

# Introduction: Whither Tactical Media?

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We began collaborating on this Special Issue in June of 2006. Our concern was to understand how tactical media (TM) had evolved in the decade since its emergence and to ask how far and in what ways this stream of critical cultural practices and approach to media activism remains viable today. The current global situation is characterised by two factors that were absent or still obscure in the mid-1990s: the renewal of radical and anti-capitalist imagination ignited by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and by movements, protests and struggles against neo-liberalism in Seoul, Seattle, Buenos Aires, Durban, Genoa, Quito and many other places; and the new politics of fear and permanent war that have been imposed globally since September 11, 2001. To these, we can add the undeniable indicators of global climate change, resource depletion and ecological degradation, and the openly fascist tendencies generated by the politics of fear. In light of these shifts, we felt a reflective assessment of tactical media would be timely. Above all, we felt it had become necessary to revisit the question of strategy and the conditions for durable, organised struggle. Despite TM practitioners' aversion to strategic thinking, institutionalisation, categorical hierarchies and grand narratives, it is apparent that a group of radicals with no such prejudices and inhibitions are busy imposing their ultra-conservative vision on the world. Is it still reasonable, then, to insist on the viability of ephemeral tactics that hold no ground of their own, that disappear once they are executed, and that represent no particular politics or vision of a desirable future? Thus, to a range of theorists and activists, we posed this question: 'Whither tactical media?' We hoped the results would at least contribute to recently renewed debates about the limits and possibilities of politically engaged art.

Since 1968, social movement activism – with its emphasis on identity and subjectivity and its autonomist and DIY (do it yourself) tactical orientations – has largely displaced the party-based structures and strategies of the Old and New Left. While recognising that there are good reasons for this displacement, it has become clear that a strategic deficit is one of its consequences. After the demise of the Party, no new

collective structure has emerged to effectively organise strategic thinking. Despite the important international encounters staged by the Zapatistas in 1996 and 1997 and the social forum events that came out of them, and despite a general recognition that the revolutionary process needs to be ‘reinvented’, the ‘movement of movements’ still lacks organisational effectiveness capable of countering the strategic (not merely tactical) forces mobilised by neoconservatism and neoliberalism.

There is at least a notable tendency within TM theory to endorse de facto a refusal of strategy. For this tendency, inspired above all by the work of theorist Michel de Certeau, TM has no space of its own. A tactic, in de Certeau’s words, ‘insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over’.<sup>1</sup> In a 1997 text that became foundational, Geert Lovink and David Garcia endorse this perspective in their definition of TM:

An aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. Clever tricks, the hunter’s cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike... Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, not some vaporware promised for the future.<sup>2</sup>

Behind the appealing lightness and optimism of this description looms real ‘end of history’ despair about the failure of past revolutionary struggles and experiments and the impossibility of any ‘outside’ to capitalism. In a world without heroic visions or alternatives, the art of everyday resistance seemed preferable to the methodical work of building sustained opposition only to wind up with a new boss, the same as the old boss. Thus, for Lovink TM was ‘born out of a disgust for ideology’.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, TM practitioners did not simply give up their political commitments. Many of them remain engaged in activism that in its underlying principles appears – at least to us – broadly leftist in orientation; that is, its concern for greater personal and political freedom is balanced by a framework of social responsibility and practical solidarity, and it includes anti-authoritarian reflexes that, in this moment, translate into opposition to the militarist nexus of corporate power and the national security state. That said, TM clearly belongs to that cultural shift, so strong in the 1980s and ’90s, from macro-history to micro-politics. The abandonment of strategy and the mundane work of organising leaves TM free to pursue a tacticality that emphasises ephemeral inversion and détournement, experimentation, camouflage and amateur versatility. At the same time, TM crystallised within a corporate climate that celebrated dis-organising the organisation and thinking outside the box, two managerial mantras of neoliberal enterprise culture. However, these same strengths that made TM so dynamic in the 1990s may now have become handicaps. As we see it, the need now is for a return to strategic thinking about structures and forms of struggle. We therefore asked our contributors to this issue to consider whether it may now be necessary to rethink the emphasis on ‘tactics’ as the privileged principle of critical cultural theory and practice.

Writing from diverse locations in the global North and South, our fifteen contributors respond to these concerns by rethinking the theory

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p xix
- 2 Geert Lovink and David Garcia, ‘ABC of Tactical Media’, 1997, online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/74.htm>
- 3 Geert Lovink, *Updating Tactical Media: Strategies for Media Activism*, forthcoming

of TM, by addressing its likely institutionalisation, and by reporting on specific cases of current TM practice. All of our contributors nevertheless make one thing very clear: cultural politics remains an active sphere of contestation. At the same time, it is far easier to recognise shared opposition to militarism, social injustice, ecological ruin and patriarchy, than it is to find agreement about what a ‘better world’ would be like, how we should struggle to get there, and just who *we* ‘opponents’ of these forces are, collectively or individually. Historically, artistic avant-gardes frequently worked in support of working-class movements and subaltern revolutionary struggles. By contrast, the language of TM appears to project a very different locus of agency: a dissipated and distracted spectator constituted by historically unique sensory experiences made real by the rise of new media technologies.

In contradistinction to Marx’s Promethean working class, TM offers Eros and the liberation of the libidinal drive. But it is not so clear how this vision of empowered fragmentation relates to the historical breakdown of traditional working-class identities and cultures. While there may be some liberation and empowerment for some individuals, these processes of fragmentation seem on the whole to have been disastrous: they reflect shifts in the modes of capitalist exploitation and a neoliberal attack that have given rise to precarious forms of labour not widely seen in the developed world since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This new ‘precarity’ now extends from the *maquiladoras* and other zones of legalised super-exploitation to the electronic and cultural sweatshops of New York City where recent art school graduates find employment. Certainly there are enormous differences in material conditions, prospects and expectations within this category of precarised labour. But most forms of precarious work involve ever-increasing exposure to disciplinary forces, including anti-union legislation, the intense surveillance of both work and privatised ‘public’ spaces, and the daily terror of familiar examples, reinforced incessantly by mainstream media, of what awaits those who cannot keep up or try to resist: bankruptcy, homelessness, imprisonment, or worse. Whether experiences of precarity can become a new basis for the re-composition of class struggle, or will merely remain a factor of fragmentation and decomposition, remains to be seen. By contrast, the form of agency projected in some TM theory seems very far removed from these brutal realities. With TM, we sometimes seem to be dealing with a liberation of desire through the appropriation and re-functioning of new technologies – a kind of liberated unconsciousness or borderline self-consciousness that could perhaps at most be linked to Walter Benjamin’s notion of artistic or cinematic distraction. We are not suggesting such liberation is wholly without militant potential. But TM generally lacks the unequivocal commitment to anti-capitalist struggles and utopian anticipations of Benjamin’s tendentious criticism or his theorisations of the author as producer.

### RETHINKING TACTICAL MEDIA

Ricardo Dominguez’s description of the tactical ‘swarm’ invokes a mute, mnemonic collectivism operating in ‘the space of difference between the

real body and the electronic body, the hacker and the activist, the performer and the audience, individual agency and mass swarming'. Geert Lovink writes of 'crowd crystals' and the 'virtual intellectual' always under construction. Blake Stimson pivots tactical agency on an ever-expanding 'cyborg life', commingling love and abstraction. Nowhere, it seems, do we find the fleshy agency of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the laundresses, stevedores, carpenters, janitors, maids and teamsters, not even the white-collar salespeople, or teachers or overworked web designers. For better and for worse, the nomadic agency of TM corresponds exactly to the de-territorialised spaces of global capitalism. 'Where is our territory?' asks CAE. 'We seem to have none', comes the auto-reply. The days are gone, we are told, in which institutional power and oppositional parties and unions face off, eyeball-to-eyeball, with clearly demarcated operational boundaries, fortifications and trenches in between. By contrast, tacticians avoid state power and hold no ground. De Certeau even proposed that the tactical arts precede the very 'frontiers of humanity', representing a 'sort of immemorial link, to the simulations, tricks, and disguises that certain fishes or plants execute with extraordinary virtuosity', thus connecting 'the depths of the oceans to the streets of our great cities'.<sup>4</sup>

However, Brian Holmes cautions:

... the multiple inventions of daily media-life just became aesthetics-as-usual, enjoyed by consumers and supported by the state, for the benefit of the corporations. The theory and the artistic refinements of tactical media fell away from the radicality of their politics.

He goes on to wonder if 'the persistent concept of tactical media might ultimately be a barrier'. Looking back over the decade and considering the possible future directions for a 'highly-polarized conjuncture', Holmes concludes that 'if global social movements are going to reinvent themselves beyond the neocon shadow of the 2000s, we will need another media theory, closer to our self-understanding and our acts'. Gerald Raunig seems to agree, when he notes that it is 'too simple to consider media activism solely from the one-sided perspective of the paradigm of organic representation'. Discussing actions by Greenpeace at the anti-G8 protests in Heiligendamm, Germany, and the work of the collective Kinoki Lumal in Chiapas, Mexico, Raunig develops the possibilities for a media practice based on 'orgiastic representation'.

### **LEVERAGING SITUATIONISM**

In the meantime, the established institutions of art and culture have begun to take notice of TM. Reporting on one such effort to bring TM in from the cold Karen Kurczynski asks: 'To what extent can institutions dependent on private funding, and therefore by extension corporate-defined parameters, accommodate the inherent oppositionality of the Situationist legacy?' In the late 1950s and '60s, the Situationist International had responded to the threat of institutional recuperation by setting what remains the standard for intransigent refusal. (In this sense, if the Situationist legacy is, in addition to de Certeau, the other major influence

<sup>4</sup> De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, op cit, pp xix, xx

on TM theory and practice, these two sources remain antagonistic and largely incompatible.) As if to answer Kurczynski, Kirsten Forkert offers the example of Central Versicherung, a Cologne-based insurance company who sponsored a six-month art project by Rirkrit Tiravanija. The arrangement, Forkert insists, aligned two types of services: insurance underwriting and the cultural service of so-called relational art. And yet is it always accurate to say that TM does not generate lasting power of its own? This is the question Nato Thompson raises in his essay. Thompson, too, perceives a distinction between the ‘artistic’ use of TM by curators and institutions on one hand, and tactics used with a political objective on the other. However, carving apart these phases of tactical media is not so simple. For this reason, Thompson focuses on the shortcomings of artistic intention, pointing out that ‘Radicalism bereft of tangible results may simply be bartering in the semiotic game-play that accompanies its own particular discursive formations’. Such bartering even accumulates a type of intellectual, social capital.

Thompson’s concerns are examined from the opposite angle by Yates McKee who argues that overtly radical TM ‘can be unproductive if it is taken for granted that corporations should be opposed or resisted *as such* rather than consistently pressured through all available tactics to alter their modes of governing’. It seems that de Certeau’s deep-ocean nomad has come full circle. By escaping the jaws of those eager to swallow its modest social capital, TM has found it necessary to align itself symbiotically with the one form of institutionalised opposition that still seems plausible within the jagged post-Cold War coral reef: the NGO. But to survive without killing off this host TM practitioners must call upon all the arts of trickery and subterfuge at their disposal.

### PRACTISING TACTICAL MEDIA

As Ana Longoni’s essay shows, the effects of artworld attention on activist collectives can be destructive and neutralising. Deciding that the biennial circuit was cutting them off from social movements and struggles, the members of the Grupo de Arte Callejero withdrew categorically from these exhibitions. And the stresses and conflicts experienced by the Taller Popular de Serigrafía led to expulsions of members and eventually dissolution.

In her essay, Rozalinda Borcila describes the work of the group 6+ in developing a project with young women in the Dheisheh refugee camp outside Bethlehem. The participants produced journals and audio-mapping recordings. Construction of the project’s website intended to document and publicise this work has sparked an internal debate that follows directly along lines raised by Forkert, Kurczynski and Thompson. ‘Who benefits from the social capital generated by TM projects: participants, or artists?’, Borcila asks. She adds: ‘The crisis for me is provoked by the ways in which both aesthetic pleasure and the philanthropic mobilization of art often function to “manage” the threat of systemic critique.’

Campbaltimore mounted a series of impressive, urban projects in Baltimore, Maryland, a city undergoing a branding process to attract the ‘creative classes’. Economically blighted neighbourhoods are being

gentrified, while the mostly African-American, low-income residents are pushed out to the suburban margins or wind up incarcerated within the city's prison-heavy penal system. As much as possible Campbaltimore submerged individual group members' artistic identities in order to facilitate practical partnerships with frequently suspicious community activists. Perhaps inevitably, the strain of disavowing any accumulation of personal social capital led the group to implode. And yet with regard to sustainability the question of material support must be raised. If support does not come from the art world, or from the state, then from whom will it come? As Prishani Naidoo suggests, the future of TM may hinge on understanding the economic rules that govern the symbolic accumulation and exchange. In her account of Indymedia South Africa, Naidoo details ways in which re-imagining how to 'speak and relate' can subvert 'the logic of the market and profit' by producing a *counter-reality* with which to confront 'the "reality" of the relations that we are forced to live and the representations that we are forced to produce under capitalism'.

In her poetic meditation on graffiti in Beirut, Rasha Salti reminds us that tactical practices are not exclusively electronic, and that physical spaces can still be a sustained site of social and political contestation, even if 'public space' erases its own record of these discourses. The Situationists' slogans and wall writings, some of which have far outlasted the group itself, inevitably come to mind.

There is much to think about, discuss, debate and question here, and the dilemmas, challenges and impasses analysed in these essays are likely to be with us for years to come. We suspect that if there is any way beyond globalised capitalism – a 'war of all against all' in the form of a social relation, now enforced by 'permanent' war on/of terror – it will only be through the ordeals of intensified social struggle and the material and affective solidarities such struggles generate. To succeed, anti-capitalist struggle will need to renew the strategic capacities it lost in unburdening itself of old top-down party structures. New long-term structures and strategies still need to be invented and developed, and this can only happen from within renewed struggles. In the meantime, tactical imperatives remain in force. And there – in the place of the other, the systemic enemy – perhaps TM still has some cards up its sleeve?

# Leveraging Situationism?

Karen Kurczynski

*The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – non-intervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.<sup>1</sup>*

The mini-conference ‘The Situational Drive: Complexities of Public Sphere Engagement’, organised by Joshua Decter, took place at the Cooper Union in May 2007. Speakers included artists, theorists, critics, architects and curators, and admission was free thanks to non-profit sector sponsors such as inSite and Creative Time. Participants were asked to address such questions as ‘What is at stake today in terms of public domain experiences?’ and ‘Do we believe in the possibility of transforming publics?’. The event brought to light a range of possibilities for contesting the increasing regulation of public space and constraint of democratic expression. Nevertheless, for a conference explicitly devoted to tactical engagements in the public sphere, the absence of substantive interaction and dialogue was troubling and points to underlying contradictions regarding the institutional recuperation of the theory and practice of the Situationist International (SI) today in the form of the fully administered situation. Specifically, to what extent can institutions dependent on private funding, and therefore by extension corporate-defined parameters, accommodate the inherent oppositionality of the Situationist legacy? In significant ways, InSite, Creative Time and the ‘Situational Drive’ conference succeeded in spectacularising oppositional or community-based practices which were therefore divorced, partly or totally, from potential criticality.

My aim is not to restore the primacy of Situationist activities over contemporary ones. The Situationists were one of a long line of political activists from Dada to the Art Worker’s Coalition and beyond, and their history needs continual reassessment.<sup>2</sup> Yet the artistic and urbanist projects presented at the conference expressed the constraints of the regulation of contemporary public space in their very parameters – even as the Situationist activities themselves did half a century ago. What

1 Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, 1957, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>

2 For example, the recent conference in Copenhagen, ‘Expect Everything, Fear Nothing: Seminar on the Situationist Movement in Scandinavia’ (organised by Jakob Jakobsen and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, 15–16 March 2007), began a long overdue reconsideration of the dissident Situationist artists’ activities, <http://destroysi.dk>.



remain to be considered are the differences in funding structures, demands for accountability and expectations among varied audiences that now delimit a Situationist-inspired set of tactics, including: the *dérive* (oppositional meanderings that lay bare the power that structures public space); *détournement* (the subversion of spectacular media); and the very concept of creating a situation (provoking antagonism or demanding participation rather than passive viewing). The rhetoric of inSite and other sponsors of the 'Situational Drive' conference demands at least a preliminary examination of these potential contradictions. To that end I will consider to what extent the Situationist legacy haunted this conference, in light of other recent attempts to leverage the radical inheritance of the Situationists for contemporary purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of administering situations recalls the paradox that determined the Situationist project in its own day: the fact that it was an anti-organisation defying the capitalist regulation of society from the outside, just as it recognised capitalism's potential to recuperate the outsider dimensions of culture. According to a 1960 Situationist text:

All forms of capitalist society today are in the final analysis based on the generalized... division between directors and executants: those who give orders and those who carry them out. Transposed onto the plane of culture, this means the separation between 'understanding' and 'doing.'... The total social activity is thus split into three levels: the workshop, the office and the directorate. Culture, in the sense of active and practical comprehension of society, is likewise cut apart into these three aspects. These aspects are reunited (partially and clandestinely) only by people's constant transgression of the separate sectors in which they are regimented by the system.<sup>4</sup>

The Situationist observation so crucial for contemporary discussions was the identification of an increasing struggle between collectives seeking new ways to contest capitalist power and power's attempts to recuperate all innovation as a marketable product divorced from all threat. The SI developed a deep-seated distrust of 'the cultural sector proper, whose publicity is based on the periodic launching of pseudo-innovations'.<sup>5</sup> The Situationist concept of the (now entirely) capitalist spectacle permeating even the most seemingly private aspects of human life has become only more relevant in the past half-century of globalisation and the increasing bureaucratisation of culture.

The Situationist concept of *détournement* theorised the possibility of critical subjectivity to negate recuperation, using the spectacle's own visual language necessarily from within its parameters, because there is, as the SI would write, 'at present' no other available position. The SI upheld the promise of a revolutionary alternative, which could not arise from purely cultural innovation but did so from a broader concept of direct action, to re-determine completely the possibilities for creative expression while espousing *détournement* as a tactic of refusing present conditions.<sup>6</sup> Of course, even Situationist *détournements* were not pure outsider statements: the most orthodox examples of *détournement* entered the capitalist circuit directly, despite the SI's claims to the contrary.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, *détournement* informs protest strategies, such as those of the Yes Men and others, which recognise the beneficial aspects of globalisation (not least the very infrastructure of international

3 These might include 'The Interventionists' at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; a conference entitled 'Situationist Sim City: Critical Video Gaming', in Liverpool in 2004; the 2005 'Creative Capital: Culture, Innovation and the Public Domain in the Knowledge Economy' conference in Amsterdam; and the exhibition 'Forms of Resistance' at the Van Abbemuseum.

4 Pierre Canjeurs and Guy Debord, 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program', 20 July 1960, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/situationline/si/program.html>

5 Ibid

6 See 'Détournement as Negation and Prelude', *Internationale situationniste*, 3, December 1959, pp 10–11.

7 Although Debord claimed that the collaborative artist's book *Mémoires* was distributed only to friends as a gift, it was sold in various Left Bank bookstores and at Wittenborn in New York; Asger Jorn's 'Détourned Paintings' were shown twice at Galerie Rive Gauche even if they did not sell.



communication) while fighting for global justice. The spectre of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' haunts current discussions because it has come to stand for the domestication of the oppositional 'situation' into a bland notion of 'participation' created by jet-setting global artists and curators with tenuous connections to local settings despite their dependence on local audiences to complete them. At the 'Situational Drive' conference, critic Markus Miessen demanded that we interrogate the meaning of 'participation' and restore the economic and social determinants that define any such practice; in the end participation is problematic precisely because it has become a replacement for absent community. For non-profit institutions, what matters is how to maintain the possibility of rejecting the complete domestication of the relationalist pole given the privatisation of funding. Perhaps even more important is the question of whether institutions can promote oppositional situations that arise outside any such sponsorship without spectacularising them. This is a challenge that must be kept in mind in the development of future situations. It matters little whether or not the conference succeeded or did not succeed; discussions of 'failure' haunt all accounts of the legacy of the avant-garde in general and have become largely useless because they so quickly become dismissals that hinder critical analysis.

The organisation of the conference drew suspicion from some quarters for the same reasons that inSite, one of the principal sponsors of the conference, has been criticised in the past: for using activist concepts to frame what seemed merely to be another version of passive spectatorship.<sup>8</sup> InSite is a fifteen-year-old non-profit-based organisation in San Diego, California, which sponsors bi-national art projects concerning the US–Mexican border. Its history encapsulates the shift over the past two decades from site-specific installation to place-specific intervention. This shift began with the development of so-called 'new genre public art' in the 1980s, when curators and artists rejected the formalist and dehumanised conception of locality inherited from the site-specific practices of Minimalism and post-Minimalism in favour of more socially based projects in relation to a particular community.<sup>9</sup> InSite seeks to explore innovative ways to rethink marginalised spaces and attempt to connect communities to a wider spectrum of resources without merely making them available for gentrification. Over the years, inSite has become genuinely bi-national – itself an impressive feat – and moved toward more explicit, socially engaged interventionist practices. Yet a fundamental question not addressed in the projects sponsored by organisations such as inSite is the role of privatisation and funding in organising, promoting, channelling – in a word spectacularising – interventionist actions, which are inherently fugitive and anti-spectacular.

The very term 'interventionist', popularised by the recent exhibition at Mass MoCA, encapsulates the Situationist call to refute the non-intervention imposed by the Spectacle, which constantly creates new consumer desires that distract from political realities. InSite05, involving international artists and critics coordinated locally and flown in for residencies over a two-year period, explicitly presented itself as an anti-biennial. According to artist Antoni Muntadas, its organisation developed stronger and more productive relationships between artist and

8 Leah Ollman's critique of InSite 2000, that 'passive spectatorship became the prevailing mode of experience', could equally apply to the 'Situational Drive' conference, which similarly foregrounded video projections over conversations. Ollman, 'Losing Ground – Public Art at the Border', *Art in America*, 89:5, May 2001, p 70.

9 The issues of 'site' versus 'place' are discussed in Jeff Kelley, 'Common Work', in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed Suzanne Lacy, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, pp 139–48, and Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*, New Press, New York, 1997. See also the discussion in Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, pp 100–37.

place than a typical biennial.<sup>10</sup> Artistic director Osvaldo Sánchez laid out the curator's paradoxical task in his 2003 statement:

Even at the risk of fracturing inSite's a priori identification as a cultural event showcasing legitimate talents, the overarching challenge in inSite05 is to empower each project to suborn, clone, and de-institutionalize these artistic strategies, in order to re-inscribe them as breathtakingly innovative creative experiences with broad anthropological significance.<sup>11</sup>

His call for the 'breathtakingly innovative' neatly mimics capitalism's ongoing drive to novelty.

The attempt to 'de-institutionalize' is admirably radical from the perspective of the mainstream artworld, but can it be done by curatorial fiat, with private funding? InSite was funded by major gifts ranging from \$25,000 to \$250,000 from individuals, foundations, corporations and government agencies in both the US and Mexico. The Situational Drive conference was funded by grants including support from a new fund called Artography, the sub-organisation of a dubious-sounding entity called Leveraging Investments in Creativity, part of the Ford Foundation. The notion of 'leveraging investments' particularly underscores the privatisation of arts funding since the 1970s when artist-run spaces and organisations seemed for a time to be dominant.<sup>12</sup> A recent dialogue among a selected group of artists sponsored by Creative Time demonstrates a general feeling that artists and curators need to reassess oppositional tactics in a current climate hostile to public political opposition. Several participants noted that art schools, once a protected site of experimentation alternative to the market, have now been transformed into professional training grounds and networking sites for high-profile gallery shows.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, universities are undergoing crises of public censorship and privatisation, while the publishing industry in both art journals and academic books has contracted. Given these conditions, the corporate language of leveraging and accountability tends to direct art towards 'useful' social ends, pushing arts organisations toward relational projects more closely involved with marginalised communities, but often on the condition that they do not disrupt the larger status quo.

Activist artists have become highly sceptical of such efforts to manage situations that, at least in the Situationist conception, should be anarchic, spontaneous and driven purely by desire.<sup>14</sup> Often, if such initiatives do not put the artist or architect in the position of agent of gentrification, they mandate that she/he become a social worker in a society that has eroded its infrastructure for actual social work. Tijuana-based architect Teddy Cruz, for one, seems amenable to this shifting of roles. Cruz presented a compelling description at the conference of his own work developing artistic alternatives to top-down development. His studio attempts to ameliorate the vast disparity of wealth and poverty in the San Diego–Tijuana metropolis by turning the neighbourhood into a grassroots developer of its own housing stock. He has partnered with multiple NGOs, social service providers and providers of micro-credit in attempting to develop local infrastructures and investigating alternative economies, such as the bartering of social services for rent. Cruz makes productive use of Situationist ideas to work within the existing structures of urban planning. His diagrams of

10 Antoni Muntadas, presentation at the 'Situational Drive' panel 'Communication, Fear, Contact', 13 May 2007

11 Quoted in Joshua Decker, 'Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements: The Artist as Public Interlocutor?', in *Situational Public*, eds Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell, Installation Gallery, San Diego, 2006, p 293.

12 See Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, New York University Press, New York, 1999.

13 *Who Cares?*, Creative Time, New York, 2006. See the comments by Martha Rosler and Coco Fusco, among others, p 43 and p 73.

14 See Doug Ashford's comments in *Who Cares?*, op cit, p 34.

structures combining housing with social services were directly indebted to Constant's New Babylon and Guy Debord's détourned maps. The Situationists themselves acknowledged they were engaged in a 'race' with capitalist bureaucrats for innovation. In the postwar period of economic and technological expansion, both cultural bureaucrats and autonomous artist-activists sought the new, the marginal, the technological possibilities of liberating everyday life – but to different ends. The Situationist approach proposed the direct acknowledgement that 'we are inevitably on the same path as our enemies – most often preceding them – but we must be there, without any confusion, *as enemies*'.<sup>15</sup> Cruz's projects explore radical alternatives to the existing economy of development by re-channelling its institutional energies.

Although many artists want to make a difference, when their activities are regulated by the private sphere's demands for accountability and managed opposition it quickly becomes clear why there is a widespread perception that interventions are immediately spectacularised or defused. The obvious example of this at the conference was Doug Aitken. Aitken's thoroughly spectacular work *Sleepwalkers*, sponsored by MoMA and Creative Time, involved highly scripted scenarios featuring celebrity actors and high production values that make them virtually indistinguishable from commercials. Aitken spoke in a panel labelled 'Anti-Spectacle/Spectacle', but his own internalisation of the spectacle – evident in his platitudes about 'empowering' the viewer to 'discover' the work by 'journeying through' the space of the MoMA courtyard – inexplicably went unchallenged. If we can only empower viewers to walk to MoMA, we may as well go back to easel painting.

The Situationists, on the other hand, did not necessarily achieve more than the contemporary 'interventionists', other than developing a sophisticated body of theory to inform critical practice. Their actions, from the dérive to détourned artworks and films, resisted publicity enough to surround the group with a mystique that has made them terminally hip, heroes inspiring passive worship rather than active interpretation. Actions by even such 'rigorous' Situationists as Guy Debord were financed by the day job of girlfriends like Michèle Bernstein, who were thus prevented from playing more central roles in the movement, and by sales of Asger Jorn's paintings. Still, it is notable that this financing diverted existing capital into autonomous artist-run projects, rather than collecting funds through grants that inherently tailor an artistic project to the requirements of a parent organisation.

Joshua Decter, in his contribution to inSite, attempts to interrogate rather than resolve the problematics of working in a specific local context as an outsider. Although he does not refer directly to the Situationist usage, he mobilises the term 'situation' to investigate the range of explicitly politicised and public actions developed out of the two-year build up to inSite05.<sup>16</sup> What are the differences between institutionally coordinating, funding and publicising such situations and what the SI called 'constructing' them? Primarily, the institutionally constructed situation upholds the specialised roles of organiser versus actor, actor versus viewer. The result is a curatorial project that, even though realised by an innovative and politically challenging organisation, is still received as a weekend tourist attraction.<sup>17</sup> That inSite brings in cultural workers from outside the local area who may have little knowledge of

15 'Now, the SI', 1964, quoted in Tom McDonough, 'Introduction: Ideology and the Situationist Utopia', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed T McDonough, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, xiii

16 Decter, 'Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements', op cit, pp 289–301

17 For travel writer William L Hamilton, the inSite organisers and artists became little more than an insider advantage making the 'real' Tijuana visible to the tourist. Hamilton, 'It's Hot, It's Hip, It's Tijuana?', *New York Times*, 25 August 2006, online at <http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/08/25/travel/escapes/25tijuana.html>

local context is a frequent source of criticism. However, inSite05 artists Javier Téllez and Paul Ramírez Jonas did extensive local organising to disrupt the power imbalance of outsider versus insider. The ‘intrusion’ of outsiders is in fact crucial to the idea of *dérive* which deconstructs the spatialisation of power by bringing institutionally separated bodies or spaces into a cultural confrontation. Such confrontation is now much more easily done on an international scale. The creative re-examination of the complex relationships and misunderstandings between Tijuana and San Diego communities is what makes inSite significant. More problematic are, on the one hand, the danger of pseudo-participation or viewer passivity in some of the events themselves and, on a deeper level, the entrenched specialisation of the roles of all cultural workers and observers involved, which prevents a truly oppositional circulation of productive energies. The Situationists’ comments on this problem should be remembered, not in order to uphold a mystique of the SI as the true critical ‘pioneers’ but rather in order to reconsider problems that seem to have become invisible to the new situational specialists. According to the SI:

A constructed situation must be collectively prepared and developed. It would seem, however, that, at least during the initial period of rough experiments, a situation requires one individual to play a sort of ‘director’ role. If we imagine a particular situation project in which, for example, a research team has arranged an emotionally moving gathering of a few people for an evening, we would no doubt have to distinguish: a director or producer responsible for coordinating the basic elements necessary for the construction of the decor and for working out certain interventions in the events... the direct agents living the situation, who have taken part in creating the collective project and worked on the practical composition of the ambiance; and finally, a few passive spectators who have not participated in the constructive work, who should be forced into action. This relation between the director and the ‘livers’ of the situation must naturally never become a permanent specialisation. It’s only a matter of a temporary subordination of a team of situationists to the person responsible for a particular project.<sup>18</sup>

The Situationist mandate to ‘never work’ – in other words never to specialise into a *métier* that becomes economically exploitable – has become the province of artists alone, a kind of specialty of non-specialisation. Artists can enter the roles of curator, critic and organiser, but non-artists employed in those roles are often trapped by work schedules that make creative experimentation or sustained political engagement impossible. InSite attempted to shake up prescribed roles by creating new positions for organisers like Decter who, while not a curator, was given the title of ‘Interlocutor’ in order to become an open-ended negotiator and ‘generator of critical feedback’.<sup>19</sup> The creation of such new administrative positions, however, might defeat its own purpose by resulting in further specialisations and professionalisation of artistic projects.

Community was a fraught concept at both inSite and the ‘Situational Drive’ conference. InSite05 defined itself by a ‘commitment to facilitate new works of art developed through the long-term engagement of artists with the community’.<sup>20</sup> Its efficacy was framed from the beginning of the

18 ‘Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation’, *Internationale situationniste* 1, 1958, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/problems.html>

19 Decter, ‘Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements’, op cit, p 283

20 InSite05 fact sheet

project and evaluated after its end as an engagement with local neighbourhoods on both sides of the border. The ‘Situational Drive’ conference attempted to develop a dialogue or ‘friction’ among different artistic communities but ultimately showcased the privileged default community of the established artworld. Panels that were set up as ‘conversations’ were laughable for their lack of dialogue. This started with the first ‘keynote conversation’ between Maarten Hajer and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Wodiczko, one of the most significant practitioners of socially committed public art today, and Hajer, co-author of the book *In Search of the New Public Domain*,<sup>21</sup> presented insights focused on theorising the public sphere. Hajer argued for the public sphere as a space of homogenous, regulated enclaves that artists can potentially disrupt by developing engagements that are normally prohibited, while Wodiczko presented his public projections which destabilise public and private space, history and personal memory, and make visible normally hidden micro-communities. Yet as artist Laura Kurgan noted, endless academic dialogue on redefining the public sphere seems less useful than discussions of specific communities. Nato Thompson suggested evaluating interventionist ‘tactics’ as opposed to institutional ‘strategies’. On many panels, presentations were so brief as to be utterly incomprehensible. On the panel ‘Organizing Transitory Projects in the City’, former director of Public Art Fund Tom Eccles uttered the sentence, ‘Talking about community is a kind of paralysis – it’s the most destructive thing you could do’. The phrase seemed overtly designed to provoke Maarten Hajer’s notion of ‘friction’ in the public sphere. The idea of friction evokes the Situationist notion of refusing ‘communication’, which dominated all aspects of public discourse in the 1950s, as a one-way message always already predefined, circumscribed and clichéd.<sup>22</sup> Did Eccles mean that communities have to be built, not discussed, as in the Situationist idea that ‘communication can only exist in communal action’?<sup>23</sup> If so, the conference was utterly failing at that too; as co-panellist Mary Jane Jacobs, a veteran of innovative curatorial organising in the local context of Charleston, SC, candidly noted, ‘We’re not having a thoughtful conversation here. This is the artworld here. It’s a closed community.’ Jacobs and other participants such as inSite participant Teddy Cruz and Rick Lowe, founder of Project Row Houses in Houston, insisted that their work deals with concrete, specific neighbourhoods – communities built on social ties developed over many years. As Jacobs commented later, projects working with such communities would be better served by a much more focused and interactive discussion.

Many projects presented at the conference internalised the limits of the political efficacy of the situation today. The project by the four-man collective Gelitin, sponsored by Creative Time, compliantly reflected the position of art in today’s capitalist public space, laying bare the limits of current possibilities. Gelitin presented via DVD and live-video feed a project provocatively called ‘The Dig Cunt’. Their panel was labelled ‘Under the Paving Stones, A Beach’, a light-hearted and completely depoliticised take on the May ‘68 street-battle slogan and thus a sheer domestication of the most unequivocal Situationist intervention.<sup>24</sup> The beach in question was not the ground underlying the city streets but rather the several tons of sand shipped in every year to make a simulacrum of a beach on Coney Island. The collective dug a hole in the

21 Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of the New Public Domain*, NAi, Rotterdam, 2002

22 See ‘Priority Communication’, *Internationale situationniste*, 7, 1962, pp 20–4, trans Reuben Keehan, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/priority.html>

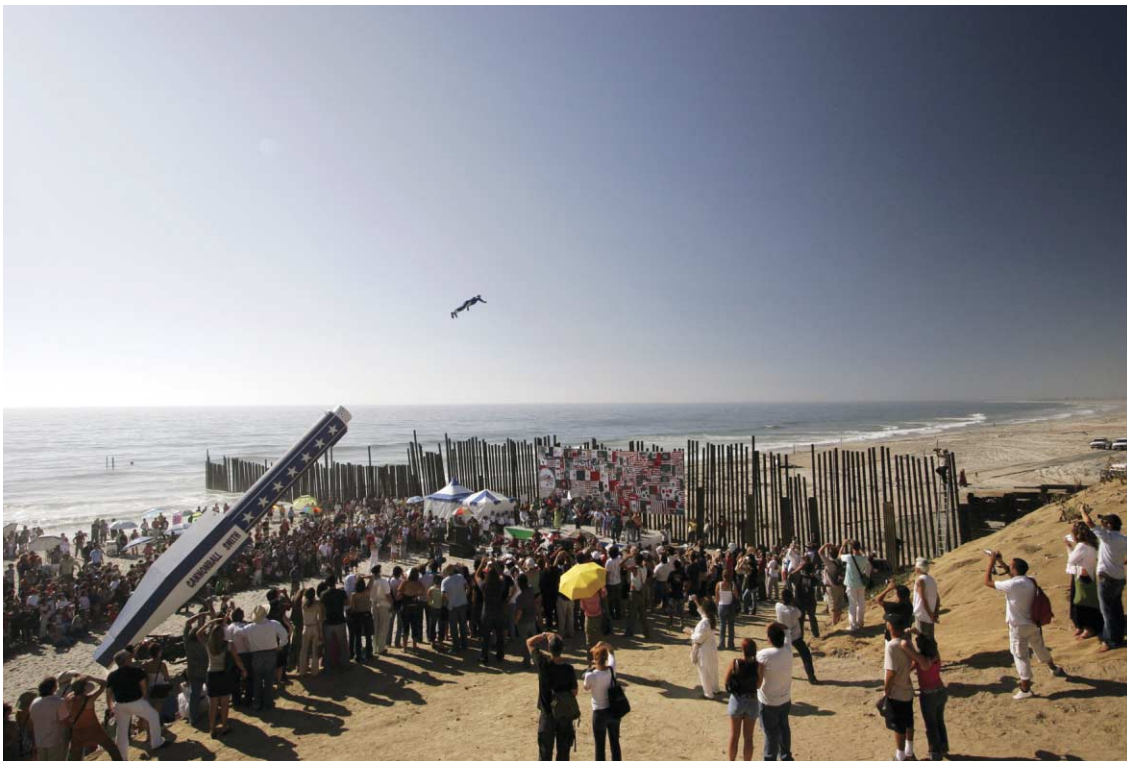
23 Ibid, p 21

24 On the Situationists’ role in the events of 1968 see Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et mai 68*, Gérard Lebovici, Paris, 1990.



beach and refilled it each evening for seven days. A spokes-artist asserted that ‘art is the counter-concept of capitalism. Art doesn’t have to do anything. It doesn’t even have to be effective [or] efficient, nothing. It’s open to anarchy which is a counter-concept to capitalism.’ After achieving the requisite permissions from the city (not a particularly anarchic process), they carried out a project that was useless and ridiculous enough to make all statements about it funny and thus nonsensical. They framed the event as an expression of the artist’s ultimate freedom: ‘Since you call yourself an artist, anything you do is art.’ In the end, it was a sad statement on the possibilities for developing contemporary situations. Either they become self-defeatist and self-marginalising in their complete rejection of politics in favour of fun, or their entanglement with the demands of timely political issues precludes all spontaneity, unpredictability, and in many cases aesthetics. More provocative than the project itself was the disruption of a live-feed interview with one of Gelitin’s members by the Yes Men’s Andy Bichlbaum. In the resulting non-conversation, Bichlbaum’s ‘translations’ completely muddled the communication. (‘The Dig What? What is the title? The Dig Cunt – is it a provocative title? Yes, the title is the Dig Cunt.’) The disruption of ‘official’ communication made a significant statement, a hilarious détournement, given the ongoing problematic of presenter versus audience communication at the conference.

InSite05 interventions also remained on the relationalist (as opposed to Situationist) pole of the administered situation. InSite participants



Javier Tellez, *One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)*, performance still, InSite05, Tijuana/San Diego border, 2005. Photograph: © Steven Lau.



Bulbo, an artists' collective from Tijuana, silkscreened collectively designed T-shirt prints all weekend for free on the sidewalk outside the conference. The diverse group creates imagery together based on their everyday lives. While *The Clothes Shop* developed an alternative product, the clothes functioned in New York as another niche market offering urban hipness for artworld insiders. In Mexico the collective sets up in malls, distributing clothes freely to the local population, many of whom work in repressive, sweatshop-like maquiladora plants producing garments for export to the US. A relationalist practice, it nevertheless inserts collectively derived imagery into spaces outside the purview of the artworld, fostering the untrackable proliferation of an anti-logo while producing an alternative network of distribution without challenging existing structures directly.

Perhaps best summarising both the potential and the limitations of the administered 'situation' in our mediated society was Javier Téllez's inSite project *One Flew Over the Void*. The event (presented as a video clip) was the culmination of Téllez's two-year collaboration with psychiatric patients in Mexicali. Together they designed a stage set against the wall separating Tijuana and San Diego beachfronts, and developed a music programme, and publicity materials using print radio, broadcast and television. Modelled on the folk tradition of the town fair, the event involved patients marching with protest messages they designed. Once onstage, a tuxedoed MC directed them to don animal masks and walk through a large hoop. The final act was the spectacular catapulting across the border of a human cannonball. Having obtained all the proper permissions in advance, the cannonball himself ceremonially displayed his US passport before shooting off. The cannonball event for once put an American in danger by crossing the border, yet it functioned as purely symbolic action; inSite director Michael Krichman called it 'a sort of spectacle so out of the ordinary that officials did not see it as jeopardizing their everyday systems of control'.<sup>25</sup> Like Mexican artist Erre's giant Janus-faced Trojan horse looming over the border traffic lanes at inSite 1997, it was completely politically neutralised, yet still powerful. It also became an icon for the 'Situational Drive' conference whose poster featured the human cannonball in flight.

The dialogic nature of Téllez's collaborative process, the heterotopic aspects of the event and its conscious video recording suggests new ways to subvert spectacularisation. More ideologically threatening than the cannonball was the disturbing sight of mental patients marching through circus hoops like animals. Viewers were forced out of their comfort zone into a personal examination of the way we normally view (or more likely, ignore) the mentally ill. With overt reference to Michel Foucault's classic analysis in *Madness and Civilization* (Random House, New York, 1965), it overturned a controlled invisibility through apparent self-objectification. Téllez asserted the work 'redefined the ethics of the representation of mental illness', drawing directly on modernist links between artistic creation and mental illness. The patients meanwhile became temporary and overtly artificial 'artists'. Arguably, the event détourned the spectacle by means of what might be productively termed a 'constructed spectacle'; it moves a step beyond the comforting pseudo-participation of relational aesthetics into a deliberate disruption of conventional ethics.<sup>26</sup> It also goes beyond the Situationist refusal of

25 Sally Stein, 'Looking Backward and Forward: A Preliminary Historical Conversation About InSite', in *Situational Public*, op cit, p 425

26 See Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, autumn 2004, pp 51–79.

visual pleasure, itself ultimately self-defeating. A constructed spectacle could destabilise the hegemonic control of spectacular imagery the way a constructed situation destabilises the social control of space. *One Flew Over the Void* mobilised the ancient traditions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to render homage to the carnival itself as a kind of constructed spectacle not intended as a political statement yet anything but innocent. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously noted, when the carnival turns the world upside down it destabilises conventional social hierarchies – but only temporarily, in situations perfectly exemplified by Gelitin's antics. The constructed spectacle as presented in the Téllez video remains permanently dissociated from the 'original' events, which were already emphatically staged. While this project diverges from the direct political tactics of interventionist strategies, it uses grotesque strategies of humour and nonsense to throw a wrench into the spectacularisation of community and action. And only this kind of direct opposition to the institutional recuperation inherent in such organisations as Creative Time and inSite can sabotage their spectacular machinery.

# Urban Scrolls and Modern-Day Oracles

## The Secret Life of Beirut's Walls

Rasha Salti

*'Why do you paint the walls with white lime?'*

*He looked at me and told me he was going to come.*

*'Listen, he will come, things will come, death will come.'*

*He clutched his navy-blue coat around his thin body, and lowered his head. 'The things that will come, you don't know, no one knows, but these walls, we have to erase everything, everything has to become white again. Everything.'*

*He pulled out a small eraser from the pocket of his coat.*

*'Look at this, they will give me a big eraser.'*

*He stretched his palm open. 'As big as this.'*

*'And who will give you this eraser?'*

*'They will, you don't know, none of you knows, a big eraser, it does not erase what's written on the walls, it erases everything, when I place it on the wall like this, the wall will disappear, without falling apart, without noise, without a sound, or dust, or rubble or stones. I place it on the wall and the wall will disappear by itself, disappear right in front of your eyes, right as you see it. We will go out, we will be a thousand men and a thousand women, each one of us carrying a big eraser, and we will erase, erase walls, houses, faces. Nothing will remain, everything would have disappeared, you will disappear, I will disappear, and the city will disappear, images will disappear, everything will disappear and become white, white like the white of eggs, like the white of eyes, like whiteness itself. Everything wiped, everything will collapse, without a trace of having collapsed. Like officers. I was an officer once, but I quit, I was a great officer, surely you must have heard about my achievements, how I used to kill, I used to wait for them at the intersection of the street and kill them. And today I carry the eraser, look, you can't see clearly, your eyes cannot see clearly, but I can see, I can see everything.'*

1 Elias Khoury, *al-Wujub al-Bayda' (The White Faces)*, Dar al-Adab publishers, Beirut, 1981, 2003, pp 138–9, author's translation

Elias Khoury<sup>1</sup>

The armed civil conflict that raged in Lebanon for seventeen years was ended with a truce, the Taëf Accords, negotiated in the little-known town of Taëf in Saudi Arabia. Behind closed doors, with most of the warring factions seated at a long table, dealing other people's destinies and getting very rich quick. This was one of the side-showcases of Bush *père's* 'New World Order', the second chapter in post-Reagan America's 'manifest destiny'. The Berlin Wall had fallen, the sweet nectar of democracy and freedom was being delivered to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Bloc. The time had come for the US to deliver freedom to the Middle East (democracy would come decades later with Bush *fil's*). Kuwaitis were liberated from Iraq's occupation, their babies were growing safely in incubators.<sup>2</sup> The civil war in Lebanon was brought to a halt and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was ushered along the shining path of negotiations for peace.<sup>3</sup> Sarcasm and caricature aside, these are the historical markers that frame the story of how our civil war ended.

- 2 In order to instigate a 'mobilisation' in favour of US engagement in the liberation of Kuwait, a fake story of Iraqis snatching babies from incubators was concocted.
- 3 The first formal round of 'negotiations' for peace between Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis took place in Madrid in 1992.

I remember walking past a graffito scribbled in paint on the modest wall that lines the road to the apartment building where I lived. It read, *On n'est pas nés sous la même étoile* (which translates roughly as 'We were not born under the same star'), an expression of disappointment that means either 'we were not born to the same privileges' or 'our destinies are not meant to meet'. The inscription occurred twice. Once on a squat wall alongside a road that connects the American University of Beirut campus to the Ain el-Mreisseh neighbourhood, and a second



*On n'est pas nés sous la même étoile* (We were not born under the same star), the inscription on a wall in Ain el-Mreisseh, one of two occurrences.

time on a slightly taller wall a street and half away. The two inscriptions, close in distance, cannot be found anywhere else in the city. The layers of ‘uncanny’ are boggling. It must have been the first graffiti I noticed during my pedestrian peregrinations (I don’t drive) that were neither political logo, slogan, slander, nor the unadventurous ‘X loves Y’. A profoundly personal expression of sorrow by some lovelorn young man or woman whose identity was resolutely anonymous, a message (or plea) intended for only one other specific person to understand besides its author. More intriguing was the use of French in a neighbourhood not really francophone, certainly not francophile. Furthermore the expression is itself passé, bordering on the old-fashioned.

In spite of its humility and mournfulness, that inscription transformed the squat walls that carried it. It transformed the neighbourhood, the city and the present time. At some point after the violence had ceased and the postwar chapter had officially been inaugurated, an anonymous individual had reclaimed space for her- or himself to express personal grief, on walls that were the exclusive domain for political parlance, bellicose sloganeering and territorial markings. The city’s walls were a ledger of the quotidian, of its wars, an endless scroll of concrete, stone, mortar and paint snaking through neighbourhoods; they collected markings that mapped who ruled in a particular moment in a particular geography around that wall. After the news broadcasts informed us of the takeover of an area by some militia, the walls were like the evidence or confirmation, on stone and concrete, that the militia had indeed deployed its authority over the neighbourhood. The earliest signs of contestation to that authority often appeared first on the same walls. Individuals and their everyday stories had no place on walls. Whoever had inscribed *on n’est pas nés sous la même étoile* had marked the end of wartime in the city. In spite of its humility and mournfulness, that inscription filled me with glee; the war must be over, I remember thinking, with a sense of relief.

Wall graffiti are remembered to have changed dramatically with the outbreak of the civil war. Before the war, when political groups or figures extended debates, calls for mobilisation and contests for power to the informal public sphere of the streetscape, they preferred banners. Stretches of white or coloured fabric with neatly hand-calligraphed Arabic slogans, pledges or famous quotes were hung across the width of a street, just high enough for pedestrian and vehicular traffic to discern without exerting too much effort. In contrast, walls were plastered with printed placards of political leaders and from 1970 of fallen PLO fighters.<sup>4</sup> Surely there must have been graffiti, but it seems that the practice of etching walls with inscriptions exploded in tandem with the pounding of cannon fire.

Although in public sight, the outer surface of a wall is not exactly in the public realm. In legalese, the state has the authority to police walls adjoining public property and protect those adjoining private property. Yet the widely prevailing perception of wall surfaces remains that of a ‘public’ platform. In the contrasting binary between the ‘street’ versus ‘electorate’ or ‘citizenry’, walls expose the more spontaneous, unrehearsed opinion of an amorphous mass of folks, or neighbourhood residents, a vista into the lingua franca and pulse of a place in the present time. In Beirut, at least, the story is more complicated.

4 The design of martyrs’ posters changed over time but generally include a portrait and a slogan to celebrate their heroism. Theatres installed custom-made poster-boxes, some protected by glass.



Identifying the perimeter and components of the public sphere in Lebanon is never simple. The state rests on a covenant that organises the distribution of power between various religious communities (or sects), and the delicate demographic balance between constituent communities has been the guarantee against a single group's absolute hegemony. Distribution of power and political representation are tabulated according to a (now fictional) arithmetic of demography between religious communities.<sup>5</sup> Contests for power have invariably involved alliances between communitarian groups engendering uncanny democratic practices. Lebanon's particularism is a paradox: while 'otherness' is normative in political discourse, egalitarianism is not. The civil code regulating private citizens falls under religious writ, but the national public realm is articulated, debated and regulated using the vocabulary of secularism. Lebanon has always had a weak state (myopically centralised in the capital), a liberal economy, tenacious class inequities and a hyper-active intelligence apparatus. It is an open yet bigoted country, profoundly parochial while boasting a cosmopolitan portent forming a barometer of political trends, ideologies and conflicts throughout the region. Between the folly of a puny state more committed to protecting the private interests of market forces, and a political class with seamless access to economic power, things 'public' are in fact very few.

From within this singular construction of the public sphere, Beirut's walls, like other Lebanese cities' walls, were acknowledged by unspoken popular consensus as sites with unadulterated exposure to the public. Writing on them is acknowledged to be within the purview of the neighbourhood's residents, but not of outsiders, even if merely one street removed.

The civil war led to the eventual collapse of the state, its authority gradually disintegrated. As militias took over with the power of the gun, they supplanted the state, the administration of 'order', and regulation of both public and private conduct. In areas with little communitarian or political diversity, militias had less trouble wresting control (such as East Beirut<sup>6</sup> or the southern suburbs<sup>7</sup>). In other areas, they had more trouble (West Beirut for example). Although all political protagonists owned media outlets (print, radio and television), the city's walls were appropriated with the perception that a public platform was being subverted from the purview of the state and from the informal civil dominion of neighbourhoods. Before the incident deemed as the marker for the beginning of the civil war on 13 April 1975 took place,<sup>8</sup> wall inscriptions had begun to emerge as dual defiance, at once undermining the authority of the state and asserting the authority of a particular political group.

Our civil war was drawn out over seventeen years. The fighting was not continuous; stretches of armed clashes were interrupted by quiet lulls. The adversaries were not always the same,<sup>9</sup> the initial fault lines deepened and splintered into more fault lines, the perimeter of fiefdoms for which armed groups vied for control shrank considerably, but the tenor of violence remained murderously strident. Never was a single group able to control the entirety of the country's territory, let alone the entirety of the capital. When a portion of the territory was claimed, victory was invariably fragile and temporary. The human landscape of communitarian diversity and pluralism changed drastically over time as

5 The covenant, instituted in 1943, at the moment of independence, was based on a perception of demographic make-up that no longer holds true today.

