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**AN ETHOLOGY OF  
URBAN FABRIC(S)**

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*... no one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of; it is a long affair of experimentation...  
(Deleuze 1988, 125)*

With this piece, we wish to open up a patchwork of relational thinking of the ethology of urban fabric(s) from a post-digital perspective. The semantic of the urban fabric normally denotes the “physical aspect of urbanism, emphasizing building types, thoroughfares, open space, frontages, and streetscapes but excluding (the) environmental, functional, economic and sociocultural [...]” (Wikipedia), from an ideal top-down perspective (see e.g. Bricoleur Urbanism). Here, however, we would like to explore a non-metaphorical understanding of urban fabric(s), shifting the attention from a bird’s eye perspective to the actual, textural manifestations of a variety of urban fabric(s) to be studied in their real, processual, ecological and ethological complexity within urban life. We effectuate this move by bringing into resonance a range of intersecting fields that all deal with urban fabric(s) in complementary ways (interaction design and urban design activism, fashion, cultural theory, philosophy, urban computing).

We wish to underline that this is a conceptually explorative piece written in the first year of the 7-year grant *IMMEDIATIONS: Art, Media, Event*. Rather than presenting defining arguments, we wish to sketch out a field of questioning that can inform future interventionist or practice-based experimentation — or research-creation — within an academic context. At this moment, we are using the notion of urban fabric(s) to produce conceptual and relational trajectories we want to investigate further during the project. To us, this means following and unfolding the conceptual richness in a number of directions, drawing on the ambiguity of the notion of fabric(s), from textures to textiles, but always in relation to the urban, and within the

frame of the post-digital, meaning the thinking and organizing procedures (networking, relational procedures, rhizomes) that we have culturally approached through the novelty value of the recent digital phase.

In this article, rather than attempting to pin down the notion of urban fabric(s) to any absolute definition, we want to open up lines of thought and experimentation around the concept by sketching out possible ethological dimensions to be considered. We take the term ethology from Deleuze’s book, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, where he states the following:

*Ethology is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing. For each thing these relations and capacities have an amplitude, thresholds (maximum and minimum), and variations or transformations that are peculiar to them. And they select, in the world or in Nature, that which corresponds to the thing; that is, they select what affects or is affected by the thing, that moves it or is moved by it. For example, given an animal, what is this animal unaffected by in the infinite world? What does it react to positively or negatively? What are its nutriments and its poisons? What does it “take” in its world? Every point has its counterpoints: the plant and the rain, the spider and the fly. So an animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior. The speed or slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions, and reactions link together to constitute a particular individual in the world. (Deleuze, Spinoza 125)*

Looking into the ethological workings of urban fabrics directs our attention towards a range of possible areas of investigation and propositions, among other things:

- *What is the velocity of urban fabric(s)?*
- *What characterizes urban fabric in terms of amplitude, thresholds, variations, transformations; what affects or is affected by urban fabric(s)?*
- *What relations and capacities emerge through the processes concerned with the creation and distribution of urban fabric(s)?*
- *What interfaces between (what kinds of) exterior and interior are produced by urban fabric(s) (animal-organic, skin-textile/skin-city, language-fabric, habit-character)?*
- *How does this relate to the intensity in the formation/transformation of habits, perceptions, actions, movements in urban environments?*

In the following we will sketch out some lines of thought relating to in particular the first two of these four questions, moving towards propositions for possible forms of experimentation and expositions with the relational aspects of urban fabric(s).

## Velocity of urban fabric(s)

When asking what the velocity of urban fabrics might be, two main themes occur; the speed vs. slowness of fashion in the past and the present and the temporary nature of the built environment in a post-digital perspective.

In fashion, novelty and modernity have been aligned with the shifts and modi of

fashion (*la mode*) since 1850, and considering that the development of capitalism had its take-off from the industrial production of linen by the meter (the Jacquard loom/weave), novelty in fashion has been a very visible force for the understanding of 'time as progress'. The aesthetic novelty in the form of a folding, a lace trimming, a color shade or a cut in its always renewed relational connectivity with bodies and urban surroundings has been an essential part of the aesthetic attraction of fashion. In Charles Baudelaire's essay on modernity from 1859 this passion for the transitory, fugitive element is an important indicator of the painter of modern life's ability to be on par with his time:

*In texture and weave [...] [modern manufacture; our note] are quite different from the fabrics of ancient Venice or those worn at the court of Catherine. Furthermore the cut of skirt and bodice is by no means similar; the pleats are arranged according to a new system. Finally the gesture and the bearing of the woman of today give to her dress a life and a special character which are not those of the woman of the past. In short, for any 'modernity' to be worthy of one day taking its place as 'antiquity', it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it. (Baudelaire 13)*

