



Radical Napkin Theology (minutes from a world portable gallery convention)

Morning Thoughts

"The question of action comes down to a question of love—and of whether to act and of how to act —> we manifest what we love. We believe in what we love and therefore we believe in ourselves, in the act. We know this feeling, this love, as our own, even though its very purpose and provenance is in its sharing. There are different loves, to be sure, but each one is like the axel of a wheel and each one of us is like the spoke on that wheel, that thin and singular conveyance meant only for us, even if we ourselves can be linked to several loves, to several wheels, all in rotation, in acting, and moving this way and that in an undersea of wheels rising and falling, our wheels carrying us on the traffic of a tempest of loves, loves obscuring other loves, moment by moment, by their unceasing crossings and coincidental alignments. Can we only be fixed onto that love, and be driven on its carriage, to unknown positions, out of control and spiraling in our indentured roles as props to a love that may not even, in that last instance, in the final, compromised, but best-we-can-do glimpse into some flash of distance, love us back? No, this is based on an outmoded maths, on some kind of fixed

relativity, a propriety of protestant proportions, where we are all allowed our positions, but no more nor less than any other.

(...)"

Coffee Break

Standing next to the tea table, a gallerist and one of the convention planners discussed the intricacies of dealing with tax laws regarding each of their professions.

The convention planner likened her job to a DJ who controlled all the elements of an event, and more importantly the degrees of each element. If balanced well, then all those concerned, whether entrepreneurs and stakeholders, service staff, auditors or the general public who might be aware of the event, would be more likely to agree that "this was a legitimate rave."

This, she said, holding up 3 slender fingers, was important because the legitimacy of a convention as a tax deductible event rests on the following provisions, in the language of the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA):

- Held by a business or professional organization.
- Connected to the taxpayer's business.
- Held at a location consistent with the territorial scope of the sponsoring organization.

These sound fairly straightforward, she admitted, but they depended variously on the publicity around the event, the content's relevance to the overall theme, the suitability (or appearance as such) of the venue, and most importantly the real human contacts made during the event—in short, on various factual interpretations of the three provisions.

But don't we all know what a good convention, er, rave, is? wryly interjected a fresh participant in the informal chat. I mean, are you suggesting it's like the blind men and the elephant?

In a way, yes. But not because we can or want to find out the *truth* of the event, but because we want to advance a particular interpretation of it. Our

motives are multiple. I recognize as a planner that many people just want to work in a subsidized vacation as part of their business trip—think about it, this extra something is the very reason why governments and entrepreneurs push so hard for building these facilities in the first place; not just for the catering companies, but for the souvenir shop too. But let's get real, the CRA would never agree to deduct expenses from a convention held on a trans-oceanic cruise ship. Why not? Because it doesn't conform to the accepted definitions of "territorial scope"—the ocean, without business, is the boardroom of only the super elites who don't pay taxes anyway. So, can't we find a way to position your desire for a convention on the high seas so that it can be counted as a legitimate business expense?

Everybody knows that the government just doesn't understand business today, the interlocutor said aside. So we build a convention center that is a ship, and register it with a port address.

Bingo.

The group nodded with approval.

Some rules are not about interpretation, inserted the gallerist. You can't just talk around them, adjust them with rhetorical loopholes, and still count as legitimate. You need to resort to transgression and clandestine tactics. For example borders. You're either on one side or the other.

The small gathering looked puzzled, but amused.

I'll give you a couple quick examples. The artist Daniel Spoerri once talked about an experience he had in June of 1961, on his way to an exhibition in Cologne and crossing the Franco-German border with a suitcase containing works by artists like Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Raymond Hains, and others. It was fitted with a padlock by Robert Rauschenberg—these names mean anything to you?

The mixed crowd offered expressions that suggested uncertainty about their uncertainty.

