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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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Anarchopanda's Soft Subversions

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Students and Bodies

Over the many months of the student strike in Quebec, the streets of Montreal have been filled with the creativity of protest as street theatre, an enactment of eventness in which “becoming produces nothing other than itself”¹ as the affective surplus of potential. This potential is the sign of the productive vagueness (both its indistinct outlines and its force as a wave) of the event of the student strike itself; that is to say, this vagueness is not the result of a “dilution” of their demands beyond opposition to the tuition hike, as the protest has become a site for an expanded litany of complaints, desires and demands. This potential is the blurred edge of something coming into effect, not yet determined. What would things be like if, say, we had free tuition as a social value, or if people met their neighbours through direct expressions of democratic dissent and joyful sonic choreographies and callesthetics, or if the presumptive appropriation of the city streets by corporate festivals or outdoor malls fringed with artist accessories was replaced with mobile and spontaneous sites of political, artistic and social enactments? We don't yet know, but we are in the process of finding out!

Through the last edges of winter and into the traditional off-season of academia, the student strikes have maintained their vitality through creative affective reroutings, and through the material instantiation of protest as an intensive and productively *ambiguous* mode of embodiment. The nightly marches have, more often than not, been *détournements* of sense: for instance, in their ability to subversively deploy a refusal of organization (by not preplanning march routes) and yet enact the nightly marches as spontaneous and opportunistic co-ordinations. Every night in the streets, this generative insistence on embodiment is not simply reactive; that is to say, it is neither a demonstrative rejection of accusations of the ‘slacktivism’ of social media, nor is it a legitimating throwback to earlier moments of political protest. The quotidian focus on embodiment should make us think of the actualized gestures of specific protest tactics not as the *interpretation* of an established political discourse, set of complaints, or demands, but as direct expressions of a becoming political of “matter-ing”.

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 237.

Tactical formations

From the start of the strike, one of the main strategies of dismissal directed towards students has been infantilization, a targeted dilution of their status as full citizens in Quebec society. Students have been consistently characterized as “*des enfants rois*”, spoiled brats subject to a generational dismissal as overindulged, lazy, impractical and entitled. It's time they paid their share, politicians and the sage pundits of the comments sections have repeatedly declared, ignoring the fact that a substantial percentage of students work (and pay taxes) while they study, and that the guidelines on parental contributions ignore the many students who receive little or no support from their families (not to mention the liminal status of mature students or graduate students, who fall outside of the age range that typically lends itself to the perception of hedonistic, latte drinking, iPhone toting youths). Like overgrown babies, students are dismissed as soft bodies, demanding, consumptive without the return of ‘real’ labour, and requiring a hard bodied, adult response from cops in riot gear and politicians who know how to draw and hold a line, even to absurdity. Let's find these kids a job up north, Jean Charest famously joked, as students protested his plans for developing the national body to maximize profit through the *Plan Nord*. One subtext: these kids wouldn't last five minutes if faced with real work. Given this, it might seem surprising that one of the most iconic, effective and popular figures to emerge out of the events of the last several months is a giant stuffed *toutou* known as Anarchopanda. If students are being characterized as big babies, isn't it a bit counterproductive to embrace a giant adorable stuffy as a serious figure of their discontent? Actually, such détournements are exactly the effective territory of the students' contagious actions.

Hands on a Hard Body

Before there was Anarchopanda, there was a group of cégep² profs who would take their place at student demonstrations, rerouting the incorporeal authority of their cultural capital into a physical line of defense by standing between students and the hard bodies of the police. Eventually, these soft bodies wore down through the attrition of injury and the sheer duration of this strike.³ One prof wondered what other kinds of bodies might be effective. With the click of a mouse purchase to buy a giant panda costume, the “cheapest thing (he) could find on Ebay”, Anarchopanda was made (not born).⁴ An indefatigable figure at protest, albeit sometimes (on hot days) disconcertingly clad only in an oversized head and a spandex bodysuit or (as an-

² Cégeps are ‘free’ (for Quebec students, albeit with numerous fees) colleges that offer either pre-university degrees, replacing the last year of high school and the first year of university, or terminal professional degrees.

³ Melissa Gira Grant, [“Anarchopanda Hugs the Front Lines of Montreal Student Protests”](#) *Wired Magazine*, June 8 2012.

⁴ Catherine Lalonde, “AnarchoPanda : la philosophie dans le trottoir” *Le Devoir*, May 26, 2012, and a nod to Donna Haraway.

nounced on his Facebook status update) “in disguise as a human”, Anarchopanda is the alter ego of a philosophy professor at a French cégep.⁵



“Don’t shoot! Pandas are an endangered species, and peaceable vegetarians!”

Photo taken from [Anarchopanda's Facebook page](#).

One of Anarchopanda’s first appearances was during one of the most tense moments of the strike, when a convergence of outrage around the strike, the *Plan Nord* (a massive development scheme in the north of Quebec which has been widely critiqued by indigenous people, environmentalists and anti-capitalists) and police brutality in Montreal made the threat of bodily harm to protestors more likely than ever. Into this fray wandered a man in a giant panda suit, who offered cuddles to police officers in an attempt to reroute the negative charge of the event. Since then, Anarchopanda

has been a mainstay at the protests and is a wild attractor for protestors in need of comfort in a difficult and dangerous situation. While this *gros toutou* is disarming, it is not because Anarchopanda stays in place as a non-threatening distraction from the student demands (which have been explicitly and repeatedly coded as violent, dangerous and disruptive by the press and members of Quebec’s ruling political party).⁶ After all, the gesture of care towards the police is also one of potential danger for the man in the panda suit, and a blurring of the boundaries between two very different types of bodies. Articulating a set of preexisting conditions (including the infantilization of student protestors themselves) with an exceptionally ambiguous non-human

⁵ Such nonchalant inconsistency about his appearance is part of Anarchopanda’s rakish appeal and, of course, his anarchist nature.

