Out of the Blue: Instant Urbanism, Hospitality and History
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http://www.blauwehuis.org/

SESSION ONE: DURATIONAL PRACTICE AND ORGANISED NETWORKS

'Organized Networks: Questions of Politics, Translation and Time'[1]

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1. In this talk I would like to address the question of time and translation as they relate to the political concept of organized networks. The Blue House project, in as much as I understand it, is an experiment in sociality, politics and culture which subsist in the space of an urban intervention. Always temporary, such spaces are shadowed by the certainty of termination. The clarity such knowledge provides is frequently the condition of singularity and intensity for such urban laboratories. No matter how formal or informal experimental platforms may be, their imminent decline provokes the question of sustainability, which for me is a question of time and energy. How to find continuity within social-technical formations that are, by default, unstable, often fragmented, and more than likely short-term? The logic of multiplication and movement is key to addressing the question of sustainability for network cultures.

2. Urbanism shares with the social-technical system of networks a bias towards space. The material property of spatially distributed social-technical relations that are forever being remade through the logic of connection and speed provides sufficient grounds for distraction from the problem of time understood as the experiential condition of duration. This was the analysis of Canadian communications theorist and political economist Harold Innis, whose writings in the late 1940s and early fifties sought to address the rise and decline of ancient civilizations due to the spatial or temporal bias of their communications media and transport systems.

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[1] Substantial parts of this paper draw on a text written with Geert Lovink: 'Urgent Aphorisms: Notes on Organized Networks for the Connected Multitudes', in Mark Deuze (ed.) *Managing Media Work*, London: Sage, forthcoming 2010.

3. In Out of the Blue, we find ourselves in a similar situation, where the logic of the experiment is organized as a program on urban space in which the ephemerality and contingency of time underscores the dimension of experience. Within such conditions, what constitutes the work of politics? As I have written elsewhere with Brett Neilson on the occasion of an experiential experiment which took place in September 2005 at Naushki train station that marks the border between Russia and Mongolia:

> Action, in these circumstances, is predicated on not knowing, of being uncertain about what is to follow. Organization becomes structurally unhinged from any causal temporality. Indeed, it is precisely this 'not knowing' that serves as the precondition of experiencing action as that which can only ever be temporally present. Here we get a suggestion that the time of the present has multiple registers and dimensions. It is within this temporal cartography that action is without reaction.[2]

4. How, though, to reconcile this idea of a kind of autonomous, spontaneous expression with the problematic of sustainability, which is usually understood as continuity over time? Here, I find, lies one of the central questions of organization as it relates to the culture of networks. I will spend the rest of this talk elaborating some of the core features of organization, network cultures, politics and the social practice of translation. My hope is that in doing so, aspects of both The Blue House and Out of the Blue might be illuminated in ways that open up the possibility of sustainability understood as *the translation of resonance across time and space*. Such a proposition does not assume time as continuity, but rather continuity through discontinuity and multiplication that marks the culture of networks. I will return to this idea at the end of my talk, and just say for now that the distributive, social capacity of networks is key to their sustainability over time.

5. Organized networks are best understood as new institutional forms whose social-

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[2] Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Action without Reaction: A Mongolian Border Intervention', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 5.X (2005): 144-149, http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-X/5-Xneilson-rossiter.pdf. See also Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Towards a Political Anthropology of New Institutional Forms', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 6.4 (2006): 393-410. http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/6-4/6-4neilson-rossiter.pdf.

technical dynamics are immanent to the culture of networks. Organized networks are partly conditioned by the crisis and, in many instances, failure of primary institutions of modernity (unions, firms, universities, the state) to address contemporary social, political and economic problems in a post-broadcast era of digital culture and society. In this sense, organized networks belong to the era and prevailing conditions associated with post-modernity. Organized networks emphasize horizontal, mobile, distributed and decentralized modes of relation. A culture of openness, sharing and project-based forms of activity are key characteristics of organized networks. In this respect, organized networks are informed by the rise of open-source software movements. Relationships among the majority of participants in organized networks are frequently experienced as fragmented and ephemeral. Often without formal rules, membership fees, or stable sources of income, many participants have loose ties with a range of networks.

6. The above characteristics inevitably lead to the challenge of governance and sustainability for networks. And it's at this point that networks start to become organized. With a focus on the strategic dimension of governance, organized networks signal a point of departure from the short-termism and temporary political interventions of tactical media. At first glance organized networks are a natural, almost inevitable development of the 'network society' as described by Manuel Castells. Yet nothing is 'natural' in virtual environments. Everything needs to be constructed. And if so, under whose guidance? Who sets the very terms under which networks will grow their roots into society? Will this process of institutionalization have a (built-in) financial component?

7. As a political concept, organized networks provide what urban theorist Saskia Sassen calls an 'analytical tool' with which to describe 'the political' as it manifests within network societies and information economies. The social-technical antagonisms that underscore 'the political' of organized networks are instantiated in the conflicts network cultures have with vertical systems of control: intellectual property regimes, system administrators, alpha-males, tendency toward non-transparency and a general lack of accountability.