Well, anyhow, at the border Spoerri had to lie to the customs officers, convincing them he was an illusionist whose gig would be ruined if they insisted

on breaking the padlock and opening up his suitcase. It's interesting because it's hard to know from the anecdote whether the guards would have even picked up on the possibility that this was an exhibition in a suitcase rather than just a random assortment of stuff and objected on those grounds. So perhaps it was more out of concern for security than for trafficking of untaxed artworks.

1961, you say? said a young man shuffling through his iPhone, that is, after all, a year of several terrorist incidents, including the first U.S. plane hijacking, the Berlin Crisis and construction of the Wall, and a massacre of North African protesters in Paris.

The gallerist took the interruption in stride, continuing, and his friend, Robert Filliou, had the following year proposed to a group of friends to found a commercial art gallery called Galérie Légitime on a wheelbarrow that he would haul around the streets of Paris, and then internationally. But he dropped the format when his application for a business license was rejected. He decided to put the gallery inside his hat, and thus, in the words of Spoerri, "The Legitimate Gallery turned out to be an illegitimate gallery." The gallerist then lowered his voice, and then there are the secret overland routes out of Basel, Switzerland, if you know what I am saying...

The young man with the iPhone paused—nobody present could discern what was being referred to.

Look, say you want to get out of Switzerland without paying taxes on your sale at the Basel Art Fair—the safest way to do that is to deal in hard currency on-site, right? Well, how are you going to bring suitcases of cash, or disassembled installations through all those X-ray machines and interrogations? Not through the airport, that's for sure. There are some storied roads you can take through the Alps with a trunkful, without once meeting a single surly customs officer. And I must say the views are also well worth the drive...

World Bistro Session 1

"Okay, so here it is, number 4: *What are the ultimate goals of any enterprise starting up in today's metropolis?*"

"Well, that's clear, in our field it is success and sustainability."

"Okay, so to play the devil's advocate, say we recognize a certain self-destructiveness in-built in our field, are those goals then not contradictory?"

"I am not sure I totally follow: the self-destructiveness of what?"

"Say, the self-destructiveness of crisis-capitalism."

"Well, since our field isn't completely commensurate with crisis-capitalism, I would say it isn't a perfect contradiction. Think about an enterprise in which stakeholders measure their success by the degree of self-sufficiency they are afforded within the field, theoretically this would be a way to allow participation in the field without paying lip service to the same oppressive conditions that dominate crisis-capitalism."

"Ah, so what you are talking about is autonomy? I'll write that down."

"Yeah, autonomy, and ideally one could reach a level where the field and the enterprise are basically totally unwedded. But this is not just a matter of buying a few solar panels and growing your arugula in rooftop container farms, right?"

"But hold on, if you are going to eat arugula, it has to come from someplace—are you suggesting limiting diet to whatever can be grown self-sufficiently? Our field would be totally transformed if that was the demand. Does that go for coffee too? We'd have to move headquarters to the tropics to sustain productivity."

"Yes, and think about your laptop, your clothes and the Internet. And even one's desire for mobility—these all belong to someone else, someone not quite oneself."

"But is that really what autonomy means, making everything by yourself? Doesn't it have more to do with dictating one's own laws, which could very well line up with the current laws at several points, as long as it was issued from the self? And how do you expect to empower this self if you take away all these tools and structures that the modern world has produced, isn't that a bit like shooting your self in the foot? It sounds a bit idealistic to me."

"No no no, what I am saying is that we need to expropriate these tools for use in undermining the oppressive regimes of crisis-capitalism and the police state. The idealism lies in thinking that these regimes will allow change from within, that producing alternatives will affect anything. No, the entire system has to be taken down, and I mean literally, with force."

"Wait a second, but where does that leave our field?"

"It leaves our field in a non-hypocritical position; indeed, in a very empowered position, pursuing the only viable ultimate goal of the destruction of states and the production of a federation of anarchist communes. No more whining."

"But there it is again: idealism. Because in proposing this goal, you are simultaneously advocating any physical means necessary (including violence) while delaying any glimpse of success to what you have to admit is a very unlikely future. I don't think we can afford such fundamentalism. Yes, we should forego aspiring to make changes through the State, but we should rather acknowledge and claim as real existing small pockets of autonomy, however fleeting. We are not losers waiting for a revolution."

