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Internet activism – Beyond Microsoft's walls

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In *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), linguist John L. Austin described the "performative" as a spoken expression that not only describes the world but changes it and creates new facts. The effectiveness of verbal action is tied to certain conditions. The most important of these aspects is context – the history, culture and legal system – to which it relates and from which the quote is derived. The performative derives its authority from all these aspects. The internet has established itself as a text medium and only secondarily as an image medium. Speech as text is its predominant form of action.

The text – which is entered via computers, then stored, processed and distributed – has a different relation to space and time to printed text: it can be accelerated, and displaced. The internet is a communications medium, not an archive; at the most it is an intermediate storage medium. Any document can be made available worldwide via a server within seconds and can be edited or read from anywhere in the world. It is normally not of any importance in which country the server is based. The time interval between production and publication of the text is reduced; the potential readership is not defined by its location but by its access to the infrastructure of information and communications' technology; its financial, educational and ideas background. This infrastructure, which enables rapid and dislocated communication, is not the a priori of the current political and economic distribution of power. It has, however, proved itself as the technical "dispositive" of the present, which is suspected of stabilising or radicalising the dominant condition, in the sense of an increased concentration of capital and power. The technical dispositive structures the actions of states, corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists and groups of artists.

A new generation of artists is moving about in the data landscapes of networked computers and delivers critical insights into the results of the globally distributed processes that our society is built on. The global information space of our network, and not the

framed blackboard image, is the new frame of reference, the arena of action. Artists' field of action has moved from the closed object of modern art to the open action arenas of the postmodern age. Through global information technology, new communities are formed that may have similar social structures in some sense but are not defined by their location. Art, which in the mid-20th century expanded its field of action from the picture to include physical space, now uses the data space too. Locally defined methods of production and perception of the classical arts have become non-local, telematic communication and action spaces. The aesthetics of processing and networking aim at re-civilising certain areas of the military and commercial complex of our information society. Artists in the net-world act as hackers and software experts in much the same way as guerrillas. They do not only bring the standards of civil society to the forefront but they implement these in the practical application of their software art.

Network-based artistic works represent the current form of art in which political hopes have been expressed most clearly in recent years. The socio-revolutionary utopias of historical avantgarde movements and enlightenment movements are supposed to become reality with the help of the new internet technology – which, like the telegraph, the railway, the telephone, etc stirred into life social visions of emancipation and justice [1]. Network-based art is currently the clearest form of action, which transforms the closed system of the aesthetic object of the modern age radically into the open system of the arenas of action of the postmodern age. Art that sees itself as a form of action with a social dimension will give its attention to forces that structure society, and thus to those technologies that it discovers for itself and that in turn transform it. The already noticeable and future changes brought about by the information and communications' technologies were the subject of my ZKM-exhibition *net_condition* as early as 1999. Here, works of art based on networking technologies were presented

that reflected the new conditions at an aesthetic, economic and social level.

Artists react to the fundamental effects of information technology, which cannot be separated from the global economy. The ascent of neo-liberalism is also based on the global expansion of information technology. It produces a fourth world, as Manuel Castells called it [2], which is excluded from the global information flow and which may be encountered on a selective basis even in the current first, second and third worlds. The mega-fusions of large telecommunications and information technology companies, of print and electronic media, of content providers and distribution companies aim at controlling the technology as well as determining the hierarchy of the contents for which it is the vehicle. The artists and activists of the internet culture see the use of the internet as a historic opportunity to make communications' technology available to the emancipated citizen, i.e. the individual who has rights, and thereby to free the technology from the dictates of money, commerce and the military. Net-based art is trying to contribute to re-civilising global media technology by criticising the economic, social and technical conditions and limitations of the internet, analysing software, and attacking the global monopoly of software and hardware and the adoption of the new media by corporations. Internet-based activism acts at the level of the technical dispositive itself, i.e. in the network, via distributing network-based documents and software and by attacking hardware, but it also uses the digital action space to organise criticism and protest in real space in a new way and to speed it up. Beyond sensitising or alerting and educating users, network activism uses digital blockade or sabotage as well as innovative forms of political mobilisation.

