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Event Value: The Aesthetic Ethics of Brian Massumi's Affect Theory

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Article

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Abstract

"Event value" serves as an implicit thread in Brian Massumi's response to the dilemma of "heterogeneous coexistence" that has emerged since the "ethical turn". In his affective analysis of fear, Massumi successively put forward the cultural power logics of "Fear-Consumption" and "Ontopower" within late capitalism, which ultimately lead to the value priority of "potentiality" and its actualizing effects. Subsequently, Massumi integrates the value of "potentiality" into empiricism, replacing static spatial and visual experiences with "transitional experience." He emphasizes the value of intensity within the absolute nature of quality and establishes a semblance aesthetics rooted in the creative "virtual-real" experience. The "surplus value of life" represents the manifestation of event value in the ethics of sympathy and the economics of affect, upon which Massumi proposes "dividualist politics" as a new paradigm of biopolitics. The aesthetic community of affect is constructed through the logics of "collective individuation" and "body-event," offering a novel interpretation of "heterogeneous coexistence" and pointing toward an ecological ethics.

Introduction

Since the "ethical turn" in the 1970s, the issue of "heterogeneous coexistence" has become one of the core topics in aesthetics and literature. Confronted with the historical context in the aftermath of Auschwitz, representatives of the "ethical turn" such as Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, proceeding from the dimensions of the alterity of the Other and the witnessing of trauma and suffering, sought to break away from structuralism and rediscover a shared history. However, this approach has faced criticism from contemporary leftist scholars. For instance, Jacques Rancière, from an egalitarianism stance, pointed out that the "absolute Other" in the thoughts of Levinas and Lyotard regarding "alterity" renders the subject passive in the face of events. Instead, Rancière reoriented the search for a method of "heterogeneous coexistence" through the concept of "dissensus" and pioneered a path toward an "aesthetic community".Since the 1990s, with the trends of globalization and multipolarization, the erosion of shared values has intensified. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the ideology of the "aesthetic community" has become a cornerstone of contemporary cultural critical theory. Beyond Rancière, thinkers including Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt have attempted to place the hope for "heterogeneous coexistence" in the irrational domains of "sensation" and "life". Nevertheless, these approaches are generally regarded as idealistic and unrealistic, thus lacking practicality—in other words, an incomplete critique of sensation. When examining these theoretical trajectories, the predicament of "heterogeneous coexistence" lies, first, in its failure to break free from binary oppositions such as subject versus Other or subject versus event; and second, in its lack of an essential exploration of the concept of "value", which serves as a trigger for any conflicts.

Brian Massumi, a pivotal figure in both the "affective turn" and "event turn" in contemporary cultural critical theory, adopts a postmodern natural philosophical perspective—namely, activist philosophy—to conduct an event-based analysis of sensation itself, thereby forging a path toward an aesthetic ethics of affect. However, there remains a paucity of research on the axiological dimensions of Massumi's

thought within academic circles. The term "event value" is not an explicit technical term coined by Massumi, but it recurs implicitly throughout the entire trajectory of his theoretical system. In his essay *The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens*, Massumi, drawing on Gilbert Simondon's ideas on technology to analyze art, argues that, as a "technology of relations", " claims the right to have no manifest utility, no use-value, and in many cases even no exchange-value. At its best, it has event-value" (Massumi,2011,p. 53).Within the context of the contemporary philosophical trend centered on events, Massumi shifts the focus from the impact of events on the subject to the occurrence mechanisms of event itself. By investigating events from the perspectives of affect and process philosophy, he establishes the theoretical characteristics of his thought, such as "the autonomy of affect" "posthumanism" and "the turn to natural philosophy." In essence, "event value" constitutes the hidden core underlying these distinctive features.

1. Disaster and Fear: The Origin of Event Value

Massumi's axiological analysis of "potentiality" initially emerged in his research on "fear", which also laid the groundwork for his characterization of the logic of subjectivation in late capitalism. During this phase of his work, the events Massumi addressed primarily centered on catastrophic events. He introduced the concept of the "accident-form" to describe how "accidents in the most general sense", when functioning as commodities that represent our existence, are "groundlessness"(Massumi,1993,p.7). Examples include Lynn Hill, a world-class female rock climber, who fell 85 feet yet suffered only minor injuries while wearing a Timex women's fashion watch (equipped with a safety clasp) priced at approximately $45; pilot Hank Dempsey, who survived a fall from an airplane at 2,500 feet while wearing a Timex multi-time zone flight watch costing around $60; and 52-year-old Helen Thayer, who skied to the North Pole with her dog, enduring numerous dangers yet surviving, while wearing an civilized Timex watch priced at roughly $40... Massumi argues that these cases are used to illustrate that the extraordinariness of individuals and the personal value it entails are "not because they have qualities that place them a notch above the rest of us in the chain of being, but because of something that happened to them. An event" (Massumi,1993,p.6).And the individual value generated from accidental events is rapidly transduced into the price of commodities. Therefore, in late capitalism, consumer behavior becomes the means through which subjectivation is achieved via event value, and it also constitutes the core element in the formation of individual and collective identities.

On a broader social scale, the "accident-form" manifests as ubiquitous potential dangers (such as crime, disease, and disasters), becoming the "general form of existence" in late capitalist society. It is not a specific accident but an abstracted "disaster" and the potentiality of its "avoidance," which together constitute the fundamental conditions of existence. Under the "accident-form," individuals achieve subjectivation through "general identity" and "specific identity". Massumi states: "Our generic identity (our subject-form, or humanity) is the generic event (the accident-form); our specific identity (the content of which is our "individuality" or "self") is the sum total of our purchases. In other words, contingency is the form of identity, and identity is determined (given content) through the serial commission of the act of groundless consumption" (Massumi,1993,p. 7). "Their generic identity-their belonging to the class of

remarkable people-is defined by the condition of groundlessness" (Massumi,1993,p. 7); it does not rely on specific traits but on the universality of the "accident-form".The "accident-form" represents a shared human identity, a universal state of "potential disaster" or "free fall"—whether one is a rock climber, a pilot, or an ordinary person, all share the existential state of "potential accident". This identity is abstract and devoid of content, requiring supplementation by the "specific identity".The "specific identity", which defines individual differences through consumer behavior, is manifested in concrete characteristics such as gender, social status, and personality, and is symbolized by the attributes of commodities (e.g., price, style). "The commodity encounter not only specifies but also actualizes the subject of the purchase. (Massumi,1993,p.7). Through consumption, individuals attempt to offset the fear inherent in the general identity: "Buying is prevention. It insures against death" (Massumi,1993,p.9), thereby facilitating the ungrounded emergence of existence.So as, "I buy therefore I am"(Massumi,1993,p.7).