"Not revolution, but insurrection. Actually, I think we agree on that point. I'll write that down."

"But even within insurrection, I think that engaging in guerrilla warfare will only attract the State's wrath and will set one up as a martyr in permanently antagonistic terms, hindering one's possibilities for the realizations of temporary autonomous zones. We have to be able to come and go as necessary, consummating, dissolving and forming somewhere else, dropping out, striking and running away..."

"Now it's clear we agree."

"Maybe, but when I say strike, when I say temporary autonomous zone, I don't want to give the impression that ultimately what I am talking about is throwing bricks at cops, yeah?"

"Hmm."

"I want the enterprises in our field to be counted, after all, that's the content of the question here."

"So, you want to claim that you and I, this conversation, and maybe this entire convention should be potentially counted as autonomous spaces?"

"Why not, we are talking quite freely, who knows what its effects could be."

"That's rubbish. I am not writing that down."

"Oh, look at that, time is up. Thanks, let's talk after, okay?"

"Yeah, great. Do you know where table 11 is?"

"By the fountain."

"Thanks."

Lunch Opportunity

Streaming out of the conference hall, the mass of congregants gradually maneuvered in chatty and turbulent disarray up a broad staircase flanked on one side by a huge glass wall. On the other side of this wall stretched a vast saltwater aquarium that spanned between separate halls and rose three stories. A plethora of sea life teemed around a central towering reef and along the perimeters. Schools of small silver fish flitted about together like a single indecisive kite in a storm, innumerable polyps and medusas flared and contracted in hypnotic rhythms, eels and octopuses slipped around outcroppings and holes, and a few large sharks circulated insatiably.

Sometimes the convention centre allowed field trips of public school kids to sit on the scrubbed carpets and conduct classes on marine life and what it must feel like to be a fish. But engrossed in their intercourse, most convention participants paid this magnificent animal kingdom little mind, or occasionally stepped out of the mob to snap a self-portrait. For them, there was no time to gaze purposelessly at the microcosmic dramas unfolding in the tank. This lack of time, however, did not mean they didn't absorb the parallels inherent in these mortal and unstable straits. The duller of the bunch might exhibit the tendency to time his or her self-portrait exactly when the sharks passed by: I am a shark, I am the

king of the ocean, I eat smaller fish, and am unstoppable. But everyone was inevitably in the tank. And the less they reflected this, the more at home they were in it—which is to say, the more at home they were in their homelessness.

Lunch is labour—all good delegates recognized this. They had their napkins ready, their elevator pitches prepared, and were even set to forego food. Networking can be the ticket to the next meal, a pragmatic truism that became impossibly convoluted when practiced on the buffet line. But returning to the aquarium, we could ask, wasn't this the kind of labour that divided humans from animals, the architect from the bee, the bureaucrat from the flounder? After all, it was true the opportunist making a proposal over a tray of wine-poached salmon paid close attention to the patterns and aesthetic semiology of the etiquette governing interactions. This certainly seemed the most civilized way to conduct a meeting, in an ambiance of pleasure and satiation, values shared by nearly all of humanity.

However, another commonality (between nations, between species) underlay this easygoing coming-together: fear. For all its gregariousness, the convention centre's layout, decor and lack of ordinary and distinguishing comforts inside only emphasized the *extraneousness* the opportunist felt as fact outside of the glass box. Granted, people were not fish. But today's human being, through its conquests and rationalization, had not succeeded in making the world an easier place to live. Without a natural order to oppose, without authentic communities to ground it, and without even the ethics that a world of organized labour once held in place, the human was divested of any trace of a habitat, as its environment fragmented into a constellation of possibilities. The rules—of nature, of markets, of spontaneous camaraderie—became the vehicle for mere opportunities, to subvert, to innovate and manipulate. Human existence, via abstraction, paradoxically took on the characteristics of the animal, *thrown into its environment without any moral solidarity*. Carried on the back of a vulnerability so existentially profound as to go unnoticed as the loach, the active appearance of this situation was the perspective that anything was possible. As such it didn't quite matter

whether we were talking about the particular version of snakes and ladders of any single extremely specialized field, or opportunity as an abstract idea.

