

## Tactical aesthetics. Some partial declarations.

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As a proposition, tactical aesthetics imagines an art practice for myself (a white settler-Australian woman) that seeks to avoid reinforcing and reproducing oppressive political structures. In an attempt to answer the question, 'What are tactical aesthetics?' I am presenting here sixteen partial declarations. They don't provide a definitive answer to that question because tactical aesthetics are inherently unsettled, self-contradictory and undefinable. Nonetheless these partial declarations provide some framework for understanding them.

### 1. *Tactical aesthetics is a concept and therefore a tool*

*Let us never cease from thinking—what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men?*  
Virginia Woolf (1938)

It is useful to think about tactical aesthetics as a concept in the sense developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *What is Philosophy?* (1996) and elaborated on by Elizabeth Grosz in her essay "The Future of Feminist Theory" (2011). (These ideas of the concept follow from Immanuel Kant's (1998) explanation of human knowledge as a result of the distinct and separate effects of intuition and concepts.) As she works out what the future of feminist theory might be, and precisely what theory is, Grosz aligns theory with Deleuze and Guattari's specific idea of the concept and situates it within the developing trajectory of the cosmos. She says, 'Concepts are one of the ways in which the living address and attempt to deal with the chaos which surrounds them'(78). In other words, concepts are tools. She says that without concepts, 'we have no horizon for the new, no possibility of overcoming the weight of the present, no view of what might be, only the weighty inertia of what is. Without concepts, without theory, practice has no *hope*, its goal is only reversal and redistribution, not transformation'(83).

Understanding tactical aesthetics as a concept means seeing it as a way of thinking through the forces that act on contemporary art, and as Grosz says, as a way of addressing a future

that is different from the present (80). Thinking a new concept enables an outside to the already determined paradigm of contemporary art. Grosz says, the concept ‘adds to the world ... imbues it with the possibility of being otherwise,’ it is ‘how we welcome a people to come, a world to come, a movement beyond ourselves, rather than simply affirming what we are’ (81). In a lecture given to film students at La Fémis in Paris, Deleuze said, ‘Concepts do not exist ready-made in a kind of heaven waiting for some philosopher to come grab them. Concepts have to be produced. Of course you can’t just make them like that. ... There has to be a necessity...’ (2006, 313). As a concept, tactical aesthetics is a tool for an alternative paradigm, because there is a need for one.

## *2. Tactical aesthetics, as a concept, might not be adequate*

At the same time, American poet and theorist Fred Moten questions the adequacy of ‘concepts.’ When he is talking about the continued invention and use of new concepts he says, ‘... we can’t just keep going on like this. The conceptual apparatuses at our disposal are inadequate and we’re just spinning our wheels in a lot of ways. ... It doesn’t mean that what’s needed is a new theoretical disposition, it’s really a new set of moral dispositions about how we treat one another and talk to one another. And it goes against the grain of someone being able to achieve an adequate theoretical perspective on things themselves.’ (Moten 2016, 41:26).

## *3. Tactical aesthetics is a tactical concept*

I am proposing tactical aesthetics as a tactic and not as a strategy. Although the recent history of the word ‘tactical’ has military associations, it comes from the Greek *taktike techne* which means the ‘art of arrangement’ and *taktikos* ‘of or pertaining to arrangement.’ You can see this meaning in our contemporary word ‘taxonomy.’ The distinction Michel de Certeau makes between actions that are ‘strategies’ and actions that are ‘tactics’ is useful here (1984, 34). For Certeau, a strategy comes from a relationship of power to place, and a tactic is the opposite—it has no ‘proper locus’ and ‘is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power’ (36-7, 38). Tactical aesthetics has no strategic power (except that which is in this very acknowledgement).

#### 4. *Tactical aesthetics is a tacking concept*

Tactical aesthetics are about changing direction while heading into the wind.