6 Gradually Beirut was split east-west, between Christians in the East and a mixed population in the West.

7 Residents of Beirut's southern suburbs are mostly Shi'a.

8 The conflict broke out from an escalation of smaller violent acts. On 13 April a bus carrying PLO fighters was attacked by Phalangists as they drove through Ain el-Remmaneh, a working-class fiefdom of the Phalangists. City-wide shelling started shortly afterwards between two main warring fronts, the National Front (a coalition of leftist and secular Lebanese parties in alliance with the PLO) and the Lebanese Front (a coalition of right-wing and Christian parties, of which the Phalangists were the major force).

9 As the conflict continued the two main coalition fronts splintered into their constituent parties.



shifting constructions of antagonistic otherness compelled demographic shifts, greying neighbourhoods to a colourless homogeneity. Shifts in the geography of communities' demographic configurations, as well as the struggle for taking over territory, were immediately transcribed to the walls of the city.

During that period graffiti were almost exclusively political, including slogans, famous quotes by ideologues and insults. They were habitually written in the name of the collective. A small sample to illustrate the diversity of graffiti, from the period known as the 'Two-Year War' (1975–1977):

Cultural diversity is the guarantee for the future. (Signed by the National Front)

There are no differences between a worker and a student. We are all for Palestine. We will resist until death. Peoples of the world unite. Long live Marxist-Leninist ideology. (Signed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine)

If you silence one voice, a thousand others will rise to say no to the conspiracy. (Signed by the Union of Kurdish Youth)

Muslim brother, Christian brother, let's fight against the partition of Lebanon. (Signed by Fateh)

Vaccinate your children against the left; [and] Don't release the enemies of Lebanon from jail. (Signed by the Guardians of the Cedars)<sup>10</sup>

There were cases of fighters leaving a mark of their identity, signing with their name or *nom de guerre*. Often sophomoric in their provocation, invariably vulgar (at times obscene) the inscriptions left by armed fighters resonate with a note of pathetic tragedy. They are the markings of young men who, in the heat of the shelling and at the sight of death, wanted to brand their identity knowing they would perish and slip into oblivion as anonymous integers in the final body count of battles. They left something to be remembered by, no matter how shallow, ideological or indecorous. A small sample from this time:

Sabah Maged Abou Hadi was here

If my dick were a Phalangist I would cut it off. The words of Marx have no par because they are true. (Signed by Shawqi)

Shammoun is a dog. (Signed by Hitler the leader)

If I advance, follow me, if I trail back, kill me, if I fall as a martyr, don't cry over me, continue the fight. (Signed by comrade Nabil Hochar)

I come to you a wanderer and filled with hate. Abou el-Foz is my *nom de guerre*. I don't kill one by one because I am used to killing two by two.<sup>11</sup>

Scant traces are left of these markings today. As the war officially ended, its paraphernalia and accoutrements were slowly removed from our daily lives,<sup>12</sup> its vernacular and streetscape furnishings all erased<sup>13</sup> as if with a magic eraser. Most of the warlords remain, now leading political parties as parliamentary representatives and cabinet ministers. They ordered most of the erasing. They did not release a thousand men and a

10 Maria Chakhtoura has documented the phenomenal explosion of graffiti in the first chapter of the civil war, see *La Guerre des graffiti; Liban 1975–1978*, first edition published by Dar a-Nahar in 1978 and second edition in 2005.

11 Ibid

12 Objects associated with wartime survival: flashlights, stocks of food that do not perish easily, large plastic containers for water, photocopies of identity cards for checkpoints.

13 Checkpoints blocking streets, sandbags to protect windows from explosions, etc...

thousand women armed with big erasers into the streets, as the passage from Elias Khoury's premonitory novel imagines, but they ordered the erasing after their guns were silenced and stowed out of sight.

Postwar graffiti stand in remarkable contrast. The content is different, but also purpose, interlocution, interpellation, dissemination, scope and quantity. The dialectic between public and private shifted as successive postwar governments promoted neoliberal social and economic policies. When the authority of the state was reinstated, its regard for all matters 'public' wavered between disdain and duplicity, honouring neoliberalism's core values. When a public domain was deemed potentially 'marketable', it was rehabilitated and swiftly auctioned off. When it was not deemed potentially commodifiable, it fell into malign neglect. The rehabilitation of neighbourhoods, relegated to the greed of private developers, included the rehabilitation of walls, fencing property and buildings. Some walls were dressed to suit the promotion from cosy and picturesque to exclusive and fancy, a fresh coat of paint or a peel-thin plaster of stone or brick to feign an upgrade. Within a short span, private security guards or cameras were posted to protect the cosmetic improvement (and market value) from vandalism and graffiti.

The civil war had not ended with a clear-cut victory between warring factions. The truce was pragmatic. Intra-factional feuds were gradually superseded by Syria's military control,<sup>14</sup> arbitrating and enforcing a semblance of security. Ultimately the protagonists agreed that the postwar transition to 'peace' would endow Syria with the privileged role of 'tutelage'. A profound schism emerged in the body politic. On the one hand, people from all walks of life resented Syrian control over every avenue of political life. On the other hand, the political class administering the country eagerly displayed subservience to the regime to avoid marginalisation. Opponents of Syrian hegemony comprised the 'Free Movement' and pledged support to former general Michel Aoun, shunted to exile in France after a previous defeat by Syria. Enduring severe repression, the movement's base and middle cadres went underground, yet still managed to stage open protests.

Beirut's graffiti reflected Lebanon's postwar reconfiguration of 'publicness'. In the first few years after the war political movements instigated inscriptions to feign grass-roots support for Syrian tutelage. Yet graffiti were deemed an unprestigious platform for displaying 'allegiance' (or subservience), so banners, full-colour posters and billboards soon appeared lavishing praise on Hafez el-Assad's 'wisdom' and 'benevolent leadership'.

The first postwar parliamentary elections in 1992 were intended to herald the return to normalcy and conducted in an atmosphere of euphoria. For the first time in decades, contenders to the most important legislative arena were campaigning for popular votes using 'conventional' means. Overnight, the city's walls were awash with candidates' posters. The practice flares up with every round of elections and is closely followed by artists, commentators and comedians.<sup>15</sup>

With the re-institution of municipal elections the walls became monitored and obscene graffiti were removed regularly.<sup>16</sup> While no graffiti artists were arrested in the act, the potential for enforcement was constant. On the wall lining the American University of Beirut's Basic Sciences building there was a drawing of an erect penis ejaculating. It

14 In 1976, the Syrian regime was asked to secure stability by Lebanese president Suleiman Frangieh. Syria did not leave until 28 April 2005, in the meantime becoming a prime agent in Lebanese politics.

15 Photographers and video-artists such as Jalal Toufic have produced work about this tendency.

16 Municipal elections had been suspended since 1963.

was blotted out within weeks, appeared a second time, and was wiped away again. At the second appearance, however, slightly below the sketch, a sentence read 'No to the suppression of civil liberties'. The inscription recurred in several places in the city, in upper, middle- and working-class neighbourhoods. It appeared around the time when activists from the Free Movement were agitating on campuses (1996–1998). Their protests were severely repressed. Intimidated in everyday life, many were jailed without due process and tortured. Still, the inscription was not removed everywhere and can be seen in several places today (2007). Around 2000, other inscriptions appeared, demanding the release of well-known political opponents of the Syrian regime.

Not all political scribbles were directed at criticising (or rejecting) Syrian hegemony. Graffiti appeared to underscore this or that leader depending on the micro-conflicts punctuating the postwar. The inscriptions comprise praises and pledges of allegiance, some so rehearsed and formulaic that they had the virtue of comic relief. But the hallmark of Beirut's postwar walls is a remarkable array of graffiti of an entirely different nature. First, walls were reclaimed by their 'owners' and treated as surfaces for posting information (instead of investing in proper signage). Some walls lining empty spaces, turned into privately operated parking lots, were inscribed with parking instructions. Other walls adjacent to neighbourhood butcher's shops, mechanics and groceries were inscribed with the shop names, telephone numbers and hours of operation.

Walls were also re-appropriated by individuals and the classic, 'X loves Y', covered walls regardless of affiliation or social status in Arabic, French and English. Most amusing are inscriptions related to soccer and these constitute venues for 'creative writing' far superior to the declarations of love. An example from a wall in the southern suburb of Beirut: 'Brazil will remain the queen of soccer until the coming of the mehdī', signed by fans from the Nejmeh soccer club, which translates culturally to 'Brazil will remain the queen of soccer until judgement day comes'.<sup>17</sup> In affluent neighbourhoods, some walls are inscribed with graffiti reproducing almost exactly the scribbling one finds in European or American ghettos: the lexical and visual vocabulary of rap and hip-hop. Illusions of global village aside, these forms of expression are the purview of the privileged.

At the southern edge of Beirut, on the boundary of the capital and suburbs, lie the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps.<sup>18</sup> They too have their share of stories with walls that speak in tongues and graffiti. The question of Palestine and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was at the heart of the civil war; the end result in the postwar period is that Palestinian refugees and their offspring live in abject denizenship, hostages to squalor and humiliation, at the margins of a society that looks away systematically. A young Palestinian, Abdel-Rahman, born and living in the Shatila camp and enrolled at the academy of fine arts of the Lebanese University, proposed in 2004 to cover the pallid despair that sheathes the camps' walls with colour, paint, mural drawings and graffiti. He collected 500 Lebanese pounds (the equivalent of a third of a US dollar) from each home to buy paint. Over the span of a summer, he and a band of brothers diligently painted walls, drawing from the rich imagery of Palestinian art and inscribing verse from renowned poets. The skin of

17 Lebanese soccer clubs pledge allegiance to other nations' teams and Nejmeh soccer fans traditionally support Brazil. Many Shi'a believe judgement will come when the last of the imams or *mehdi* (prophets) appear on earth.

18 Some 350,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon, almost ten per cent of the population, mostly refugees from 1948 and 1967 who reside in camps served by the UN. Meanwhile, Palestinians are barred from 72 professions including medicine, law and engineering.



The photograph illustrates a good example of public and private use of Beirut's walls. On the one hand, the inscription in Arabic (neatly calligraphed) indicates that the plot of land behind the wall belongs to the republic of Iraq (no doubt to deter vandalism or squatting). On the other hand, the inscription 'My full moon' (in English) is the cryptic slogan that started to appear on the city's walls gradually, beginning in 2004, in almost every popular neighborhood. The meaning is locked; it is a message exclusive to the author and his private interlocutors.

Shatila began to speak, sing and recite poetry, recanting slogans, in life-affirming colours. Palestine proudly celebrated, providing a feast for all eyes. Here and there, the oranges of Jaffa, the pomegranates of Nazareth and the al-Aqsa mosque were reclaimed as the camp's own.

Beginning in 2003, artists turned their attention to the city's walls and left their mark as well. Rana Maktabi, a young woman living and working in Beirut, produced five different life-sized stencilled drawings of a defiantly posed female figure in 2004. Beneath the drawings, she wrote 'You can't stop me', 'I can say what I want' and 'I am not scared of anything'. The stencils appeared unsigned in fifteen different locations in the city.<sup>19</sup> The same year, a collective of artists who remain stubbornly anonymous staged 'Heartland', an artistic intervention on Beirut's walls. *Al-Murashah* ('The Candidate') appeared during the May municipal elections of that year. In the midst of the clutter from candidates' campaign posters, Heartland invented a fictional candidate whose campaign posters were inserted in the mix. The posters reproduced a black-and-white image of a man that seemed to be peeling away, a common accident during the manic placing of posters in the last days preceding the ballot. Under the unidentifiable face, and where the candidate's name would normally appear, there was only an email address. This image of a nondescript candidate circulated throughout neighbourhoods and constituencies for the entire election period.

19 This artistic intervention was planned in three stages; in the second, the artist documented the reactions to her inscriptions on the wall (in the vein of 'who do you think you are'), and in the third she defaced the stencilled drawings herself.



During the Israeli war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006, a stencilled drawing of a woman's portrait screaming in horror or rage peppered the city's walls. Nearly a year later, it is still visible. Shortly after the war ended, the country fell hostage to a political crisis with the main protagonists grouped in two coalitions. Their bickering resorted to all means except, thankfully, armed conflict but, in the back and forth of insults, one group accused the other of driving a generation of professionals to emigrate. Within weeks of these accusations saturating newspaper headlines and filling sound-bites, a new stencilled drawing has appeared. It depicts several men and women with the caption 'emigrant'.

These artistic interventions endow the walls with a new mode of interpellation and interlocution. They are interactive, dialogical, playful and, on the whole, profoundly democratising. On the one hand, they have de-ghettoised 'vanguard' or unconventional artistic practices from the exclusive microcosm of an intellectual and economic elite group and released them into the street. On the other hand, the mode of interpellation is predicated on the perception of the audience as a citizenry and an electorate, not an undifferentiated mass incapable of articulating sophisticated opinions, swayed by base communitarian sentiment or duped by demagoguery.

Throughout this essay, one element has been missing from the social, political and cultural map, namely civil society. Indeed, civil society is an



This series of stencils was produced by a collective of graphic design students from the American University of Beirut signing themselves as ©grey, who chose to remain anonymous. The collective has now disbanded. The two sets were produced in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The first depicts a man whose face is covered by a scarf, his hand caught at the moment of throwing something, a reference to the iconic images from the First Intifada in Palestine, also known as the Intifada of the Stones, because Palestinians faced the high-tech, fully-equipped Israeli army with stones. The covered face concealed the identity of the protestor and protected him/her from tear gas. The icon is also associated with anti-globalisation activists protesting at G-7 and G-8 meetings who often responded to police violence by throwing stones (Seattle, Genoa, etc). In other words, the stencilled graffiti is a reference to popular and grassroots 'resistance' fighting, strikingly different from the iconography of Hezbollah, the heroes of that summer war. The second and third photographs are random portraits of men and women with an inscription that reads muhajer or muhajera, Arabic for immigrant (in the masculine and feminine forms). By 2006, especially after the war, politicians were alarmed by the increasing numbers of young men and women leaving the country to look for work or better living conditions in the United Arab Emirates, US, Canada and Europe. Emigration was not only the result of economic hardship; it was also the result of severe disillusionment with political and civil life in Lebanon. Rather than propose serious solutions, the political class instrumentalised the problem, blaming local opponents, and lamented their misfortune. The graffiti is intended to deride these reactions. The photographs record those on the wall fencing the American University of Beirut, in the same area as Rana Maktabi's graffiti. They are still visible.

important and vibrant pillar of Beirut's body politic and public sphere. In the postwar period, when not a single political initiative was able to gel into a cogent, inclusive or plural front of opposition, in contrast, the battles to protect civil liberties, social safety nets and public institutions were rooted and fostered in civil society. From protest against the censorship of novels, films or performances, against the usurpation of public spaces, the denigration of public institutions, against the neoliberal onslaught on social wages, and finally against the curbing of freedom of expression or manipulation of votes during elections, all these political actions were and remain embedded in civil society. There is an organic mirroring between the plural and vivacious use of the city's walls in the postwar period and the state of civil society. I will cite one instance to illustrate how the battles waged in the civil realm marked the city's walls. Lebanon is one of the handful of Arab countries to have witnessed the emergence of associations that defend gay rights. The country's laws and mores are profoundly homophobic. Beginning in the autumn of 2006, a series of graffiti has appeared on walls of affluent neighbourhoods that defy prevailing perceptions of homosexuality. One piece of graffiti depicts a stencilled portrait of a man (or woman) styled as a guerrilla with the inscription: 'Who's queer? Your mother is queer, I am a same-sex loving person.' A second depicts the portrait of a young man with eyes wide open that says: 'I love him.' Thus far (and to my surprise), these graffiti have not yet been defaced or erased, even if they have appeared in neighbourhoods associated with intellectual elites,



A stencilled drawing of a face covered in a ski mask along with the inscription that reads: 'Who's queer? Your mother is queer, I am same-sex loving.' The graffiti's author wants to remain anonymous, he is a graphic design student and once part of the @grey collective. In the autumn of 2006, he produced a set of two explicit, openly defiant gay rights graffiti; the other depicts a boyish face that says 'I love him'. Of all the variety of graffiti (except for the very explicitly defamatory), these incited the most passionate responses, both positive and negative. Some were erased or covered with paint, others were supplemented with complimentary inscriptions, but most were left untouched, much to my own and the artist's surprise. The one photographed here, for instance, remained intact for two years. It was painted over only in the winter of 2007–2008.



since homophobia cuts across class appurtenance and communitarian affiliation.

On 14 February 2005, former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, one of the main architects of the postwar, was assassinated as his car convoy drove from parliament to his private residence. The country has been thrown into a state of disarray ever since. Since 2000, his relationship with the Syrian regime had begun to go awry. The crisis reached paroxysm in the autumn of 2004 when a strong front of opposition demanded the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the entire Lebanese territory and the end of Syrian tutelage over Lebanese political affairs.

Hours after the news spread, people from all walks of life, in deep shock, flocked to the murder scene. The gathering became an informal social ritual. The funeral attracted a crowd unprecedented since the 1960s. Hariri was buried next to a mosque he was building in downtown Beirut, a few steps from the city's most famous public square, known as 'Martyr Square'. The urban site had been relatively lifeless until then, visited by tourists and the discriminating consumers who could afford the leisure activities in downtown Beirut. It was transformed overnight into a quintessential public space.

The radical transformation of public spaces, the massive mobilisation of the citizenry and the profound polarisation between two feuding fronts have impacted on the body politic and the public sphere. Much to



The inscription reads: 'The Intifada continues', intended as an ode to the *Intifada*, the image depicts the map of (historic) Palestine, piercing at the bottom the military head shield of Israeli soldiers, with a fist holding a grenade in upward motion at its top. The graffiti/wall art was produced by Abdel-Rahman in the Chatila Palestinian refugee camp, in the summer of 2004. By 2008, most of the series has disappeared, in most cases painted over and in some cases covered by posters.

the horror of developers, the rehabilitated stone walls of downtown Beirut's buildings are now chock-full of graffiti and inscriptions, slogans and insults. These slogans have spilled into the city's other neighbourhoods and have become dialogical by eliciting reactions and responses. An inscription hailing a political figure is either painted over or slapped with an insult. The assassination of Hariri was followed by a string of assassinations targeting journalists and political figures who played pivotal roles in the anti-Syrian front. Posters commemorating their martyrdom have been placed in neighbourhoods deemed 'friendly'. The sloganeering, the insults, and the martyrs' posters recall the wartime decoration of the city's walls. The spectre of civil war has haunted Lebanon since that fateful date of 14 February 2005.

A cryptic inscription has recently captivated my attention. Inexplicably I have seen it in elite and working-class neighbourhoods, in Sunni, Shi'a and Christian neighbourhoods. Its meaning escapes me entirely, and my investigations as to its author or meaning have led to nothing. It reads, in large capital letters in English, 'MY FULL MOON'. Mapping its track and struggling to unlock its secret has been a welcome distraction from



This photograph illustrates the new prevalence of slogans, statements, elegies and curses on walls. In the photograph a young boy, with Hezbollah's flag draped over his shoulders, has been handed a pen and encouraged to express his sentiments towards Hezbollah on a mural set up by the political movement during one of the mass rallies staged by the party after the summer war of 2006 in downtown Beirut, near Martyr Square. The mass rallies escalated to fully fledged protest. Hezbollah and its political allies (self-styled as the opposition) set up a camp laying siege to the seats of the cabinet and parliament. The reigning cabinet, headed by Fuad Siniora, had been elected after the political front that endorsed them staged massive protests and camped in Martyr Square, demanding the resignation of the then reigning cabinet in 2005 after the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. At the time protestors covered the pedestal of the infamous sculpture in the centre of the square with scribbles and graffiti. After nailing their political victory, the graffiti were documented and reproduced in books and postcards before being voluntarily erased. In May 2008, after violent clashes broke out and Hezbollah wrested military power from all their political opponents, a truce was brokered, the Lebanese army took over, and Hezbollah's camp in downtown Beirut was disbanded.



The inscription reads: 'We pledge our blood to our leader (Speaker of the House) Nabih Berri'. This is a good illustration of graffiti by political parties in postwar Lebanon. The logo of the Amal Movement, one of the country's two main Shi'ite political formations, is embedded in a cedar tree, a national symbol, the central element of the country's flag. The combination of specific partisan symbols with national icons is a hallmark of postwar Lebanon. This graffiti is on a wall in the Musaytbeh neighbourhood of Beirut whose sectarian and class demography changed drastically during the war. A traditionally middle-class Sunni and Christian (mostly Greek Orthodox) neighbourhood, the forced and voluntary migrations that marked the war witnessed the flight of Christians and settlement of Shi'ite communities. The neighbourhood residents have experienced a noteworthy class demotion as well. The Amal Movement logo is a marker of territorial claims in the postwar era.

monitoring the sinister poltergeists of our unfinished and uncivil, civil wars, as they leer from the city's walls. For now I read it a like a sign from a netherworld, a poetic oracle for the possibility of another reality where maybe the present political crisis is merely ephemeral and not the resurrection of a familiar nightmare. In spite of its irritating incommunicability, the inscription fills me with glee; maybe the war is really over, I catch myself thinking, and breathe a brief sigh of relief.

# Tactical Media, Sustainability, and the Rise of the ‘New Green Revolution’

## From Neo-Situationism to Nongovernmental Politics

Yates McKee

In this special issue of *Third Text*, ‘Whither Tactical Media?’, Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette extend a series of questions concerning the historical obsolescence, future survival or revolutionary sublation of tactical media, refracting it through the distinction drawn by Michel De Certeau between the ephemeral, contingent and opportunistic temporality of tactics – ‘the art of the weak’ – and the long-term vision, large-scale planning and cognitive security associated with the realm of strategies. While Ray and Sholette appreciate tactical media for having kept some spark of resistance alive during the dark days prior to the aurora of Seattle, they also warn that at present the tactical orientation – clearly the privileged term for De Certeau – is dangerously close to a post-1968 ‘liberalism’ which would concern itself with either easily assailable intra-systemic shocks and subversions, or what Ray dismissively calls in his own article ‘begging those in power for reforms and accountability’.<sup>1</sup> Eviscerated of the authentically ‘anti-systemic’ project of the Situationists from which De Certeau loosely derives his post-1968 theory of tactics, this weak – if not farcical – liberalism is especially dangerous, according to Ray and Sholette, at a world-historical moment in which ‘we are witnessing the return of the strategic with a vengeance’. For the editors, the latter is exemplified by ‘the long-term planning by institutionally entrenched conservative movements’, provoking them to ask whether ‘it is necessary for anti-capitalists to move in the direction of sustainability and confederacy, even if that demands a degree of institutionalisation abhorred by adherents of tactical media?’<sup>2</sup>

Among other things, my response to this question will aim to complicate, if not displace altogether, the putative cultural-political agenda of ‘anti-capitalism’ the authors presume to be shared by theorists and practitioners of tactical media, especially if such an agenda is possessed by fantasies of revolutionary violence such as that conjured by Ray at the conclusion of his recent *Third Text* essay ‘Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector’:

1 Gene Ray, ‘Tactical Media and the End of History’, November 2006, <http://www.linksnet.de/de/artikel/20223>

2 Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette, Editorial Prospectus for this special ‘Whither Tactical Media?’ issue of *Third Text*, email message, autumn 2006



- 3 Gene Ray, 'Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector', *Third Text*, 21:3, May 2007, p 255
- 4 *Wired*, special issue on 'Climate Crisis! The Pro-growth, Pro-tech Fight to Stop Global Warming', May 2006. Unsurprisingly, in using the phrase 'New Green Revolution' the editors of *Wired* fail to mention the unhappy history of the first 'Green Revolution' in which USAID and the World Bank exported what were initially high-yield but ultimately ecologically destructive soil and seed technologies to the global south in the 1970s and 1980s. See Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, Zed Books, London, 1991.
- 5 United Nations Environment and Development Program (UNEP), *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, p 1
- 6 The literature on sustainability – and its contested philosophical, politico-ecological and socioeconomic-status – is immense. See Michael Jacobs, 'Sustainability as a Contested Concept' in *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*, ed Andrew Dobson, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, and the essays collected in Julian Agyeman, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans, eds, *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003.
- 7 Andres Edwards, *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 2005, pp 20–3

De-reification hovers in the daily images of global governance: robocops with riot sticks and shields, streets filled to bursting, cars in flames. The message circulating, whispering behind the chatter of talking heads: perpetual war and 'common ruin' are not immovable fate, encore un effort. After the dissolvent of the negative, after the rupture, would begin the time of free creation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet while I take a distance from both the monumental iconography and the eschatological rhetoric of such a neo-Situationist position, I am nevertheless sympathetic to certain of the problems laid out by Ray and Sholette in their editorial prospectus, especially those concerned with the terms 'long-term planning' and 'sustainability'. Exposing the editor's terms to a certain tactical détournement, I will argue that they are most productively considered by those interested in the fate of tactical media not only in relation to the neo-conservative idealists who advocated the invasion of Iraq, nor even the orthodox market-fundamentalism established during the Clinton era, both of which have been ideologically discredited to various degrees by moderates and liberals in the US public sphere from Jimmy Carter to George Soros to Joseph Stiglitz; Rather, I want to consider the editors' question 'whither tactical media?' in relation to an urgent historical development of the past three years that goes unremarked by Ray and Sholette: the unprecedented ascendancy and legitimisation of certain environmentalist discourses among key factions of the global elite, with the issue of climate change as the centrepiece of what *Wired* magazine recently celebrated – with a certain terminological amnesia – as the 'New Green Revolution' crystallising around Al Gore and his high-profile Hollywood film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).<sup>4</sup> The imperative precariously shared by this emergent coalition of celebrities, policy-makers, executives, intellectuals, designers, technologists and non-governmental activists in their bids to legitimise their various and often conflicting agendas is 'sustainability', a concept derived from the UNEP's definition in the *Our Common Future* report for 'development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own' and subsequently adopted by the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro.<sup>5</sup>

Etymologically, sustainability suggests the creation of regular conditions for holding up or holding onto the long-term viability or health of an entity that would be precarious or impossible on its own; translated into ethical terms, this sense of a life-support system opens onto an economy of intergenerational responsibility that links bio-ecological survival on the one hand with socioeconomic durability on the other. The *political* question, of course, is who or what is to be sustained, and on whose or what's terms.<sup>6</sup> As I will argue, it is through engaging the contested discursive terrain of sustainability, understood as a long-term intergenerational imperative concerned programmatically with 'environment, economy, equity, and education', that I believe theorists and practitioners of tactical media will find the conditions for the survival, if not flourishing, of tactical media itself.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this apparent opposition between the strong, strategic claims increasingly made by the various advocates of sustainability and the weak, provisional and ephemeral nature of tactical media, I will argue that these two terms constitute not a binary opposition but an aporetic couple in which each term requires the other for its own precarious

survival. To put it another way, any project of long-term sustainability worthy of the name is unsustainable without a certain exposure to the disruptive temporality and unauthorised demands of tactical media. Without a certain encounter with the long-term imperative of sustainability, tactical media risks either (a) relishing its own small-scale ‘molecular shocks’ for their own sake, a crucial concern sounded by Ray and Sholette or (b) reducing itself to a mere way-station to a messianic anti-capitalist event that, from what I can tell from the discourse of its advocates in the cultural-artistic sphere, remains relatively alien to the techniques, claims and sensibilities of non-governmental activists actually working to challenge or mitigate contemporary modes of governmental and corporate power under the umbrella of ‘Another World is Possible’ (a group that I think should be respectfully distinguished from – which is not to say set against – para-academic cultural critics such as Ray, Sholette, and myself). My contention is that if tactical media can be carefully re-articulated as a critical supplement to the discourses of sustainability, then the terms, techniques and temporalities of tactical media can be affirmed in their own right without having to be judged in relation to an eventual, mythic telos of anti-capitalist cultural revolution. Further, tactical media might thus be re-imagined as a term not only for complicating anachronistic forms of leftist cultural politics but also, more importantly, for challenging and if possible re-directing the self-consciously ‘revolutionary’ aspirations of neo-green elites. Articulating a credible and productive challenge to the latter is a task that requires us to rethink the ‘anti-systemic’ ideology that has been relatively easy for many left-oriented cultural producers to assume vis-à-vis the increasingly vulnerable hegemony of neoconservatism, as well as the neoliberal market-fundamentalism enshrined under the Clinton administration.

A first point to make in considering how theorists and practitioners of tactical media might approach the emergent ‘neo-green’ horizon is that it is clearly dangerous to uncritically accept the premise of novelty and renewal implied by the prefix ‘Neo’, as if environmentalist discourse in general had somehow become stagnant or obsolete prior to the messianic arrival of citizen Gore, his high-profile film, and the elaborate media architecture surrounding it, including the star-studded globally coordinated Live Earth concerts of 2007. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case if one considers the proliferation of non-governmental ecological activism in the north and south alike since the 1992 Rio summit at which the empty philosophical principle of sustainability was simultaneously formalised and exposed to new forms of biopolitical conflict.<sup>8</sup> However, it is true that this proliferation has occurred at a relatively low level of visibility in the public sphere and electoral politics, at least in the United States; as Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger charged in their influential 2005 report ‘The Death of Environmentalism’ this lack of general visibility arguably falls on the shoulders of the large, well-financed environmental NGOs that have devoted the majority of their resources to technical policy prescriptions and legislative consultation without developing the cultural and mediatic means to capture the hearts and minds of a broad-based public for whom environmental issues could become a principle of passionate political identification. In a way that Ray and Sholette might appreciate, albeit from a more ‘mainstream’ ideological orientation, Nordhaus called for environmentalists to

8 On this contested history, see Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, eds, *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Kyoto*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1998. The 1992 Rio conference was also the occasion for the global declaration of the US-based People of Color Leadership Summit Statement on the Principles of Environmental Justice, available at <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>



construct what he called a 'strategic vision' that would 'tap into the creative worlds of myth-making... not to better sell technical policy proposals but to figure out who we are and who we need to be'.<sup>9</sup>

In its mythopoetic thematisation of what Gore calls 'the survival of our civilisation and the habitability of the planet', *An Inconvenient Truth* in many ways fits the bill of what Nordhaus called for in his report – but it also speaks to a certain weakness in the latter's hegemonic project. While in the report Nordhaus specifies the general social-democratic programme with which he argues environmentalism needs to link itself for its own survival, he also failed to maintain a space for politico-ideological dispute surrounding the identity of the mythic 'we' to which a newly energetic left-liberal eco-populism might address its aesthetic or cultural repertoire. Nordhaus himself cannot be blamed for the relative political emptiness of the sustainability imperative as articulated by *An Inconvenient Truth*; but his failure to account for intra-environmentalist antagonism leaves the door open for a major cultural event such as the Gore film to be claimed by an emergent strand of techno-utopian environmentalist tendencies such as that of *Wired* magazine, which is in fact where the catchphrase 'neo-green' was first coined in a special issue devoted to Gore; the same issue also happens to feature a fluff-piece on Nordhaus himself that reduces his agenda to wind farms and hybrid cars.

Indeed, whatever its potential interest for tactical media, it is immediately important to recognise that the dominant iterations of the neo-green agenda self-consciously distance themselves from anything that would smack of leftism, anti-capitalism or any kind of outmoded ideological extremism whatsoever, especially as embodied by the insidiously reductive stereotype of the technophobic, misanthropic, scarcity-obsessed, fashion-challenged doomsayer of the 'old' environmentalism:

You don't change the world by hiding in the woods, wearing a hair shirt, or buying indulgences in the form of Save the Earth bumper stickers. You do it by articulating a vision for the future and pursuing it with all the ingenuity humanity can muster. Indeed, being green at the start of the twenty-first century requires a wholehearted commitment to upgrading civilisation.<sup>10</sup>

As the verb 'upgrade' suggests, the *Wired* iteration of the neo-Green agenda looks to technological design for the prime solutions to environmental crisis, belying its indebtedness to 1960s techno-utopians such as Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and eventual *Wired* contributor Stewart Brand, who saw ecology and technology as complimentary rather than opposing forces in the evolutionary achievement of what was ultimately a post-political self-regulating planetary equilibrium.<sup>11</sup> Combining elements of this earlier eco-futurism with the mid-1990s market-populist digital euphoria for which the magazine would become infamous among net.culture critics, the special neo-green issue of *Wired* declares 'technology is leading environmentalism out of the anti-business, anti-consumer wilderness', and breathlessly announces that:

... a new green movement is taking shape, one that embraces environmentalism's concerns but rejects its worn-out answers. Technology can be a font of endlessly creative solutions. Business can be a vehicle for change. Prosperity can help build the kind of world we want. Scientific exploration, innovative design, and cultural evolution are the most

9 'The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World', first presented at the 2004 Environmental Grantwriter Association meeting, published, with responses at <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>. The arguments are expanded in Ted Nordhaus and Michael Schellenberger, *Breakthrough: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2007.

10 Alex Nikolai Steffen, 'The Next Green Revolution', *Wired*, May 2006, p 140

11 On this history, as refracted through sixties countercultural discourses of aesthetics and design, see Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics after Modernism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

powerful tools we have. Entrepreneurial zeal and market forces, guided by sustainable policies, can propel the world into a bright green future.<sup>12</sup>

*Wired* neglects to elaborate on the million-dollar question of what ‘sustainable policies’ would actually entail in relation to the generically market-oriented account of eco-capitalism underpinning the magazine’s version of the neo-green project, and is eager to elaborate on the role played by ‘innovative design’ and ‘cultural evolution’ in the overall process of civilisational ‘upgrading’. For *Wired*, the ‘bright green future’ now on the horizon is populated by self-described ‘eco-chic’ and ‘eco-radical urban hipsters’, as opposed to hippies, who, with ‘solar panels on the roof, hybrid car in the garage, organic-cotton clothes in the closet’ are ‘voting with their dollars’ in the form of both consumption and investment in an emergent green-industrial complex informed by eco-economic paradigms such as ‘natural capital’, ‘carbon footprint analysis’, ‘cradle-to-cradle manufacturing’ and ‘sustainable design’.<sup>13</sup>

As suggested by the inclusion of sections such as a self-administered ‘Carbon Quiz’ and a ‘12-Step Program to Kick the Carbon Habit at Home’, a key factor in this emergent movement, according to *Wired*, is thus interpellation of a consumer-base that is simultaneously morally conscious about topics such as the global impact of their personal carbon emissions and aesthetically, practically and stylistically invested in the products and technologies made available to suit their morally affected desires.

Thus, *fashion*, *media* and *marketing* are among the crucial ‘cultural’ elements of the version of the neo-green project put forward not only by *Wired*, but also, significantly, *Vanity Fair*, which ran a simultaneous cover story on ‘Al Gore and the New American Revolution’. Accordingly, these sectors provide one important place for members of the ‘creative class’ addressed by *Wired* and the Hollywood liberal elite addressed by *Vanity Fair* to contribute their respective forms of expertise in synergising the technologies, initiatives, ideas and images pertaining to the neo-green agenda for a broader, less elite and less specialised mass audience of potential consumer-citizens: a veritable cultural front for a post-*Inconvenient Truth* ‘ecology of affluence’, to use Ramachandra Guha’s term.<sup>14</sup>

Here it is worth mentioning *WorldChanging: A User’s Guide for the 21st Century*, a dynamically designed six-hundred-page encyclopaedic ‘directory’ of contemporary ecological technologies, concepts, business models, movements and resources addressed to fashion-conscious consumer-citizens in the global north. With prefaces by Al Gore and the ‘green design’ impresario Bruce Sterling, who first introduced the neo-green agenda to readers of *Artforum* in 2006, *WorldChanging* embodies a kind of hybrid genre located somewhere between the eco-voluntarist imperatives of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* of the early 1970s and the politicised tactics outlined in Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette’s *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. Modelled on the open-source and multi-authorial ethos program of the worldchanging.org website on which it is based, this anthology uneasily constellates everything from carbon-footprint analysis to green building techniques, to green venture capital, to sustainable urban planning, organic farming, and eco-tourism programmes in the global south. A highly significant feature of the anthology for the present is the seventy-page section entitled ‘Politics’, which provides an impressively documented and annotated survey of concepts such as

12 ‘Special Issue: The Rise of the Neo-Greens’, *Wired*, May 2006

13 On this series of concepts, see the essays anthologised by Stephen M Wheeler and Timothy Beatley, eds, *The Sustainable Urban Development Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004; Paul Hawken, ‘Natural Capitalism’, pp 162–70; William Rees, ‘What is an Ecological Footprint?’, pp 211–18; and William McDonough, ‘Design, Ecology, and the Making of Things’, pp 181–6. Also see McDonough’s *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York, 2002.

14 Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History*, Addison Wesley Longman, New York, 2000. According to Guha, this ‘ecology of affluence’ is haunted what he calls the ‘environmentalism of the poor’, which is to say, those ecological claims that are concerned less with a ‘green’ consumerist lifestyle than the unequal distribution of resources and risks as structured by broader socio-economic power relations. Advocating a project of sustainable ‘green collar’ job creation for US inner-cities, Van Jones addresses this question in his editorial ‘The Unbearable Whiteness of Green’, May 2007, <http://www.ellabakercenter.org/page.php?pageid=26&contentid=258>

movement-building, network organising, corporate monitoring, media campaigning, and even the typically left-wing discourse of ‘direct action’, including an entry on the civil disobedience techniques of the Ruckus Society and the Yes Men’s 2002 Bhopal project.

Yet in cautiously engaging a phenomenon such as *WorldChanging*, it is more important than ever to remain vigilant about the potential subsumption of groups such as the Yes Men into an indifferently pluralistic landscape of lifestyle options for what *Wired* celebrates as ‘eco-chic hipsters’. This is a serious risk given that, despite its many promising entries on politics, culture and activism, the overall programme of the massive *WorldChanging* volume remains by and large informed by the premises of *Wired*, whose model of environmentalism ultimately looks to technological innovation, consumer desire and corporate voluntarism – rather than political mobilisation, public planning and governmental regulation – as the primary solution to ecological degradation.

A familiar response to a project such as *WorldChanging* on the part of Marxists – especially those working in cultural fields marked by a neo-Situationist renaissance – would be to echo Heather Rogers’s critique of the ways in which ‘green commerce’ ‘reinforces the long-standing tendency of mainstream environmentalism to treat the ecological crisis as something separate from the economic system from which it arises’, and ‘draws energy away from the struggle required to secure real political solutions’. In this scenario:

... people are induced to accept individual, personal responsibility for cleaning up the environment and are lulled into a sense of complacency by the idea that they are actually doing something effective.<sup>15</sup>

While Rogers’s call for a ‘systemic’ critique of neo-green phenomena is ultimately indispensable, the impulse to demystify so-called mainstream environmentalism can prove counter-productive if it paints us into a corner of fundamentally *opposing* the consumers, corporations or governments involved therein as such, rather than using all available means to challenge, mitigate or hold them accountable for the specific practices regarded by activists as intolerable from the perspective of social justice, ecological sustainability and human rights.

As a concluding example that speaks to the possibilities and limitations of an environmentalism in which neo-green consumer subjectivity plays a key role, let us consider Green My Apple, a tactical media initiative by Greenpeace which happens to concern itself with Rogers’s own area of expertise: the transnational political economy of garbage.<sup>16</sup> Green My Apple was launched in 2006 as a multi-sited and multi-faceted campaign that targets the Apple corporation’s use of several highly toxic chemicals in its computer hardware.<sup>17</sup> After their often short lives as consumer objects, many used computer products make their way into the unevenly regulated circuits of global waste-management, and ultimately into massive dumps of e-waste in Asia and Africa. Such dumps are the sites of informal work for e-scavengers, often children, who strip exhausted electronics of their valuable metal components for resale on the black market. In addition to exposing local populations to water and soil contamination, these e-dumps expose those who work there to direct manual contact with the hazardous substances in question, resulting in often deadly physiological effects across entire communities that are already underserved by healthcare infrastructures and formal employment systems.

15 Heather Rogers, ‘Garbage Capitalism’s Green Commerce’, in *Socialist Register 2007: Coming to Terms With Nature*, eds Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, Monthly Review Press, London, 2007, p 249

16 Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*, New Press, New York, 2005

17 <http://www.greenmyapple.org/>

The Green My Apple campaign seeks to bring into visibility the chain of accountability involved in the generation of such ‘effluents of affluence’ and demands that the corporation eliminate the use of the toxic chemicals in its production process as a first step in making Apple the exemplary spearhead of a ‘sustainable electronics industry’. This industry has hitherto been relatively successful in framing itself as ‘clean’ when compared with, say, the non-renewable energy sector. As Soenke Zehle has noted, this is an ideological accomplishment related in no small part to the imaginary of digital dematerialisation shared by both dot-com capitalists and many net.culture participants over the past decade and a half – a charge that contaminates the latter’s enthusiastic calls for ‘an environmentalism of the net’ with what Sehle calls ‘the ecopolitical implications of the very infrastructures that facilitate and sustain the net.cultural dynamic of collaborative creation’.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as the possessive first-person pronoun of the campaign suggests, Green My Apple is addressed primarily to a public of Apple users composed largely of what the market-populist booster Richard Florida celebrates as the ‘creative class’ – a figure of creative, flexible work exemplified by the urban, hip and scruffy spokesman who appears in Apple commercials as the polar opposite of the pathetic and uptight corporate number-cruncher made to stand in for PC users.

In this regard, the campaign unabashedly makes tactical use of an affectively potent consumerist brand-identification with the entity whose mode of governing it aims to pressure, rather than opposing or denouncing that entity *tout court* in the way that many liberal-left Apple users themselves are probably wont to do with regard to a near-universally reviled corporation such as Halliburton. The specificity of the public addressed by the campaign is indicated by the conceptual and formal organisation of the campaign’s website, [www.greenmyapple.com](http://www.greenmyapple.com), which self-consciously mimics the layout, icons and typography of the Apple site itself – an ‘adbusting’ technique clearly indebted to the innovations made by the Yes Men and others in the late 1990s. More specifically, an important feature of the site is the ProCreation interface; marked by the iconic bodily silhouettes of the iPod advertisements, this interface calls upon ‘Apple fans’ to personally design their own counter-publicity materials for the campaign including T-shirts, desktop wallpaper, videos, letters to CEO Steve Job and, significantly, a set of photographs of children working in Asian e-dumps that are offered up for what is called in a classic post-Debordian phrase ‘repurposing’ by concerned consumer-citizens.

Another facet of the campaign that also indicates a certain link to the genealogy of tactical media is the site-specific architectural intervention made by Greenpeace activists at the Apple flagship store in New York City. A street-level glass cube leads to an underground emporium, which has been celebrated for the way in which its crystalline transparency mediates between its public urban surroundings and the virtual spaces enabled by the computer products on sale within the store. The intervention consisted of a nocturnal projection onto the building’s vitreous façade of two alternating images. The first was a close-up shot of electronic detritus, implicating the seductively immaterial structure within a global network of material waste-products and ecologically harmful pollution-flows. A Wodiczko-style imageric-architectural collage speaking to the disavowed conflicts and exclusions haunting the spectacular spaces of the city that resonates with De Certeau’s remark that ‘a tactic

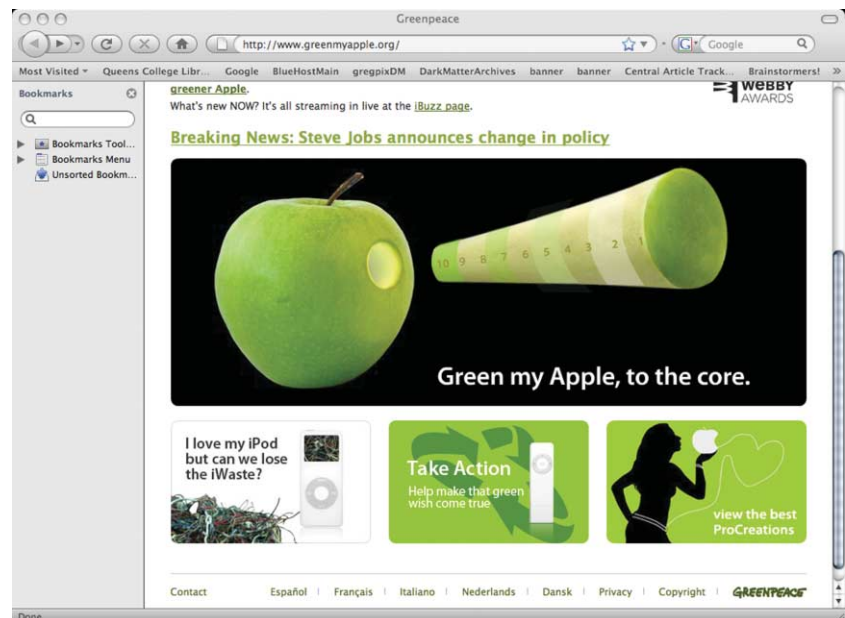
18 Soenke Zehle, ‘Environmentalism for the Net 2.0’, *MetaMute*, September 2006, available at <http://www.metamute.org/en/Environmentalism-for-Net-2.0>

boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order to suddenly produce a flash shedding different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer'.<sup>19</sup> Yet such an antagonistic remarking of the structure was not treated as an interruptive end in and of itself; the second image projected was the green-collared iteration of the Apple logo framing the campaign's website, a future-oriented dream-image addressed mediatically to executives, shareholders and consumers alike demanding that Apple become an exemplar of the 'sustainable' practices advocated in principle by the corporation's most famous board member, Al Gore himself.

On 2 May 2007, the campaign appeared to have accomplished a provisional victory: the official Apple website actually adopted the Green My Apple icon as a link to a 'Greener Apple' page featuring an open letter by Jobs announcing the corporation's aspiration to become 'an environmental leader' in the electronics industry, and making a very specific pledge to eliminate the toxic chemicals in question from its products, as well as to revamp its global take-back programme. Greenpeace framed the news of the Jobs announcement for campaign participants in the following way:

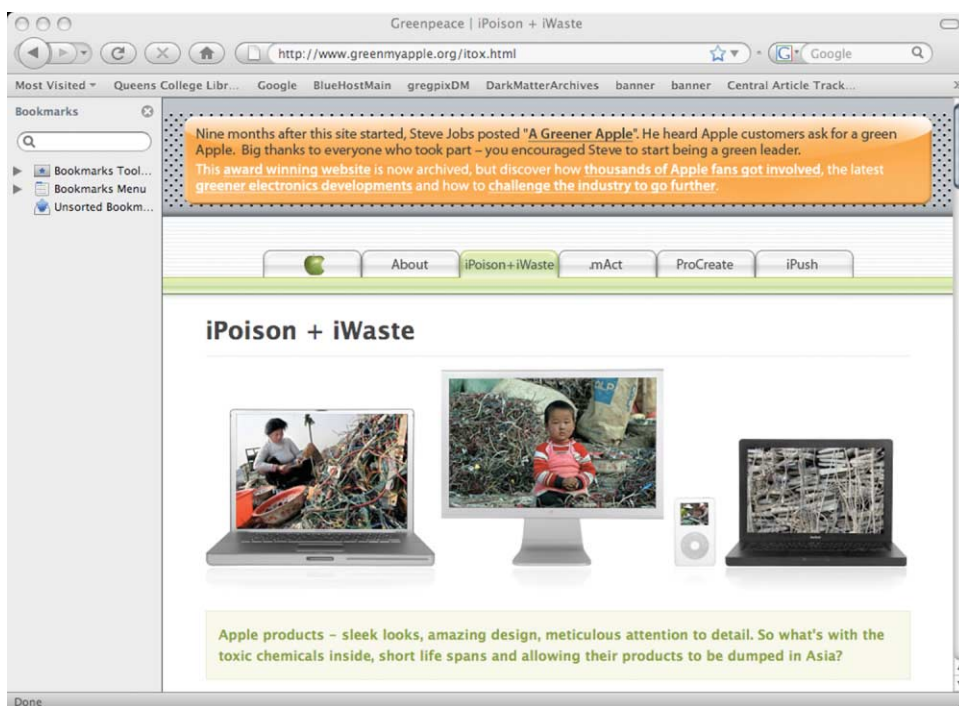
You're the consumers of Apple's products and you've proven you can make a real difference. You convinced one of the world's most cutting edge companies to cut the toxic ingredients out of the products they sell... We've seen the enthusiasm with which Apple fans have greeted our campaign to make Apple a green leader. They've made clear what they want – an Apple that isn't just skin-deep green, but green to the core. One that creates products free from the most hazardous chemicals, that they can buy and return with a clear conscience, secure in the knowledge that Apple will re-use or recycle them responsibly and that won't end up in scrap yards or add to the mountains of e-waste that the electronics industry has created. Apple must begin to address these growing problems to ensure that the workers and children of Asia and many developing

19 Significantly, Wodiczko is the one artist cited by David Garcia and Geert Lovink as a crucial precursor to the paradigm of tactical media in 'ABCs of Tactical Media', 1997, available at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9705/msg00096.html>



Screen-grab from: <http://www.greenmyapple.org>





Screen-grab from: <http://www.greenmyapple.org>

nations no longer face the unnecessary environmental and health dangers posed by the hi-tech industry's waste. Our work isn't over till Apple users get that. We look forward to working with the new, greener Apple in the future – toward greening the entire electronics industry... Now let's take it to the next level! An Apple green to the core!<sup>20</sup>

- In order to understand the Green My Apple as something more than a limited if not complicitous instance of what Ray dismissively called, in his critique of tactical media, 'begging those in power for reforms and accountability',<sup>21</sup> the temporary campaign must be understood as one node in a long-term, worldwide network of activists working on 'human rights and the politics of pollution',<sup>22</sup> especially the anti-toxics movement that has shadowed the global electronics industry over the past decade. While the aesthetically dynamic tactics used in this campaign are relatively innovative in terms of their highly visible appeal to consumer-citizens, the demands made upon Apple by Greenpeace are drawn from the discourse of the organisation's less well-publicised partners such as the Basel Action Network (<http://www.ban.org>). BAN is a non-governmental advocacy group named for the 1992 Basel Convention which set up a framework governing the transboundary shipment of toxic waste. In 1995, BAN successfully lobbied to have an amendment added to the treaty that specifically prohibits the export of toxic waste by OECD countries to non-OECD countries and obliges northern states to assume responsibility for the waste generated within their borders. While the amendment has not been officially ratified and thus lacks enforceability at a global scale, it was adopted voluntarily by the EU and incorporated into the Waste Shipment Regulations to which all member states and their domestic corporations are subject.<sup>23</sup>
- 20 Greenpeace, 'Tasty News From Apple', 2 May 2007, available at <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/news/tasty-apple-news-020507>
- 21 Ray, 'Tactical Media and the End of History', November 2006, available at <http://www.linksnet.de/de/artikel/20223>
- 22 Robert Bullard, ed, *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and The Politics of Pollution*, Sierra Club, New York, 2006
- 23 Jim Puckett and Cathy Fogel, 'A Victory for Environment and Justice: The Basel Ban and How it Happened', available at [http://www.ban.org/about\\_basel\\_ban/a\\_victory.html](http://www.ban.org/about_basel_ban/a_victory.html)

BAN frames its advocacy in terms of combating ‘toxic trade’, which it sees as intrinsically related to globally uneven dynamics of market deregulation. While it often consults with southern governmental agencies about the necessity of maintaining barriers to the import of waste, the organisation uses the 1995 amendment as a point of reference with which to articulate technical policy issues with a call for a more expansive systemic transformation against which to judge the activities of corporations, states and inter-governmental bodies alike:

We promote the development of production systems and consumption patterns that are environmentally sustainable and socially just. We advocate an equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of change in our struggle for a healthy environment of the planet.<sup>24</sup>

24 ‘About the Basel Action Network’, [http://www.ban.org/main/about\\_BAN.html#mission](http://www.ban.org/main/about_BAN.html#mission)

25 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op cit, p 37. In a remark that is especially germane to my critique of neo-situationist positions such as that of Gene Ray, Garcia and Lovink echo De Certeau when they write in ‘ABC of Tactical Media’ that ‘Of course it is much safer to stick to the classic rituals of the underground and alternative scene. But tactical media are based on a principle of flexible response, of working with different coalitions, being able to move between the different entities in the vast media landscape without betraying their original motivations’.

