Helen Stratford

Collective Assemblages, Embodiment and Enunciations

This paper is an investigation into the role of language and perceptions in supporting a certain way of being or placing, exploring the intersections of power relations and spatial practices in relation to gender, focusing specifically on feminist spatial practice. This investigation seeks to redefine, rethink and ultimately challenge the binary relationship between theory and practice, in order to open different ways of understanding and inspire new modes of spatial practice. It is divided into three parts: the first section 'Theoretical Action' explores Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's pragmatic approach to language. The second section 'Active Theory' explores feminist readings of the concepts of assemblage and figurations. In the final section, 'Practical Thinking', this paper goes on to investigate the implications of these concepts for spatial practice, in terms of its capacity for critical action, through the work of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Theoretical Action:

In *The Idea of Critical Theory* Raymond Geuss describes how a critical theory is itself always part of its 'object-domain' (Guess, 1981: 55). Unlike the 'objectifying' structure of scientific theories there is no clear distinction between the theory and the 'object' to which the theory refers. A critical theory does not describe *how* to do something which is subsequently *applied*. Instead, its theory is an argument, an act which deconstructs normative beliefs and attitudes of agents.

This notion of theory which engages in a "reflective process of interpretation" (Guess, 1981: 93) is taken further through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. For them, theory is action. In 'Intellectuals and Power,' Deleuze comments, "representation no longer exists there is only theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks" (Deleuze, 1977: 207). Theory is "exactly like a box of tools … It must be useful. It must function" (Deleuze, 1977:208). Theories are 'localized counter-responses' that are necessarily instruments for 'combat'. For Deleuze, theory "does not totalize." It "is an instrument for multiplication" that also "multiplies itself" (Deleuze, 1977). This creative ability of theory is made possible through their treatment of language as a mode of practice, which situates it within a larger theory of action (Bogue, 1989: 136).

For Deleuze and Guattari, language is not simply a medium for communication. In 'Postulates of Linguistics' they explain how its fundamental role is in issuing *Mots d'ordre* – statements that impose social obligations. *Mots d'ordre* are not merely associated with commands or certain 'explicit statements' but concern any statement which maintains implicit presuppositions and "*every* act that

is linked to statements by a 'social obligation'" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987:79). For Deleuze and Guattari, "every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Furthermore, for them "the only possible definition of language is the set of all order -words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at any given moment" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 79). *Mots d'ordre* do not merely describe or represent, they intervene in the world, functioning to organize its 'social character.' They effect what Deleuze and Guattari describe as "incorporeal transformations of bodies," forming part of a "collective arrangement of enunciation," which is defined as "the set of all *incorporeal transformations* current in a given society and *attributed* to the bodies of that society" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 80).

Incorporeal transformations are attributes or events assigned to bodies. Bodies here imply groupings that work across a whole spectrum of scales, including a single organ and a human body, as well as institutions of politics, law and so on. In language terms saying something is often a means of doing something or allocating designations. An example is "the transformation of the accused into a convict", which "is the pure and instantaneous act or incorporeal attribute that is the expressed of the judge's sentence" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 81).

Incorporeal attributes and *Mots d'ordre* help to "actualise particular events in the social field" (Patton, 2000: 28). They have clear implications for practical actions in terms of setting up a framework of comprehensibility which influences a body's powers and capacities to act. Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with the ability of this framework to stifle the capacity of a body to affect and be affected - its efficacy to "block what a body can do" (Fraser, 1999: 168).

In their pragmatic approach to language, theory itself becomes a means of provoking certain actions and so can readily engage in a "reflective process of interpretation" through which social obligations can be unpacked. Yet *Mots d'ordre* cannot be reduced to the words through which they are expressed: for Deleuze and Guattari, there are a whole manner of assemblages which serve to support certain incorporeal transformations.

The shifting complex or 'mechanic assemblage' is a key concept throughout A *Thousand Plateaux*. It includes social, linguistic, conceptual and 'practical' assemblages. Of key importance for spatial theory and practice is the notion that assemblages are composed of discursive and non-discursive components: they are both assemblages of enunciation/utterance and assemblages of bodies/matter (Patton, 2000: 9, 42-6). Here, a situation of qualitative difference is coupled with a situation of interdependency. Furthermore, these complex arrangements of discourse and practices both define and are defined through their location or 'circumstances.' Assemblages of enunciation cannot be divorced from the very place in which they are uttered, "'I swear' is not the same when said in the family, at school, in a love affair, in a secret society, or in court: it is not the same thing and neither is it the same incorporeal transformation" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 82). It is in this sense that assemblages are spatialised. Yet, places here do not merely refer to external

circumstances, they are also assemblages of socially mediated practices from which meaning or identities are drawn.

