

Interview with political theorist, writer and philosopher Brian Massumi
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Action Fragments for the City

Interview with Brian Massumi

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JFP (*Jean-François Prost*): Adaptive Actions was developed following a desire to infiltrate something from the outside into a personal or individual practice. We wanted to see how the fragments of action and engagement in the city, those which aren't necessarily practices yet -they are more signs of participation- could be brought in. To us, these fragments constitute a reservoir of actions. Although this reservoir goes beyond actions. It also includes ways of talking about their singularities and of creating networks of exchange around them. Networks that might extend, reformulate or give them new meanings. That's what we mean by adaptation. Part of the idea is that an action by a single individual is already an adaptation of a context, and in that sense it is already collective. It becomes an opportunity for others to appropriate those actions, or fragments of actions, for themselves and to relocalize and/or recontextualize them.

BM (*Brian Massumi*): I like the way you work with the idea of adaptation. The word often makes me cringe, because there is an inherent conservatism in the way that it is normally used, but your approach gives it a very different inflection. My problem with the usual notion of adaptation is that it assumes a certain pre-formation, and whenever you start from an already given form there is a certain pre-determination of possibilities. The common notion of adaptation in fact starts with a double pre-formation. On the one hand, there is the individual, already constituted, with already-existing needs. On the other hand, there is the environment, offering already concretized affordances. Put the two together, and you get a linear path from the need to the affordance that satisfies it. The action-paths are pretty much pre-mapped. Except obstacles get in the way. The only creativity that's involved is in finding ways to get around the obstacles. Creativity is chained to necessity, and invention is secondary to what has been pre-determined. This makes the whole framework profoundly normative. The slogans for adaptation in this sense would be "accept it, that's just the way it is" and "necessity is the mother of invention." Your idea of adaptive actions opens up that closed framework. It does this by starting in the middle: with action itself, rather than the two points it connects. If you start in the middle with action itself, you can see that it's not just a pre-mapped path. It's a mode of activity that might be adaptable to different starting and ending points. That's the "singularity." The singularity of the action isn't a "that's just the way is." It's a potential. It's the way it might have played out differently, and might still, if the potential is recontextualized and replayed. The singularity of the action is its particular way of being full of variations on itself. No one individual can enact them all. So if you approach the question in this way, even one action by one individual is already a place-holder for a collectivity, a kind of dynamic place-holder for what hasn't taken place yet *between* people. You've opened up a relational space of potential. It seems to me that what your projects do is create a setup for this opening. It gives this relational space of urban action a concrete place of its own, an actual, local embodiment in the city. The project offers a different kind of affordance. People are invited to reimagine and repurpose their actions, in interaction with each other. They are given an opportunity to redraw the map. This turns adaptation on its head. Instead of the individual adapting to the environment, in this

case the urban context, it is the urban context that is asked to redraw itself relationally -- this is an adaptation *of* the context, not to it. This doesn't deny needs or that there are obstacles to their satisfaction that have to be contended with. But it does suggest that necessity need not be the only measure of action. There is also play, imagination, desire, the joy of conviviality, the pleasure of invention just for the sake of enriching one's context, intensifying it, repotentializing it, and doing this together. So the life of the city is about more than each of us getting where we already want to go. It's also about finding new paths together. It's very suggestive the way you think of this as starting again from "fragments." If you started from the context as a whole, you'd be boxed in again. But if you detach "fragments" from the existing coherence of the context, with each fragment carrying the potential to grow back into the overall fabric, the box opens. Because when they grow back into the urban fabric, it will have taken on a new coherence as a whole. The fragment as the seed of something larger than itself, a seed of reconnection.

JFP: When you talk about the traditional definition of adaptation, could you apply it to architecture as having pre-programmed adaptations?

