

# Continental Drift

## THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO

### Artistic Critique in the 21st Century

([https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/nyt\\_special\\_edition.jpg](https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/nyt_special_edition.jpg))



([https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/nyt\\_special\\_edition1.jpg](https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/nyt_special_edition1.jpg))

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In the twentieth century, art was judged with respect to the existing state of the medium. What mattered was the kind of rupture it made, the unexpected formal elements it brought into play, the way it displaced the conventions of the genre or the tradition. The prize at the end of the evaluative process was a different sense of what art could be, a new realm of possibility for the aesthetic. Today all that has changed, definitively.

The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular state of society. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark a possible or real shift with respect to the laws, the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence.

How does that chance come to be? Expression unleashes affect, and affect is what touches. Presence, gesture and speech transform the quality of contact between people, they create both breaks and junctions; and the expressive techniques of art are able to multiply those immediate changes along a thousand pathways of the mind and the senses. An artistic event does not need an objective judge. You know it has happened when you can bring something else into existence in its wake. Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens up expanding territories. These territories are occupied by the sharing of a double difference: a split from the private self in which each person was formerly enclosed, and from the social order which imposed that particular type of privacy or privation.

When a territory of possibility emerges it changes the social map, like a landslide, a flood or a volcano do in nature. The easiest way for society to protect its existing form is simple denial, pretending the change never happened: and that actually works in the landscape of mentalities. An affective territory disappears if it isn't elaborated, constructed, modulated, differentiated, prolonged by new breakthroughs and conjunctions. There is no use defending such territories, and even believing in them is only the barest beginning. What they urgently need is to be developed, with forms, rhythms, inventions, discourses, practices, styles, technologies – in short, with cultural codes. An emergent territory is only as good as the codes that sustain it. Every social movement, every shift in the geography of the heart and revolution in the balance of the senses needs its aesthetics, its grammar, its science and its legalisms. Which means that every new territory needs artists, technicians, intellectuals, universities. But the problem is, the expert bodies that already exist are fortresses defending themselves against other fortresses.

Activism has to confront real obstacles: war, poverty, class and racial oppression, creeping fascism, venomous neoliberalism. But what we face is not so much soldiers with guns as cognitive capital: the knowledge society, an excruciatingly complex order. The striking thing from the affective point of view is the zombie-like character of this society, its fallback to automatic pilot, its cybernetic governance. Neoliberal society is densely regulated, heavily overcoded. Since the control systems are all made by disciplines with strictly calibrated access to other disciplines, the origin of any struggle in the fields of knowledge has to be extradisciplinary. It starts outside the hierarchy of disciplines and moves through them transversally, gaining style, content, competence and discursive force along the way. Extradisciplinary critique is the process whereby affectively charged ideas – or conceptual arts – become essential to social change. But it's vital to maintain the link between the infinitely communicable idea and the singularly embodied performance.

World society is the theater of affectivist art, the stage on which it appears and the circuit in which it produces transformations. But how can we define this society in existential terms? First, it is clear that a

global society now exists, with global communications, transport networks, benchmarked educational systems, standardized technologies, franchised consumption facilities, global finance, commercial law and media fashion. That layer of experience is extensive, but it is thin; it can only claim part of the lifeworld. To engage with affectivist art, to critique it and recreate it, you have to know not only where new territories of sensibility emerge – in which locale, in which historical geography – but also at which scale. Existence in world society is experienced, or becomes aesthetic, as an interplay of scales.

In addition to the global, there is a regional or continental scale, based on the aggregation of populations into economic blocs. You can see it clearly in Europe, but also in North and South America, in the Middle East and in the East Asian network. Make no mistake, there are already affects at this scale, and social movements, and new ways of using both gesture and language, with much more to come in the future. Then there is the national scale, seemingly familiar, the scale with the richest sets of institutions and the deepest historical legacies, where the theaters of mass representation are overwhelmingly established and sunk into phantasmatic inertia. But the national scale in the twenty-first century is also in a febrile state of continuous red alert, hotwired to excess and sometimes even capable of resonating with the radically new. After this comes the territorial scale, long considered the most human: the scale of daily mobilities, the city, the rural landscape, which are the archetypal dimensions of sensibility. This is the abode of popular expression, of the traditional plastic arts, of public space and of nature as a presence coequal with humanity: the scale where subjectivity first expands to meet the unknown.

And so finally we reach the scale of intimacy, of skin, of shared heartbeats and feelings, the scale that goes from families and lovers to people together on a street corner, in a sauna, a living room or a cafe. It would seem that intimacy is irretrievably weighted down in our time, burdened with data and surveillance and seduction, crushed with the determining influence of all the other scales. But intimacy is still an unpredictable force, a space of gestation and therefore a wellspring of gesture, the biological spring from which affect drinks. Only we can traverse all the scales, becoming other along the way. From the lovers' bed to the wild embrace of the crowd to the alien touch of networks, it may be that intimacy and its artistic expressions are what will astonish the twenty-first century.





([https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/naked\\_protest.jpg](https://brianholmes.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/naked_protest.jpg))

Vincent Bethell: website [here](http://www.geocities.com/stop_racist_human_skin_phobia) ([http://www.geocities.com/stop\\_racist\\_human\\_skin\\_phobia](http://www.geocities.com/stop_racist_human_skin_phobia)), film [here](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz7g8N30u0o) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz7g8N30u0o>)

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## 23 Responses to “THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO”

**Book Materials « Continental Drift Says:**

November 21, 2008 at 5:49 pm | Reply

[...] -The Affectivist Manifesto: Artistic Critique for the 21st Century [...]