Active Theory

Debates in recent feminist critique have centred to a large degree on the problem of privileging either side of the mind/body dualism, highlighting the need to express or think beyond a mindset whose descriptions replicate the binary of traditional logics and politics (see Bradiotti, 1994a; Butler, 1993; Gatens, 1996a; Grosz, 1996; Irigaray, 1985, 1993). Moira Gatens describes how it is this 'thinking beyond' which is key in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. For her, their approach "does not posit bodies on one side and language on the other. Rather bodies and states of affairs are interleaved with the 'collective assemblages of enunciation/utterance'" (Gatens, 1996b: 180). This points towards what Rosi Braidotti describes as an understanding of embodiment which is "neither a biological nor a social category, but rather a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the material social condition" (Braidotti, 1994b:161).

In her paper "Through a Spinozist Lens: Ethology, Difference, Power," Gatens observes how Deleuze and Guattari follow Spinoza's notion that "to think differently is, by definition, to exist differently: one's power of thinking is inseparable from one's power of being and visa versa" (Gatens, 1996b: 168). In this univocity of being there are networks of assemblages which in their very multiplicity have no definite causal relation between them but which together interact to *support* a certain way of being. Yet, this materialisation of bodies through language and assemblages is not simply a passive inscription. In fact, the conception of human being as a component of a dynamic inter-related aggregate makes it possible to express the potential of being otherwise. For Deleuze and Guattari the expression of a certain possible world is always accompanied by the possibility of expressing a different world. Here, they follow the Nietzschean concept of thought as a creative and transformative action − an exploration of that which escapes common sense, rationality and representation.

Gatens describes how "the order-word expresses a possible world as if it were the only and inevitable world" but she goes on to state that "it is an utterance that should be seen as an attempt to pass of the virtual as actual" (Gatens, 1996b: 181). She draws on the feminist theories of Sharon Marcus to compare this 'virtual' or 'obstinate real' to a script which holds the possibility to be re-written. She describes how, "words … express *both* the attempt to capture bodies in stable forms … *and* the possible becomings of bodies" (Gatens, 1996b: 182). Ultimately, for Gatens the tools which attempt to "pass of the virtual as the actual" can be re-employed to decompose those relations which organise affects and powers in stable forms, in order to recompose other becomings − different acts, affects and desires. She goes on to describe the expression of these other 'possible becomings' as *pass-words* which "rupture the habitual organisation of a body's powers and capacities and express new powers of affecting and being affected" (Gatens, 1996b: 183).

When maintenance workers were asked to designate one hour of their daily work as 'art' or 'work' identical activities were frequently awarded with different utterances. **I make maintenance Art one hour everyday,** 1976, Chemical Bank, 55 Water Street, Downtown Whitney – Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

For Rosi Braidotti, figurations are ways of "bringing into representation the unthinkable" (Braidotti, 2000: 171). She describes figurations as invented "unconventional and even disturbing conceptual personae" by which Deleuze "thinks" (Braidotti, 2000: 170). Yet she stresses their material basis and political accountability aligning this 'thinking' with feminist theories of 'politics of location' or 'situated knowledges' (Braidotti, 2000: 171, see also Haraway, 1991 & Rich, 1987). In this way feminist figurations are *pass-words* that find expressions not simply in words but through performative practices based in memory and narrative. Here, bodies themselves can utter and through these utterings they can resist or challenge the imposition of certain frameworks or narratives. It is in this politically located performativity that feminist figurations become intrinsically spatialised. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, "a performative statement is nothing outside of the circumstances that make it performative" (1987:82). The circumstances of a figuration gives it meaning, a subject and an addressee as well as credibility making it a 'veritable assemblage' (1987: 82).