8. How to rebuild labour organizations in the network society? This was one of the

many unrealized ambitions of the anti- and later alter-globalization movements. And, for the most part, the unions never quite realized that life and labour within a digital paradigm had become the norm. Let me sketch out some of the current conditions challenging political organization within network societies. First, we need to problematise the concept of labour when understood as some kind of coherent, distinct entity. We know well that labour in fact is internally contradictory and holds multiple, differential registers that refuse easy connection (gender, class, ethnicity, age, mode of work, etc.). This is the problem of organization. How to organize the unorganizables?, to borrow from the title of one of Florian Schneider's great documentary films.[3] Second, we need to question the border between labour and life – contemporary biopolitics has rendered this border indistinct. Techniques of governance now interpenetrate all aspects of life as it is put to work and made productive. The result? No longer can we separate public from private, and this has massive implications for how we consider political organization today. What, in other words, is the space of political organization? Paolo Virno, for instance, speaks of a 'non-state public sphere'. But where, precisely is this sphere? All too often it seems networked, and nowhere. This is the trap of 'virtuality', understood in its general sense. Of course there can be fantastic instances of political organization that remain exclusively at the level of the virtual, which is the territory of today's 'info-wars'. Here, we find the continued fight over the society of the spectacle. Yet the problem of materiality nonetheless persists, and indeed becomes more urgent, as the ecological crisis makes all too clear (although this too is a contest of political agendas played out within the symbolic sphere).

9. We see great benefits in adopting a combinatory analytical and methodological approach that brings the virtual dimension of organization together with a material situation. This may take the form of an event or meeting, workshops, publishing activities, field research, urban experiments, migrant support centres, media laboratories ... there are many possibilities. In Italy, uninomade and the media-activist network and social centre ESC are good examples of what we are talking about here.[4] Sarai media lab in Dehli would be another.[5] In the instance of bringing many

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[3] Florian Schneider, *Organizing the Unorganizables*, 2004, http://kein.tv/v2v/Organizing_the_Unorganizable

[4] http://www.escatelier.net/

capacities together around a common problem or field of interest we begin to see the development of a new institutional form. These institutions are networked, certainly, and far from the static culture and normative regimes of the bricks and mortar institutions of the modern era – unions, firms, universities, state. Their mobile, ephemeral nature is both a strength and a weakness. The invention of new institutional forms that emerge within the process of organizing networks is absolutely central to the rebuilding of labour organizations within contemporary settings. Such developments should not be seen as a burden or something that closes down the spontaneity, freedom and culture of sharing and participation that we enjoy so much within social networks. As translation devices, these new institutions facilitate trans-institutional connections. In this connection we find multiple antagonisms, indeed such connections make visible new territories of 'the political'.

10. In many respects communication conditions the possibility of new political organizations. We could say that 'the political' of network societies is comprised of the tension between horizontal modes of communication and vertical regimes of control. Just think, for instance, of the ongoing battles between Internet and intellectual property regulators such as WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) and pirate networks of software, music or film distribution. Collaborative constitution emerges precisely in the instance of confrontation.[6] In this sense, the horizontal and vertical axes of communication are not separate or opposed but mutually constitutive. Moreover, how to manage or deal with these two axes of communication is often a source of tension within networks. Here, we are talking about the problem of governance, and there are no universal models to draw on. More often than not, networks adopt a trial-and-error approach to governance. It is better to recognize that governance is not a dirty word, but one that is internal to the logic and protocols of self-organization.

11. The 'participation economy' of Web 2.0 is underscored by a great tension between the 'free labour' (Terranova) of cooperation that defines social networks and its appropriation by firms and companies. How is the 'wealth of networks' (Blenker) to

[5] http://sarai.net

[6] See Soenke Zehle and Ned Rossiter, 'Organizing Networks: Notes on Collaborative Constitution, Translation, and the Work of Organization', *Cultural Politics* 5.2 (2009): 237-264.

be protected from exploitation? Unions, in their industrial form, functioned to protect workers against exploitation and represent their right to fair and decent working conditions. But what happens when leisure activity becomes a form of profit generation for companies? Popular social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, del.icio.us and the data trails we leave with Google function as informational gold mines for the owners of these sites. Advertising space and, more importantly, the sale of aggregated data are the staples of the participation economy. No longer can the union appeal to the subjugated, oppressed experience of workers when users voluntarily submit information and make no demands for a share of profits. Nonetheless, we are starting to see some changes on this front, as users become increasingly aware of their productive capacities and can quickly abandon a social networking site in the same manner in which they initially swarmed toward it. Companies, then, are vulnerable to the roaming tastes of the networked masses whose cooperative labour determines their wealth. This cooperative labour constitutes a form of power that has the potential to be mobilized in political ways, yet so rarely is. Perhaps that will change before too long. Certainly, the production of this type of political subjectivity is preferable to the pretty revolting culture of 'shareholder democracy' that has come to define political expression for the neoliberal citizen.