**rebel:art » Blog Archive » Brian Holmes: Affectivist Manifesto Says:**

November 23, 2008 at 6:55 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Theorie-Brocken am Wochenende: Brian Holmes und das "Affectivist Manifesto". "World society is the theater of affectivist art, the stage on which it appears and [...]"

**Cultural Codes : mediaspace 09 Says:**

December 7, 2008 at 10:21 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes blog an excerpt from THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO / Artistic Critique in the 21st Century: "... Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens [...]"

**insightarts Says:**

December 8, 2008 at 4:41 pm | [Reply](#)

would love to publish this on the Insight Arts blog. we recently hosted a social movement information session and it would be great to provide this as an example on how art is used for progressive social change.

**beth jacobs Says:**

April 10, 2009 at 2:25 pm | [Reply](#)

i am writing to you before my heart stops racing from the thrill of reading this piece. i have tried to educate myself and construct myself on the last scale of intimacy that you describe, feeling that the concrete scale of being a human organism was all that i could handle. life in these times has demanded a broadening that i find a little painful and creaky, but i'm working on it.

this includes developing an on-line life, studying some ancient Buddhist psychology and trying harder to listen to the people who i meet in my world. i will read some more and let this sink in more, but i wanted to send out my thanks and burst of enthusiasm for your effort. Beth J.

**Online Publication: Escape the Overcode « Maakbaarheid in de Grote Stad Says:**

June 5, 2009 at 9:06 am | [Reply](#)

[...] book opens with the Affectivist Manifesto: Artistic Critique in the 21st [...]"

**world cities Says:**

June 7, 2009 at 9:09 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes blog an excerpt from THE AFFECTIVIST MANIFESTO / Artistic Critique in the 21st Century: "... Artistic activism is affectivism, it opens [...]"

**Book - machine quotidienne Says:**

July 27, 2009 at 8:46 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] -The Affectivist Manifesto: [...]"

**radionica: Tekst i kontekst by Klaudio Štefančić | CroHr.com Says:**

August 14, 2009 at 3:07 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] <http://www.wdw.nl/project.php?id=183> • Za čitanje: <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> • <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808> • ...jedan primjer 'novinske kritike': [...]"

**Art Sheffield » » Art Sheffield 2010 - Life: A User's Manual Says:**

January 13, 2010 at 4:11 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Brian Holmes, the Affectivist Manifesto Andrea Fraser (on wikipedia) Professor Sara Ahmed (Goldsmiths staff profile) Brian Massumi (on wikipedia) Okwui Enwezor (on wikipedia) [...]"

**hito Says:**

[January 27, 2010 at 2:17 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

hey brian, what a brilliant piece!

h.

**<https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11...> « Status Quote Says:**

[January 4, 2011 at 6:39 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

**[The Shifting Boundaries of Art](#) | [aslaboratory](#) Says:**

[January 5, 2011 at 8:07 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] The Affectivist Manifesto This entry was posted in Uncategorized. Bookmark the permalink. LikeBe the first to like this post. [...]

**[How Does Collective Practice Function Within Contemporary Art Practice?](#) « [joannelaws](#) Says:**

[April 4, 2011 at 10:31 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

**[Maya](#) Says:**

[June 24, 2011 at 9:08 am](#) | [Reply](#)

A technical note (before I plunge into reading, having just finished Unleashing the Collective Phantoms and already smiling.): the pdf link above is the same as the NYTimes link just next to it.

This site ist wunderbar!!!!!!!!!!

Happy Summer

**[Maya](#) Says:**

[June 24, 2011 at 10:40 am](#) | [Reply](#)

First and foremost: yes! And furthermore (after at least another yes per sentence): the arts are necessary for social transformation also to work against violence, which is not a categorical call for non-violence but a call like a beginning to which one knows as yet no reply.

Would love to link up on our blog! (This blog is already listed in our info. section, but would be fantastic to also have a link to the book and this first section.)

**[Brian Holmes](#) Says:**

[June 24, 2011 at 2:32 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Anyone is welcome to link to this site and use the materials, I am glad you like it!

**[the affectivist manifesto by Brian Holmes](#) | [13/10/11](#) Says:**

[July 20, 2011 at 12:43 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

**[osfa](#) Says:**

[February 5, 2012 at 8:23 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Hi Brian, nice piece! ... as usual. I really appreciate – and share – your explanation about art today in the central part of the piece... To me this comes through Guattari... and of course through our own experiments... 😊 \_ haven't gotten yet to the intimacy part... Still playing with the machines... Will send you something soon \_ Looking forward, all the best \_ just stop by in Spain – south – sometime soon! \_ osfa

**[Brian Holmes](#) Says:**

[February 5, 2012 at 9:10 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Osfa, wonderful to hear from you. Suerte con las máquinas!

**Mircea Husar Says:**

[November 25, 2015 at 12:33 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Can you take down the picture of the naked fellow, please? I understand that it's there to make a point, but still ...

**Brian Holmes Says:**

[November 25, 2015 at 8:06 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I don't understand what the problem with the naked fellow would be. I am naked, you are naked – sometimes. When we want or need to be.

**Class prep – julianastudies Says:**

[August 22, 2016 at 4:17 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> [...]

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