

A Virtual World is Possible. From Tactical Media to Digital Multitudes



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Abstract:

We start with the current strategy debates of the so-called "anti-globalisation movement", the biggest emerging political force for decades. In Part II we will look into strategies of critical new media culture in the post-speculative phase after dotcommania. Four phases of the global movement are becoming visible, all of which have distinct political, artistic and aesthetic qualities.

1. Part I

1.1. The 90s and tactical media activism

The term 'tactical media' arose in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a renaissance of media activism, blending old school political work and artists' engagement with new technologies. The early nineties saw a growing awareness of gender issues, exponential growth of media industries and the increasing availability of cheap do-it-yourself equipment creating a new sense of self-awareness amongst activists, programmers, theorists, curators and artists. Media were no longer seen as merely tools for the Struggle, but experienced as virtual environments whose parameters were permanently 'under construction'. This was the golden age of tactical media, open to issues of aesthetics and experimentation with alternative forms of story telling. However, these liberating techno practices did not immediately translate into visible social movements. Rather, they symbolized the celebration of media freedom, in itself a great political goal. The media used—from video, CD-ROM, cassettes, zines and flyers to music styles such as rap and techno—varied widely, as did the content. A commonly shared feeling was that politically motivated activities, be they art or research or advocacy work, were no longer part of a politically correct ghetto and could intervene in 'pop culture' without necessarily having to compromise with the 'system.' With everything up for negotiation, new coalitions could be formed. The current movements worldwide cannot be understood outside of the diverse and often very personal for digital freedom of expression.

1.2. 99-01: The period of big mobilizations

By the end of the nineties the post-modern 'time without movements' had come to pass. The organized discontent against neo-liberalism, global warming policies, labour exploitation and numerous other issues converged. Equipped with networks and arguments, backed up by decades of research, a hybrid movement—wrongly labelled by mainstream media as 'anti-globalisation'—gained momentum. One of the particular features of this movement lies in its apparent inability and unwillingness to answer the question that is typical of any kind of movement on the rise or any generation on the move: what's to be done? There was and there is no answer, no alternative—either strategic or tactical—to the existing world order, to the dominant mode of globalisation.

And maybe this is the most important and liberating conclusion: there is no way back to the twentieth century, the protective nation state and the gruesome tragedies of the 'left.' It has been good to remember—but equally good to throw off—the past. The question 'what's to be done' should not be read as an attempt to re-introduce some form of Leninist principles. The issues of strategy, organization and democracy belong to all times. We neither want to bring back old policies through the backdoor, nor do we think that this urgent question can be dismissed by invoking crimes committed under the banner of Lenin, however justified such arguments are. When Slavoj Žižek looks in the mirror he may see Father Lenin, but that's not the case for everyone. It is possible to wake up from the nightmare of the past history of communism and (still) pose the question: what's to be done? Can a 'multitude' of interests and backgrounds ask that question, or is the only agenda that defined by the summit calendar of world leaders and the business elite?

Nevertheless, the movement has been growing rapidly. At first sight it appears to use a pretty boring and very traditional medium: the mass-mobilization of tens of thousands in the streets of Seattle, hundreds of thousands in the streets of Genoa. And yet, tactical media networks played an important role in it's coming into being. From now on pluriformity of issues and identities was a given reality. Difference is here to stay and no longer needs to legitimize itself against higher authorities such as the Party, the Union or the Media. Compared to previous decades this is its biggest gain. The 'multitudes' are not a dream or some theoretical construct but a reality.

If there is a strategy, it is not contradiction but complementary existence. Despite theoretical deliberations, there is no contradiction between the street and cyberspace. The one fuels the other. Protests against the WTO, neo-liberal EU policies, and party conventions are all staged in front of the gathered world press. Indymedia crops up as a parasite of the mainstream media. Instead of having to beg for attention, protests take place under the eyes of the world media during summits of politicians and business leaders, seeking direct confrontation. Alternatively, symbolic sites are chosen such as border regions (East-West Europe, USA-Mexico) or refugee detention centres (Frankfurt airport, the centralized Eurocop database in Strasbourg, the Woomera detention centre in the Australian desert). Rather than just objecting to it, the global entitlement of the movement adds to the ruling mode of globalisation a new layer of globalisation from below.

