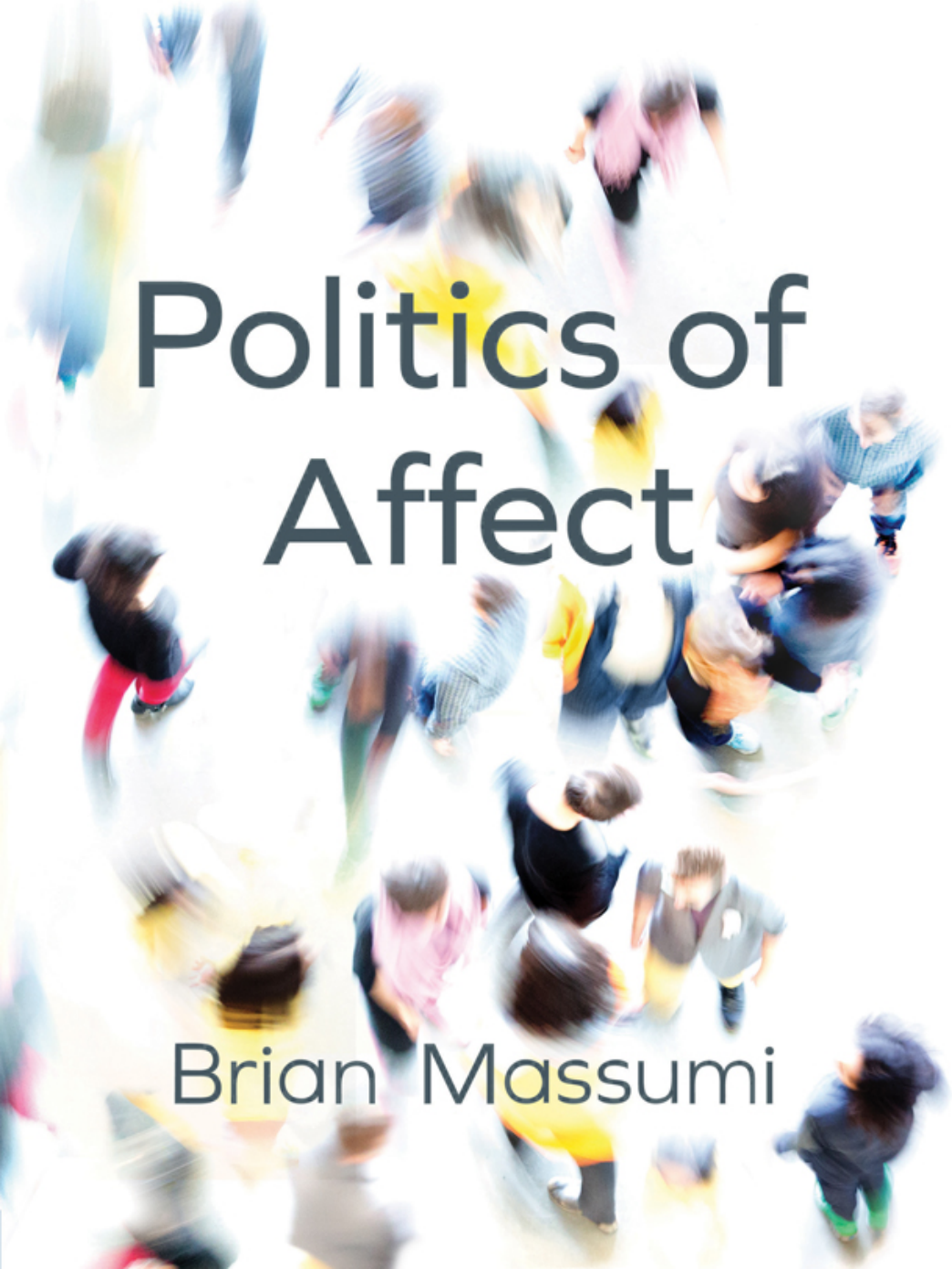
Politics of
Affect
Brian Massumi

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Preface

The 'politics of affect': the phrase is somewhat redundant. Affect, as it is conceived in this book, is not a discipline of study of which the politics of affect would be a subdiscipline. It is a dimension of life – including of writing, including of reading – which directly carries a political valence.