It is evident that during this period, Massumi sought the foundation of the subject's existence in the potential and uncertain threats to existence. The fundamental logical loop of "fear-consumption" constitutes the value model of late capitalism. The ungrounded emergence of the subject driven by the potentiality and uncertainty of event occurrence represents the event value that Massumi initially explored.Subsequently, Massumi identified another dimension of event value inherent in the emotion of fear, derived from the ambiguous generative logic of power in late capitalism. This approach has its origins in the field of military studies. From George W. Bush's "preemptive" military strategy to the "color-coded terror alert system," a form of "ontopower" has emerged. Ontopower does not rely on established facts or concrete existents as its basis; instead, it is grounded in "affective facts" .Among these, "fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter"(Massumi,2015a,p. 191).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, terrorism led to a shift in strategic defense toward targeting potential threats, which became a typical military approach in late capitalism. Threats are uncertain and generative, giving rise to widespread fear. In 2002, when Bush delivered a speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point, he explicitly put forward the "preemptive" strategy for the first time. Distinct from the "preventive" and "deterrent" strategies of the Cold War era, its epistemology "centers on 'uncertainty'"(Massumi,2015a,p. 9), revolving around potential threats and operating according to the logic of the proliferation of such threats to address dangers that have not yet taken shape or even emerged. Its targets and enemies are difficult to define. It represents a non-causal and open-ended logic of effectiveness, where "the felt reality of threat legitimates preemptive action, once and for all. Any action taken to preempt a threat from emerging into a clear and present danger is legitimated by the affective fact of fear, actual facts aside." (Massumi,2015a,p. 191).Meanwhile, the Bush administration introduced a color-coded terrorist alert system domestically, aimed at calibrating public anxiety and enabling the exercise of government power to acquire a mode of perception that acts directly on the public's nervous system. Under specific circumstances, fear can become a threat unto itself and a virtual cause, triggering itself autonomously and even existing independently of external threats, evolving into an "affective tonality" or "emotional atmosphere" and thus achieving autonomy. "Everywhere, fear double-features: as vaguely and clearly featured; as generic and particular; as ground of existence for itself as a

way of life. Fear, in its quasi-causal relation to itself, has become redundantly self-sufficient—an autonomous force of existence. It has become ontogenetic: an ontopower."(Massumi,2015a,pp. 181–182).Ontopower, in essence, represents the generative potential of influence arising from the authenticity of felt intensity and the ambiguity of meaning. This constitutes the power logic of affect.

Distinct from power whose legitimacy is established by a structure of meaning, the point of its generation lies in an existential form where life, expression, or power exists in a critical point—neither fully present nor fully absent, but in an ambiguous zone between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, meaning and meaninglessness. Massumi refers to this critical point of affective extremities as the "Barely-There," which denotes "To grasp the overall mode of power today, one must grasp the political operation of this affective limit—life at the edge of its capacity to affect and be affected" (Massumi,2021,p. 240).Massumi maintains that ontopower differs from the sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower defined by Michel Foucault. It revolves around the recurring "Barely-There" threshold, transforming the transmission of uncertainty into organizational force. Examples include the Terri Schiavo case and George W. Bush's public performances in the aftermath of 9/11. Schiavo suffered cardiac arrest due to anorexia, resulting in severe brain damage from oxygen deprivation, and relied on a feeding tube to sustain her life, existing in a critical point between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. Her ambiguous utterance "ah... waaaa" was interpreted by her parents as "wanting water (to live)," endowing it with the meaning of a will to survive. However, the medical community and her husband regarded it merely as a neural reflex. All forces became embroiled in a struggle over the meaning of "Schiavo's ambiguous expression", and the dispute lasted for 15 years. The case escalated to the level of the U.S. federal government, becoming a focal point for the contestation of various powers and social forces.In the 9/11 attacks, scenes such as the collapse of the Twin Towers and the loss of lives constituted images of life at its extremities. The "Ground Zero" site of the attacks became a symbol of the blurred boundary between life and death. Images of survivors emerging from the rubble and the American flag waving were repeatedly broadcast by the media, evoking intense feelings such as shock and fear among the public and serving as a matrix for the generation, interweaving, and transformation of multiple meanings. The public interpreted the images of the 9/11 rubble as "trauma," the George W. Bush administration framed them as the legitimate starting point for war, and the media portrayed them as symbols of national renewal.Bush himself also crafted ambiguous images to shape his own narrative. For instance, his public appearances were characterized by fragmentation and brevity; his brief speeches at the disaster site and his address at Washington National Cathedral projected an ephemeral image; in his daily life, he engaged in meaningless activities such as jogging and clearing brush to convey a sense of "vitality," using "amodel completion" to lead the public to interpret him as a symbol of national vitality; and his actions of taking photos with rescuers and embracing the families of victims at "Ground Zero" transduced "personal emotion" into a symbol of national unity, justifying political actions such as the "War on Terror" and the establishment of the "Department of Homeland Security ". Ultimately, this transformed the 9/11 events into the affect foundation for political initiatives like the "War on Terror".It is within such "pluralistic game" triggered by events that ontopower activates the "surplus of meaning"(Massumi,2021,p.241);"The operations of

power at the limit of life do not displace sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical modalities—they reactivate them, folding them into a renewed coordination" (Massumi,2021,p.247).