1.3. Confusion and resignation after 9-11

At first glance, the future of the movement is a confusing and irritating one. Old-leftist grand vistas, explaining US imperialism and its aggressive unilateralist foreign policy, provided by Chomsky, Pilger and other baby boomers are consumed with interest but no longer give the bigger picture. In a polycentric world conspiracy theories can only provide temporary comfort for the confused. No moralist condemnation of capitalism is necessary as facts and events speak for themselves. People are driven to the street by the situation, not by an analysis (neither ours nor the one from Hardt & Negri). The few remaining leftists can no longer provide the movement with an ideology, as it works perfectly without one. "We don't need your revolution." Even the social movements of the 70s and 80s, locked up in their NGO structures, have a hard time keeping up. New social formations are taking possession of the streets and media spaces, without feeling the need of representation by some higher authority, not even the heterogenous committees gathering in Porto Alegre.

So far this movement has been bound in clearly defined time/space coordinates. It still takes months to mobilize multitudes and organize the logistics, from buses and planes, camping grounds and hostels, to independent media centres. This movement is anything but spontaneous (and does not even claim to be so). The people that travel hundreds or thousands of miles to attend protest rallies are driven by real concerns, not by some romantic notion of socialism. The worn-out question: "reform or revolution?" sounds more like blackmail to provoke the politically correct answer.

The contradiction between selfishness and altruism is also a false one. State-sponsored corporate globalisation affects everyone. International bodies such as the WTO, the Kyoto Agreement on global warming, or the privatisation of the energy sector are no longer abstract news items, dealt with by bureaucrats and (NGO) lobbyists. This political insight has been the major quantum leap of recent times. Is this then the Last International? No. There is no way back to the nation state, to traditional concepts of liberation, the logic of transgression and transcendence, exclusion and inclusion. Struggles are no longer projected onto a distant Other that begs for our moral support and money. We have finally arrived in the post-solidarity age. As a consequence, national liberation movements have been replaced by a by a new analysis of power, which is simultaneously incredibly abstract, symbolic and virtual, whilst terribly concrete, detailed and intimate.

1.4. Present challenge: liquidate the regressive third period of marginal moral protest

Luckily September 11 has had no immediate impact on the movement. The choice between Bush and Bin Laden was irrelevant. Both agendas were rejected as devastating fundamentalisms. The all too obvious question: "whose terror is worse?" was carefully avoided as it leads away from the pressing emergencies of everyday life: the struggle for a living wage, decent public transport, health care, water, etc. As both social democracy and really existing socialism depended heavily on the nation state a return to the 20th century sounds as disastrous as all the catastrophes it produced. The concept of a digital multitude is fundamentally different and based entirely on openness. Over the last few years the creative struggles of the multitudes have produced outputs on many different layers: the dialectics of open sources, open borders, open knowledge. Yet the deep penetration of the concepts of openness and freedom into the principle of struggle is by no means a compromise to the cynical and greedy neo-liberal class. Progressive movements have always dealt with a radical democratisation of the rules of access, decision-making and the sharing of gained capacities. Usually it started from an illegal or

illegitimate common ground. Within the bounds of the analogue world it led to all sorts of cooperatives and self-organized enterprises, whose specific notions of justice were based on efforts to circumvent the brutal regime of the market and on different ways of dealing with the scarcity of material resources.

We're not simply seeking proper equality on a digital level. We're in the midst of a process that constitutes the totality of a revolutionary being, as global as it is digital. We have to develop ways of reading the raw data of the movements and struggles and ways to make their experimental knowledge legible; to encode and decode the algorithms of its singularity, nonconformity and non-confoundability; to invent, refresh and update the narratives and images of a truly global connectivity; to open the source code of all the circulating knowledge and install a virtual world.

Bringing these efforts down to the level of production challenges new forms of subjectivity, which almost necessarily leads to the conclusion that everyone is an expert. The superflux of human resources and the brilliance of everyday experience get dramatically lost in the 'academification' of radical left theory. Rather the new ethical-aesthetic paradigm lives on in the pragmatic consciousness of affective labour, in the nerdish attitude of a digital working class, in the omnipresence of migrant struggles as well as many other border-crossing experiences, in deep notions of friendship within networked environments as well as the 'real' world.

2. Part II

Let's now look at strategies for Internet art & activism. Critical new media culture faces a tough climate of budget cuts in the cultural sector and a growing hostility and indifference towards new media. But hasn't power shifted to cyberspace, as Critical Art Ensemble once claimed? Not so if we look at the countless street marches around the world.

