Bauer and Kosiba, “How Things Act.”

²⁷ Pallasmaa, *Skin of the Eyes*, 72. On ‘finding one’s niche,’ see also Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*.

and the sensed. Indeed, a broad and critical consideration of sound—of acoustic perception, of the social role and embodied experience of sound, and of the potential for sound production as tool for, and field of, critical research—can be a helpful counterweight to the ocularcentric bias that is present in much of the theoretical literature. And, as will be seen in later chapters, the sonic dimension of urban life has a special relevance as concerns the arts of the street, toward which we are working.

This expanded understanding of the everyday sensorium emphasizes the “ecological approach” that underpins my position—an approach that, according to anthropologist Tim Ingold, “take[s] as its point of departure, the whole-organism-in-its-environment.”²⁸ We are always already enmeshed in a world of sense. The question is, then: how is it that we negotiate these myriad sensory stimuli, all the while maintaining a cohesive sense of self? How do we ‘make sense’ of a world that is in perpetual flux? For Merleau-Ponty, this happens first and foremost at a level of pre-conscious perceptual awareness that inheres in my corporeality, when “my body is geared into the world,” such that “my perception presents me with the most varied and most clearly articulated spectacle possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they anticipate from the world.”²⁹

1.2 *Perceptual Faith* and Everyday Practical Knowledge

At the level of our everyday activities, we generally assume that things will follow familiar patterns; like all organisms, we seek predictable regularity so as to orient ourselves within our environment. It cannot be otherwise: to make sense of our surroundings and procure the needs for survival—to simply ‘get by’ in the day-to-day—we cannot engage in detailed reasoning at every moment before taking action. It would be completely impractical to consider all potential outcomes stemming from our actions in every daily encounter and situation. We thus rely on a pre-reflexive understanding of ourselves and our surroundings. We get by, at a pragmatic everyday level, by way of

²⁸ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 19.

²⁹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 261.

what Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith”³⁰: a sort of ‘taking at face value’ the way that we experience things, which allows us to carry out daily activities without considering the conditions that make those activities possible. This is not a faith based on conscious inner reflection or a reasoned consideration of the world. Rather, it is founded in the fleshiness of being, in our sensorial entwinement in the world—a corporeal faith that precedes concept formation and provides the basis for subsequent rational thought and critical interrogation. Insofar as the world ‘gives’ me my body and is the ground of my experience, my body—in advance of my ability to reflect upon my own bodily experience—knows its place in the world and does not interrogate the veracity of what it senses, unless explicitly provoked to do so. Without our even noticing it, a perceptual faith allows us to accommodate the contradictions we are faced with when we try to reconcile our own subjective experience of the world with a more objective perspective that seeks to account for the very possibility of a world, that there is *something* that I and others can experience. “*The ‘natural’ man,*” writes Merleau-Ponty, “holds on to both ends of the chain, thinks at the same time that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of his body. Yet coexist as the two convictions do without difficulty in the exercise of life, once reduced to theses and to propositions they destroy one another and leave us in confusion.”³¹

That there *is* a common world of which we are a part rests not on some universally accessible self-reflexive consciousness but, in the first instance, on what Merleau-Ponty designates as “natural perception, which is accomplished with our entire body all at once and opens onto an inter-sensory world.”³² This pre-reflexive experience of the world—of my body in the world—is the basis for any subsequent action or interrogation. Even as we focus our attention and critically interrogate the world, we are still *in* and *of* the world. The transition from a pre-conscious corporeal investment in the world to a reflexive position of remove (or, rather: of *partial* remove, a feeling of holding the world at arm’s length, even as we are always already invested in the world) involves a series of

³⁰ *Visible and Invisible*.

³¹ *Ibid*, 8. Italics in the original.

³² *Phenomenology of Perception*, 234.

abstractions. But, the very possibility for critical interrogation depends upon an already accomplished bodily disposition: a *being-toward* that allows myriad sensations to cohere in such a way that, not only can I say, *a posteriori* to conscious reflection, that ‘I felt *this*’ or ‘I had *that* experience,’ but that this awareness constitutes the very ground of the *I*, of the ‘I-as-the-one-who-perceives-*that*.’ In this pre-conscious sensorial cohesiveness, that Merleau-Ponty describes as a *gestalt* experience, the world and my body are given for each other, in advance of the perceptual awareness that gives me my body as distinct from that which surrounds me and those others with whom I share the world.

Consequently, to carry out any form of critical interrogation we must start from our own enfleshment in the world. We begin in a world that at once delineates the realm of possible action and is always made anew, a world that is dynamic, processual—in a word: experiential. “The world itself,” says Merleau-Ponty, “is the totality of perceptible things and the thing of all things... the universal style of all possible perceptions.”³³

A *style*: not a script or a stage, much less an abstract, reasoned understanding, but a mode of being that confirms for us our place in the world alongside the presence of others. It is my body, as a general project in the world, that is the precondition for my own individual projects and the activities that sustain me and animate my life—a life that is at once ‘my own’ and that proceeds from a shared realm of pre-personal corporeality. My activities are my own but they are preceded by my body, and this body is not “the momentary body that is the instrument of my personal choices and that focuses upon some world, but rather the system of anonymous ‘functions’ that wraps each particular focusing into a general project.”³⁴ We take up projects in the world, first, in the midst of ambiguity and imprecise perceptions relative to others and the world and in our use of the things in the world. The pre-personal ground within which our own intentional activities take shape cannot be fully grasped by us as individuals and implies some excess beyond our own perceptions. This collective—because pre-subjective—experience of the world “gives every subsequent perception its sense, and it is started over at each moment.”³⁵

³³ *Primacy of Perception*, 16.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 265.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The vital world of our singular actions and of historical-material processes must ever be started anew. The social relations, corporeal habits, and material arrangements that comprise the lived experience of daily life are not fixed and enduring: they must be continually enacted and reproduced in our activities. The quotidian is maintained by, and in, our daily practices—practices that are largely sustained by normalized responses to existing conditions and thus tend to reproduce those same conditions. But this is only a tendency, not a certainty. Just as Merleau-Ponty describes the world as a “style”, we might think of the everyday as an ensemble of relations and improvisational techniques that is put to use in a wide range of situations but that cannot be understood as a comprehensive system or cohesive field. The everyday can be said to be less of a territory, discourse, or performance than an attitude—which is not mental *or* physical but both at once.³⁶ And if the world and our presence in it is expressed as a style, it is one that is malleable, readily adaptable, yet maintains enough of durability to be apprehensible; it is one that seeks novelty as much as it is routine-bound—an attitude in and through the body, a disposition that lends itself to a wide range of situations and conditions, while still being largely constrained by past conditions. In practical terms, the field of play between body and world, between sensation, perception, and reflexive consciousness, articulates itself, in the first instance, in our everyday activities that weave the matrix of our experience and give it a temporal and affective durability. “My body is wherever it has something to do,” writes Merleau-Ponty,³⁷ affirming the active, processual nature of perception and consciousness. Perceptual faith, as a pre-reflexive practical awareness that organizes our perceptions and gives form to our projects in the world, operates on a logic of approximation and of ‘making do.’ In our everyday activities, we draw upon the common skills of the generalist in a sort of improvisational and adaptive *bricolage* (of which more, below) that matches the protean and processual nature of lived experience.

³⁶ The earliest known written use of ‘attitude’ in English, dating to 1668, is in the sense of *posture*; it can be traced through the Italian for ‘aptitude’ to the Latin root *aptus*—fit, physically prone and capable (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/attitude>), but also in the sense of “fastened, connected, prepared, in good order.” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apt#etymology>).

³⁷ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260.

Comprised largely of habituated procedures and dispositions—but never a fully worked-out project that achieves completion—the everyday hovers mid-way between our subjective lives and the impersonal movement of total perception. It is in this crossing over that individual social actors inculcate the habitual spatial-corporeal practices that reproduce the dominant relations of social and material production and reproduction. In any given cultural-historical setting, a conventionalized set of mental and corporeal attitudes/aptitudes, corresponding to the “stock of knowledge” as theorized by Alfred Schutz,³⁸ is maintained and reproduced both collectively and individually.³⁹ This general stock of knowledge (the conventionalized ‘ways of doing and being’) provides the basis for how corporeal and spatial relations are enacted, according to the particular occasion. As a sort of behavioral guideline, this ‘common knowledge’ informs us in how we are to behave, carry ourselves, react—what is expected of us—in everyday situations. And, for the most part, people seem to ‘just know’ these things.⁴⁰ However, it must be emphasized that none of the foregoing implies that all people experience the world in the same way, or that we may posit some universal perceiving subject to which all particular subjectivities would conform. Indeed, despite the social or general character of the shared stock of knowledge, we cannot overlook the variability of bodies and their singular interactions not with *space*, as an abstract category designating a universal condition, but with particular concrete *spaces*. In reality, we all experience *a* space somewhat differently from each other. In addition to the particularities of our own singular experiences, factors such as race, gender, class, physical abilities all weigh heavily in this. The concrete spaces of modernity are not neutral but built with purpose—primarily to facilitate the smooth functioning of global capitalist exchange, and the reproduction of compliant subjectivities. It is, thus, necessary to consider how built space and spatial practices work together in allowing some people to readily *fit* into their environments,

³⁸ *Phenomenology of the Social World*; Schütz and Luckmann, *Structures of the Lifeworld*.

³⁹ I would contrast my own position with Schütz’s in that my emphasis is more on a corporeal stock of knowledge than on a linguistic or mental-conceptual one, whereas Schütz largely remains within the more ‘mentalist’ perspective of German idealism, with less attention paid to the actual details of corporeality.

⁴⁰ The *doxic* as described by Pierre Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*.

while others my struggle on a daily basis to do so, or are marginalized within everyday spaces, or excluded altogether.

“One of the hallmarks of modernity is the effort to control and standardize human bodies and to bestow status and value accordingly,” writes Rosemary Garland-Thomson who argues that disability—or ability, for that matter—is never an inherent characteristic of a person but is always constructed in a specific spatial and temporal context.⁴¹ Dis/ability is defined relative to the space of experience, which bears the imprint of what has preceded that moment. Spatial-corporeal practices lend a continuity and cohesiveness to our perceptual experiences and ensure the reproduction of existing socio-economic relations. Space is never neutral: the dominant relations of class, gender, race, language, corporeal and cognitive capacities, and a range of other classificatory categories, help structure modern human society.⁴² Everyday ‘casual’ racism, of the kind that may be barely registered by its promulgators, is but one of the ways that existing forms of division and oppression are continually re-inscribed through daily habits.⁴³ Age is also an important factor in our ongoing ability to gear in to the world—not simply, or only, as a natural fact of our bodies but because of the social and material structures that guide the experiential flow of our individual lives. As we age, or as our bodies change in other ways, we must adapt the means that we use to get by as we attempt to mesh with our surroundings.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, major disruptions to our perceptions may often, with requisite time, be overcome and we adapt, learning to gear in anew, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates.⁴⁵ The extent to which we may do so, however, will depend upon the nature of the disruption, an individual’s prior history—their experiential trajectory—and what strategies and support may be available. However, sometimes the conflict between a person’s subjective experience and their surroundings is such that they simply cannot comfortably fit in: bodies that do not fit in, that *misfit*.⁴⁶

⁴¹ “Misfits,” 598.

⁴² Hetherington, *Badlands of Modernity*.

⁴³ Ngo, “Racist Habits.”

⁴⁴ Paiva, “Collapsed Rhythms”; Weiss, “Normal Abnormalities.”

⁴⁵ *Phenomenology of Perception*.

⁴⁶ Garland-Thomson, “Misfits.”

Indeed, if the way that we orient ourselves in the world involves a gearing in, in which the body finds itself at home in the world, we might, then, ask: what happens when the gears slip, or simply don't mesh? As Mariana Ortega points out, much of the literature in the phenomenological tradition has been amply descriptive of *being-in-the-world* as a form of being "at ease" in one's wider environment, sometimes including an account of disturbances to this ease, though these are typically treated as occasional or exceptional. However, for those who are marginalized because of race, gender, physical or linguistic ability, or any of the myriad other ways in which some bodies are marked in opposition to a normalized sensorium (above all, that of the affluent, hetero-normative white male), this is an everyday reality. "While all selves may experience not being-at-ease occasionally, multiplicitous selves at the margins experience it continuously."⁴⁷ And yet, it is possible for our own sense experience and perceptive capacities to be fundamentally altered by being close to others who may be sensorially marginalized—'close' on a personal, emotional level, or even by working with and around them. For example, Christopher Fletcher reports that, over time, doctors and other staff in a specialized clinic for patients with extreme environmental sensitivities (primarily triggered by odors from chemical compounds such as cleaning and personal care products) develop an extremely acute sense of smell.⁴⁸ This suggests that, in some instances at least, bodily co-presence and focussed activity can help reconfigure our sense perceptions and change how we engage with and understand the world. This point will become more important later when I examine forms of everyday creativity and informal, or minor, art practices. It is this apparent capacity to modify spatial and sensorial experience—our own and that of others—that underlies the project at hand. It is my contention that the productive disturbances to the dominant sensorium as may be encountered in everyday life can provoke moments of possibility, of other ways of being and doing—ones that may or may not be more equitable and inclusive but that invariably show us some other way of engaging in our environment. We orient ourselves in the world by taking up projects that

⁴⁷ Ortega, *In-Between*, 60.

⁴⁸ "Dystopothesia," 385.

may then become processes of *reorientation*: “it is at the heart of the everyday,” says Henri Lefebvre, “that projects become works of creativity.”⁴⁹

The everyday allows us to reach into the pre-conscious being of the world and interrogate the conditions within which we find ourselves. The everyday touches the objective body of the world but can never contain it—there is always some excess beyond routinized spatial practices, that escapes the most complex aggregates of social relations and biological forms. Because of this excess, this ‘beyond-me’ whose presence can nonetheless be sensed, the everyday presents moments of difference that stand out against a background of average anonymity. Such moments may be ‘lifted’ to a more focussed level of engagement, becoming material for new projects, for creative action. There is, thus, a problematic at the core of everyday life that allows for a broader critical project—one that sees reflected in individual subjectivities the ideological machinations of capitalist interests. Rather than an individualized, isolated phenomenon, Dorothy Smith argues that subjective everyday experience “presents itself to us... as a point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject or subjects, into a larger social and economic process.”⁵⁰ The everyday, as much as it reproduces and naturalizes ideological obfuscation, provides openings for reflection, for critique, for action. The very material-practical basis of everyday life offers itself as the means by which we may take up creative, critical projects that themselves exceed the half-lit world of daily habits and unreflexive socio-corporeal practices. The everyday gathers together subject and object within these practices—in my pragmatic activities—and coheres in a space that it is both my own and that of others. My body finds itself guided by the objects and relations that comprise my materially grounded pragmatic concerns. My hand moves among things; touching them, I bring a coherence to the world, to my vantage point upon the world; the things assume form and solidity under my touch. At the same time, these things order space, guide my hand as it moves among them. I am, according to Merleau-Ponty, both the touching and the touched, and I come to find my place, as one body, among these things.⁵¹ And if the

⁴⁹ *Critique of Everyday Life II*, 41.

⁵⁰ *Everyday World as Problematic*, 157.

⁵¹ *Visible and Invisible*.

things in the world are receptive to my touch, if they show themselves to my sight, it is because there is some shared nature between them and myself, some sympathetic relation, some resonance that precedes my conscious attention and that opens up the world of experience before me.

1.3 Space: Production, Reproduction, Rhythm

The activities and attitudes that comprise the everyday do not, of course, take place in a vacuum: bodies do not move in empty space—there is no ‘empty’ space. Body and space, self and world, are inconceivable one without the other. “Our body,” says Merleau-Ponty, “is not primarily in space but is rather of space.”⁵² Space is here understood as being both phenomenal and social. As an experiential fact, it is produced by human activity and sets the stage for the ongoing reproduction of those activities. For Lefebvre, body and space are co-productive of each other, much as body and world are understood by Merleau-Ponty as creatively entwined, never fully separable one from the other. Moreover, just as the body and space are not fixed and entirely circumscribable but always unfolding in a process of becoming, so too any attempt to theorize and act upon the world must understand both subjective experience and the world itself as historically located, thus bound to changing social, political, and economic conditions. It may be that the productive correspondence between oneself and the world represents a generalizable relationship; however, as both terms (i.e. *oneself* and *the world*) are not consistently determined but historically contingent, it follows not only that the nature of that correspondence as ‘actual’ (lived) is mutable, but that any attempt at critical reflection takes place within, and is tempered by, existing spatial-corporeal relations. In the contemporary world, these relations are formulated within the globalizing forces of capitalism. We may, then, turn to Lefebvre’s analysis of spatial experience which locates questions of alienation, action, and the possibilities for difference and emancipation, squarely within the conditions of capitalist modernity.

⁵² *Phenomenology of Perception*, 149.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre provides a detailed argument covering the historical transition from what he calls absolute space to abstract space, and from thence into contradictory and, finally, differential space. The first of these corresponds, loosely, to the undifferentiated space of a ‘natural world’ before human conceptual mapping but which already contains the human as species. The expansion of mercantile interests in late medieval Europe fuelled the increasing abstraction of space, with the levelling power of the money economy homogenizing all places—just as the nascent forces of capitalism transform the use value of things into the exchange value of commodities. In the global project of late-stage capitalism, space undergoes a process of homogenization, fragmentation, and hierarchization.⁵³ All spaces are stripped of their cultural and historical significances, their unique characteristics suppressed (these differences being reflective of the bodies that produce and inhabit those different spaces), producing a mass of homogenized spaces that, then fragmented, are rendered exchangeable, discreet and alienable from their surroundings. Finally, spaces are hierarchized and reproduce existing relations of production, with centers of wealth and power dominating peripheries. This is seen in everything from global geographic concentrations of wealth versus poverty to the hierarchization of classed and racialized neighborhoods in urban centres, to the individual’s occupation of—even right to—personal corporeal space in daily life. One can think of the people who live in overcrowded tenements or refugee camps, compared to those with spacious homes and even multiple homes; the people who crowd onto buses and trains compared to those who drive alone, or perhaps even take an airplane, to go to work; or, on a smaller scale, the space that each person occupies, feels entitled to, on a bus or walking on the street, which is reflected in how we ‘carry ourselves’ and how we move. My body’s position in space and the possibilities for action—the realm of affordances that presents itself to me—is already implicated in relations of social and economic reproduction. Yet, from within the fragmented space of late capitalism, *differential space*, “the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” offers itself as a site of struggle and creative impulse, of potential action and opening onto difference.⁵⁴

⁵³ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, “Space and Mode of Production.”

⁵⁴ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 39.

While we may find fault with Lefebvre's tendency to universalize certain elements of the historical and economic development of western Europe from the Renaissance on, his overall analysis provides a viable framework for understanding what space *is*—that is: how it moulds the field of our activities, how we experience it, and how we participate in its production. In this analysis, space is simultaneously *perceived*, *conceived* and *lived*. This tripartite understanding of spatial experience has its corollary in the three ways that space is encountered and enacted; in Lefebvrian terminology, these are (somewhat awkwardly) labelled as *spatial practices*, *representations of spaces* and *representational spaces*.⁵⁵ The first of these describes the standardized and naturalized social and corporeal behaviours through which we construct the space of inhabitation that then enables the reproduction of those same behavioural attitudes (in both the mental and bodily senses of the word). Our spatial practices make up a sort of social code that we adopt, and adapt ourselves to; all members of society partake in and contribute to the reproduction of the spatial practices that structure our day-to-day perceptions and interactions (though the ways in—and extent to—which this is true will, of course, vary a great deal among individuals).⁵⁶ Representations of space, on the other hand, involve a certain technical authority. Mapping and urban planning provide convenient examples of spatial representation: they simultaneously abstract space, make it productively available to us, and define how it is to be conceived of and engaged with on a practical level (by, for example, determining the flow of traffic and regulating the movement of citizens). In the modern context, this mastery over space involves an explicit process of rationalization, as space and everyday experience are increasingly quantified in terms of their productive value. Finally, representational spaces can be understood as the lived embodiment of space: space as locus and process of inhabitation, space as sensed and performed, as unfolding experientially. It must be emphasized that, for Lefebvre, these three terms—the *perceived*, the *conceived* and the *lived*—operate in tandem and cannot be treated as fully separable, one from another: they describe spatial modes of being that,

⁵⁵ Edward Soja suggests “spaces of representation” as a more appropriate rendering of what is usually translated into English as “representational spaces.” *Third Space*, 61.

⁵⁶ The *habitus* as theorized by Bourdieu might be taken as loosely corresponding to Lefebvre's *spatial practices*. See Bourdieu, “Field of Cultural”; *Outline of a Theory*.

together, formulate spatial—thus social and sensorial—experience. The streets of the city are not simply mapped out in the abstract but directly onto the body, through daily use. Consider speed limits, crosswalks, parking regulations, bus routes, sidewalk maintenance schedules, public accessibility building codes: all are representations of space that discipline bodies and spatial practices, condition responses and impose limits on the possible, thus helping to formulate the representational—that is: *lived*—spaces of quotidian urban life.

The production of space is a multi-modal process that takes place simultaneously on multiple levels: material (involving our bodies, objects and materiality, and the wider environment), social-practical (the routine framework of procedures that structures our daily lives), and subjective-psychological (which includes reflective emotional states, creativity, and critique). Space itself, as can be said of sensation, is processual, thus time-bound. And, in the context of advanced capitalism, the rapid and ever increasing pace of technological change is such that the individual is all but overwhelmed by the need to ‘keep up.’ A constant frenzy of activity—of ‘updates’—ensures that our attention, and thus our productive energy, remains hostage to market exigencies, to the necessity of ‘earning a living’ (a phrase that expresses well the socio-economic demand that one justify one’s very existence in terms of productivity and marketability). Space comes under the sway of a perpetual drive toward consumptive growth that envisions ever new territories to absorb, well in advance of satisfying its needs in the present. No longer a stable integrated field, such as might be said of absolute space, global urban space is an amalgam of shifting, overlapping spaces held together and subsumed under the workings of capital. Economic imperatives knit together disparate places, abstracted labour, and distribution networks, but only insofar as they serve productivity and profitability.

In the contemporary world, centres and peripheries, countryside and city are all integrated into one global urban project.⁵⁷ But, this is a non-systematic project that always delays arrival. That is: capitalism’s colonization of space—at the three registers of perceived, conceived, and lived—is processual, always incomplete, an endless attempt to reach

⁵⁷ Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*.

beyond its capabilities and produce new spaces to be territorialized. This unstable ‘becoming’ is, in a sense, capitalism’s greatest strength—it accounts for a seemingly limitless capacity to adapt to and exploit new, unforeseen circumstances—but it also suggests possible openings that point beyond its monetizing logic: ruptures that may well up from within the subtle variations in subjective experience and the minor idiosyncrasies that characterize both our own individual habits (in a socio-psycho-corporeal sense) and the material particularities of any given moment in our daily lives. Fragmented and malleable, space must be continually (re)produced by social actors whose individual quotidian spatial practices are subtly but singularly coloured by their own subjective positions, giving each experiential moment a unique inflection. Consequently, if capitalism’s production of space, as an on-going condition of its own ceaseless totalizing drive, always includes rifts, disjunctures, cracks,⁵⁸ it is in these spatial interstices that we may locate all that which is not (or not easily) contained and appropriated by the forces of wealth-creation and market growth. In the marginal and the mundane of everyday life, the richness of emotional, sensory, and socio-spatial experience that exceeds the logic of capital may find expression and make itself available to us—to our interrogations.

Representations of space, in the Lefebvrian analysis, are largely conceptual and can be universalized, or at least applied in the abstract to many situations. While they may represent the language of the bureaucratic planner, their abstractive power also suggests an inherent potential for critique, for theorizing the general. Representational space, on the other hand, is precise, concrete, it “is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre,” writes Lefebvre; “it embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time.”⁵⁹ The unity of space and time in the lived body can be said to articulate itself as movement and as rhythm. In the ecological model of perception of Gibson, Ingold, and others, movement is essential to perception. Ingold writes that “far from working on sensations already received [perception] involves the continual movement, adjustment and reorientation of the receptor organs themselves.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*.

⁵⁹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 42.

⁶⁰ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 166.

As we move within an environment, the richness of our perceptual awareness increases, is continually modified. The eyes are in constant motion; the angle of the head shifts as the ears seek out sonic details in the surroundings; the whole body moves, thus imparting an endlessly shifting perspective on the world, and it does so in relation to other bodies in movement. The temporality of multiple, interacting forms of movement unfolding in space is organized and expressed as rhythm: the everyday is structured by the rhythms of our quotidian activities and of the wider relations of social and economic reproduction.⁶¹ From this, Lefebvre proposes *rhythmanalysis* as a method of critical interrogation, of bringing into evidence the relations and movement of the body in space and the reproduction of social practices that uphold the everyday.⁶²

Lefebvre's rhythmanalytical project understands the body—which is, itself, comprised of multiple rhythms—as the gauge of the rhythms of the lived world. Not simply movement itself, but the variations and irregularities that give each moment its unique characteristics: “In the body and around it,” Lefebvre writes, “rhythms are forever crossing and recrossing, superimposing themselves upon each other, always bound to space.”⁶³ Perceptual experience is formulated into a cohesive whole and held together—assumes a duration—by the patterned rhythms of everyday practical concerns, by the habituated repetition of social and material processes with the minor rhythmic variations that characterize any given moment and particular position. Rhythm expresses a materially-emplaced temporal relationship between two or more elements, a dynamic unfolding that, in its patterned regularity, provides an anchorage point for perception.

In the modern city, the rhythms of industrial output and urban infrastructure, transportation and shipping networks, and the ubiquitous automobile, all help structure what and how we perceive.⁶⁴ There is a tension, argues Lefebvre, between the cyclical time of ‘natural’ rhythms (the procession of seasons, the movement of tides, etc., and the internal rhythms of the body: lungs, circulatory system, digestion, etc.) and the linear

⁶¹ Wunderlich, “Aesthetics of Place-Temporality.”

⁶² Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

⁶³ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 205.

⁶⁴ Rhys-Taylor, “Urban Sensations,” 65.

rationalized time of the clock, of the factory and the globalizing economy. We sense this tension in our bodies, but can raise it from there to the level of conscious awareness. The rhythmic structure of daily life is performed in and through the body: a spatio-temporal process that is never complete and contains caesura, interruptions, unanticipated concordances and discordances—polyrhythmic and eurhythmic consonances, and arrhythmic breaks. As with space, the rhythmic structuring of daily life suggests a potential for play, for improvisation, for appropriation and redirection. Major disruptions to conventionalized quotidian temporality can cause one to “enter into another everydayness,” says Lefebvre.⁶⁵ The more ‘natural’ rhythms of life—deep rhythms of biological processes and of long-established cultural forms and social relations—can never be fully subsumed under the mechanized meter of economic functioning: the body resists, it maintains its own rhythms. Whether through determined negation or sheer inability, the body refuses to completely synchronize with, and submit to, the logic of instrumental reason and spatial abstraction. But in more extreme cases, rhythmic disjunctions and discord characterize the experience of the body that cannot fully gear into the world, that ‘does not fit’ into the everyday space of global modernity, or do so only with great difficulty. And these different rhythmic experiences imply a spatial experience that is different for those at the margins—people living in shelters or on the streets of modern cities, for example—but that largely goes unregistered by the majority, such is the compelling force of entrainment that lends cohesion to social space and everyday corporeal practice.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, as with resonance, paying close attention to rhythm can provide an entryway into a critical mode of being, as a means to reckon with the largely unexamined processes and practices that structure quotidian experience.

Body and space, time and movement and the finite detail through which these are lived: these, then, are the terms which underlie, at a primary level of investigation, the argument pursued throughout these pages. In the next chapter, I examine in greater detail the production of space in the context of late-stage capitalism and the formation of the modern urban sensorium. For the present, however, I further elucidate the more

⁶⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 84.

⁶⁶ Desjarlais, “Movement, Stillness”; Hall, “Urban Outreach.”

theoretical aspects of sensation, perception and everyday experience. While I aim to delineate a theoretically robust approach to these questions, I do so with the understanding that all forms of questioning find their origins in the particular, in the finite—in the fleshiness of the world and our own singular emplacement within it. Moreover, the formulation of the finite, the material, the lived, is to be found both in the mundane (re)production of the ordinary world and in the creative act of making—of making the new.

1.4 Creativity and Resistance

It is in the minutiae of the everyday, in its movements and moments, that we may locate what Merleau-Ponty calls the “anchorage points” that ground our experience by lending form to perception,⁶⁷ and that may become points of departure for a critical unsettling of perceptual faith. It is in the everyday that pragmatic concerns—which can be thought of as first existing at the biological level as a simple life-drive, the satisfaction of basic needs, and from thence developing into the complex projects whereby we implicate ourselves in our present world—cohabit with a more abstract level of engagement with the world, with our ability to think beyond our immediate circumstances and discern the less-than-obvious ways in which our world is structured. In “the lived,” Lefebvre writes, there is “a focussing of practical knowledge”⁶⁸ that both enables the reproduction of existing socio-material relations and provides the means to realize and mobilize an intersubjective consciousness, with the potential to transform social and economic relations. The pragmatic concerns of our ‘projects in the world’ underlie our ability to question and to seek out difference. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual faith accommodates the inconsistencies and lacunae in ordinary experience but simultaneously presents us with potential points of entry into a critical mode of reflection that can destabilize the ‘naturalness’ of our everyday state of being—of perceptual faith itself—and force us to reckon with the incompatibilities in our perceptions of ourselves and the world. When we focus our attention and closely interrogate the world, we begin to notice

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, 259ff.

⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 216.

the inconsistencies, contradictions, and ruptures in the fabric of everyday life. “The world is what I perceive,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance.”⁶⁹ We project ourselves into the world and come to know it through our relations with others and our surroundings, but there is also a potential for critique, for disrupting the uncritical attitude of “natural perception.” Unsettling the corporeal confidence of unreflexive everyday activity provokes a questioning of the taken-for-granted that may then inaugurate a critical perspective and initiate creative action. “*To know the everyday is to want to transform it,*” writes Lefebvre; and, to carry out a critique of everyday life “*is to understand the real by seeing it in terms of what is possible, as an implication of what is possible.*”⁷⁰

Whereas perceptual faith might be thought of as a trans-historical condition of humanity, a way of negotiating the indeterminacies of the world so as to procure the means for survival and reproduction (both social and biological), the problematic of everyday life in Lefebvre’s analysis is, as previously noted, specifically concerned with the conditions of modernity. The modern everyday involves a process of mystification: the naturalization of bourgeois values and of the socio-economic relations of mature capitalism—an ideology of dominance hiding in plain sight. The everyday presents itself as a site of possibility that can expose the ambiguity of lived experience, and in the process “leads us towards a decision which will negate [this ambiguity] and reveal it, bringing it to an end and unmasking it.”⁷¹ The ambiguity at the core of lived experience presents us with dilemmas, with the need to make decisions: this tension, according to Lefebvre, expresses a dialectical relationship between ambiguity and decision that drives the everyday. This is not a determinative dialectic that achieves a logical resolution. It is an open relation that always posits something beyond its own terms. In this sense, the dialectic in Lefebvre bears a resemblance to Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics” in that both imply

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 8.

⁷⁰ Lefebvre, *Critique II*, 98-99. Italics in original.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

something *beyond*, or *outside of*, in the negation of the actual (i.e. of the world as it is).⁷² Similarly, Ernst Bloch conceives of a dialectic that, in accounting for nonsynchronism, accommodates rather than overcomes the negative.⁷³ There is a generative impulse underlying our quotidian acts that, along with its reproductive capacities, aims for the new, for difference. Although it coalesces in the commonplace activities of life, this impulse expresses a creative desire for something other than what is: it implies a movement toward action.

However, it is important to emphasize that this is always a *potential* creative capacity. As Lefebvre notes, such “spontaneity is not always creative every time... it makes mistakes, and it fails more frequently than rational prognostication and calculation.”⁷⁴ Any moment of rupture in the fabric of the everyday, when we are confronted with the reality of how our lives fit within the wider relations of global capitalism, is just as likely—more likely, even—to collapse back into unreflective passivity under the weight of ideological mystification, as it is to initiate critical assessment and action. In this sense, there is a utopic desire in the spaces and moments of everyday life: an *unrealistic* demand for the impossible that may provide the necessary rupture with the determining realism of global capitalism’s rationalization and commodification of lived space. It is an impossible demand that defies the logic of planning, of the cartographic and the economic, that may thus locate in the fissures of modern space openings for critique, creativity, and the new. Only the negation of the present can inaugurate creative movement, difference, change: “demanding the impossible may always end in failure but doing so is the first step toward other possibilities nevertheless.”⁷⁵ The negative is the necessary condition for creativity, for creative acts; failure is thus a virtue, a strength. Failure, in this sense, can be understood as a refusal to embrace achievement and a rejection of standard norms of success. It then becomes a tactical operation that is ‘successful’ to the extent that it can continue to fail and thereby confound the logic of capitalist economics, of production-consumption *ad infinitum*. This dialectical impulse, which does not overcome but simply

⁷² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; Gardiner, “Everyday Utopianism.”

⁷³ Bloch and Ritter, “Nonsynchronism.”

⁷⁴ Lefebvre, *Critique II*, 218.

⁷⁵ Coleman, “Utopian Prospect,” 349.

negates by refusing to comply with the terms at hand and thereby directs us toward some beyond—toward that which is *not yet*—finds its most ‘refined’ expression in art.

I will deal more explicitly with questions concerning art and the space of politics, in the exploration of the arts of the street toward which we are working. For the moment, we may note the negative on which the possibility for imagination, for resistance, and for creative action rest: it is the ‘useless’ work that, by being ‘good for nothing,’ resists the commodification process. Yet at every turn, creativity and difference are threatened with co-optation by financial interests. Avant-garde art movements and elements of subversive political programs are all too easily recouped by capitalist interests and put into the service of private wealth creation, as attested to by many examples from the mass-produced calendars of surrealist art to the multi-million dollar sales of (what had been) street art—an art, moreover, that is formulated in opposition to the world of gallery art. This seems to present a problem, if we claim that there is a procreative force in the everyday that might exceed capitalist reduction. But this is only a problem if we conceive of the creative act—that is, the production of difference—as aiming for completion, as aiming to produce *a* work. Such a work may then act as a product and be available for commodification, even if conceived and enacted otherwise. But the creative act, to remain freely creative, can never congeal into a work or inhabit a proper position of its own: “creation is perishable: it passes because it is an act.”⁷⁶ If the creative act is just that—an activity and not simply an object or an effect—it does not become objectifiable, a property that is alienable from the context of its production. It never settles into a ‘proper place of its own’ and thus continually risks extinguishment. And so it is with the utopic element in the everyday: the creative drive and urge for difference always risks extinguishment in the largely monochromatic repetition of quotidian routines. The everyday encompasses the very procedures that maintain existing relations of power, but remains imbued with hope nonetheless. Hope is the utopic sentiment, and it is inextricably bound to failure. “Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointed it

⁷⁶ de Certeau, *Culture Plural*, 140.

would not be hope,” says Bloch; “hope is critical and can be disappointed.”⁷⁷ Hope is critical—it asks for something other than what is—and, insofar as it is utopic, it is always on the verge of collapsing into disappointment. This fundamental drive can be seen as an expression of a vital force that animates even the most seemingly simple life forms and processes. If we understand the affordances available to an organism as given by its environment, the organism is also stimulated by a desire for difference, for novelty, and for distinction. The ongoing tension between simple replication—the maintenance of a status quo—and the drive toward something other than what is—the irrepressible forces of change—finds expression in everything from the ‘natural world’ (the world of experience understood first at a biological, material and natural-historical level), to the human world of social relations, to the constitution of a sensing, reflexive subject. Operating on multiple levels, it is this dialectical tension that drives change while also, by and large, maintaining the reproduction of existing formal relations (whether biological, material, social, corporeal, psycho-affective, linguistic, etc.).

It is this dual question of ‘what keeps things the same, imparts continuity?’ and ‘what are the mechanisms that enable change?’ that Karin Barber addresses in the context of cultural-material forms and practices, arguing that “things do not last through inertia... [but] are made to last, through intense human creative efforts.”⁷⁸ The maintenance of artistic traditions, ritual practices, and social conventions demand concerted and continual effort: they must, therefore, achieve enough cohesive durability to be socially (and materially) transmitted and committed to somatic memory through a process of abstraction and incorporation.⁷⁹ In fact, in many so-called traditional (or non-modern) art practices, innovation and variation are, by and large, discouraged: the point is not to express individual ‘vision’ or experience, but to maintain the forms that themselves help maintain the wider cultural setting, such that it may identify itself in those forms.⁸⁰ Thus, while the idiosyncratic variances between individuals may be the basis for creative innovation, these always operate against the backdrop of conventional practices and

⁷⁷ “Something’s Missing,” 16-17.

⁷⁸ “What Makes Things Stick,” 28.

⁷⁹ Høgseth, “Knowledge Transfer.”

⁸⁰ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 94ff; Morphy and Perkins, “Anthropology of Art.”

narrowly replicative traditions. This does not, however, imply that there is an essential core to artistic forms and practices, any more than there is an enduring centre to subjective consciousness; but, it does indicate that the embodiment and enactment of these various practices, both express a tradition, belief, or ideal and gives it form such that it may be taken up again and again. As Barber notes, this process is exemplified by performance—dance, music, vocal and ‘stage’ arts, etc.—in the way that it conveys a reproducible form which becomes a measure for future performances, while also making evident the reproductive activity that goes into the performance itself. And if the ‘core message’ of the performance is that it must be continually re-performed, this then implies that there is no durable essence at the centre of the performance—or, by extension, in the ritual, the custom, the cultural tradition, or the art practice.

Performance gives form to emotion and idea, imparts them with a transmissible unity but not necessarily a stable identity. Moreover, this is as true of the activities and relations that comprise our daily lives as it is of the more rarefied practices of the arts and of rituals. As already discussed, our spatial practices and affective relations are given form in our everyday reproduction of them, but they do not, thereby, assume a perpetual consistency. “A spatial practice must have a certain cohesiveness,” writes Lefebvre, “but this does not imply that it is coherent (in the sense of intellectually worked out or logically conceived).”⁸¹ Our everyday spatial-corporeal practices operate according to a certain perceptual faith that allows us to carry on ‘as though’ our activities are logically and consistently formulated, yet all the while vaguely aware that we are always making things up as we go along. Thus, improvisation is as central a concept as is reproduction, in understanding everyday experience and, more specifically, in the examination of various creative urban practices to follow in these pages.

