



Affect as Disruption: Affective Experimentation, Automobility, and the Ecological Crisis

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In this chapter we explore affect as a means of disruption. Can affect be deployed to disturb, fracture, and break ossified social formations, practices, and patterns? In asking this question we take up but also diverge from a central motive in affect studies. Commonly, affect in the tradition of Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and later Brian Massumi is thought of in terms of a dynamic relationality, as the capacity of bodies affecting and being affected by each other (see, e.g., Deleuze 1988; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Mühlhoff 2018; Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019). There is a promise attached to this articulation of affect that it is immanently transformative, open, and continuously prone to change bodies in their

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composition and relationality (Anderson 2010, p. 162). Hence, much work on affect has focused on the potentials within this dynamic relationality, on the possibility of a “creative opening to an outside in moments of rupture [and] instances of discontinuity” (p. 166).

In contrast to some of these prevailing conceptions of affect, we argue that affect is in fact not a predominantly transformative force. Affect operates equally as a conservator of established structures, as a ‘dynamic glue’ that holds things in place. While affect indeed implies a potentiality, for “you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination” (Deleuze 1988, p. 125), this potentiality is not necessarily transformative, but it also implies that relational dynamics may solidify and lock into relatively stable formations. In other words, affect facilitates territorialization, consolidation, and a routinization of (social) life as much as it offers potentialities for breaking out. Accordingly, it is a difficult, non-trivial task to actualize affect’s transformative potential given the grip of consolidated patterns of affecting and being affected. In this chapter, we argue that this actualization implies a willingness for affective experimentation, to explore ways in real-life scenarios in which affect can intentionally be mobilized as a disruptive force.

Instead of contemplating the transformative possibilities of affect, instead of getting lost in potentialities and a virtuality of ‘what could be’, we propose to first reflect and deconstruct the old solidified affective formations. In that way, we draw on the concepts *affective arrangement* and *affective milieu* to show affect as a bearer of the old and as a force preserving the past. In surveying this apprehension of affect, we direct our attention towards the ecological crisis. Using the case of automobile supremacy, we discuss a paradigmatic affective formation that keeps many of us deadlocked in a continuous loop of business as usual. We then turn towards prospects of obstruction within these affective tangles, leaning on affective experimentation as a method of disruption, exploring how and under what conditions affect might be mobilized in such an experimental way.

THE IRON GRIP OF AFFECT

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an overarching pause upon societies across the globe when cultural as well as large parts of economic life came to a sudden halt. As hard as this pause has hit many people, it simultaneously represented a unique chance for a collective new start.

Questions about the distribution of the pandemic's costs, the best support for workers and the most affected economic segments, or about the worthy payment of care work, brought with them the discussion about the very fundamentals of the societal order. And so, for a short period of time, a possible social and ecological transformation seemed to lie within reach. An unprecedented break in the continuous loop of business as usual made conceivable a turn towards a sustainable and social economy. But so far, none of this has occurred. Instead, Western societies find themselves dead-locked in their old routines and any thought of 'the new' is yet again buried under the pressure of daily routines as a distant utopian ideal.

The reasons for this overwhelming inertia and, it seems, mesmerizing magnetism of the status quo are varied. Some are plainly economic, some political, others reflect locked-in infrastructures and practices whose reform or abolishment seems unthinkable to many. Yet, there is more to the swiftness with which alternatives to the prevailing condition are time and time again side-lined in favour of nothing but the ordinary. Central to the tenacity of established ways of doing and thinking is their affective grounding. Social formations are anchored and manifested in sustained and enduring affective patterns. These affect dynamics have settled and solidified over long periods, laying down dispositions and modes of attachment that make up the texture of social life. Accordingly, these affective patterns and structures of feeling are unlikely to change just like that. In many of its prevailing social forms, affect operates as a sluggish glue or even an iron grip that holds practices and social routines in place. From this perspective, it is not surprising at all that the concreted social structures persevered.

