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A rhizome is a vegetable. In the newspaper it appears in the lifestyle section, something to be grown or eaten, laying underground, woody, deep, ready to be dug. Ginger is one example, and turmeric another: they can be combined with split peas and lentils for a tasty dhal,ⁱ or as sauce with foie gras, smoked salmon, even a chicken salad.ⁱⁱ If you're planting salvias, take care to protect your rhizomes with a deep mulch so they survive the winter.ⁱⁱⁱ So far, so good: it's just an "elongated, usually horizontal, subterranean stem which sends out roots and leafy shoots at intervals along its length."^{iv}

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Except further digging reveals more, stranger features of these tubers: the rhizome, apparently, "does not die"^v – like a hydra head, you can cut one in half, but two grow back in its place. The ginger root appears in purification rituals across world history,^{vi} and the word itself has found its way into philosophy, contemporary art, pedagogical research, architecture, computer coding environments, curatorial practice, science fictional corporations,^{vii} even grassroots^{viii} political movements. At some point the rhizome has risen above its earthy uses into a metaphor, or something else.

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The elevated sense of the word could be traced back to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critical text *A Thousand Plateaus*. Complex and thoroughly tangled, Deleuze – a philosopher – and Guattari – a psychiatrist – produced a work in fourteen chapters, to be read in no particular order. The rhizome is central, set up as an opposition and antidote to the traditional concept of 'the tree' (as used in botany and

biology, but also logic, anatomy, philosophy, and so on). Again, we seem to be talking in metaphors; trees of knowledge, 'the tree of life', family trees and genealogies; things following each other in a linear fashion, growing, expanding, and branching in ways we can trace and predict; ideas beginning with a solid foundation, becoming a hierarchy; subcategories of categories of categories, and so on.

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Against the linear tradition, a new methodology is enthusiastically suggested; the rhizome is chaotic, unpredictable, a knot of roots and ideas shooting off every direction, disconnecting, looping and regrouping in no particular order. The tree model is redundant, suppressing and distorting the complexity and creativity of human thought; it is an inadequate concept for the way life actually works, producing only rigid repetition and reinforcement of the higher branches. By contrast, "the rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots...the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways, exits and its own lines of flight."^{ix}

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And it's not even a metaphor.^x As a means of making sense of the world, metaphorical talk only produces more trees; the transfer of meaning from a secondary to a primary referent, from branch to root. Against this, the rhizome is proudly, insistently non-metaphorical. It is not *like* stuff; it *is* stuff.

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Further back in time, Carl Jung reflects in his memoirs,

Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer...when we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains.^{xi}

Jung's 'collective unconscious' could have something to do with this. Humanity's shared psychic baggage buried in layers of sediment, far below the level of conscious thought; millennia of cultural residue breaking apart and combining, producing experience but also being reshaped by it in a perpetual psychic loop; the 'true life' of life.

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Life as rhizome? The idea goes back to Plato, and further still,^{xii} which explains Deleuze and Guattari's urgency; life is a rhizome, yet we still carry on like trees?! It seems like a bad situation. But if the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem, there are some encouraging signs that we are starting to catch on.

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To misparaphrase GWF Hegel, art is the final stage of humankind's journey towards self-awareness.^{xiii} And, just maybe, this is exactly where we are. Contemporary art has few defining characteristics; for sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the defiance of order is a paradigm of anti-modernity,^{xiv} simultaneously dismantling existing structures of knowledge and producing infinite possible and contradictory alternatives.^{xv} If art at

least is coming round to the idea, perhaps human consciousness is not far behind.

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In the earlier days of the Internet, American artist Mark Tribe set up a mailing list for his friends and colleagues, and called it *Rhizome*. Interested in Joseph Beuys' social sculptures,^{xvi} Tribe endeavoured to produce a transformative social space with an emphasis on the emerging artistic possibilities of digital media. The list was a means to freely create, discuss, archive and critique work, in an unmediated, open access format.^{xvii} As he recounts, "You have to remember that 1996 was a time of great optimism, excitement and enthusiasm. The net's potential seemed limitless. Nobody knew what was possible."^{xviii}