1.5 Improvisation and *Bricolage*

Improvisation is not a matter of simply making things up freely without any constraining parameters—an unbridled free-for-all. Any creative endeavour, any “form-giving

⁸¹ *Production of Space*, 38.

activity... always draws upon the conventions of genre, and at the same time subtly modifies them.”⁸² The play of improvisation takes place within a pre-arranged ‘field’ or ‘structure’ (musical, verbal, spatial, etc.) that provides the basic materials which the improviser then attempts to rearrange in novel, unforeseen ways. In many contemporary musical practices improvisation typically involves a form of free-play in which harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic patterns may repeat themselves but always do so with internal variations, such that the overall form (e.g. song, but also recitation, dance, even simple movement) is unique in its singular enactment. All of this is done, however, against a background of embodied standards and practiced skill.⁸³ Indeed, improvisation is “a defining aspect of music making”⁸⁴ and is found, for example, in traditions stretching from renaissance and baroque improvisational methods to modern jazz techniques.⁸⁵ For musicians, there is a virtuosic quality in improvisation that, in some traditions and circles, is understood as the preeminent expression of skill. But there is also a virtuosic potential in the minor practices that comprise the bulk of any one person’s life, in our mostly unremarkable quotidian activities. In this case, however, the skills are those of the generalist—the common abilities of the species, of the collective body of pre-personal awareness—but always contextualized and concretely specified in their everydayness.

The ability to improvise, to work within pre-established terms and boundaries, might be thought of as the most ‘pure’ or refined (as in: purified, condensed into a concentrated form) expression of decision-making, of the free-play of the imagination. Accorded a limited range of affordances, the individual nonetheless creates something that might not have been predicted and most certainly would not be actualized if not for the precise choices made, the specific options favoured over other possible choices. This ability to work creatively with what is found to be already present in an environment—the at-hand, whether material, linguistic, conceptual, etc.—permeates our participation in the world,

⁸² Barber, “What Makes,” 32; see also Born “After Relational Aesthetics.”

⁸³ Berliner, *Thinking In Jazz*.

⁸⁴ MacDonald, “Improvisation,” *n.p.*

⁸⁵ King, “Looking Back”; Serebrennikov, “Fugal Improvisation.”

from the most mundane tasks to the most celebrated artistic outputs.⁸⁶ This *basic* ability—in the sense of fundamental, collective, pre-personal—is a defining feature of the organism engaged in its environment. And, it is precisely in the everyday that the universality of our skills as improvisers is most eminently expressed. Although we tend to follow standardized patterns and, in general, deviate very little from set routines, *how* we do so—the precise, singular micro-choices we constantly make (though usually unthinkingly) that, coordinated together, comprise our actual daily activities—is organized in a play between precise repetition and random selection. We may follow the same route home every day, but occasionally make or are forced to make unexpected changes—for example, by traffic delays, a chance meeting with an acquaintance, or suddenly remembering an errand to fulfill, etc.— that may present new opportunities, sudden new perspectives and experiences. How we react, what we *do* with the unforeseen depends, at least in part, on our improvisational abilities. Improvisation relies on tactics rather than strategy, in the sense that Michel de Certeau draws a distinction between the two.

A strategy, according to de Certeau, involves a certain formal relationship in which “a subject of will and power... can be isolated from its ‘environment’... [and] serve[s] as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it,” whereas a tactic is an evaluative operation that “cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization) nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality.”⁸⁷ The strategic is the method of planning, of a certain scientific rationalism; it delineates a field and adopts a defined position, imposes itself on space and demarcates a place of its own (or attempts to). The tactic, on the other hand, “does not have a place [but] depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins,” writes de Certeau, “it does not keep.” In the context of the Western musical traditions, we might think of the strategy as being the formal structure of the

⁸⁶ Even if many art forms do not employ or express an improvisational approach in their final ‘form’ (painting, sculpture, film, etc.) the work that goes into their creation, from conception through execution, invariably relies on the same fundamental creative process that characterizes improvisation.

⁸⁷ *Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

piece of music—with the written score uniting the logic of writing (and of the writing of history) with the authority of the map—and of tactics as the improvisational skills of the performers who insert themselves into the text of the strategy, always with a general sense of the whole but without ever knowing precisely where the next action will lead to.

The tactical, like the improvisational, “constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’”⁸⁸ But those opportunities are ever mobile and mutable. The strategy is the domain of formal dimensions and definitions, of institutional power, while tactics belong with the particular interests of the everyday inhabitants of space as actual, concrete, experiential—those who *use* but do not necessarily *own*: “the ordinary practitioners of the city.”⁸⁹ In opposition to the top-down strategies of urban planners and developers who employ the discourse of property (“the proper”—*le propre*), the everyday users of space, according to de Certeau, appropriate what scraps of time they can, and in the process subtly modify the future affordances available within strategized space. The strategic, then, expresses a will to dominate and codify space, defining it “in conformity within abstract models” while the tactical aims to “use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” according to the singular desires and motivations of the everyday user of those spaces.⁹⁰

Our ability to improvise, to creatively act in-the-moment—upon which the tactics of everyday inhabitation rely—amounts to a form of *bricolage*, a way of working with the at-hand without a master design in mind, using a loose set of skills that is transposable across diverse settings, materials, and projects. The French verb *bricoler* means, loosely, to fashion, ‘tinker with’ or ‘cobble together,’ and implies a degree of playful experimentation without a project assuming authority. The concept enters the anthropological and wider theoretical literature via Claude Lévi-Strauss, who describes bricolage as a form of science (in the sense of a practical *techne*) that is not inferior or ‘primitive’ relative to modern science (science proper, the way that the word is typically used in the contemporary) but, instead, precedes it in the historical development of

⁸⁸ de Certeau, *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 29-30.

complex civilizations.⁹¹ Bricolage—our ability to develop projects that are practical (concerned with particular ‘problems’) and experimental (concerned with how certain pre-given elements can work together), by cobbling together the materials that we find around us, in an informal but coherent way—is the common heritage of the species. Bricolage functions on the terrain of the sketch not of the architectural master plan. It designates the *modus operandi* not simply of so-called non-modern peoples but also the ordinary everyday activities that *all* people engage in, outside (or on the margins) of the totalizing logic of modern science. The critical difference between the procedures of the *bricoleur* and those of the (modern) scientist, says Lévi-Strauss, is that the former are those of a generalist who adapts to a wide range of concrete conditions, whereas the modern scientific mind is capable of formulating general abstract laws (objective knowledge) and implementing more precise operations. But, because of its rigid division of labour and high level of specialization, modern science lacks the same versatility and ability to adjust ‘on-the-fly’ that characterizes bricolage. “The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks,” writes Lévi-Strauss, “but, unlike the engineer... does not subordinate each of them to the availability of materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project.”⁹² When we tinker with some home project, experiment in the kitchen or the garden, build something out of necessity or simply desire, but do so in accordance with some recycled material already on hand, we orient ourselves in the world through a common set of operations derived from the collective abilities of the pre-personal body: in the everyday we are all *bricoleurs*.

There is a fluidity to the improvisational tactics of the everyday users of space that is speculative and experimental. Relying on a diversified and adaptive skill-set, employing left-over materials from other projects, industries, intended uses, the bricoleur moves across what are, within the workings of capitalism, sharp divisions in the productive process. This ability to move between different categories and codes (forms of speech, discursive practices, technical language)⁹³ applies not only to the materials of daily life,

⁹¹ *Savage Mind*.

⁹² *Ibid*, 17.

⁹³ to “poach on,” in de Certeau’s words.

but to the concepts by which we form an understanding of ourselves and our environments, which then modify the relations that order space. For Lévi-Strauss, bricolage describes mythic thinking; the organizing logic of the myth continually recycles recurring themes and formal structures, but always with modification. Similarly, the materials of the bricoleur are not ‘raw materials’ in the sense of unformed, basic material substances, nor specialized secondary materials (of the type that go into high-tech industrial production), but scraps and left-overs that may be scrounged, saved up, or stolen. The bricoleur may set aside all and any materials (including what may no longer be able to serve as originally intended—‘damaged goods’), not knowing ahead of time how they might be put to use.⁹⁴ It is the nature of a particular project, combined with the available resources, that will determine how and what materials are used, as well as the trajectory it follows. But it is an unscripted trajectory, the product of its own activity: “to improvise is to follow the ways of the world, as they open up, rather than to recover a chain of [pre-established] connections.”⁹⁵

A simple mundane illustration: duct tape and a stretch of old baling wire can both be used to lash together two poles—to build a fence or a wood frame for some use, for example. However, their different qualities change how the work is done and the use it is put to. The duct tape is easy to work with: the poles can be bound tightly together and the job is quickly done. The wire, on the other hand, is harder to wrap tightly around the poles; tools may be needed for tightening or for crimping the ends and cutting off any excess. However, the wire is more durable than the tape, and if the job is done skillfully, the result will have much greater strength. Finally, the lashed-together poles may eventually be put to other uses, in which case the choice of binding materials has different implications: the duct tape is easily cut but the wire must be unwrapped (which may again require tools); on the other hand, the wire can then be used again for some other project. Thus, as much as it is the needs and desires of the bricoleur that give shape to the project, the participatory role of objects and materials cannot not be underestimated.

⁹⁴ As an old folk wisdom adage has it: if you throw away a nail, you’ll need a nail.

⁹⁵ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 97.

Bricolage involves a conceptual mapping out of materials and (potential) uses—but it is a provisional mapping, continually modified according to changing conditions and, consequently, reconfiguring the particulars of our ways of *doing* and of *making do*.⁹⁶ Moreover, in both the original French verb *bricoler* and in the theoretical concept of *bricolage*, there is a sense of free-play, of ‘puttering’: a procedure that, as much as it serves concrete needs and desires, is ultimately an end in itself, an activity that has no end but its own activity. Bricolage is a pragmatic response to existing conditions that expresses a fundamental mode of our being-in-the-world. The improvisational tactics of *making* and *using* operate on the level of the approximate: they form a non-systematic science, worked out in the moment as the occasion demands. This necessitates an awareness of how various parts (materials, tools, skills, projects) might fit into a broader approach within the indeterminacy of daily life—it requires a pre-established familiarity between bodies and things and the world, in all of their fleshiness. As such, the logic of the bricoleur involves a perceptual faith: a positioning of oneself ‘in the midst of things’ with an understanding that the rough calculations and adaptive techniques of daily life may smooth over contradictions and inconsistencies in the world but that this is a practical requirement of making do, of simply getting by in the day-to-day.

1.6 Projects in the World

Throughout the preceding pages, I have drawn on a range of sources—general research and specific thinkers, especially Merleau-Ponty and Lefebvre—to lay the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent chapters. My goal has been to provide a general understanding of perception and creativity in everyday life and to an account of the generative relationship between organism and environment. In the process, I have explored various connecting threads, from the nature of our phenomenological presence in the world and the perceptual faith of the natural attitude, through the production and experience of space and the ambiguity at the heart of everyday life, to the improvisational tactics of bricolage. This last, I contend, can be understood as a pragmatic expression of

⁹⁶ de Certeau: *le savoir faire* and *les arts de faire*—‘know how’ and ‘the arts of doing,’ *Invention du quotidien, Practice*.

perceptual faith as it is applied to the projects that orient us in the world. It is in taking up projects—activities that are organized into a cohesive fashion, whether with some ultimate end in mind (work) or as an end in itself (play)—that we are implicated in our environment and that we find our way in the world. We are projected into the world in our activities, as we orient ourselves relative to the space of our environment and the things that we find therein. It is not only the space within which we move that may be welcoming or unwelcoming to individual bodies; objects, too, help us to orient ourselves, but they may also resist, hinder, *disorient*. “An action,” writes Sara Ahmed, “is possible when the body and the object ‘fit’ ... [but] objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others.”⁹⁷

But if we are *thrown*, such that these activities are always already circumscribed for us,⁹⁸ it is nonetheless within the co-productive relationship of an organism in its environment. And this indicates that we are also already anchored in a preconscious corporeal awareness that brings us into contact with the negative, that is, that which exceeds us.⁹⁹ And it *is* a generative relationship. Through its activities, in concert with those of others, an organism modifies future affordances—not simply its own, but the general affordances of the environment. As we hollow out a space of inhabitation, a perceptual faith allows us to experience, without apparent contradiction, both our own subjectively embodied sense of self and an objective world (a world of objects) that we share with others. I find myself in my practical activities: “my body is wherever it has something to do,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it.¹⁰⁰ When we engage in any activity, in the most rudimentary sense, we are already embroiled in the flesh of the world and we orient ourselves by drawing on the abilities of bricolage, which itself is a product of the general affordances of the environment.

⁹⁷ *Queer Phenomenology*, 51.

⁹⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Schütz and Luckmann, *Structures*.

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty does not speak of ‘the negative’ in these terms, although his description of the invisible does encompass the inexhaustibility of that which exceeds us. See *Visible and Invisible*. The idea of the negative, as I use it, is further elucidated in subsequent pages.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260.

The project at hand is, then, a practical one, concerned with how it is that we gear into the world—or don't, such as when 'the gears slip'—and what possibilities this presents for critical interrogation and creative action. This is a true of the research intentions that have propelled this present work as it is of any other complex phenomenon. The world is fluid and, in this particular case, the affordances (i.e. the potential that my planned fieldwork seemed to offer) which I believed to have identified, were transformed or seemed to wither away altogether, thus redirecting the trajectory of my research. At the same time, my own everyday sensorial and perceptual experiences—of myself, of the world, and of my relations with others—morphed in response to both personal and global factors, but not without some slippage of gears. Despite these disruptions, this entire process (which I discuss at greater length in the final chapter of this text) reinforces the lesson that thinking, as founded in perceptual experience, is inextricably bound up with and in the world: *thinking*, like all forms of *doing*, or *making*, takes place within an environment. And it is in the flux between the two—between organism and environment, body and space, sensation and reflection—that creativity emerges, that difference can assume enough cohesive durability to present other ways of being and doing. Creativity hovers between repetition—not necessarily one-to-one reproduction, but repetition that suggests variation, novel reconfigurations of existing elements—and the autopoietic movement that touches on the excess of the negative, that produces a different possible world and formulates the new.

Creativity is intrinsic to our everyday activities (and thinking is in this sense an activity), to how we orient ourselves in the world, and we are attuned to—resonate in consonance with—our surroundings to the degree that we are able to express the affordances available to us to the utmost. All of our attempts at inquiry begin in everyday perceptual experience, in the particular. While the everyday expresses the generally pre-reflexive activities that sustain our shared world, it can only be apprehended and described in its singular manifestations—and by way of this description, or critical attention, we can bring into focus what had only been sensed and but dimly perceived. When we focus our attention in some project, we draw on the particular, embedding ourselves in the possible

as it unfolds: lived space is always concrete and emergent. The “spatial body” acquires its “material character from space, from the energy that is deployed and put to use there”¹⁰¹ It is a product of the generative relationship between bodily practices and an environment that informs, and is in turn continually modified by, those practices. It thus gives us access to other ways of *doing* and of *being*. The pre-conscious body of inter-corporeal awareness that underlies our activities exceeds our own individual perceptions yet, through repetitive habit, assumes and largely maintains a normative form, and this form—as well as any modifications—is characteristic of a particular regime of sensation. In the following chapter, I examine in more detail what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible.”¹⁰² This concerns the ways that the senses are conceived of, normalized, regimented and regulated within particular socio-political and economic modes; what can and cannot be sensed, what *counts* as sensible—that is: what is deemed to be perceptible and what ‘makes sense’ (i.e. seems reasonable). As will be seen, the perpetuation of the social-sensorial order of late-stage capitalism relies upon forms of spatial-corporeal and cognitive ‘training’¹⁰³ that involve a process of abstraction and alienation—of worker from product, of commodity from production, of self from world.

Abstraction and rationalization, key characteristic of capitalist modernity, spring from what we may call categorical thinking, which works in the first instance by division, assigning every new consideration (percept, thought, fact, or question) to a position, or category, within a global—strategic—classificatory system, operating by way of reduction (to basic elements, first principles, or final causes) and universalization. It is a process mirrored in the fragmentation, homogenization, and hierarchization of space described by Lefebvre. And, as we will see, it underpins the logic of the money economy and the formation of the modern sensorium. This is not to say that categorical thinking is necessarily ‘bad’ in itself, or always leads to error. Like the scientific method, it expands human capacities in new ways; but it does not serve well in all situations and, more

¹⁰¹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 195.

¹⁰² Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*.

¹⁰³ Discussing the rhythmically structured habituation of everyday gestures and bodily comportment, Lefebvre uses the term *dressage*—which in French is used to describe the ‘breaking-in’ of animals, particularly horses, as they are trained. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

importantly, it errs when it attempts to apply its own power of abstraction to itself and supposes that interrogation—critical thought—can free itself from sensory perception, from the conditions of its own unfolding, from the confused world of lived experience, and thereby assume a transcendental objectivity. Rather than limiting ourselves to the categorical thinking characteristic of Cartesian dualism, I suggest a Spinozist understanding of perception and experience—one that relies not on categorical divisions but on modes of being and of expression,¹⁰⁴ that is largely congruent with Merleau-Ponty’s description of perceptual awareness as a gestalt that, rather than imparting objective distance, implicates us firmly in the world.¹⁰⁵ Although Spinoza is not a major figure in this present work, the influence of his thought, particularly of his *Ethics*,¹⁰⁶ may be felt as we proceed.¹⁰⁷ This is notable in the idea that the different modes of perception, and the sensory pathways that support them, are not fundamentally distinguishable categories but modifications of the body—of the one and total body—that constitutes our perceptual being in the world. But, as I stress throughout these pages, understanding how these different modes actually function cannot be treated separately from the specific material, cultural, historical and political contexts within which they are formulated. Consequently, in the next chapter we turn to a more detailed examination of the structuring of the specifically modern sensorium and consider some of the consequences of the politics of the sensible of global capitalism.

¹⁰⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics, Theological-Political Treatise*. On the categorical vs. the modal see also Laplantine, *Life of the Senses*.

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*.

¹⁰⁷ This can also be seen indirectly in my reliance on thinkers who are themselves indebted to Spinoza—notably, Georg Simmel in Chapter 2 and Paulo Virno in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2

2 The Modern Urban Sensorium

If we walk down the streets of a given city, take public transit, visit various workplaces and sites of daily transactions—markets, stores, malls, and so on—or look in on schools and other institutions of bodily and mental training, we may note that people ‘carry themselves’ and move in specific ways; and, comparing these to similar habituated patterns in other places, we will see that the details of these daily practices vary from place to place, from society to society. Distances between bodies are regulated by relatively fixed norms of behaviour; there are discernable patterns in when, how and with whom people make eye contact, whether and when they smile at others, how or if they touch each other, and a host of other daily corporeal behaviours. And, there are different bodily ways of being that are assigned by gender, class, or cultural sub-group. More often than not, these habituated practices go unnoticed—they are fully naturalized. Within the familiar realm of quotidian habits, few will question this state of affairs: it’s ‘just how it is.’ The everyday presents itself, in the first instance, with the matter-of-factness of the perceptual faith. If someone behaves in ways that contravene these habits, they are usually sanctioned, either overtly (for example: fines for jaywalking) or more subtly (as when passersby may modify gaze, gait and facial expression in an attempt to avoid an apparently intoxicated panhandler on the street).¹⁰⁸ Our own socio-corporeal habituations and those of others within our home cultural settings are difficult to discern, for us. As the saying goes, a fish does not ask “What is water?” But, travel to a different region, to a different cultural setting and one immediately notices that people *do things differently* there. Like the natural attitude that characterizes our usual everyday activities, there is no need to think about how to behave: one ‘just knows.’ These internalized habits help condition the possible, determining spatial relations between bodies through sets of normative socio-corporeal practices. As such, they foster distinctions between members of a specific cultural grouping, and between that grouping and others. Customary spatial

¹⁰⁸ Dixon, Levine and McAuley, “Locating Impropriety”; Rogerson and Rice, “Making Sense of Places.”

practices and corporeal habits are intrinsic to the formation and maintenance of social and economic relations—and consequently, to everyday perceptual experience and any potential therein for creative action.

Space, as Lefebvre reminds us, is not a blank slate upon which we transcribe the details of our actions. It is produced within and conditioned (but not determined) by the socio-economic order of late-stage capitalism, while we, in our routinized quotidian practices, reproduce the relations that help sustain this everyday state of affairs. Social practice and corporeal habituation are intimately entwined. In all cultures, the ways in which we ‘use’ and conceive of our bodies is largely socially prescribed. I should note, here, the seeming contradiction in the idea of *using* one’s body in a particular way, as this suggests a self that is independent of the body and that ‘puts the body to use.’ However, I maintain that body and self are as inseparable as are body and space. Nonetheless, in everyday speech, we speak of *my* body and of *using my* body for certain ends, in certain ways—all of which highlights the limits of language. Yet, hitting this limit can help expose the ways in which everyday language contains the irresolvable contradictions that our perceptual faith obscures.

From earliest childhood, we learn how to integrate ourselves into our environment, first through unconscious repetition—a process of mimesis—followed by the deliberate attempts at imitating the quotidian adult behaviour that we witness, then finally through formal education in whatever guise—all of which train us and continually reinforce what Marcel Mauss names “the techniques of the body” in his influential essay of that title. These techniques can be understood as the traditional, socialized norms of corporeal dispositions by which the dominant beliefs and values, the habits of mind and the ethical considerations of a given society, are not so much inscribed upon the surface of the body—much less exist as some external signifier to which we make reference when we act—as reproduced by and within the body, and between bodies in space. “Through

gestures,” writes Lefebvre, “ideology escapes from pure abstraction and performs actions.”¹⁰⁹

In this chapter, I draw on a broad range of literature to examine the ways in which our bodily comportment, our habits of mind and spatial practices, work together to reproduce the social and material forms that help maintain the everyday and, by extension, the relations of capitalist society. I begin by arguing that *how* and *what* we sense is not simply ‘given’ by nature but is as much socially as it is materially or biologically structured. This shows that we err if we naturalize and attempt to universalize our own everyday sensorium, ignoring its unique historical formation. I then take up Mauss’ seminal essay in detail alongside other relevant literature and outline a theoretical understanding of our everyday socio-corporeal practices, but do so by critiquing some of the shortcomings I see in his text. This leads to a discussion of the emotions—a topic that Mauss raises, then abruptly drops—where I turn to other writings, including those of Georg Simmel, to further the discussion of everyday sensation and affect in modern capitalist society. I compare the sensorial-emotional numbness of Simmel’s “blasé attitude” to similar depictions of the fragmentation and estrangement of everyday experience in other writings, including Lefebvre’s theorizing of space and some of Walter Benjamin’s writings on urban sensation. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “distribution of the sensible” and François Laplantine’s “politics of the sensible” as means of describing how our perceptual possibilities are organized according to particular material-historical processes and ideological commitments. I discuss how, within the distribution of the sensible of modern society, vision has assumed a highly privileged position amongst sensory modes. In examining the hierarchization of the senses, I discuss the central role of actual technologies (in their primarily material form—another lacuna in Mauss’ essay) in forming the urban sensorium, and touch on the role of architecture in this context. I close this chapter by further examining visibility and make the case that is necessary to reconsider some of our fundamental assumptions about vision and the senses in general. In this chapter, I flesh

¹⁰⁹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 215.

out in greater detail the central points made in the previous chapter concerning sense relations, perceptual experience, and the possibility for the new in everyday life; and, I introduce new elements concerning the emotions, technology, and creativity that will be further explored in the subsequent chapters.

2.1 The Social Construction of the Body

Just as lived space is not some trans-historical abstract void in which we move but is defined by activity, by bodies in motion, so too our bodies and our senses are not neutral facts, simply given universally as conditions of our existence. Rather, they are informed by the dominant relations of production and reproduction (social and material) and thus are as much cultural and historical as they are biological. What constitutes the sensible, what the senses actually *are* and what they do—for example: that there *are* five senses, or certain types of definable taste sensations, or what colours may be perceive—is given form by particular cultural orders of meaning.¹¹⁰ My analysis of how these orders take shape is mutually informed by a phenomenological understanding of experience, a Marxist-inflected critical account of late-stage capitalism’s sensorial regime, and the expanded worldview of an ecological anthropology that places “thinking, perceiving, remembering and learning... within the ecological contexts of people’s interrelations with their environments” and each other.¹¹¹ There is, for example, a considerable range of cross-cultural variation in the perception and coding of colours amongst human populations.¹¹² Indeed, the anthropological literature is replete with examples of different ways that people relate—corporeally, affectively, linguistically, conceptually—to each other and to their environments. In his now classic work in the Bosavi rainforest of Papua-New Guinea, Steven Feld details the central role of sound and speech in the lives of the Kaluli.¹¹³ It is not simply that hearing is largely privileged over sight for basic survival (the utility of sight, compared to hearing, is greatly reduced in the dense mountainous rainforest), but the far greater emotional and communicative breadth and

¹¹⁰ Howes and Classen, *Ways of Sensing*; Le Breton, *Sensing the World*.

¹¹¹ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 171.

¹¹² Le Breton, *Sensing the World*, 52ff.

¹¹³ Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*.

depth of spoken language in Kaluli society (compared to most modern European languages, for example) is indicative of the primacy of sound in the Kaluli sensorium and, consequently, worldview. From this, Feld develops the concept of acoustemology—an acoustically-focused understanding of how perception and everyday experience is meaningfully organized.¹¹⁴ For the Kaluli, sound appears to be especially important in the structuring of perceptual experience though in their basic biological capacities they might resemble any other human population. For the hunter-gatherer Jahai of the Malaysian rainforest, olfaction assumes a prominence—and power, in social significance—far exceeding that of the typical Euro-American sensorium. This heightened olfactory awareness is evinced by the accuracy and detail with which the Jahai can identify smells, in marked contrast to their horticulturist neighbours who—much like the average Westerner—have great difficulty accurately identifying even familiar smells under controlled conditions.¹¹⁵

We need not, however, look so far afield for examples of how sensation and perception may be organized in ways that we are unaccustomed to. For homeless and street affected people in large urban centres the ‘usual’ modern sensorium may be disrupted by a combination of chronic boredom and sensory oversaturation, as individuals struggle to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.¹¹⁶ This sensory displacement and readjustment (or lack thereof) is intimately linked to space—what kinds of space the individual has access to and to what degree they have the power to shape them.¹¹⁷ Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, the living body may be disrupted, displaced, disabled in many ways—always in relation to an idealized conception of The Body

¹¹⁴ Feld coined his neologism by combining the words ‘acoustic’ and ‘epistemology.’ Feld, “Acoustemology,” *Sound and Sentiment*.

¹¹⁵ Majid and Kruspy, “Hunter-Gatherer Olfaction.”

¹¹⁶ Desjarlais, “Movement, Stillness.”

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*; Hall, “Urban Outreach”; Werdal, “When You’re Homeless.” In the winter of 2021, during the writing of this text, a stark example of the coercive spatial-corporeal control of the socially disadvantaged appeared in some Montreal news outlets. The managers of one of the city’s biggest and oldest services for the homeless had fired all of the front-line workers—those who worked directly with people in need—and hired private security guards to maintain order at its facilities. See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/accueil-bonneau-intervention-workers-1.5961996>.

(‘properly’ upper case and singular) as opposed to bodies (lower case and multiple). The modern categorizing and policing of bodies may operate most obviously along lines of gender, race, and a range of physical and/or economic capabilities, but all socio-historical settings are characterized by culturally construed spatial-sensorial ways of being and doing. All of this indicates that the biological and ecological do not inextricably determine the social any more than culture can override biology. In so far as we can talk about a human species, the biological (or, put differently: the material) presents to us the most basic foundation of our common lot. To say that humans, in the aggregate, possess certain common perceptual traits may be uncontroversial, but there is a significant degree of variability in how these are organized into formal socio-corporeal practices and relations, relative to time and place, to history and ecology.¹¹⁸ These sets of terms—biological and ecological on the one hand, social, cultural and linguistic on the other—do not comprise oppositional dualities. The recurrent theme of a fundamental Nature/Culture binary is undone by the processual current within which consciousness coalesces and human history unfolds. That two terms in a dialectical relationship are non-identical does not make them antithetical—nor, as a consequence, synthetical. But if we can say that *the body*—both as an abstract conventional model, and as our own individual bodies—is produced, or ‘constructed,’ this in no way suggests that it is not ‘real.’ The body—as *a* body, *my* body—is the very crux of perception and the experiential condition of consciousness; it is ‘real’ as felt, lived.

It may be evident, for example, that the notion of race and of distinguishable races is a social construct that has no basis in biological or ecological fact; nonetheless, race is experienced corporeally and subjectively as very real.¹¹⁹ Through the application of statistical averages that themselves are formulated according to implicit social

¹¹⁸ I do not believe that we can dispense of a concept of the human without relinquishing our ability to engage in meaningful critique. Thus, I do not discard the idea of the general or the rule; I do, however, understand it as an averaging and thus always ‘inaccurate’ (or incomplete) if applied concretely and universally.

¹¹⁹ I follow, in a general way, the idea of social construction as outlined by Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*.

conventions, “race becomes biology.”¹²⁰ *Conceptions and perceptions* of the body cannot be completely disentangled from how the body is *lived*. It may be that the racialized body, like ‘reality’ itself, is socially constructed, but the social categorizations of bodies and of bodily experience—driven increasingly by bio-medical assumptions coupled with economic interests—is real insofar as it imposes a framework that assigns hierarchized subject-positions, outlining a range of socio-sensorial affordances for the experiential reality of lived bodies. Moreover, there is a considerable range of variation between individuals within any grouping that cannot be discounted—a point that I have already touched on and that I re-emphasize at various points. For the moment, I focus in a more general way on what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible”—that is, the social regimentation of the senses and the political implications that this entails. “Politics,” writes Rancière, “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”¹²¹ These are, then, questions concerned with the sensible, with sensorial possibility. In a more explicitly proscriptive vein, François Laplantine calls for a “politics of the sensible” that would equitably account for our engagement with the world and each other as fully embodied activities, affirming “the gap between each person’s respective sensibility” and thereby “resisting the uniformization of tastes.”¹²² And yet, within much of the philosophical and critical tradition that I draw upon, there is a recurrent tendency to objectify the body and reduce the senses to distinct, mechanical processes—a move that impoverishes our understandings of sensory experience by imagining an abstract body and reinstating the processes of subjectification that help maintain the socio-economic relations of capitalism. Nonetheless, in seeking out a politics of the sensible that would be more inclusive it is necessary, for my purposes, to work through much of this tradition, while maintaining a critical stance and examining some underlying assumptions.

¹²⁰ Gravlee, “How Race Becomes Biology.”

¹²¹ *Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.

¹²² *Life of the Senses*, 87.

2.2 The Measure of the Body

In the critical theorizing of the body and senses, Marcel Mauss's relatively short "Techniques of the Body," stands out as a foundational text. First delivered as a lecture in 1934, this work provides an important starting point in understanding the relationship between the dominant social order and how the organization of the senses is enacted and expressed in everyday bodily comportment that is, for all its communal structuring, experientially subjective. It is also an important text for understanding the history of how the senses have been conceived of, and the socio-political consequences of this history. Although not worked out in some of its wider implications, a key aspect of Mauss' argument is that how we engage in the world with and through our bodies is largely determined for us through a process of social conditioning: a disciplining of the body and education of the senses and of the psyche that both expresses and reproduces customary social relations.

In the essay, Mauss envisions a social scientific analysis of routinized bodily activities, arguing that the body is our "first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means" whereby we engage in the practical activities that constitute the social world.¹²³ Drawing on a range of ethnographic examples as well as personal experience, the essay proposes an investigation into the "social nature of the *'habitus'*," noting that acquired habitual ways of comporting oneself—physically and socially—differ "not just between individuals and their imitations, [but] especially between societies, educations, properties and fashions, prestige."¹²⁴ Mauss sketches out a schema for classifying a range of bodily practices that are common throughout human societies. As a classificatory system, it proceeds by division, with the first differentiation along lines of sex (or, we might say, assigned gender), followed by categories based on age, or life-stage. This is followed by a catalogue of dispositions, labours, and other activities, ordered chronologically from birth to adulthood, including sleep and rest, diverse forms of "activity [and] movement" (i.e. sitting, walking, dancing, climbing, etc.), eating,

¹²³ Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," 83.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 80. Italics in the original.

procreating and various “techniques for care of the body.”¹²⁵ Curiously, although Mauss discusses the “techniques of birth and obstetrics” and the care of the body in general, those of death and dying are passed over in silence. Critically, all of these corporeal techniques also involve a sustained training of the mind that helps integrate the subject into existing social relations.

Following the general socialization of the body that takes place within the immediacy of familial relations, education provides the primary mould for the social affordances accorded any given subject-position. Education, it should be noted, describes a society’s common means of propagating bodily and mental dispositions according to station, and is thus not limited to modern concepts of formal education. Mauss draws on his own training as a swimmer to show how the disciplining of body and mind follows established customs but is nonetheless subject to change and individual variation. He goes on to note that there is a *way of swimming* and a *way of learning to swim*, “techniques of diving and techniques of learning to dive.”¹²⁶ The educational process whereby one learns to swim and dive, for example, accords with a standardized form proper to one’s socio-historical location. Thus, the means of transmission of educational practices are themselves embodied, learned through specified forms of corporeal training. Knowledge *and* the teaching of knowledge are, in this sense, *in-corporated*—quite literally, ‘brought into’ the body—largely through imitative repetition. The patterned repetition of mental and corporeal dispositions enacted in daily practices is essential for social and economic reproduction but this “work of repetition is not neutral work,” as Sara Ahmed notes; “*it orients the body in some ways rather than others.*”¹²⁷ The politics of space accord with a distribution of the sensible that affords different possibilities to different bodies. Our education, in whatever form, comes to mould our habits and dispositions, how we carry ourselves, occupy space, present ourselves and react to others. But, as much as our interactions in the world may be structured through the repetition of mental-corporeal techniques, like the reproduction of space through everyday practice, this is not a

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 89-91.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

¹²⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57. Italics in the original.

mechanically replicative process but one that involves continual variation and thus changes over time. The techniques of the body have their own rhythmic structures that lend them a cohesiveness, but only so long as they are enacted and embodied in practice.

In many respects, Mauss' techniques of the body can be seen as an attempt at a concrete measure of the more theoretically elaborate "stock of knowledge" later detailed by Alfred Schütz—that is: the collective tacit knowledge that makes up the standardized ways of knowing and doing of a society.¹²⁸ The influence of Mauss's essay can also be traced through Pierre Bourdieu's phenomenologically inflected sociology.¹²⁹ In common with these other thinkers, Mauss aims at a comprehensive understanding of everyday practices that is arrived at by closely observing the plurality of singularly-embodied corporeal habits and activities. From such observations, argues Mauss, "it is possible to produce a theory of *the* technique of the body."¹³⁰ As with ethnography—which is concerned with the fine-grained detail of lived experience—Mauss's ground up approach suggests an implicit phenomenological basis alongside his more explicit sociological framework. Emphasizing the importance of "mov[ing] from the concrete to the abstract and not the other way round"¹³¹ underscores the pragmatic nature of his project. But Mauss also shows that intellectual activity is itself formulated within the culturally codified but subjectively enacted bodily practices of a given time and place: observation and analysis are fully embedded in the sensual world. Indeed, by including the processes by which he develops his outline of a theory of the body—how particular personal experiences informed his investigations—Mauss shows theoretical concepts developing out of practical activity. One's own perceptual experience can open points of entry into a critical understanding of social relations and the world more broadly. And, this may be particularly true when the natural attitude is disrupted, when some aspect of the world appears strange to us, when we feel out-of-place—when we do not or cannot 'gear in' to

¹²⁸ Schutz, *Phenomenology of Social*; Schutz and Luckmann, *Structures*. See also Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*.

¹²⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline*. Alongside Bourdieu's theorizing of the *habitus* in conjunction with Mauss' essay, we might also draw parallels between Mauss' outline of a 'general bodily knowledge,' Bourdieu's *doxa*, and the (social) stock of knowledge of Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann.

¹³⁰ Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," 77. Italics in the original.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 78.

the world, when the experiences and capabilities of our individual bodies do not seem to match the correct way of doing things, the ‘proper’ practices.

The demands of global capitalist management strip our individual bodies of their distinctive characteristics, matching the fracturing and levelling of space. We are reduced to producers and consumers of commodity forms, with our sensorial lives consequently impoverished—the inevitable result of a life ruled by averages and norms, and a requisite of a world of fixed *thingness*. By measuring and averaging bodies and sensory modes that are, in fact, endlessly varied (among themselves, as spatial relations: no two bodies can occupy the same space) and variable (within themselves, as temporal relations: one’s body changes over time), an *abstract body* is produced. This abstract body is de-spatialized, de-temporalized and defined by a limited set of essential characteristics—above all: one’s abilities as a socially-integrated consumer-producer. Those who are able to do so, cluster around the abstract body, modelling their dispositions according to this abstract-ideal even if it does not completely align with their own experiences. Yet, this apparently neutral body has an unmarked antecedent: the White Western hetero-normative male who is physically fit, economically productive, and dependably self-managed. So long as one appears to more-or-less conform to this idealized body-image, one “fits in.”¹³² Many will go to great lengths—consciously or not—to adapt themselves in an attempt to conform to this idealized social-body.¹³³ As an illustration, we can think of the ways that immigrants arriving in a country such as Canada are expected to integrate themselves into the dominant modes of socio-corporeal behaviour. As part of the immigration process (which is further reinforced as one is groomed for, and initiated into, full citizenship). Although told they can retain their own cultural and religious traditions, prospective citizens are taught to model their *public* behaviour upon the corporeal, linguistic, and socially-expressive aspects of the abstract body of the idealized citizen-consumer. This, of course, demands that clear and decisive boundaries be drawn

¹³² Garland-Thomson, “Misfits.”

¹³³ By ‘social-body,’ I mean the individual body as socially produced and the means by which the individual is integrated to a greater or lesser degrees into dominant socio-economic relations and institutions.

between public and private (which would, in a secularized state, include one's religious affiliations, ethnic identity, or cultural attachments).

We may all experience some degree of misfitting, when the world seems strange at certain moments in our lives. This may be associated with illness or an accident, and is often understood as a transient experience. No organism can survive for long without consequences if it cannot adapt and find a 'fit' within its environment. Thus, the 'exception' is pathologized and an idealized 'normal' body becomes the standard against which to measure all bodies—a standard that, it is assumed, describes the average socially-typical, perceptual experience of everyone. But in the context of late-stage capitalism, many people continue to find that their experience of the world barely resembles that of the apparently well-integrated and purportedly successful citizen-subject. One need only look to the crisis of systemic racism in both Canada and the United States (each with their own particular historical variants, and thus particularities as concerns spatial-corporeal modes of oppression), or the myriad processes—both overt and subtle—that model women into second class citizens, or the ways that international borders are constructed upon, and often violently contested over, categories based on birthplace, cultural or religious affiliation, or ethnic belonging, etc.