The Seattle movement against corporate globalisation appears to have gained momentum—both on the street and online. But can we really speak of a synergy between street protests and online 'hacktivism'? No. But what they have in common is their (temporal) conceptual stage. Both real and virtual protests risk getting stuck at the level of a global 'demo design,' no longer grounded in actual topics and local situations. This means the movement never gets out of beta. At first glance, reconciling the virtual and the real seems to be an attractive rhetorical act. Radical pragmatists have often emphasized the embodiment of online networks in real-life society, dispensing with the real/virtual contradiction. Net activism, like the Internet itself, is always hybrid, a blend of old and new, haunted by geography, gender, race and other political factors. There is no pure disembodied zone of global communication, as the 90s cyber-mythology claimed.

Equations such as street plus cyberspace, art meets science, and 'techno-culture' are all interesting interdisciplinary approaches but are proving to have little effect beyond the symbolic level of dialogue and discourse. The fact is that established disciplines are in a defensive mode. The 'new' movements and media are not yet mature enough to question and challenge the powers that be. In a conservative climate, the claim to 'embody the future' becomes a weak and empty gesture. On the other hand, the call of many artists and activists to return to "real life" does not provide us with a solution to how alternative new media models can be raised to the level of mass (pop) culture. Yes, street demonstrations raise solidarity levels and lift us up from the daily solitude of one-way media interfaces. Despite September 11 and its right-wing political fallout, social movements worldwide are gaining importance and visibility. We should, however, ask the question "what comes after the demo version" of both new media and the movements?

This isn't the heady 60s. The negative, pure and modernist level of the "conceptual" has hit the hard wall of demo design as Peter Lunenfeld described it in his book 'Snap to Grid'. The question becomes: how to jump beyond the prototype? What comes after the siege of yet

another summit of CEOs and their politicians? How long can a movement grow and stay 'virtual'? Or in IT terms, what comes after demo design, after the countless PowerPoint presentations, broadband trials and Flash animations? Will Linux ever break out of the geek ghetto? The feel-good factor of the open, ever growing crowd (Elias Canetti) will wear out; demo fatigue will set in. We could ask: does your Utopia version have a use-by date? Rather than making up yet another concept it is time to ask the question of how software, interfaces and alternative standards can be installed in society. Ideas may take the shape of a virus, but society can hit back with even more successful immunization programs: appropriation, repression and neglect. We face a scalability crisis. Most movements and initiatives find themselves in a trap. The strategy of becoming "minor" (Guattari) is no longer a positive choice but the default option. Designing a successful cultural virus and getting millions of hits on your weblog will not bring you beyond the level of a short-lived 'spectacle'. Culture jammers are no longer outlaws but should be seen as experts in guerrilla communication.

Today's movements are in danger of getting stuck in self-satisfying protest mode. With access to the political process effectively blocked, further mediation seems the only available option. However, gaining more and more "brand value" in terms of global awareness may turn out to be like overvalued stocks: it might pay off, it might turn out to be worthless. The pride of "We have always told you so" is boosting the morale of minority multitudes, but at the same time it delegates legitimate fights to the level of official "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions" (often parliamentary or Congressional), after the damage is done.

Instead of arguing for "reconciliation" between the real and virtual we call here for a rigorous synthesis of social movements with technology. Instead of taking the "the future is now" position derived from cyber-punk, a lot could be gained from a radical re-assessment of the techno revolutions of the last 10-15 years. For instance, if artists and activists can learn anything from the rise and subsequent fall of dot-com, it might be the importance of marketing. The eyeballs of the dotcom attention economy proved worthless. This is a terrain is of truly taboo knowledge. Dot-coms invested their entire venture capital in (old media) advertisement. Their belief that media-generated attention would automatically draw users in and turn them into customers was unfounded. The same could be said of activist sites. Information "forms" us. But new consciousness results less and less in measurable action. Activists are only starting to understand the impact of this paradigm. What if information merely circles around in its own parallel world? What's to be done if the street demonstration becomes part of the Spectacle?

The increasing tensions and polarizations described here force us to question the limits of new media discourse. In the age of realtime global events Ezra Pound's definition of art as the antenna of the human race shows its passive, responsive nature. Art no longer initiates. One can be happy if it responds to contemporary conflicts at all and the new media arts sector is no exception. New media arts must be reconciled with its condition as a special effect of the hard and software developed years ago.