To distill beauty from the fugitive moment became the task of Baudelaire himself as Walter Benjamin has noted in his essays on the relationship between the city of Paris and the modern poet, assembled in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Benjamin 2006). Baudelaire was aware that poetry was just as transitory as fashion and that clothings as well as books were goods at the marketplace, and that he

like the designer of fashion had to know life as it is lived by the crowd in the streets in order to illuminate these impressions of the transitory moment to modern art. The new metropolis of Paris became a second skin for the reader of modern life. Baudelaire became a forerunner of the material analysis of the culture of modernity, later carried out by Benjamin and Michel Foucault. They both wanted to read modernity by its traces on the skin by digging into the structures and technologies applied in everyday life. In his essay, "What is Enlightenment?", Michel Foucault comments on Baudelaire's text in length underlining that his method of unravelling the meaning of modernity is not just being sensitive to 'the fleeting present'. It is far more a question of having a 'will to "heroize" the present', by performing as the so called 'dandy' who must 'invent himself' in order to produce art that could still affect the masses in the urban environment of the metropolis (Foucault 1984). This brings to Foucault's method the necessity to step back from universal values in art and transcendental ideas in philosophy to propose instead his well-known archaeological method and its genealogical research design described as 'experimental': 'it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think' (Foucault 1984).

What connects the methods of Baudelaire, Benjamin and Foucault is a search for new beginnings on par and in touch with the textures of the social formation of their own time. This entails a reconsideration of the formative technologies and organizational patterns of society and culture – in order to analytically grasp the *material* formations of lives lived and performed within systems of fashion, architecture, archival systems etc. But whereas Baudelaire wanted to extract the poetics of modernity from his

experiences with (amongst other things) the novelty of fashion, Benjamin wanted to keep open an awareness of the social body involved in the aesthetic experiences of modernity, and Foucault wanted to question the disciplinary, driving forces of power. Foucault's main question in "What is Enlightenment?" is phrased: 'How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?' (Foucault 1984).

This question must in a contemporary context be posed differently, since disconnection in revolutionary terms has declined in favour of an awareness of the relational and affective connections and forces involved in networks that are rapidly becoming the weaved fabric of almost all connectivity in society. Foucault's society of control and surveillance indeed plays an important part of this fabric, but the relationship between individual and dividual, between speed and slowness has indeed changed with the overlapping networks. This entails that we can no longer inhabit the position of dandyism nor extract allegorical connectivities between past and present and furthermore envisage what the *dispositif* of our time would look like. The challenge as well as the potential of our time is to acknowledge that each event holds a virtual openness involving past or futurity in the actual change taking place. So, just as each modulation of digital sound or image data changes the whole, each modulation, vibration or stretching of the forces of the velocity of urban fabric(s) affects the whole.

In line of the above arguments, the contemporary recycling of former fashion clothings can be seen as a digging into (imaginary) spaces belonging to older or disappeared spaces and places in the city, forming our experiences of the urban fabric(s) anew. The culture of recycling, reusing and the compilation of fabrics belonging to different clothings and body-sizes have developed into a new ecological model of business in

which the relational capacities of body and fabric are re-thought and re-worn. This 'slowing down of fashion' in order to focus on affect and appreciate the relational production of spaces and places in connectivity with the ethology of the fabric-becoming-body is further touched upon in the section Relational Capacities.

Focusing on the temporary nature of the built environment, we want to move from a top-down understanding of urban fabric(s) to the actual configurations and compositions of texture and their relation to experience in and of the urban sphere. Here, we are interested in the use of different forms of duration relating to the materiality of the cityscape, as well as in the changes in velocity and perception with the advent of digital activations of the city in the light of urban computing (see e.g. Greenfield & Shepard 2007) through mobile phones, media facades, urban screens and the like. The velocity of the built environment can be sped up or slowed down – disrupted – through the use of digital layers, changing our perception of the built city, as seen in the artistic practices of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (<http://www.lozano-hemmer.com>), United Visual Artists (<http://www.uva.co.uk/work>) and the Graffiti Research Lab (<http://www.graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/>).

In addition, a range of practices have arisen around the creation of temporary urban spaces, among others the Danish-based Institut for (X) who are working actively with emerging spaces in the city as part of their artistic and investigative practice, as seen in the project 'Platform 4' (<http://www.detours.biz/projects/platform-4/>). For a large part, Institut for (X) use wood to build structures that can easily be dismantled again. Looking at interventionist strategies such as Urban/Guerilla Gardening and Urban/Guerilla Knitting (<http://knitthecity.com>), it might be argued, from an ethological point of view, that we are witnessing the complexity of the

'speeding up' of the built infrastructure somehow merging with a 'slowing down' through the agency of more or less analog — post-digital? — materials, textures, fabric(s) and data.