But it is not only the discourses of neoliberal economics, biomedicine, and the modern state that attempt to impose an abstract ideal body upon the lived body of perceptual experience. A great deal of Western learning—and certainly, much of the 'canon' of Western philosophy, insofar as that might be loosely defined—is characterized by the effacement of *bodies* as lived (grounded, processual, multiplicitous), while *The Body*, as object and fact, is placed in their stead. At the more applied level, the social sciences have been instrumental in reproducing and naturalizing an abstract referential body against which deviations, pathologies, and other 'subjects of interest' are measured and defined. In this sense, Mauss' essay is both an invitation to a relational and historicized understanding of the body, and lays the groundwork for a rationalist program of corporeal analysis and management. Destabilizing such models seems a necessary step in fostering a politics of the sensible that aims for a more equitable space of inhabitation. Such a reorientation requires taking seriously other perceptual possibilities and resisting the

everyday normalization of privilege and oppression. It requires a frank and sustained critique of the ways in which socio-corporeal practices couple with the apparatuses of corporate and state power (educational, legal, etc.) all but completely erase marginalized bodies, precipitating a crisis of corporeal as well as social dimensions. Yet, such crises may, at times, open up moments of possibility by offering some other way of engaging in the world. Just as hope depends upon failure to be hope, the modern crisis of the body may harbour a utopic potential.

Because the process of socio-corporeal reproduction is enacted anew ever and again by embodied individuals, with all their physical, psychological and social variants, difference and possibility inhere in every moment, even if muted and without being durably effective. Moments of crisis can bring these possibilities to the fore: instability requires of any organism a response, and when repetition of the same fails to meet the demands of the situation, grasping for the new may be the only effective course of action. Still, we should not naively imagine that crises—whether at the macro levels of social and economic reproduction or the micro level of personal experience—necessarily engender creative possibilities and redistributive change. Indeed, as shown in the previous chapter with reference to Lefebvre, the drive toward possibility and the new fails more often than not. Similarly, as Bourdieu has argued, while crises may present opportunities for creative action and the production of the new, moments of crisis also act as nodes around which structures of reproduction cohere and reassert themselves with socially hegemonic, if not overtly violent, force.¹³⁴ Indeed, we can see how effective capitalism has been at mobilizing its own internal crises into vehicles of growth: consider the corporatized responses to climate change and environmental catastrophe, from the ever-expanding ‘green energy’ sector to carbon-offset schemes peddled to consumers like so many late-capitalist indulgences (which have the added benefit of redistributing and individuating social, economic, and moral responsibility for the simultaneously destructive and reproductive forces of global capitalism, thus exculpating corporate and state players—and above all, the super-rich).

¹³⁴ “Field of Cultural Production,” *Logic of Practice*. See also Fowler, “Pierre Bourdieu.”

Nonetheless, there is a momentum toward change in the tension between these competing forces: a striving for and embracing of novelty, for the new, alongside the drive toward simple reproduction. That this is the case is demonstrated by capitalism's resilience in the face of crisis, by its ability to reinvent itself according to changing conditions while still maintaining its essential characteristics. The production of the body, of space, and of perceptual experience, imply both the conservatively replicative and the creatively innovative. For capitalism to survive, it has of necessity operated along these same lines.¹³⁵ These two different tendencies—replication and innovation—are *opposed* but they are not *opposites*. They represent movements that work against each other; but, neither one can contain or negate the other. As a dialectic, these forces can be understood as organizing and giving expression to perceptual experience, and on a different scale, as operating in the spheres of social and material reproduction. Because they do not form an antithetical binary, they suggest that there is always some excess that both precedes and succeeds them. The excess that this dialectical tension makes us aware of, but that we cannot fully grasp (precisely because the negative is this excess), has its corollary in the pre-personal body of sensation, while our own singular embodied subjectivities cohere around the productive play between replication and creative innovation. My understanding of a dialectical relationship that is always unstable and incomplete—in a certain sense: excessive—derives from Adorno's theory of dialectics (*viz.* the 'excess' of the negative and the non-identical nature of oppositional terms)¹³⁶ as well as Lefebvre's treatment of the dialectics of space and the body as a three term relation.¹³⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, this last is understood as operating in a productive tension in which no one element assumes final, lasting authority. This conception of a multiple-term dialectic can be extended to Mauss' techniques of the body, where the human body is conceived of as a tripartite relation, with the physiological, the sociological, and the

¹³⁵ I leave aside the question of whether capitalism is now nearing—or has already reached—its limit in terms of adaptability, and whether we are witnessing a global transformation as we move into some new (though not necessarily more equitable) form of socio-economic relations. For the present, I remain skeptical in the face of arguments that late stage-capitalism is now at its end.

¹³⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

¹³⁷ i.e. spatial practices, representations of space, spatial representations; or, the perceived, the conceived, the lived. Lefebvre, *Production of Space*.

psychological mutually constitutive of our embodied selves. The biological body of raw life determines the fundamental conditions of possibility and is given to us in advance of ourselves, by nature, but the phenomenal presence of the active body, in its responses and effects, always remains malleable to a degree. The social body is a reflection of the social order, of custom, ritual and law; it positions us in relation to others and reproduces socio-spatial relations. Finally, the psychological acts as a mediating process between social forces and the individual body as singularly lived: the embodied mind reproduces the social but it is also the locus of introspection, creativity, and interrogation.

Despite aiming for a relational, comprehensive understanding of the body, Mauss remains within the framework of a largely Cartesian dualism in which the social—and with it, reason—ultimately assumes prominence. It is by way of social practice, inculcated through education, and for “social authority” itself—the organizing principles that give a particular society its defining characteristics—that various culturally-specific forms of corporeal techniques assume durable prominence. The social, as the organized expression of human minds, here takes on the determinative role of fundamental cause and ultimate aim of human life, driven by a supposed “determinate efficiency,”¹³⁸ as human cultures adapt and improve the techniques whereby they make their worlds. This perspective evinces a rationalist humanism predicated on the Enlightenment principles of reason and progress in which ‘Man’ betters ‘himself’ (*sic*)¹³⁹ by improving the technical means and abilities that constitute human societies. There is an implicit teleology at work in this, one that is easily heralded in the service of Eurocentric conceptions of civilization. Grounded within the philosophical, anthropological, and socio-political thought of late 19th and early 20th century European intellectual culture, Mauss’ project depends upon an understanding of a civilizing ‘drive’ in the human psychological make-up that acts as a repressive force.¹⁴⁰ The progress of reason and civilization rests upon a disciplined coordination of the body that is replicated in the mind, with the aim of

¹³⁸ Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” 92-93.

¹³⁹ I emphasize the gendered formulation so as to keep in sight the gendered assumptions (explicit and implicit) at the heart not only of Mauss’ but of much sociological, anthropological and philosophical treatments of the body.

¹⁴⁰ See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

controlling brute biological corporeality and directing its potential toward some rational goal. But, if the mind is the source and expression of reason, it is also subject to emotion. The unruliness of the emotions, coupled with our bodies' tendency to sometimes fail us in unexpected moments, makes them seem suspect, yet they also provide the raw material for the project of human society. In Mauss' analysis, the project of civilization is one of containment and control that establishes a "resistance to emotional seizure," for "it is thanks to society that there is the certainty of pre-prepared movements, domination of the conscious over emotion and unconsciousness."¹⁴¹ And if the emotions must be strictly regulated and governed by reason, so too must sensation be managed and bodies policed.

2.3 Sensation, Emotion, Estrangement

Like sensation, the emotions resist categorical thinking, frustrating logocentric reason with their unruly excess. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accurately and consistently describe and categorize emotional states and reactions: not only are they eminently subjective but their cultural variability poses further challenges to broader historical analyses. Consequently, a great deal of academic scholarship has tended to bracket these problems, relegating them to some 'outside of the equation' category. Historically, this has been particularly true of the social sciences, with the emotional aspects of social life set aside altogether or at best treated as de-corporealized cultural formations with no discernible sensory presence.¹⁴² In this sense, the emotions are often treated as an 'externality' in the same way that land and the natural environment are set aside as externalities in classic economic theory—and, this is true not only of liberal-capitalist analyses. As David Howes notes, the 'scientific' materialism of the late Marx eschews a more corporeally-grounded understanding of human society, as "the senses seem to wither away and retain only a phantasmal presence."¹⁴³ An oddly anti-materialist understanding appears to reinstate the rule of objectifying rational thought over the sensing body, while an impersonal historical force that seems to transcend the very materiality of life assumes centre stage. This apparent dualism in effect bypasses the

¹⁴¹ Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," 93.

¹⁴² Gieser, "Embodiment, Emotion."

¹⁴³ Howes, *Sensual Relations*, 230.

unstable processual becoming of the body as socially enacted and as subjectively lived. Yet, as I argue throughout these pages, it is not simply the case that sensation precedes reason, laying the foundation for reflection and interrogation, but that thinking is itself an embodied activity that grounds reason, action, and human history in the thick materiality of sensation. But, while reason allows us to reflect upon our material emplacement, with a sort of perceptual sleight-of-hand that accords us a *sense* of a-corporeal distance, the emotions are always inextricably sensual.

Certainly, the diverse developments of affect theory within feminist and critical theory—and beyond—have encourage a general reconsideration of the significance of the emotions, with differing attempts to describe and analyze them.¹⁴⁴ But, precisely because of their nature, the emotions remain slippery subjects. The volatile unpredictability and oft ‘irrational’ operations of human emotions, with their unabashed defiance of the cool self-assuredness of reason and understanding, seem to present a constant danger in need of containment. Indeed, Mauss hinges his analysis on “an opposition between social order and the threat to order posed by forces of emotional origin.”¹⁴⁵ And yet, as much as they may seem to threaten order, intense emotions may also act as forces of social bonding—which cannot be fully accounted for if our emotional states are understood merely, or primarily, as irrational impulses that express some primordial state of disorder. Moreover, strong, even unbridled, emotion may provide a necessary social corrective in some settings: just as “emotional excess can destroy social order, it can also loosen and lighten a social order that has become insensitive to life.”¹⁴⁶ Our everyday lives are permeated with a range of emotional responses that cannot be easily disentangled from the social elements of our environment.

The emotions are, thus, highly ambiguous in that they are intensely personal yet they are given cohesive form by our social enmeshment. We may feel alone at times, but those feelings—like any other—are always-already intersubjective. Conversely, moments of

¹⁴⁴ See for example Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*; Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory”; Wetherell, “Trends”; White “Affect.”

¹⁴⁵ Lyon, “Material Body,” 88.

¹⁴⁶ Jackson, *How Lifeworlds Work*, 135.

collective joy, grief, fear, anxiety may intensify existing bonds, or they may initiate new relations—all of which operate at the crossing-over between the social, or group level, and individual subjective experience, and between preconscious sensation and conscious reflection. Although the distinction between emotion and affect may not always be clear, and remains disputed among theorists, I follow a general trend and understand the emotions as the tangible expression of the affective forces that animate our lives.¹⁴⁷ That is, an emotion—or emotional response, as the emotions are always dynamic, processual, never fixed—is identifiable, recognizable, even if it may be hard to pin down, hard to put into words; and, it assumes a certain coherence within the cultural particularities of a given locale and material-historical setting (i.e. a human environment). While there is considerable variation among human cultures in terms of the language used to describe emotional states, as well as much nuance in understandings of what those terms mean within those cultures, there are nonetheless common characteristics across human cultures that include certain basic universal emotional states (i.e. fear, joy, sorrow) though, once again, how these are locally expressed, whether in words or through facial expressions, bodily gestures and various culturally-specific forms of behaviour, varies across time and place. On the other hand, I understand the affects in terms of movement and intensity, as non-conscious forces that gather themselves into and animate our bodies.¹⁴⁸ The emotions can be thought of as coalescing moments of affective intensity: what they express has less to do with ‘objective reality’ than with the preconscious forces that help organize our perceptions. We might say, as a loose analogy that, as the pre-reflexive body of sensation is to discernible conscious perception, so affect is to perceived emotion. Although the analogy may only go so far, the key point is that the emotions, as culturally-organized affective forces, are felt subjectively at the level of the body, and communally across bodies, coordinating their movements and responses. And, they are available to us, in that we may critically interrogate them, in ways that the affects may not be. Thus, following Sara Ahmed, I am less interested in clear definitions of what

¹⁴⁷ See Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory”; Stewart. “In the World that Affect.”

¹⁴⁸ White, “Affect.”

the emotions *are* than in asking “What do emotions do?”¹⁴⁹ Emotions certainly do make us *do* things, behave in certain ways: they orient us in particular ways, though we may not understand why or how. As Spinoza reminds us in *The Ethics*, we do not know the causes of things; we merely perceive effects upon—or in—our bodies. As we are always-already in the world, we can only begin by interrogating these perceptible effects if we wish to understand the affects that we may have on others and our environment.

The emotions might then be thought of as the perception, expression, and participation in the production of affective forces that resonate in and between bodies within an environment. And, they express movement and rest within a social field: “emotion is precisely the experience of embodied sociality.”¹⁵⁰ Intense socio-emotional forces can be felt as strife—as dissonance—that may shatter bonds between individuals; but those forces seem to lose intensity more readily than ones that solidify human relations. While a mutual *feeling-with*—a corporeal recognition that the emotions that animate me somehow spill over into others, thus unsettling any insular sense of self—may be transient, such events can foster an awareness of common experiences, convictions and concerns. This awareness may be limited and provisional, yet at times it can have a lasting effect on those who share in the experience, nudging their perceptual awareness in some other direction. Consider the sense of excitement and group cohesion that can develop in a crowd at a large sports event or in the audience at a top-selling concert. Most of the participants will have no prior and likely no post-event interrelations, but within that particular setting the apparent boundaries of the autonomous self become blurred, as collective emotion swells up and through the crowd. This feeling of togetherness may sometimes be intense enough to be quite overwhelming, and in some group settings collective emotion can produce much stronger ties. Traditional communal events and sacred rituals, for example, may generate more durable group affect, solidifying social bonds among participants, while shared ecstatic religious experiences can radically

¹⁴⁹ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Lyon and Barbalett, “Society’s Body,” 48.

transform the individual's understanding of and relationship with the world and with others.¹⁵¹

Moments of powerful and extended group emotion (extended in terms of temporality, and/or of numbers of individuals involved and their proximity to each other) can thus unsettle the 'normal' parameters of our selves, showing them to be porous and malleable.¹⁵² This blurring between my body, my feelings, and that of those with whom I share the experience produces a strong sense of group cohesion. Caught up in the collective enthusiasm of the moment, we *sense* that we all feel the same things, that a common affective force animates and unites us. This is, in the first instance, not an idea—a concept—that occurs to us: it is a form of corporeal awareness. Our emotional lives take place at the level of the body but at the same time they are accessible to conscious thought to a large degree. The emotions thus operate at, and across, the apparent divide between our inner being and our external expression of self, between conscious, reflexive interrogation and the perceptual murkiness of the preconscious body. The emotions, consequently, have as spatial presence: we are bodies *in* space and the emotions find expression in us—in and through our bodies. Space is animated by affective forces; it expresses varying degrees of emotional valence.¹⁵³ The emotions mediate between our individual psychic lives and the unarticulated but (generally) commonly recognized conventions of public emotionality, or *affective doxa*—the 'proper' ways to behave, express oneself and, crucially, how to respond to others. "Emotion," writes Margot L. Lyon in her critical take on Mauss' essay, "is an ongoing aspect of all social relations."¹⁵⁴ Any human society, in addition to its material-historical basis and its cultural forms and traditions, is both product and source of affective relations, of intersubjective emotional experiences that bind just as they threaten social accord and mutual obligation.

¹⁵¹ See, for example: Csordas, *Sacred Self*; Throop, "Sacred Suffering"; Turner, *Blazing the Trail*.

¹⁵² Le Breton, *Sensing the World*.

¹⁵³ Low, *Spatializing Culture*.

¹⁵⁴ Lyon, "Material Body," 97.

Simultaneously subjective and collective, socio-emotional relations can be understood as modes of being-in-the-world, as modifications of the body and of bodies: the body as mood and style. In understanding sensation, emotion, and reflection, I thus link Spinoza's definition of the emotions [*affectus*] as "modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications"¹⁵⁵ to Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the body, of perceptual experience, and of the world, in terms of style. For example, the latter writes that "categorial activity, prior to being a thought or a knowledge, is a certain manner of relating to the world, and correlatively is a *style* or a configuration of experience."¹⁵⁶ At the level of the *lived*—in the immediacy of encounter with others in the world—the movements and moods that animate us are experienced sensually, with our perceptions coloured by the emotional shadings of our past experiences. We are social because we are effected and affective: "That we get involved in interactions at all," writes Georg Simmel, "depends on the fact that we have a sensory effect upon one another."¹⁵⁷ We sense others—they have a sensory-emotional effect on us, pleasant or unpleasant—and through sensation we gain "knowledge of the other," as our sense impressions "lead us into the human subject as its mood and emotion and out to the object as knowledge of it."¹⁵⁸ Sensation and emotion confirm for us our presence in the world, and act as a sort of bridge between ourselves and others, and the objects and materials that make for us a common world.

While these relations are in the first instance sensorial, the corporeality of the emotions cannot be completely disassociated from language and social formation: it is these that help give communicable form to our emotional lives. How we speak about our emotions depends upon our own linguistic experience, as well as our wider social-historical emplacement.¹⁵⁹ We may speak of getting feelings in our gut or a knot in the stomach, weights are lifted from our shoulders, our skin may crawl or feel electrified with

¹⁵⁵ *Ethics*, 130.

¹⁵⁶ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 197. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁷ Simmel, "Sociology of the Senses" 110.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 111.

¹⁵⁹ Silverstein, "Cultural Concepts."

pleasure: these words seem to contain the emotionally charged sensations they connote. But, to the extent that we rely on what is already given to us to express ourselves, they are arbitrary, historically contingent, devoid of absolute meaning; nonetheless, they help formulate the forces that move the pre-personal body of perception, articulating them into the specific, communicable emotions that we experience. Indeed, as the anthropologist Michael Jackson notes, it is irrelevant “whether emotions are sincere or insincere, it is their effect on human relationships that is critical.”¹⁶⁰ Emotions are as much ‘real’ or ‘factually correct’ as is the facticity of our own bodies. Yet, there is always a gap between what we say and what we feel—something that exceeds language and the organizing logic of reason.¹⁶¹ We might perhaps think of emotion and sense as the negative of language—not as an antithetical opposition but as that which both presupposes and exceeds language.

Alongside the techniques of the body of a given time and place, language partitions and distributes (or ‘shares out’)¹⁶² the affective forces within which sense perception coalesces, and assigns meaning within a broader social context. A wide-ranging study of how people speak about and classify emotional concepts within nearly 2500 spoken languages shows that, along with a high degree of variation (primarily linked to relative cultural-historical and geographic proximity), there is evidence of a “common underlying structure in the meaning of emotion concepts across languages” that suggests “common physiopsychological dimensions shared by all humans.”¹⁶³ There appears to be a deep level of raw emotion—of unarticulated affect—that is common to all peoples: something that is fundamental to all humans. But, much like sensation, the processes that develop and diversify our emotional states, bringing them to the level of conscious awareness and social expression, are uniquely formulated within the specific conditions of any particular cultural setting.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, language makes emotional states communicable beyond the

¹⁶⁰ Jackson, *How Lifeworlds Work*, 181.

¹⁶¹ White, “Affect.”

¹⁶² I am thinking, here, of a *partage de l’émotionnel* that would accompany Rancière’s *partage du sensible*. See Bargetz, “Distribution of Emotions.”

¹⁶³ Jackson *et al.*, “Emotion Semantics,” 1522.

¹⁶⁴ Dalidowicz, “Being Sita,” 104ff.

present, projecting them outward over time and imparting a temporal durability that we quickly naturalize and integrate into our quotidian lives. As with our everyday practices and dispositions, language tends to neutralize the historical-material context of ideas and of the assumptions that help structure the experiential world. This, in turn, makes it difficult for us to relate to sensory and emotional experiences that seem markedly different from our own. The way that we speak, the words that we use, and the wider implications these have in how we understand the world are never politically neutral or objective in any absolute sense.

Where Mauss' essay aims for an air of 'scientific disinterest,' describing and cataloguing without paying overt attention to the particularities of urban capitalism, Simmel, notably in texts such as "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" and "The Metropolis and Mental Life," adopts a more polemical position in detailing the sensorial and psychological estrangement of the individual modern subject. In Simmel's account, life in the modern city involves a new sensorial-affective environment and radical transformation in social relations that mirrors the development of the commodity form and the alienation of labour. With the ascendancy of capitalism and the rapid growth of industrializing centres, the need for labour draws diverse rural populations from surrounding regions into the modern city: there, the continuity of traditional community and custom is severely disrupted. Psychologically jarring, the sudden transformation of social relations, in which the familiar rhythms and sensations of everyday life are superseded by the depersonalization and rapid changes of modernity, induces a mental-emotional malaise, a sense of estrangement that is both psychological and material (economic). No longer measured against the long complex rhythms of weather and season, of moon and tide, of craft labour and community ritual, life is now partitioned and parceled out by mechanical time, by the clock, the assembly line, by the demands of managed productivity. In an attempt to adapt to these new conditions, says Simmel, the individual psyche adopts a "blasé attitude": the mood of a sensorially overwhelmed subjectivity, largely turned in on itself, standing at a remove from its surroundings and those others it encounters, affecting

a calculated coolness.¹⁶⁵ In this sphere, where “the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests, must integrate their relations and activities,” the nature of society and of the human mind are transformed by the cold logic of the money economy. “Money... becomes the common denominator of all values,”¹⁶⁶ the great equalizer that renders everything into interchangeable units and problems of management, as quality is transmuted into quantity. This leads to an intensification of the intellect, of calculating reason: the “money economy” and the modern psyche, writes Simmel “share a matter-of-fact attitude in dealing with men and with things.” The rationalizing logic of the market mirrors that of the abstracted, monistic intellect of the citizen-subject; the unique colouration that gives every sensation, every place and moment distinguishing characteristics is bleached away by the universal solvent of money. “Money,” says Simmel, “is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value,” and makes of all interaction an economic transaction that simply asks: “How much?”¹⁶⁷

The subordination of body and mind, of the sensations and rhythms of daily life in Simmel’s account have a corollary in Lefebvre’s analysis of the fragmentation of space and experience in everyday life. The formation of the urban sensorium and atomization of the modern subject mimic the process of homogenization, fragmentation and hierarchization that renders lived space into the malleable utility of the commodity form.¹⁶⁸ Increasingly, everyday relations and activities are structured around the demands of production and consumption as strictly economic activities. The division of labour in capitalist relations of production translates into the intensified divisions between public and private and between roles or positions within those realms, assigned or assumed, based on gender, race, class, and other categories that help set the general parameters of subjective experience. Over time, the homogenization of space and of productive labour within the capitalist mode render superfluous the specialized skills and knowledge of trade workers and artisans and the unique-to-every-place relationship with the land of farmers and pastoralists. Economic relations map themselves onto lived space: with the

¹⁶⁵ Simmel, “Metropolis.”

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 177-8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 176.

¹⁶⁸ Lefebvre, Production of Space.

expansion of global commerce from the Renaissance period onward, the city becomes the absolute centre of political and economic power “constitute[ing] a hub, a privileged focal point, surrounded by peripheral areas which bear its stamp.”¹⁶⁹ These rapidly expanding centres of diversified activity constitute “pivot points”—spatially fixed centres of social, economic, and political power that dominate and direct the peripheries.¹⁷⁰ Henceforth, all territories are colonized by an economic rationalism that knows only production and consumption and perpetual expansion. However, with exponentially accelerating economic growth and technological development, the city/country (or centre/periphery) distinction dissolves into a new socio-spatial arrangement: the urban.¹⁷¹ No longer tied to central cities, capital frees itself within this new economic order, seeking out ever new opportunities, dispossessing and displacing some populations while dragging others along behind, as labour is also forced to ‘freely wander’ ever more widely in search of a buyer. With the rise of mature global capitalism, it is in the realm of the urban—as a total social (*perceived*), economic (*conceived*), and subjective/corporeal (*lived*) project—that the spatial and sensorial constitution of lived experience is most radically transformed. The urban most fully expresses the distribution of the sensible of late-stage capitalist society.

2.4 The Urban Spectacle: Technology, Art, Architecture

In tandem with the transformation of space, the subject’s sensory enmeshment in the world becomes increasingly fragmented, homogenized, and hierarchized. Although largely elevated to the status of the sense of objectivity and reason by the time of the Enlightenment,¹⁷² vision is further privileged with capitalism’s restructuring of socio-sensorial relations. As such, sight and visuality are valorized in a way that mirrors the mental and material alienation of modern life described by Simmel. Sight seems to impart a sense of distance, of standing apart from objects—but also from other people: a sense of objective remove that provides a basis for the ‘rational actor’ *Homo economicus*. Moreover, the visual field seems to lend objects a constancy in a way that other sensory

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 235.

¹⁷⁰ Simmel, “Sociology of Space,” 146.

¹⁷¹ Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*.

¹⁷² Le Breton, *Sensing the World*, 25ff.

modes do not. I can look at a thing in the world, look away, and when I look again, it appears unchanged—and all the while, I imagine it in my mind as fixed and whole.¹⁷³ Taste, smell, and audition, on the other hand, are more obviously temporal: they require my continuous involvement with the ‘object,’ and the sensations that I experience change over time—they have a perceptible temporality that the visual appears to shed. Touch, in turn, involves the immediacy of the flesh: it demands direct tactile activity between the touching and the touched, blurring the distinction between the two, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us.¹⁷⁴ While our other sensory modes—and corporeality, in general—have been largely devalued in Western thought, deemed unworthy when it comes to assessing the accuracy of our perceptions, sight has assumed a pre-eminence as the sense that *reveals* the world to us, and through which we ourselves *appear* and make ourselves known to others.¹⁷⁵

In conjunction with the ascendancy of the commodity form—which abstracts itself from labour and the materiality of its own production—under the authority of visuality and the visual image, sensation and experience seem to become unmoored from the specificities of place and time, from the granular details of the environments that afford the very possibility of those same perceptual experiences. With the consolidation of industrial capitalism and its transition into a totalizing global project, the senses are further fragmented and segregated. For the first time in history, a multitude of strangers are suddenly crowded together in workplaces, in cramped living conditions, and face-to-face with each other in public transit systems “in a situation where for periods of minutes or hours they could or must *look* at each other *without talking* to one another,” severing sight from speech and audition.¹⁷⁶ Simmel argues that the overwhelming effect of the

¹⁷³ On the problem of the appearance of perceptual—especially visual—constancy, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 312ff. in particular. See also O’Dea, “Perceptual Constancy.”

¹⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*.

¹⁷⁵ To a large degree, Rancière’s “politics and aesthetics” replicates the strong emphasis that Hannah Arendt places on speaking and appearing before others as the pre-condition for a participatory space of politics. Arendt, *Human Condition*.

¹⁷⁶ Simmel, “Sociology of Senses: Visual,” 360. Emphasis added. In a similar vein, the acoustic isolation of individual subjects from each other and the surrounding environment is furthered in

urban spectacle, with its saturation of the visual field and general sensory overstimulation, numbs perception and “incapacit[ates]... react[ion] to new sensations with the appropriate energy.”¹⁷⁷ The subject is thus pacified and sensorial-affective presence reduced to simple production and consumption.¹⁷⁸ As Spinoza—to whom Simmel is indebted—argues in *The Ethics*, we end up being moved by passions rather than consciously engaging in activity.

The *blasé attitude* of the modern city-dweller also shows up in the emotional coolness of *the flâneur* as conjured by Walter Benjamin: the detached visual witness who is a product (quite literally, in an economic sense) of the modern city and who casually consumes the urban spectacle. A generation younger than Simmel, Benjamin furthers our understanding of the increasing interiorization of subject and the atomization of object in modernity. In *The Arcades Project* in particular, he details the changes to the life of the senses in the burgeoning urban commercial centres, as visibility gains an increased prominence.¹⁷⁹ This is epitomized by the specialized fashion stores catering to nascent bourgeois consumerism and, especially, the department store—a new commercial institution of visual spectacle and sensorial saturation. In contrast to the protean intimacy of the small shop, now “goods were largely out in the open,” writes David Howes, “and anyone could enter simply with the purpose of having a look”¹⁸⁰—thus making of consumption a casual pass-time that is eminently visual. The simple act of viewing commodities becomes a form of consumption in itself, one that helps formulate the modern subject as a citizen producer-consumer. Benjamin links the changing sensorium of modern urban life directly to the transformation of socio-economic relations wrought by capitalist expansion, and, more prosaically, with changes in common merchandising practices. “With the increase in displays of merchandise,” he writes, “the physiognomy of the commodity emerged

the contemporary by the wide-spread used of personal listening devices: see Bull, “Privatizing Urban Space.”

¹⁷⁷ Simmel, “Metropolis,” 178.

¹⁷⁸ Debord, *Society of Spectacle*.

¹⁷⁹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*.

¹⁸⁰ Howes, “Hyperesthesia,” 284.

more and more distinctly,”¹⁸¹ underscoring the affinity between the commodity form and the visual image as object. Like the fetishized commodity that cuts its ties to the means and moment of its production, the reified image assumes an independence and mobility, exerting a power of fascination yet lacking any continuity or rootedness in the present of lived experience.

The institution of corporate mass media in the 20th century—and especially television, with its unending sensually-seductive stream of moving images—has accelerated the simultaneous reduction in local quality and enlargement in affective reach of visibility. But, it is with the development of the Internet and digital media that the comingling of private and public—and the blurring between reportage and opinion, science and private business interest, community initiative and corporatist state imperative—seems to reach its apotheosis. And with it, visibility seems to solidify its pre-eminence among sensory modes: though we can no longer have faith in the truth of the image, all seems to now depend upon sight. Seeing may no longer be an adequate basis for believing (if, indeed, it ever was), yet we continue to seek insight into the world and crave illumination; we watch out for others and look into the facts but may be deceived by illusory claims; we praise the vision of artists and political leaders, curse the blind, and are suspicious of what remains hidden in the shadows. We seek an objective view of the world. How we speak betrays the central place of visibility in the modern sensorium¹⁸² *seeming* to confirm vision’s power of objective distance and rational evaluation. The modern subject-position produced under these conditions is distinguished by a visual ambiguity corresponding to Benjamin’s “dialectic of flânerie”—the experience of feeling that one is “viewed by all” yet is simultaneously “utterly undiscoverable,” hidden within the anonymity of the crowd.¹⁸³ We can conceal ourselves and present a constructed image at will; yet, not only are we under constant surveillance—from our personal and work-related online activities, to corporate-state apparatuses such as tax filings, passports, or air mile points, to our public utility use and everyday purchases, to the myriad CCTV

¹⁸¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 368.

¹⁸² Truax, *Acoustic Communication*.

¹⁸³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 420.

cameras populating the urban landscape—we now willfully participate in the promulgation and maintenance of an expansive network of subject-forming systems of desire production.¹⁸⁴ The digitization and diffusion of production and consumption in a hyper-capitalist mode furthers the fragmentation of sensation and spatial experience set in motion with the beginnings of the industrial revolution, but now in a way that seems to dematerialize labour and the reproductive forces not only of capitalism but of the human being.¹⁸⁵ And yet, the very means that capacitate this transformation are eminently material. Indeed, the ‘Cloud’ of the so-called information economy is weighed down by millions of tons of heavy infrastructure that must be continually maintained and upgraded—all of which takes an ever-increasing toll on the global environment.¹⁸⁶ Technologies—and above all, visual technologies—thus play a crucial role in the formation of the modern sensorium.

Material technologies (tools and implements, equipment and machinery, infrastructure and working materials) are central to most forms of corporeal training that are requirements of a self-reproductive society. Although Mauss never directly addresses their role in his essay, objects and materials populate the whole of the text, like so many mute witnesses to the concreteness of experience that theory may oft neglect. Nearly all of the techniques that Mauss discusses involve some form of material technology: diving (from an elevation of sorts?), sitting (seats), sleeping (some form of bedding), cooking and eating (diverse containers and implements), various forms of bodily care (brushes, etc.), and so on. Or, at the least, they involve raw materiality: climbing (what?), for example. Clothing clearly also has a significant effect on our sensorial engagement with our surroundings. Thick warm clothing has allowed us to inhabit colder climates, a hat reduces exposure to rain and sun, shoes greatly change the way we walk and where we do so, etc. Clothes can be also be designed such that they limit our movements, or makes us

¹⁸⁴ I draw, to a significant degree, on Deleuze and Guattari’s two volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* for my understanding of how desire production propels late-stage global capitalism. That is: under this socio-corporeal regime, desire—as a subject-forming force—comes under the sway of private property and wealth creation. See Chapter 4 below.

¹⁸⁵ Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labour*.

¹⁸⁶ Cubitt, *Finite Media*.

feel vulnerable, or set us apart in relation to those around us. Most of these technologies are so mundane that they generally go unnoticed: they remain ready-to-hand, in Martin Heidegger's terminology,¹⁸⁷ yet they are integral components of the politics of the sensible—how everyday perceptual possibilities are organized and deployed. As much as the techniques of the body are socially produced they are also reproduced by and in the material-technical means that are integral to those practices, above all those that we commonly engage with on a routine basis.

I am thinking of technology in two ways, here: in a very general, common-use sense of the word—the tools and machinery with which people make their worlds: everything from millions-of-years-old stone tools to our latest software updates—and in a more comprehensive sense of *techne*, as technological process. By this, I mean a combination of technology in the first sense (tools, etc.); the materials that are put to use; the bodily practices and socio-psychological dispositions through which particular technological forms are standardized and are routinized in the body; and, the methods of maintaining and transmitting those practices (i.e. their educational forms). Our entire existence, as species and as individuals, is technological: our archaic hominin ancestors changed the course of our biological and cultural history, with increasingly sophisticated tools and with the controlled use of fire¹⁸⁸ while our lives now are more technologically-mediated than ever before. Computer technologies have, quite clearly, altered our lives in ever changing ways, transforming our perceptual worlds—*redistributing* what is afforded to us—though we are frequently unaware of this and certainly largely ignorant of long-term outcomes. This is, of course, true of all technological forms: they help form our experiential worlds by affording certain parameters, and modern digital technologies, while dramatically altering human possibility, can be understood as part of an ongoing process—a fundamental aspect of our existence as species.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷That is, until something malfunctions or doesn't operate as we expect it to, and the object becomes present-at-hand. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

¹⁸⁸ See Foley and Lahr, "On Stony Ground."

¹⁸⁹ I touch on the particular influences of computer-based technologies here and there but this is not a major focus of this work.

With reference to the previous discussion of an organism's activities as always formulated within the possibilities afforded by its environment, we can say that, in an ecological model of perception and experience, the *technological affordances* of late-stage global capitalism both act as processes of subjectification that constrain our ability to discover difference and to think and act creatively, *and* suggest new forms of creative action that can foster different ways of engaging with our environments and each other. While it can be said that the affordances of any environment—which is, itself, neither fixed nor bounded—both limit and expand the scope of an organism's ongoing activities, under the current conditions these two tendencies have given rise to the heightened tensions and contradictions that increasingly face us in the everyday and that disrupt the *just-so* faith of the natural attitude. *The crisis of late-stage capitalism is a crisis of the body and of bodies*—bodies that are varyingly quantified, racialized, sexed, gendered, classed, dis/enabled and policed, but that are also always sensing, feeling, exceeding.

The contradictions between the insatiable demands of capitalist growth and the fundamental requirements of the base upon which any mode of social and material reproduction depends—that is: the body itself—strain to the breaking point our ability to adapt and successfully integrate ourselves into our surroundings. We may find ourselves misfitting, unable to gear in. Yet, as our everyday experiences becomes ever more destabilized and our perceptual commitment to *a* locale dissolves into the everywhere-and-nowhere fragmentation of capitalist hyperspace, something in us rebels: although continually subjected “to social injunctions, the body is prone to resistance.”¹⁹⁰ Seeking security, the body continually attempts to reorient itself, turning this way and that. The sensory overload and psychological estrangement described by Simmel now reaches a point where anything may seem possible yet we are prone to doubt everything (and we may even congratulate ourselves for being such clever sceptics).¹⁹¹ Presented with so many options—the department store model has now colonized every aspect of our

¹⁹⁰ Laplantine *Life of the Senses*, 15.

¹⁹¹ Which is precisely how Hannah Arendt describes the psychology of the masses under the sway of totalitarian propaganda: “In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world, the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.” *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 382.

lives—any semblance of auratic value seems to have faded into a limitless array of value-neutral choices that keeps us in a constant state of sensory stimulation and simultaneous psychological lack. In the process we become dis-oriented, as our bodies seek reassurance, grasp for certainty. We reach a *limit state* that seems to be both an impasse and an entryway into other possibilities. The dissonance and rhythmic breakdown between the misfitting body and the environment of late-stage capitalism hits a limit that is less of a foreclosure than a “threshold” that we face when the usual perception we have of a cohesive, enduring self is destabilized and threatened. “What remains constant,” in such a state, “is a sense of existential risk.”¹⁹² This sense of risk is entwined with the technological means of social and material reproduction: our lives have become hyper technologized in ways that are beyond our control and our comprehension. Machines are seen to displace workers, infrastructure networks appear to take on lives of their own, social media fosters asocial behaviour and smart appliances colonize suburban homes, while the very notion of the human—so central to the project of modernity—is thrown into question.

Undeniably, digital media have changed the ways that we interact with each other and the wider world. Indeed, our understandings of space and community have been altered, with the creation of virtual networked space and online communities. The question of whether (or: to what degree) digital technologies might represent a radical break in human history (and human consciousness) or are integral developments in our ongoing technological history—going from the earliest tools which altered the organism-environment relationship to the newest devices, software and applications—lies well beyond the scope of this present work. But what can be said with certainty is that all technologies invariably induce particular forms of mental, physical, and social behaviour: they have a politics. The politics of technology, moreover, are neither strictly deterministic nor entirely closed off to the marginalized and oppressed. With the progressively fragmentary nature of perceptual experience in late-stage capitalist society, there continue to be opportunities in the everyday for reappropriation and creative experimentation. The

¹⁹² Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, 23.

organism in jeopardy attempts increasingly novel strategies as it strives to adapt. The creative act can be understood not simply as involving a singular agentic consciousness driven by inspiration—the creative genius of Romantic conceptions of the artist—but as the response of a being under threat, a subjectivity in crisis. The contradictory forces of capitalist society—one reducing all labour and experience to exchange value, the other opening up new liberatory possibilities—are at work in the creation, reception, and circulation of art—and in the everyday creativity encapsulated in the arts of the street, as we will see. Modern technologies of reproduction, which replace older tradition-bound craft techniques, have radically transformed the nature of artistic work. Just as social relations and everyday sense-experience change in accordance with the capitalist mode of production, and are further transformed by digital technologies, so too the making of and encounter with art is brought under the dominion of the market while also finding radical new channels of expression.

