Reviewed by Marcus Boon

Just as 9/11 constituted a crisis for Deleuzian thought in its postmodern insurrection, so the various liberatory movements that sprung up around the world in 2011, from Occupy to the Arab Spring, have constituted a crisis for the schools of critical thought that have flourished around Zizek and Badou in the last decade. While Badou’s notion of fidelity to the truth of an event initially seemed to be an advance over the Deleuzian project of groundlessness, immanent experimentation—so easily appropriated into the capitalist marketplace as the logic of consumer choice—fidelity itself seemed to find its limit in 2011 in Zucotti Park, as Zizek’s passage of a “Herculean gesture of intervention, encountered the full might of spectacular force, and it became increasingly unclear what would be at stake in continuing to occupy 100 square metres of corporate/public land at the southern tip of Manhattan (to use only the most well known location) against the massed forces of the media and the police. The courage to act, while praiseworthy, is evidently not enough. But what, then, is it? What should we do, now that we know there is a “real” that has publicly declared itself? Zizek has claimed that it is a matter of a “strong body able to reach quick and decisive decisions and to implement them with all necessary hardness.”1 There are few takers for this today other than radical stalwarts and the venture capitalists who currently own the state. We can formulate the crisis of liberation movements today as one of action. Although the world initially evokes little more than the banality of “what one does,” or perhaps the pursuit of some hobby or interest, it is clear that our political crises today involve our inability to imagine a set of practices that constitute the basis of an emancipated world.

One of the interesting things about Massumi’s work in the last decade (especially Parables for the Virtual) is its attempt to develop a Deleuzian philosophy in accordance with contemporary neurological and cognitive science. This has been most notably approached through a Critical Inquiry for narrating neuroscientific developments in terms of a series of pre-subjective affective vectors and a philosophy of timely, but not excessive, but radical vertigo or “jumping one.”2 The title of the book, Semblance and Event, refers to the way that a pre-cognitive, pre-structural immanent multiplicity of events are taken up and figured as perceptible forms which he calls semblances. Massumi gives the example of a flash of lightning. The totality of atmospheric conditions that produce the flash are inaccessible to the senses. The visible lightning and the boom of thunder comprise the semblance of the event of a certain set of atmospheric conditions, their configuration. “Lightning is the appearing tip of a more expansive event that never shown in its entirety. The fullness of the event’s conditioning and occurrence is peripherally felt, in the dynamic form of how what actually appears steals the show” (24). The framework here is that of Deleuze’s actual (semblance) and virtual (event). But the example is problematic, since at the moment of the flash of lightning, there is a radical and correlative shift in atmospheric conditions. As Massumi observes, that flash is not the semblance of the buildup of atmospheric tension, but its resolution. In other words, the semblance is itself a new event, rather than the semblance of the prior one. The problem is that Deleuze’s model of virtual and actual works well when applied to film, where a cinematic image clearly has a double character—the image as semblance constitutes an event. But does it work as an ontology? That is one of the fundamental “techniques of existence” that Deleuze’s model brings up, but his model remains an intriguing notion—fidelity itself seemed to find its limit in 2011, and the liberal utopia that Zizek has assailed so well?

Today, the term “activist” is a key concept in the world of art and politics. It is a term that has been co-opted by the liberal establishment, but it is one that still retains some of its radical potential. Activist art is not just about creating art, but about using art as a tool for social change. It is a form of resistance that is both political and aesthetic, and it is one that is constantly evolving.

Semblance and Event raises some important questions about what constitutes a new event, and how we can think about it. What does it mean to say that an event is a “virtual” event? Is it something that is not yet realized, or is it something that we are in the process of realizing? What role does the body play in the creation of events? What is the relationship between the body and the world around us?

In conclusion, Semblance and Event is a provocative and thought-provoking book that challenges us to think about the nature of events and how they are created. It is a book that is sure to inspire further discussion and debate about the nature of life and the world around us.

5. Semblance and Event (New York, Dorset, 1988). Semblance and Event is a book that has been influential in the field of philosophy and political economy. It is a book that has been widely read and debated, and it has played an important role in shaping the way that we think about the world around us.

By “technique of existence,” Massumi mostly means “a philosophy of action, of acting” rather than “political activism,” but he does follow through on the latter meaning in the final section of the book. Indeed, he offers a rather stirring reversal of the two meanings, such that the politics of parables are, in the form of the book itself, “apocalyptic,” while the creative “techniques of existence” deployed by modernist masters such as Kafka and installation artist Robert Irwin, are now key examples of the “political” because of their inventive iterations. But if creativity is immanently political, how does one escape the capture of a relational form such as interactive art or gaming, which Massumi himself claims is now one of the fundamental “techniques of existence” of global capitalism?

More generally, how does one stop “creativity” from “immaterial labour” from becoming the newest form of capital, as it has today? Isn’t the assertion of immanent creativity as political per se just another version of the liberal utopia that Zizek has assailed so well? My sense of it, as indicated above, is that Massumi needs to explain what happens if the notion of the real is introduced into his (and Deleuze’s) system—the Lacanian Real as “that which always comes back to the same place.”3 And if capture by the symbols (in Massumi’s version, the return of truth, content, etc.) is inevitable, what form does a “technique of existence,” (aka a parable), have to take to produce actually novelty rather than just relabeled “innovation” questions and what does a version of the event closer to Badou’s, something perhaps quite rare but which requires a response, a “technique of existence,” but one demanding fidelity to the truth of the event. It’s not that I think Badou is right and Deleuze and Massumi are wrong. The point is that practice must involve some kind of constraint or logic that shape creativity in particular ways, allowing it to be explored collectively, and increase its efficacy. This remains our challenge today, and it is in this situation that the important work Massumi has done here regarding the development of a practice takes on its full power.