Enlightenment and informing

The attacks by artists' groups are directed, for example, against the norms of technology itself but also against the monopolists implementing these norms. Their resistance in its most basic form is directed against the browser, the programme that enables graphic representation of the information that is accessible via the worldwide web, but which also determines how the signs are represented, and therefore interprets them and determines their effect. The formal commitment to the commercial browsers of Netscape and Microsoft, which are used by more than 90% of users, is interrupted by artists' re-programmed browsers. Although media artists are subject to the development and sales strategies of

software manufacturers to a much greater extent than any other user (media art always justifies its existence with its technological advances, among others), media art aims at emancipation in acquiring and customising products, especially software, to an individual's own aesthetic and functional ideas. The explicit aim of avantgarde artists and internet activists is to leave the role of the consumer by descending to the source code of the purchased product or even to produce the source code. Art is to be seen not only as the consumption of ready-bought products but as a productive, selective force. The browser as the interpreter of the information on the net was at the centre stage of artistic interest even before the "browser war" between Netscape and Microsoft in 1997. In 1997, I/O/D presented their art project "web stalker" [3], which linked seamlessly to the events in the browser war. It was offered for downloading free of charge and could, at least in theory, be used as an alternative to the commercial products. Instead of showing the familiar HTML interpretation of a web page, however, it showed the structure of the internal and external links of a selected web page.

The user was encouraged to leave the closed surface of the normal product. While Netscape and Microsoft adapted their browsers to the reading habits of their users, to enable them to switch to the internet from traditional media more easily, the web stalker depicts graphically the characteristics of the worldwide web.

Another example is the "netomat" [4], conceived by artist and programmer Mciej Wisniewski as a work of art. This also tries to overcome the limitations of standard web browsers and shows new ways of using information. It detaches images, texts and sounds from the existing web pages and connects them to a flowing net that changes constantly when new search terms are used. "Netomat" is open-source software and can be modified by anyone. Its creators put their main emphasis on the fact that uncountable interfaces and functions can be developed by the worldwide community of users.

Jodi, the pseudonym used by artists Joan Heems-kerk and Dirk Paesmans, subverts the normed user surface with desktop, trash bin, and pull-down menus by programming non-semantic events, gestures of destruction, which make interacting in the sense of a targeted instruction with a processor impossible. The programme has to be read as a dysfunction of the computer. The unfathomability and the abstraction of information processing become visible. The artists, who have been working on the worldwide web since 1995, force web users, for example, with "7061.jodi.org", to explore their machines virtually, to leave the

user surface and therefore step out of their self-inflicted immaturity. Examining the specific material conditions of the web serves as a confrontation with the socio-economic forces that force particular hardware and software upon us. The aesthetic intervention aims at the structure of everyday life by software as a technical given that cannot be selected freely.

The emancipatory attitude inherent in disrupting the consumer perspective essentially depends on artists' technical know-how and ability to write programmes. These determine the scope and decide whether the artist remains at the level of the consumer. Protest is formulated in explicitly artistic ways of acting and programming strategies, as seen for example in Jodi's work, whereas the group "etoy" (www.etoy.com) or members of the group RTMark [5] act in an overtly political way. The objective is an emancipated society, whose means of cultural production does not depend on the monopoly of corporations. The internet is the ideal place to express resistance as access is principally open. Organisations that are independent of governments (NGOs or artists) can encounter corporations in a space that is, at least in theory, not subject to hierarchical structures. The resistance movement uses the same media as those that it criticises. Groups such as "etoy" or RTMark choose the appearance of their opponents in order to criticise these. Copyright, trademarks, concepts of the market economy are elements that are being used subversively against the keepers of these rights, marks, or concepts.