Although considerations of art figure into my broader argument, I am not specifically concerned, here, with the world of fine art—art, as it is generally thought of in a modern context. My interest lies more with the nature of creativity, of the creative act—thus, shifting the principal questions away from a specialized field of artistic innovation to the more generic creative abilities at the disposal of the species. This position also blurs any sharp distinctions between *technology* and *art*—a distinction that, by and large, assumes that whereas the former is largely a semi-mechanical (or culturally-determined) reproductive activity based primarily, if not exclusively, in practical needs, the work of art is, above all, imbued with representational (or ‘symbolic’) significance.¹⁹³ In this, my focus on *capacities* and *affordances*—rather than on clearly divided categories of productive activities—is congruent with Ingold’s position, which avoids the problem of drawing a clear distinction between art and technology by focussing instead on the idea of *skill*, which is a defining element of all (or both) art and technology, regardless of ascribed ‘meaning.’¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Morphy and Perkins, “Anthropology of Art.”

¹⁹⁴ Ingold, “Beyond Art and Technology.”

The nature of creative activity in contemporary society is integrally tied to the ever-evolving socio-technological means at our disposal. In this context, it is worth keeping in mind Benjamin's ideas about the "technological reproducibility" of art in modernity and in particular what he has to say about film.¹⁹⁵ For Benjamin, film is the exemplar modern means of technological reproducibility in the arts: it fully expresses capitalism's sharp divisions of labour, with the various stages and tasks involved in production carried out independently of each other. At the same time, its very nature gives it new creative possibilities that reflect the levelling and objectivizing power of the commodity form and the emancipatory potential of the individual alienated consciousness that attains a broadened social consciousness.¹⁹⁶ The mechanical means of making a film allows for total segregation between stages (this holds, whether it is the work of an individual filmmaker or that of a large studio); likewise, the filmic image undergoes a process of abstraction and fragmentation that allows it to be productively manipulated in ways that set it apart from older art forms. "Film," writes Benjamin, "is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its technological reproducibility."¹⁹⁷ No longer bound to place and tradition, the 'content' of art (its sensuous and affective force) references not a specific social context, customary belief or ritual practice, but its own production, *itself* as product and productive activity.¹⁹⁸ Film, in this telling, cultivates and expresses a new, specifically modern, form of consciousness—one that hovers ambiguously between the mass stupefaction fostered by the culture industry, and a revolutionary transformation of social relations and human potential. The visual spectacle of the filmic experience, at once immersive and alienating, replicates the logic of abstraction that Simmel ascribes to the money economy. Yet, despite Benjamin's strong

¹⁹⁵ Benjamin, "Work of Art."

¹⁹⁶ I say social rather than class consciousness as I understand this transformative awareness as residing less in a formal conception of a revolutionary class than in our perceptual capacities' potential to engage us with each other and in the world in different, more equitable ways.

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin, *ibid*, 28.

¹⁹⁸ I use the example of film, and Benjamin's analysis of its production and effects, to describe this process but much the same can be said about digital technologies—and not only visual media. For example, the fragmentation and de-contextualization expressed by the filmic process is also present in the capacities of contemporary digital audio recording and editing processes.

emphasis on visibility and the visual image, he was also keenly attuned to sound and the sonic transformation of urban space.¹⁹⁹

For example, in *The Arcades Project* Benjamin describes the ever-growing traffic noise on the streets of Paris and notes that only with the application of yet other technological means—in this case, modern road building methods—was “it possible in the end to have a conversation on the terrace of a cafe without shouting in the other person's ear.”²⁰⁰ Not only does this passage accentuate the growing noise of modern cities, which has continued unabated for over a century,²⁰¹ it also draws attention to the interactions of various modern technologies and the built environment in the configuration of the modern sensorial regime. Indeed, architecture and large-scale infrastructure play an essential role in shaping our perceptual experience as we go about the day. Architecture is a form of complex technology, in the expansive sense of a *techne*, that helps shape the individual *habitus*.²⁰² The urban dweller encounters and engages with various built features of the city that guide, capacitate, or constrain action. Spaces are designed, opened up, segregated, further enabling some bodies while restraining or excluding others. Like all technologies, architecture delineates parameters as it “initiates, directs and organizes behaviour and movement.”²⁰³ In the architectural form, power and need, materials and materiality, social convention and subjective desire, are bound up with each other in a dialectical tension that proposes an excess: “architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience.”²⁰⁴ Bearing with it a politics of domination, modern architecture also suggests an other space and a differential time.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ Hall, *Dialectical Sonority*.

²⁰⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 420.

²⁰¹ What constitutes ‘noise’ is largely arbitrary and may differ between individuals. For my purposes, noise can be defined simply as unwanted sound, much as a weed is merely some plant that grows where it is undesirable to a human observer (or cultivator). See for example Uimonen, “Acoustic Communities,” 120-1

²⁰² Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture*.

²⁰³ Pallasmaa, *Skin of the Eyes*, 68.

²⁰⁴ Barthes, *Eiffel Tower*, 6.

²⁰⁵ Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*.

If there is a utopian desire that animates modern architecture—a reimagining of built space and the relations that this engenders—it is one that aims to delineate a different space according to a preconceived plan, employing the strategies of the engineer, of top-down planning. Like the totalizing perspective upon the city from atop the World Trade Centre described by de Certeau,²⁰⁶ the architectural gaze involves a conceptual mapping that flattens space, rendering it mechanically functional. The mapping of space, both historically and conceptually, has involved a process of abstraction and expropriation, of dispossession, acquisition, and consumption. Coupled with expanding European trade in the Renaissance, the development of linear perspective in art helped pave the way for the visual objectification of space²⁰⁷ while the increasingly sharp divisions of labour of nascent capitalist forces expanded and intensified the segregation and hierarchization of the senses. In the 19th century, professional and scholarly geography took shape as a kind of visual possession of the land based on principles of property and reason. This ideological commitment gave rise to the “landscapism” that, according to Kristin Ross, takes itself to be “the science of objective space par excellence”²⁰⁸—what, in Lefebvrian terms, we might call an arch-representation of space. Throughout this historical process reason, property and sight *appear* to become naturally and inescapably intertwined, furthering the fragmentation of everyday experience. The flattening of space seems to reach its apogee, according to Frederic Jameson, in post-modern architecture²⁰⁹ while, for his part, Juhani Pallasmaa writes that “the contemporary city is increasingly the city of the eye, detached from the body by rapid motorized movement, or through the overall aerial grasp from an airplane,”²¹⁰ underscoring the relation between sense perception and the acceleration of technological change in modern society.

²⁰⁶ de Certeau, *Practice*, 91.

²⁰⁷ Le Breton, *Sensing the World*, 25-6.

²⁰⁸ Ross, *Emergence of Social Space*, 85.

²⁰⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1991.

²¹⁰ Pallasmaa, *Skin of the Eyes*, 32.

2.5 Visualism Reconsidered

I have sought, in this chapter, to describe the various forces and processes that constitute the ‘modern sensing subject,’ emphasizing their cultural-historical emplacement while also acknowledging that there is something of the body—of *our bodies*—that always resists categorical thinking, some excess in the flesh of experience that we can only know through its perceptual effects—in the effects upon our bodies. I have emphasized the mutually productive nature of the body and of technology (in an expansive sense), and the material and historical emplacement of this relationship. Moreover, by critically examining these processes, we can understand the apparent primacy of vision not simply as a given—as a ‘natural’ fact—but as a consequence of both biological/material processes and of a particular intellectual history that has identified in sight a sensory corollary to the idealized disinterested logic of pure reason. The general assumption behind this history is that vision distances and affords us an objective relationship with the world.²¹¹ In contrast, other sensory modes seem inextricably subjective, embedding us in the immediacy of experience. Indeed, there is a whole “audiovisual litany” that contrasts the supposed objectifying distance of sight with the perceptual immersion of audition.²¹²

All of our senses, including sight, may of course deceive us: they can only ever offer us a partial understanding of the world, simply because of their nature. Our sense of smell is attuned to certain kinds of chemical processes but not others, and our sense of touch can easily detect certain kinds of material forms but not those that seem less solid (such as various gases) and then only those that are within our grasp. Indeed, the hierarchization of the senses is in part structured around the relative reach of our sensory modes: all of our senses extend our perceptual being beyond the apparent boundaries of our physical bodies but to different degrees.²¹³ Touch and taste depend upon immediate proximity, while our olfactory abilities expand farther out into our surroundings. Audition extends us even further: we can hear sound events from a great distance, but as distance increases

²¹¹ Descartes, “Treatise on Light”; Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 245ff.

²¹² Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations.”

²¹³ Le Breton, *Sensing the World* 2017.

so does the time delay between event and audition (e.g. when we see someone hammering on something, in the distance: we hear the blows a split second after we see the hammer come down). Sight appears to distinguish itself not only by its great reach but also by its temporal qualities: it seems to imbue the things in the world with a durability, granting them a solidity that eludes other sensory modes. And, it presents us with the world all at once in its immediacy, for we appear to see things as they are happening, with no time delay. And if it is by way of reason—as the operations of a reflexive mind turned in upon itself and away from the partiality of the senses—that we may arrive at clear and distinct ideas, vision, more than any other sensorial mode, *seems* to present us with a world of objects that may be clearly and distinctly apprehended, if perhaps only fleetingly.²¹⁴

Certainly, the centrality of sight in the human sensorium is undeniable. Our binocular vision and complex colour sensitivity have helped define the species²¹⁵ and it can be said that, for most people, sight generally occupies the greatest portion of our everyday perceptual attention. Yet, while sight seems to impart a solidity to objects and afford us a more-or-less reliable gauge of our emplacement in the world, we are constantly reminded of the limits of vision. We know that, at best, we are only afforded a partial view of the world—that we see from *a* point of view, one amongst many. Nonetheless, largely because of its reach and the way it presents a world of distinguishable objects to us, vision has generally been accorded special status, making it among the senses what reflexive reason is to other faculties of the mind.²¹⁶ The apparent constancy, perspective, and reach that sight affords us appears to mirror the objectifying gaze of dispassionate logical thought.²¹⁷ Moreover, the distancing power of vision seems to amplify the sense of estrangement from the world, from others, and ultimately from oneself, that reaches its

²¹⁴ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 253ff.

²¹⁵ This is not to claim that particular features of our visual perception (e.g. binocular vision) are in themselves unique in how they have developed in humans; rather, it is the particular arrangement of sensorial possibilities that constitutes ‘the human’ as such.

²¹⁶ I conceive of such cognitive faculties not as fundamentally distinct functions of the mind but as varying modes of perceptual awareness, thus modifications of the body.

²¹⁷ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

full expression in capitalist modernity.²¹⁸ At the same time, this process of objectification, by causing the individual consciousness to become estranged from itself (more precisely: from the immediacy of its own conditions of production), enables consciousness to critically *reflect* back upon itself and to better understand (*see*) its position in the world. Abstract thinking demands that we take leave of our senses, as it were; but, it affords us a perspective from which it is possible to develop the concept of the general (the rule) and an understanding of the socio-economic and historical forces that elude us when we operate by way of perceptual faith. Yet, reassured by its ability to operate strategically and account for the world, the pure disinterested reason of abstract thought finds that it faces an endless series of perceptual contradictions.²¹⁹ This crisis of contradiction played out within the spectacle of urban modernity affords us the possibility of critical reflection. But just as the utopic impulse within the everyday has a propensity to fail more often than not, with hope collapsing into disappointment, the logic of the reflexive mind does not inevitably lead to a transformation of understanding but may, on the contrary, affirm the apparent primacy of its own position as a self-produced consciousness that gazes upon an objective world without necessarily participating in that world. In such a case, abstract thought would not foster critique and an enriched awareness of our place in the world but would instead naturalize the estrangement and atomism of the money economy²²⁰ and the instrumental reason that reduces all life (as process) to an operational world of things.²²¹

If I seem to have left behind the more practical considerations of perception and of the body that have been the focus of this chapter and strayed into the realm of abstract philosophical thought, this is not a departure from but an integral component of my overarching argument. That is: we think with and through our bodies; and, in our everyday socio-corporeal practices we both naturalize established norms and habits *and* have access to other ways of sensing, other ways of being—thus, other ways of thinking. If perception involves a condensation of sensation that is further distilled into reflexive

²¹⁸ See previously cited writings of Benjamin and Simmel above.

²¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*.

²²⁰ Simmel, “Metropolis.”

²²¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

mind, then we can suppose that the pre-conscious body of sensation always exceeds our subjectively embodied selves as reflexive agents: the world leads mind. “The first element which constitutes the actual being of the human mind,” Spinoza writes in the *Ethics*, “is the idea of some particular thing existing.”²²² For Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the fundamental philosophical question correspondingly shifts from the *an sit* (Could there be something? Is there something? Or even: Why is there something?) to the *quid sit* (What is there? What is it? What is the nature of my perception?). I perceive *something* and already I am entangled in the flesh of the world. My interrogation begins in experience. And with this, “there remains only to study what the world and truth and being are, *in terms of the complicity that we have with them.*”²²³ The very possibility of abstract conceptual thought not only originates in its worldliness but this worldliness always posits something more: some other sensation, perception, action. The excess of the body of pre-conscious perceptual awareness both negates the individual sensing subject and renews its commitment to the world by affording ever new ways of sensing, of thinking and being. In the following chapter, these ideas will become explicitly relevant within my discussion of various creative urban practices that may act as vehicles for critique and resistance. However, before turning to such considerations, I draw attention to the fact that I have been dealing with sight and visuality in ways that are meant to question many of the assumptions that accompany our understanding of vision and of the senses more generally.

I have deliberately spoken of how sight *seems* to operate at a level of objective things, of how vision *appears* to mirror the calculations of reason, in contrast to other sensory modes which are assumed to be more obviously processual and perceptually immediate. But are all of these assumptions well-founded? A dominant understanding is that sight, in effect, happens in the head (or the soul, as for Descartes). We see objects in the world as light that is reflected off of them and that reaches our eyes. This then causes a series of nervous excitations (to grossly oversimplify) that allows us, as conscious subjects—and

²²² Spinoza, *Ethics*, 90.

²²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 107. Emphasis added.

here the atomized Cartesian cogito inserts itself—to see things ‘out there’ in the world.²²⁴ Other senses, on the other hand, *seem* to integrate our bodies into the world more seamlessly. Taste and smell suggest a comingling of our bodies and our surroundings, as various molecules are absorbed through specialized sensory receptors; and, we understand sound as a vibrational force that penetrates our bodies. We simultaneously hear space, hear *in* space—and we hear ourselves in space, as part of space.²²⁵ Moreover, we hear *inside* of ourselves when we speak: we hear our voice both without and within our head. “The sound of the self is ultimately entwined with the environment.”²²⁶ And, we do not doubt the immediate veracity of our tactile impressions: if something feels heavy, cold, smooth, etc. then it *is* those things in terms of our perception of it. But sight feels different: we see things ‘out there’ but we see them from ‘in here,’ and thereby ascribe sight to an interior consciousness. Sight *seems* to naturally and inevitably presents us with an objectified world of things. Vision thus assumes dominance as the pathway that leads between the mind and the world—a pathway that is truncated by the gateway of the eye, an absolute boundary between myself and the world and those others who inhabit it. But is this necessarily the case? Tim Ingold argues that this relationship between sight and an interiorized cogito is precisely the opposite of what is commonly proposed. It is through its “co-option in the service of a particularly modern project of objectification,” he writes, that “vision has been reduced to a faculty of pure, disinterested reflection, whose role is merely to deliver up ‘things’ to a transcendent consciousness.”²²⁷ On the other hand, there is in much modern philosophy an ambivalence—bordering on anxiety—toward the visual realm as being the realm of *appearance* as opposed to *substance*.²²⁸ Exalted or disparaged, vision thus seems to demand greater attention than other sensory modes. However, by focussing on the *multi-sensory* nature of everyday experience—and consciousness, more generally—we may be able to attenuate the preponderant focus on vision and the objectifying reason that has

²²⁴ Descartes, “Treatise on Light”; Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*.

²²⁵ Vogelín, *Listening to Noise and Silence*.

²²⁶ Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 38.

²²⁷ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 253.

²²⁸ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*; Gardiner, “Phenomenology and Its Shadow”; Le Breton *Sensing the World*.

become associated with the visual realm. The point is thus to better understand how our senses both implicate us in the world and may act as pathways into a different way of experiencing—of sharing in—the world.

The goal, then, is not simply to invert an existing hierarchy of the senses any more than it is to deny the importance of vision in the human body (and thus mind), but to treat the senses as an integrated whole in which different perceptual modes (modifications of the body) attune themselves to different characteristics in an environment. In this context, a critical account of acoustic experience helps demonstrate how differing sensory modes are not isolated fields but dynamic processes that overlap and blur into each other.

Indeed, a full account of aurality exposes problems with trying to link a specific organ (or organs) to a single mode of perception. Although it is true that our ears play the greater part in our perception of sound, we in fact sense the vibrational forces, that for us constitute sound, with our whole bodies. In addition to the ear, we also sense vibrational frequencies with other parts of our bodies—notably the diaphragm and long bones, which are more attuned to very low frequencies at the threshold of our sensory capacities.²²⁹

The resonant forces that translate into sound for us indicate the fundamental inseparability of sensory pathways: the perception of sound exceeds the very organ that is designated as the organ of aurality. It is perhaps worth noting that this is not true of sight and of the eyes: complete blindness suggests that no information from the visual field is perceptible. But sound is not a bounded field, nor is its apperception limited to one sensory pathway. And of course, hearing cannot be ‘turned off’ the way sight can be by closing one’s eyes. We are continuously alerted by sonic cues in our environment and we respond (for the most part, preconsciously) to these cues. At the same time, we are always acoustic participants in the world. We not only emit sounds (intentionally or not) but our bodies absorb sound: our mere presence alters the sonic realm, and thus the perceptual affordances available to others.

Another important aspect of the sonic realm that I have already discussed is highly significant in the present context—that is: resonance; and, more specifically, how

²²⁹ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*; Serres, *Five Senses*.

reverberation is helpful in understanding how we integrate ourselves into our environment. As do all our sensory perceptions, audition implicates us in the world in advance of reflexive thought: when we listen, we are always already hearing in the world. Although we are not consciously aware of it most of the time, the sounds that we hear are not ‘made’ only by the originary sound event with which we associate a particular sound. When we hear *something* we hear it in space *and* we hear space. The parts of our bodies that are tuned appropriately (again: primarily but not only the ears) detect both the vibrational force emanating directly from the sound source and a series of reflected waves: energy frequencies originating in the sound source that then ‘bounce off’ of surrounding surfaces. These secondary sound signals add specific qualities to the perceived sound, and “are merged by perception into a single sonic effect: reverberation.”²³⁰ The time-delay between the sensations of the sound event and of these secondary vibrational forces may not be consciously perceived by us but it is a critical factor in everyday acoustic experience. The size, shape and material components of any space, as well as the presence of other objects and of living beings, all impart particular qualities to the reverberation that is perceived in that space.

Where reverberation refers to the sense of a sound blending with the surrounding environment, and is perceived as the totality of overlapping refractions of the sound event, an echo is a perception of reverberant sound that, due to the amount of delay²³¹ has, in a sense, broken free of the original sound event. Though we cannot clearly distinguish between the sound event itself and the reverberation that colours it, the echo detaches itself from the initiating event and returns to us as a distinct reflection of the original sound, like an auditory copy that imitates yet also differs, marked by the spatial signature of a given space at a particular time—an acoustic image of a past event: “an echo is nothing if not historical.”²³² Though all spaces impart some degree of reverberation, we usually only notice this in certain situations (e.g. inside a large, empty

²³⁰ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 111.

²³¹ Delay, in acoustic terms, refers to the time difference between the perception of the direct sound (that which is ‘heard’ directly from the sound source) and the perception of the reflected sound. Augoyard and Torgue, 37-38.

²³² Smith, “Echo,” 55.

hall or a stone-surfaced cathedral, or as we will see, the long corridors of metro stations). However, reverberation is a key component in how we locate ourselves in space: the size, shape, and materiality of any space impart particular acoustic qualities, sonic spatial cues which inform us, at a pre- or barely conscious level, and to which our bodies respond.²³³ Even in wide-open outdoor spaces, sound reflects off the ground and other nearby surfaces, though this effect is often well below the threshold of conscious perception.²³⁴ Objects and other living beings have their own sonic presences—presences which I perceive relative to myself and relative to each other in space. Moreover, beyond altering the acoustic fabric of a space by ‘making’ sound (speaking, simply breathing, etc.), our bodies absorb certain energy frequencies, so that even passive presence has an active acoustic effect. Thus, contra the idea that sight, uniquely, affords us a sense of depth perspective (because we see things as closer or farther from us and positioned relative to each other), the role of reverberation in our perception of sound indicates that our acoustic immersion in the world is equally important in how we locate ourselves in space. We simultaneously *hear in space* and *hear space*.²³⁵

We must, however, be wary of a romanticizing tendency—in opposition to a seemingly ocularcentric rationalism—to privilege sound and acoustic experience as somehow providing a more authentic, or direct, experience of the world. This is to be seen in the nonetheless important thought of composer and foundational sound theorist R. Murray Schafer,²³⁶ and in the work of many who have followed his lead.²³⁷ In this analysis, the ‘natural soundscape’ is often favorably contrasted with the ‘noise’ of modernity. Against the idea of a distinct ‘soundscape’ that might somehow compensate for the command of a strictly visual landscape, I would emphasize the integral nature of perception. In this context, I draw attention to the Spinozist idea of the senses as being modifications of the

²³³ Young. “Hearing Spaces.”

²³⁴ Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 69.

²³⁵ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak*.

²³⁶ Schafer, *The Soundscape*.

²³⁷ See for example Truax “Sound, Listening and Place”; Uimonen, “Acoustic Communities”; Westerkamp, “School of Sound Symposium.” For critical treatments of Schafer’s ‘soundscape’ perspective see Arquette, “Sounds Like City”; Guillebaud, “Introduction: Multiple Listenings”; Ingold, “Against Soundscape.”

body (and I must emphasize: of *a* body, within its own singular conditions) which itself expresses a more general force that exceeds us as individuals, in conjunction with Gibson's analysis of the senses as forming a cohesive (if mutable) whole, and Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception as a gestalt experience that, for the most part, integrates us almost seamlessly into our environments.

Thus, while it is undeniable that vision occupies a place of privilege in the sensorium of late modernity this is not simply a 'natural' or inevitable outcome but the result of specific historical and cultural processes—as is the case with all sensorial regimes. And if the social and material affordances that underpin our everyday corporeal experiences are not fixed but processual, and are tied to a particular sensorial regime—a distribution of the sensible that in the contemporary expresses the specific political and economic interests of late-stage capitalism—then it is possible to imagine, and perhaps actualize, different ways of sensing and different ways of being-together. To do so would involve, amongst other things, reconsidering the primacy of vision and understanding it as one sensory mode amongst others that is integral to human experience. And as do these other modes, vision has its own particular properties that are attuned to certain characteristics of the world (e.g. light, movement). There is already an agreement between my body and the environment in which I move, which affords me certain possibilities. Vision, as do all sensory modes, helps integrate me into my environment but can also allow me to enter into a different relationship with the world.

When in the natural attitude, I see but I do not necessarily look—though this seeing should not be thought of as a passive affair. Indeed, my sight is always actively involved in the world, but when my perceptions remain unexamined they seem to quietly confirm the naturalness of my impressions. However, if my conscious attention is directed toward what I see, such that I am intentionally looking at things, my perspective shifts and I 'see things differently.' Once again, this is true not only of vision: acoustic perception also seems to seamlessly enmesh us in the world until some particular sound event attracts our attention and we shift into a more a focussed mode of listening. We then conceptually isolate 'a' sound from the broader environment. Such shifts in perception can in some cases be traumatic, distressingly disorienting; but, they may also present moments of

possibility, of experiencing the world in a different way, with imagination leading perception. Art—and painting in particular, for Merleau-Ponty—can help us understand our perceptual embroilment in the world, just as it can shift *the way* that we see and *what it is* that we see.²³⁸ When I operate by way of the everyday perceptual faith I do not pay attention to the productive relationship between my senses and the world. But facing the work of art, my sight and attention are reoriented: it is the painting that leads my vision. Indeed, “it is more accurate,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “to say that I see according to [the painting], or with it, than that I *see it*.”²³⁹ Art is more than simply an aesthetic pleasure that stimulates the senses and mind (though it can be all that, as well). When we see *with* a work of art, our perceptions are modified by what the work proposes—that is, the effect it has on our senses. Art thus has a critical capacity in that it can present a different way of experiencing the world. However, we needn’t limit ourselves to vision in these considerations. I have already stressed the importance of not overemphasizing the role of vision and of not reverting to a scopic model of perception. Thus, if a painting can modify our vision, we can also say, for example, that music has much the same power over our sonic immersion in the world. All of our senses are informed by the things that we encounter in the world. But art, as the deliberate attempt to formulate something out of the unformulated, offers particular possibilities in terms of reorienting our perceptions and altering our engagement with each other and the world.

In the next chapter, I explore in more detail questions concerning the critical capacities of art and its potential to transform socio-spatial experience; but, I will do so by positioning these questions within the context of everyday creativity and amateur virtuosity. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that what we conceive of as *the* senses are merely different modes of sense perception—modifications of the body—and that these take shape within the sensorial regime of a given social, material, and historical setting. The sensory pathways that lead us into the world all work somewhat differently and each has a degree of independence from the others, but they are integrated with each other in our perceptual

²³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 159ff; *Sense and Non-sense*, 9ff.

²³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 164. Italics in the original.

awareness.²⁴⁰ Finally, I have emphasized that, while as individuals our perceptual possibilities are largely already determined for us, it is also the case that the dominant sensorium of late-stage capitalism is no more fixed or final than that of any other age or society. Indeed, the fragmented nature of this sensorium—as with the fragmentation of space—presents numerous potential openings for interrogation, critique, and creative action. In the following chapter, I show how the various practices I group under the loose term *the arts of the street* offer novel ways of engaging with the everyday urban environment and with others who share in this environment; and, how these diverse practices, by suggesting other ways of sensing and of being, may potentially foster a different politics of the sensible.

²⁴⁰ Gibson, *Senses Considered*; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Chapter 3

3 The Arts of the Street

This chapter expands upon ideas fleshed out in the previous chapters with regards to space, perception, habituated socio-corporeal practices, and moments of possibility present in the everyday. Here, I move into a more practical domain, to delineate a class of creative urban practices that, as disparate as they may seem, share certain key characteristics such that it is possible to discuss them in the aggregate while still keeping in mind that the terms by which they are designated remain malleable and mobile. What interests me is how these diverse sets of practices—each with their own particular technological affordances and mental-corporeal dispositions—can act as forms of resistance that propose different possibilities in terms of how we experience and share the world, have a share in the world, and share in the partitioning of the world. This grouping of practices includes, but is not necessarily limited, to street performance and street art more properly, punk, hip hop culture, and skateboarding. An odd mix, it might seem; yet, all of these practices have certain common characteristics: while they operate within the habituated common spaces of everyday life they also suggest some other possibility, some other way of conceiving of, perceiving, and acting in the world—both for the individual practitioners and for the casual witness. This loose conglomeration of practices and dispositions demonstrates different possibilities beyond, or alongside of, our largely unreflexive habituated ‘ways of doing’—the techniques of the body that help maintain for us a cohesive sense of the world. *The arts of the street render perceptible the excess of possibility that is already present in the everyday.* As such, they are political insofar as they operate ambiguously between reproducing and normalizing existing relations of social and economic power and actively resisting the logic of capital and the imperatives of instrumental reason.

I begin by turning to Jacques Rancière’s theorizing of politics, the sensible and art, but in doing so I problematize and critique certain aspects of his approach. While I find Rancière’s description of the critical and transformational potential of art in the context of late-stage capitalism to be compelling, my aim is move the discussion out of the more

rarefied world of ‘high art’ to that of everyday urban experience and the ‘life of the streets.’ I do so by outlining what I call *the arts of the street*: a grouping of practices that, each in their own ways, involve creative reappropriations of urban space by and for the practitioners of these ‘arts,’ that may simultaneously modify the spatial-sensorial experiences of others who move in and through those spaces. In what follows, I discuss in varying degrees busking (which includes all forms of street performance), graffiti and street art, punk, hip hop culture, and skateboarding (specifically: street skating). All of these have emerged from—and remain associated with—the life of streets and have an implicit critical capacity that I link to the transformative potential of Rancière’s *critical art*. In simple terms, all of these creative practices—in different ways but with similar effects—suggest other ways of conceiving, using, and experiencing public urban space. I examine each of these sets of practices in turn and together, to illustrate how their creative and critical potentials are already present in the contemporary world. However, I pay somewhat greater attention to punk and, especially, busking. This is largely because of my own familiarity with and involvement in these practices, for various lengths of time (although I might also include street skating, on this count). This approach is in keeping with my exploration of how we think with and through our bodies, and the critical potential that resides in everyday experience—a transformative capacity that ties us back to the pre-conscious body of experience, to each other, and to the world.

I discuss the everyday do-it-yourself (DIY) creativity and improvisational tactics of these arts of the street, linking these to the intuitive *débrouillardise*²⁴¹ of the bricoleur discussed previously. This, I contend, suggests that these varied ‘arts’ are tangible expressions of a fundamental human propensity to experiment and explore that helps secure our sense of a functionally ordered world whilst in the natural attitude, but that may also present itself as resistance and a desire for difference. The arts of the street can (and indeed, do) bring into evidence the productive possibilities that inhere in the everyday—specifically: in the fragmented urban space of late-stage capitalism. However, as we have already seen, while possibility may be present at any moment, hope seems to

²⁴¹ French word meaning, roughly: ‘resourcefulness’ or the ability to ‘unmuddle’ or work one’s way through a problem or challenge. See Reed-Danahay, “Talking About Resistance.”

fail more often than not. And this tendency to fail is equally true of the creative and critical impulse of the arts of the street. Consequently, in closing this chapter, I consider the limits of critique and the degree to which these ‘arts’ may resist the forces of commodification and how much they may, in fact, help normalize and naturalize the distribution of the sensible of late modernity.

3.1 Critical Art and the Space of Politics

I have already discussed Jacques Rancière’s theorizing of the “distribution of the sensible” as a way of understanding the political implications of how sensation and spatial perception are organized within the specific material-historical conditions of a given society. This “system of self-evident facts of sense perception,” writes Rancière, “simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delineations that define the respective parts and position within it.” This partitioning—or sharing out—“of spaces, times, and forms of activity” thus establishes “the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.”²⁴² According to Rancière, this allocation of sensorial possibilities in the name of society is expressive of three regimes of art—each corresponding to successive historical periods, although the earlier forms can be seen to overlap with the later ones. The first of these involves the earliest procedures and products of what we have come to call art, although strictly speaking these do not constitute “art as such but images that are judged in terms of their intrinsic truth and of their impact on the ways of being of individuals and of the collective.”²⁴³ In this “ethical regime of images,” the essential characteristics of art have less to do with technical skill or inspired creativity than with the ability to represent the divine: the ‘truthness’ of the image testifies to its divine nature. Here, art operates primarily at a religio-mythic level. With changing social conditions and technological means, this ethical regime of images is superseded by the “representative regime of arts,” in which the accuracy of the depiction—its realism, in the sense of attempting to be a faithful representation of an

²⁴² Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 7.

²⁴³ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 28.

ideal—becomes the paramount criteria for judging a work of art, and whether a particular work in fact constitutes art as such. Historically, this corresponds to a Classical (European) conception of art. But beginning in the 18th century, this ordering of the sensible begins to give way, as the “aesthetic regime of art” gains ascendancy. I note that, in this context, I am discussing a conception of art—as a practice, or sets of practices; and as a tangible expression, or as ‘works’—that has been formulated within the historical particularities of European artistic and philosophical traditions and of the modern West more generally. Therefore, it may be the case that this analysis is largely if not wholly inapplicable in other cultural settings.

Given the range of human activities that have variously been classed as art, it is difficult to arrive at a definition that is comprehensive enough without being so inclusive as to become all but meaningless. I would suggest, however, that we can at the least suppose that art encompasses the tangible expression of various human activities that produce in us an excitation of the senses and a corresponding perceptual stimulation that is at once integral to and stands apart from the everyday cultural setting within which it appears. Whether as sacred object or ritualised body adornment, traditional dance or communal song, staged musical or dramatic performance, or the art objects of late modernity whose very objectness has been thrown into question, art is always appropriate to its place and time. The assigning “to art objects a cultural significance is [thus] always a local matter.”²⁴⁴ The terms of art discussed herein are thus largely restricted to the socio-sensorial order of late-stage capitalism which is characterized, says Rancière, by the aesthetic regime of art. This idea of a *regime* can be tied to Foucault’s “regimes of truth”²⁴⁵ in that both describe the parameters of thinking—of what can be thought—and the limits of the possible, within specific socio-historical conditions. A regime can be understood as a set of rules and norms concerning not only ‘the truth’ (or ‘content’ of a truth-claim) but also how truth categories are generated and assume authority. However, while I find value in the Foucauldian analysis of power relations, the emphasis on more formalized discursive practices (which Rancière tends to reiterate) shifts attention away

²⁴⁴ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 97.

²⁴⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

from the relational becoming of embodied beings, away from the subjective corporeality with which I am concerned.

Within the distribution of the sensible that defines the aesthetic regime of art, there is a fundamental affinity between the aesthetic and the political and between art and resistance: the aesthetic regime of art encompasses “that which comes within the province of art through its adherence to a sensorium different to that of domination.”²⁴⁶ Here, politics does not refer to existing formal structures of political power so much as to the possibilities for a space of open encounter and exchange. Politics, says Rancière, is concerned not with “the exercise of, or struggle for, power” but with “the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience” and involves decisions about what is held in common and who is able to address questions of common interest.²⁴⁷ Thus, if politics centres on questions of who can speak and be heard, who is able and has (or has been allowed) the time to participate in a common space of encounter, and what the terms of participation are, then these are also questions of aesthetics. In this sense, the aesthetic does not designate an interest in the ‘content’ of art, or historical or technical analyses of various works of art, but is an account of “the sensible fabric of experience within which [works of art] are produced.”²⁴⁸ Art crystalizes the socio-sensorial realm, proposing a space of experience appropriate to its own particular regime of sense. The aesthetic regime of art distinguishes itself with the creation of “critical art”—an art that emphasizes and plays upon the intrinsic relationship between the sensible and the political. This is “a type of art,” Rancière writes, “that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation.”²⁴⁹ This critical art is characterized by two opposing tendencies that mark out the relations between art and politics: “the logic of art becoming life at the price of its self-elimination” and “the logic of art’s getting involved

²⁴⁶ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 30.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁴⁸ Rancière, *Aesthetics*, x.

²⁴⁹ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 45.

in politics on the express condition of not having anything to do with it.”²⁵⁰ And, as will be seen, these are also important characteristics of the arts of the street.

In the first case, there is a tendency for art to dismantle itself, *qua* art. If anything can become art and everyone an artist, then art has no claim to its own singularity. If nothing sets it apart from the materials, sensations, and events of everyday life, art as a category of things and of relations simply dissolves. This process might be identified, for example, in the tremendous changes in audio recording and editing technologies of the last few decades.²⁵¹ Digital audio production has led to a technological democratization that, on the one hand, affords new creative possibilities to innumerable would-be artists all around the world: surely a positive development if art is understood as a potential force of liberation that opens a (more) egalitarian space of experience. But, at the same time, we are now inundated with creative mediocrity that attempts to sell itself off as the inspired genius of a new, globalized consciousness. And while many people have indeed explored and exploited in provocative new ways the creative possibilities that digital media afford, such work is easily lost in the glut of self-produced offerings pouring out of home computers and basement studios or in the endless stream of ‘nice’ or ‘interesting’ photographic images online (Instagram, etc.), and so on. And yet, in blurring the borders between the everyday world of commodity circulation and art as a singular experience that distinguishes itself from its quotidian surroundings, there remains an indeterminacy: a productive ambiguity that speaks of an excess beyond the actual. Art, in this sense (and here, critical art) has the potential to pull us back into the body—*our* bodies—as subjectively lived, and out into the flesh of the world, and the pre-reflexive body of experience.

Conceived of as a force for revolutionary social transformation, this tendency of art to undo itself it to be found in the ideals of the Situationist International, who sought the

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

²⁵¹ I use this example based on personal experience, as a musician whose first use of rudimentary home-recording equipment pre-dates the digital audio revolution. As such, I am conscious of the ambiguity posed by new digital recording capabilities: I am both excited about the new technological affordances available to me but wary of my expanded role, in adopting such technologies, as a producer-consumer within an ever-growing decentred global economy.

means to instigate a revolution in everyday life.²⁵² Guy Debord, the best-known figure within the S.I., describes a classless society in which there would be no artists as such, “no painters, only Situationists who, among other things, make paintings.”²⁵³ Linked directly to the conditions of mature capitalism, here art’s ultimate function is to eliminate the distinction between producer and consumer, thus doing away with the category of artist—which, itself, can be understood as a bourgeois position of privilege. By taking up everyday materials, practices, and concerns, art would undo itself as a distinctive activity and would simply melt into the fabric of a post-capitalist society, just as the state and ultimately the capitalist mode of production are to wither and fade. But if such conceptions of art may have a tendency to result in work that is overtly and self-consciously political, the second distinguishing feature of critical art is that it enables a politics precisely by its very refutation of the political. That is, by eschewing any clear political stance, by refusing to adopt either the language of formal politics or any overt political philosophy, art acts in the interest of a common space of collective encounter. This relational space of encounter is to be understood as a realm of equal exchange, whereby we might realize our common mutuality. This is a framing of the political which locates its origins in ancient Athenian democracy. For Hannah Arendt, who has done much to bolster these origins and whose writings on politics enjoy lasting influence, the possibility of a true politics rests upon the ability of individuals to appear before others, to be heard, and so be recognized as individual *persons*. In this space of appearance, they may freely engage with each other and work out the difficult questions of how we are to live together. Such a “space of appearance comes into being,” Arendt writes, “whenever men (*sic*) are together in the manner of speech and action.”²⁵⁴ Speaking and appearing before others, in this formulation, are fundamental to the possibility of action. Rancière largely follows this ideal, while emphasizing that political space is never one of *de facto* mutual intelligibility, and that it is propelled not by consensus but by disagreement,

²⁵² Wark, *The Beach*; Marcolini, *Le Mouvement situationiste*.