26 Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, Vol 3: *Power*, New Press, New York, 2000, p 339. For an elaboration on the implications of Foucault’s approach to activism and the politics of reform, see Michel Feher’s theorization of nongovernmental politics, understood as ‘a politics of the governed ... determined to act as such’. ‘The Governed in Politics’, in *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher, Gaele Krikorian, and Yates Mckee, Zone Books, New York, 2007, pp 13–14. I extend this analysis in ‘Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to The Right to Survival’, in *Nongovernmental Politics*, pp 538–83

Given that the neo-green agenda is still in a phase of emergence, it is imperative that practitioners and advocates of tactical media take advantage of this uncertain moment to mark any appeal to the lives of ‘future generations’ with an attention to inherited patterns of exclusion and inequality. In other words, as a project concerned with the rights of the unborn, sustainability is itself unsustainable without also addressing itself to the traces of death, suffering and loss inscribed in the history of capitalism itself.

As De Certeau wrote in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, ‘The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power ... it is a maneuver ... within enemy territory’.<sup>25</sup> Bereft of a transcendental autonomy, tactical media practitioners must navigate between the constraints and resistances presented by the governing agencies whose practices they aim to transform, while also remaining vigilant about the capacity of these agencies to internalise non-governmental claims in such a way as to foreclose the potential extension and deepening of the latter into realms hitherto protected from pressure and contestation. Permitting such a foreclosure with either a naive celebration, a new-found corporate social responsibility or a self-satisfied denunciation of corporate villainy still runs the risk of depoliticisation. If left unchecked, the first identifies with the agency in question, taking for granted that the internal ethical conscience of a profit-making machine will lead it to do the right thing for its various stakeholders voluntarily. The second, which I would argue is more pertinent to the discourse of many left-oriented cultural producers, privileges its own supposed exteriority to power, enabling them to assume stances of revolutionary militancy without getting their hands dirty. Tactical media should thus be understood as an endless unsettling of the cherished oppositions between interior cooptation and external resistance, liberal reformists and radical leftists, short-term pragmatism and world-historical vision. In the words of Michel Foucault:

A reform is never anything but the outcome of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance... It is a matter of making conflicts more visible, of making them more essential than mere clashes of interest or mere institutional blockages. From these reforms and clashes a new relation of forces must emerge whose temporary profile will be a reform.<sup>26</sup>

# For the Love of Abstraction

Blake Stimson

*The new media are blowing a lot of baby powder around the pendant cradle of the NEW MAN today. The dust gets in our eyes.*

Marshall McLuhan, 1969

- 1 For one ambitious attempt to open up the history of the cyborg, see Allison Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine, 1660–1830*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007.
- 2 Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p 149
- 3 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006, p 31. 'The most advanced economies in the world today have made two parallel shifts that, paradoxically, make possible a significant attenuation of the limitations that market-based production places on the pursuit of the political values central to liberal societies,' writes Benkler, inaugurating his ambition (p 3).

The cyborg has long been our most vigorous figure for social imagining, our best and brightest emblem of modernity's dream of the primal intercourse of the horde. It might not seem so at first blush but, if you think about it, all the fantastic incarnations of the cyborg – since the age of Gutenberg or Galileo, say, or since the onset of the legal institution of private property, or since linear perspective's mathematicisation of phenomenal space – were never meant to be simple figures for the conjoining of man and machine or even nature and culture but instead stood forcefully for modernity's vision of the broader category of mediation itself, for the peculiar intermingling and consubstantiation of like and unlike that serves as the engine of modern life. One need only flip through some of the reproductions in the early anthologies published by Zone Books, or think of the wealth of interpretation surrounding the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or the robot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, or Dziga Vertov's various human-machine montages, or turn more recently to the yearning tone of Donna Haraway's celebrated cyborg manifesto, or the sublime dystopianism of the *Ghost in the Shell* and *Matrix* franchises.<sup>1</sup> The cyborg has always been, as Haraway put it in her opening salvo, 'an ironic dream of a common language'.<sup>2</sup> Far better than the tainted social imagining of blood or soil or nation or people, it is the best expression we moderns have ever had for our uniquely restless and reflexive desire to belong.

The specific role played by technology in this dream has been described neatly, if a little too passively and a little too technocratically, by one recent commentator. 'Technology creates feasibility spaces for social practice', writes Yochai Benkler in his ambitious attempt to wrest the promise of new media from neoliberalism, *The Wealth of Networks*.<sup>3</sup> We might make this point simultaneously more forceful and less determinist by moving it more fully into metaphor: *technology is the coin of our social realm*, we could say for example; or, perhaps more

4 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1971, p 113

5 This was put nicely recently by one commentator: 'All new machine systems overturn the distribution of power in society. The revolution of the engineers in the nineteenth century, by establishing the railway and telegraph networks, gradually destroyed the face-to-face personal relations and interactions that structured small-scale craft production. This revolution replaced the moral economy of the craftsman, immersed in the concrete community and physical existence, with a moral economy of industry within an abstract and rational society. In the process, fraternity, the concrete social relation predating all social or economic organisation, was soon replaced by solidarity, an abstract social relation, a strategic response to the unity of employers' power, from workers divided by their work and specialisations. But once it was dissociated from the fraternal sentiment, the value of solidarity gave rise to an unalienable private sphere, exempt from the obligation to welcome the other in oneself (interiorising fraternal feelings).' Ange Valderas, 'Freedom and Machines', published on the Nettime listserv, 9 June 2007, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0706/msg00007.html>

6 'The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or northern

specifically, *technology is the coin of our sense of belonging and our sense of opportunity*. Technology is, in other words, an index of social capital in every sense of the term – as such, the difference between a feasibility space and coin is primarily one of degree: a feasibility space is occasional and specific to the reach of a particular technology, whereas the mediating function of coin, while not exclusive or unlimited, is ubiquitous and at least seemingly without an outside. It is also, of course, the simplest measure of privilege we moderns have.

So it is that technology needs to be thought about in the same way that we think nation or tribe or religion or class (or, more recently, race, gender, sexuality, community and 'culture'). It is a social medium or conceptual container with all the baggage and promise that such understandings entail. 'What is novel' about the peculiar version of the Enlightenment dream driving technologisation, Georg Lukács wrote long ago, for example, 'is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the principle which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as the adamancy and totality Lukács alludes to would suggest, the rationalised and technologised relationality of the *mundo machina* is itself our modern myth par excellence, our 'ironic dream'. So it is that the cyborg's inhabited-by-the-machine being serves as our figure of social mediation in the same way that the faithful's inhabited-by-God way of life was the coin – the 'feasibility space for social practice' writ large – of premodern belonging. 'May the machine be in you', we moderns might as well intone as we tap and click our way into social imagining and collective belonging, into the matrix or shell, 'and also in you'. Amen.

Such is the big picture that cannot be avoided when trying to consider new media and its tactical offshoot: the history of technology replaces the history of religion, *Gemeinschaft* is replaced by *Gesellschaft*, the organic fraternal sentiments of the old craft economy are displaced by the industrial economy's abstract dream of solidarity and its abject reality of day-to-day social privation.<sup>5</sup> Put most simply, we live a modern life, a condition that becomes ever more distilled the more we become technologised, the more we become mediated, the more we plug ourselves into the machine. With each new layer of networked interoperability from the printing press forward we enlarge our sphere of mediation and with it our degree of reflexivity and so prolong and propagate our modernity, our systemic interoperability. Our technologies of sociality are legion and seemingly growing interminably. In this way we need to speak not only of specific, technology-enabled feasibility spaces but also in terms of the cumulative dimensions or proportions or endowment of all such spaces. In other words, we need a measure of modernity that serves as God once did for the measure of all things.

The pursuit of something like this measure was the meaning of Marshall McLuhan's old inquiry into the 'extensions of man', or his ill-fated slogan about the medium – that is, the technology of extension – being the message, or his fantastic prediction about the planet becoming an art form. 'The message of any medium or technology', he wrote, 'is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'.<sup>6</sup> The technique for enlarging, accelerating and reorganising the pattern of human affairs in the modern world is always the same, according to McLuhan. It involves breaking down experience into increasingly

small component parts and then reassembling it in a new ideologically mediated form, a more orderly, efficient, all-consuming form, a more machinic form. This is what engenders the change of pattern from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from the hieratic compositions of the Middle Ages to those ordered by linear perspective in the Renaissance, from organic, born-into unity to cog-like constructivist interoperability, from godliness to machinic. What ‘the medium is the message’ has always meant is that the medium itself is modernity’s boot camp, the place where subjectivity is broken down or disaggregated or defraged and then reassembled and reordered – into its typographic or Frankensteinian or *Metropolis*-like composite forms or, for our purposes, into its internet or digital forms – in order to effect a psychosocial reorganisation on the model of the machine.

The prospect of losing one’s humanity and becoming a machine has always been scary, of course – think of all the fear stirred up by Taylorism a century ago, say, or by the Luddites a century before that, or think of the worries surrounding the hikikomori of today – but contrary to what might first concern us, the critical question is less the one about the loss of some innate organic humanness to the process of becoming a machine than it is the one about what sort of machine we are to become, about the mechanics or operating system that gives definition to the reaggregation of psychosocial relations that constitute our long-emerging, ever-expanding cyborg life. There are machines and there are machines, in other words – good forms of machine-being and bad, forms that enable human self-realisation and those that disable it. In the end, the issue is not really about the abstraction of machinic itself but instead about how well the machines accomplish their mechanically enhanced human labour and realise their mechanically enlarged human ends. It is, in other words, about finding a form of machinic or self-abstraction that one can love rather than suffering the one that is hateful. At the centre of this enabling/disabling relation is the ‘wet’ interface between human desire, on the one hand, and its implanted apparatus, on the other, and it is the terms and conditions of this interface – the way it works for or against human desire – that defines the true promise or threat of our technological ‘feasibility space’ writ large.<sup>7</sup>

In order to begin to get at this distinction between good forms of machine-being and bad and at the meeting point between soft flesh and hard machine, we can look at how Karl Marx described the human/system relation as experienced through money. ‘The essence of money is not’, he insisted, ‘that property is alienated in it’. By this, he meant that when we speak of an artwork, say, or a family keepsake, or even a human body in monetary terms and experience that valuation as inadequate or false, that experience is not so important for understanding the social significance of money. We might say the same when describing a human exchange by email or internet telephony in terms of bytes and protocols and packets – the paucity of this measure of value and significance does little to take away from the human value of the interaction, the paucity of understanding something according to its exchange value or network value does little on its own to undermine our own sense of its use value. Instead, as Marx had it, what is essential to understand about money is that ‘the *mediating activity* or movement’ that is involved in the sort of everyday labour and commerce that consumes the bulk of our

environment, and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium.’ Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New American Library, New York, 1964, p 8

7 This is how one recent McLuhanite commentator describes the phenomenological rudiments of this arrangement: ‘I consist of a biological core surrounded by extended, constructed systems of boundaries and networks. These boundary and network structures are topological and functional duals of each other. The boundaries define a space of containers and places (the traditional domain of architecture), while the networks establishing a space of links and follows. Walls, fences, and skins divide; paths, pipes and wires connect.’ William J Mitchell, *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p 7





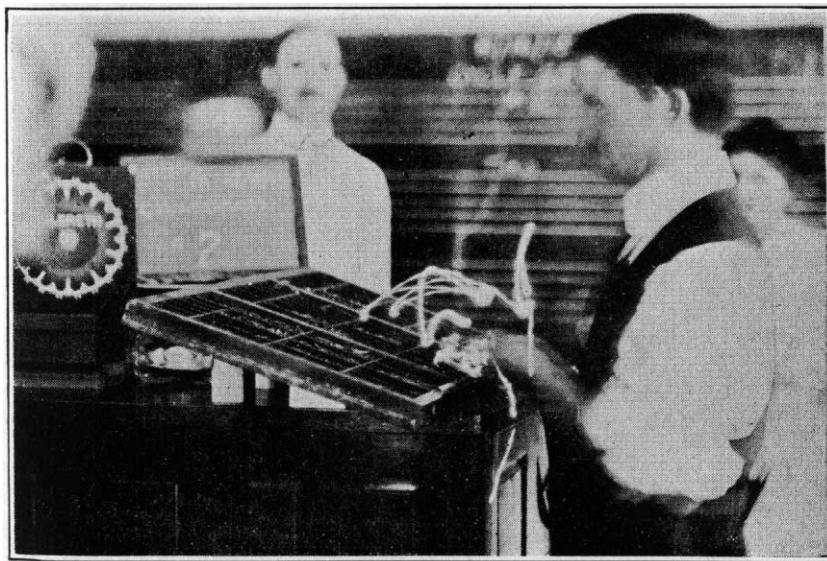
The Yes Men, photograph of *SurvivaBall* ('a one-size-fits-all solution to global warming') mock-up and demonstration at the Catastrophic Loss conference held at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Amelia Island, Florida, 8–9 May 2006

lives is what is estranged from man, what becomes 'a *material thing* outside man'. Alienation, in other words, does not exist in a devalourised or cheapened object or body or thing but instead in a misplaced relation or process between things. Marx termed this role for money the 'alien mediator' because it is one which we have little control over and little consciousness of its mediating function. As he put it, 'instead of man himself being the mediator for man' – such as through public deliberation and debate – or the exercise of democratic political sovereignty – he 'regards his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them'. In this way, he concluded grimly, man's 'slavery... reaches its peak'.<sup>8</sup>

For our purposes, we might term the first of these two relations to money 'individual alienation' because it describes the way in which the experience of value housed in an individual thing or body is not fully represented by money and the other 'social alienation' because it refers to an inability to recognise value as it is socially generated because that experience has been displaced by money. Reviving this distinction opens a foundational critical insight that has collapsed in more recent conventions of understanding about the experience of ideology. As one scholar put our common sense on this matter not too long ago, for example, 'the private subject finds his relation to both the public and the market only by negating the given reality of himself', that is, in order to experience himself as 'the abstract subject of the universal (political or economic) discourse'.<sup>9</sup>

8 Karl Marx, 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*', 1844, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, Penguin Classics, London, 1992, p 260

9 Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990, p 63. Indeed, it might be argued that something like this account of self-abstraction has been the conventional or commonsensical understanding of alienation for the new left broadly conceived.



Frank B and Lillian M Gilbreth, *Fatigue Study: The Elimination of Humanity's Greatest Unnecessary Waste: A First Step in Motion Study*, 1916, figure 24

Put in the language that concerns us here, the subject becomes a machine. The loss of the subject's 'given reality' to the negative universalism of modern political and economic being assumed here is just the individual form of alienation outlined above and it is against this loss of given individual reality that Marx posits the self-abstraction found in mediation. As a value, however, that social abstraction also cuts two ways: on the one hand, there is the false or ideological substitution of money's alien mediation, and, on the other, there is the proper abstraction of political and social processes – voting, say, or poll-taking and other forms of statistical being, or, more generally, the exercise of a public voice, of speaking in the name of the public. Separate from the individual alienation of objects and bodies, in other words, there are two types of social alienation – economic and political – and the distinction between the two makes all the difference. Indeed, it is really in the latter, in political abstraction, in self-consciousness not of one's 'given reality' but instead of one's typicality, one's abstract being in a political-economic system of relations, one's machine-being conceived of politically rather than strictly economically, according to Marx, that humanity realises itself.

The history of art is full of examples that can speak to the promise of this sort of political abstraction or good form of machine-being rather than bad – in reality, the entire history of political art might well be said to be oriented toward such an aim – but a couple of relatively recent cases in point can serve here to stand for this tendency. The first example I have in mind is a work from 1970 by the artist Emory Douglas, then Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Artists for the Black Panther Party. The image is of two women in standard action-figure poses and features a superimposed statement by BPP Minister of Defense Huey Newton that gives it its theme:



Emory Douglas, *Ideas that Sustain Us*, February 17, 1970, courtesy of the artist Emory Douglas. The quote at the top attributed to Huey P Newton, Minister of Defense, Black Panther Party, reads: 'The ideas which can and will sustain our movement for total freedom and dignity of the people, cannot be imprisoned, for they are to be found in the people, all the people, wherever they are.'

The ideas which can and will sustain our movement for total freedom and dignity of the people, cannot be imprisoned, for they are to be found in the people, all the people, wherever they are.

This theme is illustrated in various predictable ways – including with the central Panther motif of a gun and other weapons, of course (not the least significant of these being a hatchet that calls on the raised hammer and sickle imagery then part of the period's rising Maoism), with the combination of thick wavering line and simple graphical style popular in labour imagery since Ben Shahn adopted it in the 1930s, with the iconographic use of Benday dots developed particularly by Roy Lichtenstein to convey the idea of mass-cultural mediation and mirror the distribution methods being used, and with the age-old imagery of light rays emanating from the central figures. All of these iconic cues and conventions read clearly and forcefully enough: 'When the artist begins to love the people, to appreciate them, he or she will begin to draw the people differently', is how Douglas described his central artistic insight in 1972:

... we can begin to interpret and project into our art something that is much greater than it was before: Freedom, justice, liberation; all those things we could not apply to our art before.<sup>10</sup>

This Enlightenment theme, however, is also rendered in another manner that complements these iconographical conventions (that we might broadly label Social Realist) but also complicates them, at least formally. By withholding the faces of the two figures, Douglas engages in a kind of modernist negation. What is of interest for our purposes is the way in which the anti-modernist, social-realist iconographic over-determination of the image links up with and is bolstered by that moment of negation. The twin empty face-hubs at the centre of the image serve as the source of enlightenment radiating outward but that emptiness of the two female freedom fighters – an emptiness accomplished by 'negating the given reality of' themselves – is meant to be filled by the superimposed party line of the male Minister of Defense. As such, of course, negation might be seen to stand in as a figure of indoctrination, of the mindlessness or dehumanisation of one's own given reality that serves as a precondition for the acquiescence to groupthink, thereby negating the negation by turning it into a simple ideological position.

This over-determination is one side of the Enlightenment tradition – the Stalinist side we might call it, the doctrinaire side of political correctness that closes down on the openness of meaning created by modernist negation. But there is also another side, a side that is all about such an opening up of meaning – and precisely the sort of opening that is born of 'negating the given reality' of oneself. Indeed, we might take the concept of effacement or self-abstraction to be the governing principle for modern political aesthetics. In the simple choice not to render the here-and-now peculiarities of embodiment in favour of a generalised, universalist understanding of self or other – not to render individual specifics but instead a social abstraction – thereby producing a statistical self, for example, or, more simply, a sociological self or social type, the old promise of class consciousness is made available. As Marx put it:

10 Emory Douglas, 'Art for the People's Sake: Emory Douglas Speaks at Fiske University', *The Black Panther*, Saturday, 21 October 1972, p 5



- 11 Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole', in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Communist Manifesto*, trans Martin Milligan, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 1988, p 148
- 12 Indeed, it may be the filling up of that negative space of effacement – that arena for rational deliberation defined by its capacity to supersede the 'given reality' of identity, defined, that is, by enlightenment – with the opposite of the general-typical of abstraction, that is with the personal, or the bodily, or the anecdotal, or worse, the voluntaristic, that has led to claims of crisis like Al Gore's: 'American democracy is now in danger – not from any one set of ideas, but from unprecedented changes in the environment within which ideas either live and spread, or wither and die. I do not mean the physical environment; I mean what is called the public sphere, or the marketplace of ideas... It is simply no longer possible to ignore the strangeness of our public discourse.' The strangeness, it might be said, is the strangeness of objectifying oneself 'in distinction from and in opposition to abstract thinking' – as a strictly economic subject, say, or as a strictly affective, sensorial subject, or a strictly personal subject or even a strictly demographic subject – that is, the strangeness of imagining one's own embodiment outside of, and against, the abstraction of rational thought.
- 13 Chantal Mouffe, interviewed by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, 'Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension', *Grey Room*, 02, Winter 2001, p 101
- 14 Rosalyn Deutsche, Hans Haacke and Miwon Kwon, 'Der Bevölkerung: A Conversation', *Grey Room*, 16, Summer 2004, p 64

It is not the fact that the human being *objectifies himself inhumanly*, in opposition to himself, but the fact that he *objectifies himself in distinction* from and in *opposition* to abstract thinking, that constitutes the posited essence of the estrangement and the thing to be superseded.<sup>11</sup>

That is, the issue is not whether one conceives of oneself as a statistical self, it is whether the abstraction of that conception is reified or makes itself available to abstract thinking. So it is then that we might read the effacement or negation of 'given reality' of the figures in Douglas's work in two ways: either as a naturalised abstraction, rendering them as a blank slate upon which an ideological agenda is inscribed or as the site or arena in which debate and deliberation occurs, the public sphere, the space where, as Huey Newton had it, ideas are not imprisoned.<sup>12</sup>

The second art historical case-in-point we can consider, in order better to understand the promise or desire circulating around the abstraction of machine-being, is Hans Haacke's *Der Bevölkerung* from the year 2000. Commissioned for the renovated Reichstag building after considerable controversy, the work carries the building's 1915 architrave inscription 'To the German People' (*Dem Deutschen Volke*) with its own slogan 'To the Population'. As Chantal Mouffe notes in a critical response to the Haacke work, "The Population" is not a political concept that can be the locus of political sovereignty. It's a descriptive, sociological concept.<sup>13</sup> This distancing from the political was, in one sense, Haacke's intention – as he himself puts it, 'Both in English and in German the word population has a dry, sociological, and somewhat bureaucratic ring. It does not make our heart beat faster and rally behind the flag.'<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, however, Haacke's work was clearly intended, and in fact succeeded in being, a site for politics.<sup>15</sup> The question this discrepancy allows us to raise is what does and does not constitute the political in the dry, sociological, bureaucratic quality of the term 'population'. According to Mouffe, while the term may fend off the kind of abuse of the concept 'people' associated with the Nazi period, it voids its potential to serve as a social bond altogether and therefore voids its legitimacy as a representation of the work of the Reichstag. 'Collective identifications have to do with desire, with fantasies', she argues, 'not interests or the rational', and for this reason terms like 'the people' should be held on to.<sup>16</sup> The desire or fantasy of collectivity that she insists on, in keeping with the influence she has drawn from Carl Schmitt, is to participate in an organic sense of 'us' that can only realise itself in an agonistic relation to a similarly unified sense of 'them'.<sup>17</sup>

What is missing in this analysis is a way to explain the *agon* of the debate surrounding Haacke's work. As one parliamentarian noted during the Reichstag debate deciding the fate of the work, the debate itself and the public outcry that spawned it (reportedly running twenty percent in favour and eighty percent against) 'shows that Hans Haacke has hit a nerve'.<sup>18</sup> The question, of course, is how such a dry bureaucratic term could hit a nerve. The answer by now should be obvious: what Haacke's work accomplished was another form of effacement or self-abstraction, but now the 'given reality' that is done away with is that of the German *Volk*. What results is still agonistic per Mouffe's definition of the political, but the site of conflict is no longer the





Hans Haacke, *Der Bevölkerung*, 2001. 2008 photograph by Stefan Müller courtesy of Hans Haacke. ©Hans Haacke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS). The work consists of a  $21 \times 7$  metre garden installed in the center of the courtyard. In the middle the phrase DER BEVÖLKERUNG (to the population) is written in neon letters. By invitation from Haacke the garden has been filled with earth that is brought by parliament representatives from each constituency in Germany (currently the count is up to 275 MPs). Today the letters are surrounded by dense vegetation that grew on its own in the soil provided. DER BEVÖLKERUNG refers to the inscription, DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE (to the German people) from 1916 on the west portal of the Parliament building.

boundary between us and them, between German and non-German, for example, but instead over what constitutes the public, the humanity on whose behalf the Reichstag governs. The *agon*, in other words, has been internalised, an act that can only be achieved by foregoing the ‘given reality’ of oneself, that can only be achieved by giving up one’s humanness.

So it is that the cyborg serves as a foundation for modern belonging. At its root level it is simply the economic being called forth by capitalism – *homo economicus*, we might call it – but it is a form of being that is always already available to political appropriation in two ways: on the one hand, it is available to be reified, to be made back into blood and soil, the people and the nation, and in so doing disavow its own machinic by pretending to be a new/old form of godliness; on the other hand, it is available to serve as machinic itself, to objectify itself in a way that is *not*, as Marx put it, ‘in *distinction* from and in *opposition* to abstract thinking’ but instead identifies with and embraces that self-abstraction as the sphere of modern political being, as the sphere where ‘the private subject finds his relation to both the public and the market only by negating the given reality of himself’. This embrace is what stirs the political passions in the work of Emory Douglas and Hans Haacke and it is what tactical media as a genre offers as well.

We might begin to explain this tendency of TM with Gregg Bordowitz’s simple definition: ‘Tactical media has an ironic sense of humour and a sincere heart.’<sup>19</sup> That is, TM distances itself ironically, critically and with humour from the objects of its critique but it also binds itself with sincerity, sentiment and passion – that is, with the language of the heart – to the principle of the democratic public sphere that is the flipside of the economic being it opposes. It is only by seeing both sides of that coin that it is able to accomplish its aims. This combination is available everywhere in the work of TM artists generally but we can take the Yes Men as our case in point. ‘If [John] Kerry had won against [George] Bush [in the presidential election], would the Yes Men have gone after him?’, asks the staged interlocutor on their FAQ page.

‘Kerry is part of Western civilization’, they respond:

His intention isn’t to smash the state and destroy the government; his sole real concern for this world isn’t the profitability of the mighty; his concept of justice and right doesn’t come from another world altogether, one in which earthly laws and concerns have no relevance. The fundamentalist terrorist who seemingly won the election is very different in all three respects.<sup>20</sup>

That identification with Kerry and Western civilisation and the state and the government and earthly laws and concerns is precisely the self-abstraction we have been speaking of, ‘the ironic dream of a common language’ of the cyborg and the right side of our coin of social belonging.

In this way, it is not fully true to see the cheap suits or other forms of dressing up of the Yes Men, and of TM generally, to be simply tactical or ironic, simply to parody their objects of critique. Rather, the suits, the corporate speak, the website vernacular and all the rest of it also carry

15 See ‘DER BEVÖLKERUNG: The German Parliamentary Debate’, *Grey Room*, 16, summer 2004, pp 82–115

16 Chantal Mouffe, op cit, p 123

17 This, for Mouffe following Carl Schmitt, is the very definition of the political, even if it is an understanding lost on the Enlightenment traditions of Marxism and liberalism, which fall prey to the misguided delusion of cosmopolitan democracy. See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, ‘Introduction: Schmitt’s Challenge’, in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed Chantal Mouffe, Verso, London, 1999, pp 1–6.

18 *Grey Room* debate, p 90

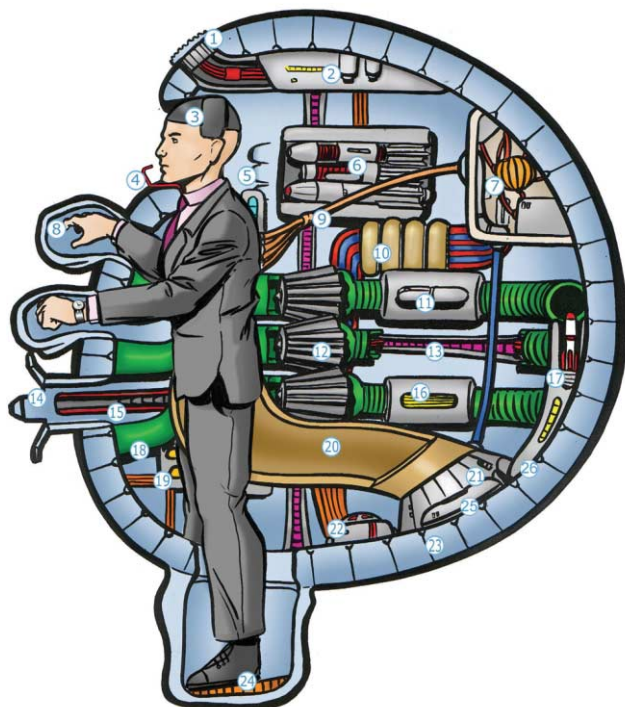
19 [http://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/definingTM/bordowitz\\_gregg.html](http://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/definingTM/bordowitz_gregg.html)

20 <http://www.theyesmen.org/faq/>



## Model X7 Survivaball Unit Z5-11 Version 11.7

Compatible with Halliburton power units 10x+ and 11x with PP45 adapter and TICC conversion software

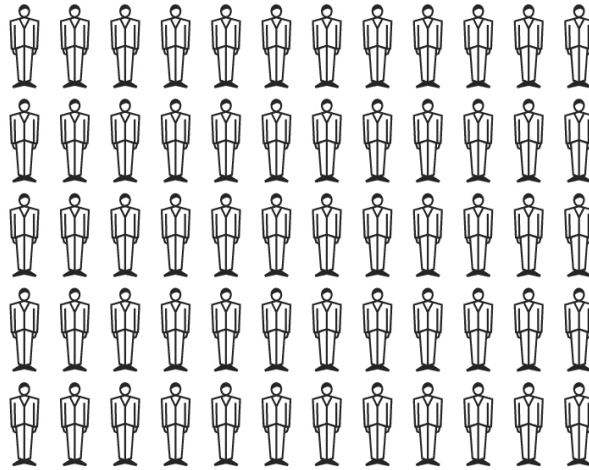


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8. Maniple Pods (for interaction with people, technology, and the environment)
9. Nutrition Utility Transfer (conveys nutrients from Food Reprocessor, 6)
10. Electrical Grafting (secures against power loss)
11. Dynamo
12. Motors (powered by dynamo and Maniple Pod plug interfaces)
13. Electromagnetic strips (generate electricity for dynamo and allow external linkage)
14. Maniple Pod deployed as rotor (applicable to all MPs)
15. Defense Enhancement Unit (2 of 3; non-lethal)
16. Power converter
17. Defense Enhancement Unit (3 of 3, rear)
18. Power conduits with inline power converters and dynamo
19. Medical Analysis Unit (runs constant scans on health and energy)
20. Personal Traptment Unit (conveys cast-off to Nutrition Refunction Center, 21)
21. Nutrition Refunction Center (extracts nutrients from cast-off)
22. Persistent Nutrition Unit (delivers small amounts on an ongoing basis)
23. Suspension Grid (elasticated cable system)
24. Hypersine Elasticity Units (impart added momentum)
25. Medical Stability & Emergency Unit
26. Communications and Infrastructure Monitoring Assemblage

The Yes Men, *A Guide to the Basic Functions and Properties of the Halliburton Model X7 SurvivaBall*, 2006

that dream of a common language that Donna Haraway spoke of, a dream inextricable from the unity of the economy and the technology that drives it. It is only in the act of negating oneself, of becoming a machine or cyborg, of becoming the population rather than the people that the full 'feasibility space' for social belonging becomes available. 'The junction of Marx', as one commentator has put it recently, 'is based on the conviction that only collectives, and not their individual components, are historically intelligible'.<sup>21</sup> This, in a nutshell, is the definition of political economy. At its best, what TM does is to redeem that economic being, that machine being, that political economy, by flipping it from the perspective of the organisation man and the lonely crowd to that of the citizen and civic protest – by making it accountable to the democratic principles of enlightenment. In this way, the Yes Men and TM generally carry on a tradition of modern art that extends through Haacke and Douglas and many others back to the foundations of modernity itself – a tradition defined by a love for abstraction rather than its instrumental and opportunistic mistreatment and abuse. In so doing, the long-conventional critique of 'the Western model of

21 Fredric Jameson, 'How Not to Historicize Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, spring 2008, p 573



# SPOT THE ACTIVIST.

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The Yes Men, poster announcing public presentation, 2004

modernity, characterised by the development of an instrumental type of rationality and an atomistic individualism<sup>22</sup>, is turned back on its feet and the place of self-abstraction in the battle for the political sovereignty is given its due.<sup>22</sup>

22 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Routledge, London, 2005, p 123



# *eventum et medium*

## Event and Orgiastic Representation in Media Activism

Gerald Raunig

*When representation discovers the infinite within itself, it no longer appears as organic representation but as orgiastic representation: it discovers within itself the limits of the organised; tumult, restlessness and passion underneath apparent calm. It rediscovers monstrosity.*

Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

At first glance the relationship between event and medium seems to be a simple one: the event appears as the material that is transferred by a medium as means into a different aggregate state, into that of representation. The term medium by itself seems to suggest that what is involved is a ‘middle’, a ‘mean’, a ‘mediator’, ‘mediation’: in other words, the medium as the middle between event and representation, between action and information; in short, as the means to the end of information transfer. In this perspective of mediation we immediately find ourselves in the paradigm of representation and thus at a hierarchically linear notion of information and enlightenment. A linearity like this implies a division into those who are informed and those who are to be informed, a dichotomous understanding of action and representation, and a rigid separation between media production and media consumption. The twofold principle of political and aesthetic representation, on which this series of dichotomies is based, is what I would like to call ‘organic representation’ here and distinguish from a different form of ‘orgiastic representation’.

A distinction of this kind also has some influence on the understanding of the phenomena that are often somewhat confusingly gathered under the term media activism. The coherent linearity of action and representation is often conceived as an organic movement in the discursive context of activists as well, such as when the aim of spectacular actions mainly consists of bringing ‘neglected topics’ to the front page of mainstream media through the action. Guerrilla communication methods, in the broadest sense, are often used for this, meaning that messages are not communicated in quite such a direct and linear way. Essentially,

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p 42



however, this still involves an organic relationship between the spectacular action and its representation that is planned as precisely as possible.

The Greenpeace dinghy action in June 2007 on the coast of the Baltic Sea by Heiligendamm in Germany, for instance, was described – at least in the argumentation of the actors – as following the pattern of an organic representation. A total of eleven Greenpeace dinghies approached the beach at Heiligendamm at high speed, where the heads of government of the G8 states were meeting under high-security conditions. Three boats penetrated the security zone around the G8 area. Because they were difficult to locate, the security authorities reacted relatively late, but then with full force. Five over-sized police boats took up the chase, including a heavy patrol boat from the water police.

On the surface of the announcements, the Greenpeace activists intended to convey simple messages: at the end of the action the crew of a dinghy unfurled a banner with the not particularly creative motto ‘G8 act now!’. Greenpeace subsequently added that the activists had wanted to present a petition with a demand for climate protection to the heads of state on the beach.

Presenting a petition to the G8 would only have strengthened their acceptance as pseudo-representative organs. Yet the goal of the spectacular action was probably not at all this purported goal, but rather the representation of strategically and precisely planned images in the mass media. To this extent, this practice of Greenpeace is to be seen as an intervention in the production of media images, in other words as ‘media activism’, to a certain extent, yet always within the paradigm of organic representation. In the logic of the battle of David against Goliath, the most important image was always the one in which a police boat (Goliath) rammed a small Greenpeace dinghy (David) with full force and at high speed, finally running over it and tipping the Greenpeace crew overboard. This image then went through all the major media as planned; the meticulously prepared stratification of the space of representation, the distribution of the roles of police and activists, the conveyance of the implied message ‘David will win!’ worked.

Greenpeace gave a textbook demonstration of the logic of the transfer of messages from the action to media representation along a more or less straight line. This attribution of the action to the paradigm of organic representation is by no means intended to denounce Greenpeace as apolitical; these kinds of intervention in the mainstream media can certainly achieve political effects. However, if they are not in any way interested in changing the production apparatus of the medium itself, or if alternative and tactical media are even conceived in the same way as quasi-neutral transmission apparatuses, but of alternative or counter-hegemonic representation, then there is a fatal reductionism to be found in this. We encounter this reductionism on both sides, which apparently do not work so separately: not only mainstream media but also alternative media often tend to see themselves as an indifferent, empty middle that touches neither the event nor its representation.

These kinds of unquestioned notions of the neutral transmission of truths primarily indicate the enormous gap that opens up between sophisticated media theories and the practice of those who constitute the notion of the medium as a middle with their modes of subjectivation. If we do not want to conceive of this middle as a vacant market for the

trading of information goods, two preconditions must be clarified: one is that the transmitting of the medium itself is never to be understood as neutral, and, more importantly, the specific form of the transmission can change the medium as a production apparatus. Walter Benjamin already investigated this eighty years ago in his essays on Bertolt Brecht's art practice,<sup>2</sup> among others, and Brecht himself developed his experiences of the alienation effect of the Epic Theater and the Learning Play in his radio theory.<sup>3</sup> The relevant genealogical lines reached a new quality and intensity in the 1970s, especially in Italy and Germany, most recently growing in significance with the increasing hybridisation of electronic media in the context of the anti-globalisation movement. Even though capitalistic appropriation and reterritorialisation were never far behind, and although this also meant that ever new forms of orgiastic representation were integrated in the fields of the organic, in the times and spaces of their invention and early development new media always also challenged questions about their emancipatory function and application, especially in terms of thwarting the organic logic of action and representation. Understanding the conjunction of social movements and new media in all its complexity also means not reducing these processes of thwarting in the reflection and theoretisation to the simplest aspects of conveying information, but rather grasping them as multifaceted phenomena.

It is too simple to consider media activism solely from the one-sided perspective of the paradigm of organic representation, as a secondary factor in a linear movement of transmission from the action to a suitable representation of this action. Besides, organic representations are not a matter of a linear logic of depicting 'reality' but rather the permanent productivity of representation, of the production of 'reality' in and through representation. Media go far beyond linear concepts of mediation as middle and means.

There is also another idea of the middle, other than that over-hastily evoked by the term of mediation. Even in antiquity, the Latin use of *medium*, for instance in the formulations *rem in medio ponere* (publicly presenting an issue) or *in medium quaerere* (demanding something for all, as a common good), suggests another meaning of medium: the *medium* as a middle suggesting an open, vague concept of the public sphere, of public space, of the common. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe this middle as a raging torrent that carries everything away with it, a line of flight, in which everything is accelerated, in which the concatenation of singularities takes place. In this kind of orgiastic concatenation *through the middle*, it is no longer a matter of supplying the constituted power of mass media with new contents but rather of constant attempts to recompose, to change and to reinvent the production apparatuses, to create a constituent power in media activism as well.

Yet, in the filmic representation of the heterogeneity of this constituent power – to the extent that it insists on oppositional truth as unbroken counter-information – there is in fact a danger of homogenising this heterogeneity and creating effects similar to those of the discredited spectacle machine. The video *Showdown in Seattle* is not only something like a founding document of Indymedia but, viewed as a product from today's perspective (after eight years of impact in different contexts), it was also highly influential in spreading the representations of an event

2 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Reflections*, Schocken, New York, 1986, pp 220–38 and Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution*, Semiotext(e), MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007, especially the chapter 'Spirit and Betrayal: German Activism of the 1910s', pp 113–30.

3 Bertolt Brecht, 'Radiotheorie 1927 bis 1932', in *Gesammelte Werke* 18, pp 117–34

that was and still is very important for the anti-globalisation movement. In this way, the video became a frequently reproduced or imitated source not only of *image production* but also for anti-globalisation *action* – even though this source was admittedly not always free from dualisms, formulas and clichés.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, counter-hegemonic images of resistance and insurrections should not be too hastily scorned – by a sophisticated art discourse, for example.<sup>5</sup> The necessarily spontaneous and precarious production of signs, statements and images of insurrection is a form that generates specific and structurally conditioned problems, but it is different from specific forms of mediation of the mainstream media in enabling a further development of media activism as orgiastic representation. Unlike the paradigm of organic representation, an *orgiastic* medium appears not only as a pure means of information, of mediating an event, but instead concatenates with the event, ultimately becoming an event itself. *Eventum et medium*: in the concatenation of event and medium, the middle as line of flight does not simply produce representations, but is a component of the event. Here the signs, statements and images do not function as representing or documenting objects or subjects or the world, but rather as letting the world happen.<sup>6</sup>

Hence media are orgiastic in their role as a possible condition for events; as an opening up of the possible, as an endless expansion of representation into the orgiastic, as the potentiality of the event and as the actualisation of this potential. Thus the video *Showdown in Seattle* became a line in the event that was actualised in the concatenation of Seattle, the concatenation of bodies, but also of slogans, Internet communication, the images and statements of the Indymedia video.<sup>7</sup> Media activism does not limit its function to documenting political movements, but instead happens in the medium becoming activism.

At about the same time that the anti-globalisation movement was flourishing in Seattle with, among others, Zapatista strategies, a precarious endeavour of media work developed in Mesoamerica. While manifold references to the Zapatistas and Subcomandante Marcos spread around the whole world, between 1999 and 2004 the collective Kinoki Lumal<sup>8</sup> sought to take the opposite path: Joaquín Santiz López, Manuel Guzman Ruis, Juan Santiz Gómez, Alberto Vallejo Reyna and Thomas Waibel organised a community cinema specifically in the marginalised and infrastructurally disadvantaged territories in Chiapas.<sup>9</sup> In the tradition of post-revolutionary Soviet documentary film practice (Vertov, Medvedkin), upheavals in film around and after 1968 (Godard, Gorin, Rouch), and the altermedia practice of alternative media in the last thirty years (Radio Alice, PaperTigerTV, later Indymedia, Telestreet, etc), models of communicative media work were to be tried out in south-eastern Mexico in the form of a travelling cinema. Thomas Waibel describes the experiences of the collective between 1999 and 2004 (until turning over all the equipment and the entire endeavour to the autonomous council of Ricardo Flores Magón) in his dissertation *The Masks of Resistance: Spirituality and Politics in Mesoamerica*,<sup>10</sup> but not without articulating the problems, the technical, gender-specific and economic limitations of grassroots media work in the context of attacks on the Zapatista revolt and of low-intensity repression.

Kinoki Lumal's media work, which was patiently built up over the course of a year in video workshops in rural cultural centres in Chiapas,

4 Hito Steyerl, 'The Articulation of Protest', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en>

5 On the question of a fitting relationship between media activism and art criticism see Gerald Raunig, 'The Document as Present Becoming', in *The Need to Document*, eds Sabine Schaschl-Cooper, Vit Havranek and Bettina Steinbrügge, JRP/Ringier, Zürich, 2005, pp 89–98.

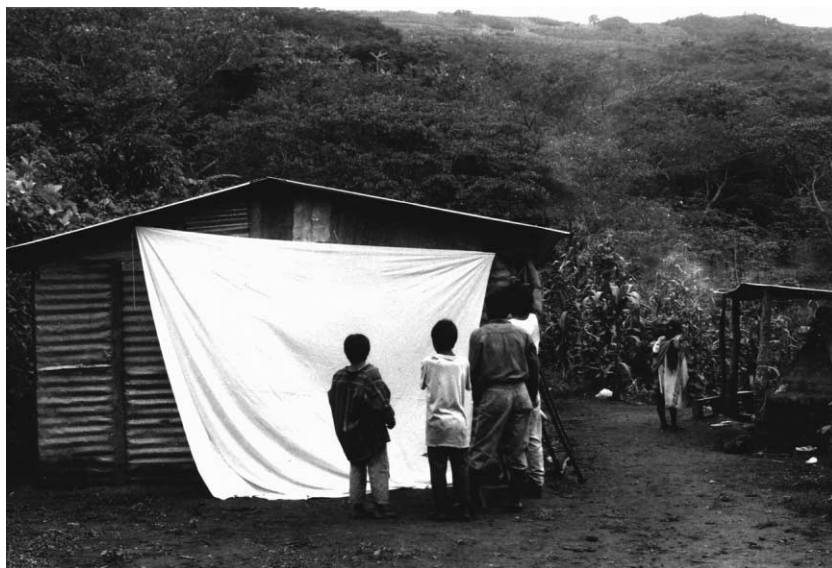
6 Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Struggle, Event, Media', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/lazzarato/en>

7 Marion Hamm, 'A/r/tivism in Physical and Virtual Spaces', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1203/hamm/en>

8 The name of the collective consists of the Russian neologism Kinoki (*kinō* = cinema; *oko* = eye), invented in the 1920s, and the Mayan word *lumal* (= land and the community inhabiting it), so that the media collective's self-description could be translated as 'cinematic eye of our territories'.

9 Information available at <http://www.kinoki.at/lumal/index.htm>

10 The descriptive parts of the following paragraphs are largely based on this work: Thomas Waibel, *Die Masken des Widerstandes. Spiritualität und Politik in Mesoamerika*, philosophical dissertation, University of Vienna 2007, especially pp 33–49.



Madlen Schering, *Preparing The Event*, Chiapas 2002, photo: Kinoki Lumal

centred on the organisation of a community cinema in the social bases of the Zapatista revolt. This travelling cinema was realised in close cooperation with the villages, village communities and collectives visited by using a system of mobile projections. It usually took place in the marginalised regions of Chiapas with little public infrastructure. The equipment for the travelling cinema was carried by the operators themselves from village to village, where visitors could choose films from a small archive. In this way the collective established participation on an equal level and intense situations of exchange in the different places. In the course of their endeavours, Kinoki Lumal went beyond the self-organised presentation of films: various video documentaries, photo reports and radio features were created in several waves. The first two short films were a response to the desire to transport the activity of the collective through media. They describe the arrival and screenings of the travelling cinema in an indigenous village community and the first results from various workshops devoted to dealing with the medium of film.<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that the cinema screenings were repeated in the different local situations, however, it no longer seemed sufficient simply to employ filmic means to present, reflect and discuss political and media activities. In a further step, the visited groups articulated the desire for a more strongly self-determined media expression of everyday work. This resulted in a first documentary about the cultivation, harvesting, processing and selling of coffee and the associated questions of social organisation which was made together with the Society for Social Solidarity Ernesto Che Guevara.<sup>12</sup>

Paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, Thomas Waibel calls the practice of Kinoki Lumal a 'media desiring-machine'. The orgiastic quality of this desiring-machine became especially evident in the vast extent to which the organic linearity of action and representation was broken open. Instead of being crushed by the contents and the medium, the protagonists set out to actualise more and more desires in relation to the media work. They

11 *Cine Mekapal*, 16 minute video, Spanish/Tzeltal, German voiceover, Mexico 2000, direction, Kinoki Lumal; and *Talleres*, 14 minute video, Spanish/Tzeltal, German voiceover, Mexico 2000, direction, Kinoki Lumal

12 *Kapel*, 48 minute video, Spanish/Tzeltal, German voiceover, Mexico 2000. Written and directed by Collective Che Guevara; camera, Joaquín Santiz López



Rainer Simon, *Magonistas in the Electric Theatre*, Chiapas 2003, photo: Kinoki Lumal

did not aim at an exercise in the classically organic form of representation with its separation of production and consumption, but rather at producing a communicative space in which reception and production, medium and event converge. And particularly in this way, a lost space of the political was re-established:

The activity of the travelling cinema contributed to tying into the social network again, which had been damaged in the course of military conflicts.



Tom Waibel, *Seeing Herself*, Guatemala 2005, photo: Kinoki Lumal



On the one hand it fostered reflection on the representability of what is one's own through the media production of subjectivity, and on the other hand it created situations through the screenings every evening in the villages that were not commonplace, situations in which the viewers could gather regardless of their political, religious or ideological differences.<sup>13</sup>

In particular, the emergence of this space of filmic presentation and production beyond the compulsion to identitary consensus indicates that Kinoki Lumal's media work broke open the hierarchy of mediation and produced the middle of the medium, the specific public sphere and participation, in which the straight line from representation to action is disrupted. Through this disruption the order of organic representation is inverted, the wild mixture of orgiastic representation diffuses. The film screening is less a representation than becoming itself an event, which in turn leads to new events of media production. A chain of events not strung together but flowing and fleeing through the middle. When the straight line of representation and action is disrupted in this middle, new lines of flight emerge again and again, yet these are not just fleeing from the constituted power of conventional media use but creating a new constituent power.

The media collective also worked on relatively classic documentary forms, such as the 2001 documentation of the famous journey of the Zapatista comandantes through Mexico. A delegation of twenty-two rebel commandantes marched for several weeks under the title *La Marcha Color de la Tierra* ('March of the Colour of the Earth') to the National Congress in the capital city to demand the inclusion of agreements that had been made in 1996 between the federal government and the rebels in the Mexican constitution. Members of the media collective accompanied them on the journey in order to present a filmic edition of the journey as soon as the comandantes returned to the rebellious Zapatista regions. Here too – similar to the case of Indymedia in Seattle – the attempt was to develop a suitable form for the representation of political events synchronously, as far as possible, with the events themselves. Despite substantial difficulties, the real-time documentation finally resulted in a videographic chronicle in six parts.<sup>14</sup>

What is interesting in this context is that the political tour de force of the Zapatista comandantes appeared to be less interesting to the participating indigenous communities than the documentation of forms of indigenous spirituality, which are undoubtedly closely linked with the Zapatista understanding of politics. In cooperation with a union of traditional corn farmers Kinoki Lumal had already produced a short film in 2001 about a ceremony for fertility in a red cave in the highlands of Chiapas.<sup>15</sup> After that, in the course of an invitation to Santiago Atitlán in Guatemala, a short media presentation of the cultural association Ahau Tepepul<sup>16</sup> was made, and finally the documentary film *El Gran Abuelo Rilaj Mam* ('The Old Grandfather Rilajmam').<sup>17</sup> Based on a ceremony lasting several days devoted to the dominant religious figure of an old grandfather, this documentary describes the different tales and social practices surrounding this spiritual tradition.

The various forms of cooperation, the continuous further development of participation and the exchange processes of media work constantly changed the production apparatus of Kinoki Lumal, never allowing the

13 Thomas Waibel, *Die Masken des Widerstandes*, op cit, p 45

14 *La Marcha Color de la Tierra*, 99 minute video chronicle, Spanish/Tzeltal, German subtitles, Mexico 2001, camera, editing and direction, Kinoki Lumal

15 *Tzajal Ch'en – Red Cave*, 18 minute video, Spanish/Tzotzil with German subtitles, Mexico 2001. Written and directed by Union de Milperos Tradicionales Hombres y Mujeres de Maiz; editing, Kinoki Lumal

16 *Ahau Tepepul*, 6 minute video, Spanish/Tzutuhil, German subtitles, Guatemala 2002

17 *El Gran Abuelo Rilaj Mam*, 77 minute video, Spanish/Tzutuhil, German subtitles, Guatemala 2002, written and directed by Asociación Cultural Ahau Tepepul; camera and editing, Kinoki Lumal



Kinoki Lumal, *Working for the Mam*, Guatemala 2001, still from *Rilajmam*, Kinoki, photo: Ajaw Tepepul

representations to become frozen in the organic. The close neighbouring zones of spirituality and sociality made it evident that local intensity in the overlapping of media production and reception was not translatable. In her essay on translating Kinoki Lumal's media work to Europe, Hito Steyerl asks:

But what happens when the comandantes take off their ski masks? Which situations dominate their everyday lives? What characterises life in a zone of 'low intensity war'? This is where Kinoki Lumal's work starts – and with it the discomfiture of the metropolitan audience. Because what comes out from under the masks are ordinary indigenous people, not leftist superheroes. They work hard, they barter, they gossip, they drink and sometimes drag gods around.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the documentation of the 'March of the Colour of the Earth' and the documentary summary of work with the autonomous institutions of Zapatista self-organisation,<sup>19</sup> which both met with interest in screenings outside Mesoamerica, the works concerning the link between spirituality and politics in indigenous ritual were not well received in Europe. Kinoki Lumal's productions manage to avoid the trap of the ethnographic substantialisation of the Other, the peripheral, as well as the essentialisation of the traditional in treating local spirituality. However, the collective's productions, which refused the familiar iconography of Zapatista resistance, presenting images of everyday work or rituals instead of armed or disguised rebels, met with rejection or boredom in Europe. It remained impossible to feed these products of the process that had shifted medium and event into an indistinguishable and open middle back into the organic representation mechanisms of political activism and cinema in Europe.