Since 1994, the website of the net group "etoy" has copied the appearance of a real e-commerce enterprise, "etoy.corporation." Users can find out about product offers and fluctuations in the share value of the company and invest in it. Predecessors in terms of copying political structures or artists organising themselves in fictitious enterprises date back to as early as the beginning of the 20th century – for example, the fictitious companies of the Dadaists, who made their companies "real" with business cards and newspaper advertisements. "etoy" mimics and thereby analyses in a playful manner the mechanisms of the New Economy. Its criticism is directed at the shareholder value, which became obvious in the "Toywar" between the toy manufacturer "eToys" and the artists' group "etoy".

"etoy" also contributed to the browser war. For the project "Digital-Hijack," the most popular word combinations used in search engines were analysed. "etoy" offered search engines sites on its server to help users to do so. Users clicked on a result found by the search engine and, reached instead of, for example, a pornography site, an "etoy" server. The

message displayed was "Don't fucking move. This is a digital hi-jack." The return button was invalidated. "etoy" intended this action to point at inattentive users who are not aware that they are being manipulated by the big software manufacturers, but mainly by search engine companies. A few big corporations – Yahoo and Altavista among the search engines, Netscape among the browsers, and Microsoft among the operating system manufacturers – have had control over their users for quite some time. The artists' criticism is, however, also directed against the users themselves, against their uncritical and passive use of the new medium. "etoy" makes transparent the functional particularities of the internet, especially its search engines, which promise access to a non-hierarchically defined medium but in reality enforce directed search results.

RTMark act on the internet as a platform for the most diverse forms of cultural sabotage. The appearance of the group in the worldwide web since 1997 is similar to the unspectacular appearance of any enterprise. RTMark emphasises that it is not possible any more to position oneself into the great tradition of resistance as has evolved historically against political power. The power of the corporations under criticism is fundamentally different in that their position cannot be seen clearly, and they cannot be attacked as opponents. Since RTMark operates as a commercial company, its members benefit from its limited liability, which is a legal requirement in the USA. A project from the environment of RTMark was targeting the influence of Microsoft on the education system. Andy Mingo, a student in English and comparative literature at San Diego University, developed as a term project a website entitled www.microsoftcu.com (RTMark project SOFT). Microsoft challenged him to remove the site immediately as it infringed the company's copyright. Mingo declared his project an attempt at exploring the postmodern age through the appropriation of literature, in which he had decided to appropriate Microsoft in a satirical manner. Microsoft did not pursue its challenge. "I've been waiting a long time to prove that Microsoft is committed to technological diversity in our universities and diversity in general," Andy Mingo writes with irony on his website.

"Microsoft isn't only a supporter of diversity, they're concerned with protecting the environment and upholding the freedom of speech, which contains within its walls postmodern theory and narrative appropriation-artistic practice is a mode of production." [7]

Josh on and the FutureFarmers (USA) show with "They Rule"[8] how, by visualising databases, the relations between the most influential economic

forces can be laid open. Users can browse through a selection of cards that depict the links between corporations and their management. Board members are shown with small icons depicting briefcases, which contain information about themselves and their companies – for example, about donations to politicians. “They Rule” uses the attributes of network technology, such as dynamic mapping and hyperlinks, and thus creates a sub-network of the power system. “They Rule” shows the network of those who rule. Microsoft, for example, is placed within this network of power, linked to the corporations Merck, Hewlett-Packard, Boeing, etc. “They Rule” attempts to transgress the internet as a mere marketing tool and reminds us of the medium’s original promise to be a democratising medium. The internet is being used as a weapon of Enlightenment or informing against the network of power.

Artistic projects of network activism create new documents, software and user interfaces that visualise the technical conditions of computer-based communications on the one hand, and those that show the power structures and inextricable intertwining with technology – for example, in the area of search engines, through which an infinite amount of information is indexed. Hence the insight of Philip Quéau, who demanded that technologies that have as great an influence on life as laws should undergo an examination and create tools for a new Enlightenment [9].