The possibility of such "renewed coordination" lies, in fact, in the transformation of the value foundation of traditional power—shifting the priority of value to the dimension of "environment-effect," that is, the priority of value in lived experience. This anti-phenomenological value foundation also opens up a new ethical paradigm, which Massumi terms the "ecology of power".The "ecology of power" emphasizes "environmental power". The salience of affective facts (such as fear) in events and the uncertainty of meaning (even the ambiguity of the boundary between existence and non-existence) together provide an "environment" for the generation of power—namely, the acquisition of power through the modulation of "atmosphere". Therefore, Massumi refers to "ontopower" as a form of "environmental power"—" It alters the life environment's conditions of emergence" and "does not correlate to the normative species-being of a population. It correlates to its singular reemergence"(Massumi,2015a,p.40). The potential generativity of the environment serves as the basis for power, rather than fixed meanings and existents, and the evaluation of the environment is grounded in "affective facts".Just as a preemptive ontopower constitutes a form of environmental power, functioning by modulating people's perceptions of threats rather than operating on specific, actual objects. "At the limit, threat is a felt quality, independent of any particular instance of itself, in much the way the color red is a quality independent of any particular tint of red, as well as of any actually occurring patch of any particular tint of red. It becomes an abstract quality. When threat self-causes, its abstract quality is affectively presented, in startle, shock, and fear. As presented affectively, its quality suffuses the atmosphere. Threat is ultimately ambient. Its logic purely qualitative"(Massumi,2015a,pp. 199–200). The authenticity of this sensation is precisely what Massumi refers to as the "virtual"—concrete yet abstract, an abstraction that resides within sensation. It embodies "importance" as intensity, inherent in immediate experience, and guides the generation of value weight in specific events.

The so-called "concrete but abstract" is analogous to the qualitative effect of affect in the aesthetic sense, which transcends the sum of visible elements (what Massumi calls "aesthetic semblance"). Furthermore, "environmentality must systematically work through the 'regulation of effects' rather than of causes"(Massumi,2015a,p. 22). Therefore, ontopower must transform "affective facts" into "effective reality".The priority of effective reality over causal reality is reflected in Massumi's analysis of "quasi-causality." When examining the divergence between Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard regarding the concepts of "simulacrum" and "simulation", Massumi identified the source of the value of "effective reality" in the concept of "quasi-causality". Quasi-causality denotes a causal force that is "effective illusion"—it is not a genuine cause, but through abstraction and re-injection into reality, it compels things to conform to the distribution of identities it establishes. On this basis, Deleuze argued that simulation is not a substitute for reality, but a process of producing the reality ,pushing reality to the extreme of its generative principles and ultimately producing reality. In this way, the reality rooted in the interpretable causal relationships of mimetic relations is transformed into the reality of effects.

From the connection between the uncertainty of catastrophic events and consumer activities, to Deleuze's affirmation of simulated effects under "quasi-causality," we can observe Massumi's efforts to construct an axiological reversal of causality, gradually delineating a path toward an axiology of affect. Along this path, Massumi consistently explores the direct value of the "effect" (i.e., the event or occurrence itself), rejecting the use of existing causal interpretive systems to explain the effects of event occurrence and attributing value priority to the "cause". Instead, he presupposes the "autonomy of affects".

2. The Release of Potentiality: The Empiricist Turn of Event Value

Concomitant with the formation of subjectivity in late capitalism and the concept of ontopower, Massumi's research on experience of movement and semblance aesthetics constitutes another crucial manifestation of event value. In contrast to fear, potentiality in empiricism manifests more positively, opening up a space for activity beyond the phenomenal world and the autonomous configurative capacity of experience.The term "potentiality" was initially linked to movement. Aristotle argued that "Change may now be defined as the actualization of the potential as such"(Ross,1936,p. 359). Alfred North Whitehead's concept of "eternal objects" is considered to contain infinite potentiality, continuously generating "actual entities"(Whtiehead,1978,p. 44). Deleuze's ideas on potentiality, derived from his re-reading of Baruch Spinoza's thought on affect, hold that potentiality represents the possibility of "substance" generating an infinite number of "modes", and he proposed the concept of the "virtual" to refer to the dynamic forces that exist but have not yet been captured by sensibility.For Massumi, the "virtual" serves as a crucial bridge connecting potentiality and movement experience. With this concept, he constructs an empiricism centered on "activity" as the basic unit. The "substance" or "God" that once served as the ultimate source of value is now replaced by the "event"—the actualization of potentiality.

Shifting the priority of value to the process of event occurrence rather than to a fixed point, Massumi terms this "passage precede position", and in the context of human existence, this is manifested in the "body" replacing the "senses". In response to Spinoza's question "Do we know what a body can do?" Massumi answers "No" and argues that "There are powers of improvisation, powers of invention in a body that we have only begun to plumb" (Massumi,2015b,p. 177), with the source of bodily action lying in "affecting and being affected" (i.e., "affect"). In essence, this identifies the body as the bearer of "potentiality"—an unstructured generative force. This proposition aims to illustrate that the body, operating at the pre-conscious level, seems to contain more active capacities and infinite possibilities that have not yet been captured by consciousness.In a series of experiments demonstrating that the motoricity of the body precedes the intentionality of the brain, Massumi identifies "amodel perception" at the pre-conscious level of the body as a domain for exploring potentiality. The two primary adversaries of this "amodel perception" experience are, on the one hand, the traditional concept of spatial experience and, on the other, visual experience understood as a static phenomenological experience.

With regard to traditional Euclidean space, space functions both as a positioning model and as a clear boundary separating the internal from the external, with bodily sensations constrained by spatial

positioning. In contrast, Massumi argues that space is generated through the affective events of the body: "The world does not contain feeling. Feeling contains the world"(Massumi,2021,p. 328). He cites the example of his young son, who, after falling, localized his pain to the pavement rather than his knee. This reveals an initial contradiction in spatial cognition: adults assume that pain should objectively reside in the knee (where the nerve endings are located), yet the child associates the pain with the endpoint of the falling event (the pavement). This indicates that space is not a pre-existing, objectively divisible container, but is instead linked to the extension of event(encompassing the past fall, the present pain, and the continuation into the future). The "there" of the pain exists both in the knee and on the pavement; "The pain points to a zone of overlap between past and present, a stretch between the two where the body's memory is not a recollection but a living tension"(Massumi,2021,p.325), with spatial boundaries blurred by the flow of the event.

