William James and the mosaic of networked experience

In the radical empiricism of William James, mosaics are less images than modes of moving thought and life along. James calls his philosophy of pure experience “mosaic” because it concentrates on the relations that allow thought to conjunctively expand (James, 1912: 42, 86). James’s thought wants to replay the movement of pure experience, pushing out from its own edges to conjoin with and separate from the next flow of experience. Events transition from one into the next, sometimes continuously and sometimes discontinuously, and it is in these very transitions that both experience and the amorphous, diffuse development of life lies: “Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, can not, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected” (James, 1912: 87). The image of a mosaic is useful for James because it gets at the sense of bits butting up against one another—bits that might snugly fit together or bits that might jaggedly push away all, moving, via an overall “second-order” process, to form a pattern or a whole (James, 1912: 41–42). Mosaics emerge processually as a bringing-into-relation that traces and delimits the outer edge of one event, conjoining/differentiating it from the inner edge of the next. It is the edge that is the mosaic’s force and that drives its patterning, not the pattern or mosaic “bed” determining where the pieces should sit.

The term edge also makes an appearance in graph theory, the mathematical backbone of network analysis and networked topological imaging. An edge, more commonly referred to as a “link,” is just that line depicting a relation between nodes or vertices. But in almost every topological depiction of networks, the edge has lost its adjunctive, cementing and edging out capacities that it holds in James’s mosaic thought. Instead, the edge as link becomes either a vector for the expansionist growth of node-driven additions to the network and/or a dead connector smoothing the flow of traffic between node-things. What we have lost in the model of the network delivered to us via the image and theory of the graph is the experience of the edges, the experience of relation, “the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations” (James, 1912: 43).

Mosaics are of course everywhere in contemporary data visualization. In fact, a standard mode of representing and comparing data sets that depend on another variable or contingency—for example, the number of women compared to men working part time in a call center—is called a “mosaic plot” (Hofman, 2003: 619). Here the mosaic is rendered nondiagrammatic, operating only as, to summon Peircean semiot-
of millions of isolated individual voices shouting at and past each other. What I am trying to do with my editing and compilation is reimagine these separate speakers as collectives taking form as a public body in physical space. (Bookchin and Stimson, 2011: 308)

For James, a relation cannot simply be experienced as this or that, be consumed once and for all qua experience. For relations only unfold in duration, “[Personal] histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced” (James, 1977: 198). Relationality is the experience of passage—a vague edging with, against, between, away from—that actualizes the related things. It is experience as conjoining/disjoining. To take the edge seriously means to also value the force of relation—its capacity to change the things in relation at the very moment change itself relationally occurs. The book on the table is different from the same book on the bookshelf by being brought into proximity, into a different relation of “withness” with the table, says James (1977: 222-224). It has changed not in and of itself (that is, essentially, although what that may be is also up for debate, according to James) but for something else—the table, the other furniture in the room, whom or whatever is knowing/experiencing the book. This is especially so for the experience of knowing the object, for an object (thing, node) can only be known via its associated milieu, “To know an object is here to lead it through a context which the world supplies” (James, 1977: 156, emphasis in original).

It is not simply that the dancers in Mass Ornament are implicitly connected by the internet’s infrastructure or by ubiquitous portals such as YouTube, which harbor techniques for soliciting the same kind of templatelike, user-generated content. By drawing on James’s understanding of the force of the edge in mosaics, the force of relations generating transitions, we shift away from the pieces—the “tiles”—sitting in their bed or structure. We move instead toward the capacity to connect nonlocally via rhythm, cross-sensory relays, patterning. Bookchin’s installation conjures the ways in which globally dancing bodies, intimately performing subjectivations, emerge in the reassembly of packets of video files. In YouTube, packets, aggregated to eventually display as video files, are uploaded by a solitary dancer in an empty domestic setting, one devoted to home-brewed celebrity. As the files are reassembled in Bookchin’s single-channel mosaic work, we sense the way in which this emerging, technically inflected subjectivation is nonetheless a collective refrain.