The two trajectories presented in this section — concerning the speed vs. slowness of fashion and the temporary nature of the built environment in a post-digital perspective — in particular direct our attention towards the entanglement of human ideas, technologies, market mechanisms, power relations and individual and collective actions continuously shaping — and taking shape from — the urban fabric(s). The next section will further elaborate on this relation drawing in particular on the philosophy of Jacques Rancière and the work of Hito Steyerl to more closely unfold the characterizations of urban fabric(s).

## Characterizations of urban fabric(s)

When attempting to analyze what affects or is affected by urban fabric(s) through looking into what characterizes urban fabric(s) in terms of amplitude, thresholds, variations, transformations, we must explore how the urban fabric(s) we want to sketch out two (admittedly rather general) points of entry; how does the urban fabric affect our ability to act in the city and secondly, how does it act upon us and how is this manifested in the fabric?

Considering the first point of entry, we want an ethological understanding of urban fabric(s) to take into account the ways in which it distributes the sensible, the aesthetics of the urban fabric(s) (Rancière 2004). The urban fabric(s) conditions our (common) everyday perception of the city, the actions we

undertake (or not), on what Brian Massumi terms a microperceptual level — with, what might be termed, macropolitical implications (Massumi 2009). Massumi links the notion of microperception to that of micropolitics, resonating with Rancière's notions of the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics, where the latter lies “[...] in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabrics of sensory experience” (Rancière 2010, 140). To Rancière, these artistic practices of re-configuration can establish a “[...] dissensual re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation.” (Rancière 140).

Thomas Markussen has explored how this might be investigated through designerly practices of urban activism using the “[...] sensuous material of the city while exploring the particular elements of urban experience” (Markussen 41). According to Markussen, who also builds on the work of Rancière, urban design activism ‘uses the sensuous material of the city while exploring the particular elements of urban experience’ (41). He mentions a range of examples, e.g. Institute for Applied Autonomy’s iSee-project allowing people to choose the least surveilled routes through urban spaces (<http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html>) and Santiago Cirugedas Recatas Urbanas (Urban Prescriptions), exploring the relation between the regulations of the city municipality and the need for extra room through the construction of scaffolds which are then turned into places of dwelling (<http://www.recetasurbanas.net/index1.php?idioma=ENG&REF=1&ID=0003>). These projects can be said to experiment with the way in which urban fabric(s) can be renegotiated through artistic and designerly experimentation, highlighting existing distributions of the sensible on a microperceptual and political level, offering ways for people to engage with the urban fabric(s) to act upon this.

The entry into the second point — how urban fabric acts upon us and how it is manifested in the fabric — can be opened by Hito Steyerl’s video installation for Documenta XII, 2007, *Lovely Andrea* ([http://www.ubu.com/film/steyerl\\_andrea.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/steyerl_andrea.html)). In Steyerl’s search for an image of Japanese bondage, that was taken of her in 1987, she documents on the one hand that power relations within a contemporary visual dominance does create an endless appetite for images of ‘truth’ and ‘freedom’, and on the other hand that images can create facts and can produce realities to unravel the interconnectedness of bondage and webs. Her examples that she weaves together are bondage girls, Spiderman and prisoners at Guantánamo Bay. Like the cobweb serves the purpose of attracting and capture, weaved fabrics, web-designs and the Internet all leave marks in the skin and connects us to buildings, archives and urban distribution and traffic (cf. trafficking). In Steyerl’s case the unraveling of the web actually generates an idea about the scale and amplitude of trades and transactions of bonding. The thresholds that determine Steyerl’s access to her own image are spelled out as ‘the cameraman’ and ‘the studio’.

The discursive ownerships belonging to the 1980s are still controlling the entry points to the material archives, but the search machines of the internet archives have for a long time attracted our appetite for ‘new material’. If this material is thought of as all the archives and databases of the Internet the thresholds are easily identified as Google, Facebook etc. — and the code is the password, that includes and excludes. In 1990 Deleuze wrote in “Postscript on the Societies of Control” on the (then future) web control that the code — “one’s (dividual) electronic card” — would grant or deny access to “one’s apartment, one’s street, one’s neighborhood” creating a universal modulation. Deleuze compared his modulation, i.e.



the processes by which we connect or are denied access to the weave of the Internet archive, to the coils of the serpent — whereas societies based upon disciplinary systems of control described by Foucault are compared to the ethology of mole and molehill. This line of thought makes it possible to think of the serpent in its relation to its coil as a rubbing between two surfaces — the skin and the ground. The friction created is becoming the new fiction, the affective field of creation. The fabric (of the ground) is just as much affected by the skin as the other way around. The skin leaves traces and form patterns in the fabric (of urbanity, the Internet, the brain) just as the fabric determines the possible coiled movements (of the snake).

