Erotic Uprising, or the Schooling of the Body

An Interview with Franco Berardi

Willem van Weelden

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Someone not to be overlooked in a publication on autonomy is Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, the *éminence grise* of the Italian Autonomia movement, which reached its peak in the late 1970s; in the last few years, however, the ideas behind it have been making a comeback. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Berardi, alongside figures like Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti and Franco Piperno, was a leader of the revitalization of the left and known as an activist for his free pirate station, Radio Alice. Fleeing the law in his own country – where Negri and others were imprisoned for suspected involvement in the Red Brigades and the death of Aldo Moro – he stayed for years with Guattari in Paris, where he became acquainted with Guattari's work on schizoanalysis in the La Borde clinic. In the 1990s, he above all focused on the impact of the new media, by developing a media theory based on a fusion of an unorthodox form of neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis and communication theory.

As a teacher, Berardi has a post at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, where he teaches the social history of communication. After the dot-com crash at the beginning of the millennium, the increasing surveillance after 9 / 11 and the uprisings of the alter-globalists, he wrote the probing essay 'What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today? Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work' in 2003, [1] in which he describes the increasing precarity of what he calls the 'cognitariat', the new proletarian class of workers in the creative industry, who have become the new exploited class as a result of the flexiblization and fragmentization of work in a collapsing financial system. His analyses primarily address the psychopathological aspects of the new developments, and his more recent writings are straightforwardly sombre diagnoses of the network society. Yet Berardi has remained a militant figure, who currently is concentrating on setting up knowledge institutes and knowledge networks outside the regular educational system, such as SCÉPSI, European School for Social Imagination. [2] In Italy, he can be considered a driving force behind the student protests and is a source of inspiration for the Occupy movement.

Reason enough to visit him in December 2011 in Barcelona, where in collaboration with the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) he

organized the conference KAFCA: Knowledge Against Financial Capitalism, and to ask him what he thinks about the possibilities for the Autonomia movement today. [3]

Willem van Weelden: To repeat the title of your famous essay from 2003 as an urgent question for once: What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today?

Franco Berardi: To begin with, I would like to say that right now autonomy is more of a keyword than ever! The only problem that must be tackled is giving it the right context. The concept and practice of Autonomia was conceived and organized in the 1960s and 1970s in an economic and social context of growth, development and expansion. Autonomia in that period, at the height of modern civilization, was seen as excess. Fundamentally, Autonomia meant the possibility of creating a space for self-organization of the general intellect, for work that in broad terms is conceived outside the socially accepted sphere of labour. Nowadays, the situation is totally different, and not just because we are now, and for the coming decades as well, in a process of increasing barbarity and of what I would like to call 'decivilization'. So we cannot conceive of Autonomia as excess anymore. The era of affluence, well-being and prosperity is over. Now we must see Autonomia as a manner of inventing a new, humane way of living and of situating a humane living space outside that barbaric order. At the same time, there is the confrontation with a physical space that is more and more characterized by war, ethnic and other violence and increasing financial and cultural impoverishment. So again, Autonomia must be reinvented more than ever, but in doing so we must think about wealth and peace in an entirely different manner. How is it possible to be 'rich' in a world that is steadily growing poorer? How is it possible to be peaceful and happy in a world that is increasingly caught up in violence and war? This conflict is the new framework for today's Autonomia.

Coming back for a moment to the announcement that *Open* in its present form under SKOR is ceasing to exist – closing, you might say – I would like to suggest a nice title for the last issue under SKOR: '*Open* is Closing Down.' Because that's indeed the reality we must face, that the openness of civilization, which was produced through conflict and an alliance between the working class and the bourgeoisie, a kind of open democracy, has come to an end. We have to think up a new kind of openness. For *Open*, this could mean starting a new European magazine that we produce collectively, in more languages, fanning out from the Netherlands to Spain, the UK, Italy, Germany, and so forth. We have to face up to this closure operation, because we know that predatory financial capitalism snaps up everything, all of the resources, all of the money, all of the valuable time, and that, inevitably, this process will destroy everything. But to think that this is the end of modern, social civilization – no! It is the closing down and cordoning off of the democratic illusion, and thus that is simultaneously the beginning of the possibility to create a new space for autonomy. Of course, this does bring with it an urgent methodological question: How are we going to do this, how can we define autonomy in a society where more and more people are armed and violent? But before you can think about techniques and methods, it is important to emphasize that the current mindset comprises a dual momentum: the closing down of what was once open and the simultaneous creation of a new autonomy that escapes this process of (en)closure. So, autonomy more than ever!

In* After the Future: The Post-Futurism Manifesto*, which you included in your book* Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation [4] *precisely 100 years after Marinetti's* Futurist Manifesto*, you write that the separation between poetry and mass communication must be abolished and that the power of the media must be given to the poets and the sages again. This statement is reminiscent of the old credo of the Autonomia movement, which argued for the abolition

of the separation between art and daily life. Even though the context has completely changed, has the movement remained the same in terms of ideology?