²⁵³ Debord, “Report,” 48.

²⁵⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199.

disputation and dissent.²⁵⁵ The place of art, in this, is to act as catalyst, or focal point around which such a space may cohere.

However, this conception of politics and of art's power to open a space of free and open encounter is clearly not unproblematic. I leave aside the more obvious problems with looking to Athenian democracy for an ideal political realm, given that political participation was limited to male property-owning citizens, though I would add that it is not enough to simply say that this model might be differently applied, without the discriminatory terms of participation. The way that the model is organized is itself predicated on a partitioning of space and of time, of the social and the sensible, that is always exclusionary: using Arendt's own terms, we might say that those who work can also speak, while those who only labour cannot. A simple reading of Rancière seems to suggest that art has an inherent capacity to foster a space unencumbered by existing socio-economic relations and the inequitable distribution of the sensible of late-stage capitalism. Art, if it is to be critical, is precisely that which defines itself as art by its ability to foster a counter-space that operates in opposition to existing relations of power and mechanisms of domination. However, it does not follow that such a space would itself be necessarily free of inequalities, or that a *redistribution* of spatial-sensorial (thus political) relations among participants would be unaffected by the individual affective-corporeal histories of those participants. Put more bluntly: while art in the gallery context may well put into play different aesthetic and political possibilities, not everyone has access to the gallery. Whether in terms of cultural capital, financial means, or of simply *having the time* (which can be seen to encompass the first two criteria), the world of fine art is not one into which we all enter equally or by the same path. As argued throughout these pages, space is never neutral—there is no empty space: it is defined by the capacities and positions it affords; and, *these* present themselves differently to different individuals. In a sense, art in the modern context is always an elite category in that it defines itself by the fact that it stands apart from the mundane everyday world of things—which is precisely what imparts it with critical capacities. But its terms of

²⁵⁵ Rancière, *Disagreement*.

accessibility are, to a large degree, already given. Formulated from within, and in reaction to, the conditions of late-stage capitalism, critical art may aim to undo the distinction between art and everyday life—and between art and politics—but if it remains confined to the rarefied world of ‘high art’ it will inevitably end up reproducing the mechanisms of domination that it sets out to undo.

Rancière provides a number of examples to support his argument concerning art and politics. Of these, I focus on one in particular—relational art—which perhaps most obviously illustrates the problems posed by an unnuanced application of Rancière’s conception of critical art. Rather than focussing on *a* work and what *it* does, relational aesthetics, in Nicolas Bourriaud’s original conception, takes as its starting point the whole of human relations.²⁵⁶ For its proponents, which here includes Rancière, relational art fosters a counter-space of micro-social encounter, with its self-conscious rejection of formalized political discourse. The ‘work’ is said to set in motion new relations between artist and public and, importantly, between the individuals who comprise such a public—an exchange that is predicated on conviviality and play rather than the formal logic of capitalist economics. This understanding, however, has been criticized as being a rather naïve misrecognition of art’s position within the capitalist economy and of ignoring actual relations of power by masking existing social inequalities.²⁵⁷ Despite claims made for the transformative effects of art-as-encounter encapsulated in relational art, nothing suggests that differences between individual social agents can be erased and that equal status can be achieved simply by engaging in an art practice that is posited as a level playing field. It may be true that, by taking part in a simple common enterprise—such as sharing food in a gallery setting—audience members can become conscious of their role as creative agents in a new space of human relations.²⁵⁸ And indeed, these relations may have the potential to foster a change in consciousness that extends beyond the space of the gallery. However, as argued throughout these pages, all embodied beings bring to any field of engagement *differing abilities, knowledges, claims, desires*. The participants in an

²⁵⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

²⁵⁷ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”; Martin, “Critique of Relational Aesthetics.”

²⁵⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

art-encounter do not possess the same social capital upon entering into the constructed situation of an art work or performance. These differences cannot be ignored, for they help mould the affordances available to the individual (the organism) within that particular setting and, consequently, future possibilities as well. Moreover, from the outset the artist has a greater degree of authority over the ‘work’ compared to the spectator, if not strictly in its production then invariably in its final form. Artist and audience can thus hardly be seen as equal participants.²⁵⁹ The same can be said of curators and gallery management, who play crucial roles not only in how a work is mounted but also in deciding what work qualifies for—*fits* into—the space of the gallery. Indeed, as Claire Bishop points out, relational art furthers the authority of the curator while valorizing an abstracted notion of human relations that fails to ask “what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”²⁶⁰

Keeping in mind de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics,²⁶¹ I would argue that while the artist’s work can—and in best cases scenarios does—operate at the level of the tactical, introducing an element of ambiguity and indeterminacy that fosters a play of the senses and imagination, the *institution* of art—of the gallery—tends to function strategically with the logic of planning, management and, finally, of economic imperative. Once again: questions concerning the terms of participation in the space opened up by art—art as a general concept, and through specific works of art—are crucial. *Who gets to play? What constitutes play? Who defines such things, and upon what authority?* In fact, the space of encounter and play posited by relational aesthetics largely replicates the neo-liberal ideology of a self-directed autonomous social agent operating on equal footing with other actors in a field of free and open exchange.²⁶² The logic of the money economy, which is—as seen in the last chapter—simultaneously reductive and alienating *and* presents radically new productive capacities, invariably permeates the experience of art in the contemporary world.

²⁵⁹ Sansi, *Art, Anthropology*.

²⁶⁰ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 65. Italics in the original.

²⁶¹ de Certeau, *Practice*.

²⁶² See Kim, “Neoliberal Aesthetics”; Downey “Towards a Politics.”

This is not to suggest that all is lost, that art is inevitably and completely subsumed under and put into the service of capital, that art's critical capacities are chimerical or, at best, are limited to a restrictively formulated public that is always exclusionary. If I have taken an interest in Rancière's theorizing of art and politics it is because I find value in the idea of a critical art that may provoke a *redistribution* of the sensible and present possibilities for other ways of sensing and of engaging with each other and our environments. Indeed, the mutual influence running between art and everyday life has long proved to be highly productive, but in the contemporary world the increasingly blurred line between the two presents new challenges and possibilities. However, there is often a tendency to focus on the migration of elements *from* the everyday *to* the world of art that, in emphasizing the imprecise boundaries between such categories, ends up reinstating the demarcation line its aims to challenge. Consider, for example, the revolutionary incorporation of the common-place and trivial by Dada artists into their work which, today, confirms their importance in the Western art tradition; or, the contemporary high-priced sale of work by street artists in prestigious galleries and auction houses—work that, at least initially, was formulated in opposition to the elite world of 'high art.' It is accorded value precisely by that to which it has defined itself in opposition to.²⁶³ Indeed, under the aesthetic regime of art that Rancière delineates, art may collapse the opposition between "museum art and street art"²⁶⁴ yet it does so by bringing the street into the gallery, by submitting the street—that rough-hewn urban space expressed through everyday practice—to the more formal logic of the gallery. We might identify here a certain colonizing tendency at work, if 'the street' becomes simply new material with which to work, new territory to be acquired. Rancière's critical art appears to maintain this perspective, where the world of 'fine art' is both point of departure and of arrival in the transaction between art and politics, and between art and everyday life. My intention is not to reverse this view, but to reorient it—to take some of these ideas and put them to work in the context of everyday urban life, of quotidian corporeal practices and perceptions, where, I contend, we may

²⁶³ Mcauley, "Graffiti or Street Art."

²⁶⁴ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 32.

locate the creative and critical capacities that I have explored throughout the preceding pages. As such, I turn now to a discussion of what I designate as the *arts of the street*.

3.2 From the Gallery to the Street

I delineate here a heterogenous class of practices and attitudes, simultaneously corporeal and mental, that, as different as some of them may appear to be from each other, share certain defining inter-related characteristics. In the first place, they all involve forms of creative experimentation that rely on the common skills of the everyday bricoleur already discussed. As such, they all involve processes that are both productively innovative and are *reproductive* of existing conditions. And, as they derive their distinctive attributes from their everyday surroundings, they operate at the level of the amateur²⁶⁵ within the realm of the common, of collective spatial and sensorial relations. This, in turn, connects them to public space—and, more specifically, to urban public space. Indeed, these sets of practices are formulated within, and are expressive of, the *life of streets*—that loose, semi-anarchic space of contending interests and influences. They all, therefore, contain an element of resistance and refusal that can foster a counter-space of possibility. And, as will be seen, these characteristics also connect them to the potentially transformative power of critical art.

It is important to note that I refer to these various practices as ‘arts,’ and indeed some of them clearly belong to this realm, even if they appear in more vernacular forms that may not be granted the same prestige as what is more widely attributed to the domain of the fine arts (or ‘high art’). Street music and street art are perhaps the most immediately obvious examples of the ‘artistic’ nature of the practices that I have in mind (as compared to skateboarding, for instance). For our purposes here, these arts can also be thought of as forms of technology or technological practices, in the more developed sense of *techne* elaborated upon in the previous chapter. Although some of these practices appear to be far removed from the world of the gallery, the museum, or concert hall, I contend that all share certain essential attributes that make it possible to discuss them in the aggregate, if

²⁶⁵ In its most basic form, the amateur is someone who does something because they love it—purely for the pleasure of the thing. See Merrifield, *Amateur*.

only provisionally and within certain limits. What I conceive of as the arts of the street encompasses a range of creative urban practices—and in some cases what may be described as subcultures—that includes busking (all forms of street performance), graffiti art and street art, punk, hip hop, street dance, and skateboarding (‘street skating’). This class of arts, as I define it, is provisional: it is open-ended, in that it may include a range of practices not considered here, and because it is possible that some of those that are discussed may not exhibit all of the defining characteristics all of the time.

As will be seen, none of these arts can be understood independently from the environment within which they are practiced. They are contingent and processual in that they are expressive of, and bound to, the specific conditions within which they are found. Yet, they may also provoke a productive rearrangement of the everyday social-sensorial fabric by fostering a momentary space of encounter—an *encounter-space*. As such, they all involve *claims to space* that express the heterogenous conceptions, perceptions, and lived desires of the diverse practitioners of these ordinary arts. And indeed, they are *ordinary* in that they are formulated and encountered within the average everydayness of the quotidian and because they are associated with the commonplace practices of the bricoleur, of the amateur. They express the different desires of the ‘common individual’ who attempts to appropriate time and divert space from pre-conceived function, using it for their own ends and by their own means. These are activities of making and of making do, of working with the at-hand in an improvisational way, with the aim of transforming space and sensorial experience in some way (even if this may not seem to be obviously so). However, it is important to avoid overstating the case and to resist a tendency to fetishize difference, finding it everywhere and always as affirmation.²⁶⁶ Indeed, we might consider that these practices can be considered *ordinary* in that they help *order* certain activities and perceptual possibilities. They construct—assemble—spatial-sensorial possibilities that define themselves in opposition to the power of state and corporation, but this does not imply that they present unbounded opportunities and are free of all restraints. And although they have an effect on how a space is experienced, this may or

²⁶⁶ Laplantine, *Life of the Senses*.

may not be the intended goal; nor do all of these practices aim to alter the spatial-sensorial trajectories of others. But, in all cases they are directly linked to the social and material relations that comprise public and semi-public urban space, and if they have a home it is ‘in the street.’

The street is both a site of possibility, where public and private come together and the unexpected may appear at any moment, and an impersonal space of anonymity, of the anonymous ‘we’ that effaces our singular desires, where creative play is corralled and given direction by the demands of private capital.²⁶⁷ When I speak of ‘the street’ in a general sense, I mean roadways and adjacent spaces, particularly sidewalks (which are arguably more central to public experience than actual streets), but I also include back alleys, vacant lots, and public squares. Small parks or the fringes of larger urban parks also figure into the life of streets. We may add to this semi-public spaces, those that are privately owned but are treated as public, such as an open plaza bordering a shopping mall, or a pedestrian passageway running in between commercial buildings. Jane Jacobs, in her influential *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, notes how city streets can enable or constrain, in various ways, the movement of people, with sidewalks playing an essential role. She emphasizes the importance of relatively short, walkable city blocks, mixed-use (residential, small businesses, etc.), and variations in design, all of which encourage a diverse and active street life. Street corners at intersections provide opportunities for encounter and decision—key elements in the formation and maintenance of a sense of participatory citizenship. The street, in Jacob’s estimation, should be a place where people feel encouraged to linger, meet others, talk, exchange. Public space may then become the locus of politics, properly speaking—politics in the sense of working out the basic “questions of *how to live together*.”²⁶⁸

The street is thus not merely a physical location defined by infrastructure and materials, or design and function; it is above all a human place, a site of potential encounter with neighbours and strangers, an admixture of the familiar and the unexpected, where the

²⁶⁷ Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*; Merrifield, *Politics of the Encounter*.

²⁶⁸ Laplantine, *Life of the Senses*, 82.

dullness of the habitual is punctuated by intermittent interruptions and irregularities.²⁶⁹ It is a liminal space between public anonymity and the private realm, between social constraints and individual motives and desires, of competing voices and conflicting interests. This contested nature means that the street presents opportunities for individuals to reappropriate fragments of time and to *poach* upon²⁷⁰ the formal space of corporate-state planning. The arts of the street arise from, and are intimately tied to, this life in and of the streets and thus can be understood as forms of resistance, for they all involve *claims to space* in opposition to the dominant relations of power. Given this oppositional nature, such practices are generally regarded with a degree of suspicion, if not deemed as being outright criminal. Busking, graffiti and mural art, hip hop and punk have all been variously associated with the ‘rabble’ of the street, with criminality and moral degeneracy, with the subversion of public order and good taste, and in some cases have been and continue to be strictly regulated or outlawed.²⁷¹

The arts of the street, as varied as they may be, thus all have a potential critical capacity in that, constituted as forms of resistance, they give expression to other ways of experiencing—and, in turn, reproducing—public space. Again, I must emphasize that this is a *potential* capacity—one that may or may not materialize in a particular instance, even if all the critical factors seem to be present. “Politics,” as Rancière’s notes, “doesn’t always happen.”²⁷² Nonetheless, this potential to foster other ways of sensing and perceiving suggests a strong affinity between the aesthetic forms of these creative practices and the formulation of a politics of difference. And it is this distinguishing aspect of the arts of street that connects them to Rancière’s treatment of politics and aesthetics and his conception of critical art.

To further elaborate, I list here four essential characteristics that link these diverse practices to the transformative potential of critical art. (1) They express a plurality of

²⁶⁹ Imai, *Liminal*.

²⁷⁰ de Certeau, *Practice*.

²⁷¹ For example, see respectively: Quilter and McNamara, ““Long May the Buskers””; Brighenti, “At the Wall”; Rahn, *Painting without Permission*; Webb, “Crass, Subculture, Class.”

²⁷² Rancière, *Disagreement*, 17.

motives, practices, and self-conceptions. The arts of the street are concerned less with traditional categories, materials, and procedures of art than with the resulting effects—the relations that are put into play. (2) They adopt themes and materials from everyday life, working in the style of the *bricoleur* with what debris and detritus presents itself as available for use or appropriation. This is particularly evident in punk and hip hop: for example, many song lyrics focus on issues of everyday life and on the challenges, conflicts, and injustices of modern urban existence. (3) They distinguish themselves from their workaday surroundings at the same time that they threaten to eliminate themselves by being swept up and consumed in the circulation of commodities. (4) They foster momentary counter-spaces within the fissures of modern space—counter-spaces that may open up possibilities for encounter and exchange and that, above all, suggest a reconfiguration of existing spatial and sensorial relations, even if only for a few brief moments.

3.3 Claiming Space

Graffiti is perhaps the most obvious and simplest example of a creative space-claiming act. The mere act of writing one's name, initials or graphic identifier on a fixed surface—'tagging'—constitutes an oppositional claim to space—all the more so when there is a realistic threat of being caught and punished for writing on a surface that is not one's own property. The writer poaches upon the architecture of the city, leaving a mark that says "I was here," bespeaking a link between self and place, a self-positioning in space that is communicated to others by the markings left behind. Because the 'message' is fixed in place it acquires a temporal endurance; graffiti binds space and time, temporalizes a space and materializes time in space. But, given time, the graffito fades: a space's durability is ephemeral. This, of course, is hardly a new phenomenon as attested to by the enigmatic symbols and drawings left by our ancient ancestors in caves, on rock walls, and even on mountain sides—from the famous examples of southwestern Europe's cave art, to giant pictorial representations in South America that can only be fully appreciated from the air,²⁷³ to more recently analyzed sites in southeast Asia and Australasia,²⁷⁴ at

²⁷³ Ruggles and Saunders, "Desert Labyrinth."

least one of which predates the figurative cave art of Europe.²⁷⁵ In its most basic form, the graffito attests to a presence: someone occupied that space, reproduced it but with a new element such that it will never be the same as it was. Although the individual ‘artist’—whether modern teenager spray-painting obscenities on the side of a building or some long-gone person working by torchlight in a cave—may not deliberately set out to alter the spatial-sensorial possibilities of a space, this is an inevitable outcome. Moreover, these various markings may be intended for specific individuals or groups of individuals: clues left behind to be deciphered by a select audience.²⁷⁶ But in the realm of public space and everyday life, urban writing and graphic art—which would include graffiti in all forms as well as stenciling, posterizing, mural painting, and even affixing stickers to signposts or inside public transit vehicles—is more often than not meant to be seen and either conveys a message or offers an alternative aesthetic engagement. Graffiti can be employed in an overtly and self-consciously political way to raise awareness of economic inequality and political repression.²⁷⁷ As such, graffiti or street art is a “reaction against oppression, a mode of protest, an anonymous way to be heard,” and a means of fostering “personal or group empowerment”²⁷⁸ by giving voice to those who feel marginalized, excluded from a space of politics that operates at the macro-level of power relations. By altering, appropriating, or demarcating existing space according to their own singular aims and desires, these ordinary artist-practitioners change how that space is experienced. A concrete retaining wall is transformed from being a functional structure into a

²⁷⁴ See Clarkson *et al.*, “Archaeology, Chronology”; Jalandoni, Taçon and Hautb, “Review.”

²⁷⁵ Aubert *et al.*, “Pleistocene Cave Art.”

²⁷⁶ In the late 1980s to early ‘90s, while hitchhiking around North America, I often saw (and on a few occasions added to) written or inscribed messages on lampposts and roadway signs: evidence of others who had passed that way—a name or initials, usually a date, often a destination or cardinal direction, sometimes other details. Some of these markings were more than a few years old. I heard about inscriptions, from other travelers I met, that dated to many decades prior, including some very old examples of hobo graffiti—a system of simple graphic codes with origins in the Great Depression that perdures still. All of these scraps of text attest to bodies in motion, like faded snapshots that hold but a few essential details until the elements and time finally erase them altogether. See Lennon, “Trains, Railroad Workers.”

²⁷⁷ Chaffee, *Political Protest*.

²⁷⁸ Waclawek, *Graffiti and Street Art*, 43.

broadsheet from which to denounce injustice and challenge domination, or a canvas awash with colour or design that proposes to the passerby a different visual relation with the urban environment.

Political graffiti has a long history but in recent decades it has branched into and melded with street art in varying forms and to different degrees. Street art can include, in addition to painting, drawing and the other above named media, affixing ceramic tile or objects to different surfaces, and various forms of installation work, some subtle and easily overlooked, others unmistakably affirming themselves.²⁷⁹ Graffiti may have a long history but modern graffiti, as art and as protest, developed identifiable styles in the post-World War II inner-city street culture of major urban centres, first and foremost in the United States (although Mexican muralism can also be counted as an early influence). Within these primarily Black American neighbourhoods—most of them economically disadvantaged, many of them contending with high levels of gun violence, problems with street gangs and drug trafficking—new forms of creative expression took shape: street dance in varying guises but most famously break-dancing, and the musical style and techniques of hip hop and rap. Emerging first in New York City, followed by Los Angeles, these practices and dispositions (in the sense of a mental-corporeal attitude or *style*) quickly spread to other marginalized communities in the cities of America and beyond. These various incarnations of hip hop culture—in so far as they remain ‘of the street’—always retain an adversarial stance toward established authority but continue to add new musical ingredients drawn from different cultural traditions, illustrating the open-ended malleability of the form while still being identifiable in a general way.²⁸⁰

Although modern graffiti and hip hop culture have some shared history and may often be associated with each other, they remain distinctive forms of urban creativity, with their own particular stories and offering their own possibilities in terms of creative production. Nonetheless, they both involve a blending of private and public, of personal and political, in which experimentation and play are highlighted both as activity and outcome. This is

²⁷⁹ Ulmer, “Writing Urban Space”; Waclawek, *Graffiti and Street Art*.

²⁸⁰ See Gross, McMurray and Swedenburg, “Rai, Rap”; Ibrahim, “Arab Spring”; Rollefson, *Flip the Script*.

the play of the *bricoleur* in which means and ends become interchangeable, or merely different modes of one continuous process. But while graffiti and other forms of graphic street art may or may not specifically try to provide enjoyment for other people, hip hop—like punk and, in a somewhat different way, street music—is, in large measure, focussed on social and sensorial gratification, and convivial enjoyment. It is concerned with individual pleasure which may be amplified in *collective* emotion. Music and dance might seem to simply be opportunities for enjoyment, but they can also foster a different sociality that is formulated in reaction to existing social and material relations. A group of inner city youths take over a street corner, turning it into an impromptu dance floor, an ephemeral space of shared pleasure. The sheer corporeality of these ‘arts’ connect our individual perceiving selves to the pre-perceptual body of sensation, suggesting an intercorporeal awareness that is expressly cultivated—for example, through street dancing. Where functional planning envisions efficiently designed spaces of production and consumption at all levels of the urban, these ordinary practitioners of the street imagine some other possibility, conceive of other uses, and subtly or overtly reconfigure everyday space. As such, the arts of the street always involve some form of appropriation, of *poaching* or *détournement*, of acquiring fragment of everyday time and space. In the process, public space becomes both a site of contention and material to experiment with, to acquire, to claim. The technologies and infrastructure of the city then become resources that may be reused, repurposed, reclaimed. Just as Lévi-Strauss’ *bricoleur* employs the remainders of past projects to initiate new ones, so too for the artist of the street, the nature of the materials determines a range of possible uses—thus orientating the project—but it does not determine how they are actually used. For this, we would need to also consider the role of the individual practitioner: their social-sensorial emplacement, the personal trajectory that they have traced out. Yet, it is a trajectory that, for all its seemingly discreet singularity, may find an intercorporeality in these ordinary arts through a different sharing out of urban space and experience.

3.4 Architectural and Technological *Détournements*

In recent decades, the possibilities for playful appropriation have expanded rapidly with ever new and less expensive technological affordances at the disposal of the would-be

urban bricoleur. Electronic and digital audio recording, in particular, offer fecund material for experimentation and play. Through the media of microphone, headphone, and editing tools, the individual's sonic relationship with the environment is radically transformed²⁸¹ and these possibilities have become increasingly available to many people of relatively limited financial means. Modern recording and playback technologies were initially developed and promoted by, almost exclusively, affluent white men of privilege, whose ability to realize their talent and imagination depended in some measure on an economic base with attendant socio-corporeal norms of behaviour that favours some over others: a distribution of the sensible that, as we have seen, is predicated on the cold logic of the money economy. But, within the dance party culture of inner city America, these sonic tools have been adopted and adapted to produce and project new sounds with the DJ and MC emerging as figures of resistance,²⁸² expressing voices from the margins of urban capitalism, with claims and desires of their own: heteroglossic murmurings and cries from those who live at the heart of global capitalist society yet who are ever denied full membership and equal share, or part, in the sensible fabric of everyday life.²⁸³ These insistent voices, as much mockingly playful as forcefully agonistic, refuse to be silenced—like Lefebvre's *right to the city* which proclaims itself as a *cry* and as a *demand*.²⁸⁴ The space in which to be heard, however, is not evenly parcelled out. Space, the sensory affordances, and the possibilities for being seen, heard, and recognized are *distributed* unevenly, inequitably.

It is not only the lyrical content of hip hop (though it is that, too) that draws on and gives form to the tensions of everyday life at the margins of late-stage capitalist society. Forms of delivery, rhythmic structures, and sonic—or tonal—qualities can be understood as expressions of a body in crisis, of the misfitting body that nonetheless has recourse to the common skills of the everyday bricoleur, which is equally attested to by punk practices and attitudes. Despite the sensory-affective estrangement and spatial fragmentation of

²⁸¹ Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape."

²⁸² Ratcliff, "Crisis."

²⁸³ Hess, "Metal Faces."

²⁸⁴ "Le droit à la ville s'annonce comme appel, comme exigence." Lefebvre, *Droit à la ville*, 120.

late modernity, those who *do not have the time* and are not allocated the space to speak and to appear in a formal space of politics continue to seek and claim space of their own through experimentation, finding momentary openings to exploit, fragments of time to appropriate, means of expression and tools for action.

The very *ordinariness* of these practices and materials means that they have a tendency to ‘fall into the background’ when we adopt the natural attitude, but at the same time they give us access to the pre-reflexive body of sensation upon which our imagination and propensity for play rely. The *art* in all of this lies in the ability to bring together certain elements—a combination of materials, skills, needs and desires—and make apprehensible what had not been so, by proposing a different way of engaging with space, a different politics of the sensible. Objects and materials are put to uses other than those they were designed for. Just as many musicians with more formal training have continued to explore new sonorous possibilities by modifying instruments or by playing them in (or playing upon them) in unusual and unexpected ways, so too hip hop artists have exploited the technological affordances available to them in novel ways, expanding the understanding of what those technologies mean and how they may be used. The technique of ‘scratching’ is a prime example of such technological *détournement*. This involves starting and stopping, reversing, and otherwise playing a vinyl record by hand on a turntable (turntables are typically paired, as per the usual DJ practice). Now no longer dutifully broadcasting the voice of authority—of the state and of an established music industry: *his master’s voice*—the turntable “becomes a metaphor for turning consumption into production,” with “active participation in the arts [giving] people a voice to express personal and political power on their own terms.”²⁸⁵ That it is *on their own terms* is a key aspect of these practices—likewise that these playful but defiant ruses operate in and upon everyday public space. For it is in this unstable space of contestation that the possibilities inherent in the fissures of late-stage capitalism may present themselves, with the intrepid artist of the street seizing opportunities “on the wing,” just

²⁸⁵ Rahn, *Painting without Permission*, 162.

as the trajectory of the urban walker never delineates a final strategy or a proper place of its own.²⁸⁶

Urban architecture, although imposing a certain order that places its own demands on the living body, presents numerous opportunities for creative *reappropriation*. In this context, skateboarding—more specifically: ‘street skating’—provides a clear example of the desire and capacity of individuals to play upon the architecture and infrastructure of the city.²⁸⁷ Despite the fact that, increasingly, one may encounter any number of skateboarders in their thirties and older, skateboarding is still generally regarded as a sport-*cum*-recreation for children and youths—fun perhaps, but not something to be treated with any serious consideration. In addition, skateboarding is not infrequently deemed a nuisance, with complaints about noise and about skateboarders on the streets and sidewalks posing a danger to pedestrians and automobilists—as well as to themselves. But the real pleasure of skateboarding is not in simply moving around the city with ease but in seeing in the urban environment an array of terrains and materials to experiment with—challenges to overcome. The “architectural and social fabric of the city,” writes Iain Borden in his Lefebvrian analysis of skateboarding and urban space, “offers skateboarders a plethora of buildings, social relations, times and spaces, many of which are free to access.”²⁸⁸ Stairs and railings, public monuments and park benches, parking blocks and paved embankments, industrial loading docks and empty swimming pools: subverted from their designed purpose, they become terrains of play, spaces of pleasure that bring imagination, desire and possibility into contact with the material present.

For some skaters, part of the appeal of street skating lies precisely in the fact that it is perceived as rebellious, as challenging the established norms of spatial behaviour. It is a form of everyday resistance that may seem ‘selfish’ insofar as the focus appears to be primarily, if not entirely, on the individual skater but that is, in fact, a communal endeavour. Skateboarding can foster a strong sense of camaraderie amongst practitioners,

²⁸⁶ de Certeau, *Practice*.

²⁸⁷ Bäckström and Sand, “Imagining and Making.”

²⁸⁸ Borden, *Skateboarding, Space*, 186.

in which the emotional intensity of attempting a difficult trick may be felt by fellow skaters: a being-with that is eminently sensorial. Skateboarding is a full-bodied practice, a gestalt experience involving the full sensorium. Skaters learn new tricks from each other while novices learn and develop technique and style by watching experienced practitioners—a socio-corporeal education that may be acquired in the street and at the skate park, as well as through articles and photographs in skateboard magazines and, increasingly, from videos shared online. This is a form of looking that involves the whole body, a dialogic vision that confirms the intertwining between the flesh of the body—of *a* body—and the flesh of the world. It is a tactile vision, by which the skater ‘reads’ the urban landscape, perceiving possibility in architecture.²⁸⁹ True to the improvisational mode of the urban bricoleur, these skills are also acquired through experimentation and play. Moreover, street skating is a concrete affirmation of imagination and corporeal possibility specifically in everyday *public* space—in *shared space* (although, as noted, this sharing out is predicated upon unequal relations of power). In this sense, like all of the arts of the street, skateboarding is a corporeal demonstration to others that it is possible to perceive and engage with the materiality of the city in different, and sometimes surprising, ways—ways not envisioned or intended by functional urban planning. Indeed, as Bäckström and Sand note in their ethnographic study of street skaters, skateboarding is an imaginative process with “material and social aspects as well as dimensions of time” that “intergrat[es] skills, previous emplaced experience, and the desire for future engagements with materiality.”²⁹⁰

3.5 Resistant Bodies

Built around a set of bodily practices and dispositions in relation to the environment and others, skateboarding is thus a form of *techne*: a technological relation, with its own transferable techniques of the body in which the skateboard is a versatile tool that enables new forms of action. Skateboarding operates by way of a three-term dialectic of body, board and space, argues Borden, in which the individual produces a counter-space that is

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* cf. Pallasmaa, *Skin of the Eyes* on ‘tactile vision.’

²⁹⁰ Bäckström and Sand, “Imagining and Making,” 132.

resistant to capital because it is useless: economically non-productive, a position of marginality within the dominant relations of social reproduction.²⁹¹ But skateboarding is also a form of resistance in the pre-conscious immediacy of the flesh—in the physical resistance of the city’s built features to the skateboard itself and, more importantly, to the body of the skater. Skaters may use varying degrees of padding and protection against harm, but accidents invariably happen and injuries are sustained. These range from scrapes, bruises and sprains, to broken bones and, in rarer cases, much worse. Although most of these injuries are minor, a certain degree of fearlessness is nonetheless required: a willingness to put one’s body on the line and attempt something that is ‘not done’—the *improper*—thus demonstrating the *possible body* through seemingly impossible gestures and actions, such as riding up a vertical wall or launching off of some built structure—a staircase, retaining wall, loading dock—and pausing mid-air for what seems a gravity-defying moment before effortlessly landing and smoothly riding on, the whole in one seamless motion. There is a self-sacrificial element to skateboarding, in all of this: a desire for danger that sets the body on alert—a utopic demand of flesh over asphalt, concrete and steel—imparting a corporeal awareness that frequently escapes language.²⁹² The body, in this sense, reflects and contains the tensions of daily life: it is a relational site of conflict, of experimentation and error. At the same time, it is the expression of a deep-seated creative urge that discovers itself in resistance and in play.

Like street skating, punk is eminently concerned with the body and the conditions of daily urban life. Responding to these conditions, they both pursue pleasure, excitement and different forms of community as antidotes to late-stage capitalist boredom. The arts of the street, in this sense, involve the projects-in-the-world of misfitting bodies—resistant bodies that are also desiring bodies, creative bodies. From its beginnings, punk has been an expression of—and a mode of resistance to—the social and corporeal alienation of modern life. The on- (and off-) stage antics and abandon of the Sex Pistols

²⁹¹ Borden, *Skateboarding, Space*.

²⁹² The skaters interviewed by Bäckström and Sand frequently resort to gesturing with their hands and whole body when describing how they carry out maneuvers and ‘pull off’ tricks, language alone proving insufficient. See Bäckström and Sand, “Imagining and Making.”

exemplified the centrality of this resistant body.²⁹³ The sheer corporeal presence of Iggy Pop, singer of the proto-punk band The Stooges,²⁹⁴ also expresses this concern with the individual body that is recognized as a unique *person* but that may likewise be swallowed up by, and disappear into, the mass. This almost sacrificial presentation of oneself on stage was picked up by many subsequent punk singers. The self-sacrificial aspect of punk corporeality is also expressed through forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing, and, in more extreme cases, cutting and scarification.²⁹⁵ In these ways, the individual body comes to both incarnate what is seen as the oppressive conformism of mainstream society and to be a mode of resistance and a way of reclaiming one's life from the corrosive demands of capitalism. This corporality is equally a social event, an embodiment of a different way of being together, exemplified by 'slam dancing' and its evolution into 'thrashing' or 'moshing.' What began as a form of wild dancing on the spot, jumping up and down, or generally flailing about, developed into thrash or moshing, with the dance becoming more violent as participants (typically) move in a circle in front of the stage, crashing into each other, arms and legs thrown up and out. And yet, despite the violence of this dance form, participants help anyone who falls down back onto their feet.²⁹⁶ This violence is in part symbolic, but it is also real and it serves to unite body and mind and the totality of bodies in the mosh pit. In this way, punk promotes a politics of togetherness and an aesthetics of corporality that blurs pain and pleasure, self and other.

As both a site of subjugation and of resistance, the punk body can be understood as expressing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *carnavalesque*,²⁹⁷ with a ritual overturning of the normal everyday order of things. The *grotesque body of punk*—alternately overcome with rage at the injustices of the world, expressing anguish or pleasure, howling, laughing, marked by piercings and tattoos, sweating in the mosh pit—comes to express the desires of those who no longer (or never did) identify with the aspirations and norms

²⁹³ Marcus, *Lipstick Traces; Savage, England's Dreaming*. See also Berger, *Story of Crass*.

²⁹⁴ Petrusich, "Where Punk Rock Begins."

²⁹⁵ Langman, "Punk, Porn and Resistance."

²⁹⁶ Thompson, *Punk Productions*. I can attest to this care for others, from my own past experience in Montreal's hardcore punk scene. If someone fell to the floor they were immediately lifted back onto their feet by those around them.

²⁹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*.

of mainstream society.²⁹⁸ The point has been made that the “carnivalization [of punk] displaces resistance from the political realm of action to the cultural realms of festivity and ultimately secures social reproduction,”²⁹⁹ in effect making of it yet more terrain to be commodified and marketed. However, the intention may be *less about founding a space that operates externally* to capitalism than about *exploiting the existing fissures within the fractured space* of everyday modern life, thus aiming for, in Rancièrian terms, “a sensorium different to that of domination.”³⁰⁰ Like skateboarding, punk seeks a different way of engaging with the world and with others.

But, punk and skateboarding also share a certain historical affinity—not entirely unlike like that shared between hip hop and graffiti art—a relationship that developed in the urban and suburban sprawl of late 1970s and early 1980s Southern California, to spread rapidly from there.³⁰¹ Punk, however, is much more explicitly political in the sense of consciously opposing the dominant relations of power. Among the arts of the streets that I consider here, punk and hip hop most clearly espouse a politics of anti-authoritarian resistance. It is true that neo-fascist elements have been associated with punk, though these are by and large linked to skinhead style and culture—which seems odd, given the skinhead style’s biracial working class origins (the association between skinhead and neo-Nazi ideology only really began in the 1980’s).³⁰² Problems of male chauvinism have also pervaded punk (just as they do all aspects of modern society), but as with neo-fascists and other white supremacists, punk scenes have been relatively successful in maintaining a certain ordered cohesion based on openness and mutual respect.³⁰³ And in this sense punk has proven itself as form of social and political critique that, just as it denounces and disputes, celebrates the singularity of every unique body as a sensing, living, being with its own experiences.

²⁹⁸ López Cabello, “El cuerpo punk.”

²⁹⁹ Langman, “Punk, Porn and Resistance”, 674.

³⁰⁰ Rancièrè, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 30.

³⁰¹ Borden, *Skateboarding, Space*.

³⁰² Berger, *Story of Crass*; Borgeson and Valeri, *Skinhead History*.

³⁰³ See for example: Ambrosch, ““Guilty””; Downes, “Expansion of Punk”; Katz, “Do-It-Yourself White Supremacy”; Parkes, “Don’t Forget the Streets.”

It may appear that much of what I describe as the arts of the street are not political in any overt manner. Moreover, the objection may be raised that, in many cases, the practitioners of these ‘arts’ are not deliberately engaging in actions that subvert public space or consciously trying to foster a different politics of engagement—all of which may be true. None of that, however, changes the resulting effects of those actions; and it is the *effects* of things that provide our entryway into the world and that help formulate the conditions of future possibilities. If politics, in its most basic sense, is concerned with how we are to live together—asking: what is the basis of community and how is this to be organized?—then it is, in essence, concerned with questions of space and the partitioning of perceptual possibilities, with the allocation of time and the designation of ability. The arts of the street are political because they hover between being modes of social reproduction that help naturalize the dominant relations of power, and being creative forms of resistance that instigate possibility by altering the sensory field of shared public space. Just as Rancièrian critical art fulfills its critical function in spite (or precisely because) of the fact that it is in continual jeopardy, always on the cusp of dissolving itself *qua* art, so too the arts of the street have a critical function because they are both unremarkable, mundane, *common*—are extensions of actual social and material conditions and the contradictions therein—and are instances of difference and possibility that suggest that things might be different from the way that they currently are.