12. The shift from Fordist modes of assembly production to post-Fordist modes of flexibilization cannot be accounted for by reference alone to capital's demands for enhanced efficiency through restructuring and rescaling. The 1970s in Italy saw the rise of *operaismo* (autonomist workerism) who, along with international labour and social movements, refused the erosion of life by the demands of wage labour. Importantly, the 'refusal of labour' demonstrates a clear capacity of workers to change the practices of capital, for better and worse. The Italian collective strike is a one-off concept workshop, blending the radical with the general. It is in this power of transformation that 'the common' is created (unlike so many other struggles and forms of dissent in Europe). The ongoing challenge remains how to organize that potentiality in ways that produce subjectivities that can open a better life – in Italy, and beyond.

13. Workfare, flexicurity or 'commonfare' – all of these options are variations on the theme of state intervention that is able to supply a relative security to the otherwise

uncertainty of labour and life.[7] Such calls are misguided. They presuppose that somehow the state resides outside of market fluctuations and the precarity of capital. The state is coextensive with capital. The recent credit crisis sweeping the world has shown the state has little command over the uncertainties of finance capital. How, then, can the state guarantee stability? Furthermore, to whom does the state offer security? Certainly not to undocumented migrants. The call for flexicurity is a regressive, nostalgic move that holds dangerous implications vis-à-vis the formation of zones of exclusion. This is not what the dreams of the multitudes aspire to realize. There is much political value in targeting not the state but the companies – especially those engaged in the Web 2.0 economy – and insisting on a distribution of income commensurate with the collective labour that defines the participation economy. This may be a more effective strategy for broadening the constitutive range of labour organizations.

14. If the movements are serious about addressing the economic conditions of workers and engaging the complexities of the political they would put an end to the mistaken faith in the state as the source of guarantees. Moreover, the logic of the state as a provider of welfare is special to Europe that does not translate to the situations of workers in many Asian countries, for example. So what are the borders of connection among workers? Does the movement simply reproduce the borders of the EU? Or does it engage in the much harder but no less necessary work of transnational connection? If so, then targeting the state does not especially help facilitate a common territory of organization. The global circuits of capital are where radical politics should focus their attention. But global capital is in no way uniform in its effects, techniques of management or accumulative regimes. Political intervention, in other words, must always be situated while traversing a range of scales: social-subjective, institutional, geocultural. The movement of relations (social, political, economic) across and within this complex field of forces comprises the practical work of translation. Translation is the art of differential connection and constitutes the common from which new institutional forms may arise.

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[7] Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks', *Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005) http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson_rossiter.html.

15. Practices of collaborative constitution are defined by struggle. There is no escape from struggle and the tensions that accompany collaborative relations. This is the territory of the political – a space of antagonism that in my view is much more complicated than Schmittian friend/enemy distinction. Again, it is the work of translation that reveals the multiplicity of tensions. As Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon have written, translation is not about linguistic equivalence or co-figuration,[8] but rather about the production of singularities through relational encounters. But let's get a bit more concrete here. What is a relational encounter? It occurs through the instance of working or being with others. Of sharing, producing, creating, listening. Sustaining a range of idioms of experience is a struggle in itself – one that is rarely continuous, but rather continually remade and reassembled. This in turn is the recombinatory space and time of new institutions.

16. Let me briefly unpack this idea of new institutions and their relation to precarity. If we say that precarity is a common condition – one that traverses class and geocultural scales – then we can ask: what is the situation within which precarity expresses itself? The situation (concept + problem) will define the emergence of a new institution. Situation, here, consists of virtual/networked, material, affective, linguistic and social registers. We are of course always in a situation, but how to connect with others? The point of connection brings about tensions – the space of the political – and the ensemble of relations furnishes expression with its contours. Real power lies not in the spectacle of the event, but rather subsists within the resonance of experience and the minor connections and practices that occur before and after the event. That is the time and space of institution formation. The rest is a public declaration of existence.

17. Finally, some thoughts on the relation between organized networks and The Blue House, an experimental platform creating new experiences of urban life. I would like to return to an earlier and fairly obscure phrase that preceded my discussion of organized networks. I am referring here to *the translation of resonance across time*

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[8] See Naoki Sakai, 'Translation', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23.2-3 (2006): 71-86 and Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. See also Jon Solomon, 'Re: <edu-factory> A Hierarchy of Networks?, or, Geo-Culturally Differentiated Networks and the Limits of Collaboration', posting to edu-factory mailing list, 23 January, 2008, http://www.edu-factory.org.

and space. What does this mean and how might it be connected to the question of sustainability for new institutional forms? 'Thinking the seeming limitlessness of experience in relation to the seeming need for determination in politics', the experiment of The Blue House might ask 'how experience can function as a generative principle in the creation of new institutional forms immanent to the dynamics of social-technical networks'.[9]

18. At once controlled and contingent – a program and condition within which I would locate The Blue House – the conjuncture of the experiential-experiment lends itself to resonance, and thus a certain mode of sustainability, through the social practice of translation. As participants move in and out of The Blue House, they invariably communicate some form of knowledge on The Blue House that goes beyond the spatial-temporal coordinates that determine its immediate borders as intervention or event. It is in this manner that The Blue House might be understood as an organized network that institutes social-political possibilities not limited to the time and space of IJburg.

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[9] Neilson and Rossiter, 'Towards a Political Anthropology of New Institutional Forms'.