The interviews that follow do not purport to present a comprehensive treatment of the field of affect. Neither do they present an introductory encapsulation – although it is hoped that the dialogic format renders the ins and out of affect more immediately accessible than the academic format. They are an invitation to voyage. Their aim is to map a passage for thinking through the intensities of feeling that fill life, and form it, across its ups and downs. Thinking *through* affect is not just reflecting on it. It is thought taking the plunge, consenting to ride the waves of affect on a crest of words, drenched to the conceptual bone in the fineness of its spray. Affect is only understood as enacted. This book hopes to

enact affect conceptually for the reader through its stream of words.

The account developed here makes no claim to objectivity or general applicability. What would an objective or general approach bring to the singular qualities of life that compose its affective dimension? Stilling. Dullening. Dead disciplinary reckoning. The aim is not to convince with claims of validity, but rather to convey something of the vivacity of the topic: to invite and to incite the reader towards thought experiences pitching off-chart from the pages of the book, on a course of their own beyond its ken. To 'think through' affect is to continue its life-filling, life-forming journey. A concept, Gilles Deleuze once said, is lived or it is nothing.

The angle of approach pursued here can be described as that of process philosophy in its widest sense. What the thinkers to whose work the discussions regularly return – Henri Bergson, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilbert Simondon, Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze – have in common is construing the task of philosophy as understanding the world as an ongoing process in continual transformation. It is not concerned with things – certainly not 'in themselves' – so much as with things-in-the-making, in James's famous phrase. It takes change as primary, and sees the regularities of life as temporary barrier islands of stability in stormy seas. This is the first sense in which the process philosophy take on affect carries a political dimension: what it is primarily about is change. The concept of affect is politically oriented from the get go. But moving it onto a 'properly' political register – the arena of social order and reorderings, of settlement and resistance, of

clampdowns and uprisings – is not automatic. Affect is proto-political. It concerns the first stirrings of the political, flush with the felt intensities of life. Its politics must be brought out. The conceptual project running through this book is to bring out the politicality of affect, constructing for it an expression that honours its processuality.

The immediately political dimension is also built into the base definition of affect informing process approaches like the one enacted through these interviews. This definition, deceptively simple, was formulated by Spinoza: affect is the power 'to affect and be affected'. This definition recurs throughout the book like a refrain. Each time it occurs, it calls forth helper concepts, in increasing variety. These also recur, and together they begin to weave a conceptual web for thinking through affect. The formula 'to affect and be affected' is also proto-political in the sense that it includes relation in the definition. To affect and to be affected is to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity. This openness is also taken as primary. It is the cutting edge of change. It is through it that things-in-the-making cut their transformational teeth. One always affects and is affected in encounters; which is to say, through events. To begin affectively in change is to begin in relation, and to begin in relation is to begin in the event.

This brief itinerary already illustrates a characteristic of the processual concept of affect that distinguishes it from the general ideas that are the standard currency of thought, and upon which the traditional disciplines of knowledge are built. The concept of affect is

'transversal', in Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of that term. This means that it cuts across the usual categories. Prime among these are the categories of the subjective and the objective. Although affect is all about intensities of feeling, the feeling process cannot be characterized as exclusively subjective or objective: the encounters through which it passes strike the body as immediately as they stir the mind. It involves subjective qualities as directly as the objects provoking them, or with which they move. It concerns desire as much as what is imperatively given; freedom as much as constraint. Thinking the transversality of affect requires that we fundamentally rethink all of these categories in ways that include them in the event, together. It requires honing concepts for the mutual inclusion in the event of elements usually separated out from it, and from each other. A simple mix and match of received categories is not enough. An integral reforging is necessary. This is complicated by the fact that although affect's openness is unconfinable in the interiority of a subject, to take one of the concepts in need of restaging, it is at the same time formative of subjects. Although affect fundamentally concerns relations in encounter, it is at the same time positively productive of the individualities in relation. In its transversality, affect is strangely polyvalent.