3.6 Do-It-Yourself

Creating a space in which disaffected individuals may find a sense of community is a central feature of punk. I note, here, that by ‘punk’ I do not simply mean a certain musical style (or spectrum of styles: multiple punk sub-genres may be identified), or a style of dress, etc., although these may figure in as components. Nor is it simply a cultural phenomenon or class-aligned subculture³⁰⁴ that might be categorically identified and analysed by set criteria. Rather, punk encompasses a range of ideals, dispositions, and desires with an identifiable (if fluid) aesthetic and attitude. These are based on a rejection of established expectations and norms—of a life ruled by production-

³⁰⁴ *Pace* Hebdige, *Subculture*.

consumption and endless growth—to insist, instead, on the dignity of the individual.³⁰⁵ But punk, from the outset, emphasizes the extent to which ‘normal’ individual experience (the average everydayness of the norm, of the rule) is formulated in the interests of the corporate state. Whether in terms of music, visual art, dress and appearance, or public behaviour, punk aesthetic practices embrace what is perceived within society at large as crude, ugly, self-consciously unprofessional and deliberately antagonistic. In the tradition of the Dada movement, punk is primarily a negation: a rejection of what is perceived as the failure and degeneracy of western societies that, in the process, affirms subjective experience and celebrates the creativity of everyday bricolage. As such, punk operates according to a DIY (*do-it-yourself*) logic. Whether this means forming a band and releasing music, perhaps touring; making and distributing art and fanzines; or forming communal living spaces and networks of mutual support, by relying on their own (often meagre) resources, punks operate on the assumption that ‘if you need it, you should be able to ‘find it or make it’ (or perhaps steal it). This is done by rejecting what are seen as the hollow formalities of the consumer society and avoiding (full) participation in the capitalist economic mode.

One of the most salient DIY features of punk involves bands and music production. Most punk musicians have little or no formal musical instruction—or even, necessarily, skill. Punk, writes Stacy Thompson, is “an attempt to open up the possibility of performance to people not formally trained in music.”³⁰⁶ Punk involves a desire to communicate something, and a need to express oneself on one’s own terms. But, the usual means of doing so (record companies, concert or art venues, etc.) are largely inaccessible, usually because the ‘product’ is perceived as being offensive or subversive, or simply as economically unviable. These are, of course, not fully separable from each other: the subversive nature of punk limits its mass appeal, while the limited market for punk music helps to confirm its political marginality. Consequently, numerous musical groups under the broad umbrella of punk have started their own record labels.³⁰⁷ This is sometimes

³⁰⁵ Kristiansen *et al.*, *Screaming for Change*.

³⁰⁶ Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 13.

³⁰⁷ O’Connor, *Punk Record Labels*.

done because no established label will take on that band (a profit-driven decision), but it is frequently also a deliberate choice by punk musicians themselves as they attempt to side-step the capitalist relations of production inherent in the music industry.³⁰⁸ A band might independently rent time in a small recording studio, then either arrange for records to be pressed, or make cassette tapes or CDs that can easily be shipped at minimal cost (the internet has further transformed this process, making it even easier to distribute and promote independent recording projects at a relatively low cost). Bands rarely make much, if any money, this way—but making money has never been the point for punk.

The DIY approach, or ‘philosophy,’ did not of course originate with punk. From the builder-inventor tinkering at home spurred on by publications like *Popular Mechanics* beginning in the early 20th century, to a variety of creative counterculture projects in the 1960s and beyond, to the contemporary ‘maker’ movement,³⁰⁹ the idea of doing and making for one’s own use and by one’s own means has continued to find new forms of expression. But for punk, the concept of DIY is not simply a vehicle for spreading one’s music or message. It is integral to what punk *is*: it is a defining feature. Doing it yourself is a conscious rejection of the power structures of the culture industry and the economic relations that underpin it. Certainly, the initial movement that motivates a project stems from some specific desire or need. But—and more importantly—the fact of *doing*, of *making*, fosters the individual resourcefulness of practitioners but always in relation to a collectivity, by drawing on a loosely organized set of practices and understandings that waver uncertainly between the singularity of art and the reproductive habits of daily life. If the arts of the street are arts at all, they are *minor arts*—more unfinished sketch to be revisited and reworked at any time than finished work: the improvisational play of the amateur maker. This conceptualization of *doing-it-yourself* should be understood as arising specifically within the context of globalizing capitalism. Even for the home DIY hobbyist, whether the goal is to fashion some functional item that is needed, or to simply build as experiment and for pleasure—to ‘see if it can be done’—the process involves a

³⁰⁸ Cogan, “Do They Owe Us.”

³⁰⁹ See respectively Dittmar, *DIY City*; Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-fi*; Marotta, “Making Sense of ‘Maker.’”

relationship with tools and materials that reorients the practitioner's perceptual relationship within the environment. This reorientation and consequent shift in future affordances arises because the activity always resists to some degree the world of work, of professionalism, and of commodity circulation.

Modern DIY practices are, in this sense, a reaction to the conditions of global capitalism. However, as much as the activities of the amateur hobbyist may seem to be those of a lone subject within a private realm there is nonetheless a certain organizing principle that structures a set of practices and of mental-corporeal dispositions into a cohesive, identifiable and transmissible form. Here a distinction may be drawn between this creative capacity in the context of late-stage capitalism and Levi-Strauss' bricoleur. This last seems to have been assigned in perpetuity to the world of the 'pre-modern' subject, and by being opposed to the engineer (the preeminent functionary of modernity: a fusion of disinterested scientist and entrepreneurial designer) helps maintain structuralism's essential nature/culture binary, in the process reinforcing western hegemony with an idea of teleological social and technological progress.³¹⁰ However, we may also say that, in most cultural settings, creative activities and traditions of making are tied directly to locally specific materials and social affordances. Their identifiable forms and their transmissibility are thus largely inseparable from their specific environments.³¹¹ But this is not the case in the context of late-stage capitalism, where the rationalization of tasks and the management of socio-corporeal behaviour rely on abstraction and universalization. Because they are formulated within, and in relation to, capitalism's fragmentation of space and sensation, the arts of the street assume forms that, like the fetishized commodity, are alienable from their context of origin—that is, the context within which they are performed, or *made*—to be transmissible to a broad range of locales and conditions, being malleable enough to resist an absolute identity while retaining enough cohesive durability to be identifiable nonetheless—but, identifiable only in their actual instantiations.

³¹⁰ On the reproduction of Eurocentric thinking and Western dominance in anthropological thought and in Western intellectual history more generally, see Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

³¹¹ Ingold, *Making*.

The arts of the street are thus comprised of sets of practices and dispositions that are transferable across global urban space and transmissible by means tied directly to the social and material affordances of modernity. As such, unlike the traditional functions of the artist and of the craftsperson, which have their *proper* place within a wider social environment, *the arts of the street poach upon the space of another*, provisionally seizing what they may, *proposing a differential space* that in its transience suggests some other possibility—a *counter-space that*, though it attempts to resist capitalist productivity, *is never the property of its producer*.

Punk blurs the boundaries between audience and performers during concerts, with frequent movement across the dividing line of the stage in both directions (e.g. audience members climbing onto stage to dance, or sing along, or ‘stage-dive’ back into the crowd, while band members, usually a singer, may join the jostling crowd on the floor area). “You are the scene” proclaimed the 1980s Montreal hardcore punk band Fair Warning,³¹² an exhortation to audience members to transform themselves into active participants, becoming producers—makers, tinkerers—rather than simply consumers.³¹³ This might be done by starting a band, publishing a fanzine, organizing shows, or working in more direct ways to provide support to others who are marginalized. While I use the term ‘scene’ when discussing punk, I do not delve into the literature dealing specifically with this concept. However, I note that this term seems more serviceable than ‘style’ which in this context tends to be associated primarily with fashion or a definable musical style. On the other hand, the term ‘subculture,’ following the influential work of Dick Hebdige,³¹⁴ and others connected to Birmingham University’s now-defunct Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, is frequently directly tied to socio-economic class, thus limiting the scope and malleability of what punk *is*.³¹⁵ ‘Scene,’ following Will Straw, is more open-ended and inclusive: a scene may designate a sense of collective endeavour, a space of encounter and exchange, the formation of an “ethical world,” and the basis for community that stretches beyond simply a shared musical interest amongst participants in

³¹² Fair Warning, “You Are the Scene.”

³¹³ Makagon, *Underground*.

³¹⁴ Hebdige, *Subculture*.

³¹⁵ Worley *et al.*, “Introduction.”

that scene.³¹⁶ While any scene, in this sense, may end up reproducing the relations of power that dominate within society at large,³¹⁷ punk scenes deliberately aim to challenge such hierarchical power structures.

The anti-professionalism of punk music also attests to the democratic—and anti-commercial—nature of punk as a whole.³¹⁸ To be in a band, one simply has to decide to do so. Boisterous enthusiasm counts for more than technical musical skill. However, punk gets caught up in an apparent contradiction, between the rejection of the capitalist mode of reproduction and the need—or desire—to produce and distribute material outputs (t-shirts, publications, etc., but especially music recordings).³¹⁹ Punk thus struggles with a seemingly irresolvable problem: as a self-conscious refusal of consumerism and rule of the norm, it exists as a consequence of modern society and thus relies on existing means to express itself. Its challenge is to overcome itself as reactive and become a force of creative action. All of the arts of the street exhibit this tension between the desire to create something beyond mere reproduction and the seemingly inescapable imperatives of globalized capitalism. Nonetheless, punk—as do all arts of the street—fosters an ephemeral space that is largely improvised and that goes on to suggest other subsequent possibilities, even as the performance of this heterotopic space can never cement itself into a coherent spatial strategy. But of all of the arts of the street, perhaps the clearest example of ephemerally performed space—and likely the most accessible to passersby, the non-practitioner who nonetheless share in the spatial performance—involves buskers: musicians and other entertainers who perform their art in public with the hope of recognition and, usually, some form of reward.

3.7 Performance Space, Performing Space

The relatively long history of busking—as compared to the other creative practices discussed herein—is intimately entwined with the development of modern cities. The

³¹⁶ Straw, “Some Things.”

³¹⁷ Carlsson, *Nowtopia*; Dupont, “From Core to Consumer.”

³¹⁸ Kaitajärvi-Tiekso, “Proud Amateurs.”

³¹⁹ Thompson, *Punk Productions*.

opportunities available to itinerant artists and artisans to secure the material means of survival are bound up with a specifically modern sense of social space: public space.³²⁰ Up until the latter half of the 20th century, however, the history of street musicians has largely remained absent from written records, other than in the form of various city ordinances restricting busking, as well as documentation of merchants and residents complaining about the cacophony caused by vagrant street musicians.³²¹ Historically, buskers have been associated with vagabondage: wandering entertainers whose roots stretch back past the minstrels and trouvères of the Middle Ages, to Antiquity.³²² The busker has always operated at the margins of society: an outsider who proffers entertainment as an other-moment set outside of normal daily activities—and perhaps intimations of distant worlds and other lives—but who is also seen as a mendicant, perhaps even a swindler too lazy to get a ‘real job.’ As such, the busker is by nature a figure of resistance—as much shadowy stranger as creative producer or charming raconteur. And, while this perceived link between busking and begging is generally much less pervasive now than in the past, it has endured in the minds of many contemporary city-dwellers. The modern busker, however, is of a slightly different type when compared to the itinerant entertainers of the past, being formed by and in the conditions of urban capitalism (as is the case of all the arts of the street).

Although musicians comprise the majority of buskers encountered in most cities, we may also count magicians and jugglers, mimes and puppeteers, dancers, poets, acrobats, and a host of other performers among their numbers. The actual details of their performances are extremely varied, ranging from pre-planned choreographed presentation to unscripted creative play, from skilled artistic practice, to craft-based commercial enterprise, to playful and perhaps cheeky act. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the desires, needs, and intentions that motivate these performers are so varied that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a precise and all-encompassing definition of what constitutes

³²⁰ DeJean, *How Paris Became Paris*; Ross, *Emergence of Social Space*.

³²¹ Cohen & Greenwood, *Buskers*; Harrison-Pepper, *Drawing a Circle*; Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies*; Quilter & McNamara, “Long May the Buskers”; Zucchi, *Little Slaves*.

³²² Carlson, “Medieval Street Performers Speak.”

busking.³²³ Instead, I define busking in rather general terms as any form of entertainment or arts-based performance that takes place in a public or semi-public space, in which the performer offers the possibility for remuneration from passersby by placing a hat, instrument case, bucket, or some other receptacle for ‘tips’—although making money may be completely beside the point for the performer. Busking—specifically as an *art of the street*—is a corporeal activity that sets in motion different forms of social, sensorial, and affective relations which can only be described and designated as such in instances of actual performance. In this sense, any art of the street is, in de Certeau’s terminology, more tactic than strategy—always in the *doing*, never settling on a defined rule. Moreover, just as punk so clearly does, busking challenges the categorical partitioning of amateur and professional, and stages a performance space that immediately questions the distinction between performer and audience, between production and consumption.

In my own past fieldwork in Montreal’s metro system, I have been able to observe and record different ways that buskers delineate a performance space for themselves—a stage, in a sense—that is maintained for the duration of the performance.³²⁴ The spatial-corporeal techniques that are deployed include where the hat, or instrument case, etc., is placed within the overall space, and how the performer positions themselves—seated or standing—in relation to this receptacle. Typically this is placed in front of the performer, either directly in front or a few feet away, thus creating a ‘stage front.’ Some busking spots are designated as such, and some of these possess features that the busker may use to advantage in ‘performing a performance space’: an alcove in a wall that creates a ‘stage’ area, or a staircase opposite the performer that becomes seating for an impromptu audience. But many sites are much more challenging. A busy downtown street corner with its traffic noise and jostling crowds of pedestrians, for example, does not so readily lend itself to musical performances. The acoustic challenges may be even greater than the spatial ones, determining to a greater degree the performance possibilities at that site. In the case of street musicians, the acoustic affordances of a particular environment are of

³²³ Wees, “Improvised Performances,”

³²⁴ Wees, “Expériences et pratiques”; “Improvised Performances.” See also Boetzkes, “Ephemeral Stage.”

prime importance, with the musical performance expressing the complex spatial and sensorial relationship between performer and passersby and the surrounding space. The degree to which the busker moves during the performance, if at all, also helps to roughly define the ‘stage.’ There are many factors at play here, including the confidence and experience of the performer, their conscious intentions (e.g. earning money, practicing an instrument, perfecting performance techniques, etc.), as well as the actual spatial requirements of the act (i.e. a single musician needs less space than a small ensemble, a dancer or larger group of performers may require yet more), and the field of play that is presented by a particular space. But in all cases, the ‘act’ is as much claim to space as formal entertainment: a process of *détournement* that, not unlike street dance and street skating, carves out some other use from the functional design of the city, by performing—producing—a differential space.

For some buskers, enacting a performance space is relatively simple. For example, a singer-guitarist who performs without amplification or pre-recorded accompaniment track (which is itself an increasingly common practice) may simply arrive at a location, quickly set up, and start to perform. They may only require a few square meters of space, although the general preference is to have some extra space in front and to the sides, allowing for greater visibility—particularly on a crowded street or a transit station during rush-hour. Other performers, however, must go to greater lengths to delineate a ‘stage.’ Amanda Boetzkes describes the efforts of a dancer performing in a busy metro station who must claim and hold enough space in the flux of rush-hour commuters for the performance to be successful.³²⁵ Even the most explicitly delineated boundaries remain porous, with some passersby ‘breaking the fourth wall’ as they walk through the performance area, although some buskers will actively encourage this, attempting to enlist passersby in the act. Some performers, however, unabashedly assert their right to the space that they claim. For example, Paul Simpson recounts the approach used by a clown duo in a public square in London, England, who use water-balloons to playfully—and ultimately successfully—clear the area they wish to designate as the performance

³²⁵ Boetzkes, “Ephemeral Stage.”

space.³²⁶ Following a loud announcement that the performance will begin soon, a few recalcitrant people still sitting on a curbside that forms part of the intended ‘stage’ are forced to move by volleys of water balloons tossed by the performers. But, most space-claiming acts by buskers are much less dramatic. Moreover, where the potential audience is comprised largely, if not entirely, of commuters travelling to and from work and others who are only moving through a given space with no intention of lingering there, the formation of an immobile audience is a less common occurrence. While the transitional spaces of the stations and underground corridors of public transits systems are primarily designed around the requirements of production and consumption, such everyday spaces—precisely because of their intermediary status—can become spaces of imagination to which individuals lay claim,³²⁷ perceiving them as their own, “transform[ing] another’s property into a space borrowed for a moment,” as de Certeau says of the reader/poacher.³²⁸ And, when a few passersby do stop to listen and watch, this can often lead to more people pausing to take in the performance, lingering for a few moments as trajectories and timeframes are altered, perceptions reoriented, if but briefly.

The first few passersby who act as the ‘coagulant’ of the impromptu encounter usually remain relatively distant from each other. As others pause, they ‘fill in’ the audience, the whole coordinated in relation to the surrounding space, the performer and, those who have already stopped to watch, producing an ephemeral heterogenous audience. The functionally built space of the city may be further repurposed by this impromptu audience, with individuals leaning against walls, or sitting on stairs or railings.³²⁹ From within the seemingly aimless and unperceptive mass that follows its regular and regulated trajectories, a transitory collective coalesces: a momentary interaction of bodies in space that produces a different space. Unlike in the concert hall, theatre, or gallery, where the performance space is already delineated in advance (including a pre-arranged demarcation between performer and spectator), here the ‘audience’ does not set out to become an audience—does not specifically seek to be entertained. Instead, the

³²⁶ Simpson, “Chronic Everyday Life.”

³²⁷ Augé, *Un Ethnologue*.

³²⁸ de Certeau, *Practice*, xxi.

³²⁹ Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies*, 99.

unexpected encounter precipitated by the busker invites the passerby to share in a “liminal space-time”³³⁰ that demonstrates a different way of imagining urban space.

3.8 Blurred Boundaries

In this sense, as an art of the street, busking is both an invitation and a provocation. While for some passersby the encounter is a source of pleasure, for others it may be perceived as a nuisance or even an affront to public order, or perhaps merely of no consequence—just another feature of the everyday landscape. A busker can thus easily become merely one of the many elements that comprise the urban spectacle: infusing a little colour in the often drab routines of daily life, perhaps, but not contrasting in any significant way with the background that—like the natural attitude—helps maintain our sense of order, of the normality and naturalness of the world as we generally experienced it. This may often be the case at spots where buskers perform regularly throughout the day. Some buskers will perform at the same spot (or perhaps a few choice spots) on a regular basis, for long periods of time (many years, in some cases), thus becoming regular fixtures of those spaces.³³¹ But, while the familiar presence of a performer may be pleasant for passersby, it can also help normalize the relations of social and economic power that underly and help determine everyday public space. Although this may seem to contradict the critical capacity that I ascribe to these various arts of the street, their propensity to function according to dominant norms—becoming, in effect, distracting embellishments that reproduce capitalist space—is perfectly in keeping with the micro-utopic potential in the everyday. The possible that resides in any given moment is rarely realized; hope is inextricably bound to disappointment. “Spontaneity,” as Lefebvre reminds us, “is not always creative.”³³² The creative act, in this sense, infers a different reality, suggests that something else might be possible—but starts with what is already here: the remainder that precedes us as individuals, the excess of the body and the world.

³³⁰ Bywater, “Performing Spaces.”

³³¹ See Tanenbaum *Underground Harmonies*; Green, *Musicien de métro*.

³³² Lefebvre, *Critique II*, 218.

Creativity and critique do not simply begin—nor do they end—with the conditions of the world as we perceive them. Rather, they locate the possible in the actual, the afforded in the realized. Of all the creative practices under consideration here, busking is perhaps the clearest example of this capacity to set in motion other possibilities—spatial, sensorial, affective—and illustrates well the fourth characteristic of the arts of the street. That is: they foster transient counterspaces that encourage a spatial and sensorial reorientation in others who share in, or simply move through, that space. The micro-social moment of encounter that busking suggests is produced by the participation of multiple agents and elements: performers and passersby, but also objects and materials such as instruments and other equipment used by the performers, *and* the diverse materials and forms of infrastructure present in that space.³³³

The arts of the street contrast with a critical art that would make its home in the conceptual world of ‘high art’—art that is recognized as such because it is accorded status by a professionalized artworld that tends to re-inscribe the categorical boundaries and relations of power that such an art aims to challenge in the first place. The arts of the street, on the other hand, invariably blur these distinctions precisely because, as minor arts, they come from a place of marginality and are thus, from the outset, oppositionally organized in relation to the dominant social norms and laws with which they must contend. Busking is increasingly regulated and restricted by formal and informal strictures. Punks are targeted on the street by police or drunken hooligans. Low cement walls have strips of metal affixed on top or along their edges to prevent skateboarders from riding there. Hip hop, rap and street dancing, as already noted, emerged from a world blighted by the violence and alienation fostered by the police, the court system, different levels of government and state agencies (various kinds of social assistance, child or family services, work programs, etc.). By their very nature, all of these loosely organized sets of practices refuse to conform to a world of standardization or clearly delineated boundaries, relying instead on tactical approximation and a do-it-yourself logic as they negotiate the unmapped terrain of amateur virtuosity. Virtuosity, in this

³³³ Wees, “Improvised Performances.”

context, does not designate a specialized skill or expressive ability that might be measured against that of other people. Rather, it describes a process in which some activity, some endeavour, coheres in a way such that it expresses more than itself. Virtuosity fulfills itself and in doing so, surpasses itself. This idea will be taken up again and elucidated in greater detail in the next chapter.

It is true that a few street performers may define themselves as professionals—that is: as professional buskers—but that is not generally the case. Some may identify as professional musicians (or another type of performer) but not primarily as *busking* musicians (or *busking* acrobats, etc.)—or at least not in the sense that is usually attached to notions of professionalism. It is perhaps more fitting to instead speak of “musicians who busk.”³³⁴ For many street performers, part of the appeal of busking—indeed, a large measure of how it is conceived of by many buskers—is precisely this ‘open-to-all’ quality, the idea that anyone can do it, as well as the fact that being a successful busker (in the various ways that this might be measured) does not necessarily depend on artistic training or technical ability. Over the many years that I have observed buskers in the metro stations, in public squares, and on the street all over Montreal, as well as in several other North American cities, I have seen professional acts and first time performers, amateurs with years of formal training and young artists with big ambitions, humorous entertainers and aggressively belligerent musicians, religious proselytizers, panhandlers attempting some semblance of a performance, and so many others. And though increasingly regulated (formally by various authorities and socio-corporeally by dominant norms of behaviour), buskers manage to juggle these difficult conditions and produce something new—deviant—even if only for the briefest moment. You can, in effect, do it yourself.

This unsettling of categorical boundaries is a common feature of the diverse creative practices that comprise these everyday arts. Punk in particular explicitly rejects exclusive norms of professionalization and refutes the partition between audience and performer, between active producer and passive consumer. This is especially true in small concert

³³⁴ Lief, “Musicians Who Busk.”

venues (bars and clubs) and the many punk shows that take place in informal settings (not infrequently an unfinished house basement); and, it is true of DIY punk scenes in general.³³⁵ Given that the punk scene coalesces around musical performances, a requisite concert space must be available, with some form of stage or stage area and—usually—an open space in front of the stage that acts as a dance floor. But immediately, the dividing line of the stage is refuted, precisely because it is seen as a form of divisive power that invariably favours some over others. Similarly, some few buskers will consciously play with the imaginary of the performed stage, inviting passersby to join in the act. I have watched spectators being enlisted to serve as assistants in a juggling act (much to the delight of the other spectators—who are *not* so recruited). A dancer invites passersby to playfully break the fourth wall of the stage, enticing them into the performance of an other space. Audience and performers blend into each other. The participants in a DIY punk scene all ‘make’ the lived space of the scene—whether by playing in a band or organizing shows, making posters, producing fanzines, or recording, filming or photographing concerts and other events. But punks also put on workshops on guerilla gardening, civil disobedience, self-defense, and more. They organize book fairs, reading groups, and activist networks. They run squats, and provide material support for each other. They salvage food from dumpsters to create meals which in some cases are distributed to through free street kitchens.

Everyone who *is* the scene is involved in some form of creative *détournement*, but not to any quantifiable extent. These are all amateur activities, the makings of a minor art that never fixes a proper place of its own. From this scene—which is only as durable as is the focussed attention and activities of the diverse participants—we can trace affinities running through the temporary encounter enacted around street performance, the street corner dance party or rap duel, the impromptu transformation of a parking lot or public square into a skateboard park, or indeed any number of other such creative endeavours that might be classed together. In all cases, these are practices that express the adaptive tendencies of human creativity, even under the strained conditions of late modernity.

³³⁵ For a detailed account of self-organizing punk scenes in the United States see Makagon, *Underground*.

However, I pause to note that it might appear that I paint an excessively rosy picture of these creative practices and of their potential to evoke something beyond the capitalist reality which seems to permeate all. I insist, therefore, that the creative impulse that I delineate herein is not simply a *maybe it happens* but *maybe it doesn't* possibility, nor is my overarching argument to be understood as a proscriptive response to the world as it is—that is: as some kind of manifesto that proposes a corrective. This is an essential point: the playful adaptations and critical potential that characterise the arts of the street are already to be found at work in the world today; and, they are expressions of a common creative impulse that binds us to the world just as it suggests some other possibility. But, as these different practices are invariably subject to the demands of capital and the conditions of globalized urban life, the profit-motive continually attempts to corral them into its service, to make of them yet more commodities on display at the ready for quick consumption. Capitalist reality, with its accompanying regimentation of sense and space, has a way of rapidly reinserting itself into whatever might appear to initially escape it.

In most cities where street performance is permitted, it is subject to various forms of regulation and restriction, and in many cities, public performers must pay a fee for a permit—or, in some cases, may end up paying a fine. Although for some buskers, making money is largely beside the point, the act of busking does presuppose the possibility of reward, of recognition—in some form, though not necessarily pecuniary. However, insofar as busking may function as a form of critical street art, I would exclude street performers who are somehow remunerated by either a civic or a commercial entity, where the performers' earnings are made up primarily or entirely of a pre-arranged 'pay' (e.g. a municipality or private business arranging for buskers to perform during special events, often at precise locales and times). In this case, the performance is already determined predominantly in terms of capital (if not strictly economic then certainly cultural).³³⁶ By its very nature, then, busking does presuppose an economic relation between performer and 'audience' (and possibly some regulatory agent), although this is

³³⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

understood by more than a few buskers as being a form of interaction more akin to Mauss' gift economy than one based on the calculating reason of Simmel's money economy.³³⁷ However, a problem seems to emerge—one that runs through of all of these urban arts: *viz.* to what extent can street performance resist the capitalist realism that seems to insinuate itself into every aspect of our lives? To what extent can a transient differential space resist capitalism's recuperative strengths and not become simply yet more terrain to be commodified?

I have already raised the question of just how resistant punk truly is to capitalist forces, given that it relies on those same forces of production for its very existence. Punk music has been integrated into the music industry, while the defiant attitude of punk has been packaged and mass-marketed with the promise of being an authentic expression of one's own individuality.³³⁸ Although punk may be conceived of as active, lived resistance that operates on its own term—producing music, fanzines, t-shirts and other graphic arts, and creating networks of exchange around the world—it is also dependent, to at least some extent, on the infrastructures of global capitalism to make and distribute those same works. Similarly, hip hop is also largely reduced to being another brand choice in an incessant stream of entertainment, stripping it of its truly oppositional character; and, though skateboarding is a relatively accessible activity, there is still a price attached to the necessary gear, while the range of associated accessories only continues to grow. I have also noted the migration of street art into the art gallery, with some artists' work now selling for millions of dollars at auction. It may be a truism to say that any activity that takes place within the conditions of globalized capitalism is formulated in relation to, and is largely reproductive of, those same conditions. But, it is necessary to bear this mind when attempting to locate the critical and creative potential that I have outlined herein. For, if the arts of the street, understood as is proposed in these pages, are dependent upon the conditions of late capitalism to function as they do, we might ask: does this then preclude any truly critical potential they may seem to offer? Given, as I have argued, that the logic of capital has a way of insinuating itself into all aspects of

³³⁷ Mauss, *The Gift*; Chambers, "Busking and the Performance."

³³⁸ Liptrot, "Punk Belongs to the Punx."

everyday life, the question becomes, to put it more starkly: is there no outside to capitalism?

Indeed, it is very difficult to think beyond—or outside of—what Mark Fisher has termed capitalist realism.³³⁹ However, it may be that the question is misguided—that it is predicated on a series of questionable assumptions. Or, that it is simply the wrong question. For, my point throughout these pages is not so much to think outside of capitalism as to locate evidence of everyday creativity and micro-resistance that is already at work in the world, and to explore how these might suggest different ways of sensing the world and of being with others. The arts of the street, I contend, do just that: they demonstrate different ways of understanding and engaging with urban space, making the possible actual. Moreover, as we will see in the next chapter, there exists in the everyday—and in the arts of the street—an ebullient excess that confounds capitalist logic: the excess of the negative, of the useless. In this chapter I have outlined *what* the arts of the street are, *how* they operate, and *why* this matters within broader considerations of perception, space, and everyday life under late-stage capitalism. In what follows, I argue that these diverse amateur practices belong to the realm of the common (the commonplace and the communal), that they express something of the crowd and of the multitude, and that they may disrupt the everyday ordering of sense and space that, for the most part, goes unnoticed and unchallenged.

³³⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

Chapter 4

4 Amateur and Multitude: Toward a Minor Politics of Everyday Life

In discussing public space, I have treated the concept of space in detail, but in this chapter I deal more explicitly with the idea of the public, the crowd, and the multitude. To further examine the improvisational nature of everyday life, collective creativity, and how the arts of the street can bring into focus elements of possibility in the everyday, I include here some longer descriptive passages drawn from field observations undertaken in the context of this present work. These are written in a largely reflexive mode, so as to incorporate an element of phenomenological description into the more theoretical treatment that I have pursued herein. This also further grounds the argument that reflection—thinking, itself—is always situational and emerges from, or with, embodied perception: interrogation begins in the everyday. The principal argument put forward in this chapter concerns the ways that the arts of the street draw on—and can draw attention to—the intersubjective nature of perception and creativity, and the broader political implications that these have. The arts of the street suggest a minor politics based in everyday experience and in the amateur virtuosity of bricolage—politics not in the sense of asserting a response to defined political problems but as enacting a different space, fostering other social and perceptual possibilities.

I have already noted how the emotions act as a sort of bridge between pre-reflexive corporeality and conscious thinking, and between our own subjective experience and the social practices and cultural norms that help regulate our affective states. The emotions have political import not least because of how they can motivate action.³⁴⁰ Further, the emotions can be thought of in terms of resonance, a recurrent concept in these pages. Much as acoustic resonance is perceived as a phenomenal relationship between bodies (or ‘objects’) in a concrete space to which we may turn our attention, the emotions can give us conscious access to the intersubjective nature of perceptual experience; turning our

³⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*; Hutchison and Bleiker, “Theorizing Emotions.”

attention to our emotions can blur the lines between ourselves and others. Finally, the arts of the street touch simultaneously on both the emotional and material aspects of resonance—of mutual attunement. In this context, the concept of rhythm is also pertinent: an analysis of rhythm can provide a deeper understanding of the pre-reflexive operations of, and the creative potential in, everyday urban life. These two concepts—rhythm and resonance—describe spatio-temporal arrangements in which there exists some accord between components: a pre-reflexive compact between the sensing and the sensed. These two concepts are useful in a critical account of acoustic experience and of the life of the senses in general, showing that our perceptual enmeshment in the world does not, first, operate by sharp categorical division. The intentional reduction of critical analysis begins in the ambiguous flux of the everyday, just as critical listening must, perforce, commence “in the midst of preliminary approximations” for it begins “with the ordinary, by proximately working its way into what is as yet unheard.”³⁴¹

Thinking of everyday activities and relations in terms of rhythm and resonance, in a more general sense, is helpful in understanding the intertwining between ourselves and the world and between each other. Both concepts are important in terms of sonic phenomena (which I touch upon again, in this chapter) but they also both express processes that extend beyond the auditory domain. Rhythm is an essential characteristic of the spatial and sensorial organization of daily life, of our interrelations with others and surrounding space: the rhythms of everyday activities structure the day, with “familiar places ...the unquestioned settings for daily tasks, pleasures and rhythmically apprehended routines.”³⁴² Rhythm, as the measure of bodies in motion, brings together space and time into one process of becoming. Similarly, resonance is indicative of a sympathetic relation between different objects and materials and living beings—but one that happens ‘all at once’ and exists only for the duration of the vibrational force that establishes a consonance between bodies, things, or processes. Thus, both concepts are intimately concerned with time; but, whereas resonance intimates a synchronic correspondence—in the immediacy of perceptual intertwining—rhythm describes a diachronic relationship,

³⁴¹ Ihde, *Listening and Voices*, 49.

³⁴² Edensor, “Walking in Rhythms,” 70.

given that it is only perceived as unfolding *over* time. Both concepts, I would suggest, can be understood as denoting the ‘fleshly’ correspondence between body and world, that Merleau-Ponty addresses in *The Visible and the Invisible*.³⁴³ Both resonance and rhythm are also suggestive of the interrelation between multiple bodies in motion—of the movements of a crowd in public—first, at the preconscious level of our habituated social, mental, and corporeal dispositions. Theoretical concepts such as these, that are explicitly grounded in phenomenal experience, afford us the means to consciously reflect upon and critically interrogate the world around us and our place in it. By ‘grounded in phenomenal experience’ I mean that, although these are introduced as theoretical concepts, the best—or indeed, the only—way to fully understand them is through our own subjective experience, in the corporeality of everyday life. Therefore, to critically interrogate public space and the possibilities therein, I position myself within the movements of the crowd and reflect upon my perceptions and how these are formed by and contribute to the rhythmic patterns and resonant forces that help structure everyday urban experience.

4.1 In the Crowd

It is noon on a Wednesday in March. I am at the lowest level of Berri-UQAM metro station—at the level of the Yellow line, which runs south under the St.-Lawrence river. I stand in a wide high-ceilinged corridor that connects multiple passageways leading either to the train platform below or up to another metro line: to the Green line that connects the east end of the city, then runs west under the downtown core, ending to the southwest at Angrignon park, some twenty kilometres from its departure.³⁴⁴ Berri-UQAM is a central hub where three metro lines intersect. At the highest level is the Orange line which traces a giant letter ‘U’ under the city: its base runs parallel to the Green line, while one arm

³⁴³ See also Merleau-Ponty, “Le philosophe et son ombre.”

³⁴⁴ Due to the shape of the island of Montreal, around which flow the waters of the St.-Lawrence and the Rivière-des-Prairies, and compounded by longstanding local custom, what most Montrealers conceive of as the east-west axis of the city actually runs roughly northeast to southwest on a geographic map. Consequently, what in Montreal is referred to as the ‘east end’ is in fact north north-east of downtown, while Angrignon park to the ‘southwest’ is actually almost due south of the central parts of the city.

extends north through the western part of the city and the other, oriented the same way just east of downtown, reaches under the Rivière-des-Prairies to connect to the city of Laval. At Berri-UQAM station, multiple stairways lead up to the station entrance—itsself at the centre of a large cavernous gallery that connects to university buildings, central library, bus terminal, and street-level businesses with office buildings rising above: the city in motion. Here, where I stand at the intersection of several tile-and-concrete corridors, deep in the gut of the infrastructure that organizes and enables so much of this bustling activity, the crowds come in thick pulsing waves. Great masses of bodies pour in from arriving metro trains and surge up toward myriad destinations, the semi-coherent waves breaking apart and co-mingling with other incoming rushes, as individual commuters either catch trains on connecting metro lines or make for one of the many exits. Down at this lowest level of the station, in between waves, it is relatively quiet in the troughs that follow the swells: a few commuters trickle down from above to catch the next departure toward the south shore. As the day progresses, the tide will gradually shift, with increasing numbers of commuters reversing their course. Drawn by the gravitational pull of home at the end of the day, they will leave behind work and studies and shopping and the other activities that lead them into the core of the city. At this arterial intersection of commuting bodies, you can sense the dynamics of urban life: the swelling, throbbing pulsations of the crowd, the ebb and flow of the daily rhythms that impart continuity and familiarity to our experiential worlds. These rhythms help structure our everyday lives, and while they both express and reproduce the dominant relations of late-stage capitalism—of productivity, wealth creation, and rapid technological advancement, all ever-increasing—they are not produced or lived as one, as a unitary beat or calculable periodicity. The myriad rhythms of urban existence, for all their machine-like qualities, are the polyrhythms of the many: a chorus of intersecting trajectories, sometimes concordant, as an amalgam of individual tempi adjusting and aligning themselves with each other, sometimes breaking apart with the interrupted offbeats of conflict and disjunction, but never assuming a strictly coordinated form or final totality.

With the arrival of another train from the south shore, another mass of bodies is funneled up into the branching corridors that lead to the upper levels of the station. A jumble of intentions and desires somehow coordinates itself enough that a myriad of seemingly

individual trajectories become synchronized: so many bodies moving in tandem produces a general collectivized motricity. When walking in and with a crowd in a metro station, on a sidewalk, etc., a spontaneous coordination of bodies emerges. We have our own ideas of where we are going and how to get there, but our actions are situated within the particularities of the urban context. Jane Jacobs famously describes what she called the “sidewalk ballet” of urban pedestrians as they mutually negotiate their way around each other along New York city’s crowded sidewalks.³⁴⁵ But in the context of the metro station at rush-hour, the energy of moving bodies is even more contained and oriented by the functionality of architecture and scheduling, and by the demands of productivity. Although we move with the crowd, attuning ourselves to its polyrhythmic structure, we nonetheless maintain our own singular gait as we adjust our movements and orientation in relation to the people around us. The spatial limits of architectural design help channel the kinetic energy of the crowd, but within the mass, individuals move at their own speed as they position themselves within the forward collective motion. This mobile crowd possesses a cohesive general structure that is enacted by an association of individuals as they pursue their own singular projects. There is, thus, a dialectical tension in this loose public-in-transit. Taken in the aggregate, the crowd’s constituent parts (i.e. individual commuters, for the most part following familiar routes) allow it to assume a perceptible form, with individuals coordinating their movements with each other; but, taken as individual persons with singular capacities, intentions, and desires, each constituent on its own resists total synchronization, thus keeping the crowd in a state of unstable fluidity.

Walking is a critical factor in the production of public space, with the interactions between bodies in motion and the built environment helping to define the characteristics of a particular locale. “Rhythm is an identifiable though dynamic characteristic of place,” writes urban geographer Tim Edensor, while walking is an essential component in the “concatenation of rhythms through which place is (re)produced.”³⁴⁶ And, *how* I walk—the reach of my step, the swing of my arms and motions of my torso—is reproductive of

³⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Life and Death*, 50 ff.