The human's "historico-natural" capacities configured their "general intellect," comprising the *epistemic models that structure social communication*. The faculty to react and adapt to the abstract opportunities reticulating away in all directions, and to foresee their para-causal interrelations, was a human faculty. And once this layer of intellectual activity had risen from the depths to the very churning surface of the mundane, it became the faculty of production. General intellect was what endowed each of the convention-goers with their means of production. Convening a convention historically furnished conventions—agreements, standards—but now we mustered to fuel speculations. Despite its appearances, its card-for-card exchanges and ostensible aspirations to intersubjectivity, the networking that took place in the cafeteria lounge made no claims to equality. Some would make it big, the floor might fall out from underneath others.

And so we didn't eat, we searched. We searched as we ate. Were we at the right table? Our eyes bulging, glassy.

Afternoon Workshop: How to be an Institution

"So, I was thinking about what to say here today, seeing as how you are such a diverse audience. And then I was thinking, better just start from my own experience, because that's what this is about, right? Sharing our experiences? And so I wanted to talk about how to make your own institution, because it's something most people think is this really daunting thing that they could never do, and this is something I have done a couple of times. Don't worry. It doesn't have to be that hard.

First lesson: Appearances are important. You say you are one thing but you are actually another. For instance, you exaggerate about your size and importance. What's so hard about that? We do it all the time, we do that every day. We do that in the grocery store, we do that when we meet our friends on the street. So what's so hard about doing it for your institution? You can be a one-

person institution but presenting yourself as a large international thing. Good ways to help out your appearance: Make a name. Make titles. Make namecards. Make letterhead. Make a website. Maybe you work yourself up to getting an office. Maybe you start wearing different kinds of clothing, uniforms, ties. Maybe you get testimonials from folks. They could even be real testimonials. Ha ha. Take it as it comes, and go at your own pace.

Okay so another thing is, there are so many types of institutions, this is true, and this is something we should consider from the beginning. I will list just a few of these different types: A business. A museum. A corporation. A school. A gallery. An organization. A tradition. Some of these sound really hard to make, yes, but we can start with baby steps. For instance, one option I have found quite useful is to cross the genres. Many people don't think of that. What I mean is that you could, say, open what looked like a store but it was actually a library, for example. You could be a right wing lobbying group and call yourself a charitable social interest foundation. Ha ha. It's true though. You could even register as a business but work like a non-profit—both are institutions, just different types. The significant difference is that it's sometimes easier to make a business. Lesson two: Use differences to your advantage. This is one way to start your institution. You are the boss.

So, you see, basically you have to build up your appearance. You might call it your brand. Now the choice of brands can be tricky, as that's really the face of your institution. And so the next question is, who are you talking to? Who is your institution talking to, who is inside of it? Who do you want inside of it? This can get really personal, and it comes down to your own decisions and tastes and what you hope to accomplish. Maybe if you start certain types of institutions there might be certain types of expectations. These can actually help you to make your plan. Your institution can either join a group of existing institutions and expectations or you can kind of twist those and fill a niche. Like how about a university for chickens. Ha ha. Huh? Oh they have one of those? Well, there's always room for another chicken university. Ha ha. Fonts, designs, logos, colours, all of these elements are important, don't underestimate them. They make your

institution more believable, and not only as an institution, but as a good and respectable institution. But again, don't get too obsessed with them, as maybe with a really hip and flamboyant or professional appearance you will turn off certain groups who you actually want to be talking to, who you want inside your institution. I mean, this is inevitable. For instance, if you start an institution that has basically a blank face or an unclear face, maybe you will puzzle some folks. Maybe that's what you want. But even that kind of, what we could call, "neutral" appearance will be off-putting to some people. Lesson three: You can't be everyone's institution.