Digital attacks

Network activism can transcend enlightenment in the sense of instruction and conveying of insights, to pushing through demands, as has been proved by “Etoys”’ “toywar”. The US toy manufacturer “Etoys” withdrew its lawsuit against the artists’ group “etoy” after it had effected a preliminary court decision in November 1999 to prohibit “etoy” from using its domain name “www.etoy.com”. “eToys”, an US online shop for children’s toys, which offers its services at the URL “www.etoys.com”, had felt that the similarity of its own name to the name of the internet artists had affected the company’s business. What followed in the months after is an example for the possibility of virtual resistance. The existing international web community was informed via mailing lists about all ideas and action plans and reacted on a massive scale. In the first night, the access screens of “eToys” website were bombarded with protest messages. Shortly afterwards, RTMark started its “professional revolt”. The resistance culminated in the “toywar platform” at the end of that year,

through which actions against the toyshop were coordinated and to which about 1800 “soldiers” from all over the world subscribed during the “war”, to demonstrate the scale of the protest. The website also contained messages to participate in investor forums. Investors were encouraged to sell “eToys” stocks and shares and potential investors not to buy them. On the website “Quit eToys!”, RTMark made available the email addresses of “eToys”’s employees, who were to be motivated to quit their jobs. In addition, a list of alternative online toyshops was offered.

In addition to these well-known patterns of protest and informing, readers were asked to support acts of digital sabotage: Through virtual “sit-ins”. The website of “eToys” was blocked and therefore made inaccessible to others. To achieve this, as many activists as possible had to log on simultaneously to a particular internet site at a certain time. Such sit-ins were limited to 15 minutes but served more as a warning strike than a total blockade. In addition the script “killertoy.html” was made available, which can be installed on any server or personal computer and helps to keep filling the “eToy” shopping basket without ever confirming the purchase. This forced the webserver of “eToys” to calculate ever-growing lists and reduced its power. Announced and time-limited “distributed denial of service attacks” (DDoS) are among the methods of network activists that may cause great potential harm to enterprises, no matter whether the inquiries blocking the server stem from programmes or individuals. “Electronic blockage can cause financial stress that physical blockage cannot” [10], according to the Critical Art Ensemble, which in 1999 coined the term ECD (electronic civil disobedience). Beyond the artistic context, electronic blockade has become an established “weapon” that was used to protest against German airline Lufthansa for its cooperation in turning away asylum seekers as well as against the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The power of international organisations and corporations is dispersed, strategic resistance is adapting, decentralised power is being fought with decentralised means [11].

Artistic and political action become intertwined. An example for this is the global internet activism of Mexico’s Zapatistas and their followers. Since their revolt in 1994, Zapatistas have been using the internet to distribute emails from the leader, Subcommander Marcus, about the living conditions in Chiapas. Supporters of the Zapatistas have put up internet websites and discussion groups with reports on the situation vis-à-vis human rights in Chiapas, which are updated on a daily basis. Two of these activists, Stefan Wray and Ricardo Dominguez, are

members of the group Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), which has become known for its software FloodNet. Since 1998, EDT has, among others, attacked the Mexican government website for the continued, covert war against Zapatistas in Mexico’s south, with its Flood Net software. FloodNet relies on mass participation and automatically calls up the website that is to be attacked. If enough people participate in a FloodNet attack, the server is overwhelmed by inquiries and cannot cope with the volume. The website is consequently inaccessible. The attack was directed against the site of Mexico’s government but also against the Pentagon, as the US Ministry of Defense had sold helicopters to Mexico’s army that had been used in Chiapas. The real political effectiveness of the action is not in taking a website out of action temporarily but in attracting the attention of the media. As Ricardo Dominguez said:

“We began to notice that 1980s activist tactics were getting less media attention. Power had shifted from the streets to the information highway, so we started thinking about how to create political gestures on the web equivalent to lying down in the street and refusing to move.” [12].

Network activism covers a wide spectrum, from the temporary and relatively harmless attack that becomes effective only via television, radio and newspapers, to something approaching information warfare, which can cause substantial financial harm to enterprises.