What remains an open question is the problem of what happens to the orgiastic representation of media activism when it is torn out of the concatenation with the event and shifts into the organic. How can this

18 Hito Steyerl, 'Das Babelights-Syndrom. Kinoki Lumal', <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl/de>

19 See also *Die gute Regierung der Zapatistas*, 31 minute video, Spanish, German and English subtitles, Mexico 2005, direction, Oliver Ressler and Tom Waibel.

transition be imagined an emancipatory one as well, instead of simply feeding spectacular cultural events and media spectacles? Beyond this, however, there is also the more general problem of the transnational, or rather translocal, concatenation of orgiastic representation: how can orgiastic representation develop beyond local experiences as a basis of experimentation for developing a translocal, non-representationist practice in which the medium is to be understood as concatenation and event, in which the endless orgiastic restlessness detaches itself from representation? Finally, how can this restless middle be actualised in every place of tumult, of insurrection, of passion, and not only in Chiapas, Seattle and Heiligendamm?

*Translated by Aileen Derieg*

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Many thanks for preliminary thoughts and revisions to Thomas Waibel and Isabell Lorey.

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# Electronic Civil Disobedience Post-9/11

## Forget Cyber-Terrorism and Swarm the Future Now!

Ricardo Dominguez

*Protest action of all kinds has been muted, first by an environment of shock and mourning, next by the rising tide of nationalism multiplied by the mass media organs, and then by the passage of legislation curtailing civil liberties in the name of the 'War on Terrorism'.<sup>1</sup>*

While it is true that contestation and protest after 9/11 felt much more dangerous than before, it did not stop Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) and many others from staging or participating in mass non-violent virtual sit-ins. In fact the theory and practice of ECD (Electronic Civil Disobedience) post-9/11 has now become part of the basic repertoire of possible activist gestures around the world and part of university research, training and implementation at Calit2,<sup>2</sup> at the University of California, San Diego, where Electronic Disturbance Theater is now based. EDT's institutional interpellation has allowed the practice of ECD to continue routing around the post-9/11 Patriot Act's attempt to place ECD under the umbrella of 'cyberterrorism' and once more to re-anchor the gesture as an act of radical poetics, of 'utopian performativity'.<sup>3</sup> This utopian performativity carries the shapes of past historical embodiments and discursive conventions of civil disobedience (CD) as a practice, while at the same time creating a 'gestic insistence', in a Brechtian sense, that provokes a constant re-consideration of the performativity of ECD in the 'no-place' and the 'every-place' of post-contemporary digital environments. This gap between the shores of CD and seas of ECD has opened a series of re-mappings of the material relations between both event zones, which in the end are embedded within each other. Both CD and ECD meet at the contact point of the mass body of the multitude moving back and forth between 'being-there' and 'being-digitally-there'.

(We now interrupt this article with an e-terview)

1 Sasha Costanza-Chock, 'Mapping the Repertoire of Electronic Contention', 2001, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, autumn 2001, [http://www-scf.usc.edu/~costanza/electronic\\_rep\\_draft.pdf](http://www-scf.usc.edu/~costanza/electronic_rep_draft.pdf)

2 Calit2, [bang.calit2.net](http://bang.calit2.net)

3 Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope At the Theater*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2005

***A TRANSPARENT AND CIVIL ACT OF DISOBEDIENCE AN INTERVIEW WITH RICARDO DOMINGUEZ BY HANS PETER KARTENBERG***

*Ricardo Dominguez speaks about virtual sit-ins and the upcoming trial against online Lufthansa Deportation Class activists in Germany. Hans Peter Kartenberg emailed the co-founder of The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) on 12 June 2005.<sup>4</sup>*

**Hans Peter Kartenberg** On your website at thing.net there was a call for a virtual sit-in on the website minutemanproject.com from 27 to 29 May 2005. Who are the Minutemen and what was the idea of that action?

**Ricardo Dominguez** Swarm The Minutemen was an e-action developed by a group of activists in the San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico border along with Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), in order to call attention to The Minutemen. The Minutemen are a non-governmental group of people vowing to patrol the US/Mexico border with guns in order to stop migrant people from crossing the border. They represent an intensification of the trend of violence towards migrant people and people of colour that has increased since 9/11. They have received right-wing state-government support from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and from anti-immigrant media. EDT called for a three-day virtual sit-in in solidarity with SWARM who had called for a number of e-actions to take place: a 24/7 telephone call campaign, a fax action, an email action and sound pollution actions on the border. Since the Minutemen say they love the silence of the desert – because they can hear the dirty rats (the people trying to cross the border) making noise – by creating lots of loud sounds it would keep the Minutemen from finding, stopping and harassing these people. These on/offline actions took place on the same days the Minutemen were holding a convention in Las Vegas.

**HPK** What were the effects of the campaign?

**RD** More than 78,500 people from around the world joined the non-violent mass virtual sit-in on sites hosted around the world against the Minutemen. It seems that in a time when almost all the space in the United States has been privatised and free speech zones have been reduced to cages topped with barbed wire, the internet can still serve as a commons where people can gather together to create positive social change. There were reports that at times the MinuteMenProject.com server was not responding, and at times the WakeUpAmericaFoundation.com server was unresponsive as well. Apparently the swarm had an effect. Within the Minutemen circles the action was discussed as well.

**HPK** In 2001, you were visiting the activists who organised the first virtual sit-in in Germany – they had been inspired by the Electronic Disturbance Theater. 13,000 people took part in the sit-in at the Lufthansa website to protest against the business the company was doing with the German state, transporting people who are deported from Germany.

4 <http://post.thing.net/node/304>, 12 June 2005



**RD** I was invited by No one is Illegal and Libertad! to speak in different cities in Germany in June 2001 about the history of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD) and Electronic Disturbance Theater's (EDT) use of mass non-violent direct action online since 1998. I helped to spread the word about the Virtual Sit-In on Lufthansa during the yearly shareholder meeting on 20 June 2001. I spoke to small and large groups of activists, media, artists and hacktivists.

**HPK** Was the Lufthansa action any different from the sit-ins organised in the US?

**RD** This action functioned exactly like our recent SWARM action. The 'Deportation class' action followed all the protocols of transparency that had been established for ECD since the first 'netstrikes' by the Italian activist communities in the mid-1990s. All the activists and artists announced the dates and reasons for the actions online, in the streets and inside the shareholders' meeting – nothing was hidden. This is important because ECD is about bringing together real bodies and digital bodies in a transparent manner that follows the tradition of Civil Disobedience – that people are willing to break a law (like blocking the street) to uphold a higher law.

**HPK** On 14 June Andreas-Thomas Vogel, who registered the domain libertad.de, where in 2001 a call for the Lufthansa action had been published, will be prosecuted in a high-security courtroom in Frankfurt, where on other occasions terrorist trials are held.

ECD should be judged by local, national and international courts as a civil act of disobedience and not as a crime. As Dr Dorothy E Denning of Georgetown University stated in her testimony before the Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism Committee on Armed Services in the US House of Representatives on 23 May 2000:

EDT and the Electrohippies view their operations as acts of civil disobedience, analogous to street protests and physical sit-ins, not as acts of violence or terrorism. This is an important distinction. Most activists, whether participating in the Million Mom March or a Web sit-in, are not terrorists.

Lufthansa and the German government knew who, what, when, why and how these actions were going to happen; it was not a secret attack. ECD is not a secret and anonymous 'cracking' into servers and enslaving in order to set off Distributed Denial of Service-attacks (DDoS). These actions only represent one or two hidden people. ECD is the unbearable weight of human beings online in a civil and transparent protest – whose main goal is to question and spread information about what they feel is a social condition that must be corrected to create a better society for all. This act of transparency is important for civil society and the courts to understand. ECD is and should be treated as another digital condition intimately tied to the long and deep Western tradition of Civil Disobedience – nothing more and nothing less.<sup>5</sup>

(We now return to the interrupted article.)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.libertad.de/inhalt/projekte/depclass/verfahren/index.shtml>, Dr Dorothy Denning on Cyberterrorism: Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism Committee on Armed Services in the US House of Representatives on 23 May 2000, <http://www.cs.georgetown.edu/~denning/infosec/cyberterror.html>

The inculcation of the politics of fear post-9/11 via the ‘War on Terror’ policies has not shifted the practice of ECD, or non-violent mass action online, as a number of critics thought would be the case:

Increased vigilance against the prospect of cyberterrorism has had its most tangible impact in the increased penalties for all forms of computer hacking – potentially including much hacktivist activity. The U.S.A. PATRIOT Act amended the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) to ‘lower jurisdictional hurdles relating to protected computers and damages, and increase penalties for violations’ (Milone 2002). The scope of the CFAA was expanded to specifically include computers outside the U.S., where they affect U.S. commerce or communications. The threshold of financial damage required for prosecution of computer hacking was revised to allow for aggregating damage caused to multiple computers, and to remove any minimum threshold in the case of damage to systems related to justice, defense, or security. Most significant, the maximum penalty for first-time offenders was raised from five years to ten, and for repeat offenders, from ten years to twenty.<sup>6</sup> (Milone 2002)

Instead what has occurred has been a growing acceptance of ECD post-9/11 as an action-space that continues to function as a mirroring of the juridical kernel at the centre of CD and that EDT has consistently participated in identifying those links: one, it is a public action; two, it is non-violent; three, it willingly accepts the condition of ‘deliberate unlawfulness and accepting of responsibility’; four, it is always conscientious concerning its civil nature. According to John Rawls:

... civil disobedience expresses disobedience to the law within the limits of fidelity to law, and this feature helps to establish in the eyes of the majority that it is indeed conscientious and sincere, that it really is meant to address their sense of justice.<sup>7</sup>

For a number of legal scholars ECD is completely outside of the frame of cyberwar, cyberterrorism and cybercrime and even the softer trajectory of social net war. Instead legal scholars, such as William Karam, view ECD as not only connected to the ‘modern theoretical roots of the late 1800s, the jurisprudence of civil disobedience involves a global narrative stretching from Aeschylus... to nomadic protestors opposing globalisation...’<sup>8</sup> For him ECD is a continuation of this global narrative; ECD is CD by other means. This mantra has been at the heart of creating a space of implementation and reflection that other forms of non-violent direct action online (such as cracktivism and some types of hacktivism, like web defacement) have not. ECD gestures continue to offer a form of social embodiment that allows everyday communities online and off the possibility of creating a space for civil society that is not directly tied to the dominant digital modes available, that is ‘communication and documentation’ or high-end code politics, as the only political options available to the non-specialist to connect with civil society in a state of contestation. ECD networks have become decisive zones for mass social expression that still carry the strong auras of human bodies gathering before and on the sites of governmentality under the historical signs of CD.

(News Flash)

6 Alexandra Whitney Samuel, ‘Hacktivism and Future of Political Participation’, doctoral thesis, 2004, <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ucsd/Samuel-Hacktivism.pdf>

7 J Rawls, ‘Civil Disobedience and the Social Contract’, in *Morality and Moral Controversies*, ed J Arthur, 4th edition, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1996, p 356

8 William Karam, ‘Hacktivism: Is Hacktivism Civil Disobedience?’, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa, 2003

## HIGHER REGIONAL COURT SAYS ONLINE DEMONSTRATION IS NOT FORCE

*Almost a year after the first-instance court of Frankfurt sentenced the initiator of an online demonstration against Lufthansa to pay a fine, the Higher Regional Court has overruled the lower court's verdict in its ruling of May 22 published yesterday and found the accused not guilty. The judges mainly questioned the definition of the use of force on which the lower court had based its ruling.*

*The proceedings concerning the online demonstration lasted almost five years. On 20 June 2001, the Groups Libertad and Kein Mensch ist illegal (No one is illegal) called for an online demonstration against Lufthansa. With special software they developed, demonstrators were able to automatically call various Lufthansa web sites in an attempt to overload the servers. The activists did so to protest the airline's participation in deportations.*

*It is not clear whether the campaign was a success. The publicity effect was tremendous, with even Germany's Ministry of Justice publicly expressing its doubt as to whether the planned event was legal. There were charges that the campaign constituted coercion and computer sabotage. Nonetheless, the human rights activists say that some 13,000 Internet users took part in the protest. On the other hand, the technical effect on Lufthansa was not great: the airline had prepared for the attack and rented additional line capacity to accommodate the traffic. Even today, it remains unclear how long the web site was actually slowed down and whether it ever went offline completely.*

*But the legal aftermath had greater effects. The human rights activists saw their online protest as a modern kind of non-violent sit-in and claimed they were acting within their basic constitutional right of freedom of assembly. Lufthansa and the state prosecutor saw things differently: they claimed that the campaign constituted coercion and that the activists were inciting others to break the law. The offices of the Frankfurt group Libertad were searched and computers confiscated – the beginning of several years of investigations.*

*In the summer of 2005, the first-instance court of Frankfurt found initiator Andreas-Thomas Vogel guilty and sentenced him to a fine of 90 days' pay. The court found the demonstration to be a use of force against Lufthansa as a web site operator as well as against other Internet users; specifically, the airline had suffered economic losses from the campaign, while other Internet users had been prevented from using Lufthansa's web site. The online demonstration was found to be a threat of an appreciable harm as defined by German Penal Code Section 240; Vogel was therefore found to be inciting people to commit coercion.*

*In its ruling (1 Ss 319/05), the First Penal Senate of the Higher Regional Court of Frankfurt has now overruled the initial verdict. The Higher Court found that the online demonstration did not constitute a show of force but was intended to influence public opinion. This new interpretation left no space for charges of coercion, and the accused was found not guilty. The initiators of the campaign see this new ruling as a 'slap in the lower court's face'. Although the online demonstration has not been repeated, the initiators expressly repeated their conviction that*

*the protest was legitimate. As Libertad spokesperson Hans-Peter Kartenberg put it, 'Although it is virtual in nature, the Internet is still a real public space. Wherever dirty deals go down, protests also have to be possible.' He also called on everyone not to forget the actual goal of the online protest in light of all the legal turmoil. According to Libertad, some 20,000 people are forcefully deported each year. Kartenberg reminds everyone that this 'inhumane policy' causes hundreds of deaths each year.*

Torsten Kleins, Craig Morris, jk/c<sup>9</sup>

(We are Back to the Future)

The German court's decision very clearly frames the utopian performative of ECD as an event that re-zones 'the real' of the virtual public. The contact point is the human core that emerges in the untimely manner in a circuit that is both all too normal and still all too deviant. For some critics, like Dr Samuel, ECD has become all 'too common' to meet the demand of the dominant media's incessant need for new attractors and for others it fails to break the machine of digital capitalism beyond a limited form of pedagogic resistance. Yet it is this very lack that has created a new staging arena for the practice of ECD and its continuation as an area for long-term research. In 2004 EDT was invited to become part of Calit2 (a new-edge technology institute at UCSD), and the conditions that were established were based on ECD as an important critical diagramming of political practice in the present and the future, as well as a recognition that the type of ECD that the Electronic Disturbance Theater has established emerged from a long history of radical social interventionist aesthetics. While the institution as a whole accepted the conditions of ECD, the specifics of the internal dialogues about how and what would happen once the gestures started was another question.

EDT, in conjunction with our researchers at Borderhacklab, have staged two actions against the Minutemen, two actions against the Mexican government in response to its abuse of power in both Antenco and in Oaxaca, one against the French government (see above) and most recently an action in support of children and families fighting healthcare cutbacks in the state of Michigan (a situation that is occurring all across the US). In each case the process of internal dialogue within Calit2 has become clearer and has produced a higher state of support with each action. This unexpected support for ECD from Calit2 functions as a form of 'interhacktivity', to use new media theorist Jon McKenzie's term for digital activism/artivism that targets institutional infrastructures and dominant social groups, and seeks to shift the new onto-historical formations of power/knowledge that have emerged under the sign of 'high performance'.

The structural entanglement of this mass gesture of ECD and an edge technology institution will definitely play itself out as a constant process of deterritorialisation to counter the rapid process of re-territorialisation and back again – the question becomes one of diagramming the shifts that have occurred and are occurring. The diagram will have to give weight to each act of destratification and resistance in order to understand the effects or mutations of ECD as an institutionalised practice.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.heise.de/english/newsticker/news/73827>

But, it is too soon to have any clear or definite view of the power dynamics at play or a sense of the futural patterns that will be established.

(Interruption from Out of the Past)

**‘WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?’ JENNY MARKETOU  
INTERVIEWS RICARDO DOMINGUEZ, 16 OCTOBER 2002**

*Artists, theorists, activists, hacktivists and artists’ collectives prior to all this have long been exploring through their works and actions various critical and crucial questions which pose the above proclaims. The artists in the exhibition *Open\_Source\_Art\_Hack* which I organised with Steve Diets at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, from 3 May to 30 June, 2002 are creatively pointing into the above debates about ‘public domain’, ‘hacking’ and ‘open source’.*

*I feel compelled to mention that at the beginning of the exhibition ‘Knowbotic Research’, the artists’ collective from Zurich, had become the target of the disturbing and constantly expanding forces of private parties which can exert control of the public domain. Their project ‘Minds of Concern’ was forced to ‘pull the plug’ on their website under pressure from the museum’s ISP who in turn depend upon higher-up ISPs to preserve their connections to the Internet and who threatened to shut down the whole exhibition if KR did not stop the scanning of security systems (port scanning) to evaluate the vulnerability of a particular server to hacking attacks.*

*Ironically ‘Minds of Concern’ was not the only project in the exhibition which ran into legal problems. The acclaimed artists’ collective Critical Art Ensemble and their performance *GenTerra* was postponed after the decision made by the director and staff of the New Museum. They did not feel comfortable with the project, on the grounds that it was illegal, or with the release of a ‘transgenic organism’ during the performance. CAE could only perform *GenTerra* in the museum once they jumped through a number of legal hoops. The tragedy is that both incidents address the political, sociological and creative sequences of a culture which is marked by the recent globalisation, privatisation and legal control which has resulted in the loss of a free public domain. Both incidents suggest that cultural institutions have not been able yet to balance artistic freedom of action with a dialogue between artists and museums which can actively engage internal critique from within the museum space.*

**Jenny Marketou** Do you think ‘creative hacking’ can intertwine with mainstream visual culture successfully? And what could be the role of the institution vis-à-vis the hacktivist artist? My argument here is what happens when the forces of the institution are confronted with radical, hacktivist net art aesthetics, when the emphasis is on direct action, transparency and agency? Or do you think that the museums and the commercial galleries are no longer interesting places for radical art practice? What are our options?

**Ricardo Dominguez** As you have pointed out, another larger social dynamic occurring around the institutional encounter, even with a digitally



correct network\_art\_activist project like the ‘Minds of Concern’, are the pre- and post-9/11 rhetoric of cyber-terrorism and cyber-crime that they are unable to see beyond. They fall easily before the digital hysteria of Empire and Terrorism just because they are using an ISP that did not support them – rather than spending time seeking out an ISP like thing.net that might have an understanding of the aesthetic and political questions involved in a work of this nature.

While many years of active education of the cultural institutions by artists working between art and politics during the twentieth century have taken place around the critique and disruption of the architecture of the museum/gallery and its policies of presentation, they fail to grasp its function within network architecture. These same institutions have not been able to leap into the networks and transfer over that history of encounters. For instance, a performance artist might receive more aesthetic and institutional support for chaining themselves to the outside doors of a museum or gallery to block access to them as a political performance than a project like the Electronic Disturbance Theater’s ‘Zapatistas Tribal Port Scan’ (2000). Not that one is a better performance than the other, but that the somatic architecture of networks is not as well understood by these cultural institutions.

One can also say much the same thing about CAE’s bio-political performances and institutional response to GenTerra as a legal question rather than a political aesthetic question: something that the museum/gallery would not do in the case of bio-formalist art along the line of Kac’s work. Formalism has been the main containment filter during the last half of the twentieth century – it will probably continue to do the same during the next half of this century (if we all live that long) – it is a very handy ideological tool. The nature of a radical transparency and direct action aesthetics as hacktivist gestures will not receive support from these older traditional spaces – until more projects like the one you have just done are done. Pedagogy is the primary event space right now for network\_art\_activism, rather than aesthetic or critical reflection within the institution.

But, even then, are these the spaces that we should seek support from? Most network\_art\_activism carried out during the 1990s existed outside the cultural institution and can continue to do so. But, if we do not pursue the artist’s right to present political art via code in the museum/gallery, we would lose one of the few spaces left that allows the possibility of presenting an important form of knowledge (art) that is not bound to science and technology to develop important social questions and ruptures.

**JM** As Lawrence Lessig puts it: ‘Free content is crucial to building and supporting new content. The raw material of Culture is Culture.’ Recently contemporary policies and practices towards the digital commons have changed. How do you see the future? Could the creative ‘hack’ with the ethics of ‘open source’ intermixed with the superfluity economy of the internet possibly attempt to maintain the richness and diversity of the public domain?

**RD** I am not sure only one way or one method can suture all of these elements together as a full-spectrum response. A swarm response will

probably offer us a better way to keep the public domain ‘rich and diverse’ online and offline. At one end of the spectrum we should have legal activism on a local, national and international level; and on the other end continue to push ‘creative’ hack crews to open more spaces, like ‘Freenet’ or the ‘Peek-a-booty’ browser by Cult of the Dead Cow. Tactical media projects should continue forward at pre-9/11 levels and at full speed, since they are not all dependent on the ‘superfluity’ of digital economies and can continue to distribute free/shareable content. At the same time the digital Agora must be pushed deeper into materiality of the social across the arcs of the world. The digital commons must become more aware of what is happening beyond code as it relates to globalisation and code’s relationship to its own expansion.

Those artists who crisscross between these spaces must bring to the foreground issues that are supposed to have been erased by the digital delirium: race, gender and class. No matter how much we hear the virtual mantra about race, gender and class no longer existing or being important it is simply not true. We now face a ‘War On Terrorism’ that is part of a global race war that is also being used to dismantle whatever small gains have been made towards democratic values around gender and class. The ‘Open Source’ movement and related digital issues, while interesting, are not going to develop solutions to these more complex issues and create the links between the global south and north that are needed to construct the alter-globalisation that will be necessary.

**JM** Taking into account your past involvement with Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) how do you describe electronic civil disobedience as ‘disturbance’ in the rhizomatic networks of power, as CAE describe it in their book, *The Electronic Disturbance*, as the only viable avenue for oppositional artistic practice in our time of globalisation? How has this altered your artistic production?

**RD** My artistic production has always been focused on developing ‘disturbance’ spaces as material/immaterial gestures within the ‘social imaginary’ that can be amplified by ubiquitous technologies – be it in traditional theatre productions, performance art, net art, or network\_art\_activism – even the pre-digital work functioned as contestational trajectories. I do not sense a deep alteration in my work between my collaborations with CAE and EDT, but a continuation of the same work under different signs.

The function of ‘disturbance’ for me is a hybrid between Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theatre and the Situationist gesture. It allows for visceral and political poetics to carve out social spaces for mass and intimate protest that can now be polyspatial. As for the ‘disturbance’ of rhizomatic power flows – this can be done if one understands that the flows of Virtual Capital are still uni-directional, that it has always been a one-way flow: steal from the bottom and keep it all on top; take from the South and keep it in the North, IMF growing and Argentina dying, Chiapas asking for Democracy and NAFTA deleting Democracy. So rhizomatic power does not lurk in Virtual Capital as a rhizome but as naked neo-imperialism. Rhizomatic power does flow from groups like the Zapatistas who have developed distributed abilities that are not uni-directional. The goal of EDT’s ‘disturbance’ is to block Virtual

Capitalism's race towards weightlessness and the social consequences of a totalised immaterial ethics.

**JM** Critical Art Ensemble advocates the practice of what they call 'Recombinant Theater'. How does this practice intermix with the powerful theatre of resistance that Zapatismo has created in Mexico and around the world that has been expanded in the performative Electronic Disturbance Theater's direct actions online?

**RD** EDT's performance involves a type of Electronic Civil Disobedience; we do not say that it is the only form of Electronic Civil Disobedience. Our gestures staged a simulation of Distributed Denial of Service as the outcome of mass agency and digital liminality. We move among net hacking, net activism, net performance, net art, and those who have no net link at all. To me this intermixing of social Zones is what CAE meant by 'recombinant theater'. Remember that according to part of CAE's analysis, Virtual Power was a counter-mapping of Fractal Politics that could be used by resistance groups to leverage the inertia and speed within each of the iterations or spaces of Virtual Power – the military/entertainment complex, the CNN effect, NGOs, the streets and jungles – to invent new dynamics for social interventions from the bottom up. The 'Zapatista FloodNet' and the 'Zapatista Tribal Port Scan' are radical aesthetic data gestures that disturb the ontology of the networks without being bound to the networks – because these gestures play on multiple social spaces in the same instant, or as after effects, or word of mouth (the most important form recombinant theatre as an aspect of Fractal Politics). We also did not ask any cultural institution if we could perform these gestures.

Digital Zapatismo understood within a few minutes of ripping into the electronic fabric in 1994 that the Fractal Politics of the web was different to that of the networks. Networks were about flawless code for command and control; the web was built in abandoned spaces and symbolic efficacy between data trash and discarded groups. Networks are about utilitarian rationality, the web is about an ontology of empathy; networks function under the teleology of robust infrastructure, the web creates a strong social imaginary that can re-route around lack of access. EDT's performative matrix has come to understand Digital Zapatismo as a type of theatrical empathy that the web can offer network\_art\_activism.

(Swarm the Future Now)

Now Calit2 is giving unlimited support for the performative utopianism of EDT's version of ECD that can at its best inject a critical humanism into the edges of high technology. As Fredric Jameson suggests, one possible outcome of a utopian gesture:

... is not to bring into focus the future to coming to be, but rather to make us conscious precisely of the horizons or outer limits of what can be thought and imagined in our present.<sup>10</sup>

10 Phillip E Wegner, 'Horizons, Figures and Machines: The Dialectic of Utopia in the Work of Fredric Jameson', *Utopian Studies*, 9:2, 1988, p 61

We must mind the gaps that are circulating around ECD now by swarming on the delays, discontinuities and retrenchments that are more than likely to be haunting this institutional setting. As the Zapatistas like to say, sometimes 'the apple falls up!'

# Participants of *campbaltimore*, USA

In Discussion with

Gregory Sholette

Baltimore, Maryland is a primarily working-class, port city close to the nation's capital. Long dependent on shipping, it remains a largely impoverished and racially segregated city with fifty-six percent of its male African-American residents incarcerated. Like so many other cities in the United States and Europe, Baltimore is undergoing rapid gentrification aimed at attracting professionals, service and cultural workers. In the summer of 2005 several meetings took place involving a dozen or so art students from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Seeking to examine their own place within this broader urban context they were simultaneously inspired by the work of curators Chris Gilbert and his partner Ciria Pascual Marquina who were, at the time, serving as curators at two local cultural institutions, the Baltimore Museum of Art and The Contemporary. The study group set out to explore the relation between art and activism, and eventually became engaged in local struggles against gentrification, police surveillance and the prison industry. Influenced by the tactics of Reclaim the Streets as well as other DIY and tactical media collectives, the group chose the name *campbaltimore* and set about organising a series of carefully researched exhibitions, publications, political meetings, social gatherings and street performances that culminated in the transformation of a portable utility trailer into a mobile kitchen, information centre, stage, sewing workshop, video studio and outdoor cinema. The trailer was used to reclaim public spaces and initiate social and educational events in collaboration with other activists across the city. Last summer, the trailer was stationed outside Red Emma's, a local anarchist bookstore, when the police intervened. Eventually, several key members of *campbaltimore* began to question what they saw as the limits of tactical and artistic interventions. This in turn led to the dissolution of the group as members decided to confront a similar range of political and urban problems either individually or in smaller units. What follows is a discussion with two former members who describe the short-lived yet highly energetic collective, as well as



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

their own ambivalence regarding artistic interventions and collaborative practice.

**Gregory Sholette** Could you briefly describe how you came together?

**Scott Berzofsky** We were all art students in Baltimore who decided to stay in the city after graduation instead of moving to New York or attending an MFA programme as most people do. Three of us started collaborating on a research-based project about urbanism in Baltimore, and others began to meet as part of a study group that Chris Gilbert organised in conjunction with his two-year cycle of exhibitions called 'Cram-Sessions' at the BMA. 'Cram-Sessions' was about testing the agency of the museum exhibition as an organising tool, using the gallery space for workshops and meetings about collectivity, activism and self-organised education. Over time the two groups merged, based on what I think was a shared desire for some kind of community or discourse that we felt was missing outside of school. We initially intended to work together organising discussions and events, but eventually we began to collaborate directly with local activists in Baltimore, partially through our participation in two exhibitions organised by Chris's partner Cira Pascual Marquina at the Contemporary Museum. These exhibitions, '(Re)living Democracy' and 'Headquarters: Investigating the Creation of the Ghetto and the Prison Industrial Complex', extended the experiments of 'Cram-Sessions', engaging explicitly with local political struggles around housing, gentrification, day labour, policing and prisons.

**GS** Why the name *campbaltimore*?





campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

**SB** At first we were resistant to naming our group at all, thinking that we could avoid institutional and market co-optation by not producing a pre-packaged identity. But at some point we decided to create a website and that forced us to come up with a name. In some ways the name *campbaltimore* was invented arbitrarily, but it did obviously refer to the city in which we were working, as well as to other things like a campus or campaign.

**GS** Would you say that the training of your group as fine artists influenced the work you all did as activists? And if so, can you be specific and tell me how and what your group did that you think other types of professionals might not have been able to do?

**Nicholas Wisniewski** Generally speaking, even the most traditional forms of fine art training such as painting can teach a kind of un-alienated working process that is social, critical and utopian. Art schools are very supportive and liberating environments for experimental practices – like laboratories for invention, production, play, research, drifting, whatever. But they can also be quite conservative places that promote regressive desires for individual recognition, institutional legitimacy and market success.

**SB** Two other features of an art school education that could have contributed to the way we worked on projects are learning to be good self-educators and the ability to work on projects in a responsive and self-reflexive way, without knowing what the final outcome will be. Another thing that distinguished our approach from that of other activists was that we were not focused on one specific issue, such as housing



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

or labour, but rather worked to seek out the connections and relationships between multiple issues.

**GS** Organisationally speaking, did you have a model in mind for the way you functioned as a collective?

**SB** One of the first times we spoke with you, Greg, I remember talking about how the history of organisational models has not been adequately written, and as a result groups are left to ‘reinvent the wheel’ time and time again. This was the case in my experience, where we were searching for a model without much direction. But we did have some contact with the 16 Beaver group,<sup>1</sup> and their practice informed our discussions about self-organisation and collectivity.

**NW** It was pretty chaotic. I think the best way to understand our organisational structure is that there was no one model. Depending on the situation we tended to appropriate models from different places. There was never a consensus about group process, it was more of an ongoing negotiation. In a sense, all of our activities were attempts at self-organisation, experimenting with different tools for facilitating communication and building solidarity.

1 16 Beaver is the address of a space in New York’s Financial District initiated and run by artists to maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production and discussion of a variety of artistic, cultural, economic and/or political projects, see <http://www.16beavergroup.org/>

2 <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>

**SB** We tried to be as horizontal and democratic as possible in our internal group process, but in reality hierarchies and centralised power formations emerge if there is no structure in place to protect these principles. Jo Freeman gives a good analysis of this tendency in her essay ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’,<sup>2</sup> arguing that there is no such thing as a ‘structureless’ group and that such concepts often work to mask uneven power relations. It is much easier to talk about ideals of horizontality and democracy than it is to enact them. In our case, while we talked constantly about these ideals, big decisions were sometimes made by a centralised group of individuals who lived together and would establish



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

an informal consensus before addressing the rest of the group. In the future I'd try to avoid this by establishing clear structures for decision-making from the beginning. We often have an aversion to establishing structures because we associate them with oppressive forms of authority, but they can be useful tools for ensuring accountability, transparency and equality within a group.

In our collaborations with other groups and individuals we were very inclusive and open to people's ideas, in some cases to the extent that we sacrificed our own authorial agency. This was another major challenge: as artists with a relative degree of privilege and an 'outsider' status in relation to some of the groups we worked with, many of us felt reluctant to impose our own ideas out of fear of being perceived as arrogant or exploitative. In this way, we sometimes risked becoming passive facilitators of other people's projects, leading to the frustration of some in the group who felt their creativity was inhibited. While we must always be cautious of the many potential problems associated with community-based projects (just read Miwon Kwon or Grant Kester's critiques of such work), we also can't be over-sensitive and allow them to paralyse us and pre-empt any attempt to invent something new.

**GS** How hard was it to make contact with some of the activists you worked with in Baltimore as privileged 'outsiders' and as college students? Did any simply refuse to work with you?

**SB** We made contact with activists and organisers through a process of informal networking, meeting one person who would refer us to another and so on. People were generally receptive, more so than I would have anticipated. Of course, we were greeted with some scepticism as young white artists (Baltimore is still extremely racially and economically

segregated), but there were no cases of straight-up rejection that I can think of. Some of the African-American community activists with whom we are now friends have said that they initially told us the superficial stuff they thought we wanted to hear, and became more honest and critical only later, after learning more about our political positions.

**GS** In terms of your relationship to the institutional ‘artworld’ – with the exception of the Contemporary project with Pascual Marquina – were you able to draw other resources from the Baltimore artworld or the cultural press to use for your work?

**SB** We did attempt to instrumentalise whatever minimal resources and cultural capital we had as artists by diverting visibility and access to the media towards activist initiatives (Brian Holmes’s essay ‘Liar’s Poker’ was a key reference here).<sup>3</sup> For example, if a reporter wanted to do a story on one of the exhibitions we worked on we would encourage them to contact the organisers and activists who had collaborated on it, and on a few occasions this resulted in some free publicity or in the broadcasting of an oppositional viewpoint rarely voiced in a mainstream newspaper like the *Baltimore Sun*. Still, this strategy can be risky because of the mainstream or cultural press’s endless capacity to absorb and neutralise criticality. Some activists would say that ‘any publicity is good publicity’, but I’m not sure this is always the case.

**NW** For this reason, we have also worked to establish our own media by starting a free quarterly newspaper called the *Independent Reader* in collaboration with Baltimore Indymedia. The first issue was published with leftover funding from the ‘(Re)living Democracy’ exhibition, as an alternative to a conventional catalogue. It has since developed into a sustainable project of its own, with each issue providing a critical analysis of a local problem and documenting activist initiatives that respond to the problem. It’s about using engaged research and communication as an organising tool, similar to other publications like *AREA Chicago*.

**GS** What was your relationship to these institutions like – the museums, the media, arts administrators – especially when they began to understand the political aim of your work?

**SB** Some figures in the Baltimore artworld, which is fairly provincial and conservative, did seem irritated by the work we were doing, and we quickly got tired of answering predictable questions like, ‘why is this art?’. But other curators and arts administrators have been quite supportive, so I don’t want to generalise. I think an observation by Martha Rosler is relevant here, namely that the artworld will support ‘critique in general’ but grows less tolerant of critiques about specific local issues. This was the case with ‘(Re)living Democracy’, the exhibition we worked on with Lasse Lau about housing and gentrification in Baltimore, during which board members at the Contemporary Museum were opposed to our plan to board up the windows of the institution in a symbolic gesture of bringing the impoverished margins of the city to the centre of the affluent cultural district. They did finally allow us to do it

3 Brian Holmes, ‘Liar’s Poker,’ online at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000943.php>

after Cira threatened to resign, and after they probably considered the negative publicity a censorship scandal would generate.

In that same exhibition, we displayed eviction notices signed by the CEO of a local development corporation that is working with Johns Hopkins University to build a biotech park in a poor African-American neighbourhood in East Baltimore, using eminent domain to displace hundreds of residents. The CEO and officials from the university visited the museum and were apparently quite angry. So we have probably made some enemies.

**GS** Was this a project you worked on with a non-arts community group or one of your own design?

**SB** This was a collaboration between *campbaltimore*, Lasse and several non-arts groups and individuals in East Baltimore including the Save Middle-East Action Committee (SMEAC), an organisation of residents who are being displaced by the biotech park project; Glenn Ross, a local housing and environmental justice activist; KIDS/TEEN SCOOP, a youth-run newspaper; and the Rose Street Community Center, a really active grass-roots organisation involved in everything from neighbourhood clean-ups to operating a transitional house to organising an awareness campaign about homicide in the city.

**NW** We should also point out that our experience working with Cira when she was acting director at the Contemporary Museum was remarkably free from the usual bureaucracy one finds in art institutions. All of this took place during a period of crisis within the institution right after the director unexpectedly resigned and Cira, who had been assistant curator, took on the role of acting director. Her new position gave us [*campbaltimore*] tremendous autonomy as well as full access to the institution's offices and other resources. In addition, Cira identified herself primarily as a participant in our group and *not* as a museum director. So there was a short period of time when the roles of artist, activist and arts administrator truly became blurred. But once the new director was hired our relationship with the museum became much more restricted and antagonistic. We had to play the whole game of justifying our budget expenses, defending the notion that what we were doing was 'art' and constantly resisting the demand to produce representations of activities that happened outside of the museum.

**GS** It seems that your group went in a very short period of time from one based on informal organising and tactical do-it-yourself actions to rethinking the possibility of sustained political work within a specific urban site. But what were some of the key factors in deciding to disband the group identity known as *campbaltimore*?

**SB** For some in the group, the notion of being branded as an 'art collective' became too much of a compromise of political and ethical ideals. In fact, several people have rejected the invitation to participate in this interview based on those same ideals, arguing that such engagements are a distraction from more urgent activities, and that they ultimately perform an affirmative function in relation to the existing order by



presenting an illusion of oppositional culture which symbolically compensates for the actual powerlessness of cultural producers to stop or even slow the destructive course of Empire or military neoliberalism or whichever term you prefer.

In some ways I share this analysis, but we must also avoid essentialist dichotomies such as art versus activism or complicity versus critique. While I reject most aspects of the commercial artworld and the gallery–magazine–museum system that supports it, I still think that the field of contemporary art has some potential to be a space of relative autonomy (and funding) for experimental practices and critical discourses. I would also add that people operating within the ‘activist world’ should give equal scrutiny to the non-profit industrial complex which sustains their activities.

NW I think the group dissolved for several reasons. There was obviously the ideological split regarding the use-value of working within the artworld, where some people took a position of total negation towards the art context in favour of other work deemed more radical or revolutionary. In addition, after a period of intense collective activity during the summer of 2006 ended and we were unable to reconstitute a common project, many questions and differences began to emerge about the direction of the group. We received a couple of invitations to participate in art/academic contexts outside of Baltimore, and the debate about whether or not to accept them became a point of serious contention. We struggled with the task of managing our group image, constantly weighing the potential use-value of symbolic capital against the perceived ethical compromises of career advancement. Ultimately, the group identity of *campbaltimore* and the notion that we had to operate as a unified body in which all decisions were made by consensus became too much of a burden and limitation. So we decided to drop the name and continue working together in a more organic, less centralised way that could accommodate difference and dissensus. Some of us still collaborate on projects like the *Independent Reader*, some are working on an urban farming project and others are starting a community radio station. So in many ways our work has not changed, we have just reconfigured the way we think about it.

## Contributors

**Rozalinda Borcila** is a Romanian artist currently based in the US. Her art/pedagogy/activism attends to the material and subjective spaces of power, and to the ways in which the aesthetic is mobilised within the circuits of capital. She is also active in several autonomous collectives.

**Critical Art Ensemble (CAE)** is a collective of tactical media practitioners of various specialisations, including computer graphics and web design, wetware, film/video, photography, text art, book art, and performance. Formed in 1987, CAE's focus has been on the exploration of the intersections between art, critical theory, technology and political activism. Their most recent publication is *Marching Plague: Germ Warfare and Public Health*.

**Ricardo Dominguez** is a co-founder of the Electronic Disturbance Theater and a former member of Critical Art Ensemble. His recent project is a GPS safety tool for crossing the Mexico/US border. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of California, San Diego, in the Visual Arts Department and Principal Investigator at CALIT2.

**Kirsten Forkert** is an artist, critic, activist and doctoral student in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths in London. Her research focuses on labour issues in the arts and on the political and economic functions of the global artworld. She has written for *Afterimage* (2008), *Hors d'Oeuvres* (2008) and *Fuse* (2007). She is currently working with the PECAN collective, Bowl Court Social Centre and the Micropolitics Research Group.

**Brian Holmes** is a freelance writer and cultural critic. He has recently published *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (2008). He is a member of the journal *Multitudes*, lectures widely and contributes to catalogues, mailing lists, tracts etc. He also collaborates with 16 Beaver group on the Continental Drift seminar.

**Karen Kurczynski** is an art historian teaching at Massachusetts College of Art and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. She is currently working on a monograph on Asger Jorn.

**Ana Longoni** is professor at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. She is a researcher for CONICET and co-founder of CeDInCI (Center of Documentation and Research of Left Culture in Argentina). Individually or collaboratively, she has published *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán Arde'* (2000 and 2008), *Traiciones* (2007), *El Siluetazo* (2008) and others books and articles. She is editor of *ramona* magazine.

**Geert Lovink** is the founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures. In 2004 he was appointed as Research Professor at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam and Associate Professor at the University of Amsterdam. He is the founder of Internet projects such as nettime and fibreculture. His recent book titles are *Dark Fiber* (2002), *Uncanny Networks* (2002) and *My First Recession* (2003); *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (2007); *My Creativity Reader* (with Ned Rossiter), Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2007; *Free Cooperation* (with Trebor Scholz) (2007).

**Yates McKee** is a doctoral candidate in Art History at Columbia University. His work has appeared in *October*, *Grey Room* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. He is associate editor of *Nongovernmental Politics* (2007), and co-editor, with Meg McLagan, of the anthology *The Visual Cultures of Nongovernmental Politics* (Zone, forthcoming).

**Prishani Naidoo**, a writer and researcher in Johannesburg, has been active in Indymedia South Africa, the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Anti-Eviction Campaign.

**Gerald Raunig** is a Philosopher working at the eipcp, Vienna; he is coordinator of the transnational research projects republicart and transform. He is founder of the multilingual webjournal *transversal* and the Austrian journal for radical democratic cultural politics, *Kulturrisse*. Recent books are *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* (2007); *Tausend Maschinen* (2008).

**Gene Ray**, a critic and theorist living in Berlin, is the author of *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory* (2005) and editor of *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy* (2001). He is a contributor to *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War* (2008) and is a member of the Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC).

**Rasha Salti** is an independent curator and freelance writer. She writes about artistic practice in the Arab world. Her articles have been published in Arabic and English, in *al-Ahram Weekly* (Egypt), *The Jerusalem Quarterly Report* (Palestine), *Naqd* (Algeria), *MERIP* (US), *Bidoun* (US), *Mizna* (US), *The London Review of Books*, *The Purple Journal* (US/France), *Afterall* and *Art Journal*.

**Gregory Sholette** is Assistant Professor of Sculpture at Queens College, New York; the co-editor with Blake Stimson of *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (2007); and *The Interventionists: A Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, with Nato Thompson (2004, 2006, 2008). He is a founding member of *Political Art Documentation/Distribution* (1980–1988) and *REPOhistory* (1989–2000).

**Blake Stimson** teaches for the Art History and Critical Theory programmes at the University of California, Davis. Recent books include *The Meaning of Photography*, co-edited with Robin Kelsey (2008); *Collectivism after Modernism*, co-edited with Gregory Sholette (2007); and *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (2006).

**Nato Thompson** is a writer, curator and activist currently working as Curator at Creative Time, a public arts organisation based in New York City. He is presently organising a public arts project, Democracy in America: The National Campaign, focusing on the current and historic position of the democratic project featuring over 100 artists, activists and writers. *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* will be published in 2009.

# Tactical Media at Dusk?

Critical Art Ensemble

*Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.*<sup>1</sup>

Antonio Gramsci

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant wrote a series of works that attempted to salvage the remnants of transcendental categories from the brutal philosophical assault of the Enlightenment thinkers (David Hume in particular). The transcendentalists that followed him (Hegel and Schopenhauer) believed that Kant had surrendered far too much to the secularists, and hoped to regain the ground that Kant had relinquished in the fields of epistemology and ontology by an exhaustive series of studies on the fundamentals of philosophy. Whether we need to go to such extremes in the area of tactical media is dubious; however, a constant reassessment of fundamental principles can never hurt, and may even help given the high speeds with which culture can shift. Serious concerns about tacticality began to show themselves at the *Next 5 Minutes* in 2003, where participants (an international contingent of tactical media users) spent a considerable amount of time discussing a return to an emphasis on strategy. Tactical media practitioners have also felt the impact of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's attempt to rekindle the productive flames of optimism. Persuasive arguments about the opportunities inherent in the transition to global capitalism that anti-capitalist vectors can exploit to re-establish principles of equality, peace, democracy and social justice, and to escape the horrors of Modernity such as fascism, world war, genocide, etc often flirt with orthodox Marxist notions of progress. At the furthest extreme, theorists such as Gene Ray have argued that revolution is again a viable option, and that tactical media should reassess itself through this radical lens. All of these points are well worth discussing and bring us to this moment of self-reflection in which we ask whether the basic principles that have guided not just tactical media, but most cultural interventionist practices over the past fifty years, are still intact, or whether we may be on the verge of a paradigm shift in resistant cultural methodology due to the historic shift in capitalist accumulation and technological development.

1 This phrase appeared regularly on the masthead of a journal called *Ordine Nuovo* of which Antonio Gramsci was the editor.

## TACTICALITY

Ipo facto, 'tacticality' is the defining principle of tactical media (TM). Unlike 'media', a completely open-ended term that refers in this context to the entire catalogue of means to produce and deliver representation (thus having no other imperative than its own existence), tacticality frames (and thus limits) every ontological strata of media expression from identity to production to environment/place. If tacticality is jettisoned from tactical media in favour of strategy then this model of resistance is truly dead, since the current manifestation has no meaning beyond the frame of tacticality.

To complicate matters further, tacticality has never been theorised to a point of consensus among its users. In fact, even the authors of the *ABC of Tactical Media*,<sup>2</sup> David Garcia and Geert Lovink, have not been able to come to complete agreement. On the one hand, Lovink is of the opinion that tacticality is primarily derived from military discourse. Certainly, the root discourse is grounded in military thought. Much about the way in which particular cultural tactics are conceived and executed has been refined through the principles offered by Clausewitz in *On War*.<sup>3</sup> He clearly understood that 'Tactics are the art of the weak', and indeed, deception and trickery are the primary allies of those who must resort to tacticality. The Yes Men, for example, are masters of this element of cultural tacticality, and to some degree all TM users must be. In an age of asymmetrical warfare, the interrelationship of tacticality in the theatres of culture and warfare is quite clear.

On the other hand, David Garcia is quick to cite Michel de Certeau as a central influence, for while military discourse may be quite informative, the cultural manifestation of tacticality should also be informed by cultural discourse in order to capture the subtleties of action within the social sphere that are quite differentiated from those within the world of war. While recognising the significance of military discourse, Garcia insists that precise articulation relevant to cultural interventions rests in culture itself.

With regard to tacticality, CAE believes it behoves us to revisit this key passage on tactics from de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

... a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus... The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the power to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection; it is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision', as von Büllow put it, and within enemy territory. It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a direct, visible, objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position and plan raids.<sup>4</sup>

2 See <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9705/msg00096.html>

3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans JJ Graham, Kegan Paul Trench Trubner, London, 1911

4 Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988

More than the limits on action, this notion of tacticality begins with the relationship to a fundamental lack of territory. To escape the limits of tacticality, we would have to ask ourselves 'Where is our territory?'. For



we seem to have none. From what place can we establish a field of vision that inverts our generic minoritarian relationship to the overall environment? There seems to be no escaping the disciplinary apparatus in which we are enveloped. When have we transcended reactive politics and been the primary agents in setting a sociopolitical agenda, instead of responding to one that is imposed upon us? Never. Perhaps the seeming fatalism and pessimism of tacticality is what keeps us from accomplishing these tasks – a self-fulfilling Baudrillardian prophecy that serves only to invigorate the agencies of domination. While CAE will not go this far in our pessimism, we believe that we have to be quite sober about assessing the possibility of strategic action.

Again, de Certeau:

I call strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as a base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats... can be managed.<sup>5</sup>

Here de Certeau may have underestimated the threat of capitalism by suggesting that institutions can become independent ‘isolated’ powers. While independence does emerge with the centralisation of capital, the interdependence and interrelationships of various institutions must also be recognised. An aggregate power exists that recuperates significant amounts of institutional autonomy. Be that as it may, de Certeau does place strategy out of reach for TM practitioners. But what of our aggregate power as the disenfranchised? Does the Movement of Movements teach us that a new coalition is possible that has a common strategic enemy (pancapitalism) and hence, as long as tactical action is tied to this aggregate strategic initiative, it can have strategic effect?

## SOLIDARITY

In the early 1930s a rather rancorous feud broke out between long-time friends and colleagues, Louis Aragon and André Breton. The bitter argument was over the role of the artist in the revolution. Aragon argued the party line that artists, like any other workers, should submit to the collective good of the Communist party by working in a manner that would best serve its needs. For Breton, that meant making agitprop, decorating floats and designing sets for communist-style passion plays. He wanted nothing to do with a party and a movement that would become the new commandant demanding the repression of desire and creativity in favour of disciplined submission to bureaucratic orders. Finding no way to reconcile with Aragon, Breton left the Communist party.

CAE believes that tactical media left the party as well. Two key principles underlie this separation from ongoing organisational structures. First is an absolute mistrust of bureaucracy. Second is that the method by which TM users produce value needs to be independent of higher powers. While bureaucracies may be a functional form of organisation,

5 Ibid

they are a horrid one. This analysis has long been available whether we look at Marx's (unfinished) examination of the Asiatic mode of production or Max Weber's critique of the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy. Or we can look to history and witness the terror of bureaucratic domination in the former Soviet Union or the violence of the current neoliberal corporate bureaucracy. However one wants to approach the subject of bureaucracy, no one wants to construct one or be a part of one unless forced. And though forced we are, it is not necessary to submit our entire subjecthood to bureaucratic demands. Even if the bureaucracy is potentially necessary, such as a union for example, total submission to the status of worker in this case is a betrayal and disavowal of the many other vectors of becoming that constitute subjectivity. Such betrayals will have very negative consequences on both personal and social levels. For example, we know the many types of bigotry that become institutionalised when workers are not considered from any other subject position. Failure to consider other characteristics such as gender or ethnicity can have a dreadful impact on minorities individually and collectively in spite of the good that workers' organisations may do. The same damage from alienation may be said to occur when invention is limited to that which will advance a specific political agenda. It seems necessary and desirable to keep resistant cultural practice as removed as possible from bureaucratic envelopment.

The transition out of organising around unions, committees, parties, etc for politicised cultural workers began in the 1980s, not surprisingly paralleling the rise of the 'new politics of difference' to use Cornel West's term. A movement such as Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America (AC) is emblematic of the shift. Organised on a large scale, AC functioned as a point of political dissent for consciousness-raising and fund-raising purposes aimed at stopping US intervention in Central America. What is most interesting about AC is that it could have solidified into a bureaucracy, but did not. The central organisers could have simply picked a new cause and continued on their way, but instead they chose to dissolve the organisation when the immediate need came to an end. Over and over again, from Women's Action Coalition to White Overalls, the dynamic of organisational construction followed by rapid deconstruction has prevented cooptation by the status quo or the solidification of a centralised power. These self-terminating organisations stopped short of taking ownership of a territory that would make strategic (on de Certeau's terms) planning and action possible, primarily because no one has found the means to undermine the exploitive and alienating tendencies of territorialisation.

The other key observation is that TM is not typically the tool of coalitions. Its tendency is toward affinity groups and small collectives. Much of this has to do with methodology. TM has two common functions. The first is pedagogical – one that is established through ideological interventions in an effort to crack the illusion of hyperreality. The second is to create tools and models that can be useful to resistance movements on any scale. Both of these functions, but particularly the latter, require research and experimentation, which require time. Time is a commodity of which resistance political organisations always have little, since they are always in a position of reactivity. TM researchers need time to explore and, more significantly, to risk failure. Experimental cultural

research, like all experimental research, is tied to trial and error. It does not necessarily move fast. For this reason, research is rather impractical in reactive spheres of action, but it must be done.<sup>6</sup> TM has been very successful as a research wing for resistant movements because it exists in a different temporal field from specific movements.