BM: Yes, the whole concept of the architectural program is exactly that. You can create variations within a program, but the programs are pretty much pre-given and correspond to already determined use-values that architecture has to adapt itself to. Architecture has to adapt to existing notions of use-value, and the people who live, work, and pass through the environment it builds have to adapt to that adaptation. The notion of the architectural "program" is itself a program: it expresses the general project of fitting building to traditional schema of adaptation. The "program" is also the rubric under which an architectural project expresses what it is and justifies what it does *as a whole*. It's the anti-fragment. It is important to emphasize that valorizing the fragment as we were just talking about, as a seed of reconnection, isn't about deconstructing architecture. It's just what you called it: an infiltration. It's a tactic for reinfiltrating architecture with its outside. The buildings still stand. The program can still be generally fulfilled. But maybe *in addition to* that, around it, or through it, other things can happen that reinhabits the space differently, or reweaves it differently into its surrounding spaces, so that unprogrammed paths open up. This is not an anti-architecture either. Many architects have been hard at work for many years to open architectural practice itself up to the eventful, the ephemeral, the self-organizing, the openly relational, the emergent. The kinds of Adaptive Actions you create, along with other kinds of practice of art as urban intervention, can be seen as being in collaboration with these attempts within architecture to open it up from the inside in a way that reconnects it more convivially and inventively with its outside.

JFP: But where is the space left to grow in a society that wants to pre-plan possibilities of change? Given the desire for control, the desire for framing, it can be hard to see the opening.

BM: It's true that a kind of managerialism holds sway that tries to program the future, to pre-plan change. This is where a distinction between possibility and potential comes in handy. Possibilities are already-charted alternatives. Which means that they are already in the present. They're already on the chart, ready at hand. So when you think in terms of possibility, you are really reigning in change, because you're drawing a line of continuity between a way of doing that is already charted-out and some future point at which the doing is actually done, in conformity with the plan. Potential is different. It's emergent. It happens, and always differently than you imagined -- singularly, in conformity with nothing. Potential is how the *unforeseen* is already present. The thing is, you can feel the *opening* for it, even if you can't see what it will be. And you can *invite* people into the opening -- instead of dragging them along with the plan. This is again why the fragment is so important. To make for an opening, you have to make a cut. This is how I like to think, for example, of the function of the blue objects you placed along the wall of the Olympic construction site in London. The blue made the objects stand out from the context. They became cut-outs, things that didn't quite belong. Because they

stood out, because they were oddly out of place, presuppositions about their meaning and their value were suspended. The blue also made them interesting, and inviting. They were like fragmentary attractors. They invited people to reconstruct a context for them that gave them a new meaning. But not in the abstract. The new meaning *was* the way in which they convoked people's actions to organize themselves around them. They had no meaning outside that convocation, outside the collective activity they triggered. That was value enough in itself. Their taking on new, active value reweave a context around them. I mentioned play earlier. This is not to say that this kind of revaluing is simply playful, in the usual sense of being frivolous or inessential. This is serious play. Reweavings of existing contexts can spontaneously model new ways of dynamically organizing urban relation. The seed can potentially continue to grow, generating unplanned spin-offs. Or it can be carried in the wind, and fall on new ground, finding a new growth medium somewhere else entirely. Play, according to Gregory Bateson, is the very engine of evolution. It is the laboratory for new models and new dynamics. Advanced planning of possibilities is grossly overrated. If you think of it, the one thing plans all have in common is that *they don't go as planned*. The unforeseen always intervenes in any case. So instead of giving in, adapting to "reality," accepting that "that's the way it's got to be," why not just accept that "the way it's got to be" is the last thing it will be -- and try to make a positive *resource* of that. It's actually a much more realistic approach. There is nothing more maladaptive than adaptation, in the traditional sense. That's a point that Gilbert Simondon makes very powerfully. Adaptation in the usual sense assumes that the characteristics of the environment are stable enough, and the nature of individuals' needs fixed enough, to conceive of a straight line between them. Planning adopts this attitude, and tries to anticipate the obstacles and pre-chart ways around them so as to follow the straightest and narrowest path. What gets forgotten is that environments are never stable. In Simondon's words, they are at most *meta-stable*. That means that any moment of equilibrium there may be is actually a holding-pattern of tensions momentarily cancelling each other out, or combining into temporary synergies. The equilibrium is a delicate balance that will not last. Planning, and adaptation in the usual sense in general, also makes the assumption that individuals are essentially equilibrium-seeking, and that the principle of the equilibrium they want is already within them in the form of needs to be serviced. If you make these two assumptions, you will be dangerously wrong every time. Live according to plan, and the landscape will shift beneath your feet -- and you won't have the agility to catch the fall. Act only in accordance with a preconception of needs, and you will be immediately confronted with *desires*, and will be caught just as flat-footed. It indicates something that what we immediately understand by phrases like "put some life into it" is "let it be unpredictable." Adaptation in the usual sense and predictability of planning are the closest thing to death, bar death itself. The Adaptive Actions you set in place create are revivifying. They're saying: embrace the unforeseeable. Capture chance. Come together, and actively capture the potential of that chance encounter. The earth is already shifting beneath your feet -- so be ready to surf. The creative opening might be anywhere. Be ready to seize it. The kind of art-action you practice is often thought of as context-specific. I like to think of it as situation-specific instead.