A NATION OF AUTOMOBILITY: ON AFFECTIVE ARRANGEMENT AND AFFECTIVE MILIEUS

Now, in view of the typical tendency within affect theory to focus on the transformative character and openness of affect (e.g., Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Lim 2007; Massumi 2015), our assumption that affect is foremost a conservative force in social life might be puzzling to the reader. However, we do not contradict the fact that affect bears much potential for change (see, e.g., Massumi 2015, p. ix). In fact, it is the very aim of the current text to probe ways in which this potential can be brought out and be utilized in ways that succeed in initiating actual, lasting change. Thus, we

concur that any dynamic of affecting and being affected is initially indeterminate and therefore immanently malleable (Lim 2007, p. 55; see also Massumi 2015, p. 3). Nonetheless, we hold that affect's potential for transformation is not always converted. To the contrary, in the current societal order this potentiality for change rarely manifests.

Recent years have brought to light the remarkable “resilience of modernity” (Jörg 2020). There is a lot of new evidence about the fundamental immovability of much of the Western status quo, not only in terms of failures to meaningfully address the climate crisis, but also with regard to racism, economic inequality, exploitation of the global south, and much else. In view of these recent (non)-developments, a celebratory insistence on affect's transformative potentials, while not wrong in a theoretical sense, begins to ring hollow and out of touch with the present moment.

Accordingly, we deem it an important task to focus on the conservative thrust of affect. Relations of affecting and being affected are always manifestations of historical trajectories. On the surface of social life—that is, feelings, emotions, or modes of attachment—they have to be understood against a rich backdrop of formative affective dynamics and socio-material relatedness. In that sense, affect is a matter of material efficacy that goes along with a discursive and mental dimension: characteristic talk and text on the societal level, thoughts, feelings, imaginations on the part of individuals enmeshed in these relations (see Slaby et al. 2019). As such, what we call the conservative power of affect is grounded in the tendency that affective relations tend to reproduce their prevailing patterns and clusters into stable constellations at the discursive level, while habituating individuals into characteristic modes of relatedness and attachment. In fact, ‘the lure of the familiar’ might be the single most effective force when it comes to affect's conservative thrust. It ensures that affect relations often reinforce and sustain specific historical trajectories.¹

The conservative thrust of affect is strikingly evident in Western responses to the ecological crisis. The alarming effects of climate change are all over the media, and they can increasingly be felt. Still, the answers remain utterly inadequate. Even though there is a rising awareness regarding climate issues, for instance in the discussions on policies for environmental protection or in the public discourse regarding CO₂

¹We keep this theoretical starting point brief, as our text has a different focus. For a detailed development of the affect theoretic position, see Mühlhoff (2018). Slaby and Mühlhoff (2019) also provide an abbreviated take.

emissions, this discursive change seems to be deadlocked in old and inadequate problem-solving approaches. So here we are, the sea levels are rising, the forests are burning, the soil is ravaged, and the air around us is polluted (von Redecker 2020, p. 83). Still, Western society keeps on driving forward.

This widespread failure to acknowledge the extent and urgency of the ecological catastrophe is a paramount instance of affect maintaining an iron grip on society and it characteristically shows why a disruption of current modes of attachment and affective practices is urgently needed, while immensely difficult to pull off. In the following, we focus on a condition that is paradigmatic for Western societies' ignorance of climate change, namely the *supremacy of the automobile*.² We find this supremacy at the heart of the Western capitalist social order. This is not only because the car is arguably “the single most important cause of environmental resource-use” given the sheer scale of materials, space, and power consumed to produce cars and the infrastructures needed to sustain them (Urry 2004, p. 26). But this is also because the automobile is characteristic of a culture of consumption, progress, and individuality, which essentially constitutes forms of life that are at the root of the ecological crisis.

The Automobile Supremacy

The automobile is a central component of the Western world. In a country like Germany, cars are everywhere³; cities are crammed with them. In rural areas they are often the only feasible means of transportation, and the countryside is scarred by highways congested with traffic day and night. It is nearly impossible to find a place where one does not see or at least hear a car. The entire infrastructure of the country is built for and around it. Moreover, the automobile industry is central to the growth of the German economy, entire industrial sectors only exist because of the car, and many livelihoods depend on it. This attachment to the automobile has led to what we call *automobile supremacy*—the dominant position of the car in the economy, in society, and even within culture. The automobile is the

²The considerations on the automobile are in part based on the text “Autoregime” (Jörg 2020).