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And the Internet looks like a perfect example of rhizomatic potential.^{xix} Content is produced, reproduced, mangled and reformed along impossibly complicated and improbable lines. It seems well formed for the kind of socially transformative interactions that Beuys envisioned. Online, another *Rhizome* exists as a "content and delivery system...[whose] long term vision is that each *Rhizome* site will intertwine together, forming an emergent fuzzy taxonomy over a peer-to-peer network."^{xx} Its commitments seem to be towards aiding non-technical users, and experimenting with collaboration and information exchange. This *Rhizome* also shares its name with a competitive Flickr group, where users attempt to 'beat' the last image uploaded by submitting a better one, in order to progress and earn 'rhizawards.'^{xxi}

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To tie these threads together extravagantly, consider the ultimate rhizome^{xxii} as social sculpture. Everyone is an artist,^{xxiii} and the Internet is our infinite collaborative, authorless work? In a small way, the story of Tribe's project suggests otherwise. His mailing list and archive continued to grow until it became necessary to make it a website in its own right, *Rhizome.org*, which is now one of the most influential online media art resources, and part of New York's New Museum gallery.^{xxiv} Tribe sits on the board of trustees. What began as a horizontal collaborative structure became, perhaps inevitably, a hierarchy of sorts. Although the site welcomes and relies upon artist participation, and is more flexible and approachable than other art institutions,^{xxv} it is an institution nonetheless, subject to the decisions of the editorial team.

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So it is with much of the online world. The limits on horizontal rhizome structures will persist, so long as they continue to rub up against the vertical reality of their participants. Perhaps society needs to be more rhizomatic. This is not a new idea either. *Rhizome* is the name of a political co-operative which works with UK communities and grassroots activists, promoting nonviolent direct action.^{xxvi} It is also the name of a Californian café committed to marginal voices in the arts and social justice,^{xxvii} and additionally a Seattle based eco-friendly design company ("for us, Rhizponsibility is simply the day-to-day actions you take to give back to the world.")^{xxviii} Furthermore, *The Rhizome Project* is a research group operating within the UK education community, investigating the social causes and implications of online identities.^{xxix} These surface trends suggest the rhizome

as a powerful tool for the de- or re-organisation of social space.

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What would a horizontal society look like? Apocalyptic chaos or progressive anarchy? Direct democracy, Ancient Greek town-square style? Perhaps just radical non-governmental, free market sprawl. And does it matter? Whatever happens, the rhizome reasserts itself, connecting the dots where linearity breaks down; to start in the middle; to backtrack, move sideways, negate, do something wrong or completely unrelated.^{xxx}
"A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things...Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions..."^{xxxi}

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Activity: cut along the lines, shuffle & remake^{xxxi}

ⁱNotes

Basic dhal: half cup red lentils, quarter cup yellow split peas, 1 litre water/stock, 1 tsp grated root ginger, 3 cloves crushed garlic, ¼ tsp turmeric, 1½ tsp salt, red/green chillies to taste

ⁱⁱ Moira Hodgson 'Ginger: Rhizome with a Reason' *New York Times*, September 29, 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Dan Pearson 'Stunning Salvias' *The Observer*, Sunday 10 October 2010

^{iv} Oxford English Dictionary, from OED online

^v "Thus if a rhizome is cut by a cultivating tool it does not die, as would a root, but becomes several plants instead of one, which explains why such weeds as Canada thistle and crabgrass are so hard to eradicate." From *The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition 2008* (via Encyclopaedia.com)

^{vi} James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: a study in magic and religion* gives several examples, for instance "Sometimes the soul of a sick person is thought to have been carried off by the souls of the dead who live in the temple. In that case the priestess offers seven pieces of ginger on a board to the spirits in the temple in exchange for the patient's soul" Frazer *Aftermath - A Supplement to the Golden Bough* p.211

^{vii} Bruce Sterling *Islands in the Net*

^{viii} Types of grass (eg. couchgrass & crabgrass) are often considered archetypal rhizomes.

