Maaike Lauwaert & Francien van Westerenen (eds.)

Facing Value

Radical perspectives from the arts

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Ad hoc means ‘for this’ specific need or purpose.

A need is common to all living things, only men have higher purposes. But these needs and purposes are normally frustrated by the great time and energy expended in their realization.

A purpose immediately fulfilled is the ideal of adhocism; it cuts through the usual delays caused by specialization, bureaucracy and hierarchical organization.

Today we are immersed in forces and ideas that hinder the fulfillment of human purpose, large corporations standardize and limit our choice; philosophies of behaviorism condition people to deny their potential freedom; ‘modern architecture’ becomes the convention for ‘good taste’ and an excuse to deny the plurality of actual needs.

But a new mode of direct action is emerging, the rebirth of a democratic mode and style, where everyone can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems, whether they are new or old, modern or antique. By realizing his immediate needs, by combining ad hoc parts, the individual creates, sustains and transcends himself. Shaping the local environment towards desired ends is a key to mental health; the present environment, blank and unresponsive, is a key to idiocy and brainwashing.

URGENCY AND PURPOSE

The phrase ad hoc, meaning ‘for this’ specific purpose, reveals the desire for immediate and purposeful action which permeates everyday life. One is constantly involved in small-scale activities which have an immediate end in view: to get out of bed in the morning, to replenish the digestive stock, to work on something significant, etc. Life is filled with such goal-directed actions, varying from the trivial to the profound, many of which are discontinuous or unrelated to each other. Two typical uses of the phrase ad hoc bring out this variable but purposeful nature of human activity:

Left-over, fermenting soup added ad hoc to spaghettis improves its rapid taste and

The Ad Hoc Committee to End the War in Vietnam was formed for the specific goal of ending that war and will disappear when its goal does.

These two statements distinguish adhocism from random, undirected or haphazard action with which it is sometimes confused. But if adhocism is indeed purposeful, how does it differ from other kinds of directed behavior? Basically, adhocism consists of a general and loose
approach to a problem rather than a tight and systematic one. Thus, seventeenth-century boat builders went into the forests to cut ready-made 'subsystems' from the trees, combining them *ad hoc* to construct ships. In these combinations, because the subsystems were not tailor-made for their new role, there was a lot of extraneous material left over which later had to be cut away. The characteristic *ad hoc* amalgamation contains much that is inessential, much that is fortuitous and redundant. But if it is not as refined and precise as other kinds of purposeful action, then at least it is more open, suggestive and rich in possibilities. The extraneous material suggests new uses, whereas the perfected and refined construction is usually confined to its specified ends.

Perhaps the oldest and simplest method of creation consists of combining readily available subsystems *ad hoc*, since it is always easier to work with what is familiar and at hand than what is removed in space and time. At any rate, this is the characteristic mode of creation in tribal cultures: the creation of masks, clothing, weapons and shelter from the materials available, such as bone, shell, wood, hair, etc. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has discussed this activity under its common French label, *bricolage*:

... the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with his hands and uses deviseous means compared to those of a craftsman. ... The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand'. ... the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them.¹

The distinction between bricolage and engineering or science is one of degree and intention rather than kind or quality. Both the bricoleur and the scientist are motivated by a search after truth and deal equally rigorously with facts. They are equally objective. Both have to make use of pre-existing subsystems, while the scientist tries to expand his initial set of resources, the bricoleur sticks with his existing resources as long as he possibly can. The distinction is between appropriateness and urgency. The scientist is intent on using the tools and hypothesis appropriate to his job, whereas the bricoleur or adhocrast is intent on undertaking his job immediately, with whatever resources are available. Both are goal-oriented in a general way.