³Being from Germany and Austria ourselves, the German context is for us, experientially and discursively, most salient. However, on a global scale, the United States is surely the paradigmatic nation built around the car, the haven of automobile supremacy (not to mention some other malign supremacies).

epitome of industrial late capitalism and it has long represented progress as well as technological dominance.

The automobile has established itself at the centre of an entire mechanistic network built around it, sustaining and reproducing itself. This network functions as an autopoietic system that only works because of its relationality: Material elements (such as the automobile infrastructure consisting of roads, parking lots, workshops, oil companies, and gas stations) and socio-cultural elements (such as automobile clubs and lobby groups, cultures of consumption and social status, perceptions of property and individuality, and the idea of a good life) are all reciprocally related in virtue of the car (see Mattioli et al. 2020; Urry 2004; Sheller and Urry 2000). Together, these material, social, and discursive components make up a system of relations, which itself works like a well-oiled engine. The car is indispensable; it is the centre of a material as well as a symbolic universe.

This formation continuously modulates its elements all the while drawing in new ones and submitting them to its rhythms. Ensuing from the Western world, the automobile makes even the remotest lands available to the needs of consumption. Ahead of the car's desire to move ever forward, the world is straightened and tamed. In this way, the car is the central player in 'modern land equalization' and it marks the social standard for getting around: villages, shopping centres, and warehouses can only be reached by automobile (see Jörg 2020, pp. 75–76). Sitting in a car, marching forward into the flattened and uniform landscapes, the Western individual travels towards the future.

Owning a car provides an individual with flexibility of movement, temporal freedom, security, and privacy, and it even feeds back into a sense of individuality that it helps to produce and hold in place. Moving around in an expensive and supposedly aesthetic vehicle distinguishes drivers from others on the road, not only in terms of size and occupied space, but also in regard to safety and the price tag attached to the car. In other words, the automobile has attached to it a socio-material arrangement—a heterogeneous ensemble united in its relationality—by which car owners as well as non-users are affected. This formation is central to the Western way of living—integrating drivers and non-users, consuming spaces and flooding cities, accumulating capital and fuelling consumption, shaping cultures, and creating ideals of individuality and privacy.

The Automobile Arrangement

The complex around the car is not a mere technological formation, but it is essentially a tangle of affect relations, an *affective arrangement* manifested in various dynamics on different levels (see Slaby et al. 2019). This arrangement has an idiosyncratic affective texture, and it can exemplarily be observed in the middle-class SUV driver. Behind the windscreens of the SUVs sit the complacent drivers, their expression blank and looking ahead, isolated, and undisturbed by the smell and noise the automobile produces. They are sitting high above the road in a pleasantly climate-controlled ambiance, surrounded by their own music, protected from the airstreams and turbulences outside—the car as a private space, an isolated cocoon keeping the hostile outside at bay (Mattioli et al. 2020, p. 11). While driving individuals feel autonomous and free, moving wherever they please in their well-maintained and unspoiled machines, they also detach themselves from the outside world (see Jörg 2020, pp. 77–78). This automobile space is not only a material space, for example, the car as a physical cocoon. But this also manifests in a uniquely textured affective space: *the automobile arrangement*.

Cars require users to change their behaviour, attitudes, and expectations. The affect relations surrounding the automobile literally hold individuals captive—unknowingly and without force, by integrating them into their web. Owning an SUV will, for instance, demand a frequent schedule of maintenance at the workshop, as the expensive and aesthetic character of the car wants to be sustained. This may be accompanied by the constant worry of whether the car will be stolen or damaged, producing a habit of finding just the right parking spot. However, not only are such habits and practices transformed, but the entire bodily awareness of the driver is adapted to the car. The SUV facilitates a certain driving style and affords a unique bodily feeling—quick acceleration and high speed while being comfortably cushioned from the road. In that sense, the driver's affective repertoire is shaped by the car; the proud SUV owner feels particularly violated when being cut off, after all, he is sitting in the superior car, and his time schedule is especially important (see, e.g., Katz 2015, pp. 14–48). And so, car owners think, talk, and behave towards and around their cars in a unique manner, resulting, for instance, in a “discursive bias that motorists exhibit towards car use” (Mattioli et al. 2020, p. 11). The negative sides of automobile culture, such as the massive environmental

damage caused by it, “are seen as distant, theoretical, and ultimately negotiable” by large parts of the population (Mattioli et al. 2020, p. 11).