As I said before, the late 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by prosperity. There came a turnabout in 1972, when the club of Rome published ***The Limits to Growth.*** This report offered a perspective that is again topical now: exhaustion. Never before in the history of society had exhaustion been a possible prospective. The Club of Rome pointed out the possibility of the depletion of natural resources, but there was also an exhaustion of psychic energy and an exhaustion in the imagining of growth. At the same time, the then-president of the USA, Richard Nixon, unilaterally changed the economic rules by decoupling the dollar from the International Monetary Standard, which is based on the price of gold. That was the moment of the arbitrary, arrogant independence of the dollar, and with it the confirmation of the superiority of the American economy.

The result was the dissolution of the principle of commensurability, which had been the most important harmonizing and balancing instrument of international world trade. The abandonment of the principle of commensurability means that nothing can be traded on the basis of a shared standard anymore. The standard is gone, and as a result we have entered the era of incommensurability. At the level of the economy, this means violence: prices are no longer determined by a common standard, but by whoever is the strongest. From this perspective and from a cultural point of view, you can say that what occurred in the 1970s, the promise of endless growth that turned into a perspective of irreversible exhaustion, can most certainly be compared with the present situation.

At that time, the question was how to redefine what wealth is; we must recognize that this is also the question today. When the Autonomia movement spoke about the refusal of work in the 1970s, [5] it meant that the general intellect was becoming more important and that the daily drudgery of physical work and poverty could be overcome by a free application of that general intellect. Today, just like 40 years ago, we can say that this misery is primarily caused by the cultural expectations we circulate in our information economy. Changing those expectations could now mean that we no longer associate wealth with having lots of material possessions or money. Wealth is living with the power to create solidarity and a communal spirit.

The political role of the Autonomia movement is basically to communicate this idea, as a necessary form of cultural contagion. Autonomy as frugality does not mean renouncing and giving up, but the capacity to be happy despite time and body. And thus I think that the hippie movement was the most important cultural experience of the last 50 years. So we have to go back to that. It's about confirming that love is ultimately the only thing that's truly important – and then not understood in the Christian sense, but in a materialistic sense. It's about the availability of body and time.

Do you have an idea that the coming generation, 'the new cognitariat', recognizes this appeal and takes it to heart? Are young people inspired by the hippie era? Or is that just a marketing term for them? Do you see any hope on the horizon in this regard?

It would be better to call the new generation 'the connective generation', to indicate the effect of the media, but also to emphasize their lack of physical experiences. I once referred to this generation as the generation that learned more words from a machine than from their mothers. For the past few years I was pretty pessimistic, which is expressed in *Precarious Rhapsody*, a book about the psychopathology of this generation. But now I'm inclined to reconsider that pessimism. Not because my analysis was no good, but because I see things shifting. I was pessimistic about the new generation because over the past 20 years I have observed in them an incapacity, caused by virtualization and precarity, to have either an exuberant physical relationship with themselves or with others. Whereas the only way to create solidarity and empathy is through the body. Solidarity is enjoying the body of

the other. Solidarity is not an ethical or political value; it is corporality. The whole area of youth culture is changing, because the call for change is now becoming an existential reality. My own future, my post as a teacher for instance, is at stake now that the neoliberal economy and its related ideology are coming apart at the seams. So a reorganization of the mental self is a necessity for everyone.

Of course it is interesting that people are occupying places and that all sorts of things are happening, but I want to look further than the direct political effects of the admission that a future cannot be offered anymore. It's about the deep anthropological effect of rediscovering the city as an erotic place, a place where you can touch and be touched. A nice expression that I recently picked up in Paris was 'Let's occupy each other'.

It's not about a political protest against something, but much more about a psychotherapeutic process, of rediscovering a common body. The generation that learned more words from a machine than from their mothers is suddenly beginning to speak! Which makes this physical psychological process a rediscovery of language!

What do you think is the most important idea for a reconfiguration of the 'cognitariat', now that this class recently received the cold message that it no longer has a future? How could the energy that has been released be bundled?

The first step is the reactivation of the social body as an erotic body, a body of solidarity. If this first step is not taken, nothing is possible. And that first step is now being taken in different ways. But you are actually asking for a possible kind of politics, and that goes beyond psychotherapy. In Bologna, we have started an experiment; there, and in other cities, the key word is now *Insolvenza*, 'insolvency' or 'inability to pay'. [6] The refusal of work has now become the refusal to pay! Vouchers are being handed out with the inscription *Santa Insolvenza* – you know that there already is a *San Precario*. These vouchers give you free admittance to public transport. But there are also food vouchers with your name, date of birth and address on them and the amount of provisions you need, along with the words, 'Dear cashier of this supermarket, please let me have these groceries for as long as I am still not getting a basic income from the European Bank', and on the other side it says, 'Debt has become the universal form of human relations'. We will go into the supermarkets with this type of voucher around Christmas time.