To sacrifice these functions for the possibility of discussing strategy – which necessarily entails seamless solidarity with a particular movement – seems to be a waste of the talent that has amassed around TM. CAE also suspects that few TM users have the inclination or temperament to surrender autonomy or submit themselves to the scale of organisation required to make strategic planning and action viable.

## UTOPIA

What are TM users working towards? Strategy needs an endgame – that final moment when the world will be wonderful, inviting and pleasurable. Unfortunately, the strategic principle that delivered this future vision of perfection seems to have died an ugly death some time in the early 1970s. The design for a future utopia that is not perceived as little more than a fairytale seems to have fallen into the category of the impossible. A quick survey of the popular conceptions of utopia on the left from the twentieth century leaves only a very abstract description of a social order that sounds nice in thought but seems unable to manifest itself in material reality.

Certainly the most popular leftist utopian vision from the last century was indebted to Charles Fourier the century before. His ideas were the foundation for dropout culture (his more psychotic notions aside). His massive work is difficult to summarise, but here are a few key influential principles:

- 1 Civilisation, as conceived in the West, is absurd and must be abandoned.
- 2 Preindustrial, precapitalist life was the most ideal. Everything necessary for human pleasure could be produced under these conditions or would be given by nature. The tools of industry should be minimal, but when employed be thoroughly aestheticised.
- 3 No one should be forced to work. Everyone should get a ‘social minimum’ (wage) that would allow them to live without discomfort. Without alienation, people are naturally productive, especially if labour is made ‘attractive’. By ‘attractive’, Fourier meant that production should be full of events, contests and surprises in a delightful atmosphere from which people could come and go as they pleased.
- 4 Pleasure and happiness are based in one’s relationship to food and sex (and not in the collection of useless industrial commodities of excess). Along with the social minimum, everyone would receive a sexual minimum.

Fourier went on to write in painstaking detail how this utopia would look and function. No stone is left unturned and a beautiful vision is presented – but an impossible one, as those who tried it in the nineteenth

6 One successful example of invention comes from the Institute for Applied Autonomy’s *TXTMob*, which acts as a mobile phone B-Board for distributing texts on a mass scale easily and fast. This tool was used by the coalition protesting US government policy at the Republican convention in New York City as well as by participants in the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine.

century (especially in America) soon found out, as did the mass of dropout culture adherents in the mid-twentieth century. The abandonment of civilisation had to be total, otherwise its forces (and sometimes those of nature or other unruly elements) would come calling to recuperate what they believe to be their own.

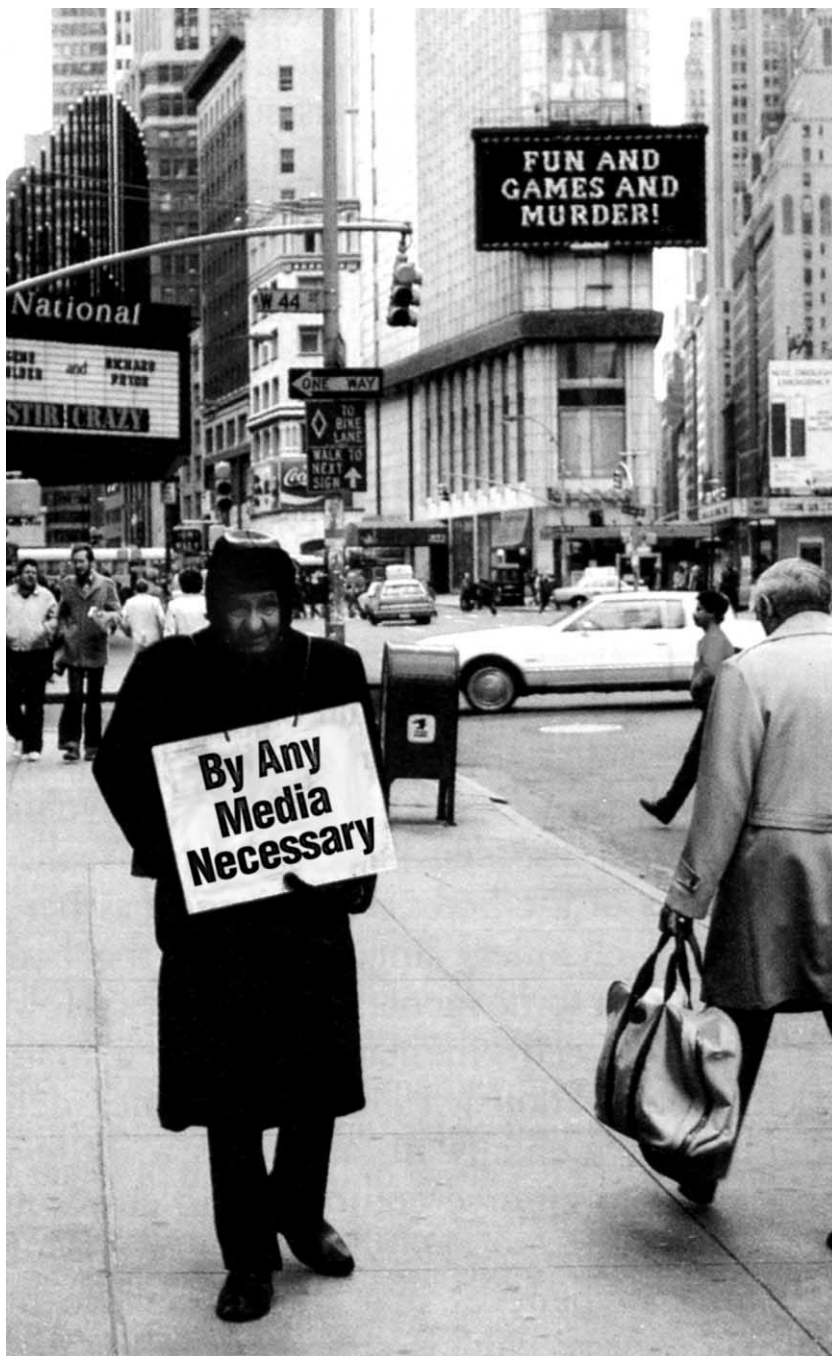
The Marxist utopian vision has also lost its credibility. Certainly, the Soviet Bloc saw to that. However, even in its most utopian form, it remains a science fiction fantasy found in the socialist optimism of *Star Trek*. In this narrative, people have become so productive, due to the excess of technological optimisation, that material value implodes. Anyone can go to a replicator and receive anything she/he desires. Since there is no need to work for purposes of material accumulation, people can instead spend their days working to improve themselves and the fate of humankind – a life of unalienated productivity, equality and justice. Unfortunately, throughout the twentieth century, capitalism's ability to infinitely expand the possibility for accumulation was underestimated. The age of imperialism and regional accumulation was just another step towards an even grander global phase of accumulation. It appears that Marx's dystopian vision of the pauperisation of the proletariat (now meaning everyone but the neoliberal elite and their servants) is coming to pass instead.

The Situationists had their own utopian vision. This view was a mix of the best of Marx, Fourier and Berkmanesque Anarchism. In abstraction it sounds wonderful and has been exceptionally influential over the past fifty years. In principle it argues for an emergent productive power through a decentralised base structure (a distributed network in contemporary jargon) that would protect citizens from the abuses of centralised power (which to the Situationists was inherently corrupt), so that everyone has a stake in the political process. Everyone would escape the oppression of work and the glue of social solidarity would be love (said without irony). An environment that fuels the engines of becoming in continuous defiance of the creation of a material status quo would be the goal of all social planning and architecture. But then come the statements about workers' councils and assemblies, and it all starts to look a bit dubious again. As always, the devil is in the details.

Among the most enduring models of the late twentieth century is Hakim Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zone*<sup>7</sup> (for which he owes a big tip of the hat to the Italian *Autonomia* movement). So many of the perennial problems with utopian theory disappear. Starting from the premise that in the current situation (of neoliberalism) revolution is suicidal, and hence utopia must emerge through another process, Bey suggests thinking smaller in scale both in terms of time and space. If smaller autonomous zones that are relatively free of capitalist imperatives can be created, and perhaps networked, then a viable alternative to capitalist culture could emerge. Emphasis is on the emergent – no more top-down party politics. Power should flow from the grassroots up. The big difference separating Bey from his predecessors is that TAZ is possible, and we know it is possible by experience. What he describes is not just a hopeful principle. Bey's theory also recognises the problem of difference in that the parts making the whole can be extremely different as well as differentiated. In fact, difference is encouraged as something desirable. However, Bey's particular vision has a limited or in the worst

7 Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, 1991

case no strategic value, in that its argument is that we can sneak and struggle for some pleasant empowering moments here and there, but mostly life in capitalist hegemony is going to be fairly awful. In other words, Bey's optimism is tempered by a sharp political critique, and thus it reads as plausible. This is the world of tacticality. Unfortunately, when



Critical Art Ensemble, *By Any Media Necessary*, poster, 2000, photo: CAE



we compare the TAZ with the strategic utopian visions of the neoliberals, it pales in comparison. The hyperreality produced by brilliant marketing and a virtual monopoly on distributive media convinces many that the neoliberal agenda is hurtling them toward a perfect utopia of total privatisation and open markets that allows anyone with a better idea to enter its perfect meritocracy. All ‘individuals’ will get what they deserve. Neoliberal forces have the strategic power to marshal a concept like utopia and use it towards their own ends, and unlike the left they also have means for revolution.

## REVOLUTION

Nestled in the comfort of historical hindsight, one can look back at the late 1960s and early ’70s and come to understand that this era is typically *misperceived* in contemporary culture as a time when leftist revolution ruled in the West. CAE does not want to underplay the many gains that occurred through difficult and brutal struggles during this time, or argue that a series of significant *uprisings* and movements did not occur. We are only saying that a leftist revolution did not happen in the advanced capitalist economies of the West. Ironically enough, however, the first phase of a revolution was taking place in the US, but it was not from the left. This revolution was coming from the far right. One in which a ‘military-industrial complex’ desired by ‘a small group of Texas oilmen’, to quote President Eisenhower, would grow into the neoliberal hegemony we know today. During the late 1960s, economic forces and the state came into such extreme contradiction that the state had to be remade to accommodate the neoliberal vision of the opening of world markets (except to labour) and accumulations of assets on a global scale. The first strategic step was to take the presidency. Once accomplished, only one important secondary goal failed – the centralisation of power in the presidency. Nixon failed in his gambit to place the presidency above the law (Reagan accomplished this goal a decade later by running illegal covert operations out of the White House without penalty), but their other goals were achieved. Controlling inflation and opening all foreign markets (a ‘pro-business’ climate) became the central concerns of the government in conjunction with the dispossession of public resources into private hands and dismantling the welfare state (a job completed by Clinton). The first neoliberal utopia was successfully established in Chile in 1973, and in that same year Saudi Arabia was subdued and became an American client state. These were strategic actions; this was revolution with global implications.

Be that as it may, one very important resistance model, essential for the development of TM, did emerge during the 1960s. Resisters to the authoritarian tendencies of the time came to understand that while the contradictions between economy and state are of primary importance, they are not of sole importance. Cultural contradiction could significantly contribute to the success of many ongoing struggles. The construction of cultures of opposition by groups such as the Situationists, Provos, the Diggers, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the Youth International Party and cultures of disappearance (the various forms of anonymous dropout culture) was enthusiastically undertaken.

The culture of opposition is the well-spring of ideas from which TM emerges, and it began with an understanding of culture not as a determined superstructure but as a causal variable in the formation of political economy. As economy, politics and social relations become ever more indistinguishable in the post-Ford era, TM (and cultural intervention in general) becomes all the more important as a model for resistance.

Can a cultural movement bring on a revolution? In light of the historical record, CAE's opinion is that it cannot. However, we are willing to entertain the *possibility* of a slower evolutionary change of equal profundity. To quote Félix Guattari only seven years after the failure of May 1968:

Some people say that social turmoil in the United States during the 1960s or in France in 1968, was a spontaneous event – transitory, marginal – and that such utopian revolutions lead nowhere. But in my opinion important things only started happening *after* [emphasis in the original] that revolution, which was probably the last revolution in the old style.<sup>8</sup>

Guattari sees the 1960s as a revolution, certainly a failed one, or the *after* would not mean so much. Be that as it may, the modern concept is historically dead for advanced capitalist economies. This notion is echoed by Hardt and Negri three decades later in the claim that revolution as understood in modernity (with the opposition being 'people's armies') is finished. The guerrilla warfare emblematic of peasant revolt also has no place within the historical conditions of post-Fordism.

This position should be taken as pragmatism, not pessimism. Both Guattari and Hardt and Negri have suggestions for what can be undertaken, but in neither case is it revolutionary in a traditional sense. For both it is a slow cultural revision constructed around tactical (not strategic) interventions in everyday life that eventually network and flourish. For Guattari, the answer is 'molecular revolution'. Guattari's choice of 'molecular' is very unfortunate for it causes a great deal of confusion due to its intense association with scale. Guattari, in his dislike for the tyranny of Enlightenment rationality, has an equal dislike for quantity and prefers instead to hover around the category of quality. By 'molecular revolution', he meant transformations in arrangements of desire into dynamic heterogeneities that open fields of possibility for activities of liberation – or, conversely, for the destruction of master narratives that maintain social and political forms of subjugation. The performance and ramifications of molecular or micro activity can be small or large, but they are always profound. For Guattari, an interventionist project that successfully intervened in the structure of semiotic subjugation, by introducing new arrangements for enunciation, would be praiseworthy even if it only benefited a few at a particular time and would be of equal importance as a molecular revolution that has global impact. One may not necessarily think of the molecular having global impact, but from Guattari's position it can. For example, when Margaret Sanger suggested the idea for the birth control pill, her goal was to better control the birthing habits of poor women. What occurred instead was the liberation of desire on a mass scale, as those able to give birth were freed from its imposition on their desires and behaviours, and

8 Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy: Soft Subversions*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1996

were instead able to turn mothering into a selectable subject position. This too was molecular revolution. As Guattari states: ‘Through systematic decentering of desire, micropolitical analysis will lead to soft subversions and imperceptible revolutions that will eventually change the face of the world.’<sup>9</sup>

Hardt and Negri take a slightly retooled model from *Autonomia*. The primary shift is due to the impact of the politics of difference on how they conceive of the tactical use of biopower (not to be confused with Foucault’s notion of it). Hardt and Negri still envision a cultural resistance where smaller, flexible vectors create new forms of subjectivity and new forms of life/living that will eventually network together as more and more nodes of anti-capitalist alternatives appear on the cultural landscape. Capital will rot from within from the corruption it generates and the struggles levied against it. If we forgive the implicit Marxist historical fatalism, what should be left is a decentralised, democratic form of organisation that values difference as well as differentiation. This activity is based on two key principles, the first of which CAE believes motivates any TM user:

Each form of organisation must grasp the opportunity and the historical occasion offered by the current arrangement of forces in order to maximise its ability to resist, contest, and/or overthrow ruling forms of power.<sup>10</sup>

What Hardt and Negri are referring to is tacticality (as in de Certeau’s quote above). ‘The second principle is the need for the form of political and military organisation to correspond to the current economic forms of economic and social production.’<sup>11</sup> Farewell to the revolution.

Some might ask, ‘But what of Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Mumbai, Gleneagles, etc. Is this not revolution?’ We must be very sober in assessing these actions, for we do not want to move forward by way of our fantasies and even delusions (let’s leave that to the neocons). Certainly, these actions were very significant for two reasons. First, the resistance showed capital that it would not find smooth space simply by abandoning regionalised imperialism. Alternative globalisation forces are onto that move. Second, and possibly more importantly, new forms of networks, alliances and coalitions relevant to current conditions are in the process of invention and emergence. The downside is that what we have seen so far on a mass scale has not been able to produce self-sustaining alternative social constellations. Protests are only protests; they remain in the realm of tacticality. The expansion of the neoliberal agenda has moved forward with only a modest amount of *strategic* resistance coming out of South America and the Middle East. Some tactical victories have been gained – for example, the Zapatistas in Mexico or the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, but for the most part the situation is as dire as ever and getting worse. No nation is contributing more to this disaster than the US, which is currently controlled by a fascist executive branch.

9 Ibid

10 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in The Age of Empire*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2005

11 Ibid

## PESSIMISM

While the unconscionable behaviour of the G8, the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank continues unabated with devastating effects in

developing nations, the situation in the US may be darker than it has ever been. A historical hiccup has occurred that has thrown the US back into the horrors of modernity. All of the terrors we were supposed to have escaped via historical conditions – fascism, world war, nuclear war, genocide, etc – are either back or on the verge of coming back. This current full-spectrum catastrophe has had a tremendous impact on TM users in the US and, CAE would suspect, to a lesser but a still measurable degree everywhere, because the consequences of this situation spill over the border and resonate around the world. TM practitioners in the US find themselves in the situation of having to look away from the global struggle in order to focus on the nightmare at home. War, nationalism (ie bigotry), natural disaster, constitutional collapse, electoral politics, prisons, poverty, health crises, environmental disaster, and so on, have become the immediate and representative points of reaction for resistant forces.

The origin of this general problem is found in the slow rise of the neoconservative movement – a ‘radical’ (as William Kristol calls it) right-wing (fascist) movement bent on the creation of *Pax Americana* (though ‘Pox Americana’ might be more accurate). Its roots in government date back to the Halloween Massacre of 1975 during the Ford administration<sup>12</sup> and consistently expanded through the Reagan/Bush administrations, finally coming to full fruition during the Bush Jr administration. In 1990, the neoconservatives wrote up their battle plan in the document *Rebuilding America’s Defenses* (RAD). For the most part they have followed this blueprint with only modest reconfigurations. The first principle of the document is that the solution to all political and economic problems is military force. The bulk of the document details how this force should be constructed so it is capable of fighting on several fronts. This has been Donald Rumsfeld’s goal since joining the presidential cabinet. Rumsfeld, as delusional as he is, probably still believes that small forces (100–150,000 troops) reinforced with high-tech weaponry can quickly and easily defeat any enemy. According to the neoconservatives, with this formation, multiple wars could be fought at any given moment, and this could be done with a volunteer army. Second, the military budget for the development and manufacture of advanced weapons should be without limits. To quote the report: ‘the process of transformation [must be] treated as an enduring mission worthy of a constant allocation of dollars and forces’.<sup>13</sup> The original first target was North Korea, to be followed by the Middle East (Iraq and Iran). After 9/11, the sequence changed according to opportunity.

RAD also outlines the militarisation of the entire culture and all related environments. The document is sprinkled with their dystopic future vision – an Orwellian universe that exists only for war and brutal domination. To give a couple of examples:

... ‘combat’ likely will take place in new dimensions: space, ‘cyber-space’ and perhaps the world of microbes [by this they mean both nanotechnology and germ warfare].<sup>14</sup>

And

Control of the sea could largely be determined not by fleets of surface combatants and aircraft carriers, but from land and space based systems,

12 The Halloween Massacre occurred on 4 November 1975. Gerald Ford was convinced by Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney to reorganise his cabinet in a manner that represented a stronger commitment to radical right politics as a way to appeal to conservatives in the next election. Most notably Henry Kissinger was relieved of duty as National Security Advisor – the Kissinger policy of détente, deterrence, and non-proliferation was at an end. Donald Rumsfeld was made Secretary of Defense, and Dick Cheney was made Chief of Staff.

13 Richard Halloran, *To Arm a Nation: Rebuilding America’s Defenses*, Macmillan, New York, 1986, position paper posted on the neocon site Project for the New American Century (account suspended).

14 Ibid

forcing navies to maneuver and fight underwater. Space itself will become a theater of war, as nations gain access to space capabilities and come to rely on them; further, the distinction between military and commercial space systems – combatants and noncombatants – will become blurred.<sup>15</sup>

RAD explicitly detail full spectrum dominance of space, the Internet and the micro world must parallel the full spectrum dominance of the geopolitical world.

The fascist tendency for military fetishism is overwhelmingly clear. The signers and implementers of this document are indulging themselves in a consensual hallucination. Pumped up by the hubris stemming from their ridiculous notion that their plans and acts of aggression defeated the Soviets, the neocons believe their military functions like a magic wand and as a product of destiny. Anyone who sees this magic force will throw down their weapons and submit to US rule, and their latent desire to be like Americans will manifest. But they do not stop there.

To accompany this transformation of the US into a military state and the world into a little America, they began another of their long cherished initiatives – to centralise power in the executive branch by making the president an absolute sovereign with exclusive world rights for pre-emptive attack. Through the use of signing statements and a full frontal attack on the constitution, culminating in the Military Commissions Act of 2006 (roughly analogous to Hitler's Enabling Act), the president was placed above the law. Habeas Corpus was suspended;<sup>16</sup> the president usurped the right of the judicial branch to interpret treaties (thus allowing pre-emptive strikes, illegal prisons, torture, etc); forced self-incrimination became acceptable in the courts (contrary to the Fifth Amendment, evidence acquired under torture was now admissible); mass widespread surveillance without warrants or court oversight was legalised. The Constitution of the United States was and still is in a shambles.

Two objections tend to be raised when CAE calls the neocons fascists. (We do admit that the term is often inappropriately used when describing right-wing ideologues.) The first is, where are the genocides indicative of all extreme authoritarian positions? The US-backed Israeli war of aggression against the Palestinians is approaching that level of destruction, and we shall see what happens in Iraq (the tendency is beginning to express itself). Many would argue that the disproportionate imprisonment of black men in the US also approaches genocide. At the beginning of the neocon revolution in 1981, 450,000 Americans were in jail. Now over 6 million are in the criminal justice system and 2.2 million behind bars with an inordinate number of black men in the system. We do not know how many people are in the secret jails the US has created around the world. Moreover bigotry has been consistently used by the conservative party to win elections – such as the attacks on gays and lesbians, on people of Islamic faith, and on 'illegal aliens' (a means to fan the flames of bigotry against Hispanics in general). All the elements historically leading to genocide are there. While we have not seen a final solution yet, we should not underestimate the brutality of the neocons, and what they might do in the future if there were no longer political or social checks on their power. Consider this passage from *Rebuilding America's Defenses*:

15 Ibid

16 While Habeas Corpus has supposedly not been suspended for American citizens in principle, in actuality it has. Habeas Corpus has to be universal in order to offer protection. Once arrested in its suspension, how can a citizen prove he/she is one if he/she has no right to a court date or an attorney?





Critical Art Ensemble, *Fear Power*, poster, 2006, photo: CAE

And advanced forms of biological warfare that can ‘target’ specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.<sup>17</sup>

Thankfully such a microbe does not exist and would be incredibly hard to manufacture. Unfortunately, the neocons are thinking about how to commit genocide and – just as with unleashing the war machine in the Middle East and against US citizens – they are waiting for the right time and the right means.

The second objection is that neoliberal free-market imperatives and the centralisation of power in the executive branch are in contradiction. No classic fascist would support such extreme market deregulation. Bush often finds himself ensnared by this very contradiction; for example his need to cultivate prejudice on the US’s southern border to win votes for the conservative party conflicts with giving business access to the most vulnerable, powerless people in the Americas for maximum exploitation. This problem is what keeps the neocons from perfectly replicating classic fascism. However, from their position, there is no difference between their positions in political office and their positions in the corporate world. For them, these are not competing spheres of power, but overlapping interdependent ones.

Is CAE pessimistic? Yes, but we still believe in the pleasure and effectiveness of tacticality, and will continue in the struggle to the best of our ability – permanent cultural resistance. The fundamentals have not really changed over the past five decades. Certainly they must be retooled and freshly articulated by each generation (no more love-ins) to fit specific needs and adjusted to historical and technological shifts, but until a major shift out of post-Fordism occurs, CAE does not see any major paradigm shift on the horizon. So while we remain open to strategic initiatives, we have yet to see a foundation for them outside limited geographic and cultural areas (Venezuela for example). The problems of alienation and the centralisation of power as inseparable from political and economic abuse have yet to be solved in the sphere of strategy. Such a treatise would be the precondition for a discussion of strategy. Moreover, while many unified theories and global maps of capitalist globalisation (strategic discourse) have surfaced over the past fifty years, no one has yet explained how to use them in a strategic manner. In the end, CAE can only conclude by reiterating that one of the most essential revolutionary qualities is patience.

17 Halloran, Op cit



# Swarmachine

## Activist Media Tomorrow

Brian Holmes

What happened at the turn of the millennium, when a myriad of recording devices were hooked up to the Internet, and the World Wide Web became an electronic prism refracting all the colours of a single anti-capitalist struggle? What kind of movement takes to the barricades with samba bands and videocams, tracing an embodied map through a maze of virtual hyperlinks and actual city streets? There are aesthetic and cultural strategies behind the Zapatista solidarity, the blockades of the G8/IMF/WTO, the No Border network, the pan-European precarity campaigns. And though the term ‘tactical media’ has been rich as a driver of theoretical and artistic experimentation, the effectiveness of media activism in the context of networked political practices is not explained by the meeting of consumer electronics and the concepts of Michel de Certeau. The subversiveness of daily life that Certeau describes so beautifully, the spontaneous rewriting of dominant codes by popular gestures and practices, has always been the background and the refuge of resistance. But the foreground can be much more interesting.

In the officially sanctioned programmes of the international festivals, ‘tactical media’ describes playful or satirical incursions into everyday consumer reality: the digital graffiti of the neoliberal city, the info-poetics of the postmodern multitudes. There were other things in the mix a few years ago. *The ABC of Tactical Media*, 1997, the founding text by Geert Lovink and David Garcia, also linked the new media practices to grassroots impatience with old left hierarchies, overflowing anger against governments and businesses, and an urge to rethink the art of campaigning on the fly – all of which were at the centre of the Next 5 Minutes gatherings in Amsterdam in the 1990s, before pouring out on the streets at the turn of the century. But later, when the urgency subsided (or was repressed by the police), the multiple inventions of daily media-life just became aesthetics-as-usual, enjoyed by consumers and supported by the state, for the benefit of the corporations. The theory and the artistic refinements of tactical media fell away from the radicality of their politics.

Almost a decade after Seattle, we still cannot explain the role of decentralised media intervention as a catalyst for grassroots action at global scales. The persistent concept of tactical media might ultimately be a barrier. If global social movements are going to reinvent themselves beyond the neocon shadow of the 2000s, we will need another media theory, closer to our self-understanding and our acts. To start, there's no time like the present.

### *PULSATING NETWORKS*

The mobilising process for the global resistance actions almost immediately became known as 'self-organisation' because of the absence of hierarchical chains of command. What appeared instead was the formal structure of digital communication nets. The multicoloured starburst patterns of early network graphs became emblems of a cooperative potential that seemed to define the 'movement of movements'. Shortly after the IMF protests in Washington in early 2000, Naomi Klein wrote a text called 'The Vision Thing':

What emerged on the streets of Seattle and Washington was an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet – the Internet come to life. The Washington-based research center TeleGeography has taken it upon itself to map out the architecture of the Internet as if it were the solar system. Recently, TeleGeography pronounced that the Internet is not one giant web but a network of 'hubs and spokes.' The hubs are the centers of activity, the spokes the links to other centers, which are autonomous but interconnected...<sup>1</sup>

Condensed in this vision are two distinct ideas. One concerns the morphology of the Internet as an all-channel meshwork, where each node is connected by several pathways to others. Ultimately there are only a few degrees of separation between every single element – a flattened hierarchy. The other concerns the property of emergence, associated with large populations of living organisms like ants and bees, where group behaviour is coordinated in real time and manifests a purposiveness beyond the capacities of any individual. Emergence describes a moment of possibility – a phase-change in a complex system. These ideas came together in the early 1990s, in the figure of the networked swarm promoted by technovisionary Kevin Kelly in the book *Out of Control*. But they were already connected in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* with the figures of the rhizome, the pack and the nomadic war machine. A theoretical and practical understanding of networked emergence made the effective chaos of the counter-summits feel familiar to many people.

What lends form and regularity to emergent action? How to grasp the consistency of self-organised groups and networks? The word 'swarming' describes a pattern of self-organisation in real time which seems to arise from nowhere, yet is immediately recognisable, because it rhythmically repeats. It was understood by strategists as a pattern of attack, and it is worth recalling the classic definition given by RAND corporation theorists Arquilla and Ronfeldt:

1 Naomi Klein, 'The Vision Thing', *The Nation*, 10 July 2000; <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20000710/klein>

Swarming occurs when the dispersed units of a network of small (and perhaps some large) forces converge on a target from multiple directions. The overall aim is sustainable pulsing – swarm networks must be able to coalesce rapidly and stealthily on a target, then disperse and redisperse, immediately ready to recombine for a new pulse.<sup>2</sup>

Arquilla and Ronfeldt studied these pulsating tactics in the complex patterns of mediated and on-the-ground support for the Zapatistas, which prevented the Mexican state from isolating and destroying them. Interestingly, the ‘target’ here was the repressive activity of the state, and the ‘attackers’ were non-violent individuals, affinity groups, communities and NGOs who either converged physically on the Mexican territory, or converged temporally with simultaneous barrages of information and interpretation in the media. But the swarm tactic only became a tangible promise – or a threat – with the successful blockade of the November 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle, Washington, thanks to the Direct Action Network (DAN). One of the best texts on the use of swarming in Seattle, by Paul de Armond, was reprinted in a successive RAND volume under the title ‘Netwar in the Emerald City: WTO Protest Strategy and Tactics’.<sup>3</sup>

The DAN used swarming as part of a broader strategy to draw union protesters into a radical blockade. Arquilla and Ronfeldt suddenly had palpable proof of their theories. Since then, American and Israeli military theorists have analysed swarm behaviour and tried to use it as a doctrine. But the military by its very nature (chain of command) cannot engage in full-fledged self-organisation where individuals coordinate their actions spontaneously. When they try to do so, it ends in disaster, as Eyal Weizman has shown.<sup>4</sup> Something here is not subject to command. What we need to understand is the ‘ecology’ of emergent behaviour, to use a word that suggests a dynamic, fractal unity: a oneness of the many and a multiplicity of the one.

## TWICE-WOVEN WORLDS

There are two factors that help explain the consistency of self-organised actions. The first is the capacity for temporal coordination at a distance: the exchange among dispersed individuals of information, but also of affect, about unique events unfolding in specific locations. This exchange becomes a flow of constantly changing, constantly reinterpreted clues about how to act within a shared environment. But the flow aspect means that the group is constantly evolving, and in this sense it is a full-fledged ecology: a set of dynamic, interdependent relations. Temporal coordination makes possible the second factor, which is the existence of a common horizon – aesthetic, ethical, philosophical and/or metaphysical – that is deliberately built up over time, and that allows the scattered members of a network to recognise each other as existing within a shared referential and imaginary universe. Media used in this way is more than just information: it is a mnemonic image that calls up a world of sensation and, at best, opens up the possibility of a response, a dialogic exchange, a new creation. Think of activist media as the continuous process of ‘making worlds’ within an otherwise fragmented, inchoate market society.<sup>5</sup>

2 D Ronfeldt, J Arquilla et al, chapter 2, in *The Zapatista ‘Social Netwar’ in Mexico*, Rand Corporation, 1998, <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR994>

3 Paul de Armond, ‘Netwar in the Emerald City’, in D Ronfeldt and J Arquilla, eds, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, Rand, 2001; [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch7.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch7.pdf)

4 Eyal Weizman, ‘Walking Through Walls’, published on the webzine *Transform*; [transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507/weizman/en](http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507/weizman/en)

5 The phrase ‘making worlds’ comes from Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 2004.



For an example, take Indymedia, launched at the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 using an Active Software programme that allows for the spontaneous uploading of various file formats onto a 'newswire'. On the one hand, this is a strictly determined technical environment. Indymedia operates on specific codes and server architectures that only allow for a limited range of actions. In addition to those technical protocols, the content of the sites is shaped by clearly stated ethical principles which attempt to regulate and legitimise the kind of editing that may or may not take place. The existence of both protocols and principles is a necessary condition for the interaction of large numbers of anonymous persons at locations far distant from the surroundings of their daily existence.<sup>6</sup>

Indymedia aims to instantiate ideals of equality, open access, free expression. But the creation of possible worlds cannot stop there. It requires a cultural strategy of liberation whereby media is 'tactile' first of all: where it touches you as a process of expression, open to creative reception and transformation by each person. This kind of approach can be found in the aesthetics of the Reclaim the Streets carnivals or the Pink Bloc campaigns, to name well-known activist projects that create entire participatory environments or 'constructed situations'. At stake in such situations is the development of an existential frame for collective experience, what Prem Chandavarkar calls an 'inhabitable metaphor'.<sup>7</sup> Only such metaphors make dispersed intervention possible. But they must be widely communicated, woven into dialogical worlds.

What needs to be understood – the media strategy of the global campaigns – is this tight imbrication of technological protocols and cultural horizons, lending a machinic extension to intimate desires and shared imaginaries. Swarming is what happens when the aesthetic or metaphorical dimensions of radical social contestation are enriched and complexified around the planet, via electronic communications. A global activist movement, for better or worse, is a swarmachine.

### THRESHOLDS OF INVENTION

The point is that the contemporary movements are original and should not be reduced to models from earlier periods. To illustrate this distance from the ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, we can look more closely at the strategy/tactics distinction deployed by Michel de Certeau. He describes strategic actors as having a 'proper' place from which they can analyse and manage an exteriority conceived as a target or a threat. By contrast, the dominated have no place to call their own and must operate by ruse and subterfuge within the grid of the opponent's strategy. This becomes the archetypal plight of the marginalised individual:

Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the 'art' of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days. The fragmentation of the social fabric today lends a *political* dimension to the problem of the subject.<sup>8</sup>

6 This discussion was informed by Felix Stalder's definition of a network, both on Nettime and in his book, *Manuel Castells: The Theory of the Network Society*, Polity, Cambridge, 2006, chapter 6.

7 See Prem Chandavarkar's insightful reply to these ideas, posted on Nettime on 20 April 2006.

8 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, [1974], 1984, pp xxiii–xxiv

*The Practice of Everyday Life* delves into premodern registers, in search of styles of sociability that are irreducible, invisible, untotalisable. The idea is to discover a wandering, unfocused consumer *usage* as the multiple, unquantifiable other of an instrumental goal-oriented rationality. Subjective errancy becomes a politics of difference which can be expressed even amidst the standardised environments of consumption. But a kind of nightmare inhabits this dream: the fear that even tactics will become random, indifferent and indistinct, as they extend throughout a strategic system whose corrosive force has at once liberated them from their traditional limits and colonised everything with its rational calculations:

Because of this, the 'strategic' model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success: it was based on the definition of a 'proper' distinct from everything else; but now that 'proper' has become the whole. It could be that, little by little, it will exhaust its capacity to transform itself and constitute only the space (just as totalitarian as the cosmos of ancient times) in which a cybernetic society will arise, the scene of the Brownian movements of invisible and innumerable tactics. One would thus have a proliferation of aleatory and indeterminable manipulations within an immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities: myriads of almost invisible movements, playing on the more and more refined texture of a place that is even, continuous, and constitutes a proper place for all people.<sup>9</sup>

Everyday tactics, in de Certeau's sense, are a refuge of multiplicity amidst a dominant technological rationality. Yet by his own account they are destined increasingly to lose their archaic depth and secret purpose, to dance in agitated, aleatory spasms over the surfaces of a cybernetically programmed society. We are not far from the nihilistic abandon of the postmodern revolutionaries, influenced by disenchanting Situationists like Baudrillard. But their apocalyptic aesthetics may not be the best way to describe the media production of the counter-globalisation movements.

Ironically, the Brownian motion which de Certeau takes as the very signifier of aimlessness and unpredictability was in fact mathematicised as a probability function by Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics. Wiener was fascinated by the turbulence of water, the volatility of steam, the erratic, bifurcating course of a flying bee, or 'the path of a drunken man walking across a large deserted playing field'.<sup>10</sup> He invented a formula that could describe the probable trajectories, not of individual particles, but of aggregate groups. In 1973, just a year before *The Practice of Everyday Life* was first published, Wiener's equations were employed by the economist Robert C Merton to predict the volatility and drift of equity values on the stock market, giving rise to the infamous Black-Scholes option pricing formula which led in its turn to the hedge funds of the 1980s and 1990s. The Brownian motion of the stock markets became predictable and profitable. In our age, the forms of expression are never just random, but always liable to be harnessed in their very randomness for ends that transcend their seeming aimlessness. But this just means that the thresholds of social invention are elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp 40–1

<sup>10</sup> Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, the Father of Cybernetics*, Basic Books, Cambridge, MA, 2005, p 51

## GLOBAL MICROSTRUCTURES

One way to approach the new intentional formations is through the work of the sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, whose studies of currency traders led her to the concept of ‘complex global microstructures’. By this she means geographically extended interaction systems which are not bound by the multilayered organisations and expert systems used by modern industrial society to manage uncertainty. To take her own example, currency-trading networks, swollen with the liquidity generated by the hedge funds, were able to precipitate the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, thereby reorganising the economy of the world’s most important capitalist growth centres. The financial markets, Knorr Cetina observes, ‘are too fast, and change too quickly to be “contained” by institutional orders’. At stake are the dynamics of change and innovation studied by complexity theorists. As she continues:

Global systems based on microstructural principles do not exhibit institutional complexity but rather the asymmetries, unpredictabilities and playfulness of complex (and dispersed) interaction patterns; a complexity that results, in John Urry’s terms, from a situation where order is not the outcome of purified social processes and is always intertwined with chaos. More concretely, these systems manifest an observational and temporal dynamics that is fundamental to their connectivity, auto-affective principles of self-motivation, forms of ‘outsourcing’, and principles of content that substitute for the principles and mechanisms of the modern, complex organization.<sup>11</sup>

Knorr Cetina stresses the importance of real-time coordination and the creation of shared horizons. She shows how networked ITCs allow distant participants to see and recognise each other, and to achieve cohesion by observing and commenting on the same events at the same time.<sup>12</sup> Yet the technology employed is used opportunistically; it can be ‘outsourced’. What matters is the system of goals or beliefs that binds the participants together. She reinterprets the usual view of networks, as a system of pipes conveying informational contents, to insist on their visual function: from ‘pipes’ to ‘scopes’. It is the image that maintains the shared horizon and insists on the urgency of acting within it, especially through what Barthes called the ‘punctum’: the affective register that leaps out from the general dull flatness of the image and touches you. Finally, the idea of ‘auto-affection’ derives from Maturana and Varela’s concept of the living organism as a self-sustaining autopoietic machine, defined in classic circular fashion as ‘a network of processes of production’ which ‘through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realise the network of processes (relations) that produced them’.<sup>13</sup>

Standard social network theory found its dynamic principle in more or less random attractions between atomistic units bound only by the ‘weak ties’ of contemporary liberal societies.<sup>14</sup> The notion of autopoietic social groups introduces a very different type of actor. To understand the implications, one has to realise that each autopoietic machine or ‘micro-structure’ is unique, depending on the coordinates and horizons that configure it. For example, take the open-source software networks. There is a shared horizon constituted by texts and exemplary projects:

11 Karin Knorr Cetina, ‘Complex Global Microstructures’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22, 2005, pp 213–34

12 Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger, ‘Global Microstructures: The Virtual Societies of the Financial Markets’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 7/4, 2002

13 Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, ‘Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living’, in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, Reidel, Dordrecht, [1973], 1980, pp 78–9

14 Mark Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 78:6, May 1973, pp 1360–80

Richard Stallman's declarations and the GNU project; Linus Torvalds's launch of Linux; essays like 'The Hacker Ethic'; projects such as Creative Commons; the relation of all that to older ideals of public science; etc. There are formal principles: above all the General Public License, known as 'copyleft', with its legal requirements for both the indication of authorship (allowing recognition of everyone's efforts) and the continued openness of any resulting code (allowing widespread cooperation and innovation). Finally there are concrete modes of temporal coordination via the Internet: SourceForge as a general version-tracker for continuously forking projects, and the specific wiki-forums devoted to each free software application. The whole thing has as little institutional complexity as possible, but instead is full of self-motivation and auto-affection between dispersed members of a highly coherent and effective formation. And the free software designers are highly capable of swarming around targets – such as the copyright provisions of the so-called content industries, gleefully attacked by peer-to-peer file-sharing technologies. The reason for the antagonism is obvious: copyright directly threatens the cooperative processes that make free software possible. The open-source movement is an active, vibrant, inventive swarmachine.

Tendencies favouring the emergence of global microstructures have been developing for decades, along the unravelling edges of national and institutional environments weakened by neoliberalism. But a turning-point was reached when a world-spanning group with a particularly strong religious horizon and a particularly well-developed relational and operational toolkit was able to coordinate violent strikes on the centres of capital accumulation and military power in the USA. Suddenly, the capacity of networked actors to operate globally, independently and unpredictably began to appear as a crisis affecting the deep structures of social power. The threshold of invention became deadly dangerous. At that point, the figure of the swarm rushed to the forefront of military analysis, and the broader question of whether complexity theory could predict the emergent behaviour of self-organising networks became a priority in the social sciences.

Knorr Cetina's article is subtitled 'The New Terrorist Societies', and extends the analysis of global financial microstructures to Al Qaeda. Where, in the 1990s, everyone saw networks, now everyone would see the threat of radical militants. The counter-globalisation movement, long plagued by the difficulty of distinguishing its own mobile formation from the vanguards of financial globalisation, began rapidly to fall apart after September 11 when accusations conflating the protesters with the terrorists started rising on all sides.<sup>15</sup> Almost four years later, on the last day of the 2005 G-8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, the explosion of terrorist bombs in London totally eclipsed any message that could have been brought by the protesters. Al Qaeda still appeared as the exemplar of global activist movements – and the perfect excuse for eradicating all of them.

15 The conflation of terrorists and protesters is a leitmotif of the PBS documentary, 2002; <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights>

## SECOND CHANCES

What I have just suggested is rather frightening: a comparison of the counter-globalisation movements to both terrorists and financiers. But

the only thing that brings these distant galaxies together is the force of historical change, which upsets the rhythms of daily life and throws every certainty into question. Knorr Cetina claims that change in the contemporary world is driven by microprocesses, put into effect by light, agile formations that can risk innovation at geographical scales and degrees of complexity where traditional organisations are paralysed. As she has written: ‘The texture of a global world becomes articulated through microstructural patterns that develop in the shadow of (but liberated from) national and local institutional patterns.’ But the ways that national institutions have reacted to the changes says a lot about how the emergent world society is being articulated.

Even as swarm theory became a strong paradigm for the militarised social sciences, attempts were launched around the planet to stabilise the dangerously mobile relational patterns unleashed by the neoliberal market society and its weak ties. On the one hand, there is a continuing effort to enforce the rules of free trade, and thus to complete a project of liberal empire. Its theory is stated in the book *The Pentagon’s New Map* by the strategist Thomas P Barnett, who explains that the priority of American military policy is to identify any breach in the world network and then ‘CLOSE THE GAP’, by force if necessary. The thesis – providing one of the rationales for the invasion of Iraq – is that only the extension of the world market can bring peace and prosperity, rooting out the atavistic beliefs on which terrorism feeds and, in the process, rationalising the access to resources that capitalism needs to go on producing growth ‘for everyone’.

On the other hand, the most common responses to this market enforcement are regressions to exacerbated forms of nationalism, often with a deep-seated fundamentalist component, as in the United States itself. Neconservatism in all its forms is the ‘blowback’ of neoliberal economics. On a longer timeline, one sees continuing efforts to configure continental economic blocs – the EU, the Russian Federation, ASEAN+3, MERCOSUR, NAFTA – whereby the instability and chaos of market relations could be submitted to some degree of institutional control. These reactions can be conceived as ‘counter-movements’ in Karl Polanyi’s sense: responses to the atomisation of societies and the ecological destruction brought about by the unfettered operations of a supposedly self-regulating market.<sup>16</sup>

The political pressures on any democratic-egalitarian movement thus include the imperial project of a world market, the regressive nationalist refusal of it and the more ambiguous processes of bloc formation. All these may be actively pursued by the same state, but they are antithetical, and their contradictions lie at the source of world conflicts. In this respect, there is something prophetic about Félix Guattari’s discussion in the late 1980s of the interplay between deterritorialisation (which ‘has to do with the destruction of social territories, collective identities and systems of traditional values’) and reterritorialisation (which ‘has to do with the recomposition, even by the most artificial means, of individuated frameworks of personhood, structures of power, and models of submission’). Or maybe his concepts, which run parallel to Polanyi’s notions of ‘disembedding’ and ‘reembedding’, are just historically exact:

16 Karl Polanyi (1944), *The Great Transformation*, Beacon, Boston, MA, 1957/1944



As the deterritorializing revolutions, tied to the development of science, technology and the arts, sweep everything aside before them, a compulsion toward subjective reterritorialization also emerges. And this antagonism is heightened even more with the phenomenal growth of the communications and computer fields, to the extent that the latter concentrate their deterritorializing effects on such human faculties as memory, perception, understanding, imagination, etc. In this way, a certain formula of anthropological functioning, a certain ancestral model of humanity, is expropriated at its very heart. And I think that it is as a result of an incapacity to adequately confront this phenomenal mutation that collective subjectivity has abandoned itself to the absurd wave of conservatism that we are presently witnessing.<sup>17</sup>

Guattari's question is this: how to invent alternatives to the violence of capitalist deterritorialisation, but also to the fundamentalist reterritorialisation that follows it? The dilemma of the contemporary world is not Christianity versus Islam. It is at the very heart of the modern project that human potential is expropriated. Since September 11, the American corporate class and its allies have at once exacerbated the abstract, hyperindividualising dynamics of capitalist globalisation, and at the same time reinvented the most archaic figures of power (Guantánamo, Fortress Europe, the dichotomy of sovereign majesty and 'bare life').<sup>18</sup> Guattari speaks of a capitalist 'drive' of deterritorialisation, a 'compulsion' for reterritorialisation. What this means is that essential dimensions of human life are twisted into violent and oppressive forms. The effect is to render the promise of a borderless world repulsive and even murderous, while at the same time precipitating the crisis, decay and regression of national social institutions, increasingly incapable of contributing to equality or the respect for difference.

So after all the definitions of tactical media, and even of the 'movement of movements', what we still need to know is whether one can consciously participate in the improvisational, asymmetrical force of microprocesses operating at a global scale, and use their relative autonomy from institutional norms as a way to influence a more positive reterritorialisation, a dynamic equilibrium, a viable coexistence with technoscientific development and the trend toward a unification of world society. To do this means taking on the risk of global micropolitics. It also means drawing mnemonic images from latent historical experience and the intricate textures of everyday life and mixing them into media interventions in order to help reweave the imaginary threads that give radical-democratic movements a strong and paradoxical consistency: the resistance to arbitrary authority of course, but also solidarity across differences, the search for the common grounds of both oppression and liberation, and the desire to create consensus on the basis not of tradition but rather of invention, experimentation in reality and collective self-critique. The ability to create the event is what has given the recent movements their surprising agility in the world space. As Maurizio Lazzarato has written:

The activist is not someone who becomes the brains of the movement, who sums up its force, anticipates its choices, draws his or her legitimacy from a capacity to read and interpret the evolution of power, but instead, the activist is simply someone who introduces a discontinuity in what exists. She creates a bifurcation in the flow of words, of desires, of

17 Félix Guattari, 'Du postmodernisme à l'ère post-media', in *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, Galilée, Paris, 1989, p 54. An English translation, with a major error, appears as 'The Postmodern Impasse', in *The Guattari Reader*, ed Gary Genosko, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.

18 In Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, California, 1998

images, to put them at the service of the multiplicity's power of articulation; she links the singular situations together, without placing herself at a superior and totalizing point of view. She is an experimenter.<sup>19</sup>

The close of his book makes clear, however, that what should be sought is not a chaotic escape into the unpredictable. The point is to find articulations of human effort that can oppose and even durably replace the death-dealing powers of the present society. Right now, the prospects look extremely slim for any kind of grassroots intervention into a highly polarised conjuncture. But if things become desperately worse, or if on the contrary the political-economic pendulum makes one of its swings back to a more confident phase of expansion, the likelihood is that there will be important second chances for radical democracy movements, and new roles for improvised global media. The future belongs to those who can make the experimental difference.

This text emerged from a debate on the Internet mailing list Nettime, 10–25 April 2006 – and to that extent, it was at least partially written by the many-headed hydra of the list. Thanks, everyone. The whole debate is accessible at [www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0604/maillist.html#00058](http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0604/maillist.html#00058).

19 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les révolutions du capitalisme*, op cit, p 230

# Reloading Tactical Media An Exchange with Geert Lovink

Gregory Sholette and Gene Ray

*The problem is that today we have infinite technologies available, but there are simply not enough social movements to properly utilise what we have at our disposal. The what is to be done question therefore is: How do we create urgency in a situation of semiotic abundance?*

Geert Lovink

In 1997, David Garcia and Geert Lovink wrote *The ABC of Tactical Media*, the first theoretically inclined text to label a variety of emerging, yet consistently nomadic, forms of DIY (do it yourself) activism made possible by digital technology and the Internet. Borrowing from the Situationists as well as Michel de Certeau, the authors celebrate what they call Tactical Media (TM) as an experimental aesthetic of ‘poaching, polymorphic situations, tricking, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike’. The timing of the essay marked the highpoint of what Lovink terms the golden era of TM. Forged within the bubble of energy released by the end of the Cold War, yet amplified by globalisation, multiculturalism, and above all by the growth of increasingly networked communications media, TM took advantage of deterritorialisation brought about by post-Fordism. TM did not make real political power more democratic, but with its DIY approach to new technology it sought to position resistance furtively inside the machinery of what Guy Debord termed ‘the spectacle’ rather than in transparent opposition to it from a claimed outside. Just as DIY movements like the anti-roads campaign in Great Britain or zinesters championed political autonomy and self-production, the political subject of TM engages in ‘a radical techno-engagement, expressed in festive forms of data nihilism, joyous negativism that resists reductive and essentialist strategies’.<sup>1</sup>

Today, ten years after Lovink and Garcia’s influential essay, TM has evolved into what Lovink calls a meme: a theory-as-virus which has escaped, for better and worse, from the laboratory of political resistance and activist circles, out into the world at large. And while TM still harbours genetic material that identifies its origins in ‘a media of crisis,

1 Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p 39

criticism, and opposition’, it has by now infected a wide range of practices, both inside and outside the dominant culture, from graffiti pranksters such as Banksy to mainstream media interventionists like the Yes Men and to CEOs seeking to ‘think outside the box’ through unconventional business models or deviant, fringe and super-flexible forms of mass marketing. This shift from practical toolbox to life game is no less paradoxical than TM itself, and yet Lovink has also updated his description of TM in such a way as to place added emphasis on the entire field of play in which hunter and hunted, master and slave interact with each other. In a recent essay he writes:

Being neither cute nor ugly, neither good nor bad, tactical media appear, strike, and disappear again. Instead of the old school rituals of negation and refusal, tactical media engage both maker and users, producers and viewers, into a game of appearances and disappearances.<sup>2</sup>

While these are subtle shifts in tone and emphasis, the real challenge is how TM can remain viable as a resistant practice in the post-September 11 era of imperial crusades and ‘war without end’ – the permanent wartime economy. What follows is an edited email exchange that took place in the spring of 2007 between Geert Lovink (Amsterdam), Gregory Sholette (New York City) and Gene Ray (Berlin).

**Greg Sholette and Gene Ray** Can you fill us in a bit on your personal history and how that led you to become involved in Tactical Media (TM)?

**Geert Lovink** With Baudrillard I would say that TM is a fatal object that came to me, not the opposite. It seduced me, if you like that kind of discourse. But let’s not mystify the production of critical concepts. TM is just another word for media activism, which has been around for centuries. I don’t want to go into pre-history, we all know what crucial role the printing press played in the Reformation and early revolutionary movements. This importance increased during the Enlightenment and became industrial in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of the rotating press and the mass circulation of newspapers and books. The histories of social movements and technical media are deeply interwoven, which, by the way, includes Fascism – it’s by no means limited to progressive struggles.