The automobile arrangement claims a territory that pertains not only to car users but to non-users as well. When walking through any city, an overwhelming presence of steel, noise, and smell testifies to the dominance of cars and makes any living being aware of their presence. Parking cars enclose pedestrians wherever they go, shiny machines occupy public space while embodying modern perceptions of private property. Just as car owners are painstakingly focused on protecting their car, non-users are always aware that their surfaces must not be touched, no scratch, no dent must disfigure them (see Jörg 2020, pp. 76–77). Moreover, cyclists and pedestrians encounter cars not only as a waste of space, but as dangerous objects. The habituated glance to the left and right is a permanent companion in city life—or rather, a vital necessity. And so, for non-users automobiles anonymously pass by, almost as living entities accompanied by an aura of discomfort and fear. The car is a vehicle of domination that manifests in affect relations, submitting cities and landscapes, threatening and restricting its non-users, and paving the way for its owners.

The Automobile Milieu

However, the automobile supremacy is not only substantiated in the automobile arrangement, but it stretches far beyond constellations surrounding automobility. At heart, this complex is built on and facilitated by the expansion of Western industrial capitalism in the twentieth century (see, e.g., Mattioli et al. 2020). The automobile is paradigmatic for a capitalist mode of production in which the environment and its resources are equalized and made accessible (see Jörg 2020). The car may move freely while capitalist production may expand and grow without bounds or interruptions. Where roads and automobiles conquer and straighten the landscapes, they leave behind places of accessibility, turned into commodities, shrouded in exhaust fumes, and seamed by piles of debris. Likewise, where the capitalist wheel starts turning, it transforms landscapes into accessible resources, and resources into profitable commodities, only to leave behind dust clouds above polluted and consumed places (von Redecker 2020, pp. 49–64).

In essence, the Western societal order is an automobility-based, capitalist culture paradigmatically represented in the Western middle-class construct. This construct is inherently entangled with the functioning of

fossil fuel capitalism (see, e.g., Malm and Hornborg, 2014), and attached to the authority of the automobile. In terms of affect dynamics, this means that the relations of the automobile arrangement are not merely tied to the localities of the car, as shown in the section above, but they reach out and permeate society on an extensive scale. They form a deep affective complex of capitalist Western culture that is cemented—literally: made concrete—in society with the help of the car and can be observed particularly well in the affective underpinnings of the middle-class construct. The nature of this affective formation can be captured in terms of what we have elsewhere called an *affective milieu* (Schuetze 2021).⁴

The notion of affective milieus illustrates how the social sphere at large is fundamentally influenced and moulded by affect relations. An affective milieu describes a uniquely textured territory in the social universe where specific affect dynamics are at play (see Schuetze 2021, pp. 6–9). This means that the capitalist-fuelled middle-class construct is essentially etched into peculiar affect relations that take shape in an affective milieu: *the Western middle-class milieu*, or in brief, *the automobile milieu*. Different from the tangible automobile arrangement, which can concretely be felt and observed in local and material patterns anchored by the car itself, the automobile milieu describes a larger societal constellation attached to the car. At heart, this constellation is characterized by liberal ideas of freedom and opportunity, a longing for money and social status, a need for control and regulations, as well as an affirmative vision of progress and technology. This substantiates in the attachment to, for instance, unfettered traffic routes, such as the autobahn without speed limits, or specific practices of urban planning and construction, such as sprawling car parks and multi-lane roads.

Moreover, the automobile milieu is the result of historically grown and sedimented processes of exclusion and domination manifested in particular affect relations. These relations come together and create “a racialized, androcentric, and class-based hierarchy of knowing and being” (Schulz 2017, p. 47; see also Malm and Hornborg 2014; Moore 2015; Todd 2015, p. 247). This creates a milieu that is characterized by a kind of masculinity “which is formed in the context of class and race as well as gender

⁴Our use of the term ‘milieu’ is in part inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as well as Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012). However, we are closer to a sociological conception of social milieus (such as, e.g., in Bourdieu; for a discussion of this, see Schuetze [2021]). A deeper engagement with these conceptual issues is unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter.

domination” (Plumwood 1993, p. 26) and which is at the core of a cultural development of peculiar middle-class and masculine-governed processes of societal becoming (Plumwood 1993, p. 23; see also Scholz 1992).