So one tip: Start small. Be professional but not too ambitious at first. Professionalism is something that is unavoidable. This means different things in different contexts. It could mean being thorough with roles and appearances. If you sign your letters "Treasurer" but then you switch that up one day without any reason, or spell it wrong, these are details that affect people. It is harder to believe an institution that can't get the details right. Especially a small one. Like for instance say your institution is only a diary shared by friends: if someone doesn't assume their role in the rotating leadership of this institution, i.e. they don't write their entry at the agreed upon time, then that institution just kind of falls apart. It is easier to pay attention to small scales, but we still have to be thorough. I want to say one thing about rules: Rules exist not because we are by nature fascist multinational corporations, but because they make explicit what exists beyond the individual. Institutions need rules, they must have principles or protocols, something we can hypothetically share and develop together in common... Although I see some of you in the audience are fascist multinational corporations. Ha ha.

Okay, you ask, but still, why do people follow the rules that institutions make? Are we all just robots? Is someone just telling me what to say here? I sure hope not. Basically what holds your institution together is belief. This is related to something we already covered, which is appearance. But it is more than that. I guess it's what you might call the social contract or something. Because hey, you are not only a butterfly mimicking an owl, are you? No, you may be a butterfly,

but you have your own functions! Lesson four: Institutions are positive! They have attributes of productivity, function, agreement. We also each judge them according to our own capacity as an individual for agreement, according to their reasonableness. People aren't stupid. But they can help your institution.

And how? I will tell you. Through rituals. Lesson five: Rituals are important. Rituals re-inaugurate your institution, in the face of oblivion and chaos, again and again. They can be modest or lavish: Saying your prayers, gathering at special moments, displays of excessive expenditure or conspicuous consumption, meetings and audiences, of one or a hundred... Each institution has to find its own way, its own mantra.

How many of you think you can get rid of institutions? Can we get rid of them? I see a couple hands up there. There's probably a few libertarians out there, am I right? Well, let me tell you the answer: You can't get rid of institutions. If you claim you can, it's just because your definition of institution is extremely limited. You are probably only counting banks and opera houses. But your own family is an institution. And so the question isn't should we or should we not have institutions, but what kind of institutions should we have? This is not about looking around the kitchen, finding what kind of ingredients you have and then making an institution sandwich. This is the sandwich making itself. Do you know what I am saying? Or how about many little buns and mini pickles and stuff, all coming together on the plate. Having food fights. Can you picture it? So, let's not mince words. Lesson six: Get ready for criticism!"

Dinner Break

After the day's presentations finished, the crowd milled around at a pop-up bar that had been rolled in among a stand of tall round tables wrapped in stretchy black polyester. Faint music encouraged friendly repartee. The neighboring buildings glinted with the sun's pinkish blessings. A dinner buffet was being laid out on the mezzanine, so all the participants in the convention loosened up with identical alcoholic beverages and appetizers. A couple of young men, having swiftly knocked back several rounds, started walking across the carpet toward an

empty corner of the room, leaving the hubbub. They waved and shook hands with several of their colleagues on the way. Reaching the glass wall, they opened one of the emergency exits and left the convention centre. The alarm caused some consternation among the centre staff, but the crowd had already gotten quite gleeful by that time and didn't notice much, differences and defenses were dropping, personalities emerging. A young security guard grabbing the door handle lingered to watch the men. Their gaits shifted slightly, bobbing, cooling off, as they tossed their jackets over their shoulders, giggling and glancing back. They walked down the sidewalk and crossed the street toward the overpass, where there was a group camped out underneath. As the two participants sat down and accepted bottles in brown bags, the security guard, closing the door, could faintly make out their riotous laughter carried on the gentle September evening breeze.

This text contains elements of:

The Coming Insurrection by the Invisible Committee

Temporary Autonomous Zone by Hakim Bey

Toward a Phenomenology of Opportunism by Massimo de Carolis

The Ambivalence of Disenchantment by Paolo Virno

An Anecdoted Topography of Chance by Daniel Spoerri