MPB (*Marie-Pier Boucher*): Could you explain the difference between context and situation?

BM: I think of a context as a coded space. Its coding limits it to certain functions. A context is a space you recognize. They come according to model. A situation is when something opens a context up to something that it is not already encoded into the space, something as yet unmodelled. To the extent that it is not pre-modelled, it is unrecognizable. A situation is when something as yet unrecognizable cuts out from a context, making palpable its potential to change. Situations are irruptive. They irrupt into a context as a leading edge of change. A contextual element has a use, and a meaning associated with that functionality. A situational element carries a *force*. It is the surfacing from within the situation of a real potential for change, the use or meaning of which is not yet in place. I think of Adaptive Actions in the sense you practice them as the art of transducing contexts into situations, by planting triggers for this kind of irruption into existing contexts. This is an invitational art, in the sense that it obligates no one. It

just offers an affordance, in a way that makes felt the situational potential. Nothing happens if people don't take up the invitation. It's a convivial art, because the implanting of situational elements is strategized to bring people together around the invitation, to convoke them into action. It's totally voluntary. But that doesn't mean a force isn't unfolding. The voluntary responses have been powerfully elicited. This kind of action actually goes beyond the opposition between voluntary and forced. There are forces of convocation. They are real, if well-strategized and well-implanted they are effective, and most of all they are inventively open-ended. There is such a thing as creative forces. Adaptive Actions are designed to trigger creative forces into urban action.

MPB: It seems to me that these distinctions between context and situation, between conservative and creative adaptation, can be understood in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari call micropolitics, which they explain in terms of relations between molar and molecular formations, between micro and macro. Although they insist on the fact that those relations are not relations between scales. So micropolitics is not a quantitative concept. It is rather a problem that deals with qualitative relations.

BM: That's exactly right. The term "micropolitics" is misleading, because as you point out it's not a question of scale. The difference between the "micro" and the "macro" is qualitative. Macropolitics is contextual. It construes the world and everything acceptable within it, everything that has a "right" to exist and to continue, as equilibrium-seeking. Accordingly, macropolitics intervenes at the level of codes, and the way they regulate present and future functions, and assign more or less fixed meanings to them. Macropolitics is about program and planning. It marshals normative forces, forces of conformity. Its element is the possible. Macropolitics is applied to individuals, using a collective apparatus that approaches each individual from the same generic angle ("the citizen," for example). At its best, it is managerial. At worst, it turns dictatorial. Micropolitics, on the other hand, is situational. It concerns itself with creative forces. It embraces meta-stability, and looks not to conformity to but to emergence. It organizes triggers or trip-wires that open contexts to unforeseen potential. That is its element, potential. The trigger may be set individually, but the dynamic it sets in motion is collective by nature, and not in some generic way. It is totally singular, in the sense that how it all plays out depends on just how the trigger is set, just whom it convokes, and just how those who take up the invitation in their interactions do so. Macropolitics' formula of conformity is: "*like that*," said before the fact. Micropolitics' formula of singularity is: "*just so*," said of an event. Micropolitical actions are as contingent as they are elicited. What eventuates is the working out of a creative force that has been planted in the city, but the form that working out effectively take cannot be pre-mapped. Micropolitics is a convivial politics of the unforeseen. It doesn't actually "work" so much as it *expresses*. It sets up the situation where potentials can come to inventive expression. The difference between the "micro" and the "macro" in politics has to do with these qualitative differences in the *mode* of activity they involve. They are modal distinctions that can be found at any scale. A traditional family, for example, is not micropolitical by this definition. To the extent that it functions in a mode dedicated to future conformity, it's a small-scale macropolitical formation.