Thus, even though the car is a central component of Western culture and as such it is widely accessible, the affective meaning attached to it is distinctively entangled with this smaller social space—the automobile milieu. This illustrates the unique and paradoxical character of the car. On the one hand, the automobile is designed for the masses; it is available for all and an important part for the independence of many people. On the other hand, it is an integrative force attaching people to a way of living that developed emanating from a small group of people, from the middle-class milieu.

Now, the above provides a tentative grip on the fundamental affective formation that facilitates the culture of automobility. This is a culture of isolated subjects that construct and conceive their autonomy depending on various degrees of privacy and materiality. At the centre of this culture is the need to continuously move forward, fuelled by neoliberal ideals of freedom and progress, and fantasies of everybody being given the ability to freely impose their exhaust fumes and noise on the environment (e.g., Plumwood 1993, pp. 20–27). Of course, these ideals are not only characteristic of the automobile milieu, but historically, these dynamics have developed for and around it.

In sum, we have seen that the middle-class milieu and the automobile arrangement are the affective formations that underlie the automobile supremacy. They manifest not only in affect relations around the car, but they also materialize in the affective underbody of the Western middle-class construct. Distinct affective formations on different scales come together, feed into each other, and thus support as well as reproduce each other. This comes about as a web of affective threads running through society, where one thread supports the other, resulting in a thick, tear-resistant fabric that holds habits, practices, and ways of knowing and being in place.

DISRUPTION

Before we can move beyond the automobile supremacy, we need to disrupt the underlying affect relations that uphold and reproduce it. Moving beyond the authority of the car requires more than a transformation of technological or cultural structures. The affective underpinnings of this

socio-material formation need to be disrupted in order to enable sustainable changes. However, affect is not a paramount, progressive, and transformative power that readily enables new beginnings. The automobile arrangement and its affective milieu are dynamic patterns that form individuals; they form what individuals can perceive, what they can see, what they can feel, what they desire, and what they can think or imagine. These formations are the affective fabric of the automobile-based capitalist culture.

Our bodies are products of powerful affect relations stretching from the past to the present. These relations mould and constitute us (see von Maur 2021a). As Eva von Redecker nicely puts it, they are like “ingrown walls” enclosing our being (von Redecker 2020, p. 32)—just like parked cars frame the streets. These walls are manifestations of the past and they sit heavily on the present. To move towards something truly otherwise, one cannot just build on or transform already existing walls, for this inevitably inherits their constraints. Taking this seriously means to grapple with the walls that enclose us; it calls for a recognition of their toxicity and for an appreciation of their radical, world-preserving influence. Here is where a disruption of these walls, a rupture in the affective fabric, is needed. However, since many of us are affectively, economically, and socially invested in this way of being, bringing about such a disruption is immensely difficult. To overcome this entanglement with a toxic lifestyle, a subtle and yet effective deep transformative disruption is called for.⁵

Disrupting the Automobile Supremacy

How can the affective underpinnings of the automobile supremacy be disrupted? In his book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, Andreas Malm (2021) illustrates a case of disrupting the well-oiled machine of the automobile supremacy. Targeting one of the richest neighbourhoods in Stockholm, Malm and a group of activists took action and deflated the tyres of about 60 SUVs. They moved in at night and ‘disarmed’ the cars by opening their valves, flattening the tyres without damaging the car. To make the owners

⁵This thought is developed in von Maur (2018, ch. 5) with more of an emphasis on the individual and the epistemic dimension of conservative affect. Importantly, the habitualized schemata through which an individual makes sense of the world are socio-culturally specific and need to be brought to awareness as something contingent and thus changeable. This is made possible through affective disruption.

aware of what had happened at night, they put leaflets on the windscreens of the SUVs, preventing the owners from driving off with a flat tyre and informing them about the reasons for the sabotage (Malm 2021, pp. 79–81). “Don’t take it personally. It’s your SUV we dislike” (p. 80). Now, this is a prime example of a disruption of the car on the material level as the functioning of the technological and cultural automobile complex is brought to a halt. However, this is not only a break on the socio-material level, that is, stopping SUVs from moving, but this is also a disturbance of ingrained affect relations.