In fact, if one were to contrast adhocrism with other activities and theories, it would be over the question of purposefulness. Such things as empiricism, search by trial and error, mechanistic determinism and, most emphatically, behaviorism, differ from adhocrism on this point. They all substitute blind chance for purposeful creativity. For instance, in 1928 J. B. Watson, a father of Behaviorism, defined the principles of random or accidental creativity which are still held by Behaviorists today (although in a more sophisticated form):

*How the new comes into being: one natural question often raised is: How do we ever get new verbal creations such as a poem or a brilliant essay?*

*The answer is that we get them by manipulating words, shifting them about until a new pattern is hit upon. ... How do you suppose Patou builds a new gown? Has he any 'picture in his mind' of what the gown is to look like when it is finished? He has not ... He calls his model in, picks up a new piece of silk, throws it around her; he pulls it in here, he pulls it out there ... He manipulates the material until it takes on the semblance of a dress ... Not until the new creation aroused admiration and commendation, both his own and others, would manipulation be complete—the equivalent of the rat's finding food.*²

This denial of any picture in the creator's mind, indeed denial of the existence of the mind for the mechanism of a neutral brain, is an orthodox point among Behaviorists. Furthermore, they continue to place emphasis on happy accidents, on manipulating words at random until a 'poem or brilliant essay' is luckily 'hit upon' quite by chance. Finally, such purposefulness as there is lies in the 'commendation' of society. Patou knows he has designed a good dress when society responds by buying out the line. It is not surprising that Watson stopped teaching Behaviorism and went on to help develop advertising as a big business in the United States. The ideology which denies individual purposefulness and places all motive power in the environment is well suited to successful mass manipulation. After all, advertising is Behaviorism conditioning applied to the mass market.

However, while Watson's approach may be pragmatically successful, what his quote obscures is the fact that 'commendation' always has to occur in someone's mind (or brain), and that it will not occur unless that someone already has an idea of what sort of thing he might find commendable. What the Behaviorists are really asserting here is the tautology that successful things are those which are sought after by many people—a circular definition of success which obscures the important discovery of what people might find provocative in the future. Where luck, or random trial and error, do enter into successful creativity, they enter in as an aid to purposeful searching and not as a substitute for it. Fortune, as the discoverer Louis Pasteur put it, favors the prepared, not the passive or empty, mind.

Hence the attack on the concept of a purposeful mind and the emphasis on random action can create particularly vicious circles. If a society believes in conditioning and progress through happy accidents, it will tend more toward passivity, and hence the acceptance of a stereotyped environment, than if it believes in purposeful creativity. If it is nurtured on this environment, it will be led to a further inactivity which will tend to confirm the initial belief in Behaviorism and determinism. Countless tests on animals that have been deprived of a stimulating environment in which they can actively participate have shown that they remain physically undeveloped. For instance, two kittens were brought up in a dark laboratory environment, where light was shown only in a carefully controlled way. One kitten could change its position when the light was shown and therefore developed sight; the other, which couldn't move at all in response to the light, remained blind.³ Accounts of prisoners deprived of a rich environment tend to confirm these basic principles of atrophied

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development, although happily men are far more able to provide their own rich, internal world, no matter what the sensory deprivation, if their beliefs and will power are strong enough.4

Such comparisons between the animal and human worlds are no doubt both dangerous and melodramatic. So too are the analyses which show that the environment is becoming more stereotyped and totalitarian as different forms of determinism take hold in various parts of the world. (On this score things have probably become better not worse since the days of the Egyptian bureaucracies and the Roman army, both of which pervaded their societies.) Yet there are still today many deterministic ideologies that prevail in certain places such as large sections of corporate America and the Russian bureaucratic state. Most important are the countless organizations which have reached a complexity of development because they use and create advanced technology. While these areas of repression do not dominate the whole of everyone's life, they influence a substantial portion of it in such a way as to frustrate natural creativity and self-realization. They place impossible barriers between the initial idea of a goal and its final realization. This paralysis of will is a general theme of twentieth-century thought; the complaint about delayed or frustrated action has now become as ubiquitous as its various causes. No doubt they are multifaceted enough to resist any panacea, and it would seem naive to suggest otherwise. Yet the basic justification for a mode of action and design such as adhocism is that it is in opposition to these negative forces, even if it is not the final answer to them. It places purposeful action against the ideologies of determinism, and immediacy against the omnipresent delays caused by specialization and bureaucracy.

REPRESSIVE FORCES

A plethora of things hinder man's ability to create a suitable environment—a world custom-built to his individual desires. There is the necessity of specialization and the systematic application of scientific knowledge which, as John Kenneth Galbraith argues, must accompany any advanced technology.5 As he points out, to organize these specialists and pay back the great investment in capital which innovation demands, corporations must guarantee a certain amount of sales. Hence they standardize the product, drive out competitors and try to influence consumers into accepting things they might otherwise not want. This tendency towards standardization and cliche is an inexorable force in any advanced industrial state regardless of its ideology. Yet in human terms, in terms of allowing each man to shape the objects he fabricates as well as his environment, this force is absurd, if not actively destructive.