^{ix} *A Thousand Plateaus* p.23

^x "The plane of consistency is the abolition of all metaphor – all that consists is real" *A Thousand Plateaus* p.69

^{xi} He goes on; "In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one. That is why I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the prima material of my scientific work. They were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized." Carl Jung *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* p.4

^{xii} To Heraclitus, Parmenides, Pythagoras and so on, as argued by James Olney in *The Rhizome and the flower: the perennial philosophy, Yeats and Jung* (cf. Plato: "...for we are indeed a plant sprung not from the earth but from heaven...for it is to heaven, whence the soul first grew, that the divine part attaches the head and rhizome-root of us and keeps the whole body upright.")

^{xiii} To bastardize further – history is a description of humankind's journey towards self-knowledge. In this process, art is supposed to pick up where philosophy ends, where thought is no longer useful; art is the final stage of self-awareness.

^{xiv} "Liquid Modernity: A Rhizome Kind of Life...Liquid modern living is best seen through the metaphor of the rhizome because it is constructed as an open map – rather than the closed book of social class or any other kind of rooted or structuring way of life" *Zygmunt Bauman* by Tony Blackshaw p.93

^{xv} Zygmunt Bauman *Intimations of Postmodernity* p.27

^{xvi} For example the work *7000 Oaks*, created for documenta 7, consisted of a pile of basalt stones, where no stone could be moved unless an oak was planted at its destination. Beuys: "Let's talk of a system that transforms all the social organisms into a work of art, in which the entire process of work is included... something in which the principle of production and consumption takes on a form of quality...Everyone is an artist." Artforum, June 1967

^{xvii} As described in Tom Corby's *Network Art: practices and positions*

^{xviii} Interviewed by Randy Adams for *trAce* <http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/opinion/index.cfm?article=35>

^{xix} "The internet is the ultimate rhizome. It simultaneously compresses (in the sense of making easily available) and through one portal expands access to enormous portions of the visual cultural realm...an art teacher and his or her students can gain access to nearly any aspect of visual culture at any time" Brent Wilson 'Of Diagrams and Rhizomes: Visual Culture, Contemporary Art, and the Impossibility of Mapping the Content of Art Education' *Studies in Art Education* 44 No. 3 214-29

^{xx} "Rhizome is a Wiki-like content management and delivery system that exposes the entire site -- content, structure, and metadata as editable RDF. This means that instead of just creating a site with URLs that correspond to a page of HTML, with Rhizome you can create URLs that represent just about anything" <http://www.liminalzone.org/Rhizome>

^{xxi} "A rhizomatic picture is a picture which needs to be so thoughtfully rhizomed, so that the next post will be a better one. This is rhizoming ! The rhizome is a community of passion for images, of passion to progress through the eyes and comments of the others, a passion to work ! Our progressing pictures will make our rhizome pools to progress, in all its contents, in its selected images as in its comments, in our satisfaction to win together. Have you said Utopia 3.0? Why not?...Please, rhizcomment me, rhizaward me, rhizlink me, rhizthread me, . . . I need to progress !"

<http://www.flickr.com/groups/rizhome-awards>

^{xxii} Brent Wilson, *ibid.*

^{xxiii} Beuys *ibid.*

^{xxiv} “Rhizome is dedicated to the creation, presentation, preservation, and critique of emerging artistic practices that engage technology” <http://www.rhizome.org>

^{xxv} Corby *Network art: practices and positions*

^{xxvi} “We are a co-op providing facilitation, mediation, consensus building and training to grassroots activists and communities across the UK, and to those organizations that support activism in all its forms” <http://rhizome.coop/>

^{xxvii} “Rhizome is a friendly neighbourhood café AND... We support social justice struggles... encourage dialogue and mutual learning... build community... towards a more just, sustainable world for all” <http://www.rhizomecafe.ca/>

^{xxviii} “Integrated marketing for Socially responsible and Eco-friendly businesses” <http://www.rhizomedesign.com/>

^{xxix} “Rhizome is a research and development project funded by the Eduserv foundation... that moves forward the community’s understanding of the impact that emerging technologies will have on the way learning and research are undertaken.” <http://digitaldisruptions.org/rhizome/>

^{xxx} In their final work *What is Philosophy?* D&G show some concern about their ideas being adopted by ad-men, internet ideologues, free market hypercapitalists, etc. – there is of course a right way and a wrong way to *get it wrong*.

^{xxxi} *A Thousand Plateaus* p.25

^{xxxii} Or, cut each line of text out and repeat