

A CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN  
VALENTINA  
DESIDERI  
AND  
DENISE  
FERREIRA  
DA SILVA



July 8, 2015

VALENTINA        I would like to start from a recent thought. It's not a fully formed thought, it's just an intuition, a beginning. We did many readings<sup>1</sup> together and I start to see how healing happens through those practices. I mean, they seem to really help and not only on the intellectual level of opening up interesting perspectives or new ideas. Some things just really made sense or made a difference at some level for the people we read with and I'm trying to think how that happens. How can we think of healing as a political practice of (re)connecting internal and external processes of different scales?

When we formulated our own political problem for which we did readings, we asked "How to image an ethics with/out the subject?" and I feel that this question of healing is very connected with it...

DENISE        We could think with Reiki, for instance, and the experience of connecting in such a way that we access another person's past, present,

<sup>1</sup> Denise and Valentina use well known as well as newly invented reading tools such as Tarot, Astrology, Reiki, Fake Therapy, Political Therapy, Poetry etc., to map out hybrid poetical/ethical readings of political problems. They call this practice Poethical Reading.

and future, and also connect to things and animals and the whole planet. Now, one of the distinguishing aspects of the subject is precisely the assumption that the human is separate from everything else. Then an ethics with/out the subject (one which is with and out) decenters the subject, without ignoring it, and has to begin by considering that we are connected to everything else. For that we can relate to Leibniz and his description of the plenum.

VALENTINA        I understand the fact that we are connected with everything else as the background assumption. And yet it's not like saying we are all one, as if we had to reconnect with the One or any other hippie or religious stuff. I'm thinking about how we make also new connections, how the process of making connections is healing in itself. Especially when I am sick or suffer. I really do not feel connected with the plenum then, or anything else really.

DENISE            We are connected but we live with the assumption that we are not connected.

VALENTINA        Is there a way to reconnect?

DENISE        It is not so much about reconnecting. We are always already “connected.” What Reiki does it to recall (to make **actual**) the (**virtual**) connection because we live with the illusion that we are isolated, self-enclosed – or, as they say, “self-possessed” individuals.

VALENTINA        Mmm.. It would be nice if we could manage to reconfigure self-possession not as an illusion about ourselves that we have to break, which feels to me like a new battle, a new quest for change or breaking “free”. That would feel like a lot of work to do. Instead, how do we see that it’s not about doing something more? On the contrary! We constantly do a lot of work to keep up that illusion. If we stop working, if we stop doing that work, maybe that illusion goes. So what is that work of maintaining the illusion of “self-possession”? When do we sense it? How do we recognize it?

DENISE        When do you sense that you are not in control?

VALENTINA        I was trying to think when do I sense that I’m working to be in control...

DENISE        I think it is important to look at those moments when we are not being in control, with that feeling that somehow something escapes you. When that happens, you have to do something, to work. What I mean is: when we are working to be in control you feel like you have to do something, not just the things you usually do, but something extra. Like when you have to go on a diet. When you diet you need to control what you eat, to pay attention ... When we are called to pay attention is when we realize how much work it takes to be in control. For the most part, we do the work without paying attention.

VALENTINA        So the work we do to keep ourselves as one (subject) is the work we do without paying attention, all these things that feels normal. I'm thinking of an example: I started not to make introductions before lectures or events I organize, just in order to not determine what something is before it happens. This is really not much, but it helps to keep the situation, the way of talking or being in space open. Here there is also something about how we use language.

DENISE        Yeah, this thing about not perceiving the work we do to be in control, I think, has to do with language. We assume that there is something that does (the subject) and there is an object, which is something that is done. Is there a way to speak without it being an indication that we are determining something? That we are doing something? The subject is a linguistic figure: I think, I work...

VALENTINA        Maybe if I would pay attention to all the rest that is also happening at the same time, like saying now: "I am writing". No, it's not me! I am in conversation with you... but also with other people and thinkers and thoughts and future readers and conversations.

DENISE        We tend to place the "I" in a context: a historical, cultural, social, or existential one. Now the suffering I appears in the existential context, where it has to face the world. In the Sartrean version, this is "hell" – because this world is also inhabited by other Is, and not only by objects and things. Could it be more about how we work? I can see when we fail, or when it fails, that we have to do some work. I think it is more about

how we are affected by the inability to actually be in control – because we live in the world with other Is – in love, when you get sick, when something happens to somebody you love. I think it is always a crisis... and that crisis shows that we are actually not in control.

VALENTINA        Then you can also say that the I is part of living because we need a sense of self in order not to be completely lost in the complexity of world. I guess we need that to orient agency, but when the I is in the center, when I is the self-possessed subject that acts, then the crisis is just a moment of exception, a mistake, something “bad”, before the norm (“good”) gets reinstated...

DENISE        That could also happen with readings. When someone decides to have a reading, there is an expectation for the usual approach, which is meant to reinstate “control”: the assumption is that once you know what is going on, you can act, and fix it. The way we do readings is different, no? When we read, the reading brings out the complexity. There is no fixing. It is all there and the person who comes for the reading will

experiment with living with the complexity, instead of trying to resolve it. Now there is no deciding what is what. This is why the question is with/out the subject, assuming that it is very difficult to displace or eliminate the I. The important question, I think, is how you respond to the crisis? Do we try to resolve it? Or do we take it as an opportunity or a situation, in which you recall the connection, to experiment in the complexity. Once you recall the connection, the crisis is no longer a crisis.