But as a concept, *Insolvenza* has many more layers of meaning, for it is not just about the refusal to pay; it is particularly about the refusal to pay the symbolic or semiotic debt, if you will. It's about breaking the sense of guilt, the idea that you would be 'guilty'. Thus the idea is not to take on the bankers of this world for once, but to deprive them of their power. To rid our lives of their power! That's the true meaning of insolvency. The next step would be to effectively use the force released by this. That means that the general intellect, the techies, the doctors, the poets, can work freely in spaces that we will have to create for that purpose. When the health care and the sanitation systems collapse, when as a manner of speaking you don't even have the money to die anymore, it will be a matter of survival; then the Europeans will become just like the Americans. What will we do then? We'll set up hospitals where doctors, social workers and technicians get the opportunity to voluntarily work in a space where you can get free assistance. Creating such a space is by no means a question of money.

Precarious Rhapsody ***was in many ways a furious tome, but when I saw a video recording of one of your public speeches at the Brera Academy, your anger aroused a feeling of hope.*** [7] ***Do you think that a change in education at the institutional level is one of the possibilities?***

I spoke in Brera on 14 March 2011; it was the beginning of a process of uprising in Italy, where education has been completely destroyed over the past three years. Eight billion

euros' worth of cutbacks have been put through and 130,000 teachers have been fired, at all levels of the Italian educational system. At the Brera Academy, the majority of the teaching staff are now 'precarious workers', working without a contract or rights, for a lower salary. The situation is extremely uncertain. I have made it clear that I do not want to teach under such conditions. I only want to teach about uprising, outside the academy. Originally the idea was to do this in a bank opposite the academy, but the police managed to prevent that. So then we occupied the Bourse. Universities and art institutions are tremendously important. The question, however, is whether we indeed should fight for the defence and restoration of the old humanistic universities and knowledge centres, whether this should be the focus of our resistance. I don't think so. Not because of the cutbacks, but because the university is an old institution, created in the time of a rising bourgeoisie when industrial production and humanistic values could still be synthesized from the spirit of the Renaissance. We are now seeing a profound change in all of society, especially in the area of the production and imparting of knowledge. The Internet is naturally very important in changing people's relation to knowledge. Universities are becoming superfluous in terms of transmitting knowledge, but necessary for the creation and transference of power. Public schools and public universities in Italy have mainly become places for conferring power; the transmittance of knowledge lies with industry, where large corporations pay directly for applied research. After the Treaty of Bologna in 1999, the corporations went into the universities, and the universities are now modelled on the Research & Development structures of the business world.

Why should we have to defend such a system? We are now seeing a financial aggression that is out to transform all universities into corporate structures, and in the process banish the humanistic and critical traditions. We must form new institutions for the production of knowledge that can adapt to network conditions and to the fragmentalization and transformation of knowledge. At the same time, these institutions must be capable of coming face-to-face with the interdisciplinarity of knowledge that is bound up with the hyperspecialization of technology. We must set up institutions that couple the exchange of knowledge with sensibility. For you can't be a technologist if you're not also a poet. I am not against specialization, but hyperdisciplinarity must begin with the ascertainment that you first and foremost are a thinking and feeling body, and only after that, an engineer or a designer. That's the new starting point for the university of the next 500 years!

In San Marino, you founded SCÉPSI, the European School of Social Imagination, and here in Barcelona you have organized the three-day conference KAFCA: Knowledge Against Financial Capitalism, as part of the SCÉPSI programme. Can you say something about how that initiative came about and how it is financed?

In order to start up SCÉPSI we needed support, which we found in an association of civilians from the Republic of San Marino. These civilians are relatively well-off and for years and years have benefited from their country's independence and role as fiscal shelter for the Italian Mafia. San Marino is a tax haven of course, and SCÉPSI is fiscally registered there. In May of 2000, these civilians made a seminar possible and promised to pay for an annual meeting. So it's not a case of the Republic of San Marino paying us. Here in Barcelona, the MACBA helped us with the financing of the KAFCA conference, and next summer we are organizing a conference in Kassel, Germany with the help of the *documenta*. In this way, we try to organize conferences and seminars within art institutes or institutes related to art. But in principle, every university or knowledge institute can act as a host for a SCÉPSI initiative.