Practical Thinking

Like the theoretician for Deleuze and Guattari, the role of the artist for Mierle Laderman Ukeles is not privileged and detached: art must play an activist role in

Shifting the location of a habitually hidden action to an exposed and public space. **Wash,** 1973. Sidewalk performance at A.I.R Gallery, New York City – Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

empowering people to act as agents of change. This agenda stems from a feminist concern with challenging the privileged and gendered notion of pure creation and the myth of the independent artist. Ukeles' 1969 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art,' proposes the dismantling of the notion of art as fixed and complete through the literal transformation of everyday activities into 'art'. In her manifesto she proclaims, "Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials" (Ukeles, 1969: 623).

'I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Everyday' was a project executed in 1976 for a branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Ukeles sent letters to three hundred maintenance staff at the Chemical Bank in Water Street, downtown Whitney, asking them to designate one hour of their daily work as 'art'. The time of the hour was their choice and, to outside observers, the activity of floor washing, window cleaning and so on remained unchanged. Everyday, over five weeks Ukeles took Polaroid photographs recording the various practices of the workers. At the same time she asked them if they were doing 'art' or 'work.' The photographs were subsequently exhibited alongside the worker's remarks revealing that identical activities were frequently awarded with different utterances. In her extensive paper on Ukeles entitled ' Maintenance Activity': Creating a Climate for Change,'

Through her appointment as the 'unsaleried, official Artist in Residence, at the New York City Department of Sanitation, Ukeles directly investigated how sanitation is 'trapped in a miasma of essentially pre-democratic perceptions.' **The Social Mirror,** 1983. – Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Patricia C. Philips observes how "For one worker, washing a window on the south facade at ten in the morning was 'art'; for someone else performing the same task alongside it was 'work'" (Philips, 1995: 174). This project engendered shifts in the status and meaning of 'work' and 'art,' and challenged the social construction of aesthetic and cultural values that coagulate them into binary oppositions. Furthermore it highlighted the fragility of such oppositions which "attempt to capture bodies in stable forms" (Gatens, 1996b: 182). In this way, like the *passwords* it explored how language itself opens possibilities for a re-appreciation and re-appropriation of everyday life. Conversely, the projects *Wash, Handshake Ritual* and *Flow City* explore how certain inquisitive, invasive practical actions help to actualise certain conceptions.

Wash was a street performance conducted in 1973 at the A.I.R Gallery in New York City where Ukeles fastidiously scrubbed the pavement of the public space outside the gallery. Through shifting the location of a habitually hidden action to an exposed and public space Wash forced spectators to conceptually and tacitly engage with the gallery threshold in a very different way. It unveiled the socio-spatial and temporal assemblage which supports the utterances of public/private, clean/dirty, acceptable/abject activity. In this performance the collective assemblage of a human body and its 'circumstances' implied a certain enunciation regarding the status of

The offer of a handshake to city sanitation workers invented new subject positions, which enabled them to speak. **Handshake Ritual,** 1978-9, New York City. – Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

maintenance activity in society. Figurations for Braidotti are 'materially embodied' representations which mark different steps in "undoing power relations in the very structures of one's subject position" (Braidotti, 2000: 170). Wash pushed the static conceptions of 'woman' and 'women's work' together in a space to examine the processes of subjectification and the power differentials at work within both conceptions. Braidotti describes how, "the practice of accountability as a relational, collective activity is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narrative" (Braidotti, 2000: 171). The potential to create new narratives which transform and create new subject-positions forms a key element in the performance Touch Sanitation.

In 1977 Ukeles was invited by the New York City Department of Sanitation to be the "unsalaried, official Artist in Residence" (Ukeles, 1995: 184). *Touch Sanitation* formed the basis of a project which directly investigated how sanitation is "trapped in a miasma of essentially pre-democratic perceptions." It involved multiple components spanning a period of six years. One performance within it was entitled *Handshake Ritual* and for Ukleles was a means to "peel away and separate ourselves from the ancient, trans-cultural alienating notion and aura of the caste-stigma of waste-worker, of 'garbage-man'" (Ukeles, 1984: 624). She describes how these designations or incorporeal transformations have always translated into "'their' waste, not 'ours', they're 'dirty', we're 'clean'" (Ukeles, 1984: 62). *Handshake Ritual*