#### 5. *Tactical aesthetics is a tacky concept (1)*

The extra 'k' in the word tactical points to its tacky nature. Tactical aesthetics are not, nor claim to be, high art. Horses of very little value.

#### 6. *Tactical aesthetics is a tacky concept (2)*

*We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction.*

*Back to the rough ground!*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967, 46)

Tactical aesthetics are also tacky because they are sticky. They resist smooth operations and look to a sticky relationality for form and function.

#### 7. *Tactical aesthetics is a way of tacking things together*

*The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others.*

Donna Haraway (2016, 31)

#### 8. *Tactical aesthetics is a relational concept*

*If you see yourself as part of me and I'm part of you, if we have that relationship then..., we can move together.*

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Browning 2016, 00:10:49)

Tactical aesthetics are inspired by Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's proposition that racism could be overcome if I see myself as part of you and you as part of me. She says, 'In Indigenous cultural domains relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory' (2000, 16). Tactical aesthetics cannot exist outside of this mode of seeing you as part of me, and me as part of you. This is its essence.

Relationality is also a feminist concept. Audre Lorde (1984, 123) says: 'The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.' Although, what I am proposing is not a *new* pattern of relating across difference. It is, in fact, a very old one.

### 9. *Tactical aesthetics is not related to shock tactics*

The tactics I am discussing here are not related to the concept of 'shock tactics' which are a common feature of contemporary politics and art. Shock tactics were arguably used to greatest effect in Australia by Mike Parr in his piece *Cathartic action: social gestus No. 5* (1977). In this piece, Parr attached a realistic prosthetic limb stuffed with meat to his congenitally short arm and proceeded to hack it off with an axe. In her essay on the ethical value of producing discomfort through art, Australian artist and scholar Barbara Bolt (2015, 61) writes that 'as the lifeless arm lay on the table a profound shock registered in the gathered crowd.' Bolt notes how Jean-François Lyotard's 1984 essay 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' makes the case that shock 'provides the foundations of the transformative power of art' (61). Lyotard (1984, 40) paralleled the shock required to achieve the effect of the sublime—the intangible, momentary, awesome effect of art—with 'hypercapitalism.' He says, 'The arts, ... pressed forward by the esthetics of the sublime in a quest for intense effects ... must test their limits through surprising, difficult, shocking combinations. Shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing at all.' Noting 'a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde,' he said, '[t]here is something of the sublime in capitalist economy...one thinks one is expressing the spirit of the moment, whereas one is merely reflecting the spirit of the marketplace. Sublimity no longer is in art, but in speculating on art' (43).

Social activist Naomi Klein (2007) made explicit neoliberalism's use of shock to further its own agenda in her book *The Shock Doctrine*. Tactical aesthetics does not employ shock tactics because, following Klein and Lyotard's logic, doing so mirrors and reinforces hegemonic practices.

### 10. *Tactical aesthetics is underwhelming*

Without shock tactics or the generation of discomfort, tactical aesthetics might leave the viewer or participant feeling underwhelmed. Tactical aesthetics seek to evoke other emotions with the audience, or maybe more radically, no emotions—a state of underwhelm. If shock tactics provide 'the foundations of the transformative power of art,' what might an underwhelming tactic provide?

11. *Tactical aesthetics might be decolonising/deinstitutionalising/destabilising/  
divesting/defamiliarising/deterritorialising*

*The value of thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar.*  
Theodor Adorno (2005, 80)

In the introduction to the issue of the literary journal *Plumwood Mountain* called 'Decolonisation and Geopoetics', Peter Minter (2016) wrote 'Decolonisation can be shared by everyone ... for everyone needs to take responsibility for imagining their own unique kind of transformation. ... (W)e have to think about how non-Indigenous form, western form, romantic form, lyrical form, white form, have a responsibility to current and future cultural conditions.' In her article for *Overland*, Evelyn Araluen (2017) says settler colonials working in the space of decolonisation are expected to be accountable for their material realities and lived experiences and to take responsibility for the privileges of citizenship.

