

## Molecular Collaboration – Stuart Tait

A lot of artists are, frankly, idiots. They talk about how collaboration teaches you about the world and yourself, or that it challenges you and changes your practice, but without any reflection on why or how this happens. The most artists can usually say about collaboration is that trust and risk-taking are somehow involved (Freemantle 2012), but without any critical reflection on how that manifests.

This paper has been developed out of my PhD research, which was a practice-led study of collaboration in contemporary art. The research used a hybrid methodology that incorporated literature review (of philosophy, art theory, art history and case studies), research interviews with collaborative groups, and an action research process on four collaborative groups in which I was involved. The methodology allowed for a direct testing of theories developed out of the literature review and interviews in the context of a number of inter-related art groups, developing as a reflexive process.

Standard discussions of collaboration tend to be built upon a series of identities: individuals, groups, projects and the world, which are all dealt with as discrete unities. What I want to propose is a type of collaboration that recognises people's 'molecular' nature and molecularises groups, projects, and even the world. Throughout their writing, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari draw a distinction between molar and molecular formations. They are generally considered as two ways of considering the same phenomenon or situation with the molar being a 'macro' way of considering wholes, structures, and systems of organisation, while the molecular is a 'micro' way of considering changes, particle flows, and the way that elements and forces interact to produce effects (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, p. 279-281).

Molecular and molar are different ways of seeing or 'taking up' the same elements, or the same assemblage, 'as nomadic, polyvocal, rhizomatic, transversal, smooth, processual, intensive and indivisible on the one molecular side; as sedentary, bi-univocal, arborescent, linear, striated, static, extensive, and divisible on the other molar side' (Mullarkey 2006, p. 20). However, this shouldn't be simply thought of as belonging to our own apprehension, whether we perceive things as molar or molecular, but as always intermixed (Mullarkey 2006, p. 20). There is a tendency to think of molecularity and molarity as a distinction of movement and stasis, but Mullarkey writes that even molarity is a movement, 'a making-the-same' (Mullarkey 2006, p. 23). According to Deleuze and Claire Parnet, individuals and groups are made up of 'lines': molar lines of rigid segmentarity, supple lines of segmentarity made from molecular fluxes, and lines of flight that cut right across things and launch us into the unknown (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, pp. 124-5). There is an oscillation between stability and ruptures where neither condition is privileged (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 9).

## **Molarity**

There are three types of movement associated with molar forms. The first is construction of the territory of the group: a territorialising movement. This tends to define the molar formation in terms of a theme, a style, an identity or a 'program' that categorises, defines and delimits a group, so it can be grasped in its entirety, such as trades unions. The second is when individuals move from one 'segment' or 'space of enclosure' to the next, where each stage in the series has its own 'laws' (Deleuze 1992, p 3) such as the movement from student to graduate, or accused to prisoner: a movement from one molar state to another. An example of this second type of movement is the tabard transition in Reactor's Geodecity project, where one makes a symbolic transition from being outside of the project to being a co-participant within it. The final movement could be described as a 'nomadic' movement of whole bodies through space, an example of which is an artists' residency programme in which the identities of the institution and artist remain unproblematised.

## **Molecularity**

Rather than the structure and form of molarity, molecularity is primarily concerned with deterritorialising flows and movements that cross thresholds *other* than the edges traced by molar segments. The molecular fluxes slip between the more rigid structures and categories of our lives. Deleuze and Parnet describe them as the attractions, repulsions, and 'forms of madness that are secret' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p 125). Examples of molecular practices that destabilise structure and problematise molar forms are the paranoid-critical method used by London group The Bughouse and 'fabulation' that constantly throws the idea of truth into doubt, destabilising dominant significations and opening up potential (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p. 41).

## **Lines of Flight**

A line of flight is a deterritorialisation that causes an assemblage to open up towards an unknown future, or to mutate into a new form. These ruptures are often completely unexpected, but can also be provoked or sought out. Lines of flight tend to result from molecularisation but the form and structure of molar formations are not invulnerable to glitches or ruptures. One form of glitch that relates to molar forms is the 'deliberate' glitch, which is inserted into or allowed by a system or project in the knowledge that it will provoke unexpected changes. A third party is often responsible for introducing this kind of rupturing of the molar on purpose. Molecular flows are more likely to create the circumstances for glitches and other ruptures to occur because confluences can have unexpected outcomes. To be clearer about the distinction, a workers' council that arises in response to a particular

issue or situation and then dissolves is a molecular form of organisation. A saboteur is a glitch that provokes a line of flight.

### **Molecular 'dividual' and molecular group**

The function of each artist, or co-participant, within a molecular collaboration is not fixed in the same way as it might be considered within more molar conceptions of collaboration, but is in a state of flux and enters into temporary alliance with other parts of the group, and other collaborative groups. Each artist, or co-participant, has different capacities actualised in each different group and so can be thought of as what Deleuze refers to as dividuals rather than individuals. (Deleuze 1992) The subjectivities of participants and collaborators are not fixed. Group names are no longer proper names, but as in the case of *The Bughouse*, are adjectives that connote shifting regions whose territories overlap with other regions. What I am proposing with the notion of molecular collaboration is that the 'region' of each group's practice can overlap or connect with other regions and thereby form new configurations, which have the potential to produce new relations and new worlds. In the same way that a piece in the game of Go plays a particular role, has particular capacities, depending on its position within the assemblage of the whole game, at a given point in time, artists and groups have different capacities activated in different assemblages. These capacities and assemblages condition each other and are imminent to each other (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 353).