Collective Assemblages, Embodiment and Enunciations **113**
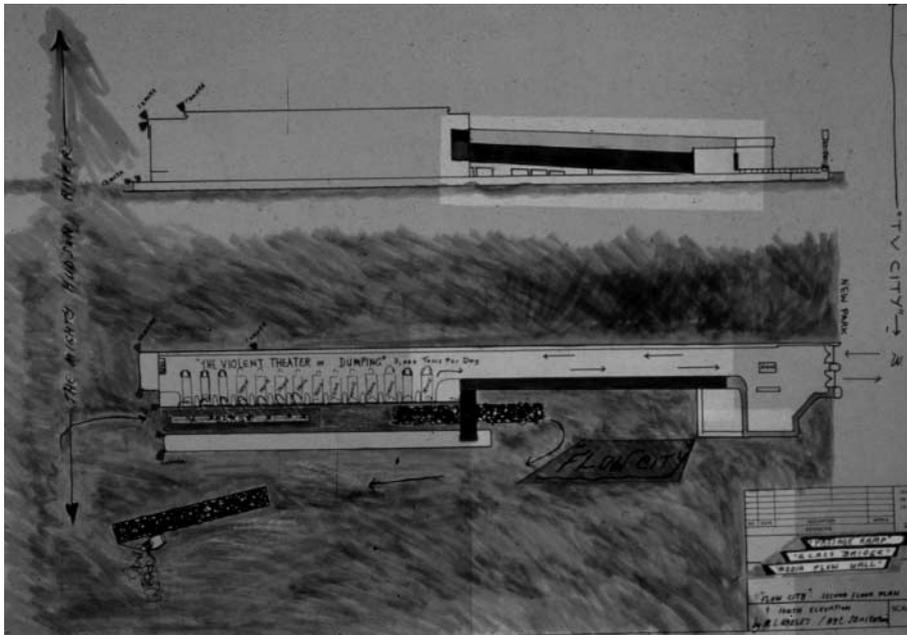
In the juxtaposition of reprentational, directly lived and symboloic aspects, of habitually disregarded everyday processes, "everyday things" are "flushed up to consciousness." **Flow City,** 1983, New York City – *Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York*

was performed from 1978 to 1979 and involved a collaboration with 8,500 city sanitation workers. Over a year and a half Ukeles shook hands with every worker and face to face to each one said "Thank you for keeping New York City Alive" (Ukeles, 1995: 184). During the project her discussions unveiled accounts which confirmed many denigrating and detrimental perceptions. Some workers described how they suffered a barrage of insults when working, others recounted how fears of condemnation had resulted in efforts to hide their profession from neighbours (Philips, 1995: 183). This project offered the space for these workers to voice their individual narratives. It unveiled the speech-acts which positioned them as 'dirty' and at the same time the offer of gratitude expressed in the handshake invented new subject-positions which enabled them to speak.

Flow City is an ongoing project which began in 1983. It is designed around creating a setting within the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station. At a transfer station refuse collected from homes and businesses is loaded onto barges before being shipped to a landfill site. The primary focus of Flow City is a viewing platform entitled 'Glass Bridge', which enables participants to conjoin three contrasting views of city life and urban ecology. To the east lies the abstracted, pristine and static stereotypical panorama of New York City. To the west visitors can directly register what Ukeles describes as the "the city in flux" (Ukeles, 1995: 187). Here, the practices of refuse disposal are witnessed directly in the work of the station's

maintenance staff. To the south Ukeles plans to install the 'Media Flow Wall,' comprising a bank of video monitors programmed with live cameras and prepared sources. Here, the process of waste disposal throughout the city will be documented by artists, ecologists and scientists.

Flow City creates a space which occupies a liminal position between its participants and the dynamics of city life. Although the project has yet to be completed as designed it still grants access to a space from which visitors are normally excluded. This space allows the juxtaposition of representational, directly lived and symbolic aspects, of habitually disregarded everyday processes. Here as Ukeles describes, "everyday things' are "flushed up to consciousness" (Ukeles, 1969 in Philips, 1995: 171). In this way *Flow City* forms a transformative assemblage which engenders the potential for shifts in the conceptual imagination.

Patricia C. Philips observes how for Ukeles the conception of *Flow City* rests on the conviction that "if people can *directly* observe how the city works, they can then direct their actions and ideas toward the construction of a meaningful public life" (Philips, 1995: 188). Here, one's power of thinking is expressed through one's power of being. Ukeles comments that *Flow City* strives to "lift the veils between ourselves and our waste" in order to "see who we are, where we come from, and what we can do" (Ukeles, 1995: 189).