Another repressive factor is the system of hierarchical organization and elitist philosophy which enjoys an acceptance in the East and West. There are probably official hierarchies in every society in which each level of organization obeys commands from above and in turn tries to control the levels below. This vertical hierarchy comes to be justified as the natural course of things because men are equipped with varying talents. Yet again, from a human point of view, two objections can be made. For one thing, a hierarchy is unjust and contrary to the individual's desire to be able to affect any part of his life. And secondly, it is a rather inefficient way of organizing men's talents, for if they do vary, then they are likely to be out of phase with slow-changing hierarchies. Any organization except the most mechanized would come to a halt if decisions had to follow just the explicit structure; hence what we actually find in organizations is an implicit web of ad hoc relations which are determined by friendship, skill and the particular problem at hand. The most talented organizations are those that can restructure themselves ad hoc with each new problem that arises, rather than have to strain the unique situation through the same old hierarchy.

Edward Banfield, in a recent book called Political Influence, gives a detailed account of the patterns of influence and control that have actually led to decisions in Chicago.

He shows that although the lines of administrative and executive control have a formal structure which is a [hierarchical] tree, these formal chains of influence and authority are entirely overshadowed by the ad hoc lines of control which arise naturally as each new city problem presents itself. These ad hoc lines depend on who is interested in the matter, who has what at stake, who has what favors to trade with whom.

This second structure, which is informal, working within the framework of the first, is really what controls public action. It varies from week to week, even from hour to hour, as one problem replaces another. Nobody's sphere of influence is entirely under the control of any one superior; each person is under different influences as the problems change. Although the organization chart in the mayor's office is a [hierarchical] tree [with few relations], the actual control and exercise of authority is semi-lattice-like (with many relations between the persons concerned).6

It is this latter tissue of unseen relations which makes up the life and energy of an organization, but unfortunately, whenever noticed it is usually lamented and suppressed, because of the prevailing elitist and fatalist philosophies.

THE GENIUS AND STUPID RATS

Most of these philosophies have been supported by the fatalism inherent in certain theories of our time, such as Darwinism and Behaviorism, which place the significant determinants of life outside the organism and in the environment. While external determinants do indeed act upon and partially shape the life of the individual, they are by no means the most significant forces (as is argued in chapter three), and their one-sided accentuation in our century has brought out the fatalistic attitudes in men. The most extreme cases have been, of course, the fatalistic totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin which invoked a social determinism; but similar if less exaggerated tendencies can be observed in more liberal societies. If men are treated as conditioned automatons with diminished responsibility they start to act as such, thus confirming pessimistic views on the power of external conditioning. But are men's mechanical responses proof of determinism or something else? The study of genius rats and stupid rats suggests an answer.

In a carefully controlled experiment, a group of research workers were given a set of specially bred 'genius rats' who had an exceptionally high IQ and came from the most aristocratic rodent stock. All their ancestors had excellent records

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3 For references to this experiment, see R. L. Gregory, Eye and Brain, World University Library, pp. 209 and 246, London, 1966.
4 For a discussion of how this difference in belief led to a difference in survival in the Nazi concentration camps see Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, New York, 1963.
6 Christopher Alexander, 'A City is not a Tree,' Design Magazine, February 1966, pp. 53-54. As Mayor Daley proved during the 1968 Democratic Convention, Alexander's idea that 'actual control' in a city is ad hoc is a bit too optimistic.
for quickly learning how to run through a maze (for these ‘behaviorist’-oriented research workers, the mark of a truly intelligent rat). Another group of workers were then given a set of ‘stupid rats.’ Both sets of scientists were, of course, trained in the methods of objective research and vigilantly guarded against the intrusion of subjective factors. As expected, the genius rats outperformed the stupid rats by quite a margin. They learned to run through the maze much faster than their underprivileged cousins. Yet what in fact was the difference between these two sets of rats? None at all. The test was a deception, an ‘experiment on the experimenters’ rather than the rodents. The rats were all chosen at random from the same stock of common, garden variety. According to the scientist in charge of this double experiment, Robert Rosenthal,7 the bias or expectation in the research worker got across to the rats and either egged them on, as it were, or discouraged them.