As William James also observed, infants do not localize pain to their toes (as they have not yet formed the concept of "toes"); pain constitutes "a world onto itself". Through repeated experiences (such as a nurse touching the toe causing pain, or the infant touching their own toe exacerbating the pain), the pain's repeated occurrence across different movements creates an "emphatic point", gradually differentiating the "toe" as a body part from the vague experience. Massumi argues that this process reveals the essence of spatial cognition: it is not that body parts exist first, enabling the localization of experience; rather, the repeated emphasis of experience precedes the differentiation of body parts. Space (including bodily space) emerges as a derivative from experience, and only later gradually contracts into a locatable space. This "inversion", which Massumi terms a "Copernican revolution," serves to illustrate the value of events in the configuration of space.

If the identifiable content is merely the result of the contraction following amodal experience, then what constitutes the true object of experience itself? Massumi contends that it is "pure transition"—that is, the experience of movement, change, or the absolute qualitative nature of the event's process. This constitutes the actualization of the "virtual"; hence, Massumi also refers to motor experience as the effect of the "virtual-real," a concept that permeates both his empiricism and his semblance aesthetics.

The essence of transition is pure movement transformation, representing the possibility of sequential without a fixed order. "The movements composing the space of experience are pure transitions, with as yet "no order of parts or of subdivisions" (cited James 1950). They must be considered to coexist in the same potentiality, butwithout mixing, as though superimposed upon each other on a single,vaguely ontological plane: a "simple total vastness". Composed as it isof transition, the vagueness of the plane is as timelike as it is spaceable.The atoms of sequenceabilty comprising it are timelike precursors of position, awaiting activation by events to unfold (Massumi,2021,p.331). This transition is pre-objective and pre-subjective, preceding the differentiation of time-space and subject-object. As Henri Bergson argued, the framework of objective experience is abstracted from a "pre-objective dimension of duration" ,with transition at the core of this dimension.Transition serves as the core driving force for the generation of experience, underpinning the construction of abstract forms. Objective forms such as vision and space "must fall back imperceptibly from sequencing" from transition—i.e., they depend on

transition as their foundation. When vision recedes from specific ordering, it merges into transition, and the sense of continuity it presents is actually achieved through transition via "synesthetic filling" (Massumi,2021,pp.334–335). Ultimately, visible forms such as objects and space are contractions and abstractions of the "a simple total vastness of transitional reality". As the core of the dynamic experiential field, transition constitutes the source of all experiential forms(Massumi,2021,p.339). Therefore, "transition" is purely event-based and non-spatial.

Massumi clarifies the distinction between Plato's cave metaphor (the visual version) and Charles Sanders Peirce's cave metaphor (the blind version). Plato's "cave" relies on vision and constitutes an "anesthetic space" (devoid of direct feeling, merely receiving passively). Prisoners are chained in fixed positions, observing the "shadows" (illusions) on the wall and striving for the "true forms" (Ideas). This space achieves the binary division of truth and illusion through the separation of internal and external boundaries. In contrast, Peirce's "cave" excludes vision; humans actively "swim" to explore, directly perceiving qualitative reality through smell, temperature, and movement. There is no dichotomy between "illusion and reality," and truth resides in the experience of "groping": "The link is a limit. It is a limit-event more than a spatial boundary. "(Massumi,2021,p. 366).Within Peirce's "cave", there exist various non-visual sensory gradients. For example, the cave contains continuously changing temperature gradients (with some areas being warmer) and smell gradients, and the smells belong to specific "families". For instance, a lemon-family cave contains scents such as orange blossom, lime, and lemon, while a cinnamon-family cave features contrasting scents like frankincense, cinnamon, and coffee; the temperature ranges of the two caves also differ significantly (one cool, the other warm). The cave has no fixed boundaries; "walls" "ceiling" and "floor" are not rigid boundaries and eventually disappear entirely, transforming the cave into a field of "pure immanence" without an exterior. The relationship between caves is defined solely by transition: when one is in a cave, the other cave does not exist as an "adjacent space" but merely as a "potential in-come"(Massumi,2021,p. 366), which needs to be actualized through a transitional event.Transition "belongs to neither cave" but to the transformation itself between the two, possessing an invisible continuity that serves as the foundation for visible forms. It constitutes "immersive immediacy", encompassing everything at the visible level yet existing as a continuous movement transformation. Transition is "intensive movement" rather than extensive displacement: the transition from one cave to another is more like a vibration in place than movement from one point to another, with its core lying in the qualitative change of bodily sensations (such as sudden shifts in temperature, smell, and texture) rather than the quantitative change of spatial position. Therefore, Massumi argues that the space in Peirce's cave metaphor is a "a field of qualitative intensity" (Massumi,2021,p.363).

Transitional experience redefines the value of "reality" through intensity. This value is not derived from the interpretation of experience by an external structure carrying a specific value system; instead, value, as intensity, is inherent in the generation of "reality". Massumi finds further support for this view in Whitehead's concept of "importance" and James's "radical empiricism".

Whitehead posits that "importance" "can be inadequately defined as 'Interest, involving that intensity of individual feeling which leads to publicity of expression'. We are here trenching upon the topic of the next lecture. The definition is inadequate because there are two aspects to Importance; one based on the unity of the Universe, the other on the individuality of the details." (Whitehead,1958,p.11). "Thus the sense of importance (or interest) is embedded in the very being of animal experience." (Whitehead,1958,p.12). With this concept, Whitehead suspends the objectivity of "facts" and the subjectivity of value, arguing that the task of philosophy is not to provide a precise definition of "importance" but to reveal its presupposed existence in experience. Whitehead's "importance" represents a value that resides within sensibility, and this value manifests as intensity in the sensory experience of the absolute unity of quality. Massumi argues that "The question of how the beyond of an occasion 's self-enjoyment is effectively included in its constitution is the question of importance so central to Whitehead 's philosophy (cited Whitehead 1968). The question of importance is also the question of expression, or what is effectively passed on by an occasion ' spassing (cited Whitehead 1968). Importance and expression are not add-ons to experience. They are not " merely " subjective. They are what bridge the subjective and objective aspects of the world, in its rolling effectively on. They are fundamental categories of the world 's becoming. They are ontogenetic factors, constitutive of the politicality of process" (Massumi,2011,p. 14).

