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# On Critique

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I wanted to follow up on the discussion thread about the organization of the event. As a co-instigator of the series of events and a member of the organizing committee, I bear a large share of the responsibility for the “noncritical” approach. In view of this, I thought I might explain some of the background to the adoption of that approach, as I have understood it. For me, there were three principal starting points. The first was the distinction that Deleuze makes between criticism and critique. The second, entirely related to the first, was a statement by Isabelle Stengers that she rarely accepts invitations to academic meetings because they are normally structured in a way that ensures that nothing “important” (in Whitehead’s sense) can happen. She went on to say that she only accepts when she has a sense that the interaction is prepared so that something actually happens that is truly an “event.” Since she made this statement in response to an invitation Erin and I had just tendered, we figured we’d better start thinking fast and seriously about what it might mean for an academic or artistic meeting to be an event, and pragmatically how you go about setting in place the conditions for its occurrence. Isabelle did come, and these questions became the core of intense discussions with her that grew to include a number of people who would later become participants and co-organizers of last year’s *Dancing the Virtual* and the upcoming *Housing the Body*. The third jumping off point was the sense that part of the response to the problem Isabelle posed might be found in the “radical” empirical call for our thought-practice to “be true

to the conjunctions as well as the disjunctions." I think that Isabelle's aversion to the usual academic practices is rooted in her acceptance of Deleuze's assertion that critique, if it is to be eventful, must be an "immanent" critique. One of things this means is that everything that enters the interaction must do so actively, not by proxy, as represented, simply spoken for, or even transmitted (in short, not as an already constituted content). It must become equal to the coming event by performing itself in and for that particular assembly, so it enters actively into the constitution of what happens as a co-creative factor. Its "critique" is then not the opinions or judgements we have of it. It takes place on an entirely different plane. The critique is not an opinion or a judgment but a dynamic "evaluation" that is lived out in situation. It concerns the tendencies that the introduction of that factor actively brings into the situation. It is the actual, eventful consequences of how that factor plays out, relationally with any number of other factors that also activate tendentially, and in a way that is utterly singular, specific to those situated co-expressions. That is why Deleuze speaks of critique as a "clinical" practice: it is the diagnostic art of following the dynamic signs of these unfoldings, which can then be actively modulated from within the situation, immanent to it. The modulation can take be augmenting (taking a certain tendency to the limit), diverting (deflecting it into a different tendency), transmutational (interacting with other tendencies in a way that invents a whole new direction as a kind of surplus-value of interaction) – or, it can lead to a clash that stops the process. Any furtherance, convergence, becoming or blockage that happens, actually happens: it's an event. This kind of eventful, affirmative critique is very different from criticism, or what I would call negative critique. In a negative "critical" situation, rather than asking the factors entering the situation to be "true" to the coming event (asking that they actually take the risk of putting themselves into play, accepting that they may exit the event having fundamentally changed), it is the people entering the situation who are asked to be true to what they represent – their preexisting positionings, as encapsulated in already arrived-at opinion and judgment. These necessarily enter the situation as generalities, because their pre-encapsulation prepares them for representation in any similar situation and not just the one at hand. The only singularity is the way

in which the legitimacy of the general representation in question is performed. In other words, the only difference affirmed is rhetorical, and what it fundamentally asserts is the personal prowess, in that situation, of the defender. It's all about legitimation and ascendancy. This leads, in the best of scenarios, to blockage. Blockage is the best of all because the interaction is formulated a priori (if only "humorously") in terms of a war of position assuming an enemy-friend distinction the playing out of which takes the form of a victory or defeat. If there is no blockage, it means that one set of positions has "won" and another has been disarmed or annihilated. It's a war of "disqualification" in Isabelle's terms. And whichever way it goes, it is a non-event, because the most that might change is a reversal of fortunes within a pre-given positional structure. Deleuze's belief that debate and conversation are anathema to thought, to the extent that thought allies itself with emergence and becoming, I think relates to this. Debate is the war of annihilation practiced as a form of politeness (where the annihilation remains symbolic). I entirely agree that there are many academic meetings that are far more "critical" than *Housing the Body* is proposed to be. That is why I, endorsing Isabelle's attitude, tend to avoid them as much as possible. Responding to Isabelle's challenge in no way means adopting a fake attitude of harmony. It doesn't mean wishfully seeing only conjunction and denying disjunction. But it does, I think, mean launching into the event from a certain kind of conjunction: a set of shared initial conditions that is experienced by all participants, putting them on the same event "plane," as Christine put it, so that whatever disjunctions occur do just that - actually occur - rather than being represented and legitimated in proxy war. The conditions that the organizing committee has set - no transmission of content (no presentation of pre-completed work), a common set of challenging readings, a certain pre-collectivization of tendencies entering the situation in the form of open "platforms for relation" ready for activation, etc - are meant to be techniques for creating a shared frame for the activation of differences, as creative co-factors for what will become the multiple singularity of this event. The idea is close to that of structured improvisation in music, where enabling constraints are put in place, not in order to impose sameness but quite the contrary to foster unforeseeable

differentiations. The idea is not at all that everyone will arrive at the same conclusions, or even to “agree to differ.” If successful, the enabling constraints have placed the coming event on an entirely different plane than that of debate or discussion. Rather, the hope is that the ways in which we differ will pass together through the generative filter of the enabling frame—that we will continue to differ—all the more so—but together, for the moment at least, in creatively “impolite” but not disqualificatory ways. The hope is that together we can invent new modes of academic and artistic encounter that don’t endlessly reproduce the same critical debate model, and that those new ways might contribute, in some small way, to a change in the culture of intellectual and artistic “exchange.” I was truly touched by the generosity and openness of last year’s participants, and by their willingness to set aside the rhetorical war posture. That I consider “important.” I deeply appreciated people’s willingness to take the risk of entering a situation where it was clear that whatever was going to transpire could only transpire if they actively brought it to fruition – that there was no product being offered to them – the only product being the process they would make together. I learned a great deal from *Dancing the Virtual*, and what I took away energized me in a way conventional conferences never do. I am looking forward to this year’s event with great expectation, knowing that last year’s momentum is poised, due to many people’s efforts and talents, to make a new event of itself, with all sorts of emergent differences due to the passage of time, the playing out in the meantime of off-site interactions flowing from the last event, and the addition of new participants who will bring their own tendencies and talents creatively and affirmatively into the mix.