Even though, the deflating of the tyres did not actually damage the SUVs—the material disruption was limited to the loss of air—the action evoked vigorous personal, public, and medial responses. The group even received death threats: “If I would have seen you ‘in action’ I would have killed you” (Malm 2021, p. 82). For a moment the entire automobile arrangement was revealed to be vulnerable. While the media reception of the action was mainly negative, the success lay in making visible, tangible, and therefore debatable what usually goes by unnoticed and unseen: the catastrophic status quo of the automobile supremacy and our entanglement with it. The drivers and a shocked media-society witnessed a rupture in their well-attuned affect relations. An immobilization of the SUVs not only prevented some—in fact very few—individuals from driving, but it meant an obstruction of a hegemonic affective regime of producing individuality, privacy, social status, and freedom. A minor material sabotage that would warrant annoyance at most did elicit a massive affective and media reaction revealing a deeper structure of our toxic and beloved lifestyles.

Immediately after the action, various counter-movements emerged, revealing the persistence and depth of the affect relations emanating from the car. Not only were these people concerned with the sabotage of their cars, but they were irritated by a disruption of the capitalist Western culture. Now suddenly compromised, the background conditions that had always been in place became abruptly felt. As a consequence, the automobile milieu was defended with slogans such as “The air in my tires is private property—deflation is an assault on democracy” (Malm 2021, p. 83). And after some more nightly actions of deflating tyres, the SUVs were even guarded by “grim men in dark clothes” ready to violently preserve their authority (p. 83). It was no longer about preventing sabotage to cars, but the automobile milieu felt the need to defend itself.

Even though the above is a prime example of what it means to grapple with the walls that enclose us, it also demonstrates how prevailing patterns of affective relationality resist, tighten, and keep us in their toxic grip. One affective thread supports the other, the threads interlock, if one fails the others maintain their grip. But then, if such disruptions of the old affective formations are immediately fought off by the status quo, should we rather pursue a consensus-based, slow transformation? And how can we actually apprehend affect as a disruptor after all, if affect seems so deeply implicated as a conservator of the old?

Affect as Disruption

Firstly, our emphasis on disruption, as opposed to transformation, aims at forestalling visions of glorified new worlds in front of us. Regarding the ecological crisis, the “boat had sailed on gradual change” already back in 2013 (Klein 2013). Secondly, our focus on disruption is based on the assumption that we cannot simply build new ways of knowing and being on top of the existing majoritarian ones. It matters from where this world-making starts, from where we start moving (Haraway 2016, p. 35). As the critical Indigenous feminist Zoe Todd puts it, we need to ask: “What other story could be told here? What other language is not being heard? Whose space is this, and who is *not* here?” (Todd 2015, p. 244). Change is not a matter of looking ahead, but of struggling with the troublesome present (see Haraway 2016).

Yet, how can affect be understood as a disruptor if it is the very reason for the immense staying power of current structures of knowing and being? First of all, a disruption of current affective formations does not necessitate a singular heroic sacrifice, nor does it demand a grand tipping point (see von Redecker 2020, p. 147). There is no single action that can overthrow the automobile arrangement, let alone the middle-class milieu. Rather, moments of disruption are small-scale openings that abruptly, unexpectedly, and momentarily bring to a standstill the affect relations that were running smoothly before. The plain action of deflating the tyres of a handful of SUVs briefly halted the autopoeitic system attached to the car, and all of a sudden, this brought to light the deep affective connectedness of the automobile supremacy. A point of disruption is therefore first of all a disturbance of well-oiled affective machineries (von Maur 2021b; see also von Maur 2018, pp. 241–258).

Exactly this is where an understanding of affect as a disruptor comes to fruition. Deflating the tyres of an SUV temporarily halted the automobile arrangement, and it might even have created a break in the Western middle-class milieu. For a brief moment, a small-scale action became a momentary disruptor—a break occurred, a moment of standstill, if only briefly. When the pathways in which affect usually flows are interrupted, the usual routes these flows constitute are shaken. What before were ossified affect relations reproducing themselves are suddenly inoperable symbols of what, from one moment to the other, begins to look suspiciously like a soon to be overcome past.