As so often in Behaviorist theory, what holds true of the rat holds true of the human being. In a similar test carried out with schoolchildren, Rosenthal again found that expectations and bias were being transferred subconsciously from teacher to student, bringing about an objective difference in the students’ work. In this experiment,8 teachers were told that certain students were ‘spurters’ who could be expected suddenly to improve academically. In fact, like the test of the genius rats and the stupid rats, the groups were chosen at random so there was no inherent difference in intelligence. But like the rats, those who were expected to improve faster did so.

These two tests, and others, have indicated the presence of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ in the social sciences and indeed in society itself. Rather than proving anything like a deterministic view of organisms, however, they showed the great flexibility and two-way determination of events. A case in point is the large bureaucracy where men cheat and steal with impunity because the individual act has no significance, no effect. The bureaucracy programs the statistical rate of crime into its accounts, and writes it off beforehand as deterioration, wastage or breakage. The individual is expected to act in a certain way and so, like the ‘spurters,’ he does. But if we examine the difference between the organization’s explanation—wastage or breakage—and the individual’s—self-assertion, subversion—we can comprehend the actual two-way determination (or freedom) of events. Each side of the equation uses the other for its own intentions. There is a nice symbiotic relation reached between the two which is not without its ironic side. The humor built into this dualism consists in the fact that each side considers itself to be the free agent and the other side a conditioned automaton. This was evident in a joke current among sociologists in the sixties:

One rat to another in a Skinner box: Oh boy, have I got this psychologist conditioned! Every time I press the lever he gives me a pellet of food.

As a more serious example of how a shift in intention can reverse the determination of events, there are the ‘Drop-Out Communities’ which take the wastage and breakage—even garbage—of a consumer society and turn it into new food, energy and shelter. Or, during the 1968 May events, the youth of France threw up its barricades, its transient architecture, from the various objects it had on hand: paving stones, automobiles, etc.

There are many reactions to deterministic orthodoxies on a more philosophical level: Waddington and other biologists show that evolution proceeds from internal as well as external factors: Chomsky and other linguists show that inbuilt language competence limits the possible malleability of men and allows them a certain creativity or freedom denied by the Behaviorist linguists; Talcott and other psychoanalysts show that men need to manipulate and form their local environment to sustain their identity and sanity. Again, the evidence supports the idea that an environment should allow for active, individual participation in its building. What this last point partly means in visual terms is that the environment should preserve a record of past: action, so that present and future actions may become intelligible. The significance of individual action and group life could then find a demoralization instead of being suppressed every generation, and the result would make economic sense, as Jane Jacobs has argued.

All these positive ideas have gained strength recently and have challenged the conventional orthodoxies so that one can now see a counter-view of man emerging that places much more emphasis on his creativity and self-determination. This happens to concur with the rebirth of a democratic mode of action where everyone is encouraged to create a personal environment out of impersonal subsystems whether they are new or old, modern or antique. By realizing his immediate needs, by combining ad hoc parts, the individual sustains and transcends himself. Shaping one’s personal environment toward desired ends can break the vicious circle of sensory deprivation; much of the present environment, blank and unresponsive, is a key to idiocy and brainwashing.