VALENTINA        The crisis opens up another way of living and being that feels OK again. Also the crisis, the problem, stops being something “bad”, an exception that confirms the rule or something to be fixed as soon as possible. Rather, the crisis or the problem becomes a place that holds the potential to change those rules and the situation. In that moment of crisis when you realize you’re not in control, that the situation it’s not what you thought, then you have to re-image the situation, and your place in it, the forces acting upon and within it and so on. That is why reading is nice: it does this imaging, and it does

it collectively. You have to be at least two to do a reading, and through all the speculations you end up making, another kind of organization will emerge that you could not have imagined or planned ahead on your own. You can make different decisions.

DENISE        This is why the question is about ethics; it is about how we think about how we live as part of a collective; it is not about how to live, but about the best way to live. At the same time it is not something to be institutionalized, which would become a requirement, like to be “self-possessed.” Because if it would be, then it would become the same thing, something institutionalized, a requirement, which is about control. To experiment living with complexity is to live without trying to control.

VALENTINA        Healing in this sense is always going on. It is a process that is never done, there is no moment of outcome, neither successful nor unsuccessful. It’s not about capturing something and holding on to it as “the right thing to do”. Healing is a political practice: if we understand that

politics is how we organize life together, then we can question and formalize other kinds of ways, rules, practices and habits we partake in, and situate them in a context without institutionalizing or instrumentalizing them.

DENISE        To live with the awareness of the complexity that we are, to think with Joan Rettelack and Leibniz...

VALENTINA        Do you think that living with the awareness of the complexity is a way of healing? It is as a political practice, in the sense that it proposes a specific way of living with others/other things.

DENISE        Yes, but not in terms of identity, or in regards to the question of who we are, as an ontological question. It is existential, it is about how we live, how we are aware of the relationships; how we live through each other. Even though we are different, this difference is also related to how other people are. How do we live knowing that every body affects all other bodies? And every body – a body is a thing – expresses everything else in the only way that each can express it

(Leibniz). That is also assuming that relationships are fundamental in a particular way, because it is not about reacting (as in cause and effect) but about expressing: every thing is also an expression of everything else. The question is how to image the world in this complex way, instead of making sense only in one way, one articulation – that is, without the need to resolve or determine. What discourse that presupposes the subject can allow the statement that everything relates to everything else through expression? That is, it is not relativism because the different positions are also fundamentally connected.

VALENTINA      I guess it's important to draw specific connections. I think a lot through my own crises, with work or love or any kind of crisis... How do I live with them? How can I make any sense of those situations and feelings? For me it is fundamental to draw connections also with processes of different scales, beyond just me and the other person, or the project or whatever else. I want to be aware of the gender politics, the cultural and historical backgrounds, the personal histories, the economy, the power-struc-

tures involved in the situation I am suffering from. This is not to make a big map where everything is put down and at the end I can say: this is how it works and now I can control it. I can't. But, at each new reading, with each new connection, I make a movement. I move, the way I feel or think or talk moves. The situation changes.

There is a big relief, a sense of space when you de-responsibilize a little and it is not just about me and you, that you are wrong or I am wrong... all these things are playing on us too and we practice them.

DENISE        So, yes we can do that: we can say a lot about how the world is and how we live and yet it's not about that, as we can never say exactly how it is. We have one practice: we read. We do the poethical readings. There are obviously other practices. There is not one map for how exactly one should live. There is one stance that is important to the readings we do: to pay attention and stay there without trying to name and to fix, which is what the subject has done.

VALENTINA        So we could see reading as a tool that can help us pay attention while staying in the crisis?

DENISE        I would say: it is a practice. We use so many different tools when reading. Reading is a practice. It is actually a praxis: there is a view of how to live that is tied to it (which is a kind of knowing) and also it is something that you do (a kind of doing) – so reading could be a way to recall (or actualize) the connection. When we do it, when we image or read and approach a crisis/question without meaning to gather knowledge to fix things, this other way of living together takes place. So, it is something that can be part of how we as people organise our lives, but it can't completely organize our lives because we live in political economic structures that presume the subject. So, this is again why we need to remember that it is about an ethics with/out the subject.

(silence)

VALENTINA        I was also thinking that one kind of work we do to keep ourselves one, as self-possessed subjects, is calculating. You know: the way

we integrated economic logics into our behavior, so that we constantly have to calculate, optimize, profit etcetera. And not even because we want or mean to! We are always reminded of our debts, work is precarious and scattered, deadlines are scattered too, and so on. So when we want to embrace complexity, to follow Retellack, what do we do? Do we stop calculating? Or do we complexify calculations?