William James's "radical empiricism" is neither subjectivist nor objectivist. It holds that things and the experience of things exist within the same transitional process, and there is no classic dichotomy between an objective transition leading to functional purposes and a corresponding internal experience and perception within the subject. Its core lies in the primacy of relations—relations are just as real as the related subjects, objects, and sense data, and they can be experienced. As James states: "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system"(James,1958,p.42). Massumi integrates this with Deleuze's affect ontology to further develop a "relational ontology". He proposes the concept of "relation-of-nonrelation", referring to the dual-dimensional conditions of "disjunction" and "conjunction" exhibited by various elements when an event occurs—"the differential status of its conditioning elements" and "the dynamic unity of their sheer occurrence as a little absolute" (Massumi,2011,pp.20–21).

Relations inherent in experience are by no means logical abstractions but what Massumi calls "lived abstractions", which are experienced in the course of event occurrence and cannot be reflected upon independently of experience itself. Elements enter into relations when an event occurs, yet they themselves remain distinct and not actually connected; instead, they manifest their absolute individuality through an "extra-effect" ,which Massumi terms "semblance". "Semblance is another way of saying" the experience of a virtual reality. "Which is to say: " the experiential reality of the virtual. "' (Massumi,2011,pp.15–16), enabling the event to be "seen".Massumi cites the Kanizsa triangle as an example—a simple optical illusion consisting of three black circles with angular cuts. While there are no

actual lines forming a triangle, people perceive a virtual triangle. Another example is perspective painting in the classical period, which, through devices such as vanishing points, creates a sense of visual depth, allowing viewers to perceive the continuation of a virtual space within the painting. This kind of relation "is what makes “ elbow room ” in the world for an experience to come absolutely into its own production of novelty, uncramped by the constraint of connectively fitting in"(Massumi,2011,p.21), with elements influencing each other through participation in the bare activity of the world.Precisely for this reason, mind of object (objective experience) constructed by external values is transformed into mind of event (movement experience) constructed by intensity, manifesting the singularity of the "occurrence" process itself. As Whitehead argues, the essence of activity and change is "the creative production of singularity," and "creativity is the principle of singularity". The process of an event is the self-creative process of "the transformation of potentiality into reality". Creation and self-enjoyment are two inseparable aspects of an event’s existence: creation represents the dynamic unfolding manner of the event, while self-enjoyment constitutes the subjective form of this unfolding, together forming the completeness of the event. Thus, the value attribute of aesthetic is attributed to the process of occurrence, rather than to the relation with the subject.

The combination of the event as an "extra-effect" within dynamic unity and creativity can be said to constitute the foundation of Massumi’s semblance aesthetics of affect— the creative expression of intensity and the self-enjoyment of the event’s occurrence itself. Furthermore, Massumi states: "The relational/participatory aspect of process could fairly be called political, and the qualitative/creatively-selfenjoying aspect aesthetic."(Massumi,2011,p.12). This gives rise to a "speculative pragmatist" paradigm of "aesthetic-political".Accordingly, politics and aesthetics respectively form the dual dimensions of event value: the emancipatory dimension of singularity leads to Massumi’s discussion of the concept of "life", while the dimension of cohesion and constitution leads to his discussion of the aesthetic community of affect.

3. The Value of Life: The Vitalist Dimension of Event Value

Since Foucault’s concept of "biopower", life has been understood as a power logic that requires a cost to maintain; in Rancière’s biopolitical philosophy, life is regarded as a representation of disorder, subject to control by "police". In Massumi’s view, however, life constitutes a reservoir of potentiality—a "field of qualitative intensity." From the perspective of "excess", life, like events, is a "lived abstraction". It is not the sum of visible elements or predictable known functions, but an unpredictable "extra-effect" in the process of "occurrence"—a surplus beyond the phenomenal world. It can be sensed but cannot be described, cognized, or appropriated. This aligns with the definition of the "virtual": "concrete but abstract." Therefore, another dimension of the creativity inherent in "virtual-real" experience is precisely vitality.This line of thinking regarding "excess" may seem similar to Rancière’s "the part of no part", which refers to an unidentifiable disordered experience beyond what can be quantified by indicators. However, Massumi’s concern is not the social imperceptibility of disordered experience; on the contrary, neoliberal power is built upon this very disordered experience. Since replacing "biopower" with "ontopower," Massumi has not only transformed the power logic grounded in life but also proposed an emancipatory

logic within the contexts of economics and ethics—namely, the release of life's potentiality as a counterforce to rigid functionality.

Whether in his research on vitalistic aesthetics in animal studies or neoliberal economics, the "surplus value of life" stands as a key concept repeatedly employed by Massumi, and in many instances, he explicitly equates it with "event value". The surplus-value of life represents a "qualitative excess over functionality, and over capturable utility, as a self-affirming, lived value that it is an end in itself, in a way that doesn't directly feed the capitalist process"(Massumi,2017,p. 97), not directly serving the capitalist process of monetary production but originating from the vitality and potentiality inherent in the event itself.From an economic perspective, the surplus value of life stands in opposition to capitalist "monetary surplus value". Capitalism (particularly the experience economy and creative economy) also attempts to capture this surplus value and convert it into "monetary surplus value". Nevertheless, the surplus value of life is a qualitative attribute that cannot be fully captured, precisely because its value lies in its inherent "eventfulness"; in contrast, capitalist surplus value is quantitative, relying on the repeatable and standardized transformation of experience. Massumi points out that while capitalism excels at capturing the emergent nature of experience, "a surplus-value of life that is truly uncapturable is, by virtue of that fact, ephemeral. It might return, but each repetition of it is a regeneration, a reinvention, with its own singular vitality affect"(Massumi,2017,p. 97), which cannot be fixed as a tradable commodity. Any creative outcome that can be monetized is merely a "contraction" and "retrospection" of the eventful creative process, and the generative process of creativity itself cannot be replicated. This constitutes the basis upon which event value resists monetary value. Therefore, when Massumi replaces representationality with emergence, event value inevitably becomes independent of monetary value and serves as an escape dimension from it.