Tactical aesthetics is a form of divestment from, as Felix Guattari says, the idea of subjectivity as 'the number one objective' of contemporary, capitalist society (Guattari and Zahm 2011, 40). It is also a way of 'getting out of the way' which is what Australian academic Sarah Maddison proposes progressive Australians do to ensure First Nations people can 'thrive as equal citizens with other Australians' (2019, xxxvii, xx).

12. *Tactical aesthetics finds itself in a double bind*

*To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter.*  
Judith Butler (2016, 100)

For a white artist wanting to question privileges, it is necessary to acknowledge the double-bind that this involves. This term defined by Gregory Bateson (1972, 206) refers to what might appear to be an ethical or philosophical paradox but is really an 'unresolvable sequence of experience' and 'a situation in which no matter what a person does,' they can't win. Using white privilege to question white privilege or addressing and critiquing and somehow trying to come to terms with the privilege of the institutions that enable art practices creates a double bind. For me, the privilege of being white and middle-class, is undeniable and always there.

Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2013) sees this space of the double bind as an important place to dwell in, and advises not rushing out of it in either direction, too quickly. Others have talked about being in this space as awkward or difficult or uncomfortable or

problematic or unsettling (Harney and Moten 2013, Lentin and Titley 2011, Moreton-Robinson 2007, Wynter 2003, Tuck and Yang 2012). All the same, the double bind is not a place to occupy. In their article, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor,' American scholars Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang (2012, 23) talk about the Occupy movement as 'another settler re-occupation on stolen land.' For this reason, taktical aesthetics is situated in, but does not occupy, a double bind.

### *13. Taktical aesthetic is an ethico-aesthetic*

Taktical aesthetics is what Brian Massumi would call 'an ethical endeavour' (2002, xxii). It is an ethico-aesthetic concept. This idea of the ethico-aesthetic was developed in the mid 1990s by Felix Guattari, who in his text *Chaosmosis* takes further Martin Heidegger's distinction between aesthetics as an experience and aesthetics as a way of being. (1995)

### *14. Taktical aesthetics embraces criticality and smuggling as a methodology*

British-Israeli curator Irit Rogoff (2006) talks about moving from criticism to critique to 'criticality'. She says, criticality wants 'to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.' It means acknowledging that we all live and work under constrained conditions, that we are all subject to a world run in a neoliberal fashion. Working from a space of criticality means, to some extent, having already done the work of critique. Being able to 'analyse and unveil' while sharing and 'living out the very conditions we are able to live through.'

Audre Lorde (1984, 124) similarly said that we need to recognise the 'old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression' that are built within us and that 'these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures.' Rogoff uses the idea of smuggling to illustrate how criticality can work to transform society in this way. Smuggling is both the subject matter and methodology of her practice; she thinks about smuggling as 'an operational device.' Taktical aesthetics is a practice of smuggling.

### *15. Taktical aesthetics, as a relational concept, embraces singularisation*

Taktical aesthetics is about performing a way of being so that I can see myself as part of you and you as part of me. For Guattari, this is 'singularisation' (Guattari and Rolnik 2008,

23). In contrast to neoliberalism's mode of individualising, tactical aesthetics is a mode of creativity that aims to produce 'a singular subjectivity' (23), that as Rogoff (2010, 42) says is a way of 'coming together and producing relations and agendas that do not emanate from shared identities, shared ideologies, shared belief systems.'

Art, for Guattari (1995, 106), 'engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being.' In its effort to embrace relationality, tactical aesthetics offers people 'diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their repetitive impasses and ... to resingularise themselves' (1995, 7).

*16. Tactical aesthetics is fragile and prone to self-destruction.*

*Everything tangled in the string of everything else.  
When her cat vomited, she thought she heard the word praxis.*  
Patricia Lockwood (2019)

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