Actively experimenting with the distributions of the sensible that characterize urban fabric(s), reconfiguring our possibilities for sensory experience through activist, design-erly interventions into, amongst other things, the archives and databases that are increasingly in-forming the patterns of these fabric(s) and our experience of them, is at the core of the general project initiated by this article. Tapping into new frictional and fictional affective fields of creation focuses on uncovering existing amplitudes, thresholds, variations, transformations in the ethological workings of urban fabric(s), which will be developed in relational terms in the next section.

## **Relational capacities of urban fabric(s) (distribution and creation)**

Talking about the relational capacities of urban fabric, we want to investigate the creation and distribution of fabric and textiles on a local and global scale. On a global scale, it is possible to look into and critically account for

the complex networks of production of fabric — clothes, books, archival material on the Internet, economic transactions — to suggest a starting point. We have not yet developed a vocabulary to address this but are looking for ways to move into these explorations. An example of a recent project that deals with some of these issues is in fact entitled the Urban Fabric Project ([www.urbanfabricproject.com](http://www.urbanfabricproject.com)). The project focuses on American textile cities, and how they have been shaped when the industries have departed from these cities, leaving them disenfranchised and struggling. Here, the aim is to show how it is possible to revitalize these cities — but it would also be important to trace and diagram the new globalized systems of distribution and creation emerging from the decline of these American textile cities.

Locally, we are interested in the above-mentioned business models of recycled clothes appearing around flea markets and re-sewing businesses (<http://www.melangedeluxe.dk/conditions/>). Also, we see examples of shops appearing where you have to donate a piece of clothes to buy a new one, suggesting new forms of distribution and altering power relations. In addition, bringing it back to a global scale, we want to pursue what happens to the recycled clothes and how this can be inserted into other-than-urban loops and what that might entail. Whereas this might seem rather 'down to earth' or even simplistic following from the previous section, we do see a potential for these investigations to enter more complex conceptual infrastructures through the analysis and experiments with different kinds of creation, distribution and circulation of urban fabric(s). In addition, we wish to explore how this might relate to textures and not only textiles.

Although this might be argued to be the least developed part of the ethology of urban fabric(s), we believe there is great potential

in tying these explorations together with the previous sections to allow for a diagrammatic conceptualization of the relational complexity at stake here.

## Exterior/interior of urban fabric(s) (interfaces)

One way of exemplifying what generates the surface for contemporary interfaces between art and technology is definitely the software as a weave of algorithmic codings. In the case of interactive architecture or media facades, where buildings become interfaces, and the relation between the interior/exterior is broken up, we can argue, with Rancière, that these algorithmic codings are in fact re-distributing the sensible through an (inter) activation of the urban fabric(s):

*This is not a simple matter of an 'institution', but of the framework of the distributions of space and the weaving of fabrics of perception. Within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speed and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning.*  
(Rancière 2010, 141)

In continuation of this line of thought we might ask: What interfaces between (what kinds of) exterior and interior are produced by urban fabric(s) (animal-organic, skin-textile/skin-city, language-fabric, habit-character)? The animal-organic-artificial relations concern the raw material of the production of fabric (e.g. wool-bamboo-polyester) and its relation to the distribution of the sensible through affective fields. The skin-textile

activates a thinking of the skin and textile as surfaces that co-constitute complex inter-weavings of texture and fabric, as developed in the previous section through the story of the serpent. The language-fabric relation is etymological and can be used to develop the relation between text and textile, where text has etymological roots to both 'weaving' and 'tissue'. An interesting example here concerns the Minoan script of 'Linear B' (approximately 1250 B.C.) in which the content of the communication relates directly to the production of textiles (e.g. how many sheep are needed to produce a garment). This relation between the number of sheep and a garment has long since been lost, but today's fabric of networks have nevertheless opened the possibility to dig into the material relationality involved in interfaces of many kinds. In this project, it is our ambition to generate material fabrics that invite to experiment with the velocities, characterizations and the relational capacities of interfaces between animal-organic, skin-textile/skin-city, language-fabric, habit-character.

## Experiments and expositions

As outlined in this article, we believe urban fabric(s) can be questioned through critical conceptual, artistic and designerly experimentation, bringing forth existing ideological, sometimes totalitarian, distributions of the sensible on a micropereceptual and political level, offering ways for people to act upon the normalized distribution of urban fabric(s) through infra-ordinary micro-revolutions. Concurrently with the conceptual investigations of a possible ethology of urban fabric(s), we are contemplating how to go about this kind of experimentation, which



we want to aim at different distributions of the sensible — dissensus — through new interweavings, interactions and interfaces that rupture relations and invent new relationships. Re-thinking the notion of ‘fiction’, Rancière argues that it is possible to change ‘[...] existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective’ (Rancière 2010, 141). In future projects, we want to situate this kind of interventionist or practice-based experimentation within an academic context as a kind of diagrammatic practices of research-creation.

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