Protest > real space

The internet has created communities as well as new forms of enlightenment and informing and demonstration of resistance, which are expressed in digital attacks on the internet’s infrastructure. It has also invisibly transformed traditional forms of protest taking to the streets, via global mobilisation of interest groups. With the help of the convergence of the internet and the mobile phone, a hitherto unknown degree of resistance against free trade was initiated on the occasion of the third conference of the WTO in Seattle in late 1999. The demonstrators had organised themselves online. Groups could form and disperse quickly and through networking could keep a clear overview of the situation. In Seattle, the first of now 30 independent media centres was founded, whose freelance writers, armed with laptop and mobile phone, reported speedily and independently about the protest.

Howard Rheingold called the groups that form when computer and communications’ technologies that strengthen human beings’ capacity for commu-

nication, “smart mobs”. These can be used to support democracy but also to attack it [13]. The increasing integration of mobile telephones, computers and cameras into small, portable devices has the potential to transform the process of demonstrating as well as reporting such events, since they can subvert the regime of the mass media.

“Flashmobs” are a current example for the changed scope of action in public spaces. The term describes brief, seemingly spontaneously occurring groupings of people in public and semi-public places. They are organised through weblogs, newsgroups and email chain letters. They do decidedly not represent political ideas. Howard Rheingold’s vision of the next social revolution, which can be initiated technologically, therefore seems remote. Participants follow an internet message and meet in a place where they receive further instructions as to the actual place of action and the proceedings. Typical of flashmobs are the sudden formation of a crowd from nothing, identical actions (for example, applauding; making telephone calls by using the same script, etc.) and the sudden dispersal after a few minutes. In Juli, 200 people suddenly congregated in the mezzanine of the New York Hyatt Hotel, applauded for 15 seconds, and then disappeared [14].

Authority without force

The fascination of the electronic bourgeois resistance lies in the hope that the principle of “mystical foundation of authority” (Derrida) [15] and the law, the principle of force can be broken. The internet as a medium contains the utopian idea that reality can be changed through textual and visual performances without having to extract authority from an institution or legal framework that was originally formed by force. The idea is that spontaneous appointments between individuals who communicate via the internet can create new agreements that abolish the traditional ones without using force and without merely concealing the force used in their formation, as has happened in democratic state systems.

Derrida, in “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority” pointed out that even the expression “to enforce the law” shows that force is inherent in justice as a right. It is therefore the foundation of any act of political performance. No law exists without applicability and therefore force. Derrida asks what the distinction is between the “force of the law” as a legitimate force and the “original act of force” that has installed this power without being able to resort to existing law and

therefore can be neither legal nor illegal. His question is targeting the foundation of any law. Derrida quotes Pascal in that if one follows reason, nothing is "just" in and by itself [16]. Someone who follows back justice to its principles destroys it. Citing Montaigne, Derrida concludes: "Laws have authority because they are laws. This is the mystical foundation of authority and there is no other. As laws, laws are just. People follow them, however, not because they are just but because they possess authority. Montaigne speaks of "legitimate fictions" that the law contains; these are what the truth of justice/the legislative is based on. The origin of authority, the setting of the law is "an 'un-'founded act of violence", [17] which is neither legal nor illegal. Even if performative acts that found the law (foundation of state) succeed and thus assume existing agreements (for example, in the international sphere), the "mystical" borderline is visible where these conditions originate. The structure is a structure in which the law can be deconstructed in its essence, because its final foundation is by definition un-founded. "That the law can be deconstructed is not a disaster," according to Derrida, but a political opportunity [18]. Through the internet and the convergence of computers and mobile communications, opportunities present themselves to negotiate agreements and make decisions. At a technical level, for the development of new standards for information and communications' technology, this has been practised for a long time, and the standards have been successfully defended against monopolists. In the political and social arena, a new negotiation space is coming into view, beyond authority that is based on force.

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