Following his development of semblance aesthetics, Massumi further expanded the release of potentiality into a vitalistic aesthetics—namely, the release of life's potentiality. In the survival activities of animals, the surplus value of life represents the "irreducible quality"(Massumi,2014,p.10) in life activities, a qualitative excess that transcends survival or practical value. It originates from the "self-enjoyment" of life activities themselves, which"is the qualitative excess of an act lived purely for its own sake, as a value in itself, over and against any function the act might also fulfill."(Massumi,2014,p.10).Take animal play as an example: the distinction between "combat-style" movements in play (such as the mock biting of young wolves) and real fighting lies in their "-esque" (stylistic) qualities. This stylized difference (e.g., exaggerated, playful movements) does not serve survival functions but constitutes pure expressive excess, forming "play-value"—i.e., surplus value. Massumi invokes Raymond Ruyer's concept of "aesthetic yield": every instinctive behavior contains an aesthetic excess beyond its function. For instance, the way earthworms improvisationally block their burrows according to environmental conditions, with their creative adaptations themselves embodying surplus value. The ethics of animals emerges from this aesthetic domain; their approaches to solving survival problems and even constructing collectivity stem more from the creativity inherent in instinct and flexibility in the face of specific situations than from fixed, model-based methods. Therefore, for animals, intuition and instinct are inherently eventful, and the surplus value of life is equivalent to event value. Massumi, drawing on

Félix Guattari’s terminology, refers to this mode of playful engagement employed by animals, which relies on intuition and instinct, as the "ethico-aesthetic paradigm of natural politics " (Massumi,2014,p. 38).

This ethico-aesthetic paradigm is not absent in humans. Although under market economy conditions, humans seemingly act and participate through "rational choice", Massumi argues that under neoliberalism, reason and affect always exist in an "zone of distinction". Keynes’s "hidden factors" (doubt, instability, hope, fear, etc.), he points out that while neoliberal ideology claims that the market achieves rational optimization through the "invisible hand", the "the “rationality”of the economy is a precarious art of snatching emergent order out of affect"(Massumi,2015c,p. 2).Economic "efficiency" and "rationalization" are not objective mechanisms independent of affect; instead, through mechanisms such as competition, they transform individual affective agitations (e.g., hope, fear) into a systematic "spontaneous synthesis"(Massumi,2015c,p. 3), which is inherently a co-product of affect and reason. Reason and affect exist in a state of "mutual immanence"(Massumi,2015c,p. 19); they are not separable, independent systems but together constitute the potential foundation of decision-making. "Choice" does not originate from conscious rational calculation but emerges from the subject’s "readiness potential of the subject’s affective blind spot"(Massumi,2015c,p. 19). This non-conscious decision-making process simultaneously encompasses the potential for rational evaluation (e.g., implicit processing of risk and probability) and the intensity of affect, which are integrated in "bare activity" and cannot be disassembled into pure "reason" or "affect".

When reason is unable to bear the responsibility of decision-making, "self-interest" gradually becomes a dysfunctional concept. Therefore, "sympathy" is not an irrational behavioral model excluded by the market economy; on the contrary, Massumi argues that "sympathy" in David Hume’s sense is precisely what constructs ethics under the neoliberal market economy. In an affective politics centered on "sympathy", freedom does not originate from reason but emphasizes a form of "event freedom"—the capacity of events to determine their own course independently, not fully constrained by individual self-interest or rational calculation. The spontaneous self-sacrificing actions of "ordinary heroes" in emergency situations exemplify this event freedom (Massumi,2015c,p. 80). Their actions are not the result of deliberate weighing of self-interest but are driven by the affective force of the event itself. Such behavior demonstrates the impersonal virtue of event freedom and also suggests that under certain circumstances, people can transcend self-interest and conform to the free development of events. The "event freedom" of "ordinary heroes" represents freedom in the release of potentiality, and the generative mechanism of "sympathy" can be understood as the "actualization" of the "virtual" within the ethical dimension. This challenges the presuppositions of human capital under capitalism.

Therefore, choice is "a doing done thruogh me", not "done by me". The individual is not a dominant rational subject but acts on events through the "readiness potential" deep within the individual. This potential is not a product of conscious control by the individual; instead, "in the intensity of its immanence, the entire system at all its scales resonates in potential, carried to the absolute limit of its regressive endpoint. This infra- level holds all system states in itself, immanently, in potential(Massumi,2015c,p. 19). In short, preparatory potential constitutes a "field of potentiality"

encompassing all possibilities. It precedes conscious cognition, is not attached to personal subjectivity, yet forms the basis of individual decision-making.Massumi, drawing on Luhmann's views, emphasizes that preparatory potential is "intensely overdetermined, holding, Luhmann says, "a whole range of possible differences" in "sub- threshold latency" (cited Luhmann 1979). The whole range of potentials are in it together, in their difference. They are in a state of mutual inclusion, on the verge, poised toward the collapse destined to resolve the overdetermination of the and- both into this- not- that determinate effect, registrable in a calculus of risk and probability: from intensity to statistic"(Massumi,2015c,p. 20). Therefore, similar to the aesthetic ethics of animals, explaining the source of human action through "preparatory potential" places "intuition" at the core of ethics.