Much of the work of the book is dedicated to laying the polyvalent groundwork for this reforging of concepts, transversal to their usual diametric opposition with each other. Such fellow-travelling concepts as 'differential affective attunement', 'collective individuation', 'micropolitics', 'thinking-feeling', 'bare activity', 'ontopower' and 'immanent critique' relay the base

definition of affect with which the first interview begins. Once they introduce themselves, they wend their way through subsequent interviews, taking on greater conceptual consistency, complexifying the concept of affect as they go. This is what a process-oriented exploration does: complexify its conceptual web as it advances. It tries not to reduce. It tries not to encapsulate. It does not end in an overview. Rather, it works to become more and more adequate to the ongoing complexity of life. This means that it does not arrive at any final answers. It does not even seek solutions. It seeks to re-pose the problems life poses itself, always under transformation. The goal is to arrive at a transformational matrix of concepts apt to continue the open-ended voyage of thinking-feeling life's processual qualities, foregrounding their proto-political dimension and the paths by which it comes to full expression in politics (taking the word in the plural).

The interviews included in this book are not just dialogues. They are themselves encounters. The interlocutors are not just questioners, they are accomplices in thought. The interviews typically took place against the background of preparatory exchanges that primed the thinking they would bring to expression. In some cases (chapters 4 and 5), they arose in the context of active collaborations in processual thinking and its political prolongations. These event-based explorations were carried out in the context of the SenseLab, a 'laboratory for research-creation' based in Montreal that operates transversally between philosophy, creative practice and activism. My years of involvement in the SenseLab have inestimably enriched my thinking, and my life. The encounters and relations I have experienced

in connection with the SenseLab have been transformative – none more so than those with SenseLab founder Erin Manning, my prime accomplice in thinking (and everything else). This book is dedicated to her.

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Erin Manning holds a University Research Chair in Relational Art and Philosophy in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. She is also the director of the SenseLab (www.senselab.ca), a laboratory that explores the intersections between art practice and philosophy through the matrix of the sensing body in movement. Her current art practice is centred on large-scale participatory installations that facilitate emergent collectivities. Current art projects are focused on the concept of 'minor gestures' in relation to colour, movement and participation. Publications include *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*

(2013), *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (2009) and, with Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (2014). Forthcoming book projects include a translation of Fernand Deligny's *Les détours de l'agir ou le moindre geste* and a monograph entitled *The Minor Gesture*. She is the founder of the SenseLab and founding editor of *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation*.

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Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen is Associate Professor in the Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research is in the fields of art, culture and media (film, fashion, art video, interfaces and film, especially the haptic compositions of Lars von Trier's works). Her publications in English have appeared in a number of edited volumes including *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (2013), *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic*

Countries (2013) and *Globalizing Art* (2011). She is a participant in the SenseLab and a researcher on the SenseLab's 'Immediations: Media, Art, Event' international partnership project. She serves on the editorial board of *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation* and is currently Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*.

Mary Zournazi is an Australian author, philosopher, film maker and playwright. She teaches at the University of New South Wales, Australia. She is the author of several books including *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (2003), *Keywords to War* (2007) and, most recently, *Inventing Peace* (2013), which is co-authored with internationally acclaimed German film director Wim Wenders.

The interviews in this book have previously appeared in the following publications:

Chapter 1: *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. Ed. Mary Zournazi. New York: Routledge; London: Lawrence & Wishart; Sydney: Pluto Press Australia, 2002–3, pp. 210–42.
Chapter 2: *Inflexions: A Journal for Research Creation* (Montréal), no. 3 (October 2009), www.inflexions.org
Chapter 3: *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* (Katmandu), vol. 7, no. 18 (fall 2013), pp. 64–76, under the original title "Affect, capitalism, and resistance".
Chapter 4: *Peripeti: Tidsskrift for dramaturgiske studier* (Copenhagen), no. 27 (2012), pp. 89–96 (abridged version).