My involvement in media activism started in the late 1970s within the Amsterdam squatters’ movement. It is funny that the bi-weekly we founded in 1979 called *Grachtenkrant* still exists. Now that’s what they call ‘sustainable’, isn’t it? The circulation of 250 copies rarely went up or down and the punk aesthetic didn’t really change either. A robust meme, some would say. During the early 1980s I was involved in collaborative book publishing, and writing, of course. I worked with two publishing houses (Raket & Lont and SUA) and later founded one (Ravijn). We also made the squatters’ weekly *bluf!* (from 1981 to 1987) and from 1987 to the late 1990s I was involved in the free radio stations Radio 100 and Patapoe. After the demise of the squatters’ movement (which we described in our Adilkno book, *Cracking the Movement*) and the radical anti-nuclear movement, I became interested in the role of visual

2 Geert Lovink, ‘Updating Tactical Media: Strategies for Media Activism’, unpublished manuscript, 2006

arts and design in social movements. This coincided with the fall of the Berlin wall and the rise of the personal computer, desktop publishing (zines) and the struggles for Internet access. The shifts in the political and media landscape are deeply related. In the period when we first discussed tactical media, in 1992, it made more sense for us to look at new political moments instead of holding onto the rhetoric and rituals of the past. I celebrated the fall of communism as a victory, having known so many people who had to live under those regimes. There was a lot of positive energy back then. We can't merely reduce that time to the destructive politics of neo-liberalism. Tactical media expressed the sense of experimentation that we find these days in free software, wi-fi and 'open source culture' as Armin Medosch describes it.

**GR & GS** That so many now recognise, discuss and employ TM as a distinct and coherent approach to media activism is due in no small part to your ongoing writings and theorisations. Indeed, as you point out, it has become a meme, a concept with a viral life all its own. You devote a chapter of your new book to 'running updates' on the concept of TM, because 'in the Change Society in which we're stuck, yesterday's concepts are not just worn out, they are by definition wrong as they are deconstructed at the time of their release'. Could you clarify the difference between 'updating' and 'upgrading' and briefly enumerate the most important updates you're proposing for TM?

**GL** Running updates is an integral part of our technological culture. It's considered a necessary evil. Not to download the necessary patches is seen as suicidal. In contemporary theory production, this practice has yet to be introduced. Radio-maker and hacker Alexander Klosch from Weimar introduced me to the difference between updating and upgrading. Wikipedia continuously upgrades and downgrades its articles. Whereas updating has a time element, upgrading usually refers to quality and status. A change does not by definition result in an improvement or a disqualification. According to Klosch, the update is best placed in collaborative work. A single code master is often over-stretched, keeping a complex structure up-to-date. This knowledge should also be applied to critical concepts in media art and activism. Instead of burying the TM concept, which could have been done years ago, we may as well celebrate its robustness.

My critique of TM is not its short-lived character. By definition, TM is non-sustainable, liminal and always on the verge of disappearance. Its unstable nature creates situations while setting clear limits for further growth. The updates that I propose in a chapter of my book *Zero Comments* (Routledge, 2007) deal with a reassessment of social networks and the importance of autonomous software production. Activists will have to deal with information overload and mustn't reduce their role to that of a classic broadcaster of messages. There is still a lot to be learned from the Indymedia chapter, even though many will claim that they have moved on. The design of disagreement, debate and conflict is still up in the air. The same can be said about the shifting relationship, back and forth, between the real and the virtual. It is often hard to admit that the realm of power (agenda-setting, decision-making) is



as relatively autonomous of the techno-sphere as F2F (face-to-face) meetings. Instead, we all hang onto the idea that decentralised networks somehow dissolve power, over time.

**GS** More and more today we find TM and DIY forms of art attracting the attention of the established art world. One might even say that Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* is in large part an unacknowledged response to the rising visibility of both informal networks of production, or what I call creative dark matter, as well as tactical modes of artistic activity. What do you make of this growing interest in TM by art world institutions, even when it is not explicitly called TM? Do you perhaps see this institutional interest helping to extend the range and potential of TM as a critical, social intervention, or by contrast is it an appropriation that requires its own 'tactical response'?

**GL** We shouldn't worry too much about the recent interest in TM among US institutions such as museums and universities. All social and aesthetic phenomena fall prey to these cultural machines that are in constant need for new concepts and fashions. It's remarkable that it took them ten to fifteen years to 'discover' TM. To my knowledge this curiosity doesn't (yet) exist elsewhere. TM, as I've come to understand it, has a pragmatic and parasitic relationship towards institutions. Even though they operate outside of established structures, there's no dogmatic rejection or hostile attitude to be found. Maybe that's disappointing, but that's another matter. I came to look at these forms of activism as inhabiting a space beyond good and evil. There are aspects that I don't like either, but I am not a moralist. I theorise about what I see happening around me, anticipate current trends, and project them into the near future. A fairly simple McLuhanist strategy, if you like. In my understanding TM is not, by definition, politically correct. Again, maybe you would wish to look at them in another way but that would be a normative stand. I'm not taking up a guru role here, and we should not turn TM into a brand. Having said that, we can of course clearly see that many activists use 'viral marketing' tactics to get their message across – not because it's the latest fashion but because they have no access to the major media distribution channels.

I am realistic enough to see that all concepts, even the more radical ones, can be (and often are) turned into commodities. I have not yet seen memes that are robust enough to withstand the kind of pressure to remain 'pure'. The solution to this is not to become bitter or dogmatic but to understand this cultural dynamic and withdraw. In the end, it all boils down to how you play the game of disappearances and reappearances. Just think of the humiliating experience of Hakim Bey and his Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ). That was a much worse case compared with what is happening to 'TM' right now, as TAZ had clear anarchist roots and then quickly became the radical chic of the 1990s by way of the techno-libertarian entrepreneurship that was popular then. TM never made great claims, it merely pointed at cultural techniques. It comes as no surprise that some museums and academics are now discovering the concept and its related artists and activist groups. But that's a mild sell-out; and to some extent even disappointingly irrelevant as the military-entertainment complex has not yet come aboard. There is still

no money in TM, so it really makes you wonder what these critics in fact are talking about. We should demand substantive appropriations with real sell-outs. What we see happening right now is limited to a discursive level with the rise of a global language police who sit and judge who is the real autonomist activist and who is not: appropriation without rewards. Now that's cheap, but understandable, if you take into account that everything has to be 'free' these days.

**GS** Maybe you're sadly premature about the lack of military interest in TM? I say that in light of the recent paper by the architect Eyal Weizman in which he describes the 'infestation' of urban space by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as an attempt to 'redefine inside as outside, and domestic interiors as thoroughfares'. They sound more like students of Paul Virilio than military theorists who perceive the city as 'not just the site but also the very medium of warfare – a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux'.<sup>3</sup> But to return for a moment to the question of appropriation from another sector, what do you make of the tactical interventions of al-Qaeda and other jihadist-type groups who have tactically intervened within the space of the Western 'other'?

**GL** In this respect Israel is no different from other states and their secret services. The tactical use of the Internet, small cameras and mobile phones by Islamic fundamentalists is more interesting, and worrying, and should be properly studied. So far, I only know of three different sources that do this kind of research: Albert Benschop, in my faculty group, who got involved in online communications before, during and after the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh; Tom Keenan at Bard College who is into the distribution and aesthetics of the so-called hostage decapitation videos and last but not least the Israeli secret service with its so-called 'scientific research organizations'. That said, I believe your remarks seem to indicate a small misunderstanding of my position. The Jihadist videos in no way address Western news organisations. It's widely known that these short clips are produced for Islamic audiences in the Middle East and Asia. The Internet is used as a medium for primary distribution. Massive consumption of these images happens on cell phones and, of course, on the satellite television news channel, Al Jazeera. However, it is my guess that the sharing of such video files and related texts happens through cell phones. If only we could tell such stories about Indymedia! But let's not complain about that. Where Islamists and anti-globalists meet is exactly in their distance from mainstream news production and their 'tactical' ways to reach their own audiences.

**GR & GS** Could you clarify what you see as the historical and contemporary link between the theory and practice of TM and the critical activism you describe as its 'key'? The nature of this link is especially curious to us given that you describe TM as being born out of 'disgust for ideology'. Is there an activist practice that does not have an implicit, if not explicit, set of ideological assumptions?

**GL** Well, of course, everyone is always already encapsulated in ideology. However, the problem with such a totalising approach is that it becomes impossible to break out of a given rhetoric or discourse as you are

3 Eyal Weizman, 'Israel Goes on the Virtual Offensive', [http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/03/23/israel\\_strategy/index\\_np.html](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/03/23/israel_strategy/index_np.html)

immediately caught in the next ideological language cage. For me, that's a very disempowering discussion. People get depressed when they hear time and again that the System is re-appropriating all forms of resistance and creativity, no matter how odd, negative or irrelevant. We simply cannot avoid producing new power relations, and this is also true with TM. But what we can do is to raise (self-) awareness by establishing cultures that encourage self-reflection. What we have seen over the past decade or more is the rise of progressive and engaged forms of (media) activism that no longer operate within the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements such as Marxism and anarchism. Geek culture is probably the best example. The most obvious moment to situate this break is 1989, and with new social movements such as feminism and ecology. An important element is the breakaway from the vulgar notion that media are merely tools (owned and controlled by the Party or the Movement) that have to be used (correctly) in the name of the Struggle. The self-referential 'fun' aspect of hacking and tinkering is something that most activists do not appreciate and in fact often misjudge as counter-revolutionary. The response to that should be a classic one: 'If I can't hack, I don't want to be part of your revolution.'

GS To my way of thinking, focusing on the moment of the absolute break with the past is as problematic as letting its dead weight crush us. I would argue that TM represents only the contemporary expression of a longer, largely invisible struggle – unrecorded, fragmented, often failed – in which resistance to the alienating effects of capitalism intimates a 'history from below'. That is not to say this shadowy sphere of conflict 'belongs' to any one ideological position per se. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge see in the production of fantasy a form of resistance to alienation that is not totally annexed by mainstream media. This resistance can be both liberating, in a positive democratically inclusive way, or reactionary. I am aware of course that the moment one categorises or defines this resistant production as collective – historically, experientially – then we are inevitably propelled towards the thing postmodernists condemned: a meta-narrative that you would no doubt describe as 'romantic,' even dangerous. And yet I wonder if some degree of narrative, collectivised romanticism is not also necessary for TM even to exist as an abstract category, as opposed say to a non-aggregate of unrelated actions or technologies?

GL I don't believe that we have to find a solution with a one-size-fits-all concept. We don't need Western ideologies, let alone religion. I feel we have to go through a long and terribly cold ice age in which people will work on their own micro-issues. Every attempt to override these valuable and rich practices with large schemes is doomed to fail. Your long-range change proposal is a dream; let's all hope it doesn't end up a nightmare. What we have to deal with is cultural differences and conflicts, with very real shifts away from the West happening now as we speak. There are very interesting developments in huge countries like China, India and Brazil. We can finally enjoy the prospect of the Decline of the West on the horizon. We will see that it is really no longer our task in Europe or the USA to fill up the gap with some Big Concept. I am not arguing for realism or a new version of Third Way politics. I want

my radical pragmatism to investigate how social movements come into being, or, to use Canetti's terms, 'how crystals grow into masses'. It is in this process that (tactical) media play a modest but crucial role. In the meanwhile, it is important to criticise the wet dreams of the radical left, a task that Baudrillard took up so well, with such an attractive negativity. Sadly, he is no longer with us. The important point is for TM to break with such old-school representational politics. What cheap technologies do well is self-empowerment – away from the traditional top-down politics where leaders think for the masses and direct them. This technological democratisation is clearly a threat for all elite vanguard strategists that use activists as if they are pieces on a chessboard. At the same time, it also means that we have to find new ways to create common ground, communicate, argue and come to agreements. Žižek asks all the right questions in this respect. I disagree with some of his political solutions but in terms of the diagnosis I am pretty close to his tribe.

GS Shifting to the question of historical precedent, I have been doing research recently for a new book and was struck by the play of overlap and discord between the New Left and the counter-culture in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the way groups such as The Diggers in San Francisco or the Living Theater used cheap 'do it yourself' media including offset printing, photocopying, even mimeograph machines to enhance street performances that also intervened within urban spaces for brief periods of time. The investment in pleasure and play made by these largely counter-cultural groups reminded me of TM, as well as the way this informality contrasted with the didactic 'grey on grey' approach of the SDS or other New Left organisations. (I realise of course this distinction is not absolute.) No doubt other historical examples would come to mind. What historical connection, if any, do you see between these older activist modes and TM given that you explicitly locate TM in the aftermath of the Cold War era at a time when a 'disgust for ideology' prevailed?

GL The examples you give are spot-on and bring to mind a host of publications and media initiatives that I've witnessed or participated in in Europe since the late 1970s. In my experience, it is offset print technology and the do-it-yourself building of radio transmitters that shaped the squatters' movement in Amsterdam. These were by no means high tech. Still, to master these media one needed some skill and patience. You had to master the technique before you could properly run an offset press. One could say the same about assembling electronics. The word 'geek' does not apply here. We're talking about a skill set that you have to learn from someone else. In the age of TM one no longer obtains knowledge in this way. We play around, use search engines, read FAQs and manuals. The big difference now is that there is no shortage of computers and computation time. The media that social movements in the 1960s used were comparatively primitive in this respect. Of course there were a lot of typewriters around, but not everyone was a typesetter. That's the main difference compared with the late 1980s, when fanzine culture took off due to the rise of desktop publishing.

The problem is that today we have infinite technologies available, but there are simply not enough social movements to properly utilise what we have at our disposal. Presently, there is simply not enough creativity, subversive energy, to vitalise our own channels. That's what I call the Potentiality Surplus. Media are no longer tools, they're a sphere, a simulacrum, a separate second reality that has exploded to such an extent that it constantly disorients people who want to make proper use of the channels that they created. How do we define the relation between Political Will and Technological Destiny today? We need a return to simplicity and shortage, but that's no longer possible. So how do we create urgency in a situation of semiotic abundance? That's the Tactical Condition, which doesn't look very good, certainly in comparison with the cultural renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s when a massive number of youngsters left the system and rebelled.

What I believe in is Embedded Techno Determinism. Media technologies do not provoke social movements. But once the social movements are born (out of anger and desire), their trajectory, their faith if you like, is very much determined by the capacity of the actors to communicate to others and build alliances in a short amount of time. If the moment arises, you have to be ready. These days we have amazing capabilities to synchronise social and environmental concerns. Simultaneously we can all witness that the lifetime of a movement or revolt has diminished. Protest these days is no doubt more volcanic – hard to predict for authorities, but also for us activists. Revolution, ready or not! Synchronised global action has only occurred rarely, with the great exception of 15 February 2003, of course. That global day of protest against the Iraqi war, a month before the actual invasion, is a day that could well play an important role in tomorrow's imaginings.

**GR & GS** We're struck by your frequent denigrations of 'the left'. 'There is no way back', you write, 'to the twentieth century, the protective nation-state and the gruesome tragedies of the "left"'. By your account the twentieth century appears mainly as a catastrophe of the left's making. By contrast, capitalism – let alone Fascism, which as 'leftists' we understand as an emergency mutation of capitalism – does not come in for such critical treatment. We're not at all denying the need for a tough and ongoing critique of the leftist tradition, but to us your attacks seem strangely exaggerated and one-sided. And yet, we also notice that your recent text still makes recourse to the words 'progressive' and 'solidarity'. Is it perhaps that you see capitalism, perhaps of an entrepreneurial anarcho-capitalist type, holding out more hope of increasing democratic participation and individual creativity than collectivised production?

**GL** Maybe it's the European perspective that makes the difference here, of having lived and worked in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe. That affiliation always reminds one of the millions that died under Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. I am surprised that you pull the old communist trick out of the hat, portraying someone as a proto- or pseudo-capitalist. The relevant point here is that TM breaks with such old-school representational politics. Cheap technologies



enhance self-empowerment and pull us away from the top-down politics where leaders think for the masses and direct them. If we want to dream up new strategies and think aloud, we can only do that in a more or less open, safe and creative atmosphere, a place without Trotskyites and other agitators who clearly only think in terms of how they can use the situation for their greater scheme and for whom otherness is something that has to be suppressed, streamlined, forgotten, and – if necessary – eliminated. Even today, there is unreconstructed Marxism, and Stalin still has many fans. But there are also plenty of leftists who studied the Gulag and have drawn some grim conclusions from that darkest of chapters.

GS Point taken. But to go a bit further you write in your book *Dark Fiber* that ‘There is a need for contemporary forms of organisation, such as global (online) labor unions, networks of immigrants, refugee tongs, free association of digital artisans’.<sup>4</sup> In light of global capitalism’s power to absorb surplus labour – including from intellectual workers, the so-called ‘cognitariat’ – how is such organising to be accomplished without a theory of organisation that is other than the default of the market?

GL First, I refuse to assume that the market is, by definition, wrong or ‘evil’. There were markets in historical socialism, in anarchist communes and in a variety of alternative societies. That said, I have never been a fan of ‘the market’ as a solution for contemporary problems that are actually caused by the incredible concentration of global capital and financial resources in the hands of a few. There’s a lot of space to play around with concepts such as ‘de-privatization’ and the reconstitution of the public domain, without necessarily putting the utilities and community services back into the hands of the state. What we need to break down is this diffuse culture of fear and suspicion that is cultivated amongst activists. The world would be so much more fun without this urge, this constant threat of punishment if you are not politically correct or aligned. Because of this moralising behaviour, the critique of PC (politically correctness) has fallen into the hands of the populist right. I do not believe the subversive strategies of PC are effective or impossible to appropriate or co-opt. I stand for the heuristics of trial and error, and the art of disappearing and reappearing if the time is right to do so. As Sylvère Lotringer writes, in his foreword to Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude*:

Capitalism itself is revolutionary because it keeps fomenting inequality and provoking unrest. It also keeps providing its own kind of ‘communism’ both as a vaccine, preventing further escalation, and an incentive to go beyond its own limitations. The multitude responds to both and can go either way, absorbing the shocks or multiplying the fractures that will occur in unpredictable ways.<sup>5</sup>

4 Lovink, *Dark Fiber*, op cit, p 262

5 Sylvère Lotringer, ‘Foreword’ to Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2004, p 18

There can be so much revolutionary energy. The ‘élan vital’ of the multitude is simply there. We can of course deconstruct this Italo-workerism cult as the latest capitalist conspiracy to vampirically suck out everyone’s vitalism, but I find such a reading cynical and bitter. With Paolo Virno, we have to ask what we are capable of and commit untimely acts, with

or without TM. We can easily proclaim that TM died long ago, around 2001, but who cares? The questions are still all there, right on the table – and the Media Question is one that I am certain will stay with us for quite some time.

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# Learning Alongside

## Notes from 'Turning our Tongues: Audio Journals from Dheisheh Refugee Camp'

Rozalinda Borcila

In the Spring of 2006, the 6+ collective began developing 'Turning our Tongues', a project that would involve eighteen young women aged sixteen to eighteen from the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Palestine. Writing about work that is in progress, with unforeseeable developments over the next year or so, can run counter to the open-ended practice the collective is striving for. But it may be productive to reflect midstream on some of the tensions emerging within the specific conditions of this project – and which, to my mind, have larger implications for the possibilities and limitations of art in relation to activism. Because the 6+ collective values divergent and even dissenting positions, this text reflects both a shared perspective on the project, developed in consultation with the other members, as well as questions that emerge solely from my own commitments and anxieties.

### **GROUP WORK**

6+ is a self-organised group of women artists currently living in different parts of the US. Some of us have been individually troubled by past experiences with projects intended to address exclusion and disempowerment, but which became instead patronising 'dialogues' on unequal terms. Most had personal or artistic connections with Palestine – either through family ties or through participation in a range of anti-war, anti-occupation cultural/activist projects. All had (more or less successful) experiences working or living collectively. 6+ begins its life as an attempt to develop a different ethics of artistic cooperation, with a return to Palestine an already imagined commitment.

From the beginning, the group subscribes to the principle of uncertainty, to a practice of not knowing. There is constant struggle with the notion of difference, understood initially as a certain opacity or strangeness expected of each other. We carry this expectation into collaborations that extend beyond the group of six. Tensions emerge

when the desire to cultivate intuition and trust mistakenly presumes familiarity or shared experiential/cultural backgrounds.

A collective imagination develops, reaching for a poetic, aesthetic and political practice leveraged against patriarchy and hierarchy. We understand feminism from different generational, cultural and historical positions. We understand collectivity as a life thing, not merely a cultural thing, as implicated in the material conditions and struggles of women's daily lives.

As a group, 6+ tends towards an emphasis on the '6': Sama Alshaibi, Wendy Babcox, Rozalinda Borcila, Mary Rachel Fanning, Yana Payusova and Sherry Wiggins. As a *project* it has more to do with the 'plus', suggesting the leveraging of individual positions and privileges towards broader cooperations. As a larger collectivity of women begins to form, a number of tensions surface. A tiered structure of 'primary' and 'secondary' co-participants threatens to emerge, based on who has what to bring to the table – and although the group struggles for 'inclusive and equal cooperations' within conditions of asymmetry, this may yet prove impossible without bringing the table into question.

### 'SECRETS'

By autumn 2005, the group was exploring ways to support the production, circulation and public exhibition of new work in collaboration with Palestinian women artists. During our repeated self-funded visits to the West Bank, the International Center of Bethlehem and the Sakakini Center in Ramallah offered invaluable guidance. They were part of a defiant network of cultural producers in the West Bank, operating under conditions of almost incessant siege: by then eight months of international sanctions, daily bombings in Gaza, political posturing for control between Hamas and Fatah, the increase in checkpoints and restrictions on the movement of people and goods decimating the economy, increasing raids by the Israeli military within Ramallah and Bethlehem, a sharp rise in petty crime in the West Bank. We developed a project entitled 'Secrets', which brought together the artists of 6+ and eight Palestinian women artists: Rula Halawani, Rana Bishara, Reem Bader, Faten Nastas, Nathalie Handal, Nadira Araj, Larissa Sansour and Shuruq Harb.

Over the following year and a half, 'Secrets' evolved as a range of activities, manifested in different locations – Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jerusalem, the Birzeit Virtual Gallery, Boston, Boulder, Chicago, New York. It unfolded as a series of exhibitions and social exchanges, a platform, network and publication, among a range of co-participants and publics. An extensive network of friends and institutions formed to facilitate the project. This included securing passage into the West Bank for the foreign artists during the war with Lebanon and immediately after, as many foreign passport holders were expelled or denied entry into Israel. The US-based artists, in turn, became a mini-network of couriers, exploiting their status under Israeli Law to travel within the West Bank and between Palestinian and Israeli territories, meeting artists, transporting artworks.

The group's involvement with Dheisheh refugee camp began within this framework.

## RIGHTS OF RETURN

*We fight in different ways. Some write in the newspaper, some are teachers, or youth activists... People are busy in jail, they read books, they discuss and share experiences, some people choose to fight this way. Colonialism [means] to make new land; this is colonialism, everywhere in the world. What is your way to fight?*<sup>1</sup>

Refugees in internal exile played a key role in instigating and sustaining the *intifada* against Israeli colonialist rule. Refugee camps were turned into battlegrounds in the repression of the first *intifada*; the exhaustion of fighters, and the beginnings of the peace negotiations, led to a gradual demobilisation of camp youth.

In 1995, beginning in Balata and Dheisheh camps, the Popular Committees that had been the primary form of self-organisation during the first *intifada* re-emerged with a new structure and set of priorities. Feeling betrayed by the ‘peace process’, and anticipating that negotiations would not address their concerns, refugee Popular Committees worked as an alternative to an increasingly inept and corrupt Palestinian leadership, organising around two major goals: improving living conditions in the camps and affirming refugee rights of return as integral to the struggle for liberation. The Committees have been working with increasing urgency since the 1998 cuts in the UNRWA<sup>2</sup> budgets dramatically reduced the services provided to refugee camps, paving the way for possible forced resettlement schemes.

The tensions between the refugee struggle for rights of return and PNA efforts at state building continue today. Refugee aspirations are sometimes seen, even within Palestine, as a major block to any ‘peace settlement’. The Rights of Return movement has become the primary form of refugee political remobilisation – and now includes coordination between Popular Committees in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and activist groups of externally displaced Palestinians around the world.<sup>3</sup>

1 Naji Owdah. All quotes from Naji and Suhair Owdah used in this text are from interviews recorded by Sherry Wiggins.

2 Annual budget reports of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine are published online at <http://www.un.org/unrwa/>

3 BADIL annual reports are also published online at <http://www.badil.org>; the Principles of Unity are published on the website of the North American Coalition for Rights of Return at <http://www.al-awda.org/>

4 Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, p 43

### DHEISHEH CAMP

*Politics is the family at breakfast. Who is there and who is absent and why. Who misses whom when the coffee is poured into the waiting cups.*<sup>4</sup>

Dheisheh, situated just outside Bethlehem, was established in 1948 as a temporary living solution for 3000 refugees forcefully displaced from forty-six villages west of Jerusalem and Hebron. Each family was allotted one twelve-foot-square tent, which became a twelve-foot-square concrete room, and is now a 12' × 12' three- or four-storey concrete structure. Sixty years later, 11,000 people live in an area of less than half a square kilometre, straining an always incomplete infrastructure.

Before the siege of 2002, around 3000 camp men worked in Israel, dependent on low-pay day labouring primarily in the construction industry. With the building of the 365-kilometre-long ‘security’ wall, Israel has annexed forty-six percent of land in occupied Palestine and further expanded its settlements within the West Bank. An extensive infrastructure



ensures territorial continuity between colonies, while dividing the Palestinian lands in the West Bank into unconnected cantons. This violent re-inscription of borders has further decimated the economy of the region, leading to widespread poverty and soaring unemployment, estimated in Dheisheh to be at seventy percent in the summer of 2006. Malnutrition and hunger, especially among children, are a serious issue for the first time since the 2002 siege. The search for food and the continued danger posed by ongoing nocturnal incursions of the Israeli military on the camp are forcing young men to leave Dheisheh for the first time in its history.

The Dheisheh Popular Committee leadership is primarily comprised of Communist and Popular Front activists, who locally facilitate dozens of micro-economy projects and education initiatives, and maintain pressure upon municipal and local government authorities. They are also key figures in the international movement, articulating their position firmly within an anti-colonial politics.

In February 2006 Sama Alshaibi and Sherry Wiggins met Naji Owdah, one of the coordinators of the Dheisheh Popular Committee, and his wife Suhair, a women's organiser and counsellor. The Owdah family generously shared their time, home, food and family history, introduced the artists of 6+ to the camp and its complex forms of self-organisation, and described many examples of ongoing projects with regional and foreign partners.<sup>5</sup> A deep friendship developed, and discussions began about possibilities for working together. With great tact and sensitivity, Naji Owdah also established the exigencies of possible cooperation. Between

5 Numerous educational, creative and microeconomy projects are also organised through the IBDAA center, including a dance troupe, guesthouse, childcare facilities and an active women's committee.



View of Dheisheh Refugee Camp at night, 2006, photo: 6+ collective

February and December 2006, the group conducted four visits to Dheisheh, each time represented through a rotating subset of members.

*'If I forget them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself.'*<sup>6</sup>

In September 2006, the group was asked to work with young women aged sixteen to eighteen, whose creative and imaginative capacities are often suppressed as they take on overwhelming obligations within traditional patriarchal family structures, and who often do not have the opportunity to interact and develop relationships with women outside the camp. The desire was to cultivate the strength and vision of young women, considered by our hosts as crucially important for renewing the capacities of the community as a whole. I am particularly drawn to the ways in which the Owdahs speak about education, seeming to confront directly the contradictions of liberal education models under conditions of occupation. In my subsequent discussions and emails with Naji and Suhair Owdah, as well as other friends in Bethlehem and Beit Jala,<sup>7</sup> we began to share a wariness of liberal assumptions – in particular the expectations of emancipation and upward social mobility through (Western) education. In a liberal-colonial project that assumes either elimination or education as the only form of engagement, I am acutely aware that education functions as both a means of empowerment and a site of oppression.

### *AL FENEIQ*

*Women also join in the fighting. [A local woman] has three sons in prison for life, her husband is dead, they demolished her house twice. She is strong, she is laughing.*<sup>8</sup>

Situated at the highest point of Dheisheh camp is the Al Feneiq (the Phoenix) cultural centre. Three times bombed by the Israeli Army in 2002–2003, and three times rebuilt, it is the dream project of the Popular Committee, an impressive three-storey construction built through camp remittances and local labour. My first memory of Al Feneiq is the garden, astonishing and green. Painstakingly maintained in spite of extreme water shortages, it is a vehicle for stories of the lush and fertile Palestine of the past, stories told to those who cannot remember the land before it was robbed of its water. But the garden is also an expression of a remaking of the world. Suhair Owdah describes the garden as a delirious vision provoked by thirst, a kind of laughter-lunacy that I learn to recognise as a specific form of resistance.

On a clear day, the old villages are visible from the top of the building. Young people who were born inside the camp learn the histories of their villages as their own, and memorise the lay of the land. Spatial/narrative practices are at the heart of the Al Feneiq summer camps, as children map the physical and social geography of villages that no longer exist and lands they can see only from afar, onto the space of the building. Al Feneiq is a poetic restaging of mobility and captivity, of past and future.

6 Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, Seal Press, Seattle, 1989

7 Especially Waddad Handel and the Mikahel family.

8 Suhair Owdah, op cit

*They speak of politics as ‘facts’. As though no one had explained to them the difference between ‘facts’ and that ‘reality’ which includes all the emotions of people and their positions. And which includes also triangular time (the past of moments, their present and their future).<sup>9</sup>*

The Committee has long been working with pedagogy, understanding ‘experience’ – which grounds self-knowing – as constituted within struggle politics, within a web of social relations that extends through and beyond the ‘big family’. Naji Owdah tells the story of a picnic in 2002, in which his entire extended family crosses into Israel illegally to rendezvous in the old village. The grandmother, aged eighty-one when displaced, is the only surviving family member for whom this village has ever been a material reality. For the rest of the family, the village has been a projection, an immaterial but powerful space of individual and collective identification – the origin, in absolute coordinates, relative to which all other spaces and positions are organised. Naji admits his own fatigue from a lifetime of rehearsing rituals of belonging and continuity that grow more distant, as triangular space/time unravels into untethered instances, actions, locations. The picnic is a turning point in his life, releasing the past into the future: ‘They have destroyed the villages, but I saw the stones, I saw the places, I saw the well for the water, the press for the olive oil. Nobody can take these things from my mind. I had stopped fighting – but after that, I continue!’

## WORKSHOPS

6+ are introduced to a group of eighteen young women, aged sixteen to eighteen, who have been recruited by the Committee for a series of workshops in the Al Feneiq: Haneen Abu Aiash, Rawan Aisa, Roá Alaiasa, Eman Alsaied Ahmad, Fatma Arfa, Alà Azzeh, Majd Faraj, Rofaida Fraj, Tamara Hamada, Baraá Owdah, Haneen Owdah, Lama Owdah, Maram Mizher, Rita Ramadan, Safà Salem, Zahra Salem, Shatha Salameh and Ahlam Zwahra. It is through Naji Owdah that the artists receive permission from the families to begin working with the girls during Ramadan. On a subsequent visit I meet some of the parents, who continue to be supportive of their involvement with the project.

The strategy is to create a project in small and, it is hoped, feasible stages, each concrete in some way, yet without a predetermined outcome.

<sup>9</sup> Mourid Barghouti, *op cit*, p 43



Workshop participants work together, 2006, photo: 6+ collective

We understand we are working within conditions of extreme uncertainty. The group approaches the situation in a fairly traditional way – making small objects, telling stories, small-group exercises, physical play. There is space created for daily meetings to reflect on and respond to the process and to modify (in certain instances, completely revamp) the approach at each stage. We are looking to build upon and between small instances, and to work within the Al Feneiq project as a physical space, an institution, a set of political ideals and a kind of pedagogy.

1 *Books*. Though isolated from even the neighbouring Bethlehem community, and struggling to maintain connections with the world outside the camp walls, Dheisheh residents speak of a chronic lack of solitude, privacy, silence, especially for young girls who are often confined to overcrowded living quarters, tending to domestic duties for long hours of the day. Our first workshop in bookmaking is an introduction to simple collage and bookbinding techniques. Girls help each other make journals, a small but concrete space for private reflection, doodling and so forth. We share our own journals, are embarrassed. There is much laughter and mischief. We are hopeful this experience is the beginning of a relationship between each participant and her own book.

2 *Writing/Translation*. Initial journal entries are largely formal texts that are not exceedingly intimate – eloquently narrated family stories, events from camp life, folkloric poems or songs, or formal declarations of love to unnamed (and quite abstract) boys. The multiple translations at this stage – from Arabic to English to Arabic, from shared to private to shared narratives – generate multiple possibilities for transformation. We focus on identifying and expressively unfolding one small moment in each story – working with verbal and non-verbal means of emphasising, editing, compression.

3 *Recordings*. Each story is then converted into a 60-second oral recording. The problem of compression, and of moving from written to oral Arabic, opens up the narratives to new interpretive possibilities. I notice the girls begin to listen to each other more intently – to hear, perhaps, different nuances and interpretations emerging within familiar stories. The recordings offer the exhilarating, strange, embarrassing sound of a voice that is, and is not, one's own. We are surprised by, and somewhat under-prepared for, the girls' exuberance and intensity.

4 *Spaces, Materials, Sounds*. Using digital recorders, we work in small groups to generate, record, and listen to ambient sounds. Objects are manipulated and the acoustic possibilities of the space are explored. The Al Feneiq library and computer centre – empty rooms awaiting books, computers and the people to use them – are full of sound, of specific material and physical information, of expressive potential. We also work on the balcony and in the garden, inside the bathroom and on the stairwell.

5 *Choreographies – Sixty Seconds*. Each participant identifies small moments in the story that can be paired up with particular sounds. She can also utilise the bodies of her collaborators, directing and choreographing a series of actions that produce desired sounds. In repeated 'rehearsals'

the girls act upon each other and the built environment, reviewing their recordings to understand the possibilities of the 'instrument'. We begin to pay closer attention to the specific materiality of the building, and the material qualities of sound as vibration. But the sound-space emerges also from relative qualities (relationships between sounds, relative distance or speed, transitions from one location to another) and from the subjective ways in which sound/text become internalised. Each participant produces a sixty-second recording, an ensemble performance recorded in 'one take', combining the use of spoken and sound elements.

6 *The Web*. We try to establish email 'circles', inviting the girls to continue their recordings, and to email us their sound files. We would then upload them to a website, hoping this structure can allow us to continue working together in the long breaks between our visits. However, email communication is nearly impossible to sustain. Over the next two visits we learn that the girls continue to work with their journals, but not with the recorder. Haneen Owdah tells us the journals are full, and the girls have been teaching their younger siblings and cousins how to make small books of their own. In conversations with their mothers, the girls insist the books are private and cannot be shared – at the same time they insistently ask for this stage of the project to end, after only one more sound workshop during which to record the most recent journal entries and put them online.

## GOING GLOBAL

*They will exercise the compassion of the victor over the loser.*<sup>10</sup>

The workshops have only just begun to explore the expressive potential of sound, which we had planned to incorporate into a larger digital/spatial project extending to locations throughout the camp. We are, however, moving away from what was a rather fashionable mapping project and returning to more sustainable and, we hope, useful forms of making. The next stages of the workshops will continue the journaling; they may involve different visual narrative forms, possibly exhibiting the work inside the camp. We are also invigorated by the girls' desire to teach others what they have learned and are concerned with finding processes that can be productively sustained beyond our visits.

A different dimension of the project emerged, initially expressed as a website, later as a sound installation and then a video, directed towards sharing the recordings with the world beyond the camp walls – one of the requests repeatedly and passionately made by everyone we met in Dheisheh. This signals a shift away from working within a local context in close collaboration with a highly organised community. If this project is to facilitate the circulation of audio and other creative 'works' in the circuits of the international art/culture market, neither the young girls, the Owdah family nor the Committee are in a position to operate as a co-participant in the same sense. We are struggling as we become untethered from our relationships within a specific social movement and its political aspirations, which until now have helped guide our work. This may explain a rather cautious, hesitant approach to the website –

10 Ibid, p 156



lacking translation, descriptions, minimal (visual) interpretive framework – at least until further visits would allow us to learn *how* we might be useful. Instead, the group has chosen to ‘travel’ the project offline, through presentations at several conferences.<sup>11</sup> We understand the importance of defying Israel’s efforts to isolate Palestinians from the rest of the world, and these conferences have been ways to present possibilities for working alongside the Dheisheh community, ‘to encourage others to go there and do their own work’.<sup>12</sup> We have invited critical input into the strategic possibilities – and political/ethical implications – of re-imagining our project in order to ‘circulate’ it abroad. We are currently exhibiting a video of narratives from Dheisheh.<sup>13</sup> Discussions around the production of this video have refocused our commitment and suggested how we might experiment with different possible ways to imagine our role – as well as with the context of artistic production/exhibition in the US – the strategic alliances we might develop with other self-organised projects, and the necessity to situate the project politically while retaining the experimental and poetic intent of many of the narratives.

Throughout the process, we have been in some disagreement as to whether increased representational visibility is necessarily linked with political agency, and have internally questioned the ethics of representing the work of young people and children, especially in relation to the production and conditioning of *feeling*. Some members, myself included, have voiced strong opposition to existing models of ‘community arts’ in the US, which often work to conceal structures of oppression and domination.

Between the financial squeeze and our commitment to advocating collaborations with self-organised refugee communities like Dheisheh, the pressure is on for a clearer politics and a more efficient strategy of dissemination. My own longstanding commitments are mobilised at this moment of the project in something approaching a state of emergency. I am troubled by my own position as potentially complicitous in commodifying the work. I am troubled by the possibility of being recast as the globe-trotting artist – a surrogate for the privileged social stratum of art consumers who parachuted into so-called ‘problem’ communities or situations and whose mission is, ostensibly, either to ‘give voice’ to otherwise voiceless people or to offer aesthetic experiences that can refine and ‘sensitise’ the locals. The massive deployment on the global art market of ‘participatory’, ‘community’ or ‘relational’ practices since the early 1990s often functions to reinforce poverty, oppression and inequality as problems of specific communities, and not of capitalism, while suppressing the implication of artist and audience in the structures that produce and maintain uneven power relations. The crisis, for me, is provoked by the ways in which both aesthetic pleasure and the philanthropic mobilisation of art often function to ‘manage’ the threat of systemic critique.

‘Going global’ is not meant here to suggest the sudden appearance of the global at this stage of the project. From its inception, global capitalism has been present in the lives of all co-participants and in the conditions of our working relationships – but it has not been recognised as such. I am suggesting that interrogating our working principles in relation to global capitalism has now become urgent. But can a unifying politics vis-à-vis capitalism emerge alongside the imperative of preserving distinct, and often divergent, personal and artistic trajectories? What

11 To date, members have presented the Dheisheh workshops and recordings at the Annual Conference of the Middle Eastern Studies Association in Boston, US; ‘Imaging Place’ at the University of Florida, US; the Nobel Women’s Initiative Conference ‘Women Redefining Peace in The Middle East & Beyond’ in Galway, Ireland; ‘Sultana’s Dream’, exhibition at Exit Art, NY.

12 Wendy Babcox, private correspondence with the artist

13 Part of the exhibition ‘Sultana’s Dream’ organised by the South Asian Women’s Creative Collective. Our participation in this exhibition was initiated and strongly argued for by Wendy Babcox, who became the ‘moderator’ of an often emotional and volatile internal struggle. The extraordinary simplicity of the resulting video and accompanying documentation seems to offer the glimpse of a concrete – though incomplete – way forward. Since the completion of this article, the group has conducted several new bookmaking and imaging workshops in which walking through the camp becomes a vehicle for collective storytelling. Camp residents have drawn a map representing locations within the camp as relationships between different participants’ experiences and in relation to spaces elsewhere – particularly the original villages.

practices, strategies or forms could mediate between particularisms in this sense?

*‘...That “reality” which includes all the emotions of people and their positions. And which includes also triangular time.’<sup>14</sup>*

These tensions may help refocus the question of commonality as interrelatedness – not assuming a universal shared experience, but rather acknowledging a field of political forces within which we are differently positioned and by which we are differently impacted. In a series of internal correspondences and interviews, 6+ tried individually to make sense of the ways in which they are repositioned as political subjects through this work. Members speak of the transformative power of ‘experience’, in ways that echo an understanding of self-knowing as knowing in relation to others. The primary ground that structures this ‘relation to others’, the web of interrelations between all co-participants in the project, is initially identified as the legacy of colonialism.

Imagining a shared politics that is yet to be calls us to recognise the traces of possible futures. While productive in many ways, speaking of colonialism as a political process *in the past tense* is insufficient, if it forecloses the question of our implication in global forces today, or if it relentlessly anchors us as actors in the theatre of the past. Our task may be to develop, in the various spaces of our daily lives, in the locations and conditions within which we live and work, practices of creative resistance and struggle that can attend to ‘experience’ as a dual hinging or triangulation – to open up the self into an ensemble of social and political processes – to open up the past and future into the present.

14 Mourid Barghouti, *op cit*, p 43

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Many thanks are offered to my colleagues in 6+ for their contributions to this essay, and for their sincerity in sharing the joys, hesitations and uncertainties of the practice. I am also grateful for provocative and helpful interventions into previous drafts of this essay by Adaluna Borcila, Riccardo Marchi, Tone Huse, Sarah Lewison and Gene Ray.

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# Indymedia, South Africa

## An Experiment in Production

Prishani Naidoo

In 2001 South Africa held its first international United Nations (UN) conference, the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) – a gathering appropriately hosted by the ANC-led government, celebrated the world over for its attainment of a negotiated end to the racism of apartheid. In line with UN tradition, South African civil society came together to host a parallel NGO Forum. While the South African government wanted to use the opportunity to showcase the first seven years of electoral democracy as living up to the status of ‘miracle nation’, the occasion coincided with growing dissatisfaction amongst organisations and activists in traditional civil society and in poor communities as the effects of government’s neoliberal macro-economic strategy began to be felt. For example, in the area of basic service delivery, the introduction of the logic of cost-recovery and privatisation resulted in increases in water and electricity cut-offs and evictions. As poor people were unable to pay for basic services, a number of different community movements emerged, bringing together people protesting against the neoliberal logic, reconnecting people to water and electricity supplies and securing them in their homes. As the mainstream media continued to serve the interests of government and the private sector, the struggles of new movements came to be criminalised. As the WCAR neared, it became clear that some other space would be necessary through which stories and views critical of the government could be presented, both to the media and to activists from all over the world who would be descending on Durban. There would also be a need for voices critical of the UN and the international neoliberal architecture to be given space.

Imagined in the tradition of the growing global brand of media activism catalysed by Seattle, an Independent Media Centre (IMC) was set up within the space of the official NGO Forum to provide media coverage and space more generally for those voices critical of and marginalised by the official conference to meet and speak. Initiated by Ben Cashdan, an independent filmmaker who made contact with activists in the global Indymedia network, local preparatory meetings and discussions brought together a motley crew of progressive journalists working in the

mainstream media, independent filmmakers, photographers, social movement activists (largely from the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg and the Concerned Citizens' Forum in Durban), staff members of the South African National NGO Coalition and the National Land Committee (a Johannesburg-based NGO that was central in the formation of the Landless Peoples' Movement, also being launched at the time), unemployed township youth, and independent activists and left academics. Well resourced, in terms of finances and equipment received from the global network and with regard to the many skilled and talented people who committed to the project, the IMC became an extremely popular and well-received space and production house, organising daily press briefings, debates, film screenings, poetry readings and informal music sessions – generally an alternative space for activists to meet and through which those marginalised by the official forum could make their voices heard. The centre also sent out electronic briefings about protests around the WCAR, and set up a website (<http://sa.indymedia.org>) through which news about struggles and the issues being taken up by South African movements gained coverage. In this way, the space provided by IMC during the WCAR became important in that it provided alternative forms and modes of representation and alternative forms and modes of interaction and engagement between people, outside the sanitised spaces of the official conference.

But its success and significance meant that the IMC would be contested, in particular by those wanting to mobilise it towards representing particular political positions or understandings of situations and issues, and those seeing it as a means to advance their personal ambitions. During the WCAR, differences that surfaced within the Durban Social Forum (DSF), a space of meeting for all those critical of neoliberalism and of the WCAR, needed to be represented through the IMC. As the South African National NGO Coalition, hosts of the official NGO Forum and the DSF, found it increasingly difficult to critique the government in the antagonistic manners characteristic of new social and community movements, all gathered in the DSF, the former tried to make the IMC its mouthpiece, attempting to deny the IMC the independence to be critical of the UN and the WCAR and to dictate how severe the IMC could be in its criticisms of government. It would also see the need to paper over any differences amongst members of the DSF. While ultimately the IMC in Durban contributed significantly to the alternative imagination of new social movements that was produced in 2001 and to the negation of the image of the rainbow nation of reconciliation and freedom in which all now live a better life, its success was achieved in spite of the many battles waged amongst those vying for control of it as a space. In the discussions held to consider maintaining an Indymedia network in South Africa after Durban, it became clear that the NGO voice would not be given much space in the IMC. Rather, it would be that of community movements. In addition, activists spoke of the network as producing the means for movements and activists to imagine ourselves and speak to each other outside the mainstream media and the privileged circuits of representation and affirmation of organised civil society.

In the months after Durban, activists continued to meet in the name of Indymedia. In Johannesburg, a collective made up of independent

filmmakers and aspirant filmmakers, social movement activists (in particular, from the Anti-Privatisation Forum), journalists and independent activists continued to meet regularly, provided with institutional support from Khanya College, a local NGO, and to produce media related to the activities of movements. In Durban and Cape Town, activists from the Concerned Citizens Forum and the Anti-Eviction Campaign respectively sometimes spoke in the name of Indymedia. While there were few occasions on which a notion of ‘a different role for the media’ was mobilised, with film screenings, cultural evenings and exhibitions providing spaces in which movements and activists were able to imagine ourselves outside the images naturalised by the mainstream, in general, the IMC was seen as a space through which movements could gain representation in very conventional ways. In other words, the IMC came to be seen as a mouthpiece for new social and community movements, our production being at its peak during major campaigns of movements or periods of repression of movements.

In 2002, the IMC sprang into action in what was probably to be its most far-reaching and successful campaign to date, around the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), another international UN conference to be hosted by the ‘miracle South African nation’. With the experience of Durban behind it, and the need to assure the world of its commitments to ‘sustainable development’, the South African government began its programme of repression and silencing of movements critical of its neoliberal policies well before the summit and would employ far more violent means in its quest to protect the image of the happy rainbow nation. In the weeks before the summit, the IMC was mobilised to counter the criminalisation of legitimate struggles by the mainstream media and to organise practical support and solidarity for local movements from the global networks that we had managed to sustain since the WCAR. Importantly, it became engaged in a battle for representation over what life in post-apartheid South Africa was like, and to allow the stories of people fighting the policies of the new government in their everyday lives to gain a voice. With new social and community movements falling out with NGOs, organised churches and organised labour, represented in the official NGO Forum, the IMC became the space through which movements and activists critical of South African civil society, the South African government and the UN system were able to make their voices and stories heard. IMC thus became a channel contesting the dominant images in the mainstream that were attempting to criminalise the struggles of poor communities and those critical of the neoliberalising state. Outside the official summit spaces, the IMC also became a vibrant meeting place for activists in which music, poetry, film, photo exhibitions and media production (of various forms) became accessible and possible for those marginalised by the summit, organised civil society and the mainstream media. The IMC also became an important space through which divisions between social movements were overcome and preparations for one of the biggest marches in post-apartheid South Africa were to unfold. And it was significant in bringing activists from the global movement together with local activists and movements.

While the story of the IMC of South Africa could very easily be romanticised as a ‘southern success story’ of the global movement



against neoliberalism, there are several problems that must be acknowledged as part of this narrative – problems that relate to the fact that the IMC was largely an experiment amongst a diverse group of people united in our common critique and struggle against neoliberalism (and capitalism), needing ourselves to survive in a hostile world driven by the logic of the market and the profit motive. From its beginning, differences with regard to resources surfaced. In contrast to the north, where most IMCs are run by individuals with access to the resources necessary to make media, in South Africa the IMC has been dependent on a few well-resourced and well-intentioned activists, the support of the global network and periodic funding from donors. With the majority of members having no access to computers, internet, telephones or basic incomes, even simple meetings required funds for the provision of transport, for example. A lack of media skills also necessitated the provision of basic training in writing, navigation of the internet and video production. With some members better resourced than others (in terms of both money and skills), particular members began to wield greater power in discussions and processes. While there was always resistance amongst members to formal structures through which undemocratic practices and hierarchies could potentially develop, there was also always a need for some form of coordination amongst members in order to ensure the sharing of limited resources, the regular communication and meeting of members and levels of accountability amongst members. From 2001 to the beginning of 2003, therefore, coordinators were elected for Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg and nationally.

While the IMC has historically been able to access tremendous material resources around major campaigns and events, such as the WCAR and WSSD, because of the reluctance to formalise its structure the IMC has not been able to access or secure long-term funding that would allow it to maintain an open space for the production of independent and critical media. Until 2003, the network had also functioned at a national level, with the only real Indymedia office being set up in Johannesburg, and activists from particular movements in Cape Town and Durban grew overly reliant on the Johannesburg centre for funds for movement participation in major national events without any media activism taking place at other times. After the WSSD, however, it was decided that IMC-SA would continue only as a website, and that separate collectives (IMC-Johannesburg, IMC-Durban, and IMC-Cape Town) would be established to continue other forms of media production. While we might still come together at a national level, it was agreed that each collective would focus on developing more local strategies to build spaces for alternative, independent and critical media in South Africa. In this, collectives in Johannesburg and Cape Town have been successful in working under the name of Indymedia, while groups of activists in Durban have continued to use the Indymedia network in the representation of their movements and struggles without formally establishing an IMC. What is clear, however, is that there are no predetermined ways of approaching the functioning of this network, but that the experimental form is precisely what allows for the space to adapt to the needs of a context that is so fluid and fragile.

In trying to be an open space, with unlimited access to people, it has also been difficult to ensure common access to and ownership of the

limited equipment received around major projects. In a context in which unemployment is high and many of those who make up Indymedia collectives have few material resources or skills to be able to change this, IMCs have also always been seen as means to access immediate resources and skills. In Johannesburg, in particular, the access of activists to networks of mainstream media production (particularly in the field of video) through their association with the IMC has resulted in a large number of members making up the video team using the space to gain skills, training and experience and making off with video and computer equipment for their own personal use in commercial mainstream projects. There have also been experiences in Durban and Cape Town of equipment being sold by individuals or becoming the property of select individuals. Being able to access funds mainly around major campaigns and events has also meant that the number of IMC activists swelled at different times, depending on its ability to cover the transport and food costs of poorer people unable to afford the trip from townships to the venues where IMC meetings would be held. While this has enabled the IMC to sustain a changing core group of committed activists over the years, it has also meant that there have been a few individuals who have treated the IMC as a space for individual opportunity. These are problems that have had to be faced as they have arisen in the open forums provided by the network form.