Massumi further proposes a "dividualist" politics as a crucial paradigm of aesthetic ethics. The concept of the "dividual" represents a deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditional concept of the "individual". Its core lies in rejecting the individual as an autonomous, rational choosing subject, and instead emphasizing the autonomy and non-conscious nature of the choice act itself, as well as the individual's dynamic existence within the superposition of multiple states.The traditional view regards the individual as an autonomous agent of calculated choice .In contrast, within the framework of the "dividual", "it is the act of choice that is autonomous, in the dissociative dimension of the dividual: that of the individual, absorbed in its relation to itself, plied by superpositions of contrasting states in a mutual immanence of functional indistinction"(Massumi,2015c,p. 19). The dividual exists at the "infra-individual level," a realm that " holds all system states in itself, immanently, in potential. It dissociates itself from other individuals and other levels only the better to supercharge itself with what, elsewhere in the system, will play as separate states, following divergent tendencies: distributions of success and failure, trust and distrust, boom and bust, satisfaction and frustration, hope and fear. The nonconscious infra-individual level is, at the limit, the nonpersonal superposition of all levels, in the dissociative dimension of their distributive coming together"(Massumi,2015c,p. 19). The infra-individual level serves as Massumi's analytical approach to collectivity, based on the logic of "relation-of-nonrelation"."A politics of dividualism would affi rm complexity, and the oscillatory autonomies of decision that come with it. It would find ways of tending tendencies, in order to navigate the zone of indistinction between choice and nonchoice in such a way as to eff ect modulations of becoming that produce self- justifying surplus values of life" (Massumi,2015c,p. 35)—a value derived from the direct experiential quality of the event itself, rather than from external judgment. "This would be a directly qualitative, relational, and situational politics. It would see no contradiction between conditioning by others or by the collective texture of encounters, and the power of self- modulation each individual infracarries in the playing- out of its dividual tendencies among themselves."; instead, it holds that the two can coexist(Massumi,2015c,p. 35). This politics does not exist outside the neoliberal field; rather, it "must operate immanent to contemporary capitalism's paradoxical field, in resonance with the economy's inmost end"(Massumi,2015c,p. 43). By treating intuition as a political art, it becomes an "immanent counterontopower", altering the dominant trends of neoliberalism through situational fluctuations and thereby opening up a new dimension of biopolitics.

4. The Aesthetic Community of Affect: The Ethical Destination of Event Value

The ethics of sympathy and dividualist politics establish a hypothesis regarding the source of agency that replaces reason with affect. Given this hypothesis of individuals as unpredictable and potentialized beings, how does a community come into being? In fact, Massumi argues that the pre-individual nature of affect and the inherent potentiality of life itself possess an "direct collectivity" (or "direct relationality"). This idea originates from Simondon's key term "collective individuation".

"Collective individuation" refers to a process of individuation that occurs within a pre-individual field composed of unformed tendencies and potentialities. Here, various elements (or "terms") do not exist as independent individuals prior to relations; instead, through dynamic interactions and mutual influences, they collectively exhibit qualitative changes and thereby achieve individuation. This relation of "affecting and being affected" is what drives the process of individuation—hence, it is also described as affective. Distinct from rationality, which disassembles and identifies independent individuals according to representable combinatorial relations, this constitutes a kind of "force" that facilitates or coheres within events. As Massumi notes in his analysis of Greg Lynn's architectural philosophy—"form follows force".Within the "mutual inclusion" of affect, "the being-in-relation of the terms is primary in relation to their individual definition. The specific qualities they manifest flow from their adherence to the field, from their eventful belonging one to the other, and one to all"(Massumi,2021,p. 32). Therefore, collective individuation is also described as a dynamic co-generation that transcends the aggregation of individuals. This "trans-individuality" is not a commonality derived from a specific rational structure or interest-based demands; it precedes the differentiation of individual and collective. It is evident that for Massumi, the "community" is precisely the co-generation of trans-individuality within events—a qualitative absoluteness. Its formation bears a striking resemblance to the occurrence of the "extra-effect" in aesthetic semblance.

Based on the potential for collective cohesion within the unconscious domain of affect, Massumi critiques the misunderstanding that affect is "individualized" or "asocial", arguing instead that affect is collective "in the sense that it expresses itself in collective individuations (emergent popula- tions of individuals whose formation is processually correlated at a distance, across their differences)" (Massumi,2015b,p. 205). Affect itself possesses "pure sociality"—that is, "the social in the openness of its incipiency, ready to become all manner of social forms and contents"(Massumi,2015b,p.205). Collective individuation is precisely the expressive form of affect. However, unlike representational feelings (emotion), affect is inherently bound to events; it realizes its social expression through the immediacy of specific events. The heterogeneous coexistence of this trans-individual force is a processual convergence: within the dynamic relationality of affect, individuals maintain their differences while forming a collective emergence through processual connections. The immediacy of events ensures both the unconscious domain and pure sociality, and also guarantees that collectivity is emergent rather than representational.

In addition to event time, event space constitutes another condition for the community of affect. The community of affect is precisely a "relational architecture" of "body-event," with "architecture" serving as a metaphor for Massumi to describe the generative capacity of the affective community. Through his analysis of Greg Lynn's architectural thought, Massumi identifies that topological architecture is transforming the traditional definition of "architecture." Lynn's architecture positions itself as a virtual technology; topological architecture replaces "style" with "dynamic logic" and "processual characteristics". The essence of topological design lies in "transformation", not similarity, identity, or mimesis. Consequently, elements in architecture are transformed from spatial "boundaries" to "membranes".The "membrane" is not merely a physical material but also a materialized carrier of topological processes—it serves both as a material trace of abstract force fields (such as affect and movement) and as an interface for interaction between the body and architecture. "In the case of the architectural surface, the membrane, though physically static, is active. Its physical form co-organizes the body-events that occur in the fold between the fields"(Massumi,2019,p. 48).Take the "wave" formed by spectators in a stadium as an example. This wave is a tidal-like movement created by spectators through collective hand-waving during sports events, intended to enhance the excitement of the game. It constitutes a collectively produced "body-event". The wave cannot be initiated by a single individual; it requires the coordination of multiple bodies—participants synchronize their hand movements through non-verbal alliances. Its existence coincides with the effective process of the wave and does not persist after the wave subsides. "The matter of the body-event is affect itself. Affect is the intensive matter of the event. It constitutes the abstract surface registering the integral intensity of this singular event, bringing to affective expression the differential intensities of the contributing factors actively folding in to it"(Massumi,2019,p.45).Massumi argues that the architectural surface, as a "membrane," possesses the essence of a generative event, embodying the dual attributes of a "concrete surface" and an "abstract surface." The "concrete surface" refers to visible physical elements, while the "abstract surface" denotes a perceptible yet invisible morphological tendency catalyzed by affective mechanisms—an effect of aesthetic semblance. Although the stadium wave lacks a fixed concrete surface like that of a building, its formation aligns with the principles of topological architecture. As Massumi states, "it opens the possibility of understanding self-organizing body-events which occur on the abstract surface of perception as fundamentally architectural; even if they are ephemeral and purely abstract, doubled by no concrete surface; even if they are hosted by an architectural construction" (Massumi,2019,p.53). The "abstract surface" of the stadium wave is precisely the "extra-effect" of trans-individual collective emergence. Therefore, the affective community framed by "body-event" is, in essence, also an aesthetic semblance.