Chapter 5: *Ästhetik der Existenz: Lebensformen im Widerstreit*. Ed. Elke Bippus, Jörg Huber and Roberto Negro. Zurich: Institut für Theorie/Edition Vodemeer, 2013, pp. 135–50, under the original title "Fields of Potential: Affective Immediacy, Anxiety, and the Necessities of Life".

Chapter 6: *Wissen wir, was ein Körper vermag?* Ed. Arno Boehler, Krassimira Kruschkova and Susanne Valerie Granzer. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014, pp. 23–42.

1
Navigating movements

Mary Zournazi*: I'd like to think about hope and the affective dimensions of experience – what freedoms are possible in the new and 'virtualized' global and political economies that frame our lives. To begin, though, what are your thoughts on the potential of hope for these times?

Brian Massumi: From my own point of view, the way that a concept like hope can be made useful is when it is not connected to an expected success – when it starts to be something different from optimism – because when you start trying to think ahead into the future from the present point, rationally there really isn't much room for hope. Globally it's a very pessimistic affair, with economic inequalities increasing year by year, with health and sanitation levels steadily decreasing in

* Interview by Mary Zournazi (2001)

many regions, with the global effects of environmental deterioration already being felt, with conflicts among nations and peoples apparently only getting more intractable, leading to mass displacements of workers and refugees… It seems such a mess that it can be paralysing. If hope is the opposite of pessimism, then there's precious little to be had. On the other hand, if hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of a rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting – because it places it in the present.

Mary Zournazi: Yes – the idea of hope in the present is vital. Otherwise we endlessly look to the future or towards some utopian dream of a better society or life, which can only leave us disappointed, and if we see pessimism as the natural flow from this, we can only be paralysed as you suggest.

Brian Massumi: That's right, because in every situation there are any number of levels of organization and tendencies in play, in co-operation with each other or at cross-purposes. The way all the elements interrelate is so complex that it isn't necessarily comprehensible in one go. There's always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context. This uncertainty can actually be empowering – once you realize that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. It gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to

experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation. The present's 'boundary condition', to borrow a phrase from science, is never a closed door. It is an open threshold – a threshold of potential. You are only ever in the present in passing. If you look at it that way you don't have to feel boxed in, no matter what horrors are afield and no matter what, rationally, you expect will come. You may not reach the end of the trail but at least there's a next step. The question of which next step to take is a lot less intimidating than how to reach a far-off goal in a distant future where all our problems will finally be solved. It's utopian thinking, for me, that's 'hopeless'.

Mary Zournazi: So how do your ideas on 'affect' and hope come together here?

Brian Massumi: In my own work I use the concept of 'affect' as a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability, the 'where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do' in every present situation. I guess 'affect' is the word I use for 'hope'. One of the reasons it's such an important concept for me is because it explains why focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn't really settling for less. It's not exactly going for more, either. It's more like being right where you are – more intensely. To get from affect to intensity you have to understand affect as something other than simply a personal feeling. By 'affect' I don't mean 'emotion' in the everyday sense. The way I use it comes primarily from Spinoza. He talks of the body in terms of its capacity for affecting or being affected. These are not two different capacities – they

always go together. When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity. It's crucial to remember that Spinoza uses this to talk about the body. What a body is, he says, is what it can do as it goes along. This is a totally pragmatic definition. A body is defined by what capacities it carries from step to step. What these are exactly is changing constantly. A body's ability to affect or be affected – its charge of affect – isn't something fixed.