THE PRESIDENT WIT OF ART

As in so many cases of anticipation, artists have already explored much of the ground of adhocism, although their commitment has been mostly limited to the benign effects of satire and wit. For instance, one of the first such explorations by the Mannerist painter Arcimboldo consisted of satirical figures made up mostly from natural subsystems: twigs, forests, fruit and even human bodies. Here the satire extends beyond the wit of combining previously separated systems to an ironic comment on the embarrassing repetition of nature. The naked human bodies which make up this portrait are divested of any individual qualities to become a squirming mass of biological tissue. It’s as if nature suddenly had a good idea and took out a workable patent on ‘man’. In order to mass-produce this ‘success’ endlessly until it saturated the market. By combining this idea with that of the portrait, Arcimboldo has managed to produce an ambivalent whole that has it both ways: a Renaissance individual who is at the same time a faceless monster. As with all such combinations, the viewer can enjoy oscillating back and forth between interpretations, figure and ground, pleased by the fact that these combinations are always more than the mere object, the everyday interpretation. Everything can always become something else: this is the liberating slogan inherent in creations that transcend the clichés of which they are made. After various small-scale attempts in the nineteenth century, the Dadaists and Surrealists explored the latent power within the combination of stereotypes. Thus they continued the methods of Arcimboldo, except they used mass-produced objects of man—buttons, matches, hairpins, etc.—
instead of nature's repetitions. One of the Surrealists' games, the Exquisite Corpse, consists in drawing various subsystems of the human body on a sheet, folding it over for the next section to be drawn and so on. When the sheet is finally finished, a put-together Exquisite Corpse is disclosed which has as many parts and variable interpretations as there are folds in the paper. While this form of adhocism is numerous because of its lack of consistent purpose (because it is not controlled by a directive concept and does not contain considered relations between the parts) it still can produce convincing examples. A more controlled example where the various meanings are highly related to a specific end is John Heartfield's photomontage 'Hymn to the Forces of Yesterday; we pray to the power of the bomb'. The subsystems are here combined in a purposeful way so that the oppositions in content, between money and pyre, bomb-shells and religion, are complemented.

At one time in the middle thirties the Surrealists became interested in the mass-produced object wrenched from its habitual context and placed in a new situation. They took as their point of departure Lautréamont's pronouncement—"Beauty is the fortuitous encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table"—and then went on a rampage throughout the man-made environment, placing female models on red satin wheelbarrows, hanging 1,200 coal sacks from the ceiling, stuffing mannequins into taxicabs (where perversely it rained inside rather than out), shoving them down the trumpet of Victrola and cutting off their limbs to form chair 'legs'. In the sixties this violent displacement reached a crescendo of fanatical pitch in the constructions of Edward Kienholz. His obsessive thoroughness in searching for exactly the right subsystem to achieve the intended effect places his work far above the more usually fortuitous constructions. The Wait concerns the anguish of some forlorn grandmother whose children have long since left home and whose husband is also absent (indicated by the yellowing tear-stained photographs with which she surrounds herself). She is accompanied in her wait by a heap of unfinished sewing that is covered with dust and other aged furnishings of the period such as decaying floral prints. Her face (or rather the pickled bones of a dead animal) sits on a necklace of bottled relics (presumably her memories) while all during her endless vigil a live yellow canary hops back and forth chirping mawkish encouragement. The commitment to carrying through this over-all mood of tawdry despair is unparalleled; the combination of ready-made parts is entirely without excess or cuteness. They are carefully selected for a particular purpose which has been clearly drawn out according to its inherent potential.

Another artist, who exploited the spirit of adhocism in a different medium was Buster Keaton, especially in his films Playhouse and Scarecrow. In the latter, Keaton lives in a house where all the rooms are in one room. Here the Victrola can explode into action doubling as a gas stove; the sofa can turn into a bathtub which empties into a duck pond outside (an early example of recycling waste, this bathtub also has a third function as an escape route); condiments and cutlery are suspended on strings which swing off the wall, while an ingenuous system of pulleys and flying trapezes allows Keaton extract a cool beer from the icebox behind him, open the bottle, pour a drink into a glass lowered from the ceiling and swing the bottle back into the cooler—all without having to budge an inch from his seat. Yankee ingenuity and the fascination with gadgetry are two themes that run through Keaton's movies. He is always trying to find a new use for old objects. A doorknob on a swinging door serves to pull out a sore tooth, an upended bed serves as a music organ, an umbrella serves, naturally, as a parachute while Keaton himself serves, when pushed by necessity, as a cannonball or boat.

Everything can always be something else. The artists who have caught the spirit of adhocism have shown this. They take the ready-made clichés of industrial society or bountiful nature and disconnect them from their habitual context. In this way the stereotypes of an advanced industrial state can be used to advantage; used in their ordinary contexts they stifle individual initiative and the development of personality. Used in a dislocated way they become refreshed through juxtaposition. The eighteenth-century wit was a man who combined heterogeneous ideas by violence. If this combination is made for an immediate need or purpose, it forms a third entity, a relation, a purpose carried through to its end satisfies the mind and is the precondition for anything of greater significance.