In Latid Off (2009), a work that develops this mosaiclike compositionality, Bookchin collects “vlogs,” online video confessionalists, mainly from North Americans who have lost their jobs. Each “mosaic” window of an individual vlog recounts and reflects on the moment an employee was told (usually by their employer) that they had lost their job. Using the same strategies of rolling out edited together “rows” of the video
confrontations across the scene, the networked diagram here is driven by voice and timbre. On the one hand, the job loss narratives are remarkably similar, signaling the widespread use of “management-speak” to flexibly maneuver through contemporary industrial relations. Video fragments of each individual’s working day flow into the others to create a shared narrative of insecurity and job loss in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. We listen to similar stories as people’s jobs are pulled from under them: “one of the larger people in the company and someone from human resources was there”; “well,” he said, “this is the part of the job I really don’t like”; “and finally the owner cut everybody’s hours down to nothing” (Bookchin, 2009). But the “shared” narrative falls away at the same time as feeble excuses are proffered by managers, pauses, sighs, and gaps are all they can find to replace their words. A different moment of collective enunciation suddenly crashes through this feeble narrative of excuses. “Laid off” resounds through each tile, as each employee speaks the phrase simultaneously. From a centered window, Bookchin arranges two lines of almost simultaneously speaking tiles of recently unemployed people, fanning out and diminishing in size, as they edge toward each side of the screen. It’s a startling moment both because the synchronicity of the editing amplifies the vocal volume and because the very slight temporal delay incurred by visually scanning each speaker’s tile across the screen also creates a slight reverberation through the phrase “laid off.” The voices speak together but not as one. It is the reverberation that gives the sound its peculiar timbre—a vibrating chorus in which neither unity nor disparity prevails. As if we were listening, not to the same experience, but instead from the inside of (a) collective multiplicity.

**Diagram and dispositif**

To engage diagrammatically with works such as *Mass Ornament* and *Laid Off* is not to deny the spectacular uniformity of globally connected bodies or voices that unknowingly perform similar movements or say the same things. To return, then, to the mechanosphere, *Mass Ornament*, for example, does not escape the overdetermining of the network by spectacular aesthetic machines (links and nodes, grids, mechanical dancing). *Laid Off* does not avoid the monotonous tone of protocols and the language used to justify corporate restructuring and job loss after 2008. Both videos slip along the conjunctions of a network that is becoming—generating itself dynamically as relations form and play out transversally across diagram and network as dispositif. We need something like Foucault’s concept of the dispositif or “apparatus” to continue metamodeling networked experience.

What I’m trying to single out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The dispositif itself is the network that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, quoted in Agamben, 2009: 2, my emphasis)

For Foucault, “the field” is coextensive with “the social” but we might think about the field aesthetically too. The diagram is an immanent tracing of the qualities or traits of relations at play and operates aesthetically across a field—the recursive arraying of networking, for example. The dispositif is an actualization of the concrete network or assemblage—the concatenation that joins networks with hacker culture, for instance—that is produced as a specific individuation out of the conjunctive work of these traits (Deleuze, 1988: 36–37). The diagram will never simply function demonstrably as “proof” of what exists in the dispositif, although it is also always indicative of the kinds of conjunctions that any field will be likely to make. Yet diagrammatically things are always moving, creating more conjunctions as they become, across a dispositif, and as the concrete assemblages of the dispositif concatenate with new assemblages: “From one diagram to the next, new maps are drawn. And there is no diagram that does not also include, besides the points which it connects up, certain relatively free and unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance” (Deleuze, 1988: 44).

Aesthetic forms such as representational images of networks or “mosaic plots” or arrayed formations of crowds comprise part of our contemporary network dispositif, our “network condition” (Munster, 2009: 4). Tiziana Terranova sees the emergence of network science, responsible for the proliferation of, especially, the ubiquitous maps of networks, as a powerful element of this dispositif’s discourses and sets of scientific statements (2007). According to Terranova, the key mechanisms of this dispositif are security and the market. But, she argues, it is the relation of these mechanisms to each other that is crucial. Although what needs to be secured is the ongoing life of the population, giving security a biopolitical vector, it is risk—calculated as the series of events that will incur potential economic loss—that must be managed bioeconomically and minimized. What must be secured, then, is not life itself and not the risk to life but rather any potential damage to ongoing growth of the market. The network model and image play a key role in simulating risk events and predicting outcomes, hence their use in both organizational analysis and antiterrorist detection: “The network intervenes in this calculation as a productive machine and as a predictive/preemptive mode of simulation. As a mode of simulation, it allows one to model and rehearse possible strategies of preemption. As a productive, concrete assemblage, it