Through their own experiences, IMCs in South Africa today reflect the many changes that new social and community movements have undergone in their short history. Collectives continue today in Cape Town and Johannesburg, made up primarily of independent activists, social movement activists, poets and musicians. While resource issues and the differences produced by capitalist society will always shadow our interactions and processes of production, it is also now clear that there is an imagination amongst South Africans of a different way for us to represent ourselves and tell our stories, a way that does not always have to speak to the mainstream or to anyone at all, but that produces relations between those fighting capitalism that speak to our vision of a different world in the here and now. This spirit and commitment to our 'other world' being attained in the here and now is a thread that runs through the story of Indymedia South Africa – embodied in a slogan scrawled on a placard carried by a protestor during the WCAR which was featured on our website and became the picture on T-shirts produced for the WSSD, 'Give Us Or We Take!', and was carried through in the name of one of our most recent projects, a low-power community radio station in Soweto, 'Rasa', meaning 'make a noise'. Refusing the 'reality' of the relations that we are forced to live and the representations that we are forced to produce under capitalism, the IMC has become a space in which the contradictions and problems thrown up by capitalist society are being confronted as people try to find ways to speak and relate that are not fashioned by the logic of the market and profit. This is an ongoing struggle in which the ways we imagine ourselves are also being confronted.

# Crossroads for Activist Art in Argentina

Ana Longoni

The crisis and unprecedented popular uprising in Argentina that culminated in the disturbances of December 2001 produced an aftermath of institutional instability and ongoing unrest in which new social movements played a leading role. Many artists' collectives became involved in the widespread call for substantial change in the political system – summed up in the radical slogan '*que se vayan todos*' ('out with them all'). Since Néstor Kirchner's government came to power in 2003, political and economic stability and a hegemonic pact for governance have been re-established. In this new and complex scenario social movements are disbanding, losing the impetus they once had and, in many cases, reverting to traditional political relations based on patronage and party. Among the new forms of activism, a sharp division has opened between those who support the government and those who oppose it. This divide profoundly separates people who not long ago took part in the same struggles.

The power of the Argentinian uprising caught the attention of intellectuals and activists, as well as artists and curators from other parts of the world, who glimpsed in this turbulent process a novel and vital sociocultural laboratory. The new term *turismo piquetero* (picket line tourism) describes, ironically but accurately, the stream of visitors who arrived, armed with cameras and good intentions, to visit neighbourhood meetings, reclaimed factories, pickets and roadblocks. Among other consequences, this focus of interest gave a certain international visibility to *activist art* practices, which until then had remained decidedly on the margins of the conventional spheres of institutionalised art.<sup>1</sup> In this context, activist art groups were subjected to intense attention and wide international circulation. Certain groups were catapulted into prestigious biennials and group shows in Europe, America, Asia and even Oceania. Today, after other global disturbances have captured the attention that was focused temporarily on Argentina, we have to face and assess the implications of this enormous international over-exposure for the practices and subjectivities involved. These are confusing and contradictory but not necessarily dark times. There are signs of

1 I use the term 'activist art' with reservations, given that some of the groups mentioned here refuse to define themselves as 'artists' or their practices as 'art', understanding them instead as a specific form of militancy linked to creative strategies in political communication.

disintegration, of a loss of heart and crisis among the groups that kept up a frenetic level of activity on the streets between 2002 and 2004, groups that suddenly found themselves thrust into the most prominent showcases on the international art circuit. But, at the same time, some groups are celebrating their tenth birthdays with gusto, while continuing to work actively and even taking on joint projects with other collectives.

Between March and May 2007, I met with protagonists and asked them to share and reflect on their experiences and expectations. The following collage of voices – sometimes in agreement, sometimes divergent – may contribute something to the prevailing ‘state of deliberation’. Here are opinions and stories from Magdalena Jitrik, Karina Granieri and Carolina Katz, all members at one time of the Taller Popular de Serigrafía (Popular Silkscreen Workshop, or TPS for short); Javier del Olmo, who formed now-dissolved collectives such as Mínimo 9 and Arde!Arte, currently informally linked to the Frente de Artistas Darío Santillán (Darío Santillán Artists’ Front); Daniel Sanjurjo, who has a long history with various collectives dating back to the 1980s, and in recent years participated in Arde!Arte and the TPS; Charo Golder and Rafael Leona, members of the Grupo de Arte Callejero (Street Art Group, or GAC); Federico Geller, who left the GAC and now works with Comunitaria TV, an alternative television project based in Claypole; Federico Zukerfeld, Loreto Garín and Nancy Garín, old members of Etcétera, which has now become Internacional Errorista (Errorist International); Pablo Ares, a member of the GAC who has been active with Iconoclasistas (Iconoclassists) for a year; and Julia Risler, one of the driving forces behind the Potlach Festival and the other half of Iconoclasistas. I have also made use of the written comments sent to me by Verónica Di Toro who left the TPS in 2007.

This list of interviewees may provide some markers for a map of activist art practices in Argentina since the mid-1990s – practices that have been subjected to a vertiginous reshaping by migration, dissolution, renaming and recycling, conflict, rupture and even expulsion. Through the recent experiences of these groups, we can enquire about dilemmas and new directions in response to two main problems: first, the unfamiliar situation that has arisen for these groups as a result of the human rights policies of the current government; and second, the visibility and legitimacy on the international art circuit gained by these groups and their practices.

Two moments are crucial to the appearance, proliferation and vitality of the street art groups linked to new social movements in Argentina in the last decade. The first, in the mid-1990s, is the appearance of HIJOS, a group bringing together the sons and daughters of those detained and ‘disappeared’ under the last dictatorship. The origins of two still active groups, the GAC and Etcétera, were closely related to the planning and realisation of *escraches*, a form of direct action undertaken by HIJOS to draw attention to the impunity of those responsible for repression and to generate social condemnation. Both the GAC’s urban signposting and Etcétera’s performances were, to begin with, completely invisible to the artworld as ‘art actions’; nevertheless they gave the *escraches* identity and visibility.

The second moment, in the heat of the revolt of December 2001, involves a significant number of visual artists, film- and video-makers,

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javier del olmo 2007

Javier del Omo, Aparición con vida ya de Jorge Julio López (Let Jorge Julio López appear alive at once!), 2007, typewritten text on paper, 21 x 29 cm

Downloaded By: [New York University] At: 15:43 12 February 2009





Lucas Di Pascuale, *López*, 2007, building sign, Centro Cultural España Córdoba, Argentina

poets, alternative journalists, thinkers and social activists. They invented new forms of intervention linked to social events and movements in the expectation that they would change life in Argentina: popular assemblies, pickets, the reclaiming of factories by workers, movements of the unemployed, bartering clubs and so on. The subversive use of the mass media and the development of alternative means of communication are tools common to the new forms of protest. Of the new groups, some had an ephemeral existence, linked to a particular moment, while others survived until not long ago. Among the latter are the TPS whose distinctive hallmark was printing *in situ*, during protests, onto the demonstrators' clothes; and Arde! Arte which carried out numerous actions and interventions during the demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

2 A fuller version of this brief description of activist art over the last decade and its dialogue with the radicalised artistic avant-garde of the 1960s can be found in Ana Longoni, 'Brennt Tucumán noch immer?/Is Tucumán still burning?', in *Collective Creativity/Kollektive Kreativität*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2005, pp 150–74.

### **INSTITUTIONALISING MEMORY**

On 24 March 2004, on the anniversary of the 1976 coup d'état, an event of enormous symbolic significance took place. The ESMA (Escuela Mecánica de la Armada – Naval School of Mechanics) building, in which the largest clandestine detention and extermination centre operated under the dictatorship, was handed over by the Kirchner government to human rights organisations to be turned into a memorial site. Discourses and practices – demanding trial and punishment for perpetrators of genocide and state terrorism – that under adverse conditions

3 For example, Federico Geller says: 'I feel different from most people in this micro-environment where art meets politics in that I'm not as bothered by ESMA being turned into the Museum of Memory or by schools making homages they didn't used to. While I could see there was a repetition of state interference, and I was sensitive to that, I also saw something original. It's not original when the teacher always talks with the same tone (whether she's talking about the Malvinas war, or whatever), but the fact that it has become official meant that the subject of the dictatorship could be introduced in places where it was never discussed, for example, in a whole lot of schools.'

4 Jorge Julio López, a near octogenarian survivor of the concentration camps of the last dictatorship, was abducted without leaving a trace shortly after giving key evidence in the trial that led to the imprisonment of former repressor Miguel Etchecolatz (ex-chief of police of the province of Buenos Aires). Here Verónica Di Toro's testimony is representative:

had resisted the military dictatorship and afterwards had tirelessly denounced the impunity extended by successive democratic governments, were suddenly held up as banners for current government policies. As the terrain of activism and opposition was in part annexed by official policy, many activists began to work with different government agencies and ministries. Reactions varied, some activists responding to specific measures, such as the reopening of the genocide trials and the abolition of the so-called laws of pardon, with confidence, expectation or even joy.<sup>3</sup> Others kept their distance, interpreting the new policies as rhetorical gestures that limited the defence of human rights to past abuses while suppressing current conflicts (strikes, pickets) and neglecting the investigation of new disappearances (such as that of Jorge Julio López in September 2006).<sup>4</sup>

Two events on the day of the handing over of the ESMA building demonstrate the extent to which the line now dividing activists with official roles from those in opposition has influenced the practices of art groups. The first, involving Etcétera, took place during the ceremony at which the president transferred the ESMA to human rights organisations. In a typical performance, the group distributed to those present – among them the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo – hundreds of little bars of soap wrapped in a printed paper that called for a 'general clean-up'. Phrases such as 'ideal for washing face or hands, recommended for washing the head' or 'with 28 years of experience declaring war on dirt' alluded ironically to the complicity between the political class and the repressors who labelled guerrilla actions a 'dirty war'. Nancy explains the intervention:

We had a lot of discussions about whether to go or not. It was a confused, complicated situation. That day Kirchner was taking down from a wall the portrait of a military man, something that was being presented as a sort of reconciliation and clean-up of the Armed Forces, a symbolic gesture by the government. We were thinking about working with the image of 'face washing' and had the idea of the little soap,



**DESAPARECIDO POR RAZONES POLITICAS**  
**DESDE EL 18 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2006**

TPS (Taller Popular de Serigrafía, Popular Silkscreen Workshop), *¿Dónde está Julio López?* (*Where is Julio López?*), 2006, serigraphy printed during street protests, Buenos Aires, Argentina

packaged as though for a marketing campaign and using a text that was apparently extremely ambiguous, although it was crystal clear to us.

In this context, however, such action was read as threatening. Later, the group was denounced on television and in various newspapers by Hebe de Bonafini, Chair of the Association of the Plaza de Mayo Mothers.<sup>5</sup> This figure interpreted the action as part of the campaign of threats the Mothers, an undisputed moral authority in the fight against the dictatorship, were then suffering – this despite the facts that the Mothers knew Etcétera and the text was clearly signed by the group with its email address and the slogan ‘*Ni olvido ni perdón, no usemos el jabón*’ (‘No forgetting, no pardon, let us not use the soap’). The impact of the accusation on the group was tremendous. Federico Zukerfeld explains: ‘An *escrache* by the Mothers against us – that is the worst thing that could happen to us!’ Nancy continues, ‘The following day we went to the Mothers’ house to try to explain ourselves and they threw us out’. Loreto adds: ‘It provoked in us a crisis about the language we had been using... That crisis made us think about our whole history.’

The second event took place the same day in the geographically central and symbolically loaded Plaza de Mayo where demonstrations traditionally arrive. The TPS set up a printing table there for silk-screening onto paper or clothes. The print offered that day quoted a phrase from a recent presidential speech (‘Argentina 2004, Capitalism in earnest’) accompanied by a group of images that implied criticism of the official policy of memory, extending the case of the ESMA as a Museum of Memory, so as to include ironical mentions of the Congress, the Ministry of Economy, Government House and the Courts as supposed museums of corruption, hunger, surrender and impunity respectively. Unlike most TPS images, which support, affirm and disseminate the struggles they accompany without double meanings, these images used sarcasm and risked provoking those who had come to participate in the demonstration and celebrate the handing over of ESMA. Magdalena reports:

‘I’ve just listened to the news on national radio and heard part of Kirchner’s speech campaigning for the presidential elections, appealing to Argentinians to use their memories when voting; of course he used the word ‘memory’ several times during the speech. As I was listening I thought about the manipulation by the State of the struggle for memory, for human rights. A discourse that cannot be sustained while Julio López remains “disappeared”.’

5 This is how the episode appears in the *Página/12* newspaper on 27 March 2004: ‘The usual anonymous individuals are at work: In the past few days [Hebe de Bonafini] has received a number of emails from a so-called ‘24 March Commando’. ‘The message was that if we didn’t stop making trouble they would liquidate us’, explains the Chair of the Association, Hebe de Bonafini... she considered it to be part of the same campaign when several young people gave out gifts of soap with the slogan “General Clean-up!” to members of the association during the ceremony at ESMA last Wednesday.’

We were assaulted by bands of Kirchner supporters... It was the first warning: watch what you’re saying... We set up in the square as usual with the strange difference that nothing happened, no one brought along posters or T-shirts. We always printed in the same spot on the square, by an olive tree. That day there were some youths from the group *Venceremos* (We shall overcome) in the area, and they confronted two psychology students from the Partido Obrero (Workers’ Party) because the Partido Obrero did not join in with the ceremony to hand over ESMA. They used that as a pretext to overturn the table and printing equipment.

Karina and Carolina believe the assault towards the TPS, who merely found themselves in the middle of the scuffle, was a matter of chance. They also point out that the image was ‘very bizarre, incendiary. Unlike the other TPS images, which expressed support for a struggle, this one was disconcerting, critical. It functioned as criticism of all types of representation, of institutionalisation, of “museumification”.’

As for the GAC, Charo sees the group as having managed to avoid the pro-Kirchner/anti-Kirchner divisions: ‘We never worked with

political parties and we never worked to order. That's why, because we were unattached, we remained friends with the Mothers and with HIJOS. It kept us pretty much on the sidelines of this argument.' But in 2004, faced with what they saw as 'the institutionalisation of the human rights movement', they decided to stop installing the flag/sign saying 'Trial and punishment', two metres in diameter, that they used to stick to the ground in the Plaza de Mayo every year. 'We thought that as a symbol it had already become institutional. Let the institutions do it if they want to. It doesn't belong to us any more.'

Javier, of Arde!Arte, tells how – as an effect of the prevailing polarisation – his group called off an action during which they had planned to wear Kirchner masks [*caretas*]: 'a cardboard mask with just one eye to look out of, which said 'Presidente Karetá'.<sup>6</sup> When we were about to go ahead, we realised we were on course for a collision, or that it was going to be interpreted as pro-Kirchner. It was a bit ambiguous.'

The entry of activists into the state apparatus also affects the groups. Federico Geller explains:

In my opinion co-option is occurring as a sort of phagocytosis, like a creature sucking the vitality out of individuals. Co-option is real, it is an undeniable political process, but not everything can be reduced to that. You also have to see what the state is, that it is not monolithic. One has to have a scheme of action that will allow you to think in every situation and to bring personal identity into play. Now I'm working for the state with people from Comunitaria, giving workshops on alternative communication to young people between seventeen and twenty years old in neighbourhoods and shanty towns around the country. We have total freedom to work with whatever tools we choose, and we try to look at each context and decide what might work... There are places where there are no imaginaries of the dictatorship or the Desert Campaign [the extermination of the indigenous population at the end of the nineteenth century] even though everyone is indigenous or mixed race. They don't know the original nation they come from. We try to generate interest, and to provide the minimal tools they need to turn that into a question... In that context the discussion of the institutionalisation of memory makes no sense.

## INTERNATIONAL OVER-EXPOSURE

The other topic touched on repeatedly in these interviews was the new visibility of Argentinian activist art in both local and international group shows, biennials, meetings and publications. This has undoubtedly affected them, impacting on their practices, the ideas they hold, the networks of relationships and affinities they construct – in short, the whole framework underlying their collective and individual subjectivities.

The first group to go through this experience was the GAC. Their most critical moment occurred in 2003 following the invitation to participate in the 50th Venice Biennale, in the section curated by Carlos Basualdo. The swift arc propelling them, with no intermediate steps, from street activism to inclusion in such prominent international art spaces generated undeniable tensions within the group. These were finally resolved when they decided – after several more experiences

6 *Careta* refers to hypocrisy in the local dialect used by the young.

and much discussion – not to show their productions in conventional exhibition spaces. Charo summarises:

In 2000 we travelled for the first time as a group, to a meeting in Monterrey, with a five-star hotel and a lot of money for the work. We did our last international shows in 2005, in Germany and France. We got fed up with it and decided not to go to any more shows. [The invitations] kept coming, we turned them down, and then they stopped coming. We've got a black mark against us. Many people think we don't exist any more. And we had to put up with a lot of criticism, discussion, comments from people who don't know us but talk about our contradictions or problems. All that contributed to our radical decision not to participate any more... I could be seduced by the travelling. It's great to travel for free! But it's not free... You think you don't give a shit about that world, you can just use it to travel, but it's not for free, something happens to us.

Pablo sees it in pragmatic terms:

Venice meant 2400 Euros for us, and we chose to participate for that sum, which meant printing thousands of posters saying *Aquí viven genocidas* ('Perpetrators of genocide live here') as well as other work. Our participation in Venice was very much criticised, but it was only one week's work for us. I don't know how Basualdo – that guy from Rosario with the thousand dollar Italian shoes – got the idea of inviting us.

The issue was resolved by the extreme decision to remove themselves from the circuit, even though it was recognised as a source of finance that could be used for street actions.

The TPS was sucked into this whirlwind of demand at a late stage, but their arrival was dramatic: in a few months between 2006 and 2007 they were invited to four biennials (São Paulo, Moscow, Istanbul, Valencia) as well as major local and international exhibitions. This huge demand forced the group to concentrate purely on these events, disrupting their active links with social movements. 'For the past year we've been working for biennials', says Karina. The group also had to deal with the members' different views on how to participate in those spaces. When it seemed attitudes could not be reconciled, the group dissolved. Karina reflects: 'It was dizzying – four biennials in under five months. There was no time to mature or to prepare what we sent. All of a sudden we were launched into an artistic career we didn't sign up for.' Carolina points out that for groups with scant means the offer of institutional resources is difficult to refuse: 'I wonder how to say no to these invitations. If they don't seduce you with their symbolic power, which isn't of much interest to me, they get you with their economic power. It's the first time I've ever charged anything for what I do, even though it's not much.' And biennials have a way of absorbing a group's time and refocusing their work. Carolina continues: 'For me the scale is exhausting and overwhelming. It forces us to work exclusively for that, to maintain relationships with curators and the bureaucracy of these mega-events.' Magdalena, however, interprets this stream of invitations as 'a huge response that means our work can be seen in a different way. All the difficulties we had to insert ourselves in the world of the left politics, we didn't have to insert it in the art



world.’ She did not experience the new challenge as a contradiction: ‘I see it as an arena for us to occupy. It means we expand our capacity for dissemination.’

Of the crisis that led to the dissolution of the TPS, Verónica notes: ‘The TPS’s participation in international shows mainly showed up our different ways of thinking about the work and the art object, about artists as workers on the art circuit and our individual relationships to this new situation.’ What became evident was that ‘in some way the coming together and the affinities in the group had more to do with acting in the political sphere and not so much the artistic sphere, let alone the specific area of curated exhibitions’. Karina adds:

Groups have their time. The TPS was no longer fluid, we already knew how each of us would react in a given situation. The responsibility that came with the demand from the biennials made us inflexible. We had to be very efficient, functional, we had to work hard and well. Everything was negotiated between us. And the relaxed approach of previous years was lost. We took a very radical decision that two people should leave the group. We used to exercise horizontality in our decisions and our work, and suddenly we were asking two people to leave.

Concerning this episode, Daniel says:

The TPS threw me out. I said that if we were going to go to the São Paulo Biennial, we couldn’t just show images. In the end all that was shown was a mural of the silkscreen prints and a couple of flags – the representation of political art. I wanted us to do something more political, something to shake them up: for us to invite the social movements to the Biennale, for them to come with their flags and put them up in the park. We could have contacted all the graffiti and street art groups in São Paulo, too. And we ended up going to an international gathering with a political or social aspect and showing calendars. They wanted to turn the TPS into a trademark.

## A NEW MATURITY

*More than five years after the Argentinian insurrection of that December in 2001, we realise the extent to which our interpretations and emotional responses to that episode have differed. For many of us, sadness was the feeling that accompanied one phase of this sinuous course of events.*

Colectivo Situaciones, ‘Politicising sadness’

The Colectivo Situaciones (Situations Collective) speaks in terms of sadness when describing the generalised feeling of emptiness that affected a broad section of Argentinean activists faced with the dissolution of a collective experience of unique intensity. At the same time there is a drive to find a political dimension to that feeling so that it feeds into a ‘new maturity’ capable not only of self-reflection in the analysis of what has happened, but also of reinventing forms of action in the existing situation.

Signs of such a ‘new maturity’ are indeed visible. Julia notes: ‘This is a moment of reflection, of introspection in groups and social movements

who are thinking about their position, the nature of their links to government and others.’ At the present juncture activist art groups have not disappeared but have reformulated their strategies. These have been affected by changes in individual lives. Many activists have reached the age of thirty or become parents – decisive factors translating for some into a need to choose priorities, become more selective and avoid exhaustion. Additional factors are a weakening or falling off of social protest, as well as the current complexity of politics and the tensions caused by institutional demand. For some, street-based action is no longer the most privileged form of intervention. A number of interviewees have shifted to longer-term projects, and are no longer subjecting themselves to the urgency of the ‘revolutionary calendar’. Daniel says: ‘I’m tired of working for immediate demand: today we get together to think about something, we put it together tomorrow and show it the day after. I’m tired of working one day for something happening the next. I’m tired of demonstrations.’



Hugo Vidal, *Botella de mensajes (Message on Bottle)*, 2007, intervention on wine bottle labels in supermarkets, Buenos Aires, Argentina



## ¿Cuántos días sin **LÓPEZ**?



Hugo Vidal, *Calendario de ausencias* (*Calendar of the Missing*), 2008, edition of 500 offset lithographs on paper 220 g, 30 × 42 cm

On the other hand, it is worth noting the extent to which modes of action that were the territory of activist art groups a decade ago have been taken up by new social protests around trade union disputes and strikes and in spontaneous actions by the young. The use of creative resources in struggles – especially the political use of stencils, silkscreen printing, street performance and anonymous interventions in political advertising – is an aspect of critical political culture that has expanded beyond the mediation of specific groups of artists. Federico Zukerfeld reflects: ‘People have already adopted all our strategies. They don’t need us to show them how it is done. Lots of small new groups have sprung up. That is better for us.’

Clearly there is some exhaustion after so many years of intense group work, visible in attrition and dissolution among groups. But Federico Geller notes: ‘You have to do things by consensus but not be paralysed if there is no consensus.’ Now the groups take on projects that demand greater preparation, interventions based on process rather than immediate actions. Having recently celebrated its tenth birthday with a massive party, the GAC is working on communications workshops in minority institutes, on an experimental video on new forms of subjectivity in Buenos Aires, and on a book documenting the group’s interventions over the past decade. Julia tells how the work of *Iconoclastas*, which is defined as a laboratory of communications and anti-hegemonic resources, ‘came from what we perceived as a need or a demand at a couple of meetings with different movements: finding new ways of communicating’. Following the *Anuario Volante* (Calendar Flyer) that was widely distributed and used last year, they continue to work ‘spreading information that mobilises action, reusing graphic tools available on the web page, and making flyers that can be easily reproduced by photocopying’. They have just edited a magazine/poster: *An ABC of how to live in Buenos Aires and not be alienated in the attempt*.

Etcétera reached the age of ten and reinvented itself as the *Internacional Errorista*. Federico Zukerfeld says:

Errorism isn’t the waving of a drowning man. It’s obvious that the shipwreck happened and we were on it, we can’t deny it. But the opportunity to be part of that discussion at a global level is unique.

Loreto describes how in the last *Errorista* action, at a march on the fifth anniversary of the 2001 popular rebellion, they felt pushed out: ‘We were walking to one side because we weren’t with any party, or movement of the unemployed or human rights group.’ She goes on:

The question for *Errorism* now is whether we want to continue to occupy that public space on the street or to work in ‘normal’ day-to-day situations. At the moment we spend a long time preparing our actions and we are protective of our visual and aesthetic language. Before we would take an afternoon to prepare for an action, now we work on it for months.

Like the GAC, the *Erroristas* are planning a book on the group’s history. They are also working on ‘the idea of making an opera and on plans for a manual of *Errorism* for children, because we want to influence education’ (Loreto). Magdalena reflects:

Not everyone on the left liked what we did, they expect something from graphic design that we didn't deliver, but as time passes they are starting to value what we did. I get the impression they are realising that it was effective in disseminating the political ideas that are around today. I hope the TPS influences the left-wing graphic design of this era. Now different sections of the left are beginning to ask us for images for the press and for flyers. This is when we manage to 'infiltrate' them. (laughter)

Let us leave it there, then, with a laugh that weighs up and conveys some of the sadness of retreat, a laugh that celebrates, as a small and unexpected triumph, the fact that something from the universe of activist art should be taken on and owned not just by the new social movements, but even by the old Left.

*Translated by Zoë Petersen*



# Tactical Media and Art Institutions Some Questions

Kirsten Forkert

## *TACTICAL MEDIA, POLITICS AND ART WORLD TABOOS*

As an artist, writer and activist in Vancouver, Canada, I first encountered tactical media (TM) around 2000. Through word of mouth as well as descriptions of projects and actions on various email lists, I heard about the activities of the Barbie Liberation Organization (a project by RTMark involving the switching of voiceboxes of GI Joe and Barbie dolls, so that GI Joe would say, 'Let's plan our wedding', while Barbie would say, 'Vengeance is mine'). At the time I was becoming politically active and was frustrated with the lack of political consciousness within the artworld, often expressed through post-critical, post-political apathy. In Canada, the word 'politics' had become inextricably linked to the word 'identity'. This association made many people immediately switch off, partly because of still unresolved issues around institutionalised racism, and also because of that combination of generational conflict narratives and fashion that would lead the artworld to dismiss earlier struggles as passé. TM provided a needed and refreshing approach to cultural practice because it was unafraid of being explicitly political. In some cases TM was based on an anti-capitalist analysis, lacking, in my experience, within discussions around identity politics, as earlier challenges to Eurocentrism and institutionalised racism were being co-opted into official and corporate multiculturalism. TM was not afraid of didacticism, another artworld taboo; many projects had an obvious pedagogical dimension. Interestingly, TM in Canada seemed to emerge out of activism rather than art (as defined by museums or even independent spaces at the time). One particularly inspiring example of this was the Deconstructionist Institute for Surreal Topology, whose members catapulted teddy bears across the fence (the infamous 'Wall of Shame') at the 2001 Free Trade of the Americas summit in Quebec City. In a general sense, I associate TM with the notion of culture jamming popularised by Adbusters and the counter- or alter-globalisation movement.

Those two aspects came together in Naomi Klein's influential book *No Logo*,<sup>1</sup> which includes a section on culture jamming. Klein discusses the interventions of Adbusters, Jorge Rodríguez Gerada and the Billboard Liberation Front among others, and historicises these activities in relation to Situationist *détournement*. I also think of alternative media initiatives such as resist.ca, tao.ca, or the Indymedia network, which were indispensable as information and organising tools.

### PRAGMATISM AND THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF TACTICAL MEDIA

As TM now seems to be becoming institutionalised, there are certain questions that it needs to address, which will be the focus of this text. These questions have to do with the contradictions of a tactical approach within a process of institutionalisation (which Raymond Williams, in *The Sociology of Culture*, defines as becoming 'officially recognised as a part of the central organisation itself').<sup>2</sup> At a time when culture is used to serve many kinds of 'image management' purposes, the 'central organisation' may mean not only the museum or the state but also the corporation, cultural policy initiative or city branding campaign. I am asking whether this places some real limits on TM's pragmatic method – in other words, if TM has taken the approach of 'take the money and run', then have we been noticed? The second question I am asking is how TM engages a wider public, audience or political constituency, if it now has greater visibility. Much of the rhetoric around TM claims that the work can potentially empower the audience. But the context where the activity takes place affects how people might experience or participate in TM. As TM becomes institutionalised does it mean operating in contexts that work against these intentions?

TM has occupied multiple contexts, ranging from exhibition spaces to demonstrations to media interventions to the web, and the agility with which practitioners have shifted between these contexts is exemplified by Critical Art Ensemble and subRosa. TM practices have also encompassed a range of activities including art production, writing and publishing, and political organising. This has meant negotiating different, sometimes contradictory disciplinary, criteria and bringing them into a productive tension, such as the demand for formal or visual experimentation within an art context, or communicability and easy reproducibility within activism. One context could be used to problematise another, as in the use of visual and performance art strategies within anti-globalisation protests mentioned earlier.

Pragmatism was at the heart of this approach, connected to TM's interdisciplinarity and apparent lack of concern with the usual taboos of art (the didacticism and explicit politics mentioned earlier but also utilitarianism, collectivism and the creation of repeatable rather than unique situations). This pragmatism also guided much of TM's relationship to art institutions and exhibition spaces which were seen as useful for their space, resources and public – but not the only site where activities might take place. Much writing framing TM exhibitions reflected this: the catalogue for the exhibition 'The Interventionists' was called a 'user's manual for the creative disruption of everyday life'.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Wright, in

1 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, Taking Aim at the Brand Name Bullies*, HarperCollins, New York, 2000

2 Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p 36

3 Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, MIT and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Massachusetts, 2004

the catalogue essay for *The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade*, which took place at Apexart in 2004, stressed functionality, calling for an approach to art as both an ‘open toolbox’ and a ‘walk-in toolbox’.<sup>4</sup> The implication here is that by offering tools for use, TM practitioners can use exhibition spaces to encourage viewers to become active producers. In his catalogue essay for ‘The Interventionists’, Gregory Sholette discussed the ‘artist as tool provider’ in relation to early twentieth-century Constructivists and Productivists.<sup>5</sup> He then questioned the relative absence of political strategy in the present (post-1989) moment by quoting exhibition curator Nato Thompson’s argument that:

... interventionists do not preach. They do not advocate. As opposed to providing a literal political message, these artists provide tools for the viewer/participant to develop their own politics. In this sense, the political content is found in a project’s use. They supply possibilities as opposed to solutions.<sup>6</sup>

Sholette speculates on whether this shift reflects a ‘healthy disillusionment with expert culture as well as an acknowledgement that even when preaching social awareness artists remain a privileged class’.<sup>7</sup> He also stresses different relationships to the state: the Constructivists and Productivists were dedicated to building Communism in the USSR, while he sees the Interventionists as closer to NGOs in structure, stressing ‘pragmatic and tactical action over ideology’.<sup>8</sup>

What does it mean to claim the art context can be used pragmatically, as a toolkit? What are the conditions of possibility for this approach? What are the limits? If the point is not to preach to the audience/public but to provide tools to empower them, then how can these tools actually be put to use? These are the questions I will take up here. To answer them, it will be necessary to consider the larger cultural and social frameworks that affect audience experiences and responses to exhibitions and other public events.

### WHO IS THE PUBLIC FOR TACTICAL MEDIA?

Much of the writing on TM has focused on democratising production. Writing on open source and, more recently, social software has claimed that these technologies go beyond the sender–receiver model of communication, erasing the distinction between producer and consumer and even becoming a ‘micro-politics of resistance against the broadcast hegemony’.<sup>9</sup> Other statements, such as *The ABC of Tactical Media*, have tried to erase this distinction through de-emphasising expertise, drawing inspiration from the ‘rebellious user’<sup>10</sup> in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*<sup>11</sup> who creatively misuses consumer products. However, there seems to be little discussion of the audience/public for TM, although one could assume that culture jamming is intended to reach – and politicise – the ‘general public’, and that within the context of protests TM interventions would be speaking to activists, the police and the media. In a wider sense I would also like to ask (as TM is gaining visibility): who is TM trying to engage? Other TM practitioners? Rebellious users who may not necessarily see their small everyday

4 Stephen Wright, *The Reciprocal Readymade*, catalogue essay, Apexart, New York, USA, 2004

5 Gregory Sholette, ‘Interventionism and the Historical Uncanny, or: Can there be revolutionary art without the revolution?’, in *The Interventionists*, op cit, p 133

6 Nato Thompson, ‘Trespassing Relevance’, in *The Interventionists*, op cit, pp 138–9

7 Ibid, p 139

8 Ibid

9 Eric Kluitenberg, *Media without an Audience*, <http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=1606&page=1#1911>

10 David Garcia and Geert Lovink, *The ABC of Tactical Media*, <http://project.waag.org/tmn/frabc.html>

11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Stephen Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984

subversions as art or as activism?<sup>12</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's or Paolo Virno's multitude<sup>13</sup> or Maurizio Lazzarato's immaterial labourers?<sup>14</sup>

While most of my experiences with TM have been within activism, when I have encountered TM in exhibition spaces, it has involved documentation or props from actions or interventions, often displayed in a conventional museological manner. The implication is that the interventions take place elsewhere and the gallery space is for contemplating the evidence or results – or, more rarely, for contemplating the possibility of making similar interventions in one's own everyday life. So then, what is the difference between using the exhibition space as a toolkit or in a more conventional manner? I am not claiming that all presentations of TM should be 'interactive' in a literal sense, nor do I deny that audiences can respond in ways that are difficult to predict, including 'active' responses to more contemplative settings.<sup>15</sup> But I feel it is important to go beyond the claim of the exhibition functioning as a toolkit and ask how this might operate in practice and, furthermore, how museum or art conventions encourage or discourage the active use of the 'tools' on offer. Acknowledging here that there are many possible approaches to 'pedagogy', it is still important to consider how information should be presented to audiences, especially since the codes of the art discipline tend to limit this by privileging the metaphorical over the explicitly 'instructional'.

It is also important to ask about how contexts themselves can produce audiences. For the most part, street protests, social centres, electronic sit-ins and other media interventions construct an audience/public in different ways than do art exhibitions. In some forms of intervention, everyone becomes an active participant and there is no outside 'audience'. In other situations the immediate 'audience' is made the object of a prank for the benefit of a larger 'public', as in the Yes Men's performative interventions before WTO officials or live on the BBC. But how do publics constituted in ways such as these relate to conventional art audiences? Do they remain separate or do they ever meet? If the project takes the form of a prank, then is the art audience 'in on the joke'?

### **EXPERTS, AMATEURS AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE**

A related question is how TM projects negotiate the politics of knowledge. Power relations and socioeconomic privilege are embedded in media and technological competences, no less than in art competences. By valuing a DIY aesthetic, TM has tried to dissolve the opposition between the amateur and expert. But these differences persist to some degree in all artistic genres in which media and technology play a central role. It is a cliché to say that media and technological expertise has been the domain of privileged white men in industrialised countries. And so claims that technologies are emancipatory or effective where previous strategies have failed will continually run into this problem. However, a more productive strategy is that taken by the workshop/performances of both CAE<sup>16</sup> and feminist collective subRosa; they are significant in how they deliberately make publicly accessible knowledge usually kept under

12 For a discussion linking everyday acts of rebellion and TM, see, Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere*, <http://post.thing.net/node/889>

13 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000; *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Books, New York, 2004; Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e), New York, 2002

14 See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labour*, <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>

15 Claire Bishop argues that traditional, contemplative gallery spectatorship is not passive: 'Introduction/Viewers as Producers', in *Participation*, ed Claire Bishop, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006, pp 11–17

16 Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, Autonomedia, New York 1997, p 6

high secrecy (in this case biotechnology research) but with public consequences. subRosa in particular draws attention to how biotechnology research affects the ‘lives, livelihoods, bodies, roles and subjectivities of women’.<sup>17</sup> This includes women’s bodies as ‘parts-supply and production laboratories’<sup>18</sup> but also the use of farming technologies to deprive women of a livelihood in traditional agricultural communities, and the gender division of labour in scientific research. Their performances, often playing on the form of educational demonstrations, take place in a variety of contexts, including art venues but also technology fairs, student workshops and academic conferences.<sup>19</sup> Both CAE and subRosa are trying to *take back* expert knowledge – and as the indictment of a CAE member in the USA makes clear, there are consequences for doing this. It is different with the Yes Men who deliberately make use of these competences (in other words to perform the expert role) in order to successfully stage their infiltrations. The point is not for us all to become Yes Men.

### **DOES CONTEXT STILL MATTER, EVEN IF IT’S BEING USED TACTICALLY?**

These issues of audience and public are unavoidable in any consideration of how projects actually function. I will turn now to the exhibition framework and how it might facilitate or prevent the use of offered tools. Are there differences, for example, between presenting a project within an independent space, a media festival, a museum, a biennial, etc? As John Miller,<sup>20</sup> Pamela Lee<sup>21</sup> and others have described, biennials and other larger, prestigious exhibitions tend to involve dynamics of spectacle and reification; they can easily become ‘naturalized’<sup>22</sup> into total artworks by curator-auteurs. This tendency, Miller argues, works ‘against artists’ critical intentions, but also – more importantly – against the ability of audiences to evaluate the show in an analytical fashion’.<sup>23</sup> I would also argue that an awed and overwhelmed audience may not be in the best frame of mind to make active use of tools. To return to the question of audience, these contexts may also shape the demographics of the public attending or participating in projects.

I am moving towards a larger issue: the assumption that the art context is neutral. Assuming that tactical or pragmatic occupations of art institutions do not assume such neutrality, do they adequately take into account the realities of institutional power relations? In a climate where contemporary art, especially in its more prestigious presentation venues, is increasingly implicated in processes of globalisation and city branding, such questions must be confronted. In this regard, it is useful to think about the traditions of institutional critique and the history of that genre’s institutionalisation.

### **PRAGMATISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF CRITIQUE**

In the 1970s and ’80s, practices of institutional critique were motivated by the awareness that art institutions were implicated in hierarchies of

17 subRosa, interviewed by Ryan Griffis, in *The Interventionists*, op cit, p 124

18 Ibid

19 subRosa, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net/index.html>

20 John Miller, ‘The Show You Love to Hate: a psychology of the mega-exhibition’, in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds Reesa Greenberg et al, Routledge, London, 1997, pp 269–74

21 Pamela Lee, ‘Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism’, *Artforum*, New York, November 2003, pp 164–7

22 John Miller, op cit, p 272

23 Ibid



power and capital and therefore were incapable of the neutrality they often claimed. Artists working in this direction often put direct pressure on institutions. One only has to think of Hans Haacke's research project *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System as of May 1, 1971*, which exposed a member of a prominent Manhattan family as a slum landlord and triggered the exhibition's censorship. Another example would be the Guerrilla Girls, who forced the artworld to consider the exclusion of women and minorities from art institutions and exhibitions. In a recent article, Hito Steyerl draws parallels between institutional critique and activism. She argues that 'institutional critique functioned like the related paradigms of multiculturalism, reformist feminism, ecological movements and so on. It was a new social movement within the arts scene.'<sup>24</sup>

But by the early to mid-1990s, works of institutional critique were actually being commissioned by museums, as Miwon Kwon pointed out in *One Place After Another*. Fred Wilson's site-specific excavation of institutional racism at the Baltimore Museum, *Mining the Museum*, was later commissioned by the Seattle Art Museum. Kwon saw the commissioning of these kinds of projects in terms of institutions initiating and managing their own self-critiques.<sup>25</sup> Artists then take on a role similar to travelling consultants by providing 'critical-artistic services'.<sup>26</sup> This trend could be interpreted most generously as reflecting institution's desire to be more open and democratic – a desire artists have fostered by *identifying with the institution*. Andrea Fraser, in her 2005 *Artforum* article 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', articulates this sentiment:

It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalise, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.<sup>27</sup>

From a more sceptical viewpoint, this 'institution of critique' could be read as a defensive and neoliberal move, similar to the way in which businesses or government agencies perform internal audits to pre-empt outside criticism. In this reading, art is used by the institutions to give symbolic cover to actual failures. Returning to Kwon's critique of Wilson, an artwork *about* institutionalised racism can give the impression that the institution is dealing with the problem while leaving the situation unchanged. Steyerl draws attention to this dynamic, arguing that such practices reflect the 'unmooring of the seemingly stable relation between the cultural institution and the nation state'.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately for institutional critics, she continues:

... a model of purely symbolic representation gained legitimacy in this field as well. Institutions no longer claimed to materially represent the nation state and its constituency, but only claimed to represent it symbolically.<sup>29</sup>

The result is a situation where symbolic displays of self-critique can stand in for actual change – and, in the worst sense, can even prevent or at least pre-empt change by creating the illusion of 'progressiveness'.

If institutional critique has become institutionalised as a set of mainly symbolic gestures of institutional self-questioning and image

24 Hito Steyerl, *The Institution of Critique*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, January 2006, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en>

25 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2002, p 47

26 Ibid. 'Critical-artistic services' may also refer to Andrea Fraser's work, *How to provide an Artistic Service*, Depot, Vienna, 1994, <http://home.att.net/~artarchives/fraserservice.html>

27 Andrea Fraser, 'From a Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, September 2005, p 283

28 Hito Steyerl, op cit

29 Ibid

management, where does this leave critical practitioners? TM's pragmatic occupation of art institutions may partly be a response to this shift. If institutions aren't going to go away and are becoming increasingly sophisticated at incorporating critiques, then maybe the best approach is, as Brian Holmes argues, to 'exploit the museum's resources for other ends'.<sup>30</sup> This could mean redirecting money from museums into activist projects, or using the convention of artistic autonomy to sanction otherwise criminalised activities, such as Yomango's shoplifting. TM's pragmatism may also reflect the diverse disciplinary background of its practitioners, some of who may not specifically be invested in the politics of the art and exhibitions.

### **TACTICAL MEDIA, CRITICAL PRACTICES AND CORPORATE FUNDING**

It is certain, however, that one of the points raised by earlier forms of institutional critique will not go away. Institutions are not neutral, even when they allow themselves to be used tactically by artists. Another unavoidable question (which is why Haacke's project is still relevant) is how institutions are structured and financed, no matter how progressive they claim to be. This question is becoming increasingly urgent because of how culture is currently used to promote neoliberalism. Two recent phenomena indicate the danger: the support of critical and progressive art (including TM) by corporate institutions, and the role of museums and art festivals in city branding campaigns, especially those (pertinent to aspects of TM) that use rhetoric around 'creative industries'.<sup>31</sup> In both situations, qualities associated with critical contemporary art are used to legitimise institutions, cities and corporations, and this may point to a real limit of tactical practices.

While there is a long history of corporations collecting art, the past twenty years have seen the rise of corporate sponsorship of critical and progressive art practices.<sup>32</sup> Some examples are: Deutsche Bank and the Siemens Art Fund in Germany; Erste Bank and corporate-funded exhibition spaces such as the Generali Foundation in Austria; the Cartier Foundation in France; and the Bonniers Konsthall in Sweden. Brian Holmes addresses this issue in an essay on the politics of the exhibition 'Geography and the Politics of Mobility' at the Generali Foundation in 2003. The exhibition included the work of Bureau d'Etudes, Frontera Sur RRVT, Makrolab, Multiplicity and Raqs Media Collective. Discussing TM's pragmatic approach to exhibition spaces, Holmes writes:

For the tactical media underground in Europe, art shows offer useful research deadlines, a chance to share ideas and critiques, at best some production money – and at worst, a damaging distraction. The revenge of the concept has been to finally create parallel and alternative circuits of experimentation, production, distribution, use and interpretation. To be sure, these circuits are hardly consolidated – but the best way to do so is to maintain other urgencies, which cannot be treated within any of the specialised subsystems.<sup>33</sup>

He then registers his discomfort with the exhibition site:

30 Brian Holmes, 'Liar's Poker', *Springer*, January 2003, pp 18–23

31 Most recently popularised by Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York, 2002, and now being adopted as policy in some European nations and in Canada

32 See also Chin-Tao Wu's *Privatizing Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London, 2002.

33 Brian Holmes, op cit, pp 18–23

The position [taken in the catalogue essay] was fairly clear. But the actual site of the show in question – the Generali Foundation in Vienna – was still part of the game. And we all know that uncomfortable feeling. At whatever distance you place the operations of a foundation from the financial holding behind it, the connection through the proper name is complete.<sup>34</sup>

What are the implications for TM practices if they are now being supported by corporate institutions, and does this point to another real limit to the tactical use of institutionalised exhibition spaces? In *Sponsoring and Neoliberal Culture*, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann characterise corporate sponsorship of contemporary critical practices as a form of branding, using the example of the sponsorship of Rirkrit Tiravanija's six-month stay in Cologne by Central Krankenkassenversicherung (an insurance company). According to Creischer and Siekmann, 'the sponsors emphasised that they were no longer interested in acquiring art products, but in the transferability of art itself to the company philosophy'.<sup>35</sup> In other words, corporations seek to transfer to their own public image qualities associated with contemporary art: 'cutting edge' innovation and creativity but, more importantly, the credibility and legitimacy associated with what is perceived as mainly a non-commercial and critical activity. It might be useful to ask how qualities associated with TM might serve a similar 'image transfer' procedure: its ingenuity, its agility in adapting to various contexts and circumstances, its technological savvy or its often libertarian and even anti-authoritarian stance? How might this be useful to companies branding themselves as 'innovative', 'creative', 'entrepreneurial' or 'irreverent' (all common neoliberal buzzwords)? Gregory Sholette has argued that since 9/11 corporate culture in the US has turned away from the 'radical business management' styles popular during the dot-com boom,<sup>36</sup> while in other contexts, especially in Europe, 'creative industries' remains a popular concept.

## INNOVATION AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Another symptom of neoliberalism is the city branding phenomenon, in which festivals and cultural institutions increasingly play a role. In *The Expediency of Culture*, George Yúdice describes how culture has come to be seen as a potential 'resource' for boosting trade and tourism, lowering crime rates, etc.<sup>37</sup> As cities engage in ambitious city branding and urban regeneration campaigns, the concept of 'creative industries' is guiding urban policy-making. A high level of cultural activity is seen as having great potential economic benefit, although the nature and degree of benefits is in many cases unclear. Policy based on creative industries has also come under question for its contribution to the expansion of precarious labour in the form of temporary, low-wage service jobs<sup>38</sup> and to the displacement of low-income residents due to gentrification.<sup>39</sup>

One particularly controversial case of the use of contemporary art for city branding is an event called 'Art Goes to Heiligendamm', in connection with the 2007 G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany. The website used the rhetoric of creative activism and interventionism (rhetoric, I

34 Ibid

35 Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, *Sponsoring and Neo-liberal Culture*, in *Society of Control*, ed Stephan Dilleuth, [http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/creissiekm\\_eng1.htm#sdendnote30anc](http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/creissiekm_eng1.htm#sdendnote30anc)

36 Gregory Sholette, 'Disciplining the Avant-Garde: The United States versus the Critical Art Ensemble', *CIRCA: Contemporary Visual Culture in Ireland*, Summer 2005, pp 50–9

37 George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, 2003, p 1

38 Andy Beckett, 'Can Culture Save Us?', *Guardian*, 2 June 2003, <http://society.guardian.co.uk/regeneration/story/0,,968680,00.html>

39 Merjin Oudenampsen, *Extreme Makeover*, MUTE, October 2006 <http://www.metamute.org/en/Extreme-Makeover>

should note, which is close to that associated with some of the writing around TM):

ART GOES HEILIGENDAMM responds to the challenge of going to the places where the social movements are, in order to interact with the different participants. The art interventions are intended to allow a ‘permeability’ of action and perception between forms of presentation and representation in art and social movements.<sup>40</sup>

Some projects used strategies associated with TM: a temporary isolation cell set up in the city centre, the occupation of a storefront to develop ‘wearable architecture’, networked conversations using surveillance cameras, and an open-source video distribution platform.<sup>41</sup> While emphasising interventionism, the website simultaneously presents contemporary art as a mediating and ‘civilising’ force:

The supporting institutions in Rostock hope that the art interventions will have a de-escalating effect. All over the world we notice the urgency of dialogue between different cultures, which cannot take place without artists since their opinions are not based upon tactical and strategic interests like diplomacy or economy but rather refer to the universality and the freedom of art. Unlike the state, art is not tied to any hierarchical interest.<sup>42</sup>

The contradictory intentions here are revealing: culture can simultaneously activate the public and promote ‘de-escalation’. Will art make people less inclined to protest? Can one distinguish art interventions from protest actions, especially in terms of the nature of public interaction?

If qualities such as ‘criticality’, creativity and ingenuity are seen as good for corporate sponsors and city branding campaigns, even to the point of promoting ‘de-escalation’ at the G8 summit – not, I would argue, the most productive or useful for empowering publics – then what does participation in such processes help to legitimise? What, then, are the implications for TM? Do we need something more than pragmatism here? Do we actually need a strategy to counter the strategic use of culture as resource or image management?

### **WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?**

If these cultural institutions ultimately are not conducive to providing tools and empowering audiences, then one approach would be to follow the Constructivists and Productivists and contribute our skills directly to social movements. Or we could concentrate on creating counter-institutions better suited to the task at hand – perhaps interdisciplinary organisations that do not entirely frame themselves or their publics according to art conventions. TM practitioners may already have created spaces of this kind. However, if we conclude that museums and other cultural institutions are still useful (and of course they are not all implicated in the processes I have described to the same degree), then I would argue that we need to consider carefully how we work with them, and especially how audiences interact with projects and offered tools. This includes carefully considering the weight of collaborations with

40 From the website Art Goes Heiligendamm, <http://www.art-goes-heiligendamm.net/en/idea>

41 Ibid

42 Ibid

established institutions in relation to other activities within TM practices, so they do not dominate TM practice as a whole, and maintaining the productive tensions between these various contexts. In doing so, we can learn from how earlier traditions of institutional critique made power relations clear and apparent. This seems especially important to revisit, given that one of the effects of neoliberalism is to erase or smooth over all such conflicts. TM can productively exploit these situations, bringing the same degree of wit, humour and inventiveness with which it has intervened in other contexts. I feel that this rethinking of TM is necessary for me (as a practitioner) now at this point of TM's institutionalisation. TM's interdisciplinarity, disregard for artworld taboos, and inventive, resourceful DIY approach continue to inspire me and also, significantly, pose an important challenge to the present shifts within the artworld (beyond the scope of this text to discuss) which call for traditional definitions of both authorship and spectatorship and a return to disciplinary boundaries.<sup>43</sup> Reconsidering audience/public/political constituency, in the contexts where TM is experienced, is a necessary step to take both the practice and discourse further.

- 43 Bishop's work usefully challenges relational aesthetics, yet also reasserts traditional artistic autonomy. 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, autumn 2004, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 51–79, and 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, XLVI: 6, February 2006, pp 178–83



# When Radicalism Pays Off

Nato Thompson

Recently I attended a small art and activism event in New York. A book on anarchist art had been released and folks had gathered to discuss and hear from some of the contributors (including me). As at many of these events the conversation went long and the topics ranged widely from techniques of intervention to the role of advertising and the importance of various historic art movements. I enjoyed the dialogue but felt that certain pang that one gets when, after more than a few hours of back and forth, I realised the conversation was not going anywhere. It became clear that a significant number of people in the room ranged widely in their experience of art and activism – so widely, in fact, that they were not making much sense to each other. While this variety of backgrounds was to be applauded, I could not help but be astonished at how difficult bridging the gap was in terms of dialogue. While some discussed the relevance of puppets to anarchist art, others were discussing Giorgio Agamben, while others reminisced on the art of the lower east side in the 1980s. To all intents and purposes, everyone spoke in different languages. This tower of Babel condition remained all the more perplexing as everyone spoke in English.

Anyone who has a reasonable activist background can acknowledge the complexity of group dialogue. It is an arduous process not solved in one meeting. People's experiences or situated knowledges range vastly and the language used to analyse and act on the conditions of oppression are equally a result of these forces. When we find ourselves unable to discuss the forces of capital and authoritarianism that condition our experience, because we are trapped into a cul-de-sac of specialised language, then we should turn our attention to the very forces that produce these conditions.

From this dilemma I want to take a side-route through the concepts of the tactical and strategic. Tactics can be described as the discursive techniques necessary to produce resistance in a foreign terrain. Tactical media, a wide-ranging movement of media makers, encourages artists to adapt their media to a given situation.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise then that those who use the tactical media moniker most emphatically – the technological tinkering, new media audience – derive great pleasure from their mastery of the tools of engagement.