'Being', for Deleuze and Guattari, is mapped in terms of assemblages of extensive and intensive capacities which depend on degrees of relations embracing things and contexts as well as people. Through the feminist readings of Moira Gatens and Rosi Braidotti this "field of transformative effects" (Braidotti, 2000: 159) becomes politically located. For Gatens, the interleaving of bodies and states of affairs opens the way towards new materialisations which work on a conceptual level but are not divorced from the body in their implications for actions. For Braidotti, these new materialisations, pass-words or figurations are necessarily politically located, reconnecting theory with the practices of daily resistance.

In initiating localised counter-responses to everyday processes of stratification which coagulate 'work' and 'art,' 'maintenance' and 'creativity' into binary oppositions, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work operates at a molecular level. This molecular level indicates not a difference in scale but a difference in kind. The writings of Deleuze and Guattari attempt to affect shifts in power relations through theoretical action. The work of Ukeles attempts to realise shifts in conceptions through practical action. These subtle shifts in perception, are not readily quantifiable. Philips observes, "That a change of consciousness, an enhanced awareness of public life, takes place is unassailable but never instantly provable" (Philips, 1995: 185).

Through their location at the interplay of the material social condition, the physical and the symbolic, Ukeles' projects indicate how places of enunciation play a key role in the stratification of power differentials. They demonstrate how places are assemblages of discursive and non-discursive practices, and equally how these practices are also places – spaces in which identities are located. Ultimately for

Ukeles, public art itself becomes a transformative space which, like the immanent theories of Deleuze and Guattari, works in-between, in order to move beyond the binary coagulations of theory/practice, conceptions/actions, mind/body.

References

Bogue, Ronald (1989), *Deleuze and Guattari,* London:Routledge.

Boundas, Constantin V. and Olkowski, Dorothea (1994) (eds.) *Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy,* New York:Routledge.

Braidotti, Rosi (1994a) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory,* New York:Columbia University Press.

Braidotti, Rosi (1994b) 'Toward a New Nomadism', in (eds) Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (1994), *Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy,* New York:Routledge, pp. 159-186.

Braidotti, Rosi (2000) 'Teratologies', in Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (eds), *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, Edinburgh:Edinburgh University Press.

Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex",* New York:Routledge.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1987) *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* Volume 2, Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles (1977) 'Intellectuals and Power' in Bouchard, D.F. & Simons, S. (1977) (eds.) and trans. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univesrity Press.

Felshin, Nina (1995) (ed.) *But is it Art?* Seattle:Bay Press.

Foucault, Michel (1977) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* (ed.) and trans. D.F. Bouchard and S. Simons, Ithaca, New York:Cornell University Press.

Fraser, Miriam (1999) *Identity Without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gatens, Moira (1996a) *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, London:Routledge.

Gatens, Moira (1996b) 'Through a Spinozist Lens: Ethology, Difference, Power', in (ed.) Paul Patton, (1996), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader,* Oxford:Blackwell, pp. 162-187.

Geuss, Raymond (1981) *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt Schoo,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism,* Bloomington:Indiana University Press.

Haraway, Donna (1991) 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* New York: Routledge, pp149-82.

Irigaray, Luce (1985) *This Sex Which is Not One,* trans. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Irigaray, Luce (1993) *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference,* trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Oakes, Baile (ed.) (1995) *Sculpting with the Environment: A Natural Dialogue,* London, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Patton, Paul (1996) (ed.) *Deleuze: A Critical Reader,* Oxford: Blackwell.

Patton, Paul (2000), *Deleuze and the Political,* London: Routledge.

Philips, Patricia C., (1995), 'Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change', in (ed.) Nina Felshin, *But is it Art,* Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 165-193.

Rich, Adrienne (1987) Bread, Blood and Poetry, London: Virago.

Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (eds) (1996) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art,* Berkeley, London: University of California Press.

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman (1969) 'Maintenance Art Manifesto' in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (1996) (eds) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art,* Berkeley, London: University of California Press, pp. 623-624.

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman (1984) 'Sanitation Manifesto!' in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (1996) (eds) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art,* Berkeley, London: University of California Press, pp. 624-625.

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman (1995) 'Mierle Laderman Ukeles', (1995), in Baile Oakes (1995) (ed.) *Sculpting With the Environment: A Natural Dialogue,* London, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, pp. 184-193.