³⁴⁶ Edensor, “Walking in Rhythms,” 77.

my everyday *habitus*,³⁴⁷ or general “body schema.”³⁴⁸ Most of the time, I walk in the largely unreflexive mode of “the natural attitude,”³⁴⁹ though this depends upon the terrain and the degree to which I direct my attention toward the act of walking. If walking on a flat surface such as indoor flooring, outdoor paving, or a smooth level path, I seem to walk in a more automatic fashion: the even, regular surface allows my body to ‘walk on its own’ as it were, while my conscious attention is directed elsewhere. On difficult, uneven or slippery surfaces, however, my attention is largely focused on where my next step will land. But even then, I do not generally think about—I do not *need* to think about—*how* I actually move: the motor actions of my body, of nerve and muscle, as my leg extends and foot lands where it is directed, the whole weight of my body shifting as it prepares to take the next step. My body seems to move itself.³⁵⁰ My walk is informed by all my past walking, but as the particular conditions in which I find myself are always different, if only subtly, my walk does not have a calculable trajectory that might be precisely anticipated and that would be mappable in the abstract. It can only be known in the act. It is held together as an activity not by general rules and formulae but through the habituated practices which, together, comprise a *style*, a manner of doing and way of being that is particular to each body. Walking in a crowd, we coordinate our movements with the movement of others. We may walk at a different pace from most of the crowd, or may even go in the opposite direction, but our movements always unfold in relation to others, with our bodies anticipating the motion that animates the bodies all around us. When we witness another body in motion, this elicits a sort of neural mimeticism—even if we do not outwardly manifest the movement ourselves. That is, the actions of other bodies—other people—can cause activity in our own brains as though we ourselves are also engaged in that activity; and, rhythm plays an especially important role in this process as perceptible rhythmic structures can activate a rhythmically coordinated neural

³⁴⁷ Mauss, “Techniques,”. See Chapter 2, above.

³⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100ff.

³⁴⁹ Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction*; Schütz and Luckmann, *Structures*.

³⁵⁰ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 440ff.

response in us, as ‘passive’ witnesses.³⁵¹ In this sense, the motion that animates the body of the other is already present in my own body; it is simply latent, unexpressed.

Walking in a crowd is eminently relational; moreover, as a transitory mutual coordination among bodies, it bears a certain resemblance to the way that musicians in an ensemble coordinate themselves when playing together. In his short but influential essay “Making Music Together,” Alfred Schütz points to the minute bodily cues that guide the members of a string quartet as they coordinate themselves with each other.³⁵² This demands of each musician a continual awareness of the others, each responding to the others as they play, making micro-adjustments in intonation, tempo and dynamic as they go. As with the DIY tactics of the everyday bricoleur, they do so ‘on the wing’—in an unfolding process that is only tangible in the performance, in the precise details of a particular instantiation. The musicians are thus not directed by an external timing mechanism but, though guided by the pre-arranged strategy of the musical score, find and express an emergent temporality produced by and through their own bodies in conjunction with their instruments. This depends on an intense focussing of perceptual attention on both their own actions and those of their fellow musicians. Their corporeal synchronization is both action and effect: the act of playing together is the mechanism whereby they achieve mutual coordination, and their coordinated effort expresses something cohesive, if dynamic and mutable—that is: a musical work. Although seen here in the context of a musical ensemble, in a more general way this mutual attunement and rhythmic synchronization can foster an intercorporeal awareness in various settings where individual bodies are actively engaged with each other.

Building off of Schütz’s discussion of the mutual attunement in a musical performance, Tim Ingold argues that something similar happens when persons walk together, side-by-side.³⁵³ Direct face-to-face interaction seems to have something confrontational about it.

³⁵¹ See for example Rosso, Leman & Moundjian, “Neural Entrainment.” On neural entrainment in a specifically musical context, see De Souza, *Music at Hand*. On rhythmically-inspired corporeal synchronization see also Ehrenreich, *Dancing*, 26ff.

³⁵² Schütz, “Making Music Together.” See also Schütz and Kersten, “Fragments.”

³⁵³ Ingold, *Making*. See also Lee and Ingold, “Fieldwork on Foot.”

Where else am I to look than at the person in front of me? Facing each other, we seem to demand that one or the other speak, act.³⁵⁴ But, walking together side-by-side we “share virtually the same visual field” as our individual trajectories become mutually entwined and a special sort of intersubjective relationship develops between us.³⁵⁵ Even something as simple as walking with others seems to contain a potential for mutual awareness and coordination: an intercorporeality that may blur the boundaries between what we generally think of as own independent selves. But, *walking with* another person is clearly not the same thing as *walking in* a crowd. Although the latter can attenuate our sense of independent corporeal motion, we may also feel acutely aware of ourselves as anonymous persons within the urban mass.

Indeed, there is a certain ambiguity of being, both comforting and disconcerting, when lost in a crowd—alone, surrounded by a horde of others. “In the city, one is alone because the world is made up of strangers,” and to move anonymously in the crowd, “silently bearing one’s secrets and imagining those of the people one passes, is among the starkest of luxuries.”³⁵⁶ The urban crowd is the realm of the stranger: a figure of danger, intrigue, and of possibility—with possibility comes difference and the unknown.³⁵⁷ The stranger is at home in the street. The street—in the broad sense of urban public space—has always presented these two faces: one liberatory, a place of possibility, of encounter and exchange where the familiar collides with the new, it is the realm of the marketplace, the itinerant entertainer, the *flâneur*, and Saturday night out on the town; the other, the face of danger, of uncertainty and contagion, of the dark treacherous interstitial fragments that elude the spatial order that helps regulate our lives.³⁵⁸ The street, in a very broad sense, implies spaces that are inhabited and animated by the movements of bodies—of a

³⁵⁴ This touches on the malaise experienced by urban dwellers that Simmel describes, as the divisions between sensory modes increasingly mirror the sharp division of labour of late-stage capitalism. (see Chapter 2 above).

³⁵⁵ Ingold, *Making*, 106.

³⁵⁶ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 186.

³⁵⁷ For different discussions of the figure of the stranger see Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Simmel, “The Stranger.”

³⁵⁸ For various accounts of the street as both fomenting liberatory creativity and as a site of containment, if not outright social control, see Boudreault-Fournier and Wees, “Creative Engagement”; Ehrenreich, *Dancing*. Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*; Tonnelat, “Out of Frame.”

public. This includes semi-public spaces that are likewise defined—in terms of functionality but also in terms of how they are subjectively experienced—by the activities of an agglomeration of individuals, the vast majority of whom will be complete strangers to each other.

My research has brought me to this particular spot in the Berri-UQAM metro station. Seeking a critical reckoning of the rhythmic structuring of everyday life, I use my own body as an entry point in an attempt to gain a sense of “others’ movement and gestures, [their] attentions and anticipations, [thus] letting different rhythms make themselves felt.”³⁵⁹ I stand for a moment, gauging the pace of the arriving mass of bodies that moves up from the train platform. There is a general pace that the crowd of commuters adopts: most of the people walk at about the same speed, some a little slower, some faster. A few people hurry ahead, gaining the escalators up when most of the crowd is still far back in the long corridor. And, trickling up at a declining rate, those who move more slowly trace their own trajectories. Seeing an opening, I plunge into the crowd. Immediately, the momentum draws me along and I pace myself to the mass of moving limbs and torsos. I move with the crowd but am not completely subsumed by it; I am of the crowd but also retain my singular solitude. Focussing on my own corporeal sensations, I can learn something about the surrounding space—the practiced manners and learned routines that lend cohesion to life as social experience. As Lefebvre argues, attending to the rhythms that structure our lifeworlds offers us a means of critically assessing the broader context of our own experience (cultural, historical-material, etc.) while still remaining in the immediacy of the body—of our own bodies.³⁶⁰

I modify my pace to position myself toward the front of the loose crowd-in-motion. A wide corridor leads to a row of high-climbing escalators in a great narthex of this cavernous cathedral of subterranean movement. Mid-way in the corridor, a lone busker occupies the permitted performance spot (I already know he is there) which is spatially fixed by a metal sign bearing the image of a lyre—a concrete symbol of the standards and

³⁵⁹ Lyon, *What is Rhythmanalysis?*, 80.

³⁶⁰ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

regulations that regiment everyday interactions. A man in the later reaches of middle-age stands, tenor saxophone slung around his neck. He pauses, listens, then—with the rustling swell that signals an incoming rush of bodies in motion—he restarts a pre-recorded accompaniment track, both insipidly bland and pleasingly familiar in its genericness, of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” and he launches into the well-known melody. The warm tones of the instrument resonate throughout the corridors, taking on the sonic colourations of building material and architectural design. The musical line blends into the ambient acoustic fabric, expressing the aural possibilities of the place but also distinguishing itself against the background, gently but insistently demanding the attention of the approaching commuters who move as a semi-coherent mass through the corridor toward the escalators.

The subterranean world of the metro has its own spatial and sonic features: dark and echoey, perceptions become muddied, orientation obscured.³⁶¹ All around, a continuous low hum makes itself heard, an ever-present shadowy reverberation, varying in intensity and tonal qualities throughout the station and throughout the day. There is a rancorous murmur of machinery; of trains and escalators; of closing doors, revolving turnstiles, and barely decipherable public address announcements; of ventilation, lighting and other droning electrical systems; a chorus of machines and materials. It is the voice of the underground: a chaotic yet coherent resonant force. In the architectural hubbub, peals of footsteps resonate like great rounds of applause that swell with the arrival of crowded rush-hour trains, or as unhurried conversations among old friends, or as the gentle soliloquy of someone slowly but determinedly making their way down a long reverberant corridor. And in this symphonic tumult another voice is heard. Recognizably melodic, it announces itself, soliciting the intentional interest of passersby.

It is a challenge for buskers to stand out, to make an impression in just a few short seconds. If there is an audience, it is one that is always on the move and whose attention is already focussed elsewhere. Seasoned performers know this and may modify each performance according to the conditions at-hand, influencing and being influenced by

³⁶¹ Augé, *Un ethnologue*; Labelle, *Acoustic Territories*.

changing spatial acoustics.³⁶² For musicians, who by far comprise the majority of buskers, one of the advantages of many of these subterranean locales (if not adjacent to a train platform) is that they can be heard from a greater distance. *Heard before they are seen*: at many such indoor and underground busking spots performers can acoustically claim urban space, alerting approaching commuters to their presence. Indoor train and subway spaces have their own particular acoustic qualities.³⁶³ In the metro stations, these can sometimes be of benefit both by projecting and by enriching the performance with a deep reverberation—the qualities of which will be dependent on the precise locale.³⁶⁴ The conditions are generally quite different when performing on the street: there, traffic sound can all but completely drown out the performer, unless electrical amplification is used (exceptions are public squares or parks, but even there general urban noise can be a nuisance). However, regardless of where a performance plays out, its acoustic qualities are always formed in relation to the specific characteristics of the locale. The performance, in this sense, gives expression to latent qualities in the general environment: the performance activates the resonant possibilities that reside in that space.

I forego a detailed discussion of architectural acoustics; nonetheless, as we have seen, thinking about sound and our sonic immersion in the world is helpful in understanding the distributed nature of perception. The concept of resonance offers a description of how a force activates some element in an environment, such that other elements that share essential characteristics with the first will be mobilized by the same animating resonant force. The previously mentioned example of two tuning forks resonating together provides a very basic illustration; but, this process is at work at multiple levels in the lived world. More precisely, resonance describes *the perception* of an active consonance among various elements. For, as Spinoza would remind us, we do not know, in the first instance, the causes of things; we simply sense their effects in—or upon—our bodies.³⁶⁵ I do not normally consider how the particular construction of a metro station might accentuate some frequencies—some perceptual possibilities—over others. But when the

³⁶² Masson, “Musique a bord!”; Wees, “Expériences et pratiques.”

³⁶³ Yilmazer & Bora, “Underscoring Indoor Soundscape.”

³⁶⁴ Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies*.

³⁶⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*.

busker in the corridor takes up the melody on his saxophone, he sets in motion a vibrational force—a vibrating column of air—that, in addition to projecting out from his instrument and filling the space, also activates the already-present affordances in that space such that we perceive them *all at once*. Again: we do not simply hear *in* space but equally *hear space*. Reverberation, as we have seen, imparts an intimate bodily knowledge of space, of the architecture and infrastructures that we encounter in daily life. And architecture, as all built space, suggests—if not outright imposes—a particular politics, supports a particular sensorial regime, by delineating certain affordances with certain characteristics. Urban space thus contains a range of political possibilities—political in the sense of being concerned with the basic question of community, of living with others—that are tied to the available sensory-affective and technological affordances. But what is equally important is how these affordances are activated. In the above description of subterranean urban acoustics, it is the musical performance that renders perceptible certain latent details of that space. But more than this, the performance actually changes the space, changes how I experience it. Whether I care for the performance or not, if I pause to listen or simply walk past without even seeming to notice, the resonant forces put in motion by the busker have already helped shape the acoustics of the space that I move through. I may be no more aware of this fact than I am of the different ways that the planned construction of urban space delineates certain possibilities for me; these things are largely naturalized as they retreat into the background conditions of my daily life. However, what *can* seize my attention and render evident some of these conditions is the active participation of a performer of some minor art—who may be no more interested in me than I in them yet who nonetheless alters my experience of that space. In terms of acoustic experience, this shifts perception from *hearing* to *listening*—which, importantly, is always a *listening-to* that embroils me in the world and the presence of others who share in the same space.³⁶⁶ This is first of all a sensorial-affective transformation³⁶⁷—one that emerges from the intersubjective nature of

³⁶⁶ Nancy, *Listening*.

³⁶⁷ Simpson, “Sonic Affect.”

everyday life.³⁶⁸ In the everyday, the politics of space and the reproduction of the dominant sensory regime is largely invisible, maintained as much by our own quotidian practices as by apparatuses of state power (legal, educational, etc.). The arts of the street, however, can not only make evident what is already there but can also initiate other possibilities, different ways of perceiving and engaging with space for both performer and passerby.

Although the attention paid to sound and aurality should not detract from the broader meanings of resonance and rhythm, the arts of the street generally have significant aural characteristics, such that the practitioners of these minor arts can be said to express a “sonic agency”³⁶⁹ that can be understood precisely in terms of resonances and of rhythmic patterns. Both punk and hip hop have their musics along with associated dance forms, but they are also, more generally, concerned with the urban rhythms of everyday life. For its part, street skating has its own particular rhythmic forms.³⁷⁰ But it also has its own acoustic characteristics, with practitioners asserting their sonic presence in the world. The sound of a skateboard as it rolls down the middle of the street in the middle of the night, carrying its rider to unknown destinations, has an unmistakable sonority—a source of mild amusement, indifference, or questioning resentment. More generally, street skating has sonic effect on others in the urban environment, with the “subtle roar of wheels on tarmac, hard rasping of truck on concrete, slippery slide of slick deck on metal rail, rhythmic clicking of paving stones,” etc., altering the acoustic activity in a given space.³⁷¹ Whether in acoustic or in other terms, by drawing attention to different ways of experiencing and ‘using’ space, the arts of the street act as forms of creative resistance that ground critical interrogation in the thick of everyday life. And, as we have seen, the DIY practices that comprise the arts of the street are informed by the common skills of

³⁶⁸ Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction*.

³⁶⁹ Labelle, *Sonic Agency*.

³⁷⁰ For example: in terms of repeating a particular trick in an attempt to perfect a move, or of the rhythmic motion of spinning wheels and forward momentum upon riding down a long gently-curving slope, or again in terms of timing a move relative to traffic or other mobile obstacles (i.e. riding a steep embankment down into a street, or in general riding where automobile traffic or pedestrians present a risk and may themselves be at risk).

³⁷¹ Borden, *Skateboarding, Space*, 199.

the bricoleur. By drawing on a latent creative capacity in shared space, they point us toward the collective nature of creativity in general.

4.2 Common Creativity

I have already stressed the improvisational nature of those forms of urban creativity and resistance that comprise the arts of the street. As emphasized, improvisation does not indicate unbounded possibility but, rather, a general approach: a way of being in the world for which there is no script, only a character sketch to act as a guide.³⁷² And, we rely upon this ability to improvise, making the ‘on-the-spot’ micro-decisions that comprise our experiential trajectories as we get around in our everyday lives, all the while giving little thought to *how* we actually do this. As we have seen, the *obscurity* of our perceptual faith, as Merleau-Ponty has it, allows us to do this. That is, an unexamined trust in a clear and logical order to the world allows us to live in the day-to-day, unfronted by the indeterminacies and contradictions that arise when we critically interrogate our circumstances. Despite the general routinization of our quotidian habits, we are nonetheless faced with moments of decision in which we must adjust how we engage with our surroundings. At a very basic level, an organism’s ability to modify its activities ‘on the fly’ with only a general trajectory guiding it involves a certain creative capacity: an urge, or simple necessity, to experiment. This capacity, whatever its actual power to produce lasting difference, rests upon an implicit corporeal knowledge that delineates not strict boundaries but the approximate horizons of the possible—the affordances at the disposal the organism, in James J. Gibson’s terminology.

Improvisation is a form of activity that characterizes the organism-at-home in its environment, as it simultaneously incorporates itself into its environment while also producing variation and difference—that is, what is possible but is (as yet) unactualized.

The logic of improvisatory bricolage around which the arts of the street coalesce relies not on precise formula and replicable verifications but on approximate patterns and general dispositions that are transferable across a wide range of situations. What these

³⁷² Ingold and Hallam, “Creativity and Cultural Improvisation.”

practices lack in exactitude is compensated for by their versatility, by the transposability of the skills involved. To illustrate: some buskers develop a different understanding of everyday spatial-corporeal relations—of how people habitually move in space, and the importance of how spaces are *built*—as a result of practical experience, and so adapt their performances accordingly, in the moment.³⁷³ Such modifications may then be integrated into the everyday habitus, modifying general corporeal comportment. Or: a street skater may have a certain relationship with a particular section of a parking lot—with cement blocks, paved embankments, guard rails, perhaps the occasional security guard who chases skaters off—that for all its specificity affords a general style and mode of being—an orientation—that may be serviceable in diverse and seemingly disparate settings. For the practitioners of these minor arts, all of these factors inform how one perceives the environment and how one engages with the material and social realities of everyday urban life. All of the practices under consideration involve some form of intensified corporeal relation with an environment: a conscious, direct engagement with the world that expresses the complicity between what Merleau-Ponty calls *the flesh of the body* and *the flesh of the world*—and between the flesh of *my* body and of the bodies of others. Moreover, as we have seen—and this is a key point to the overall argument delineated throughout these pages—in addition to the direct corporeal effects on the practitioners themselves, the actual performance of these various arts can alter how *others* experience public space. And this suggests different possibilities in terms of the co-production of public urban space, of influencing the broader politics of the sensible that underlie the dominant social order, insofar as we must always *reproduce* the social world as an active practice and that this reproductive activity is not mechanically replicative but depends upon a general style and set of dispositions.

Improvisation has an unfinished quality about it: without presupposing or necessitating an end point, a finality, it opens upon a seemingly endless field of play. It is more creative *activity* than *act*, less about a moment than about movement—the orientation of a force. In musical improvisation, the musical line seems to move from one note to the next

³⁷³ Masson, “Musique à bord!”; Tanenbaum 1995, *Underground Harmonies*.

ahead of the musician's conscious attention. But the ability to do so—to let the body run ahead, as it were—depends on endless hours of repeated playing. Like any technical skill set, musical training involves concerted effort: a sustained mental-corporeal training that is directly related to the means employed (e.g. a particular instrument) but that can also afford a certain general know-how—a set of practices organized around general patterns rather than calculable formulae. In the act of playing, body, instrument and music are intertwined with each other: the instrument as extension of the body, the body as extension of the instrument,³⁷⁴ in a productive feed-back loop that operates by way of patterned sequences that may be adaptive to other situations. Similarly, for the street skater, the board (and parts of the board: wheels, trucks, deck) also becomes an extension of the intentional body³⁷⁵ as the skater attempts to pry possibility from the already-there. There is an almost musical playfulness in this ability to transpose skills that are developed in a precise setting yet are general and adaptable enough to be transferable across a range of changing conditions. The musical concept of 'jamming'—a way that musicians can play together using standard forms and basic chord progressions that allows for liberal ornamentation and extended improvisation—has been employed to explain the way urban youth claim space for themselves as a matter of daily habit³⁷⁶ which is very similar to the ways skateboarders reappropriate both public and private urban spaces (from streets, sidewalks and parks, to parking lots, loading docks, and empty swimming pools).³⁷⁷ Hip hop also has its own forms of improvisations tied directly to the life of the streets, with breakdance and rap duels giving practitioner the opportunity to demonstrate their improvisational abilities as they competitively respond to each other in the unfolding performance.³⁷⁸ Graffiti artists may have to, at the very least, improvise in finding ways to write in visible places without getting caught.

Although punk music is not generally noted for creative improvisation, it nonetheless exhibits certain characteristics that are germane in the present context. Punk music is, on

³⁷⁴ De Souza, *Music at Hand*.

³⁷⁵ Borden, *Skateboarding, Space*.

³⁷⁶ Sand, "Jamming."

³⁷⁷ Borden, *Skateboarding and the City*.

³⁷⁸ Watkins and Caines, "Cyphers."

the whole, very simple in terms of compositional styles, typically following standard chord progressions and verse/refrain structures that are common to rock and roll forms. Songs are usually devoid of ornamentation and are typically short with a fast tempo and played at a high volume. Instrumentation also generally follows the common rock and roll form of vocals, electric guitar, electric bass and drums, with sometimes a second guitar or other instrument(s) included. As previously noted, punk deliberately encourages an anti-professionalist attitude: anyone can be in a band, no musical skill or training is required. A foundational moment in the development of punk is the 1976 publication in *Strangler* magazine of the fingering charts for three simple guitar chords followed by the exhortation to “now go form a band.”³⁷⁹ Here, basic parameters are outlined, delineating a rough field within which practitioners must draw upon their own capacities, experiences, and desires to carry out particular projects (in this instance, making music together). Thus, if punk can be characterized as a “community of practice,”³⁸⁰ it is so only as a rough sketch, a silhouette of a plan: *here is a rudimentary outline, now go do something, make something of what you’ve got*. Meanwhile, usual considerations of what is ‘good’ or ‘significant’ are deliberately refuted: the precision and univocality of centralized authority gives way to the heteroglossic murmurings of the crowd, of the multitude, of everyday social relations.³⁸¹

Creativity should not be thought of as strictly a matter of individual inspiration—the lone artist struggling in solitude—but as also involving a basic capacity to experiment, a propensity for play that touches upon something of *the common*. ‘Common,’ in this sense, seems to have a de-valuative connotation: the mundane, the average everyday—cheap, valueless. But this apparent abasement can be a strength, something to be retained and nurtured: a “weapon of the weak.”³⁸² Minor, operating near the margins, seeking out other spaces—interstices in the fragmented space of global capitalism—in their commonness, the arts of the street resist capitalist logic, avoid being fully commodified by always retaining an element of the *useless*, of the *irrational* and the *inconvenient*.

³⁷⁹ Berger, *Story of Crass*.

³⁸⁰ Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

³⁸¹ Stam, “Bakhtin and the Cultural Left.”

³⁸² Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. Cf. de Certeau, *Practice*.

Tarnished by the grime of the street, there is something that exceeds the basic operations of social and material reproduction: a negative remainder. The possible. Indeed, while the conception of busking as being a little unpolished—a little rough around the edges—may be touted as part of its ‘charm,’ providing a highly marketable sense of creative ‘authenticity’,³⁸³ the fact remains that street performance, by its very nature, can never be fully categorized or pinned down as a definite position with precise properties. Like the open invitation to form a band regardless of any musical ability that punk offers to all, busking is available to anyone and everyone. *How to be a busker*: choose some kind of performance, go do it in public, and set up in such a way that it is at least *possible* for passersby to show their appreciation with some kind of reward (i.e. a hat or instrument case set out for donations), regardless of intentions or actual outcomes. *Voilà: you’re a busker!*

But if anyone can be a busker with no more than the simplest defining parameters, does this not render the term all but meaningless? Sort of like: if anything is art and anyone an artist, then does not art, as a distinctive practice, cease to exist? This brings us back to one of the characteristics of both Rancière’s conception of critical art and of the arts of the street as I have already delineated them. That is, that they distinguish themselves from their everyday surroundings while they are also always on the verge of being reduced to mundane if pleasant distractions, merely so many commodified experiences at the ready for easy consumption. The arts of the street thus exhibit dual tendencies that seem incompatible, one contradicting the other. On the one hand, they operate as identifiable (nameable) sets of practices that provide entertainment, recreation, distraction, etc., in various measures, and as such are quickly absorbed into the existing relations of social and material reproduction (with the attendant political order that this entails). On the other hand, because they always remain open-ended and are constantly being redefined by their practitioners not according to some conceptual program or analytical logic but in the act of doing and of making, they remain mobile, incomplete, impossible to enclose and to transmute from process to product. Certainly, elements of all of these practices

³⁸³ Seldin, “Voices of Berlin.”

have been successfully commercialized (successful in terms of consumption and profitability). Punk and (especially) hip hop have generated multi-million dollar music industries. Skateboarding has opened up a whole new global market for accessories. Street art festivals are organized in different cities with official approval and corporate sponsorship, etc. However, we can make a distinction between, on the one hand, *particular elements* of these different arts (e.g. a specific musical form, instrumentation, or compositional style; certain artistic practices; clothing styles or types of body ornamentation; etc.) that are identified, isolated and extracted from their original context (which in the first instance is always ‘the street’) to be reproduced in simplified, easily-consumable forms; and, on the other hand, the arts of the street understood as sets of loosely cohesive practices that are always incomplete because existing only as activities that subvert, reappropriate and move on—*they never have a proper place of their own, never assume formal properties.*

A number of years ago, I used to occasionally see an elderly man performing in the metro station near my home. He played—one might say that he *attempted* to play—a guitar and harmonica, the latter held by a support-brace resting around his neck, as he faced the rush of afternoon commuters descending the stairs and escalators. He clearly had no musical training—nor, apparently, any basic musical skill. His performances consisted in banging semi-rhythmically on the guitar strings with one hand, while muffing them with the other—not fully pressing down on the strings so as to play a series of notes or chords—thus creating a dull *thumpa-thumpa* sound, all the while blowing and drawing air, in alternance, through the harmonica, producing a randomly dissonant *whonka-whonka-whhhonnn*. I can remember noticing occasional looks of surprised amusement or sometimes mild irritation on the faces of other commuters. I frequently put some change in the guitar case he had set out. This man, in many respects, perfectly incarnated the busker as artist of the street: minor but resistant, marginal, performing on his own terms with no regard for standards of professionalization, momentarily claiming for himself a scrap of public space, in the process altering the everyday socio-sensorial fabric and thus affecting others who moved through that space. Perhaps not revolutionary but a minor instance of creative resistance nonetheless.

Organized around the non-specialist interests and abilities of the DIY amateur, the arts of the street are expressions of how perceptions and uses of space can be understood and altered, even if only subtly, in a way that does not depend upon a set of formal procedures or regulated standards. This is not to suggest that these minor arts are somehow more ‘authentic’ than practices that are highly formalized and follow strict sets of rules (although it might be said that the informal precedes the formal), merely that they show us other possibilities in terms of what urban space can be. Moreover, the commonness of these minor arts shows creativity to be a distributed endeavour rather than the work of an isolated creator. The dominant individualistic notion of creativity depends upon “an ideology of property [that] isolates the ‘author,’ the ‘creator,’ and the ‘work,’” argues Michel de Certeau.³⁸⁴ In reality, like perception itself, the creative process is as socially distributed as it is subjectively individuated (i.e. perceived as ‘my own’ individual experience). Indeed, as James Leach shows by drawing on a range of ethnographic examples, the prevailing contemporary idea of individual creativity is bound up with specifically modern ideas about private property, the creation of value through work (in which the things of nature are removed from the common), and an autonomous self that is governed by reason.³⁸⁵ Noting in particular the influence of John Locke’s ideas about private property on modern conceptions of creativity and the sovereign self, Leach goes on to argue that this “dynamic of possessive individualism” is not culturally universal in terms of how people understand knowledge and creativity. Instead, he shows that for many peoples, creation is always a collective process, that “there is no project that is not already the project of other people as well,” and that the production of the new does not originate with “any single creator, just as the [individual] person does not come from a single progenitor.”³⁸⁶

The commonness of the practices that comprise the arts of the street is thus indicative of the *communal*, that which may be accessible to all: a common ground that is immanent to, and in, the everyday—a space of common encounter. But, importantly, this is not a

³⁸⁴ de Certeau, *Culture Plural*, 140.

³⁸⁵ Leach, “Creativity, Subjectivity.”

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

space *held* in common. What is common can no longer (if it ever should have been) thought of in terms of a commonly-held property, such as the oft-touted model of English common pasture land doomed to enclosure—an ever and overly romanticized ideal of the common,³⁸⁷ which has carried over into the rush to idealize the global Occupy movement as a new revolutionary, renewed commons.³⁸⁸ Part of the problem may be in how a space of common encounter is conceived of—fixing it too firmly in *place*. Indeed, as we have seen, trying to define an open field of equal participation immediately raises problems concerning the terms of participation, the inextricability of participants’ experiential histories, and the authority upon which any such definition would depend upon from the outset. The conceptualization of a space of politics that centers on communicative language, on speaking and appearing—as is the case for thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt,³⁸⁹ and Rancière to a large degree—highlights these problems, in that it seems to rely on a set of *a priori* abstract rules which make communication possible in the first place. By failing to fully account for “the embodied, situational and dialogical aspects of everyday life”³⁹⁰ a separation of the space of politics from the lived experience of the world is thus maintained.

But if the senses provide the ground of experience (and this includes thinking, reflection, interrogation) and the body is the common basis for our being in the world, then we might locate the possibility for communication, for community, first in the facticity of the body—in the undeniability of our own bodily experience. Indeed, in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as in Schütz’s sociological contextualization of phenomenology, the body provides the basis for the intersubjectivity of experience, and ultimately the possibility for an ethics of reciprocity.³⁹¹ Note that this in no way means that there might be some universal *potential* corporeality to which we (can) all have access; this is clearly disproved by the variability of bodies and differences in individual socio-corporeal

³⁸⁷ Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.

³⁸⁸ Smith, “Politics of the Street.”

³⁸⁹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*; Arendt, *Human Condition, Lectures on Kant*.

³⁹⁰ Gardiner, “Everyday Utopianism,” 30.

³⁹¹ *cf.* Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, Visible and Invisible*; Schütz, *Phenomenology of Social*.

experience. ‘The’ body is always *a* body: specific, temporal, concrete. Rather, what is important is the simple fact that *we all have bodies*, that we all *are* bodies—singular bodies with particular needs and desires, but ones that embroil us all in the flesh of the world. To what extent a truly ‘common’ ground is possible may be debatable, but that we can debate it at all indicates that it is at least possible to try to formulate a conception of such (i.e. an equitable space of participatory politics). Thus, whereas a theory of politics constructed around language seems to assume that, even if we all have different linguistic histories and abilities, transparent communication is at least theoretically possible, a politics of the sensible founded on the sheer corporeality of experience invariably begins and ends with difference.³⁹²

We should note, however, that this does not permit understanding difference itself as equivalent with some ideal of the good or equality or openness and equity. One of the distinguishing features of the contemporary relations of social reproduction is how difference and creativity have been recouped by capital and put to work in the service of the *smart city*, while “the very notions of contingency, complexity and unpredictability have become instruments of control.”³⁹³ But, I would argue that there is something that distinguishes the arts of the street, in this respect. It may be true that, in transitioning from a disciplinary society to a society of control, desire and imagination, innovation and play now further extend the subject-forming influence of the bio-corporate state, but there is nonetheless a rational reduction at the heart of the machinations of late-stage capitalism—one that transforms quality into numeric quantity. The forces of capital may have ‘de-materialized’ themselves, but they nonetheless run on the cold logic of exchange value: in the end, all must be reduceable to calculable units of exchange. Indeed, according to Gilles Deleuze, while the disciplinary society is tied to global exchange underwritten by cash money and gold reserves, the society of control operates by way of “floating rates of exchange” that are nonetheless determined “according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies.”³⁹⁴ In both cases, then, the procedure

³⁹² Laplantine, *Life of the Senses*.

³⁹³ Krivy, “Towards a Critique,” 17.

³⁹⁴ “Postscript,” 5.

depends on transmuting what was formless into something defined, calculable by some means—which is as true of the monetization of data sets as it is of earlier forms of market transaction. But, the arts of the street, I contend, are not constrained by such a logic. That is, because they do not have a *proper* place of their own, are never reduceable to defined properties, they always retain something of the negative excess that evades recuperation by the reductive logic of calculable value. The excess of improvisational bricolage is what ties them to the uncontainability of the body and the incalculability of the world.

By demonstrating the potential to conceive, use, and experience public spaces in novel ways, the arts of street suggest certain manners in which the social fracturing and psychosensorial estrangement of modernity might be resisted, perhaps even turned to creative use. The urban sensorium of late modernity may be fragmented, spatially unfastened, and saturated with the rationalizing logic of money, but precisely because of its open-ended or incomplete nature, it offers seemingly endless opportunities in the cracks and on the margins of the dominant socio-corporeal order. The arts of the street involve practices and approaches that have taken shape in, and in relation to, these fragmented spaces of late-stage capitalism, and they continue to evolve and redefine themselves in every act of doing. In their mobility, they reach ahead of capitalist reterritorialization; in their everyday commonness, they are afforded to the general public—*they are the arts of the crowd, the swarm, the multitude.*

4.3 The Multitude

Despite the predominance of ideas about creation that are centred on the individual and the interiority of consciousness in the modern West, the force of creativity—the playful search for the new, in terms of art, in terms of knowledge, in terms of everyday innovation—as a collective endeavour and as an ongoing process that surpasses the individual, is also present in urban modernity: the excess of the body. If there is a unifying logic at work, a totalizing drive at rational efficiency running through late capitalism, there is also a generative capacity within urban space that exceeds the totalizing logic of capital—the element of possibility that, if we follow Lefebvre, inheres in everyday experience. Finally, as public space is both reproductive of habituated social norms and mental-corporeal dispositions *and* simultaneously offers moments of

encounter, exchange, and conflict—that is: difference and the new—*the street*, in the broad sense of the word, is the site and the expression of the teeming urban mass: the crowd—the semi-coordinated aggregate of multiple agencies in motion. There is a productive force at work in the distributed activities of the crowd, in the creative ebullitions of the multitude: “creation,” says de Certeau, “is a disseminated proliferation. It swarms and throbs.”³⁹⁵

The swarming crowd is always a plurality; and, if the body and the space of its inhabitation must be understood in the plural—as *bodies* in spaces—then the assemblages that constitute the public also present themselves as heterogeneous aggregations of interests, demands and desires. Multifarious impulses that, in conversation with each other and with the social and material composition of public space, have something to say: they speak a public.³⁹⁶ But, if public space and the everyday activities that sustain it have a discursive formulation, it is never a coherent voice, never becomes its own proper language. Rather, it is the jumbled cacophony of the crowd within which one may discern parts of conversations but only ever fragments, a muddled discourse that expresses the incomplete and the presence of difference in our everyday perceptual experience: ordinary language,³⁹⁷ idle talk,³⁹⁸ the overheard.³⁹⁹ If we understand speech and language as expressions of the embodied mind, and this mind is a consequence of our basic corporeality (doing away with body/mind dualism), then speech and language must necessarily be grounded in the materiality of the world, in the thickness of being. But if a discourse says something, it says it in a certain way, using certain tones and idioms, rules of grammar and wider cultural references; and if there is a dominant univocal discourse of authority (*His master's voice*⁴⁰⁰) all other voices must either adopt its style and are subsumed within it, or are drowned out completely. This process of exclusion, says Michael Warner, precipitates the formation of “counterpublics”—the vehicles of

³⁹⁵ de Certeau, *Culture Plural*, 140. See also Ross, *Emergence of Social Space*.

³⁹⁶ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

³⁹⁷ de Certeau, *Practice*.

³⁹⁸ Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, 88 ff.

³⁹⁹ Labelle, *Sonic Agency*.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. p.121, above.

expression of marginalized or subordinate sections of a population, operating in contradistinction (and sometimes in open opposition) to discourses of dominance and estrangement.⁴⁰¹ The murmur of the crowd then seems to represent a counterhegemonic polyvocality, the productive heteroglossia of the many.⁴⁰²

The post-autonomist Marxist theorist Paolo Virno argues that while it is the concept of ‘The People’ that has underlain the development of the modern state—and, to a large degree, our basic understanding of politics, of what constitutes the political—there is another way of thinking the many as one: *the multitude*.⁴⁰³ For Virno, the Spinozist heterogeneity of ‘the multitude’ opposes itself to the univocity and erasure of difference that accompanies the Hobbesian concept of The People. If The People speak with one voice—the pronouncements of the *demos*—the multitude, expressing itself in many voices, demands a polyvocal space of public encounter that does not operate along lines of categorical division—between work and action, between sensing and thinking. The vocalizations of the many, moreover, may be cacophonous—a tumultuous chorale of different voices saying different things—but what is essential is that they speak: as the many, all have recourse to the shared capacity for human language. In the destabilized and destabilizing world of late-stage capitalism, workers—those whose labour has made the expansion of capital possible—are not only stripped of all but the most meagre rewards of their labour, but are also increasingly rendered materially secondary in the productive process: with near-full automation, they are reduced to simply the conscious linkages at various points in the system of automated machines.⁴⁰⁴ What this also means in practical terms is that the many, who are now exiled into a world of mobile capital and decentred production, bereft of their material labour power are thrown back upon the basic human cognitive capacities, “the more generic attitudes of the mind... the faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract and relate, and the inclination towards self-reflexivity.”⁴⁰⁵ These capacities are the most general—generic—

⁴⁰¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

⁴⁰² Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*,

⁴⁰³ Virno, *Grammar*.

⁴⁰⁴ Marx, “Grundrisse,” 279ff. See also Virno, “General Intellect,” *Grammar*.

⁴⁰⁵ Virno, “General Intellect,” 6.

abilities available to us: the *general intellect*, the common skills of the species not in their particular expressions but in the mere fact that this capacity presupposes us as individual subjects and, ultimately, provides a basis for thinking a different politics.