As a distinctive approach within the contemporary trend of aesthetic community thought, Massumi's idea of the affective community provides a unique paradigm for addressing two fundamental questions in biopolitics and the community of difference. The dual eventfulness of time and space distinguishes the potentiality and vitality of Massumi's "community of affect" from the potentiality inherent in Agamben's "the coming community", aligning it more closely with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the "liquid community" .This potential non-representationality is not a messianic anticipation of the future

but rather the cohesive force of event intensity in the present. In short, its ethical value is not manifested in potentially shared values in the future, but in the unconscious unity of values within events.At the same time, the integration of life and the sensible community opens up a new approach: the "excess effect" as aesthetic semblance is itself the "surplus value of life", and both are unified in the emergent, intensive "absolute quality" of intensity. The affective community, as an "extra-effect" of the "abstract surface", represents a "collective force that transcends the sum of individuals". This force originates from the unconscious dynamics of collective individuation: it is not a mechanical aggregation of individual actions, but a qualitative transformation of the relational field—through the 'differentiated resonance' of affective attunement, it gives rise to the surplus value of life—a collective 'vital overflow' that cannot be reduced to individual experience. Within this approach to the sensible community, life is no longer understood as the organicity of the visible physical body and its maintenance, but as the universal intensive activity of events—a natural vitality.

Therefore, the cohesive force brought about by the vitality of nature as intensity provides Massumi with a new interpretation of the idea of "heterogeneous coexistence". Massumi argues that in practice, this "pre-individuality" is not purely unconscious intensive difference but rather difference infused with certain individual characteristics. These differences re-realize the co-generation of collective individuation within events, a process referred to as "affective attunement". Also termed "differentiated attunement", this differs from the cohesion brought about by emotional contagion implied in Sigmund Freud’s patriarchal power structure. Instead, this "differentiated attunement" represents the cohesive force of events: "‘Attunement’ refers to the direct capture of attention and energies by the event. ‘Differential’ refers to the fact that we each are taken into the event from a different angle, and move out of it following our own singular trajectories, riding the waves in our own inimitable way" (Massumi,2015b,p.115). This attunement is not the individual’s isolated positioning but rather a differentiated response to the event within the collective, where individuals are interrelated yet distinct. For example, in the aftermath of a disaster, people collectively rush toward safe areas, but their responses and actions vary—some may spontaneously offer help, while others focus on their own safety. This exemplifies differentiated attunement among people within the same event.Unlike Rancière’s "dissensus", this community of difference does not carry egalitarian value claims or construct a "defamiliarizing" aesthetic effect. Instead, it represents an unconscious harmonious aesthetic effect within the "relational field" of events, with no underlying multiplicity of rationalities. Therefore, Massumi does not focus on Rancière’s "reason of dissensus"; instead, he argues that while affective behavior releases individual potentiality within events, it also channels this potentiality toward a common trend through the field of intensity.

Massumi’s unique interpretation of vitality and heterogeneous coexistence within the affective community enables his thought on the aesthetic community, rooted in event value, to open up a distinctive paradigm of "ecological ethics." As early as his research on semblance aesthetics, Massumi defined aesthetics as "ecological," arguing that "The aesthetic problem is always on the one hand compositional: how are the ingredient elements brought together in such a way as to become-immanent to the coming event as constitutive forces of its push toward pure expression? The compositional

problem cannot be addressed without at the same time addressing the problem of relational co-habitation, which is ecological : which extra-elements will be admitted into the symbiosis of compositional co-immanence? Which will be treated as predators or competitors and be held at bay?" (Massumi,2011,p.155). The unifying point of aesthetics and politics lies precisely in ecology: "Politicality is always an ecological question of mutual inclusion"(Massumi,2011,p. 174).

Massumi argues that "ethopoiesis" (ethical generation) is another expression of Isabelle Stengers's "the ecology of practices", both of which focus on "the self-inventive becoming of forms of life in relation, or the relational vivacity of the in-formation."(Massumi,2021,p.59) All practices do not exist in isolation but are situated within a dynamic system of interaction, forming an "ecological system" characterized by interdependence and mutual influence. Society is not a fixed structure but a "relational existence" in "formation," composed of undifferentiated dynamic elements such as tensions, gradients, and trends—analogous to the mutual penetration of elements in an ecological system. The essence of cultural difference lies in "encounter", existing at the intersection of multiple forms of expression and communication. Its core is not the transmission of fixed content but the advancement of collective processes through the dynamic consequences of practice. This dynamism embodies the "ecology of practices"—different cultural practices generate new relations and meanings through interaction. At this point, events, life, and ecology together construct the aesthetic ethics of Massumi's affective community.

Declarations

Ethical Approval:

This article is a study of intellectual history that adopts exclusively the literature-research method. Accordingly, it does not involve any human or animal subjects and contains no research on human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent:

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors

Author Contribution

M.wrote the whole manuscript text.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper and its Supplementary Information.

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