In a 1938 presentation to members of the College of Sociology<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille delivered a presentation on behalf of Roger Caillois from a set of notes on the subject of secret societies in which he describes a dichotomy in society between cohesion and ferment (Caillois 1988, p. 152). In his pre-ambles to the presentation, Bataille described how 'the "elective community" or "secret society" is a form of secondary organization that possesses constant characteristics and to which recourse is always possible when the primary organization of society can no longer satisfy all the desires that arise' (Caillois 1988, p. 149). The secret society introduces a glitch into the functions of society. It exists for its own sake and as such stands as a negation of political structures that would make necessary the founding rule of all human activity (Caillois 1988, p. 155) and should therefore also be distinguished from 'conspiratorial societies' which are 'formed expressly with an action in mind distinct from their own existence: in other words, societies formed to act and not to exist' (Caillois

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<sup>1</sup> The College of Sociology was a group of French intellectuals who came together out of dissatisfaction with surrealism, which they believed privileged the individual at the expense of society. They sought to understand humanity through moments of intense communal experience. It is worth noting that the College of Sociology itself takes the form of a secret society.

1988, p. 154). The secret society stands as an autonomous, molecular, association, whereas the conspiratorial society is a heteronomous, molar, organisation.

For Caillois, secret societies introduce turbulence (molecular fluxes) into ‘encrusted’ (molar) society, and this is one argument for molecularising our collaborative practice. The molecular flows between group regions can lead to unpredictable encounters between practices or people that can send the project off on a line of flight towards an unknowable future. The molecular sets up the conditions for the novel line of flight. We do not need a blueprint, we do not need a structure, what we need is potentialities.

What Stewart Home calls the ‘heroic’ phase (Home 1991, pp. 31 & 50) of groups, when they are at their most developmental and active, is their period of ‘becoming’. Once they have a fixed identity or ideology (being), their capacity to be productive and creative is constrained. If they then cannot adapt to changing conditions, they end. If a collaboration is to be sustainable, it needs a process by which it can remain ‘heroic’, or maintain a processual ‘becoming’.

Although a group might become fixed under certain conditions of habit or ideology, and therefore too rigid to adjust to new conditions around it, adopting the mind set of molecular collaboration means that groups frequently ‘scramble’ or molecularise each other, provoking new spirals of change. This can be the case where groups intersect each other, or when a group is composed of artists who have multiple practices. There are spirals of change happening at all levels from the individual, to the group, to the overall molecular collaboration with each affecting the conditions of the scales of magnitude above and below it simultaneously, producing new becomings, new relations, and new practices. Focusing on states of ‘being’ instead of processes of ‘becoming’ would severely limit this revolutionary process, but it is dangerous to give up states of being altogether since, as Deleuze and Parnet warn, the danger of the line of flight is that it can run away with itself and become a line of abolition or destruction (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p. 142). Molecular collaboration relies on flirting with this line of abolition, risking a complete failure of the collaborative group, encouraging it to be scrambled and mutated, with the danger of it being completely destroyed, because it is only in this manner that truly creative configurations emerge.

When writing about Ania Bas’ residency at New Art Gallery Walsall, curator Helen Jones recalled that “Ania embraced being part of the gallery team and worked directly with all departments; from cleaning staff to security, the programming team to the finance department. It was rather unusual for me not to be the channel through which all residency information was shared and publicised. The gallery as a whole was her collaborative partner.” (Freemantle 2012: 5)

What is missed in this account is the fact that this probably has as much to do with Bas as a person as it does with her practice. I took part in a residency at the same gallery a while after Bas, with the art group AAS, and we tried to engage the gallery staff in the manner described here, but we were met with resistance to participating. There are several factors at play here; Bas is a solo artist, a young woman, she is very personable, and what she sought in terms of participation was relatively undemanding. Whereas AAS has a core group of four, intense people (two men, two women) who make very demanding work that requires a fundamental questioning of the nature and conditions of 'reality', encouraging people to problematise their own personal identity while still maintaining daily functioning. Bas's level of engaged participation is held up as example of successful participation judged in terms of numbers of participants and institution-wide acceptance, but the molar distinctions between the categories of artist, curator, and institution are not problematised. Our engagement with the gallery was judged as difficult, we were often rejected, and one christian member of staff even resigned because we had performed a cleansing ritual around the gallery building. While we found it difficult to deal with the gallery and its staff in molecular terms, we did manage to explore different ways of engaging with the backspaces of the building, such as escape stairwells and corridors. We also developed our interest in performance scores in relation to an exhibition of Fluxus books at the gallery, and some aspects of our practice mutated through contact with the performance group AuntyNazi. We invited them to collaborate with us on part of the residency and the differences in working practices and glitches in communication caused extreme tension between individuals, leading to new, anxious, work that was outside anything either group usually produced.

In most commentary about participatory art practice maximum success comes with maximum participation, in terms of numbers. A project's success is defined by its ability to build consensus and to produce a participatory community in the work, and host galleries want this to emerge smoothly and with minimum demands on them. This means artists are encouraged to confine themselves to convivial relationships that make few demands of their participants and remain within the parameters of what is comfortable for everyone. However, an art practice that stays within acceptable boundaries of what is comfortable, comprehensible and safe for its audience, participants or co-participants does not fulfill what for Félix Guattari is the main characteristic of art, that it be a technology for transformation. If we do not leave room for dissensus, we have neoliberalism or fascism (Rancière 2010).

The processes in molecular collaboration whereby subjects enter into practices composed of molecular becomings where they and the situation develop together is analogous to Todd May's notion of poststructuralist anarchism, which is based upon experimentation in contact with local conditions, and

which affirms liberty from dominant systems (May 1994). Collectivity should not be a static entrenchment of 'a' collective, but molecular and plural, and as Mark Seem writes in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, 'Once we forget about our egos a non-neurotic form of politics becomes possible, where singularity and collectivity are no longer at odds with each other, and where collective expressions of desire are possible' (Seem 1984, pxxi).

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