Relatedly, Walter Benjamin writes that “where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized” (Benjamin [1940] 2003, p. 396). In the context of affect this means that where the frictionless functioning of affect is interrupted, it suddenly becomes crystallized and thereby visible. The texture of the entire fabric changes, it appears in a new light: what was formerly obvious now seems peculiar, strange, and oddly alien—the formation thus literally ‘gives us pause’. It is this unforeseen standstill of the automobile arrangement that makes it possible to capture and highlight the affect relations that usually run in its background. This is not to say that this opportunity is actually seized and surely not by those immediately affected. Yet, this pause is a tangible experience for the drivers who are immediately halted in their routines, as well as for a broader social collective, such as pedestrians becoming aware of a changing status quo in their street. From the vantage point of public reception—media reporting, social media commenting, attention-grabbing political discussions, follow-up engagements by other activists, and so forth—the sabotage of an SUV brings to light the far-reaching attachment of the car to Western capitalist culture. The point is that dynamics that are normally hidden during ongoing business only become distinguishable in a moment of disruption; a moment in which affect stops flowing in its customary manner, in which its smooth operation is abruptly and noticeably interrupted. Such moments of discontinuance open the prevailing order to various ways of challenging it, of continuing differently, or questioning it fundamentally (see von Maur 2018, pp. 241–245).

This may well be illustrated with an example from a different social context. Suppose a workplace meeting where your boss unjustly shames a female colleague for a mistake that did not provoke this level of ire when male colleagues had made it before. It makes a huge difference, obviously,

whether co-workers in the meeting sit silently and wait for the tense moment to pass, or whether some colleagues stand up and object sharply to that unfair treatment, thereby transcending their role and status position. Responding to a toxic workplace routine by intervening and confronting those up in the hierarchy is a prime moment of affective disruption. The entire procedure halts, irritation turns from latent to manifest, and what was a flowing routine suddenly gives way to a juncture of collective reckoning. It is not certain that the situation will change for the better, but a brief moment of aversive standstill renders a workplace culture or ideology strikingly evident. Seizing this opportunity might initiate processes of contestation, resistance, or opposition. Even if the initial occasion might be fended off by those in charge, that one brief moment of disruption might provide inspiration and a shared rallying point. Without that initial disruptive moment, the toxic status quo would have continued unperturbed, its toxicity likely unnoticed by many in the room.

Such unexpected disruptions, small as they may be at first, can become the seeds for further disruptive interventions, encourage others to join the effort, or come up with movements of their own. They can prompt a moment of reckoning: sudden heightened attention on the prevailing practice with the potential to alter the discursive and symbolic landscape. The stage has changed; disestablishing the reigning status quo is suddenly thinkable, even tangible. Where affect is unable to operate as it had been prearranged, it can be turned into the proverbial sand in its own gears. A moment of affective disruption is therefore not an isolated instance, in which an individual may become aware of their involvement in toxic routines. Rather, it is a starting point from which the established affective fabric can be challenged.

Such moments of disruption, crystallization, and discontinuity are an essential dimension of affective relationality. However, since their outcome is more than unclear, such moments need to be initiated over and over again; they need to be experimented with. Not every rupture brings about genuine and lasting change, and so, this calls for a certain creativity in fabricating these moments. Trying out and experimenting with the disruption of habituated affective dynamics is essential in finding ruptures that stick. Thus, creatively playing with these moments creates a foundation on which a radical change of affective formations may rest.

OUTLOOK

Every third Friday in September the yearly PARKing day takes place. During this day, people all over the world are encouraged to occupy parking lots in their city centre by converting these spaces into playgrounds, improvised gardens, or places for social gathering. The goal is to unsettle the dominant cityscape, to disrupt the everyday stream of automobility flowing through the city, and to create a break in the space-devouring omnipresence of the car. In order to join the movement, participants simply seize a parking lot of their choice and set up camp for the day. In some cities the PARKing day is so popular that entire streets and neighbourhoods change into busy and colourful places freed from the usual overbearing presence of steel, noise, and smell.