Taking Marx's passing mention of a "general intellect" in the *Grundrisse*, Virno develops the concept to argue that now, in post-Fordist global capitalism, productive activity is no longer centered on the making of things but has shifted to the realm of the intellect. This collapses the distinctions between work (that is: labour power that is organized to produce something) and the activities of the mind—and between work and action.⁴⁰⁶ Intellect, here, does not refer so much to 'intelligence' but to anything that is, at its core, an activity of the mind—above all, thinking and speaking. Under these conditions, "the 'life of the mind' becomes extrinsic, shared, and common."⁴⁰⁷ Creativity, then, is likewise no longer a property of individual initiative, of singular inspiration, but a common feature of the general life of society—of its generic productive forces and its cultural forms. The general intellect, in its genericness, is akin to the communal nature of our enfleshment in the world—that is: the basic fact that all of us *are* and *have* bodies. This essential corporeality, as a general project in the world that precedes conscious reflection, is the basis of our intersubjective being-in-the-world.⁴⁰⁸ And it is this common enfleshment in the world that connects the concept of the general intellect to the ideas of creativity and bricolage—as driven by necessity and by desire—that I have explicated in the foregoing. The general intellect, for Virno, refers to "intellect in general"—not actual instantiations of applied human intelligence but the generic possibility of intellectual activity as such, in its most basic forms—and it is formulated in the "common places" of everyday speech.⁴⁰⁹ Speech, in this context, does not begin as abstract language but is always a speaking-with, or a speaking-to: every speech act is bound up with a specific material, social, historical context.⁴¹⁰ If there seems to be an endless productivity in

⁴⁰⁶ Marx, "Grundrisse," 285. Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution," *Grammar*.

⁴⁰⁷ Virno, "General Intellect," 7.

⁴⁰⁸ cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Schütz and Luckman, *Structures*.

⁴⁰⁹ Virno, "General Intellect," *Grammar*.

⁴¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*; Gardiner, "Automatic for the People?"

everyday speech, in idle curiosity and gossip, in speech for the sake of itself,⁴¹¹ it is the productivity of the body, and of bodies in space. Similarly, the inventive improvisations of the bricoleur—the amateur—also draw on the collective and the common; but, where the bricoleur is defined by inventive everyday action—specific, concrete—the general intellect concerns the generalized—the objective (because pre-subjective) capacities of the species. One offers a basis for understanding concrete individual action as undivided from collective possibility, the other an understanding of our generic cognitive capacities that allow us to think and to express ourselves and that ultimately enable action: the particular and the general, both emerging from the common.

The arts of the street express the heterodox projects of those who operate at the margins and in the interstices of urban space; as such, they share with the general intellect a productive potential that exceeds the individual subject precisely because of their commonness. In the contemporary context, argues Virno, the possibilities of the general intellect are most fully expressed not in the pronouncements of the scientist—the specialist—but in the *virtuosity* of the everyday speaker of ordinary language.⁴¹² Similarly, the arts of the street draw on our basic improvisational and adaptive capacities but they refine them in a precise context: they are the very embodiment of amateur virtuosity. Virtuosity in this context does not indicate adherence to some standardized model of perfection; it lies, rather, in the fullest expression of the spatial-sensorial possibilities that are afforded to the ‘artist’ who consequently manifests something that had merely been latent: *virtuosity lies in the expression of the unexpressed*, in the fullness of possibility. Moreover, in the everyday performance of space, insofar as it is an ongoing project of multiple participants engaged in loosely coordinated activities, we all draw on the common skills of the bricoleur and can do so without immediate recourse to reflexive analysis, for the body already knows its way. The practitioners of the arts of the street exemplify—render perceptible—this virtuosic capacity to realize the unrealized.

⁴¹¹ de Certeau, “Vocal Utopias.”

⁴¹² Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution,” *Grammar*. Cf. de Certeau, *Practice*.

Although the arts of the street may not be unique as instantiations of amateur virtuosity, they position the possibilities that this entails squarely in public urban space. And, it is in public space—despite formal and informal regulation and regimentation—that we encounter each other in a (for the most part) perceptually casual but sensorially consequential way. Public space affords us different perceptual possibilities. The practitioners of the arts of the street can creatively—at times, consciously—alter the perceptual trajectories of others by exemplifying different ways of engaging with and producing space. These practices operate on the logic of the DIY amateur: as embodied expressions of a general capacity, refined through a technical practice (in the expanded sense of technology previously discussed), they express the virtuosity of the everyday bricoleur. The idea of a general intellect helps support theorizing broader concepts concerning collective experience and action. Like the inescapability of our own bodies, the political potential in Virno’s analysis—in the sense of raising questions about collective life—rests on the general nature of our enmeshment in the world and with each other: seemingly mundane aspects of the quotidian are the ground within which we can find common cause. Curiosity, idle talk, the tinkering of the bricoleur: in this improvisational mode, we may find the basis for a politics of the sensible that is not tied to categorical divisions, that allows for the nuances of difference, while still positing a common space. The arts of street, by demonstrating other ways of sensing and using space, may foster such a minor politics of everyday encounter: a politics formed not upon ideological commitment but practical expediency that finds its source in a collective sense of enfleshment.

If a broader sense of politics might be suggested by the arts of the street, it is one that is situational and processual, temporally embodied: coalitional,⁴¹³ experimental,⁴¹⁴ but above all, an *amateur politics of the everyday*. These artists of the street, in their different ways, show how certain kinds of practices can modify one’s own corporeal and affective experiences *and* demonstrate this to others as well. They evince a basic sense of collectivity that might be marshalled in the interest of a more inclusively participatory

⁴¹³ cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁴¹⁴ cf. Lazzarato, *Experimental Politics*.

politics of urban space. The performing body of the artist of the street initiates a different politics (if only a minor politics). It is in such acts of creative reappropriation that “a body... by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space.”⁴¹⁵ The practitioners of the arts of the street engage in acts of resistance and reappropriation by laying claim to and reconfiguring public spaces, in relation to but never subsumed under the planning and regulation of state and corporate interests, and the broader forces of global capitalism. But, the fundamentally chaotic nature of the world cannot always be held at bay, no matter how well we plan and manage.

In the summer of 2020, when I had thought I would be deep into the ethnographic research on street artists and performers that I had envisioned, I found myself instead wandering a semi-regular route from Montreal’s old port district up through the downtown core, on the lookout for anything of interest where, previously, street entertainers of various kinds were a regular sight. The global COVID-19 pandemic that intensified throughout that winter and spring almost totally emptied public space of its users—in many instances, leaving only those with nowhere else to go.⁴¹⁶ In the metros, the remaining commuters, by and large, were only those with no choice but to go to work—with a noticeably less white demographic than the average of the local population as a whole, remaining in the now potentially toxic public spaces. Buskers were forbidden from playing in the metro stations and the normally bustling squares of the old city, long popular among street performers, were all but deserted. And yet, before long, the everyday practitioners of the city would begin reasserting themselves, laying claim to fragments of space in acts of creative reappropriation that, for all their seemingly common averageness, suggest other spaces of encounter, different ways of sensing the world.

⁴¹⁵ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 349.

⁴¹⁶ In a public health crisis of this magnitude, the importance of space—of the right to space—becomes all the more obvious. Those who can afford the space are those who are able to retreat to home and carry on, in some measure; those who have little or no space of their own are often those already facing greater public health risks.

4.4 “Whose Streets...?”

Montreal hosts a number of important international entertainment festivals: several large music festivals, a comedy festival, street art and murals fests, film and art festivals, etc. Many of these events take place in venues (some of them temporary outdoor settings) in and around a downtown stretch of the city centred along Sainte-Catherine street: this is known as the *Quartiers des spectacles*. Most of the large festivals are concentrated in a few square blocks around the Place des Arts performing arts centre. During the height of the summer festival season parts of these streets are open to pedestrians only (a few blocks are closed to traffic much of the year, regardless of any special event). Large outdoor stages are erected for concerts that attract hundreds, thousands. These festivals generally involve extensive planning and large-scale budgets, and it is important that the unruliness of the street be held in check. Barricades may be erected to limit access, with private security guards checking bags for alcohol (one is only permitted to consume alcohol that is bought on the premises). Any sign of trouble usually draws the attention of security personnel. Over a period of years, several city blocks in the quartier have been entirely redesigned to suit the demands of large arts and entertainment festivals.⁴¹⁷ The streets, especially during summer evenings, can be jammed with festive crowds. But, as I walk up a side street toward the large main plaza area, keeping to the shade as best I can on this midsummer afternoon, there are no crowds milling about, no stage sets being mounted, no vendors or barricades or security guards. Here and there, a few people walk alone or in twos. There is a hovering fear in the air: the fear of contagion. A couple of men, tarnished by the roughness of poverty, sit at the back of small shaded courtyard.

Busking on the street in Montreal is licensed, limiting performers to one-hour sets at any one location (assuring the ongoing mobility of the practice). Sainte-Catherine street can attract many buskers, but during the festivals in the precincts of the *quartier des spectacles*, activities outside of planned programs are generally not tolerated.⁴¹⁸ However, with the streets all but emptied and the absence of competition for space from

⁴¹⁷ Cha and Diamanti, “En marge du quartier.”

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the entertainment industry, the ordinary users can more easily stake out claims to space. A young man with an electric guitar has set up near the end of the pedestrian-only strip of Sainte-Catherine, the cement block traffic-barriers behind him forming a back wall. He faces down the gently sloping street, playing for all he's worth. The sound pouring out of the amplifier and speaker at his feet is rich with electronic processing effects. A guitar case laid out a couple of meters ahead of him contains a modest assortment of cash denominations. There are not enough people on the street to form a crowd, even if he cared to attract one. A few apparent tourists walking together slow to watch him for a minute or two before continuing to languidly make their way up the street. He plays on, clearly enjoying himself: the joy of playing in a wide open space—a true public stage, even if any potential audience is small and spread out. The sound fills the space between the tall buildings, resonating down the street.

The rhythms of the city may have been disrupted by the global forces of the pandemic but in the interlude opened up by this disruption, other rhythms can be felt, other voices resonate and make themselves heard. Those who cannot afford—are not afforded—their own space may end up claiming interstitial spaces, the fragments of space and time that are the waste product of globalized capitalism—the remainder, the useless, trivial, commonplace. Moreover, there can be a deep pleasure in performing in a public space⁴¹⁹ and it may be that this pleasure is increased by the transgressive nature of ‘performing out of place.’⁴²⁰ This is amateur virtuosity: bringing forth what had not been realized but merely afforded. This busker’s pleasure in the performance, in the music, in the spatial staging, are all rewards in themselves for him, but there is nonetheless a transformation of space for others, for all who share in the sensory horizon of his performance. In the opening created by a crisis in the system of mass reproduction, everyday amateurs continue to seize what they can ‘on the wing’ through various tactics and *ruses*.⁴²¹ The

⁴¹⁹ Amundsen, “Out in the Cold”; Chambers, “Busking and the Performance.”

⁴²⁰ Certainly this can be true of skateboarding, where part of the challenge—and pleasure—may lie in skating where one is not allowed to: plazas and buildings patrolled by private security guards, for example, or drained in-ground swimming pools. See Borden, *Skateboarding and the City*; Chiu, “Contestation and Conformity.”

⁴²¹ de Certeau, *Practice*.

arts of the street are notably mobile: a product of the ‘life of the streets,’ they are imbued with the mobility of *those who have no space of their own*. Normally, to perform in such a location, a busker would need to be licensed—if they were allowed to perform at all. Today, the whole street, stretching up though to the central plaza, is permeated with another voice: distinctive, welcome or not, an ordinary practitioner of the city speaks.

When I walk up the same stretch of Sainte-Catherine a few weeks later, instead of the guitar soloist there is a street dance performance under way at the same spot. Three young men (probably in their 20s), with hip hop tunes playing from a portable sound system and a large foam-rubber mat spread out on the pavement, stage a performance space. They take turns moving to the centre of the dance mat, solo dancing and impressing their friends with difficult or original moves while the latter keep to the sidelines—and keep the beat. The surrounding space is thick with the music coming from the sound system, the deep bass beat asserting a presence, as they laugh and call back-and-forth to each other. A hat is produced and ceremoniously placed out in front of the ‘stage area.’ Someone deposits some money in the hat, to cheers and a chorus of “Thank you!” coming from the dancers. A police car cruises slowly by on the street that runs behind the cement barricade backdrop, but if the cops notice this reclamation of public space they pay it no mind. The dancers carry on in their enthusiasm. We have already seen how emotion can blur our sense of insularity, and how public emotion can ground us firmly in the common. The joy and enthusiasm of the dancers seems contagious, and it is hard not to be entrained by the booming beat. “Yeah!”: their cheers to each other draw the attention of passersby. The movement of the dance—of bodies in motion, producing, reproducing rhythms—opens a different space: these other rhythms are present in the bodies of the dancers but are also felt by passersby. Like the resonant frequencies of music that can enlist our emotions—and in public settings can do so in ways that specifically embroils us in the thickness of our collective being—dance sets in motion sensory-affective responses at a level that may precede subjective reflection.⁴²²

⁴²² On collective emotion and how the socio-corporeal nature of dance—of rhythmically coordinated group motion—may be deeply rooted in the archaic human past, see Ehrenreich, *Dancing*.

I would not suggest that, by taking advantage of the open space to perform—as much for their own pleasure as for a public’s—these three young men were engaged in some kind of revolutionary action that might lead to social transformation on a broad level. My claim for the arts of the street is much more modest than that—but with wide-reaching implications, nonetheless. What these dancers are doing is perfectly ordinary, commonplace, *pedestrian*—people engaged in one of the most common forms of socio-corporeal pleasure: dance—yet also extraordinary, insofar as they reformulate a space of public encounter with their own rhythms, with their own bodies, facilitated by the technological affordances at their disposal. Amateur virtuosity: the reformulation of the everyday according to one’s own conceptions and desires, one’s abilities and experience (within, of course, the inevitable constraints imposed by social, legal, and commercial forces). It is as if the performing body says: “Look! I’ve acquired this space, making it into *this*,” nudging the body of the other—entraining the passerby who, at a pre-reflexive level, may ‘think’ or feel: “Perhaps I can do the same? Perhaps I too can make this space other?”

The arts of the street do not offer a potential politics in the sense of providing a theoretical model that might be developed into more practical applications; rather, they demonstrate the intersubjective nature of everyday experience by making evident the resonant forces and rhythmic patterns that help structure our perceptual awareness; they show that it is possible to not only imagine but to produce a different reality in terms of everyday socio-sensorial experience; and, they do so by having recourse to the DIY skills of bricolage, to a fundamental improvisational impulse, and the “common places” of everyday language, curiosity, and the propensity for play and experimentation. If there might be a politics *of* the arts of the street it would, at the least, refer endlessly back to the excess of the body, of sensation, as the ground of our *potential* (if not realized) being.

The arts of the street are, in this sense, political because they help realize the possible. They act as focal points around which certain creative practices and mental-corporeal attitudes coalesce, and as points of entry into a critical understanding of everyday life. They can be seen as simply an amalgam of everyday cultural practices that form part of the background of urban life; but, at the same time, they also bring into evidence—make available to conscious interrogation—both the actual and the possible. The busker in the metro station plays with the architectural acoustics in a way that can draw *our* attention to

features in the environment that generally go unnoticed. Moreover, these features possess a durability that helps structure the everyday, yet are themselves made possible by our own participation in the environment. The crowd on the move activates latent acoustic affordances throughout the station: we are participants in the production of our world, but it is a shared world. The sounds I make as I walk—even simply the sonically absorbent and refractive effects of my body in that space—comingle with those of the people around me. The sound of the crowd flows around and through my body. Acoustic awareness implicates my flesh in the flesh of the world: it means “to be doubled, folded... to be outside and inside, opened from without and from within.”⁴²³ The resonance of the station permeates the crowd—our bodies—and the busker’s presence can makes us aware of this, drawing our attention to our collective participation in the reproduction of the everyday world. Similarly, the movement of the street dancers can entrain something in our own bodies, activating a response in us—potential movement—that is firmly situated in the material conditions of that particular setting.

The publicness of the arts of the street (public in the sense of drawing on the resources of a dispersed social collectivity) connects them back to the body as the first fact of our being. For those who practice these diverse creative practices (and to some degree, those who simply encounter and are moved by them), conscious attention is directed to one’s perceptual enmeshment in the world, while deliberately adopting a particular orientation and making a claim to space that in the process produces a different space—a counter-space that exists not outside of but alongside and in excess of the functional design of space. They produce a space that was not planned or foreseen but is made possible nonetheless precisely because of the fragmented nature of modern space. From the simplest “I was here” graffito to well-rehearsed street performances, from the street-corner rap duel to the playful antagonisms of punk’s DIY aesthetics, the practitioners of these minor arts proclaim the streets for themselves, and in doing so suppose a common space that would belong to all those who participate in its production: a politics of the sensible in and of the everyday.

⁴²³ Simpson, “Falling on Deaf Ears,” 2567.

As life slowly returns to the streets of downtown Montreal during the summer of 2020, there are a number of street protests denouncing police violence and the systemic racism that enables much of that violence. I witness one such demonstration, one day as I follow my regular route from the old port up toward the Quartier des spectacles. The demonstrators' chants accompanied by drums resound through the streets as they march up René-Lévesque boulevard, a wide downtown arterial nearly devoid of traffic, as office workers from surrounding buildings are mostly working from home. "Whose streets?" a voice calls out through a megaphone. A line of police officers on bicycles keeps pace a block or so behind the marchers, while up ahead a couple of cruisers make sure the right-hand side of the street is clear of traffic. There are only a few people here and there walking on the street; it is otherwise very quiet. The demonstrators, like many a busker, may be performing as much for themselves as for anyone else. "Our streets!" the marchers proclaim, their voices filling the open space, resounding up between the towering all-but-empty buildings that flank the boulevard. They make their way to a large grassy lot that is often used for outdoor events during summer festivals; there, speeches are delivered. The core of the message: the right to be—to breathe—cannot come from the state; it is a fundamental claim that is authorized by the simple fact of our corporeal presence in the world. Thus, while the demonstration is, ostensibly, about broadcasting a message—an overt political message—the political import may be less in the enunciation of a statement than in the performative act of marching and chanting together. By engaging in the collective coordination of bodies, the demonstrators draw on the same common corporeality of the crowd-in-motion, not unlike the mutual resonance of musicians performing together. But, the demonstration is largely a symbolic gesture that depends on some external factor to come into being—a cause to be defended, an issue to be addressed. It is coalitional, in that a call to action coalesces around some specific issue, a precise demand. But, where formal political action (exemplified by the party) "focuses its action upon the state" it will inevitably, in the end, reproduce "state structures within social relations."⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 59.

Moreover, it bears noting that the idea of *The People* dominates in the majority of contemporary public political demonstrations, such as marches and public speech, as well as various grassroots social movements (encapsulated in the chanted slogan “The people united will never be defeated!”). Thus, by clinging to a Hobbesian concept of The People, the contemporary political street demonstration may be understood as always already defined within the terms of the state. But, where the political is understood as being situated within everyday perceptual experience—in space, sensation, and our practical involvement in the world and with each other—there, we may locate the loose cohesiveness of the many, the coordinated heterogeneity of the multitude, that can then express itself (if only ever provisionally) as action and as enactment of the new. The arts of the street are thus not explicitly political in the usual sense of proclaiming a political message. Theirs is a *minor politics* whose potential lies solely in their sensuousness, in the way that they enlist bodies into the production of a different space. Unlike the demonstration, they are eminently practical, concerned specifically with everyday life; and, they are organized around the singular motivations of their practitioners. Their heterogeneity assures their status as amateur arts.

4.5 Crisis and Possibility

Despite the creative effervescence that these diverse practices seem to suggest, we cannot ignore the ways that capitalist realism seems to continually reassert itself. There is, as I have attempted to describe, an ongoing tension between the profit motive and rational planning of capitalism and the amateur excess of everyday creativity that the arts of the street embody. Moreover, the crisis of space unleashed with a global pandemic has wrought rapid and significant changes to the possibilities that present themselves in everyday urban life. I have already noted some of these changes, with the most obvious being the emptying of public spaces. In some cases, this has also led to greater regulation of the streets. Some of these measures lasted weeks or months; some seem to integrate themselves into existing apparatuses of power. In Montreal, public health measures have included curfews that forbade all but the most essential movement of people in the city from evening until early morning. For street performers of all kinds, not only did potential audiences vanish but further restrictions were imposed that have

directly impacted them.⁴²⁵ For more than a year and a half, no performances were allowed in the metro stations. During the winter months, when it is usually too cold to perform outdoors, this meant that there were no public performance spaces available. In late 2021, buskers were welcomed back into the metro system but with far greater restrictions. The number of permitted busing spots is limited—initially just four spots; subsequently expanded to ten in early 2022—and prospective performers must try to get a spot through an online reservation system (though there may be much more demand than supply).⁴²⁶ The increasing shift to online platforms in many aspects of life, which has accelerated with the pandemic, has also meant new opportunities for some buskers who have expanded to include online performances.⁴²⁷ This comingling of mediated space and the more obviously concrete space of the streets does not signal a fundamental shift or technological break from non- or pre-digital media. As I have shown, the arts of the street are both specific to modern urban life and touch on something that always exceeds us; and, there is nothing non-technological about them: their precise technical means are tied to the conditions at hand. The arts of the street do not depend upon a separation of inside and outside, or the demarcation of an authentic form and proper space that might remain untainted by the everyday relations and subject-forming forces of late-capitalist society. However, moving to the virtual realm of online platforms also moves the performance out of the urban environment of the street which is my primary concern. For, to say that one can blur over into the other in some circumstances is not to say that they are the same, that street-space and digital virtual-space are reduceable to common essential elements. Nonetheless, continually changing material-technological factors can never be ignored—as with the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on everyday creativity.

⁴²⁵ See for example: <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/with-no-gigs-on-the-horizon-montreal-street-musicians-ponder-a-career-change-1.5252252> and <https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/musique/2021-01-03/ou-sont-passees-les-musiciens-du-metro.php>.

⁴²⁶ As of this writing (March 2022), performers must wear face-coverings at all times, except if playing a wind instrument; singing is permitted (with a face-covering), after being forbidden for nearly two years. See <https://www.stm.info/en/about/business-zone/partnerships-and-permissions/musicians-metro>.

⁴²⁷ Elkins and Fry, “Street Performers and Donations.”

Some of the other practices discussed herein were affected differently by these events. The music scenes of punk and hip hop cultures were limited, with concert venues closed. But in some cases practitioners have found other means of carrying on their activities. For example: an outdoor punk concert in a large Montreal park, organized clandestinely and advertised through word of mouth and restricted social media.⁴²⁸ Street skaters, on the other hand, may have benefited from the emptying of streets, as the disappearance of auto traffic (as well as office workers and business owners and patrons who might complain about the skaters), allows for many new skating opportunities. It is too early, I believe, to make long-range predictions about the effects of this pandemic on public space, but what is undeniable is the way that such a crisis exacerbates existing inequities—and makes them more obvious, brings them into focus.⁴²⁹ At least for a time. For as we have seen, we have a propensity—as do all organisms—to adapt and integrate ourselves into our environment to the extent that this is possible—within what is afforded us—though initially marked by difficulty, conflict, resistance. If capitalism is marked by a series of crises, as Marx theorized, and the acceleration of late-stage capitalism entails an acceleration in the pace of crises,⁴³⁰ then we may be all the more in need of the improvisational muddling of DIY bricolage, of an amateur virtuosity that draws on and remains with the common ground of a shared world, as we struggle to orient ourselves in a continually changing world. The arts of the street help illustrate the deeply social nature of perception and everyday corporal experience while at the same time reminding us that it is possible to *conceive, perceive* and *live* everyday space in different ways—other than how we normally experience it.

The project pursued throughout these pages is more descriptive than proscriptive, and as such is not meant to provide a historical analysis or defined political response to the ongoing crisis of capitalism. My more limited claim concerns certain characteristics of what I have designated as arts of the street—characteristics that depend upon and can render evident a collective sense of creativity and our perceptual enmeshment in the

⁴²⁸ I learned about this through an informal social media group, after the event had taken place.

⁴²⁹ Bamba, Lynch and Smith, *Unequal Pandemic*; Di Cesare, *Immunodemocracy*.

⁴³⁰ Virilio, *Original Accident, Speed and Politics*.

world. And as we have seen, the everyday is never fixed but always being made and remade, such that failure—in the context of the amateur virtuosity of bricolage, of the common-places and productive excess of our collective being—is never closure. Strict closure is a property of formal structures; but of the enactment of the everyday, I am able to say “I can always do it again.”⁴³¹ The arts of the street encapsulate this propensity to experiment and to seek difference *and* continuity—that is also characteristic of the everyday bricoleur. As minor arts, they must always be re-performed, maintained through active practice: mobile and malleable, they are only identifiable as such in their actual instantiations. And ultimately, this is what distinguishes them from being a productive activity from which a product—something *properly* defined—can be extracted and rendered into simple exchange value. The arts of the street always retain something of the useless, valueless: the negative.

In the winter of 2020, about a week before the imposition of the strict public health measures brought on by the global pandemic, I saw a busker who I knew from my previous research on metro musicians. We exchanged only a few words, as he was in the middle of performing a set, but agreed to speak at greater length soon (he performed almost every day at a few regular spots in the metro system). Soon after, the streets and metro stations were all but emptied and I did not see him for more than a year (it was during that time that I was forced to abandon the ethnographic research I had planned). When I did see him again, he was busking outside of a metro station in the core of the city. It was early evening, the weather was pleasant, and a few people had stopped to watch and listen. His voice was both gentle and forceful, as he sang a variety of songs in French and Spanish. It can be a tough gig, playing in the street. But here he was, still at it: a seasoned performer who knows how to appeal to passerby while still always performing according to his own conceptions and desires. Not many of the passersby—including those who stopped to listen—added to the small pile of coins and bills in his instrument case. But, this is not unusual and it did not deter him. Indeed, while for some buskers making money is a powerful motivator, the arts of the street—in all of their

⁴³¹ Schütz and Luckman, *Structures*.

forms—are nothing if not adaptable and, although intrinsically tied to urban space, are never reduceable to the simple logic of the money economy. They are both *of this place* (i.e. specific, contextual) and have no place of their own: ever mobile, these minor practices express a practical curiosity that is the common lot of the species. Whether or not we can ever truly think outside of capitalism is not a question that I have attempted to address. Instead, what I have shown is that the arts of the street do not rely on such formal—or *proper*—distinctions; rather, they draw upon and return to an excess that is both inside and outside, accessible to perception (thus identifiable and recuperable) and always exceeds any and all of our projects in the world. They operate in and with the thick materiality of the world, drawing on the common creativity of amateur virtuosity, and remind us that not only can we always begin again but that we always begin where we already are—that the world precedes us but is ever made anew by our collective participation in it.

Conclusion

In the foregoing I have laid out a broad argument, drawing on many sources, to make the case that the diverse practices that I have described as arts of the street reveal something about an innate creative capacity that binds us to the world and each other and that affirms the presence of possibility and the new in the everyday. I began by examining the nature of space, the body, and perception from a largely phenomenological perspective, inspired chiefly by the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and then proceeded with a critical consideration of urban experience, everyday life, and the socio-economic relations of reproduction of late-stage capitalism, drawing primarily on the work of Henri Lefebvre. I went on to discuss the concept of the *bricoleur*, arguing that the processual and unstable nature of space and of the everyday suggest that there always remain moments of possibility—of creativity and resistance—and that the improvisatory do-it-yourself logic of bricolage, which helps us negotiate the myriad micro-decisions that constitute our daily lives, presupposes a common ground and a realm of common skills that bind us to each other (common = *shared* and *average* or *mundane*).

In the next chapter, I provided a more concretely detailed consideration of sense perception and how the perceptual possibilities that are afforded to us are largely formed according to the particular cultural-historical and socio-economic conditions within which we find ourselves. Yet, despite the fact that in our mental-corporeal dispositions and everyday activities we tend to reproduce dominant social norms and power relations, precisely because the everyday sensorium must be conditionally reproduced—that is, re-performed—there always remain possibilities for difference, for other ways of experiencing the world. The emotions, I have suggested, help us to negotiate the transition between collective experience and individual subjectivity and between ‘interior’ reflexive consciousness and the pre-reflexive corporeal awareness that both precedes and exceeds our individual presence in the world—our ‘selves,’ as self-aware. Paying critical attention to our emotions and our everyday perceptions can open us up to other ways of engaging with the world and with each other. Thus, a critical consideration of how our perceptual experiences are formed by and in relation to the social and material

conditions within which we find ourselves is essential, if we are to imagine other possibilities—other ways of being—in both abstract and concretely pragmatic terms.

In the third chapter of this text, we reached the core concept within my broader argument: the arts of the street—what they are, how they function, and what they suggest in terms of the overarching theoretical concerns I have explored. There is no need to review in full detail the different ways that these arts take shape and express themselves. What is essential can be summarized with a few key ideas. The first of these considers the composition of this loose class of practices: what makes them *arts* and, more specifically, *arts of the street*. I have delineated these sets of practices as forms of creative *techné*, insofar as they involve sets of identifiable material and spatial-corporeal habits and dispositions that play with various elements of urban space and everyday experience in late-stage capitalist society. They are *arts* in the sense that they propose some other way of experiencing the world; they suggest what is merely latent. They open up a different space. However modest their effects may be, they remain testaments to the possible within the mundane: the new, as emergent in the routine reproduction of our habituated attitudes/aptitudes.

Crucially, these creative practices are specifically tied to the streets: historically, they have all taken form on street corners and in back alleys, in public squares and subway stations, and they continue to play with the materiality and the spatio-temporal possibilities that *the street* affords. As such, these creative activities act as forms of resistance by acquiring a space, claiming a remainder, and redirecting it to some other use. And, while it is true these *arts* can be, and frequently are, simply reabsorbed into the seemingly limitless circulation of commodities and value production that characterize late-stage capitalist society, they nonetheless offer other ways of perceiving—and thinking—space and our everyday socio-sensorial relations. This is so, in the first place, precisely because of their continuing association with ‘the street’ in the general sense that I have described—for the street always retains an element of excess, something of the negative, the useless, the grime of what is left-over and the untameable of what was already there. The arts of the street seize this excess, poach upon planned space without ever establishing their own formal properties—or, if they seem to do so, by becoming

commercially successful (e.g. top-selling hip hop artists, professionalized busker festivals, etc.), they nonetheless always offer themselves as forms of do-it-yourself resistance that can open onto other possibilities, other ways of perceiving, conceiving, and living (in) shared space. These creative urban practices are tied directly to the spatial realm of late-stage capitalism while simultaneously suggesting some negative remainder that always exceeds capitalist recuperation.

The arts of the street thus act as forms of creative resistance that find their source from beyond the specific conditions of modernity and global capitalism: this is another key point. They are instantiations of the improvisational approach—*attitude*, or *style*—of bricolage, which itself expresses a creative impulse that animates us as individuals while drawing upon and returning to a pre-reflexive corporeal awareness that binds us to our shared environments. The arts of the street formulate themselves within and in reaction to the conditions of late-stage capitalism—the spatial-sensorial order that lends cohesion to the flow of perceptual experience in the contemporary world—while also suggesting something deeper, transhistorical: a pre-subjective perceptual presence in the world that provides a foundation for subsequent conscious reflection and action. The arts of the street thus act as a sort of bridge between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and the role of reflection, interrogation, and the perceptual faith in lived experience, and Lefebvre’s critical treatment of space, everyday life, and the sense of possibility that inheres in the everyday. The arts of the street are pragmatic responses to the conditions of late-capitalist urban life: they claim a spaces of inhabitation for themselves, without formalizing property relations. I also detailed how Jacques Rancière’s theorization of critical art is helpful in further exploring the arts of the street and understanding them as forms of everyday resistance. We saw how these various *minor arts* express a politics that revolves around other possibilities in how we sense and share space, in how we parcel out—distribute—the sensible in our everyday interactions: a politics of the sensible that offers an open-ended space of encounter not designed by the professional, the planner, and the instrumental logic of rational management. We are in the realm of the everyday amateur.

In the final chapter, we saw in more concrete detail how the fluid, unstable nature of the arts of the street means that they always retain some unruly productivity: a negative

excess that reminds us of the pre-subjective—*excessive*—common ground that precedes our conscious reflection and that expresses itself in the common spaces of everyday speech, curiosity, and improvised experimentation. This is the virtuosic in the mundane, in the ordinary, the common: a propulsion to muddle one's way through, to improvise on-the-wing according to a particular orientation—or *disposition*—but without resorting to a totalizing plan. Again: virtuosity in this context does not refer to an elite ability or display of talent that distinguishes the few from the many. Rather, following Virno, the amateur virtuosity of everyday creativity is an expression of the many: it is the common inheritance of the species. As such, it reminds us of the common ground of perceptual awareness, of our pre-reflexive corporeal presence in the world. Thus, while the arts of the street gather together a range of skills and refined abilities, of interests and attitudes that practitioners develop in relation to specific features of the urban environment, they also suggest that the ability to make evident the latent—to materialize mere possibility—extends beyond these particular sets of practices: it is an ability that helps us orient ourselves as we take up our diverse projects in the world.

Of course, the objection might be raised that all of this is fine and interesting but if, as has been suggested, we are indeed transitioning into some new form of social order—or at least one in which the very nature of productive activity and of the social and economic relations that this engenders have been radically altered—then do the points that have been made concerning the arts of the street have any import at all in the contemporary context? Put differently: could it be said that the arts of the street, as I have described them, belong to an order that is giving way to some other—perhaps even more constrictive—arrangement of socio-political forces and material-economic relations of production? In yet simpler terms: do the arts of the street, as such, have any relevance today? My answer to this last question (perhaps unsurprisingly, given that I am only addressing it now) is an unequivocal *yes*. Beyond their significance in understanding certain aspects of everyday modern experience, the arts of the street continue to be relevant to considerations of how we might bring about different ways of engaging with our environments and with each other. They are thus political, as I have argued, while also—or: precisely by—deliberately eschewing the formal realm of political discourse.

I would note that I am as yet unconvinced by the claim that we have experienced an unbroachable break with the past. Postmodernist declamations aside, we do not appear to have irrevocably left the past behind any more than the past determines an inevitable future for us. Certainly, we have witnessed significant changes in the social order as local economies are more firmly integrated into a global economic system that subsumes local concerns, knowledges, and practices, rendering them into seemingly dematerialized commodities (i.e. alienated from the means and moment of their production and made available for free circulation within an ever-expanding market). But, while many of the concerns associated with the socio-cultural and material-economic homogenizing effects of globalization are well-founded, the arts of the street are not subject to these pressures—or, at least not in the same ways. They are not threatened with extinction precisely because they have evolved with, or alongside of, modern capitalist society; but, they also touch on something that is transhistorical, that is fundamental to human experience, modern or otherwise. As do all of our activities, they formulate themselves within existing conditions and can be largely reproductive of those same conditions, but at the same time—and this has been central to my overarching argument—they draw upon, and draw our attention *to*, the excess of *the world* (in the broadest sense of the word), an excess that is also that of pre-reflexive perception, of the objective (i.e. pre-subjective) *possible body* that finds expression in the everyday *débrouillardise* of amateur virtuosity (i.e. an endless propensity to experiment, to improvise).

The arts of the street are by their nature always incomplete, always suggest some other possibility. They come into being in their enactment as creative activities, but never assume formal properties such that they may be fully *identified* and thereby fully recuperated by the forces of productivity and value creation. It might be countered that the foregoing claims seems to support the idea of an ever-expanding realm to be colonized and reappropriated by the forces of capital. However, while it may be true that the creative forms and practices encompassed within the arts of the street may offer new terrains to be commodified, what is more important is the fact that they represent both something intrinsic to the species (bricolage, common creativity) but also always posit something the supersedes them—and that surpasses us—that both gives them ever new possibilities and undoes them, as distinctive sets of practices. Like Rancière's *critical art*,

these minor arts have a habit of collapsing back in on themselves, of dissolving themselves into the common techniques that support the everyday world. I have already discussed the idea of failure as possibility, and it returns here. By ‘not succeeding’ (exemplified by the anti-professionalism of punk), the arts of the street always remain open to future possibilities: they refuse the terms of ‘success’ dictated by the state, by capital, by formal property and private profit. Indeed, we might say that, just as the very existence of the capitalist depends on that of the worker while the obverse is patently not true, so too we can say that late-stage capitalist expansion depends on the very kind of endless productivity expressed by the arts of the street while these practices themselves escape capitalist logic, finding their origins in a transhistorical creative instinct that is intrinsic to the species—a force that can never become property, that never assumes a formal identity. It is in this way, finally, that the arts of the street continue to be relevant—are, as I have suggested, perhaps more relevant than ever: precisely because of their status as *amateur* arts, because *the amateur does what they do for the love of it only*. This is crucial: the work of the amateur operates outside of, or beyond, the profit motive. While such works may have some use that can be recouped and converted into value, there also always remains some playful uselessness in the tinkering of the amateur bricoleur. *I do it just because*. Because: *I can*. And, because *I can always do it again*.

The arts of the street are *amateur arts*, minor modes of operating in the world that draw upon and return to the common spaces of creativity and curiosity. And, as I have indicated, this common sense of curiosity and experimentation also provides a basis for reflection and interrogation, for critique and for creative action. If the amateur is the one who operates outside or on the margins of a proper(tied) space, then the amateur is also the one who can act as critic, because not constrained by the formalism of the professional. What is needed in the face of the crisis of late-capitalism is not so much anti-professionalism but non-professionalism—everyday creativity—as Andy Merrifield argues.⁴³² And it is this, finally, that I contend make the arts of the street relevant at a broader theoretical level. Beyond being forms of practical creative action, they suggest an

⁴³² Merrifield, *The Amateur*.

approach—an orientation, or style—that operates as a form of amateur critique, of amateur theory. Indeed, we might remember that Kant himself argues that one of the roles of philosophy is to critique the other disciplines—or faculties—by eliminating errors of reasoning: to keep them honest, as it were. For Kant, philosophical critique is, in this sense, a *minor* faculty, as opposed to the professionalized disciplines such as medicine and law.⁴³³ Similarly, Edward Said puts forward the argument that the intellectual-as-amateur is precisely the one who is best able to critique dominant norms and ideas.⁴³⁴ The amateur does not answer to the legitimization of the professional, and is thus freer, in a sense, to offer honest criticism.

Although I do not make quite such extensive claims for the arts of the street as might be made for developed critical theory, I do suggest that they are critical in that they offer themselves as examples of how we *might* engage with the world and each other, and—more importantly—how we already do these things, and how we continue to do so on a quotidian basis. And though it may seem strange that I end by citing Immanuel Kant—that most rational and systematic of thinkers—my entire argument is, after all, positioned within a tradition of critical thought whose history has afforded me certain possibilities—and I would be at odds with my founding assumptions, were I not to acknowledge these influences. But, it is with this supposition that I both summarize the foregoing pages and suggests further possibilities: aside from their practical productivity, the arts of the street remind us of the common source of creativity and of our capacity to act and to act anew. They show that whatever ability we may have to make a different world, we depend upon capacities that are already afforded to us. The arts of the street demonstrate the creative and critical potential of bricolage—not simply as an approach to *making* but as a way of *thinking* and of *being*, and of *being together*.

⁴³³ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*.

⁴³⁴ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 65ff.

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