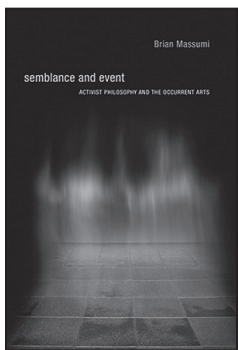


Reviews



Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts, Brian Massumi, MIT Press, 2011, 224 pp.
Reviewed by Marcus Boon

Just as 9/11 constituted a crisis for Deleuzian thought in its postmodern incarnation, 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 Žižek and Badiou in the last decade. While Badiou's notion of fidelity to the truth of an event initially seemed to be an advance over the Deleuzian project of groundless, immanent experimentalism—so easily appropriated into the capitalist marketplace as the logic of consumer choice—fidelity itself seemed to find its limit in 2011 in Zuccotti Park, as Žižek's *passage à l'acte*, the heroic 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? What should we do, now that we know there is a "we" that has publically declared itself? Žižek has claimed that it is a matter of a "strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness."¹ There are few takers for this today other than residual Stalinists and the venture capitalists who currently own the state. We can formulate the crisis of liberation movements today as one of practice. Although the word 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 crisis today involves our inability to imagine a set of practices that constitute the basis of an emancipated world. To put it bluntly: how does one establish a collective practice of being in the world (formerly known as "political economy") without it devolving into matters of private, individual, consumer choice—and without it devolving into a collective exercise of force that lacks any value or orientation other than the mere reproduction of power through its repeated exercise?

This is the point at which another look at Deleuze's work, or more specifically his work with Félix Guattari, seems to hold potential, since the key to a radical, new, and emancipatory form of practice may involve being able to think fidelity to the truth of the event, in the terms set out by Badiou, along with the Deleuzian imperative to experiment. This is where Brian Massumi's new book, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, comes in. It is not an easy

read; if you dislike Deleuzian jargon, then following its translation into Whitehead's jargon and back is going to be even more unpleasant. More frustratingly, the book simply ignores the important critiques made of Deleuze over the last decade as if they never happened. Nevertheless, the book has something new to tell us.

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 neuroscience.² Massumi was recently criticized in *Critical Inquiry* for misinterpreting neuroscientific data to support his elaboration of a world of pre-subjective affective vectors and a philosophy of immanence, but his model remains an intriguing one.³ The title of the book, *Semblance and Event*, refers to the way that a pre-cognitive, ever-shifting 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 figuration: "The lightning is the appearing tip of a more expansive event that never shows in its entirety. The fullness of the event's conditioning and occurrence is perceptually 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, the flash is not the semblance of the build-up 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 likely that Deleuze's model of virtual and actual works well when applied to film, where a cinematic image clearly has a double status of virtual and actual, and where the appearance of the image as semblance constitutes an event. But does it work as an ontology? That there is a gap between appearance and reality is well known, but in what way does reframing this as actual and virtual, or semblance and event, help us to generate new kinds of practice?

Although Massumi dubs his "activist philosophy" "speculative pragmatism," there is no mention in the book of the speculative realist philosophers who have emerged in recent years. This is unfortunate because, whether you agree with them or not, the assertion of a real—either that of objects that remain beyond all iterations of appearance in Graham Harman's case, or of mathematical forms in the work of Quentin Meillassoux—is significant, especially since the real is asserted there precisely against the vagueness of Deleuze's ontology. Massumi is also vague, tantalizingly so. What is the world beneath, before co-evolving with the subject-object relationship? It is one of movement, process, waves, to use Massumi's favoured words. But Massumi hesitates to designate what is in effect a vibrational ontology as such. Pre-subjective affect, "direct perception," "feeling-thinking," "the amodal in person," and other such designations remain more or less Kantian formulations. Furthermore, for Massumi, the semblance of an event or, if you like, the event of a semblance, is equivalent to the instantiation of the virtual as the actual, but what is the relationship between virtual and real? The virtual is usually described as a swarm of potentialities—

and such a swarm cannot be the same as the real. The notion of a singular "truth," which for Badiou emerges out of the event's manifestation of the real and cuts through the multiplicity of the virtual, is unimportant to Massumi or Deleuze. A semblance is beautiful, at best a truth rather than the truth, but better than that, it is "quivering life" or "bare activity," before things like truth and content intervene.

In *Semblance and Event*, Massumi offers a brilliant reading of Walter Benjamin's mysterious notion of "non-sensuous similarity" as the "non-local" connection of pre-cognitive entities, which provide a kind of ground for the production of sensuous similarities, likenesses, discourse, etc.⁴ This potentially does provide a way of rethinking the relation of virtual, actual, and real, as well as a basis for a new kind of practice. But, to return to the topic of the weather, the example of the ritual production of similarity that Massumi uses (taken from Benjamin but updated for rave culture), that of dancers who imitate the sky, falls apart, because no one today really believes that this imitation is efficacious in changing the weather. What one is left with is something "aesthetic." Massumi has described what the hope of so much "relational" art is today—using a local practice to produce a nonlocal effect, but it remains unclear whether art, in these terms, is capable of producing the kinds of nonlocal political effects that this model aspires to. The creative life that Massumi affirms is captured by structural elements that enforce particular meanings and ways of living—for Deleuze this was the Nietzschean cycle of active and reactive forces. And guess who tends to win?

By "activist philosophy," 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 stunning reversal of the two meanings, such that the politics of parties, laws, doctrines, etc. is "apolitical," while the creative "techniques of existence" deployed by modernist masters such as Mahler 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 explain 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" qua "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 Žižek 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."⁴ And if capture by the symbolic (in Massumi's version, the return of truth, content, etc.) is inevitable, what form does a "technique of existence," (aka a practice), have to take to produce actual novelty rather than its reified form? These questions also suggest a version of the event closer to Badiou'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 Badiou is right and Deleuze and Massumi are wrong. The point is that practice must involve some kinds of constraint or logic that shape creativity in particular ways, allowing it to be explored collectively, evolve 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. X

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, "Shoplifters of the World Unite," *London Review of Books* (19 August, 2011).
2. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Raleigh, NC: Duke UP, 2002).
3. Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 433-472.
4. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Selected Writings: 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 720-722.
5. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI* (New York, Norton, 1998), 42.

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