Critical new media practices have been slow to respond to both the rise and fall of dotcommania. In the speculative heydays of new media culture (the early-mid 90s, before the rise of the World Wide Web), theorists and artists jumped eagerly on not yet existing and inaccessible technologies such as virtual reality. Cyberspace generated a rich collection of mythologies; issues of embodiment and identity were fiercely debated. Only five years later, while Internet stocks were going through the roof, little was left of the initial excitement in intellectual and artistic circles. Experimental techno culture missed out on the funny money. Recently there has been a steady stagnation of new media cultures, both in terms of concepts and funding. With millions of new users flocking onto the Net, the arts can no longer keep up and withdraw into their own little world of festivals, mailing lists and workshops.

Whereas new media arts institutions, begging for goodwill, still portray artists as working at the forefront of technological developments, the reality is a different one. Multi-disciplinary goodwill is at an all time low. At best, the artist's new media products are 'demo design' as described by Lunenfeld. Often it does not even reach that level. New media arts, as defined by its few institutions rarely reach audiences outside of its own electronic arts subculture. The heroic fight for the establishment of a self-referential 'new media arts system' through a frantic differentiation

of works, concepts and traditions, might be called a dead-end street. The acceptance of new media by leading museums and collectors will simply not happen. Why wait a few decades anyway? Why exhibit net art in white cubes? The majority of the new media organizations such as ZKM, the Ars Electronica Centre, ISEA, ICC or ACMI are hopeless in their techno innocence, being neither critical nor radically utopian in their approach. Hence, the new media arts sector, despite its steady growth, is getting increasingly isolated, incapable of addressing the issues of today's globalised world, dominated by (the war against) terror. Let's face it, technology is no longer 'new,' the markets are down and out and no one wants know about it anymore. Its little wonder the contemporary (visual) arts world is continuing its decade-old boycott of (interactive) new media works in galleries, biennales and shows like Documenta XI.

A critical reassessment of the role of arts and culture within today's network society seems necessary. Let's go beyond the 'tactical' intentions of the players involved. The artist-engineer, tinkering on alternative human-machine interfaces, social software or digital aesthetics has effectively been operating in a self-imposed vacuum. Science and business have successfully ignored the creative community. Worse still, artists have been actively sidelined in the name of 'usability', pushed by a backlash movement against web design led by the IT-guru Jakob Nielsen. The revolt against usability is about to happen. Lawrence Lessig argues that Internet innovation is in danger. The younger generation is turning its back on on new media arts questions and if involved at all, operate as anti-corporate activists. After the dotcom crash the Internet has rapidly lost its imaginative attraction. File swapping and cell phones can only temporarily fill up the vacuum; the once so glamorous gadgets are becoming part of everyday life. This long-term tendency, now accelerating, seriously undermines future claims of new media.

Another issue concerns generations. With video and expensive interactive installations being the domain of the '68 baby boomers, the generation of '89 has embraced the free Internet. But the Net turned out to be a trap for them. Whereas assets, positions and power remain in the hands of the ageing baby boomers, the gamble on the rise of new media did not pay off. After venture capital has melted away, there is still no sustainable revenue system in place for the Internet. The slow working educational bureaucracies have not yet grasped the new media malaise. Universities are still in the process of establishing new media departments. But that will come to a halt at some point. The fifty-something tenured chairs and vice-chancellors must feel good about their persistent sabotage. What's so new about new media anyway? Technology was hype after all, promoted by the criminals of Enron and WorldCom. It is sufficient for students to do a bit of email and web surfing, safeguarded within a filtered, controlled intranet. In the face of this rising techno-cynicism we urgently need to analyse the ideology of the greedy 90s and its techno-libertarianism. If we don't disassociate new media quickly from the previous decade, the isolation of the new media sector will sooner or later result in its death. Let's transform the new media buzz into something more interesting altogether—before others do it for us.

Related links:

- ➡ LOVINK, Geert; SCHNEIDER, Florian. *The ABC of Tactical Media*. *Nettime*:
<http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html>
- ➡ LOVINK, Geert; SCHNEIDER, Florian. *The DEF of Tactical Media*. *Nettime*:
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- ➡ LOVINK, Geert; SCHNEIDER, Florian. *The GHI of Tactical Media*. *Artnodes*. UOC:
<http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/eng/art/broeckmann0902/broeckmann0902.html>

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