⁶ On the late evening news broadcast on June 10, 2012, concerning the protests during the Montreal F-1 Grand Prix, a local CTV news reporter breathlessly narrated the scene in downtown Montreal, characterizing the student protestors as violent and destructive towards property downtown and towards police dressed in full riot gear. As he described advancing students, who were attempting to get past police towards the closed off streets where F-1 activities were being held, the reporter opined that as students made a break for the festivities, a “*merchant or a citizen* took matters into his own hands” and threw a metal barricade at students. This indistinct characterization, *merchant or citizen*, makes perfectly clear not only that students are not citizens in this instant, but also the path to such a standing and the right to act (violently) in the name of the law. The other recent example is, of course, Minister of Culture Christine St-Pierre’s claim that wearing a red square is a symbol of “intimidation, violence”, in response to Fred Pellerin’s decision to decline the order of Quebec as a gesture of support for the student strikers and critique of the government.

embodiment (not just animal, but cuddly, oversized, artificial, etc.), Anarchopanda's affective force lies in his ability to precisely enact the emergence of the event itself through a disruptively ambiguous embodiment. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "anexactitude (is) the exact passage of that which is under-way" (20). For example, the out-of-scale size of Anarchopanda makes him the absurdly right toy for students as overgrown children; but in a *détournement* of the authoritative insistence for students to "grow up" and get with the program of the governmental timetable of tuition increases, Anarchopanda's soft subversions, emerging from the wear and tear of the fragile nature of human bodies, open onto a different temporality, imaginatively holding open the time of endurance and persistence that the student marchers and their supporters insistently repeat every untimely night.



The Political is (De)personal

As Anarchopanda notes of his intervention: "Strange times call for a strange response. It's my way of intervening so that the students no longer suffer, without betraying or diverting their discourse".⁷ Anarchopanda's allure lies in the way that his very iconicity, which of course makes him an accessible grounding point for emotionally weary protesters, becomes also a charging point for effective political action. The enactive ambiguity of his embodiment is in fact one of the key stakes of the student protests, a remapping of the body politic to include the soft bodies of students: liminal subjects and often imperceptible as citizens, vulnerable to police and future economic brutality with the seeming approbation of disturbingly complacent or satisfied segments of society.

In foregrounding the playful performance of the giant panda, in no way do I want to play down the genuinely remarkable, dedicated and deeply ethical efforts of the individual behind Anarchopanda. His identity was recently made public, when he went to court to protest Montreal's recent municipal ban on masked protesting. Despite this demasking, Anarchopanda continues to perform as a figure of collective action. Anarchopanda's insistence on retaining an ambiguous embodiment of referring to himself in the third person, for example, re-marks him as someone who has not simply "spoken for" students or usurped their discourse, but who has walked the line be-

⁷ Lalonde.

tween the “personal touch” for which he is known (literally, hugs!) and an insistent depersonalization that derives both from his specific but non-human mode of embodiment and a rejection (or rather, playful subversion) of the politics of personality that so frequently captures and defuses the affective power of direct political action.⁸ Over the course of the student strike, many tactics have been deployed by students and their supporters to both raise the volume on political noise (in Rancière’s sense, of that which falls outside of the recognized distribution of the sensible in relation to political recognizability) and to shift the terrain such that the diverse visions and relations mobilized by the student discontent might produce a remapping of political potential. While student *porte-paroles* of various organizations have made eloquent and accomplished interventions in terms that *should be* understandable as political speech,⁹ many of the most effective and striking tactics have involved soft bodies as direct expressions of a becoming-political of “mattering”. We might think of the sonic and dancing contagions of les casseroles; the student “ma-NU-festations” (nude marches) where body language speaks the contrast with the violence of the hard bodies of the cops and their corporeal extensions (*les matraques*, pepper spray, kettling); the *poussette* contingent of parents and babies making the protest scene; or the “*têtes grises/carrés rouges*” of elderly supporters who may not be able to maintain the brisk pace of the manifs but who turn out to show support. Anarchopanda is likewise part of these soft subversions of the attempted kettling of the potential that began with protests over tuition hike. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett writes: “A vital materialist theory of democracy seeks to *transform the divide between speaking subjects and mute objects into a set of differential tendencies and variable capacities*”. This entails not simply the recognition of other “actants”, but rather a reconfiguration of the field of relation. A radical materialism asks us to think of the in- or extra-corporeal or ephemeral (such as gesture, noise, breath) as not expressive of a set of beliefs or intentions, but directly enactive. The ambiguous embodiments of Anarchopanda directly enact this line between speaking subject and mute object to help hold open a field of expression as the fierce joy of the political.

Anarchopanda on [video](#).

(the crowd is chanting “a hug! un câlin!”)

⁸ See, for example, the mainstream media’s gleeful overplaying and accusations of hubris in the wake of MNA Amir Khadir’s comments that he is inspired by Ghandi and Martin Luther King as an attempt to delegitimize his embodied actions of, say, biking down to take part in night manifs. Or consider the constant speculation around the potential political future of the student spokespersons (especially male representatives like Léo Bureau-Blouin and Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois) which makes their current actions seem merely opportunistic and individualized. The potential political future of Anarchopanda makes a lovely kind of non-sense.

⁹ Even when this speech is dismissed, as for example, in the Minister of Education’s claim that the students “refuse to compromise” during the last set of negotiations.

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