MPB: I recently heard Zizek saying that micropolitics could not generate an impact on the transnational level because they do not have the potential to operate widely. Could you explain how one can approach a large-scale problem micropolitically?

BM: I'd say exactly the opposite. *Only* micropolitical action can hope to succeed at the global level. How could a macropolitical program ever respond to all the contingencies of a world of such complexity, rife with level upon level of contingencies, a world continually spinning off in new and unforeseen directions as it lurches from one crisis to another, economic as well as environmental, with positive feedback loops making all linear prediction impossible? Think of the role of thermodynamic feedback in climate change, and affective feedback in economic crises. No, only micropolitical activity has a chance, because it is self-organizing. Like climate change or global economic crisis, all it needs is

a trigger. And like them, it is potentially self-amplifying and self-proliferating. The power of micropolitical action is in contagion. Even if it were conceivable for a global macropolitical solution to be pre-mapped, it could never be implemented without oppressive violence. Remember, macropolitics is a contextual power that applies itself to individuals in order to make them fit the model. It is certain that a large minority of the people who would be supposed to fit would have their own remodeling ideas. They'd have to be forced to conform. It is precisely at its most global, at its largest scales, that macropolitics becomes the most dictatorial. It's mortifying. Micropolitics doesn't apply itself to individuals. It triggers them to express their potentials, just *so*, in an event or series of events of their own making. It addresses people from the angle of their vivacity, and convokes them to see where they can go together. It's not a power-over. It's a tripping into action of collective powers of emergence. Micropolitics is not: "it takes a village to raise a child." It's: "it takes a multitude to raise a creative commotion" -- to a global scale. I compared micropolitics' self-amplifying and self-organizing to things like climate change. The key difference, of course, is the creativity of its commotion. It's an alter-storm.

JFP: I think that the confusion raised between micro and macropolitics in relation to the effects they generate or in relation to the system of operations within which they work might be based on the fact that we often confuse spontaneity with simplicity. We tend to make a direct link between them.

BM: Yes, you could even say the opposite, that true spontaneity is really an effect of complexity. Cities are spontaneous because of their complexity, not in spite of it. There are other confusions, too. Like thinking that spontaneity is the opposite of force or power. It is a force of situational circumstance, and a power of emergence. Or thinking that individualism and spontaneity go together. It's actually the opposite. It is macropolitics which applies itself to the individual, using generically collective means. A micropolitical trigger might be set by an individual, but it only works if it brings a collective potential to collaborative expression. It is openly, and open-endedly, relational, or it is nothing. Let an individual go off spontaneously, and the only thing that is likely to be generated is a cliché. That's exactly what made "free association" so useful to psychiatry. Free association was the short-cut to answering which generic complex had most imbedded itself in the individual's life -- as a function of how macropolitical powers had applied themselves to it and were now working it from within. This working-from-within the individual of macropolitical power is what Deleuze and Guattari call "micro-fascism." Individual spontaneity is best understood as a diagnostic for micro-fascism. The charge of collective potential that individual actions carry is the only true source of spontaneity, in the sense of a generative expression of unprogrammed potential. That way of putting it is actually a bit misleading itself. It is also off the mark to think that the spontaneity that micropolitical activity triggers is the opposite of programming and planning. It's not "free" in the sense of the word as it is used in the phrase "free association," meaning anything goes. A lot of things don't go. A lot of things fail. A lot of things short-circuit. Triggering is not easy. It involves observation, preparatory interaction, hard thinking, and most of all precise, tactical action. It takes technique to capture chance. It takes finesse to bring out the positive power of situational forces. That's why Deleuze always said that the aliveness and joy of micropolitical action is in fact a form of sobriety. It has to be done with technique and sobriety, because if a lot of things don't go, it's always as much a risk as an adventure.