So depending on the circumstances, it goes up and down gently like a tide, or maybe storms and crests like a wave, or at times simply bottoms out. It's because this is all attached to the movements of the body that it can't be reduced to emotion. It's not just subjective, which is not to say that there is nothing subjective about it. Spinoza says that every transition is accompanied by a feeling of the change in capacity. The affect and the feeling of the transition are not two different things. They're two sides of the same coin, just like affecting and being affected. That's the first sense in which affect is about intensity – every affect is a doubling. The experience of a change, an affecting-being affected, is redoubled by an experience of the experience. This gives the body's movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions – accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency. Emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment.

Mary Zournazi: Emotion, then, is only a limited expression of the 'depth' of our experience?

Brian Massumi: Well, an emotion is a very partial expression of affect. It only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies, for example. No one emotional state can encompass all the depth and breadth of our experiencing of experiencing – all the ways our experience redoubles itself. The same thing could be said for conscious thought. So when we feel a particular emotion or think a particular thought, where have all the other memories, habits, tendencies gone that might have come at the point? And where have the bodily capacities for affecting and being affected that they're inseparable from gone? There's no way they can all be actually expressed at any given point. But they're not totally absent either, because a different selection of them is sure to come up at the next step. They're still there, but virtually – in potential. Affect as a whole, then, is the virtual co-presence of potentials.

This is the second way that affect has to do with intensity. There's like a population or swarm of potential ways of affecting or being affected that follows along as we move through life. We always have a vague sense that they're there. That vague sense of potential, we call it our 'freedom', and defend it fiercely. But no matter how certainly we know that the potential is there, it always seems just out of reach, or maybe around the next bend. Because it isn't actually there – only virtually. But maybe if we can take little, practical, experimental, strategic measures to expand our emotional register, or limber up our thinking, we can access

more of our potential at each step, have more of it actually available. Having more potentials available intensifies our life. We're not enslaved by our situations. Even if we never have our freedom, we're always experiencing a degree of freedom, or 'wriggle room'. Our degree of freedom at any one time corresponds to how much of our experiential 'depth' we can access towards a next step – how intensely we are living and moving.

Once again it's all about the openness of situations and how we can live that openness. And you have to remember that the way we live it is always entirely embodied, and that is never entirely personal – it's never all contained in our emotions and conscious thoughts. That's a way of saying it's not just about us, in isolation. In affect, we are never alone. That's because affects in Spinoza's definition are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places. Spinoza takes us quite far, but for me his thought needs to be supplemented with the work of thinkers like Henri Bergson, who focuses on the intensities of experience, and William James, who focuses on their connectedness.

Mary Zournazi: When you were just talking about Spinoza and the way you understand affect, I don't want to put a false determination on it, but is it a more primal sense of the capacity to be human and how we feel connections to the world and others? That's almost natural to a certain extent…

Brian Massumi: I wouldn't tend to say it's primal, if that means more 'natural'. I don't think affective intensity is any more natural than the ability to stand back and reflect on something, or the ability to pin something down in language. But I guess that it might be considered primal in the sense that it is direct. You don't need a concept of 'mediation' to talk about it. In cultural theory, people often talk as if the body and its situatedness on the one hand, and our emotions, thoughts and the language we use for them on the other, are totally different realities, as if there has to be something to come between them and put them into touch with each other. Theories of ideology are designed for this. Mediation, in whatever guise it appears, is the way a lot of theorists try to overcome the old Cartesian duality between mind and body, but it actually leaves it in place and just tries to build a bridge between them. But if you define affect the way we just did, then obviously it includes very elaborated functions like language. There's an affect associated with every functioning of the body, from moving your foot to take a step to moving your lips to make words. Affect is simply a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential – its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do. It has to do with modes of activity, and what manner of capacities they carry forward.

Like I said, the directness I'm talking about isn't necessarily a self-presence or self-possession, which is how we normally tend to think of our freedom. If it's direct, it's in the sense that it's directly in transition – in the body passing out of the present moment and the situation it's in, towards the next one. But it's also the