However, what should offer a liberated and above all varied sight is not perceived so by all. While the participants and passing pedestrians enjoy their newly gained territory, automobiles and their drivers rush by, perturbed by the fact that their usually granted spaces on the side of the road do not readily present themselves. Sitting in one's converted parking lot, one is even yelled at angrily by some particularly agitated individuals in their automobiles, looking for a space to place their machines. Other drivers honk their horns, and a slight aggression strikes the peacefully seated. A peculiar situation: objects that are usually welcomed—gardens as green oases in an otherwise grey city, or playgrounds as gathering spaces and recreational areas—suddenly become obstacles disrupting the automobiles in their free movement. As soon as the daily flow is disrupted, cracks open up and the relations within the automobile arrangement crystallize. For a moment, it becomes tangible that the freedom and taken-for-grantedness of automobility is built on the constraints imposed on others. When the side of the road is occupied by something other than the car, this is perceived as irritating, whether positively or negatively, because in truth this territory only belongs to the automobile arrangement. One might even call it the property of the middle-class milieu. So here, in a situation of organized disruption, we once more see how prior background relations suddenly come to the fore and emerge as available positions.

Now, when we consider disobedient acts of affective disruption as instances of experimentation, we are not adhering to a cynical neoliberal idea of trying out policy measures in real-world settings. In contrast, we focus on more daring interventions into an ossified status quo. It is

characteristic that such affective disruptions oppose dominant formations and might accordingly seem like lost causes at first. Yet, as we hope to have shown, these interventions can initiate transformative processes. Moments of disruption in which the smooth functioning of affect comes to a halt and the background affect relations crystallize present an opening. These moments begin to unsettle symbolic and discursive landscapes, shake up established hierarchies of knowing and being, and put aside the habits and routines normally employed without asking. In short, these moments are the disruptive seeds necessary for true transformation.

The conception of affect that has inspired the field of cultural affect theory understands affective relations as a web of dynamic forces that coalesce into local ecologies shaping the conditions of existence for all the entities and actors involved in these settings. In such a field of immanence, there is no external vantage point from which one can neutrally assess the relational fold. All actors—including decision-makers in policy, researchers, practitioners, and activists—are thoroughly involved and immersed. What they do, how they react, what they feel and imagine inevitably contributes to the ongoing tangle of relations of affecting and being affected. An intervention into the majoritarian formations, such as the automobile arrangement or the middle-class milieu, has the potential to ramify throughout the whole fabric. Yet, the direction, magnitude, and sustainability of these changes are impossible to predict. That is why such interventions are a form of affective experimentation: disruptions of established affective ecologies happen under opaque conditions; they are wagers on a future that is not yet tangible. The art of deploying affect disruptively is an art of reading social situations in order to choose a promising mode of intervention, after which the events run their course. Affective experimentation, as an activist political practice, concerns such disruptive interventions and the balancing of their ramifications. There is always also an acute awareness of alternatives that are already present in minoritarian formations, or in the virtual undertow of surrounding affective spheres. Thus, what we mean by affective experimentation always involves a point where potentially new dynamic constellation and angles of disruption unfold—opportunities to intensify or adjust one's initial interventions. This requires a playful, risk-seeking ethos and a refined sensibility for tonalities and nuances within prevailing affective ecologies.

Furthermore, when we speak of these disruptions as forms of affective experimentation, we do so in view of an important connection between affect deployed as a means of disruption and affect as the focal point of a

type of research and scholarship. Given the immanence of affective ecologies, scholars are themselves immersed within the domains under study, and thus affected and conditioned by affective milieus and their affective arrangements. The study of affect itself involves an element of experimentation even where it is theoretical and discursive in nature. Writing on affect is an experimental intervention into an affective milieu with the potential to alter habitual modes of perception, reasoning, and imagination. In light of this, our message is twofold: Given the stability and historical depth of dominant affective formations and their power to modulate subjects, we should never underestimate the permanence and change-resistance of the status quo. Yet, we should likewise not underestimate the potential of affective interventions to disrupt the dominant affective milieus, even if the ramifications of affective disruptions seem miniscule initially.

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