1 The definition of tactical media, like all arts movements of any scale, retains multiple manifestations. I focus on Michel de Certeau's definition of tactics as a starting point for clarifying a methodological approach but realise that this definition finds plenty of contradiction in a wider understanding of how tactical media defines itself.

Equally, tactical media shifts not only their tools but also the discursive fields within which they operate. Consider as an example the various interventions by the Yes Men in disguise as HUD representatives at a New Orleans rally or Critical Art Ensemble's research in biotechnology. This Pierre Bourdieu-inspired movement between different discursive terrains is a complicated and critical component of the tactical media practice. That is to say, by taking on the language and aesthetics of a particular discursive structure (whether biotechnology, housing policy, or corporate board room), tactical media encourages an awareness of the ever mutable form of meaning contained within each. And this stealthy form of trespass is where tactical media can manoeuvre most effectively. Ironically, however, tactical media can also fall prey to confining its radical potential inside the walls of its own discursive regime.

When Michele de Certeau wrote *The Practice of Everyday Life* and articulated the terms of the tactical and strategic, he was not particularly invested in the manner in which tactics worked toward social change. For de Certeau, the tactical was a method for producing meaning in the face of overwhelming power. It was in all respects a personal journey filled with shortcuts through yards and doodling in the office. But the tactical media (and many other similar movements with art and political intentions) have more ambitious political goals than personal poetry. This is not to take away from de Certeau, whose post-1968 ruminations were mired in the political climate of the time but are clearly of use. It is helpful to think of the tactical and strategic as opposite ends of the spectrum of power. If the tactical action, one wedded parasitically to its oppression, exists at one end, then of course, the WTO would operate on the other. If tactical political action by necessity slides down the scale toward the strategic (that is to say, an action increasingly becomes strategic the more it shapes the battleground of power) we can begin to develop criteria for gauging a project's effectiveness. That is to say, if a project intends to develop counter-power, its effectiveness operates increasingly on a strategic level.

If a project leads to no social change but contains its language, what is that? Too often the politically ineffective project occurs where the rhetoric of radicalism is a thin veneer for the production of social capital for the producer.<sup>2</sup> If a tactical media project takes place but no one encounters it, is that living too close to de Certeau's definition of the tactical? Is it simply a personal poetics? Surely we must incorporate some strategic elements into the discussion. The strategic element I would like to focus on is the production of radical subjectivity. How does a tactical media project or, for that matter, any project, produce a radical subjectivity?

We could use Felix Guattari's term *transversality* as a starting point. Derived from the psychoanalytic term 'transference', Guattari changed it to apply to the environment of the clinic. Guattari focused on how the singular emerges through the operations of the multiple and how the multiple produces the singular. In particular, his interest focused on the space in which power opened up within a group such that each participant's agency was maximised. This area of potentiality between the singular space and the collective he deemed the transversal and it is in the transversal that we find the vulnerable locus for social production. Many other forms in the lexicon of political art point to this type of

2 I use the term social capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu: 'the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of... membership in a group'. The term has since been embraced by economists with a conservative interpretation lending itself to advancing capitalist agendas. More appropriately, social capital is a measure of the power produced through an understanding of the semiotic and social nuances within a particular social network.

social formation (dialogic, temporary autonomous zone, community art), but the transversal specifically addresses the tilting of the balance of power which moves an important analysis of social dynamics into the heart of personal network formations.

A network of transversal sites could once be referred to as counter-culture, but the term 'counter' culture seems to imply yet another tactical error. In fact, the dependence on the counter-position in all its aesthetics and sub-cultural posturing is in line with capitalism's formation of cultural niche markets. For it is in this ongoing 'outside' position that we find a deeply situated site for capitalist production. Cultural producers in regions where cultural capitalism has dug in deep are aware of the many tentacles that the commodification of counter-culture has produced. We know that plenty of room exists for retaining the rhetoric of the 'outside' or 'the radical' while ultimately trading in on its semiotic production for sheer capital gain.<sup>3</sup> Not that cultural producers should operate without financial reward, but when the sole purpose of radical projects becomes the typical résumé-building, name-dropping phenomenon known as social capital, then this tendency should be acknowledged. The flavour of radicalism bereft of tangible results may simply be bartering in the semiotic game-play that accompanies its own particular discursive formations. Constantly travelling to hermetic technological conferences and participating in high-theory journals (sound familiar?) can easily operate more as vehicles for the production of social capital than any form of social change. As my uncle once said, man is not a rational creature, man is a rationalising creature.

The residue of these social capital formations left unchecked can erect renewed boundaries between radical projects; thus the potential paradox of tactical media. This returns us to the original quandary. How do we produce a practice that constantly upsets the territories produced through the infusion of capitalism into cultural production? As our interest and language become specialised, we are then allowed access to the paths of social capital that lend cash and social legitimisation (the two are good friends). Social capital is an essential guiding principle in the era of commodified cultural production that can obscure the reading of a project's effectiveness. While the development of sub-cultural forms has many proponents on the left, it also replicates the logic of all niche cultural market capital. It leads to distinct spheres of social production (anarchists, high-theory artists, academics) that confuse aspirations for social capital as an analysis and, in turn, such analysis as being capable of producing social action. For many cultural producers, making a living is part of, but not the entirety of, their projects. An analysis of cultural production that avoids this most obvious necessity can only lead toward a skewed sense of the total reality at play.

If we come to terms with the ever-present force that is social capital, then we can turn our attention to actual strategic social progress. Under this lens, certain necessary compromises as well as rhetorics of self-serving anti-establishment radicalism come into focus. For a project that refuses to participate in any discussion of the strategic or in the production of community may retain the flavour of radicalism but also may simply be protecting its own social capital. There is relatively more comfort in residing in a sub-cultural niche unencumbered by the compromises that inevitably present themselves when attempting projects

3 Corporate culture's embrace of the baby-boomer rebel is well documented in many books including Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* and Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. Corporate culture positions itself on the side of the alienated outsider who desires freedom and radical consumer abandonment.

beyond the safety of one's discursive field. Often living close to the uncompromising language of one's analysis à la libertarian left can in fact prevent one from entering into the messy terrain outside. And while many of us barter in the semiotic of radicalism, the right wing has clearly developed strategic spaces where subjectivity is produced (albeit in authoritarian form), the religious right and Fox News being two of the more obvious. Contextualising the growth of capitalism and authoritarianism in the United States in terms of a war on sites of transversality might allow for more strategic forms of resistance and in particular the manner in which cultural production can become political.

In order to produce radical subjectivity, tactical media must take seriously the vehicles by which social movements are produced, those being the production of radical subjectivity on a large scale, the development of a social movement, and the coordination globally between different participants. In part this occurs through collaboration with sites of transversality. During the counter-global capitalism demonstrations (1999–2002), the political momentum at the time allowed tactical media a social space to tap into productively. This global social movement acted as a conduit between many disparate social practices. With the protest movement's dissipation on US soil, many interesting social forms have retreated into the safety of their own semiotic regimes. In order to operate effectively in lieu of a large social movement, individual projects that claim a radical sensibility should tie themselves into sites of transversality. These spaces can be found across the globe but they are often at their most effective when they mix a blend of unique social activism with a committed effort at broadening their audience. The production of radical subjectivity requires a longstanding relationship with diverse audiences that challenge the language and semiotic stability of our own discursive formations. Spaces of transversality, that is, spaces where radical subjectivity is produced, can vary from small non-profit art spaces, to journals, to community groups, to union halls, and to areas yet to be defined.

Another question of no small portent is that of audience and scale. Who are these projects talking to? How many individuals? Some tactical media artists like, again, the Yes Men, mobilise large media techniques to get their stunts seen across the world, while many others, it must be said, routinely hide in the corners of academic conferences. Not that reaching large numbers is always the goal, but it remains definitely one of them. Reaching sheer numbers of individuals can surely be considered a strategic manoeuvre if it contributes to the production of radical subjectivity. On another level, institutions in the art community (museums, schools and magazines for example) often provide the opportunity to reach large numbers of people outside the specific discursive framework in which tactical media operates. These institutions can, at times, provide a platform not only for reaching people but also for getting work (social capital) for the artists participating in them. These concerns, as I have said before, are real and it might as well be considered as part of the overall approach. This is also true of institutional forms outside the particular art frame. In the move to reach large audiences, the desire for strategic action butts heads with the reasonable concern of co-optation.

In some instances, the museums operate as a site for the production of social capital and nothing else. The concerns that the veneer of radicalism

is used as a public relations shield for power are without question legitimate. Yet this phenomenon is well known and so ingrained in the activist language that it hardly needs repeating. What is not as well known is the manner in which many in sub-cultural niches internalise the de-territorialising techniques of capital to produce their own social capital. Producing new forms of capital formation in sub-cultural spheres is exactly how capital works and, as cultural producers, we constantly fall into this cycle. The constant destruction of the new formulated early on by the avant-garde is now a critical part of the capitalist machinery. Out with the old, in with the new is not simply the mantra of the sub-cultural machinery but also the logic of cultural capitalism. So what to do?

I cannot answer this question but hope that, in articulating some of these dilemmas, we can get closer to a road map for social action. In providing a matrix of tensions – the tactical versus the strategic, the rhetorics of radicality versus the tangible production of subjectivity – I hope to develop a framework for thinking through the haze of commodified cultural production. I sincerely think that the disconnection between various socially active groups' specialised languages is not simply a result of differences of analysis, but one specifically put in place through the commodification of cultural forms. We must ask ourselves in which way our actions contribute to this situation. Actively attempting to disrupt the territories by which our own languages produce personal power may ultimately lead to a larger language that produces power on the grand stage.



# Introduction: Whither Tactical Media?

Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette

We began collaborating on this Special Issue in June of 2006. Our concern was to understand how tactical media (TM) had evolved in the decade since its emergence and to ask how far and in what ways this stream of critical cultural practices and approach to media activism remains viable today. The current global situation is characterised by two factors that were absent or still obscure in the mid-1990s: the renewal of radical and anti-capitalist imagination ignited by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and by movements, protests and struggles against neo-liberalism in Seoul, Seattle, Buenos Aires, Durban, Genoa, Quito and many other places; and the new politics of fear and permanent war that have been imposed globally since September 11, 2001. To these, we can add the undeniable indicators of global climate change, resource depletion and ecological degradation, and the openly fascist tendencies generated by the politics of fear. In light of these shifts, we felt a reflective assessment of tactical media would be timely. Above all, we felt it had become necessary to revisit the question of strategy and the conditions for durable, organised struggle. Despite TM practitioners' aversion to strategic thinking, institutionalisation, categorical hierarchies and grand narratives, it is apparent that a group of radicals with no such prejudices and inhibitions are busy imposing their ultra-conservative vision on the world. Is it still reasonable, then, to insist on the viability of ephemeral tactics that hold no ground of their own, that disappear once they are executed, and that represent no particular politics or vision of a desirable future? Thus, to a range of theorists and activists, we posed this question: 'Whither tactical media?' We hoped the results would at least contribute to recently renewed debates about the limits and possibilities of politically engaged art.

Since 1968, social movement activism – with its emphasis on identity and subjectivity and its autonomist and DIY (do it yourself) tactical orientations – has largely displaced the party-based structures and strategies of the Old and New Left. While recognising that there are good reasons for this displacement, it has become clear that a strategic deficit is one of its consequences. After the demise of the Party, no new

collective structure has emerged to effectively organise strategic thinking. Despite the important international encounters staged by the Zapatistas in 1996 and 1997 and the social forum events that came out of them, and despite a general recognition that the revolutionary process needs to be ‘reinvented’, the ‘movement of movements’ still lacks organisational effectiveness capable of countering the strategic (not merely tactical) forces mobilised by neoconservatism and neoliberalism.

There is at least a notable tendency within TM theory to endorse de facto a refusal of strategy. For this tendency, inspired above all by the work of theorist Michel de Certeau, TM has no space of its own. A tactic, in de Certeau’s words, ‘insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over’.<sup>1</sup> In a 1997 text that became foundational, Geert Lovink and David Garcia endorse this perspective in their definition of TM:

An aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. Clever tricks, the hunter’s cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike... Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, not some vaporware promised for the future.<sup>2</sup>

Behind the appealing lightness and optimism of this description looms real ‘end of history’ despair about the failure of past revolutionary struggles and experiments and the impossibility of any ‘outside’ to capitalism. In a world without heroic visions or alternatives, the art of everyday resistance seemed preferable to the methodical work of building sustained opposition only to wind up with a new boss, the same as the old boss. Thus, for Lovink TM was ‘born out of a disgust for ideology’.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, TM practitioners did not simply give up their political commitments. Many of them remain engaged in activism that in its underlying principles appears – at least to us – broadly leftist in orientation; that is, its concern for greater personal and political freedom is balanced by a framework of social responsibility and practical solidarity, and it includes anti-authoritarian reflexes that, in this moment, translate into opposition to the militarist nexus of corporate power and the national security state. That said, TM clearly belongs to that cultural shift, so strong in the 1980s and ’90s, from macro-history to micro-politics. The abandonment of strategy and the mundane work of organising leaves TM free to pursue a tacticality that emphasises ephemeral inversion and détournement, experimentation, camouflage and amateur versatility. At the same time, TM crystallised within a corporate climate that celebrated dis-organising the organisation and thinking outside the box, two managerial mantras of neoliberal enterprise culture. However, these same strengths that made TM so dynamic in the 1990s may now have become handicaps. As we see it, the need now is for a return to strategic thinking about structures and forms of struggle. We therefore asked our contributors to this issue to consider whether it may now be necessary to rethink the emphasis on ‘tactics’ as the privileged principle of critical cultural theory and practice.

Writing from diverse locations in the global North and South, our fifteen contributors respond to these concerns by rethinking the theory

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p xix
- 2 Geert Lovink and David Garcia, ‘ABC of Tactical Media’, 1997, online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/74.htm>
- 3 Geert Lovink, *Updating Tactical Media: Strategies for Media Activism*, forthcoming

of TM, by addressing its likely institutionalisation, and by reporting on specific cases of current TM practice. All of our contributors nevertheless make one thing very clear: cultural politics remains an active sphere of contestation. At the same time, it is far easier to recognise shared opposition to militarism, social injustice, ecological ruin and patriarchy, than it is to find agreement about what a ‘better world’ would be like, how we should struggle to get there, and just who *we* ‘opponents’ of these forces are, collectively or individually. Historically, artistic avant-gardes frequently worked in support of working-class movements and subaltern revolutionary struggles. By contrast, the language of TM appears to project a very different locus of agency: a dissipated and distracted spectator constituted by historically unique sensory experiences made real by the rise of new media technologies.

In contradistinction to Marx’s Promethean working class, TM offers Eros and the liberation of the libidinal drive. But it is not so clear how this vision of empowered fragmentation relates to the historical breakdown of traditional working-class identities and cultures. While there may be some liberation and empowerment for some individuals, these processes of fragmentation seem on the whole to have been disastrous: they reflect shifts in the modes of capitalist exploitation and a neoliberal attack that have given rise to precarious forms of labour not widely seen in the developed world since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This new ‘precarity’ now extends from the *maquiladoras* and other zones of legalised super-exploitation to the electronic and cultural sweatshops of New York City where recent art school graduates find employment. Certainly there are enormous differences in material conditions, prospects and expectations within this category of precarised labour. But most forms of precarious work involve ever-increasing exposure to disciplinary forces, including anti-union legislation, the intense surveillance of both work and privatised ‘public’ spaces, and the daily terror of familiar examples, reinforced incessantly by mainstream media, of what awaits those who cannot keep up or try to resist: bankruptcy, homelessness, imprisonment, or worse. Whether experiences of precarity can become a new basis for the re-composition of class struggle, or will merely remain a factor of fragmentation and decomposition, remains to be seen. By contrast, the form of agency projected in some TM theory seems very far removed from these brutal realities. With TM, we sometimes seem to be dealing with a liberation of desire through the appropriation and re-functioning of new technologies – a kind of liberated unconsciousness or borderline self-consciousness that could perhaps at most be linked to Walter Benjamin’s notion of artistic or cinematic distraction. We are not suggesting such liberation is wholly without militant potential. But TM generally lacks the unequivocal commitment to anti-capitalist struggles and utopian anticipations of Benjamin’s tendentious criticism or his theorisations of the author as producer.

### RETHINKING TACTICAL MEDIA

Ricardo Dominguez’s description of the tactical ‘swarm’ invokes a mute, mnemonic collectivism operating in ‘the space of difference between the

real body and the electronic body, the hacker and the activist, the performer and the audience, individual agency and mass swarming'. Geert Lovink writes of 'crowd crystals' and the 'virtual intellectual' always under construction. Blake Stimson pivots tactical agency on an ever-expanding 'cyborg life', commingling love and abstraction. Nowhere, it seems, do we find the fleshy agency of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the laundresses, stevedores, carpenters, janitors, maids and teamsters, not even the white-collar salespeople, or teachers or overworked web designers. For better and for worse, the nomadic agency of TM corresponds exactly to the de-territorialised spaces of global capitalism. 'Where is our territory?' asks CAE. 'We seem to have none', comes the auto-reply. The days are gone, we are told, in which institutional power and oppositional parties and unions face off, eyeball-to-eyeball, with clearly demarcated operational boundaries, fortifications and trenches in between. By contrast, tacticians avoid state power and hold no ground. De Certeau even proposed that the tactical arts precede the very 'frontiers of humanity', representing a 'sort of immemorial link, to the simulations, tricks, and disguises that certain fishes or plants execute with extraordinary virtuosity', thus connecting 'the depths of the oceans to the streets of our great cities'.<sup>4</sup>

However, Brian Holmes cautions:

... the multiple inventions of daily media-life just became aesthetics-as-usual, enjoyed by consumers and supported by the state, for the benefit of the corporations. The theory and the artistic refinements of tactical media fell away from the radicality of their politics.

He goes on to wonder if 'the persistent concept of tactical media might ultimately be a barrier'. Looking back over the decade and considering the possible future directions for a 'highly-polarized conjuncture', Holmes concludes that 'if global social movements are going to reinvent themselves beyond the neocon shadow of the 2000s, we will need another media theory, closer to our self-understanding and our acts'. Gerald Raunig seems to agree, when he notes that it is 'too simple to consider media activism solely from the one-sided perspective of the paradigm of organic representation'. Discussing actions by Greenpeace at the anti-G8 protests in Heiligendamm, Germany, and the work of the collective Kinoki Lumal in Chiapas, Mexico, Raunig develops the possibilities for a media practice based on 'orgiastic representation'.

## LEVERAGING SITUATIONISM

In the meantime, the established institutions of art and culture have begun to take notice of TM. Reporting on one such effort to bring TM in from the cold Karen Kurczynski asks: 'To what extent can institutions dependent on private funding, and therefore by extension corporate-defined parameters, accommodate the inherent oppositionality of the Situationist legacy?' In the late 1950s and '60s, the Situationist International had responded to the threat of institutional recuperation by setting what remains the standard for intransigent refusal. (In this sense, if the Situationist legacy is, in addition to de Certeau, the other major influence

<sup>4</sup> De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, op cit, pp xix, xx

on TM theory and practice, these two sources remain antagonistic and largely incompatible.) As if to answer Kurczynski, Kirsten Forkert offers the example of Central Versicherung, a Cologne-based insurance company who sponsored a six-month art project by Rirkrit Tiravanija. The arrangement, Forkert insists, aligned two types of services: insurance underwriting and the cultural service of so-called relational art. And yet is it always accurate to say that TM does not generate lasting power of its own? This is the question Nato Thompson raises in his essay. Thompson, too, perceives a distinction between the ‘artistic’ use of TM by curators and institutions on one hand, and tactics used with a political objective on the other. However, carving apart these phases of tactical media is not so simple. For this reason, Thompson focuses on the shortcomings of artistic intention, pointing out that ‘Radicalism bereft of tangible results may simply be bartering in the semiotic game-play that accompanies its own particular discursive formations’. Such bartering even accumulates a type of intellectual, social capital.

Thompson’s concerns are examined from the opposite angle by Yates McKee who argues that overtly radical TM ‘can be unproductive if it is taken for granted that corporations should be opposed or resisted *as such* rather than consistently pressured through all available tactics to alter their modes of governing’. It seems that de Certeau’s deep-ocean nomad has come full circle. By escaping the jaws of those eager to swallow its modest social capital, TM has found it necessary to align itself symbiotically with the one form of institutionalised opposition that still seems plausible within the jagged post-Cold War coral reef: the NGO. But to survive without killing off this host TM practitioners must call upon all the arts of trickery and subterfuge at their disposal.

### PRACTISING TACTICAL MEDIA

As Ana Longoni’s essay shows, the effects of artworld attention on activist collectives can be destructive and neutralising. Deciding that the biennial circuit was cutting them off from social movements and struggles, the members of the Grupo de Arte Callejero withdrew categorically from these exhibitions. And the stresses and conflicts experienced by the Taller Popular de Serigrafía led to expulsions of members and eventually dissolution.

In her essay, Rozalinda Borcila describes the work of the group 6+ in developing a project with young women in the Dheisheh refugee camp outside Bethlehem. The participants produced journals and audio-mapping recordings. Construction of the project’s website intended to document and publicise this work has sparked an internal debate that follows directly along lines raised by Forkert, Kurczynski and Thompson. ‘Who benefits from the social capital generated by TM projects: participants, or artists?’, Borcila asks. She adds: ‘The crisis for me is provoked by the ways in which both aesthetic pleasure and the philanthropic mobilization of art often function to “manage” the threat of systemic critique.’

Campbaltimore mounted a series of impressive, urban projects in Baltimore, Maryland, a city undergoing a branding process to attract the ‘creative classes’. Economically blighted neighbourhoods are being



gentrified, while the mostly African-American, low-income residents are pushed out to the suburban margins or wind up incarcerated within the city's prison-heavy penal system. As much as possible Campbaltimore submerged individual group members' artistic identities in order to facilitate practical partnerships with frequently suspicious community activists. Perhaps inevitably, the strain of disavowing any accumulation of personal social capital led the group to implode. And yet with regard to sustainability the question of material support must be raised. If support does not come from the art world, or from the state, then from whom will it come? As Prishani Naidoo suggests, the future of TM may hinge on understanding the economic rules that govern the symbolic accumulation and exchange. In her account of Indymedia South Africa, Naidoo details ways in which re-imagining how to 'speak and relate' can subvert 'the logic of the market and profit' by producing a *counter-reality* with which to confront 'the "reality" of the relations that we are forced to live and the representations that we are forced to produce under capitalism'.

In her poetic meditation on graffiti in Beirut, Rasha Salti reminds us that tactical practices are not exclusively electronic, and that physical spaces can still be a sustained site of social and political contestation, even if 'public space' erases its own record of these discourses. The Situationists' slogans and wall writings, some of which have far outlasted the group itself, inevitably come to mind.

There is much to think about, discuss, debate and question here, and the dilemmas, challenges and impasses analysed in these essays are likely to be with us for years to come. We suspect that if there is any way beyond globalised capitalism – a 'war of all against all' in the form of a social relation, now enforced by 'permanent' war on/of terror – it will only be through the ordeals of intensified social struggle and the material and affective solidarities such struggles generate. To succeed, anti-capitalist struggle will need to renew the strategic capacities it lost in unburdening itself of old top-down party structures. New long-term structures and strategies still need to be invented and developed, and this can only happen from within renewed struggles. In the meantime, tactical imperatives remain in force. And there – in the place of the other, the systemic enemy – perhaps TM still has some cards up its sleeve?

## Leveraging Situationism?

Karen Kurczynski

*The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – non-intervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.<sup>1</sup>*

The mini-conference ‘The Situational Drive: Complexities of Public Sphere Engagement’, organised by Joshua Decker, took place at the Cooper Union in May 2007. Speakers included artists, theorists, critics, architects and curators, and admission was free thanks to non-profit sector sponsors such as inSite and Creative Time. Participants were asked to address such questions as ‘What is at stake today in terms of public domain experiences?’ and ‘Do we believe in the possibility of transforming publics?’. The event brought to light a range of possibilities for contesting the increasing regulation of public space and constraint of democratic expression. Nevertheless, for a conference explicitly devoted to tactical engagements in the public sphere, the absence of substantive interaction and dialogue was troubling and points to underlying contradictions regarding the institutional recuperation of the theory and practice of the Situationist International (SI) today in the form of the fully administered situation. Specifically, to what extent can institutions dependent on private funding, and therefore by extension corporate-defined parameters, accommodate the inherent oppositionality of the Situationist legacy? In significant ways, InSite, Creative Time and the ‘Situational Drive’ conference succeeded in spectacularising oppositional or community-based practices which were therefore divorced, partly or totally, from potential criticality.

My aim is not to restore the primacy of Situationist activities over contemporary ones. The Situationists were one of a long line of political activists from Dada to the Art Worker’s Coalition and beyond, and their history needs continual reassessment.<sup>2</sup> Yet the artistic and urbanist projects presented at the conference expressed the constraints of the regulation of contemporary public space in their very parameters – even as the Situationist activities themselves did half a century ago. What

- 1 Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, 1957, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>
- 2 For example, the recent conference in Copenhagen, ‘Expect Everything, Fear Nothing: Seminar on the Situationist Movement in Scandinavia’ (organised by Jakob Jakobsen and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, 15–16 March 2007), began a long overdue reconsideration of the dissident Situationist artists’ activities, <http://destroysi.dk>.

remain to be considered are the differences in funding structures, demands for accountability and expectations among varied audiences that now delimit a Situationist-inspired set of tactics, including: the *dérive* (oppositional meanderings that lay bare the power that structures public space); *détournement* (the subversion of spectacular media); and the very concept of creating a situation (provoking antagonism or demanding participation rather than passive viewing). The rhetoric of inSite and other sponsors of the 'Situational Drive' conference demands at least a preliminary examination of these potential contradictions. To that end I will consider to what extent the Situationist legacy haunted this conference, in light of other recent attempts to leverage the radical inheritance of the Situationists for contemporary purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of administering situations recalls the paradox that determined the Situationist project in its own day: the fact that it was an anti-organisation defying the capitalist regulation of society from the outside, just as it recognised capitalism's potential to recuperate the outsider dimensions of culture. According to a 1960 Situationist text:

All forms of capitalist society today are in the final analysis based on the generalized... division between directors and executants: those who give orders and those who carry them out. Transposed onto the plane of culture, this means the separation between 'understanding' and 'doing.'... The total social activity is thus split into three levels: the workshop, the office and the directorate. Culture, in the sense of active and practical comprehension of society, is likewise cut apart into these three aspects. These aspects are reunited (partially and clandestinely) only by people's constant transgression of the separate sectors in which they are regimented by the system.<sup>4</sup>

The Situationist observation so crucial for contemporary discussions was the identification of an increasing struggle between collectives seeking new ways to contest capitalist power and power's attempts to recuperate all innovation as a marketable product divorced from all threat. The SI developed a deep-seated distrust of 'the cultural sector proper, whose publicity is based on the periodic launching of pseudo-innovations'.<sup>5</sup> The Situationist concept of the (now entirely) capitalist spectacle permeating even the most seemingly private aspects of human life has become only more relevant in the past half-century of globalisation and the increasing bureaucratisation of culture.

The Situationist concept of *détournement* theorised the possibility of critical subjectivity to negate recuperation, using the spectacle's own visual language necessarily from within its parameters, because there is, as the SI would write, 'at present' no other available position. The SI upheld the promise of a revolutionary alternative, which could not arise from purely cultural innovation but did so from a broader concept of direct action, to re-determine completely the possibilities for creative expression while espousing *détournement* as a tactic of refusing present conditions.<sup>6</sup> Of course, even Situationist *détournements* were not pure outsider statements: the most orthodox examples of *détournement* entered the capitalist circuit directly, despite the SI's claims to the contrary.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, *détournement* informs protest strategies, such as those of the Yes Men and others, which recognise the beneficial aspects of globalisation (not least the very infrastructure of international

3 These might include 'The Interventionists' at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; a conference entitled 'Situationist Sim City: Critical Video Gaming', in Liverpool in 2004; the 2005 'Creative Capital: Culture, Innovation and the Public Domain in the Knowledge Economy' conference in Amsterdam; and the exhibition 'Forms of Resistance' at the Van Abbemuseum.

4 Pierre Canjeurs and Guy Debord, 'Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program', 20 July 1960, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/program.html>

5 Ibid

6 See 'Détournement as Negation and Prelude', *Internationale situationniste*, 3, December 1959, pp 10–11.

7 Although Debord claimed that the collaborative artist's book *Mémoires* was distributed only to friends as a gift, it was sold in various Left Bank bookstores and at Wittenborn in New York; Asger Jorn's 'Détourned Paintings' were shown twice at Galerie Rive Gauche even if they did not sell.

communication) while fighting for global justice. The spectre of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' haunts current discussions because it has come to stand for the domestication of the oppositional 'situation' into a bland notion of 'participation' created by jet-setting global artists and curators with tenuous connections to local settings despite their dependence on local audiences to complete them. At the 'Situational Drive' conference, critic Markus Miessen demanded that we interrogate the meaning of 'participation' and restore the economic and social determinants that define any such practice; in the end participation is problematic precisely because it has become a replacement for absent community. For non-profit institutions, what matters is how to maintain the possibility of rejecting the complete domestication of the relationalist pole given the privatisation of funding. Perhaps even more important is the question of whether institutions can promote oppositional situations that arise outside any such sponsorship without spectacularising them. This is a challenge that must be kept in mind in the development of future situations. It matters little whether or not the conference succeeded or did not succeed; discussions of 'failure' haunt all accounts of the legacy of the avant-garde in general and have become largely useless because they so quickly become dismissals that hinder critical analysis.

The organisation of the conference drew suspicion from some quarters for the same reasons that inSite, one of the principal sponsors of the conference, has been criticised in the past: for using activist concepts to frame what seemed merely to be another version of passive spectatorship.<sup>8</sup> InSite is a fifteen-year-old non-profit-based organisation in San Diego, California, which sponsors bi-national art projects concerning the US–Mexican border. Its history encapsulates the shift over the past two decades from site-specific installation to place-specific intervention. This shift began with the development of so-called 'new genre public art' in the 1980s, when curators and artists rejected the formalist and dehumanised conception of locality inherited from the site-specific practices of Minimalism and post-Minimalism in favour of more socially based projects in relation to a particular community.<sup>9</sup> InSite seeks to explore innovative ways to rethink marginalised spaces and attempt to connect communities to a wider spectrum of resources without merely making them available for gentrification. Over the years, inSite has become genuinely bi-national – itself an impressive feat – and moved toward more explicit, socially engaged interventionist practices. Yet a fundamental question not addressed in the projects sponsored by organisations such as inSite is the role of privatisation and funding in organising, promoting, channelling – in a word spectacularising – interventionist actions, which are inherently fugitive and anti-spectacular.

The very term 'interventionist', popularised by the recent exhibition at Mass MoCA, encapsulates the Situationist call to refute the non-intervention imposed by the Spectacle, which constantly creates new consumer desires that distract from political realities. InSite05, involving international artists and critics coordinated locally and flown in for residencies over a two-year period, explicitly presented itself as an anti-biennial. According to artist Antoni Muntadas, its organisation developed stronger and more productive relationships between artist and

8 Leah Ollman's critique of InSite 2000, that 'passive spectatorship became the prevailing mode of experience', could equally apply to the 'Situational Drive' conference, which similarly foregrounded video projections over conversations. Ollman, 'Losing Ground – Public Art at the Border', *Art in America*, 89:5, May 2001, p 70.

9 The issues of 'site' versus 'place' are discussed in Jeff Kelley, 'Common Work', in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed Suzanne Lacy, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, pp 139–48, and Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*, New Press, New York, 1997. See also the discussion in Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, pp 100–37.

place than a typical biennial.<sup>10</sup> Artistic director Osvaldo Sánchez laid out the curator's paradoxical task in his 2003 statement:

Even at the risk of fracturing inSite's a priori identification as a cultural event showcasing legitimate talents, the overarching challenge in inSite05 is to empower each project to suborn, clone, and de-institutionalize these artistic strategies, in order to re-inscribe them as breathtakingly innovative creative experiences with broad anthropological significance.<sup>11</sup>

His call for the 'breathhtakingly innovative' neatly mimics capitalism's ongoing drive to novelty.

The attempt to 'de-institutionalize' is admirably radical from the perspective of the mainstream artworld, but can it be done by curatorial fiat, with private funding? InSite was funded by major gifts ranging from \$25,000 to \$250,000 from individuals, foundations, corporations and government agencies in both the US and Mexico. The Situational Drive conference was funded by grants including support from a new fund called Artography, the sub-organisation of a dubious-sounding entity called Leveraging Investments in Creativity, part of the Ford Foundation. The notion of 'leveraging investments' particularly underscores the privatisation of arts funding since the 1970s when artist-run spaces and organisations seemed for a time to be dominant.<sup>12</sup> A recent dialogue among a selected group of artists sponsored by Creative Time demonstrates a general feeling that artists and curators need to reassess oppositional tactics in a current climate hostile to public political opposition. Several participants noted that art schools, once a protected site of experimental alternative to the market, have now been transformed into professional training grounds and networking sites for high-profile gallery shows.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, universities are undergoing crises of public censorship and privatisation, while the publishing industry in both art journals and academic books has contracted. Given these conditions, the corporate language of leveraging and accountability tends to direct art towards 'useful' social ends, pushing arts organisations toward relational projects more closely involved with marginalised communities, but often on the condition that they do not disrupt the larger status quo.

Activist artists have become highly sceptical of such efforts to manage situations that, at least in the Situationist conception, should be anarchic, spontaneous and driven purely by desire.<sup>14</sup> Often, if such initiatives do not put the artist or architect in the position of agent of gentrification, they mandate that she/he become a social worker in a society that has eroded its infrastructure for actual social work. Tijuana-based architect Teddy Cruz, for one, seems amenable to this shifting of roles. Cruz presented a compelling description at the conference of his own work developing artistic alternatives to top-down development. His studio attempts to ameliorate the vast disparity of wealth and poverty in the San Diego–Tijuana metropolis by turning the neighbourhood into a grassroots developer of its own housing stock. He has partnered with multiple NGOs, social service providers and providers of micro-credit in attempting to develop local infrastructures and investigating alternative economies, such as the bartering of social services for rent. Cruz makes productive use of Situationist ideas to work within the existing structures of urban planning. His diagrams of

10 Antoni Muntadas, presentation at the 'Situational Drive' panel 'Communication, Fear, Contact', 13 May 2007

11 Quoted in Joshua Decker, 'Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements: The Artist as Public Interlocutor?', in *Situational Public*, eds Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell, Installation Gallery, San Diego, 2006, p 293.

12 See Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds, *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, New York University Press, New York, 1999.

13 *Who Cares?*, Creative Time, New York, 2006. See the comments by Martha Rosler and Coco Fusco, among others, p 43 and p 73.

14 See Doug Ashford's comments in *Who Cares?*, op cit, p 34.



structures combining housing with social services were directly indebted to Constant's New Babylon and Guy Debord's détourned maps. The Situationists themselves acknowledged they were engaged in a 'race' with capitalist bureaucrats for innovation. In the postwar period of economic and technological expansion, both cultural bureaucrats and autonomous artist-activists sought the new, the marginal, the technological possibilities of liberating everyday life – but to different ends. The Situationist approach proposed the direct acknowledgement that 'we are inevitably on the same path as our enemies – most often preceding them – but we must be there, without any confusion, *as enemies*'.<sup>15</sup> Cruz's projects explore radical alternatives to the existing economy of development by re-channelling its institutional energies.

Although many artists want to make a difference, when their activities are regulated by the private sphere's demands for accountability and managed opposition it quickly becomes clear why there is a widespread perception that interventions are immediately spectacularised or defused. The obvious example of this at the conference was Doug Aitken. Aitken's thoroughly spectacular work *Sleepwalkers*, sponsored by MoMA and Creative Time, involved highly scripted scenarios featuring celebrity actors and high production values that make them virtually indistinguishable from commercials. Aitken spoke in a panel labelled 'Anti-Spectacle/Spectacle', but his own internalisation of the spectacle – evident in his platitudes about 'empowering' the viewer to 'discover' the work by 'journeying through' the space of the MoMA courtyard – inexplicably went unchallenged. If we can only empower viewers to walk to MoMA, we may as well go back to easel painting.

The Situationists, on the other hand, did not necessarily achieve more than the contemporary 'interventionists', other than developing a sophisticated body of theory to inform critical practice. Their actions, from the dérive to détourned artworks and films, resisted publicity enough to surround the group with a mystique that has made them terminally hip, heroes inspiring passive worship rather than active interpretation. Actions by even such 'rigorous' Situationists as Guy Debord were financed by the day job of girlfriends like Michèle Bernstein, who were thus prevented from playing more central roles in the movement, and by sales of Asger Jorn's paintings. Still, it is notable that this financing diverted existing capital into autonomous artist-run projects, rather than collecting funds through grants that inherently tailor an artistic project to the requirements of a parent organisation.

Joshua Decker, in his contribution to inSite, attempts to interrogate rather than resolve the problematics of working in a specific local context as an outsider. Although he does not refer directly to the Situationist usage, he mobilises the term 'situation' to investigate the range of explicitly politicised and public actions developed out of the two-year build up to inSite05.<sup>16</sup> What are the differences between institutionally coordinating, funding and publicising such situations and what the SI called 'constructing' them? Primarily, the institutionally constructed situation upholds the specialised roles of organiser versus actor, actor versus viewer. The result is a curatorial project that, even though realised by an innovative and politically challenging organisation, is still received as a weekend tourist attraction.<sup>17</sup> That inSite brings in cultural workers from outside the local area who may have little knowledge of

15 'Now, the SI', 1964, quoted in Tom McDonough, 'Introduction: Ideology and the Situationist Utopia', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed T McDonough, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, xiii

16 Decker, 'Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements', op cit, pp 289–301

17 For travel writer William L Hamilton, the inSite organisers and artists became little more than an insider advantage making the 'real' Tijuana visible to the tourist. Hamilton, 'It's Hot, It's Hip, It's Tijuana?', *New York Times*, 25 August 2006, online at <http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/08/25/travel/escapes/25tijuana.html>

local context is a frequent source of criticism. However, inSite05 artists Javier Téllez and Paul Ramírez Jonas did extensive local organising to disrupt the power imbalance of outsider versus insider. The ‘intrusion’ of outsiders is in fact crucial to the idea of *dérive* which deconstructs the spatialisation of power by bringing institutionally separated bodies or spaces into a cultural confrontation. Such confrontation is now much more easily done on an international scale. The creative re-examination of the complex relationships and misunderstandings between Tijuana and San Diego communities is what makes inSite significant. More problematic are, on the one hand, the danger of pseudo-participation or viewer passivity in some of the events themselves and, on a deeper level, the entrenched specialisation of the roles of all cultural workers and observers involved, which prevents a truly oppositional circulation of productive energies. The Situationists’ comments on this problem should be remembered, not in order to uphold a mystique of the SI as the true critical ‘pioneers’ but rather in order to reconsider problems that seem to have become invisible to the new situational specialists. According to the SI:

A constructed situation must be collectively prepared and developed. It would seem, however, that, at least during the initial period of rough experiments, a situation requires one individual to play a sort of ‘director’ role. If we imagine a particular situation project in which, for example, a research team has arranged an emotionally moving gathering of a few people for an evening, we would no doubt have to distinguish: a director or producer responsible for coordinating the basic elements necessary for the construction of the decor and for working out certain interventions in the events... the direct agents living the situation, who have taken part in creating the collective project and worked on the practical composition of the ambience; and finally, a few passive spectators who have not participated in the constructive work, who should be forced into action. This relation between the director and the ‘livers’ of the situation must naturally never become a permanent specialisation. It’s only a matter of a temporary subordination of a team of situationists to the person responsible for a particular project.<sup>18</sup>

The Situationist mandate to ‘never work’ – in other words never to specialise into a *métier* that becomes economically exploitable – has become the province of artists alone, a kind of specialty of non-specialisation. Artists can enter the roles of curator, critic and organiser, but non-artists employed in those roles are often trapped by work schedules that make creative experimentation or sustained political engagement impossible. InSite attempted to shake up prescribed roles by creating new positions for organisers like Decter who, while not a curator, was given the title of ‘Interlocutor’ in order to become an open-ended negotiator and ‘generator of critical feedback’.<sup>19</sup> The creation of such new administrative positions, however, might defeat its own purpose by resulting in further specialisations and professionalisation of artistic projects.

Community was a fraught concept at both inSite and the ‘Situational Drive’ conference. InSite05 defined itself by a ‘commitment to facilitate new works of art developed through the long-term engagement of artists with the community’.<sup>20</sup> Its efficacy was framed from the beginning of the

18 ‘Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation’, *Internationale situationniste* 1, 1958, trans Ken Knabb, available online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/problems.html>

19 Decter, ‘Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements’, op cit, p 283

20 InSite05 fact sheet

project and evaluated after its end as an engagement with local neighbourhoods on both sides of the border. The ‘Situational Drive’ conference attempted to develop a dialogue or ‘friction’ among different artistic communities but ultimately showcased the privileged default community of the established artworld. Panels that were set up as ‘conversations’ were laughable for their lack of dialogue. This started with the first ‘keynote conversation’ between Maarten Hajer and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Wodiczko, one of the most significant practitioners of socially committed public art today, and Hajer, co-author of the book *In Search of the New Public Domain*,<sup>21</sup> presented insights focused on theorising the public sphere. Hajer argued for the public sphere as a space of homogenous, regulated enclaves that artists can potentially disrupt by developing engagements that are normally prohibited, while Wodiczko presented his public projections which destabilise public and private space, history and personal memory, and make visible normally hidden micro-communities. Yet as artist Laura Kurgan noted, endless academic dialogue on redefining the public sphere seems less useful than discussions of specific communities. Nato Thompson suggested evaluating interventionist ‘tactics’ as opposed to institutional ‘strategies’. On many panels, presentations were so brief as to be utterly incomprehensible. On the panel ‘Organizing Transitory Projects in the City’, former director of Public Art Fund Tom Eccles uttered the sentence, ‘Talking about community is a kind of paralysis – it’s the most destructive thing you could do’. The phrase seemed overtly designed to provoke Maarten Hajer’s notion of ‘friction’ in the public sphere. The idea of friction evokes the Situationist notion of refusing ‘communication’, which dominated all aspects of public discourse in the 1950s, as a one-way message always already predefined, circumscribed and clichéd.<sup>22</sup> Did Eccles mean that communities have to be built, not discussed, as in the Situationist idea that ‘communication can only exist in communal action’?<sup>23</sup> If so, the conference was utterly failing at that too; as co-panellist Mary Jane Jacobs, a veteran of innovative curatorial organising in the local context of Charleston, SC, candidly noted, ‘We’re not having a thoughtful conversation here. This is the artworld here. It’s a closed community.’ Jacobs and other participants such as inSite participant Teddy Cruz and Rick Lowe, founder of Project Row Houses in Houston, insisted that their work deals with concrete, specific neighbourhoods – communities built on social ties developed over many years. As Jacobs commented later, projects working with such communities would be better served by a much more focused and interactive discussion.

Many projects presented at the conference internalised the limits of the political efficacy of the situation today. The project by the four-man collective Gelitin, sponsored by Creative Time, compliantly reflected the position of art in today’s capitalist public space, laying bare the limits of current possibilities. Gelitin presented via DVD and live-video feed a project provocatively called ‘The Dig Cunt’. Their panel was labelled ‘Under the Paving Stones, A Beach’, a light-hearted and completely depoliticised take on the May ‘68 street-battle slogan and thus a sheer domestication of the most unequivocal Situationist intervention.<sup>24</sup> The beach in question was not the ground underlying the city streets but rather the several tons of sand shipped in every year to make a simulacrum of a beach on Coney Island. The collective dug a hole in the

21 Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of the New Public Domain*, NAI, Rotterdam, 2002

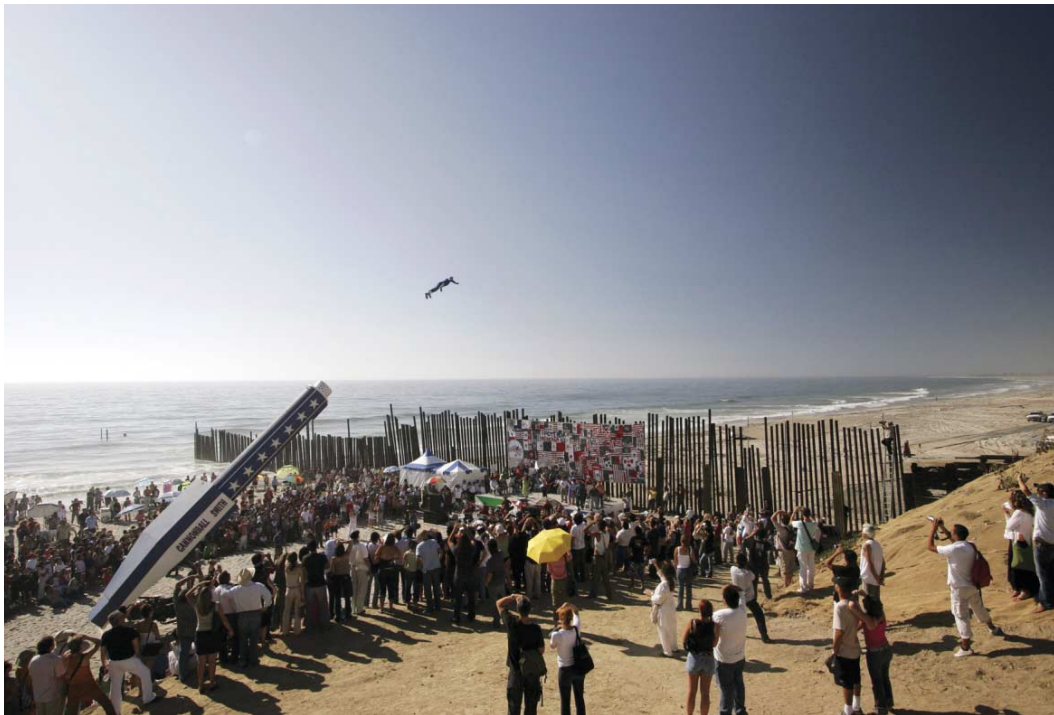
22 See ‘Priority Communication’, *Internationale situationniste*, 7, 1962, pp 20–4, trans Reuben Keehan, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/priority.html>

23 Ibid, p 21

24 On the Situationists’ role in the events of 1968 see Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et mai 68*, Gérard Lebovici, Paris, 1990.

beach and refilled it each evening for seven days. A spokes-artist asserted that ‘art is the counter-concept of capitalism. Art doesn’t have to do anything. It doesn’t even have to be effective [or] efficient, nothing. It’s open to anarchy which is a counter-concept to capitalism.’ After achieving the requisite permissions from the city (not a particularly anarchic process), they carried out a project that was useless and ridiculous enough to make all statements about it funny and thus nonsensical. They framed the event as an expression of the artist’s ultimate freedom: ‘Since you call yourself an artist, anything you do is art.’ In the end, it was a sad statement on the possibilities for developing contemporary situations. Either they become self-defeatist and self-marginalising in their complete rejection of politics in favour of fun, or their entanglement with the demands of timely political issues precludes all spontaneity, unpredictability, and in many cases aesthetics. More provocative than the project itself was the disruption of a live-feed interview with one of Gelitin’s members by the Yes Men’s Andy Bichlbaum. In the resulting non-conversation, Bichlbaum’s ‘translations’ completely muddled the communication. (‘The Dig What? What is the title? The Dig Cunt – is it a provocative title? Yes, the title is the Dig Cunt.’) The disruption of ‘official’ communication made a significant statement, a hilarious détournement, given the ongoing problematic of presenter versus audience communication at the conference.

InSite05 interventions also remained on the relationalist (as opposed to Situationist) pole of the administered situation. InSite participants



Javier Tellez, *One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)*, performance still, InSite05, Tijuana/San Diego border, 2005. Photograph: © Steven Lau.

Bulbo, an artists' collective from Tijuana, silkscreened collectively designed T-shirt prints all weekend for free on the sidewalk outside the conference. The diverse group creates imagery together based on their everyday lives. While *The Clothes Shop* developed an alternative product, the clothes functioned in New York as another niche market offering urban hipness for artworld insiders. In Mexico the collective sets up in malls, distributing clothes freely to the local population, many of whom work in repressive, sweatshop-like maquiladora plants producing garments for export to the US. A relationalist practice, it nevertheless inserts collectively derived imagery into spaces outside the purview of the artworld, fostering the untrackable proliferation of an anti-logo while producing an alternative network of distribution without challenging existing structures directly.

Perhaps best summarising both the potential and the limitations of the administered 'situation' in our mediated society was Javier Téllez's inSite project *One Flew Over the Void*. The event (presented as a video clip) was the culmination of Téllez's two-year collaboration with psychiatric patients in Mexicali. Together they designed a stage set against the wall separating Tijuana and San Diego beachfronts, and developed a music programme, and publicity materials using print radio, broadcast and television. Modelled on the folk tradition of the town fair, the event involved patients marching with protest messages they designed. Once onstage, a tuxedoed MC directed them to don animal masks and walk through a large hoop. The final act was the spectacular catapulting across the border of a human cannonball. Having obtained all the proper permissions in advance, the cannonball himself ceremonially displayed his US passport before shooting off. The cannonball event for once put an American in danger by crossing the border, yet it functioned as purely symbolic action; inSite director Michael Krichman called it 'a sort of spectacle so out of the ordinary that officials did not see it as jeopardizing their everyday systems of control'.<sup>25</sup> Like Mexican artist Erre's giant Janus-faced Trojan horse looming over the border traffic lanes at inSite 1997, it was completely politically neutralised, yet still powerful. It also became an icon for the 'Situational Drive' conference whose poster featured the human cannonball in flight.

The dialogic nature of Téllez's collaborative process, the heterotopic aspects of the event and its conscious video recording suggests new ways to subvert spectacularisation. More ideologically threatening than the cannonball was the disturbing sight of mental patients marching through circus hoops like animals. Viewers were forced out of their comfort zone into a personal examination of the way we normally view (or more likely, ignore) the mentally ill. With overt reference to Michel Foucault's classic analysis in *Madness and Civilization* (Random House, New York, 1965), it overturned a controlled invisibility through apparent self-objectification. Téllez asserted the work 'redefined the ethics of the representation of mental illness', drawing directly on modernist links between artistic creation and mental illness. The patients meanwhile became temporary and overtly artificial 'artists'. Arguably, the event détourned the spectacle by means of what might be productively termed a 'constructed spectacle'; it moves a step beyond the comforting pseudo-participation of relational aesthetics into a deliberate disruption of conventional ethics.<sup>26</sup> It also goes beyond the Situationist refusal of

25 Sally Stein, 'Looking Backward and Forward: A Preliminary Historical Conversation About InSite', in *Situational Public*, op cit, p 425

26 See Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, autumn 2004, pp 51–79.



visual pleasure, itself ultimately self-defeating. A constructed spectacle could destabilise the hegemonic control of spectacular imagery the way a constructed situation destabilises the social control of space. *One Flew Over the Void* mobilised the ancient traditions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to render homage to the carnival itself as a kind of constructed spectacle not intended as a political statement yet anything but innocent. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously noted, when the carnival turns the world upside down it destabilises conventional social hierarchies – but only temporarily, in situations perfectly exemplified by Gelitin’s antics. The constructed spectacle as presented in the Téllez video remains permanently dissociated from the ‘original’ events, which were already emphatically staged. While this project diverges from the direct political tactics of interventionist strategies, it uses grotesque strategies of humour and nonsense to throw a wrench into the spectacularisation of community and action. And only this kind of direct opposition to the institutional recuperation inherent in such organisations as Creative Time and inSite can sabotage their spectacular machinery.