DENISE        The problem with calculation is that it is just an effect of our assumption of separability, that is, we see ourselves as separate (and superior) to everything else in the world. Because of that, we also presume that it is our task to determine, and control, everything else. So, calculation – which is about being able to control (through prediction of what will happen in the future) – becomes necessary. So I think we have to be aware of the separability. Cause if the ontological condition taken for granted is separability then calculation is natural, isn't it? If we are not aware of that pre-conditioning then we end up identifying with the work we do, and then trying to instrumentalize something.

And instrumentalization still begins with and reinforces the subject. You see?

VALENTINA        Yes! Yes, it should not be about finding a solution, it's not about saying: ok well then when you think you're calculating, don't calculate and you'll be fine.

DENISE        Yes! That's why I prefer to think in terms of practice. How do we then practice? We have to get engaged in a praxis that first and foremost does not assume separability and hence the need for determining things. So we change the way we live by living differently and we change the way we think about living by doing it differently rather than by having a plan. Because so far, all the political projects we have had always had a plan of what the world should be and the set of things needed in order for it to make it so. But that failed, right? Because that is the logic of separation: from this plan I know how the world functions, because I am here, I look at it. And then I have this plan that accounts for all the mechanics and dynamics of the world and if you follow the plan then the world will be better. There is al-

ways some violence. Because of the different ways that we have been further separated and acted upon this separation. From the perspective of healing, that's what's healing is all about. It is something to do. Even medicine is something that is done! Even when you ask a physician about what's really happening they can never answer, because they don't know, but there are things that can be done – treatments, which in the case of modern medicine is very invasive – the body comes back to some kind of integration.

Because we are thinking about it in the context of ways to self-organize – in particular for those who are no longer being attended by the welfare state – is about a praxis a way of living differently, of doing differently.

Self-organizing is not the right word, really it's just about living in particular ways that violate separability or that do not reproduce it or do not rehearse it. So this is reading as a practice, and all the different tools for reading do that. They don't assume separability and they do not reinstate it. If we approach reading in a non new-age way, how you approach relationship is the same. Instead of yelling

at your partner about all the ways in which you want him to change you can instead look at the way you relate to each other and you find ways to relate that minimize the pain IF you want to stay together, and if you don't wanna be together then you just go away. And there is no recipe for it, because each relationship will be completely unique in its own way and at the same time it will be just like any other relationship in another way.

(giggle)

In terms of larger political processes one of the things we have to remember is how the globe is so tightened in so many layers of expropriation exploitation, and domination and it doesn't flow. Everybody knows about the history of colonialism, everybody knows that Germany was bailed out after the second world war and now it is acting as if bail out would be from another planet.

So why is it that we forget what we know when making statements? In particular about economic behavior?

VALENTINA  
is in the past..

'Cause history

DENISE        Yeah, but it's not right? Especially this one! It is so present! It's like the other day. History, as a discipline, is how we remember. But it makes us remember in a way that doesn't allow us to remember what really matters.

VALENTINA        Maybe it could help us to look at history as an image rather than a narrative. What if or how do we look at an historical situation or crisis as an image that also reveals the different histories/narratives within itself? Not as the past but as living history, histories that are living within that situation, within us..

DENISE        But we know that and yet it is repeated, it doesn't stick. For instance, back in the 1980's when Brazil, Argentina and Mexico were all going through crisis. We never stopped repeating: the Marshall Plan for Europe, why don't we have one for Latin America? Or Africa? Eventually that relief came to African countries, the Third World, and then capitalism changed again. Profit was not coming from countries trying to pay unpayable debts but from the opening up again to the expropriation and exploita-

tion of their natural resources; from them changing their labour laws, so that labour could be exploited again.

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VALENTINA        Why doesn't  
it stick?

DENISE        Yes why doesn't  
it stick? That 's the question...  
I keep seeing the separation.

VALENTINA        Yes they  
(back then) are fundamental-  
ly not us, they are the "other,"  
separate. So we fail to actually  
know... How do we live with  
that?

DENISE        And how do we  
organize against that? When  
we are so worried with our own  
lives, everyone turning against  
each other for the crumbs or  
"a job" the JOB!!

VALENTINA        That's what  
I was thinking about with  
re-connecting problems of  
different scales, because if you  
can't connect that feeling you  
have about your lover or the  
job with those larger processes,  
then it's hard to re-orient your  
actions. You just feel powerless.

DENISE        I know, I com-  
pletely agree. This is how the  
notion of the Nation has worked  
since ever, as an individual  
member of that nation you do  
things because you are a part  
of that whole but that whole  
separates you from other

wholes. That we have to re-connect is for sure, but how we connect? Not in terms of what to do but in terms of how we image that connection.

VALENTINA      For me it has to do with the ability to think complexity and scale. It's almost if it was a new dimension that has to become visible. Otherwise we get stuck with the holistic kind of "Whole", we reconnect to the Whole and that, be it God or the Nation, still separates us from other wholes, as you said. There's no reconnecting to the Whole! It's a matter of specific connections; of asking which connections. They form complex geometries that are diverse and divergent and form images that allow us to think, discern, distinguish, but without having to determine what that image is for everyone, as seen from above, from the point of view that is me looking at it. Really I like to think in terms of some kind of geometry. Cause when you start to connect points you have lines, then planes and then surfaces, spaces, worlds...