In the future – for this is only the first year of our existence – the idea is to become independent and to be able to support ourselves financially. For a conference or gathering, we need an average of about 20,000 euros in order to fly people in, provide accommodations and arrange food for them. That's still doable. In the next two, three or

four years we will have to find financing for each case separately. But in the distant future, we must assume that the economic idea of exchanging money in the field of knowledge will have disappeared. And as a result, knowledge will again be what it is supposed to be: free! Teachers, researchers and lecturers must also accept such a free relation, but they will have to be fed in exchange. That's what happened in the twelfth century when Irnerio, the founder of the University of Bologna, came from Germany to Bologna as a celebrated scholar: the city gave him excellent accommodations and good food in order to teach medicine, theology and philosophy there. We want to reintroduce this old principle in the field of knowledge. It's a process of reciprocal help and the nourishing of reciprocal love. That's what we need, not money. But as long as we are still in the transitional situation, flights, hotels and meals have to be paid. The key question of course remains how to imagine the university in an era of deep transition.

In some of your writings you talk about the psychological vulnerability that is produced by the subjectivating power of the network society. On the one hand you emphasize the importance of the Internet for the distribution of knowledge, but on the other hand you also see the Internet as the echo chamber of that psychopathology. What possibilities do you see for escaping from these repressive and unhealthy forces and using the network for constructive change?

This is about the paradoxical relation with technology in the general sense, not only about electronic digital technology. Technology is an important force, but at the same time it's a pitfall that produces alienation, which in the case of virtual technologies has a specific character. Virtual technologies have expanded our cognitive power and simultaneously introduced a process of acceleration of what you could call the disembodiment of communication. You see this for instance with the media activism of the last 20 years. This has primarily been aimed at the potential of the networks – video activism was a new application of the capacity to produce images that are an accusation – but at the same time, of course, it participated in the game of disembodiment and alienation. That is the reason why media activism, despite all of its critical potential and the effect that it has had, has proved incapable of overthrowing the power of the media.

Not that we suddenly must forget media activism and media technology, but I think that a change has occurred over the last six months and that we are now concentrating on another space: the street. The problem with this new phase is that a battle is going on in media activism while work is simultaneously being done on reactivating the social body. Just look at Facebook: it embodies an extreme paradox. From a critical point of view, a homogenization and thus a complete reduction of human sensibility is taking place, along with a standardization of relationships and the perception of them. The infinite complexity of human relationships is reduced in Facebook to a few standardized functionalities. And its success has contributed to the fact that the immeasurable wealth of the Internet has been reduced to the blue of its house style and the rather simplistic icon with the raised thumb: I like! But we mustn't forget that that enormous wealth is still there! Young people who make their debut on the Internet with a Facebook account think that the Internet coincides with Facebook. Therefore we must instruct them that Facebook can have a certain convenience, for example when undertaking spatial actions, but above all that the Internet is outside of that! Besides the blue of Facebook, there still are a whole lot of other colours to discover there. So I think that the rediscovery of the city and the street and the rediscovery of the body of the other will also have repercussions in the media sphere. When you are open to freely moving in other spaces, that will affect standardized spaces such as Facebook.

Jean Baudrillard writes in one of his last books,* Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared? [8]*, that art in the modern period exists by the grace of its disappearance – not through the disappearance of reality, but through its own active disappearance.

What's more, he even claims that it disappeared a long time ago, without even knowing that itself. He adds that art has survived its own disappearance. Is that also what Autonomia is nowadays?

I always have deep respect for what Baudrillard comes up with, even though sometimes I don't immediately understand what he means. This of course refers to the fact that, ever since Hegel, talking about the disappearance of art has taken on so many forms. Which is why I'm actually pretty suspicious about the accuracy of that idea: art disappears and then comes back in order to disappear again. Of course, art disappears in the sense that it becomes something different. In the 1940s and 1950s, art was primarily about political engagement; in the 1970s, art was the environment, the surroundings, and its means were problematicized; in the 1990s it was NetArt, the experiment with communication. And now we can say that art is disappearing and becoming diagnosis and therapy. You could say that art is entering the economy of sensibility, in the sense of the politics of sensibility. But another problem is that I am completely unable to say what art is. Perhaps art is a method of approaching things without it being directly usable, while revealing the rich pragmatic potential that any situation offers. In that sense, art cannot disappear, because it has an experimental attitude. It is an experimental method in relation to the future and to the imagining of possibilities. So art is always disappearing because it is always becoming something else, but at the same time that's why it is always there. Thank God! And may it also be that way with Autonomia!

Willem van Weelden is an Amsterdam-based teacher, lecturer and independent writer on new media culture, media theory and interaction design.

Footnotes

1. 'What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today? Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work', 2003: republicart.net.
2. scepsi.eu.
3. kafca.eu.
4. Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009).
5. Mario Tronti, 'Struggle Against Labor', in: *Operai e capitale* (Turin: Edizione Einaudi, 1966).
6. th-rough.eu.
7. 'Teaching Insurrection: Franco Berardi Bifo @ Brera Academy, Milan': th-rough.eu, 14 March 2011.
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (London: Seagull Books, 2009).

Tags

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